



THE SCOTSMAN

TUESDAY 23 FEBRUARY 2010

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER

80p

WWW.SCOTSMAN.COM

BONZO LED THE WAY

Deborah Bonham on living up to her Zeppelin brother's legend PAGES 38-39



IS YOUR BOSS A BULLY?

What to do if you are the victim of harassment in the workplace PAGES 14-15



TUESDAY 23 FEBRUARY 2010

Arts



Deborah Bonham and her eponymous band perform at the Fife Stock Festival tonight and tomorrow. The singer ignored the advice of her older brother John, pictured below drumming for Led Zeppelin, by going into the music industry



Deborah Bonham feels that, after 20 years of playing with her rock band, she has proved herself as a singer and musician in her own right, hears Billy Briggs

IF THERE is one aim Deborah Bonham has with her music, it is to pay a fitting tribute to her late brother John, who achieved legendary status as the drummer with rock band Led Zeppelin. John Bonham, aka Bonzo to his acolytes, is regarded by many in the music industry as one of the most accomplished rock drummers of all time, and the Englishman's premature death at the age of 32 – after a heavy drinking bout in 1980 – elevated him to almost god-like status, in chime with fellow hedonistic rock casualties such as Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Keith Moon.

Deborah Bonham, a singer and songwriter of bluesy rock, remembers well her older brother's warnings that the music industry was no place for a young girl, but after his death, she ignored the advice and launched a career of her own. "John saw the demise of so many people through drink and drugs and, as a big brother who was naturally very protective, he told me not to go into music, so I stuck in at school instead," she says. "But I'm very headstrong and wanted to sing and after he died, I decided that I still wanted to start my own career, and here I am more than 25 years later."

The 47-year-old brings her band to the Fife Stock Festival tonight and tomorrow. She played the gig last year and says she loved the intimate setting of the Inn at Lathones, near St Andrews, as did her 83-year-old mother, apparently, who accompanied her on the trip north and took to the stage to give an impromptu rendition of *Let It Be* and the Led Zeppelin classic *Rock and Roll*.

"My mum is rather sprightly and even made the front page of the local paper," Bonham says, laughing. Neither her mother or father were musical, however, and Bonham believes Welsh ancestry may cast light on her voice, which has been described by some commentators as touching on the gravelly tones of Elkie Brooks and Bonnie Raitt.

As a child, Bonham trained as an opera singer in a convent but says that her two older brothers were the main musical influences as she grew up. "There was always an eclectic mix of music to listen to," she says. "John was 14 years older and my other brother, Michael – who also

'It hasn't been an easy job being John's sister'

died young, at the age of 48 – was 12 years older than me. John's music was across the board. He loved Motown, Crosby Stills & Nash, Fleetwood Mac and Joni Mitchell, as well as all the rock stuff. Michael – who was a DJ and photographer who toured with Zeppelin – enjoyed the same kind of stuff, so I grew up on all that and Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Hendrix and Janis Joplin."

Bonham's personal inspirations include Maggie Bell, Billie Holiday, Little Feat and Led Zeppelin – the last of these she recalls seeing for the first time at the Birmingham Odeon when she was only eight years old, shortly before her brother's band hit stadium status.

"My dad took me with Michael and there were about 2,500 people there," she says. "I remember looking up at the balcony and everyone was going totally mental. It was electric and I knew then that's what I wanted to do. That gig will always stay with me and I use that concert as a yardstick for everything I do with the band."

The Deborah Bonham Band – which includes her husband Peter Bulluck on guitar – will preview songs from a new album due out later this year, as well as tracks from *Duchess*, which was warmly received by critics on its release in 2008. Bonham admits success has taken a while to consolidate and she is candid enough to admit to making mistakes early in her career.

"When I started at age 17, I went to Robert [Plant] and recorded some demos in a barn – with John's son Jason on drums – and then sent them off anonymously. I immediately got

offered a record deal, but then it all turned sour," she says.

The contract was with Garerre Records, for whom she recorded the album *For You and the Moon*. It reached the top five in the NME chart, was DJ Simon Bates' record of the week on BBC Radio One and sold well in Europe, being voted Record of the Year by *Musik Merit* magazine in Germany. But more commercial success did not follow quickly.

"One of the problems was that I'd grown up around John, and every album they made went

straight to number one, so I thought that was the norm and everything was really easy. But, of course, in the music industry, nothing is easy, and I then signed a terrible recording contract that I was stuck with for ten years. They wanted to mould me into this and that, and I just wanted to be myself, so there was not much music made for quite a long time," she says.

Bonham decided instead to learn the machinations of the music industry by working with companies such as BMG and Warner Brothers, where she learned about contracts and the legal side of the business.

"Through doing that, I was then able to read the contracts that I'd signed and I found loopholes and I finally got out," she says. "I've got a manufacturing business and mastering studio and I was able to do my own album and do licensing deals with a great company while helping other musicians."

She describes the Deborah Bonham Band as "family", having been together now for 20 years or so and she feels she has finally proved herself as a musician and singer in her own right.

"I didn't get the silver spoon treatment at any stage and it has not been easy being John's sister, because people instantly have a preconceived idea and you've got to live up to it," she says. "It's never been an easy ride. But I feel I have achieved some success and carried the Bonham name proudly, and that's the most important thing for me."

● The Deborah Bonham Band plays the Fife Stock Festival tonight and tomorrow. See www.fifestock.com for more details.

