

Tenacity is the key

says

Deborah Bonham

Story: Martin Hudson

If ever a family was rooted in musical tradition it is the Bonham family. You would have had to have been living on Mars not to know of the late, great Led Zeppelin drum master John Bonham. Then came his son Jason who has followed in his dad's footsteps and seems to have been around forever in his own right.

What has not been so well known is the musical path of another Bonham, sister of John, Deborah!

Now those regular CRS BOTY award attendees might have seen Deb handing out awards along with Dave Cousins in 2001 in Rotherham. You might even have caught her along with her band playing for the CRS in 2002 but where has she been since then? More on that in a moment but let us bring everyone up to date and remember that she released her debut album, *For You and The Moon* back in 1985. All did not flow so smoothly at that time and it took another twenty years before she was tempted back with the excellent *The Old Hyde*, produced by Mo Foster (Jeff Beck, Phil Collins) which featured Mick Fleetwood, Robbie McIntosh and among others Jason Bonham.

Now in 2008 she is back with her third and best album to date, *Duchess* on the Rhino label. The album includes thirteen songs brought to life by Deborah, Jerry Shirley (Humble Pie), Ian Rowley, Gerard Louis and Pete Bullick and guest appearances by Dave Pegg on mandolin, Paul Rodgers (yes that Paul Rodgers) oh and Jason Bonham! Her decision to continue and make another album is all down to tenacity according to Deborah.

"I just refuse to go away," laughed Deb, a lady much compared with the great Maggie Bell. "So I just keep plugging away and it's not been easy but it's getting the key people in place. It all started with this guy in America, Mike Johnson, he just found me. He found me on my website and since then it's rollercoasted. He got me the deal with Rhino / Warner Brothers and that's something that I never thought would happen at this stage. I just thought we'd keep on making records and we've got a nice little following in the UK now but it's gone global. Now we're getting a chance to go over to America which I've been trying to do for so many years. We've had an exceptional response to the record and it's out on the 24th June. Once it's out we're off to the States to tour with a couple of high-profile TV things like the Jay Leno show.

"It's all about putting the right people in place. I can only write the music and get the band and make the record. The next step is to sell it and that's somebody else's job, so I have to sit back and hope that everybody will do their job. Certainly with Rhino they have been amazing so far and the

bottom line is that they've believed in us."

To still have the enthusiasm after a not so clever experience back in 1985 would be a surprise to some but once you speak to this Bonham you hear a determination and maybe a bit of a rallying cry!

"Looking back everything happens for a reason," said Deborah, "and I don't think I was ready and had no concept about what life was really like. I just thought you made an album and it went to No. 1 because that's all I'd ever seen with Led Zeppelin. I was only young, in my late teens and then in to my twenties with Carerre Records and I hadn't grown up. I'd lost my brother which sent me off on a silly downhill spiral and so I had to get out and work and appreciate what life was like. So I landed this huge record deal, that all went wrong and I couldn't do anything because I was contracted and couldn't get out of it. I tried legal aid and couldn't get any help and so went out and got a job in the music industry and turned it all round to a positive."

It could be called a twenty-year apprenticeship, something she agreed with, "I think it's exactly that," she laughed.

The good news in her life is that she is comfortable with the whole set up and feels as if she has paid her dues. She no longer feels as if she has to carry a tag as just being John Bonham's sister. The name Bonham does mean a lot in rock music.

"It's only really now, maybe not long after we did *The Old Hyde*, but especially now with the new record that I can actually stand up and say, 'I can do it, I can sing, I don't feel that pressure and there's enough people out there know I can do it.' So it's not so much having to prove anything anymore. I feel quite comfortable in my skin with that. I'm proud of what John's done and I'm extremely proud of what Jason's done doing the O2 thing. He had to walk out there and play that gig with the other Zeppelin members and his dad would have been so proud. So I'm happy with it all."

This new confidence is reflected in how she feels about her singing back in the 80's. She openly says that she doesn't think that she was that good then. "I think those twenty years have made me become the singer that I am."

The Maggie Bell comparison is also something that Deborah is comfortable with. "I grew up listening to Maggie and one of the tracks on the album is called *Chains* and was written by the Sutherland Brothers and is the only cover I've done on the record. It was originally done by Maggie on the *Suicide Sal* album in '75 I think and I've always loved the song. She used to sing it as a tribute to John. In the lyrics it says, 'I said John, John,' and he was there when



she recorded it and she tipped her head to him and she did it on stage as well. I got Dave Pegg in to play mandolin on it. It's quite folkie this song and I adore Dave and he was a very close friend of John's and so it all tied in. I loved Sandy Denny too and so it was a tribute to Maggie, John, Sandy and Dave Pegg."

