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BLUES REVUE

T H E W O R L D ' S B L U E S M A G A Z I N E

New Women of the Blues **SPECIAL ISSUE**

with Eden Brent

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Little Miss Higgins

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Deborah Bonham

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FEATURES

7 NEW WOMEN OF THE BLUES

These fast-rising female artists — four from the U.S., two based in Canada, and one in the U.K. — are carrying the blues torch into the 21st century. They talk to us about their influences, their careers, and their hopes for the future.

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BY AUTUMN LONG

After a lifetime of struggle, this triumphant singer is enjoying the fruits of her labor. How did she survive? That's what love, and the blues, can do.



New Women of the Blues

Moving forward doesn't have to mean abandoning the past.

That's something of a mantra here at *Blues Revue*, where we've made it our mission to search out artists who take traditional music forms and put their own individual spins on them. So we're proud that our second-ever issue devoted to female blues artists — our first was published back in 1995 — showcases singers and players who gracefully balance reverence with innovation.

These seven up-and-coming blueswomen represent styles ranging from prewar country blues to contemporary blues-rock, and we believe they're among those who offer the brightest hope for the future of the blues. We made a deliberate decision to focus on artists not profiled previously in *Blues Revue*, so if you don't see your favorite new performers here, it's possible that we've covered them in the past — or that we'll cover them in a future issue.

Without further ado, we'd like to introduce these female artists who stand poised to carry our genre into the future — the new women of the blues, if you will.

PHOTOGRAPHY (from top) MARK GOODMAN; DUSTY SCOTT; STACY JEFFRESS; BRIO; DUSTY SCOTT; DUSTY SCOTT; CHRISTINA JANSEN, courtesy of RHINO RECORDS

Deborah Bonham

Duchess of Blues-Rock

by Will Romano



When considering an artist's life, the question often arises: Does environment or genetics have a greater impact on creative and personal development? Vocalist Deborah Bonham sprang from British blues-rock royalty, but without her debilitating personal losses, her addiction to alcohol, and her will to survive both of those struggles, she wouldn't possess such a deep understanding of the blues.

"I think the blues is whatever has happened in your life that you need to get through," says Bonham. "It's exorcism — a form of therapy, really."

Bonham's brother John, a member of Led Zeppelin and one of rock's greatest drummers of all time, died at age 32 from alcohol poisoning just before a planned North American tour in 1980. The elder Bonham sibling was a towering presence onstage and off.

"One day John was [here] and going off to rehearsals, and the next day we get a phone call," says Bonham, who was 17 at the time of the tragedy. "I never saw it coming. He was my hero,

my big brother. My whole family went into disarray after that."

Bonham's compass would continue to steer her through stormy conditions after the death of her father in 1989 and brother Michael, just 48, in 2000. "Just when you start to think, 'I am dealing with this,' it happens all over again," she says. "I was just a mess, drinking too much, and I couldn't cope with the amount of loss I'd had."

In recent years, Bonham has triumphed over tragedy by turning pain into music. Her latest record, *Duchess*, is a portrait of a woman who has emerged from deep sorrow and unhealthy habits. "Though [the past] is still with me and will always be there, I don't want to live in the past," says Bonham. "I want to live in the present, with

an eye on the future. It's taken me quite a long time to do that."

One of the most powerful songs on *Duchess*, "Hold On," is an open letter to the world-weary and heavy-hearted featuring a vocal duet with Paul Rodgers (Free, Bad Company, Queen). The song is made even more potent by the deep-pocket drumming of John Bonham's son, Jason, who's four years younger than his aunt. "At the time, [Jason] was rehearsing for the Zeppelin [2007 reunion] show," Bonham says. "I felt terrible, because he had to tell them that he had to leave a rehearsal early to record with — his words — 'my Auntie Deb.'"

Bonham's musical world is one big ball of intertwining personal and professional connections. Jerry Shirley, a founding member of Humble Pie who

counted John Bonham among his fans, is Deborah's current drummer. Not surprisingly, *Duchess* possesses an undeniable classic blues-rock atmosphere: You can pinpoint Zep-pelin's herky-jerky "Immigrant Song" beat in "Pretty Thing," an allusion to "Dancing Days" in "Hold On," and a slight resemblance to the bass line from "Dazed and Confused" in "How Do You Feel." Listen closer and you'll hear bits of Marvin Gaye and Little Feat ("Duchess and the Shufflemeister") and Joe Cocker (the climax of the gospel-esque "Waiting So Long").

"Everything you can think of, I can practically guarantee has been an influence on me," Bonham says with a laugh.

