

# Welcome back...

Debbie Bonham:  
a career crippled by  
contractual hassles  
for 20 years



## DEBBIE BONHAM

Yes she's John Bonham's sister. So obviously that's given her an easy ride as a singer, right? Tell that to Debbie. Then run.

INTERVIEW: HUGH FIELDER

★ "People think that being John's sister will open doors, but it doesn't. In fact it's something of a double-edged sword," says Debbie Bonham. "I've had all that 'She's just trading on the name' stuff, but I've always kept away from anything connected to Led Zeppelin. People have said I should change my name. But I was born with it and I'm really proud of my family."

Debbie was 16 when her brother John died in 1980 (he was twice her age). Her own career was virtually crippled by contractual hassles for nearly 20 years after her debut album *For You And The Moon* in 1985. She finally released the follow-up, *The Old Hyde*, in 2004, expressing her feelings on the opening track, *Shit Happens*. Her new album, *Duchess*, is out on Rhino.

**You've written all the songs on *Duchess*.**

I've always written my own stuff. On the last album there were a couple of covers. I did *Black Coffee* because [Humble Pie drummer] Jerry Shirley is in the band so it made sense. And while we were recording I heard Fleetwood Mac's *Need Your Love So Bad* one day and thought: "I've forgotten how much I love it. I should do it." But that didn't happen this time.

**Do people expect to hear you sing covers rather than your own songs?**

Record companies seem to. A few years back, after I'd toured America with Jason [Bonham, her nephew] it looked as if Sony was going to take me on. But they wanted me to do an album of classic blues songs – Billie Holiday and so on – and that's not really me. I had the songs ready for *The Old Hyde* album and I wanted to do those. In fact I'd been playing them on tour and getting a great reaction. But Sony didn't want to do that so it all fell apart.

Then I dabbled with a couple of independent labels, but one of them went bust. I'd already had a rough ride with record companies, so I was starting to think: "I'll just make my own records and sell them at gigs

and online." I'd already started this album [*Duchess*] when this new American manager came on board, and the next thing I know I had a deal with Rhino. And the great thing is they get it – they get the music.

**There's a great duet with Paul Rodgers on *Hold On*.**

He's always been one of my heroes. And he turned out to be one of the loveliest people I've been lucky enough to meet. I opened up for him on his UK tour last year. He offered me the gig out of respect for John. Which, like I said, doesn't happen often. On the first night, he stood at the side of the stage, and when I came off he just put his arm around me and said: "You've got it." And on the last night his road manager came up at the soundcheck and said: "Paul's wondering if you'd like to sing with him tonight." I nearly dropped to the floor. We sang [Bad Company's] *Can't Get Enough*, and it was the most amazing moment.

So when I was recording this album I was wondering whether he'd fancy singing with me. I sent him the song, and he got straight back and said: "Yeah, I'd love to." So then I called Jason and he came down and helped me

out, even though he was rehearsing with you-know-who at the time. Apparently he told them: "I've got to go and play with my auntie tonight."

**What did you think of you-know-who at the O2 Arena? Presumably you**

**traded on the name to get tickets for that?**

Yes, and I'm not ashamed to admit it. It was incredible. It felt like a whole different band. I mean, my vision of Zeppelin, like most people's, is of them immortalised in their 20s. But 30 years later they are different people. I thought I would get upset about John but I didn't. I was just completely focused on what Jason was doing. I didn't go back to how it used to be. And it blew me away, that's what was so remarkable about it. I hope they do more.

• *Duchess* is out now on Rhino Records.

**"Led Zeppelin blew me away. I hope they do more..."**