The remainder of the material on *Duchess* highlights a versatility not only performance wise but in the song-writing stakes too. Luckily when America called she already had a few songs in the locker. "I write every single day and I've always got bits and pieces around. It's a continual thing and it's something that I do. Not everything works out and so I'll leave it and pick it up another day. So there was bits and pieces ready but I really wanted to give it a band chant this time and so I'd come to the table with, 'these are the ideas I've got.' Then my bass player, Ian Rowley, my keyboard player, Gerard Louis, and Pete (Bullick) would get together some evenings and jam around until it really felt a real collaboration. If you're going to record and get the best out of a band it's got to be organic, it needs to start at the beginning and grow and we did that. I was thrilled at the way it worked. We live in each others pockets a bit and love each other and I think we'll go on forever."

She laughs when I ask if it is a big advantage having your husband working along with you as your guitarist. Bruce Willis lookalike Pete Bullick has a great sense of humour and plays a tidy guitar too. "I'm not answering that one," laughed Deb. "There's some rows I could tell you. I don't know how many marriages would survive it because we're together 24/7. We never have a break, if we're doing the record or recording we're there together all the time and we run the business together. The only thing I don't do with him is work with my horses but I've dragged him in on that as well. So it can get volatile and the other lads handle us very well but I couldn't be without him," she smiled.

As we got all emotional it returned to *Duchess* and picked a couple of songs out. *Love Lies* is a strong contender for best of the album but it is nice to be able to call on certain people to help you out. One such gentleman that gets in an assist is former Free, Bad Company and now Queen frontman Paul Rodgers. Not bad hey!

"As soon as I got involved with Mike Johnson in America, the manager, the next thing that happened is we got the Paul Rodgers support slot in the UK. He's another guy that loved John and gave me the break we're forever grateful to him for that and he's such a beautiful man. He's absolutely the sweetest man and with his new wife Cynthia, they just couldn't have been lovelier. On the last night of the tour his tour manager, Brad, came over and said Paul wanted me to sing with him that night. Of course I was like, "Oh my god." I went a bit silly and said, "Oh no, okay yes, what's he want me to sing?" He said, "Well come and see him." So I went to see him and he said, "I think we can do Can't Get Enough together," and I said, "Oh my god, okay." He'd heard the story of when Free were on Swansong (that belonged to Led Zeppelin) and they brought out Can't Get Enough. They got on Top Of The Pops and John called us all in and said, "Look, this is the band we've just signed." So we all sat round and watched this Can't Get Enough and I'd told Cynthia about it and so he said we should do it. He said, "Do you know the words?" and I said, "Err, yeah!" He said, "Okay, I'll be on stage and I'll sing it. By the second verse I want you to be at the side of the stage and I want you to walk on singing the second verse." Honestly, at this point Pete and the band just got hysterical because the singing for me is fine but the walking just wasn't, I just walk like a dork sometimes. So I'm at the side of the stage and someone said to



Pete, 'Is Deb nervous?' Pete was like, "No she's fine with the singing, she's practising the walking," she laughed.

"Anyway it happened and it was absolutely great. Afterwards he said that we ought to do it again sometime. Then when I'd recorded the album I sent this particular track, *Hold On*, to him and he came back and said he'd really love to do it. I couldn't believe it, I just thought, 'Oh my god I'm going to be on record with Paul Rodgers.' So that for me was vindication of not just being John Bonham's sister. If Paul Rodgers thinks it's all right for him to sing with me then I've made it as far as I'm concerned. Even if I never sell millions it'll never get any better than that moment."

Overall Deborah Bonham is chuffed to bits with her new album and the next step is to get it out there in to the big wide world. "We've just got to tour it really. That's really where you see the best bits and when we really come to life. I love recording but I find it a struggle because I have to get the setting right so that I feel we're on stage. We don't do lots of takes and I like to try and sing a song all in one. We really are a live band and so we need to get out there.

"We did our showcase at the 100 Club in London and that went down a storm and the record company was thrilled with it. We'll keep pushing," concluded Deb with much humour and comment from Pete in the background!

Watch out for a CRS Deborah Bonham gig next year and even an acoustic show too at the Manor Barn!!! Something special.

In the meantime check out her website www.deborahbonham.com

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