Despite Bonham's Stevie Nicks-ish gypsy vibe, her vocals most closely resemble those of her idol, Scottish blues belter Maggie Bell, who, coincidentally, also recorded a song titled "Hold On" (originally cut by the Free spinoff band Kossoff, Kirke, Tetsu, & Rabbit). Bell sang: "When times get so hard you must believe that they're gonna get better/Wipe away those clouds of despair/Good times gonna come soon/I just know they're there." It's as if Bonham not only heard and understood those lyrics, but adopted them as her mantra.

"Blue," a sister track to "Hold On" that features BJ Cole's mournful pedal steel guitar, underscores the growth of Bonham's inner strength. "The song is saying, 'I hope that one day I'm not going to be that down about what's happened'," she says. "You *can* move forward. That's the main thing I've learned. There's no alternative. Life is there to be lived."

Duchess, whose title Bonham says is a reference to her mother, the strongest woman she's ever known, displays open wounds even as it edges away slightly from 2004's emotionally charged *The Old Hyde*. Says Bonham, "*Hyde* was based on the house we all lived in — the farm John bought and built with my dad. [That album] came out of a lot of emotional turmoil, so, for *Duchess*, I wanted to

create lyrics that were deliberately less heavy."

Bonham is a sympathetic storyteller and lyrical interpreter capable of expressing vulnerability and confidence at once. Take a song like "Chains," originally recorded by folk duo the Sutherland Brothers as "I Was in Chains" and later cut by Bell for her 1975 record *Suicide Sal* (released on Zeppelin's own Swan Song label): Bonham's sweet, raspy voice conveys the song's themes of love, loss, and addiction as it floats above guitar figures reminiscent of Sandy Denny-era Fairport Convention. It's wholly appropriate that Fairport member Dave Pegg contributes mandolin to the track. "Dave loved John, and they were close friends for years," Bonham says.

It was in the wake of John's death that Bonham began to break out on her own, performing live and recording demos. "I'd always wanted to sing, but John was against it," says Bonham. "He knew how hard things were, and he saw a side of the business in the Seventies that he felt was no place for his kid sister."

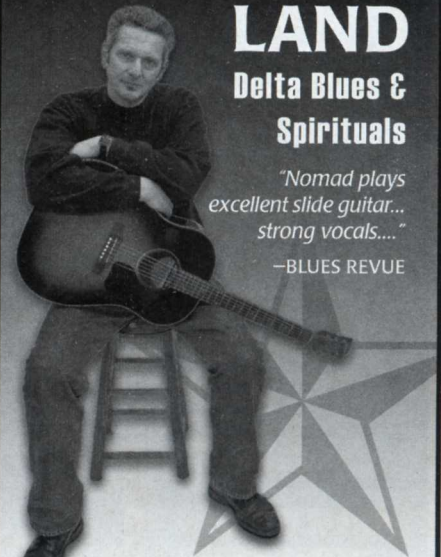
Bonham forged ahead and cut her debut album, *For You and the Moon*, in 1985, but was sidetracked for years after its release, turning to alcohol to soothe her suffering. "It is a very, very funny pain that you have, grief," she says. "You can't see it. You can't take anything for it. The only thing I found that I thought would help was drink. But [drinking] only added to the problems, because the more you drink the more heightened your sensitivity becomes. Then you *really* can't deal with anything."

One thing that has helped Bonham work through her losses is her love for animals. She's a trustee of the Racehorse Sanctuary, which rehabilitates equines that otherwise would be euthanized.

"I have some land where I live, and I rescue racehorses," says Bonham. "That keeps me on the straight and narrow. The idea of a sanctuary has turned my life around. I'm a lot better in myself now than I was a few years ago. I'm in a good place." ☐

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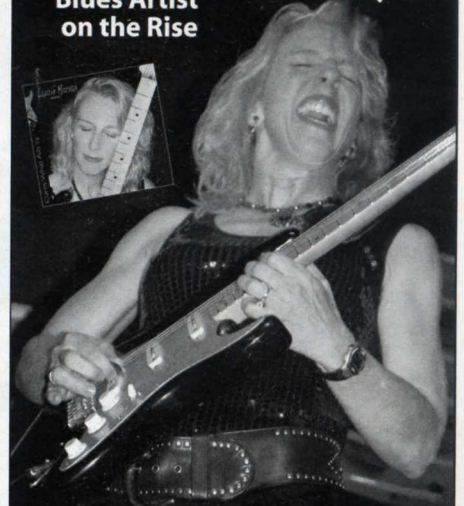
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