

# A BONHAM SISTER ACT

The death of a father and two brothers would shatter most people. But Deborah Bonham is paying a musical tribute to the men she lost, including Led Zeppelin legend John Bonham. Chris Goodman reports

Deborah Bonham laughs, a bit, sitting in her country home near Ragdoll Bay, memories are everywhere but she has learned to deal with them. "You can't go through what we have and not be scarred," she proclaims. "But things have turned around. I was spiraling down, out of control, and one day I thought, 'This is my god.' We opened and scored down here."

Her eldest brother was John Bonham, legendary drummer with Led Zeppelin and alleged wild man of rock. Zep's hometown adorns the walls of her house. John's famous gun, placed at the back of his colorful Ludwig drum kit, hangs prominently, as do a few of the band's platinum discs. They are faded a little now, still too long in the sun of the conservatory, something Deborah regrets. Even the toilet has a huge newspaper cutting of an American *Led Zep* gig, thousands of faces looking into the picture, adoring fans of the biggest band that rock has ever seen.

Her mother, Joan, lives with her, a regal presence who's always happy to talk about her son. Photos of John and the family are everywhere. One is particularly poignant: a picture of three men—John, brother Michael Bonham and their father, Jack Bonham. They called themselves Les Three Bonams. All are now gone.

John was found dead on the morning of September 25, 1980. He had passed out the previous night while drunk and had been placed on his back, he choked on his own vomit. Deborah found her father dead in 1980 and then John's younger brother and right-hand man, Michael, completed the horrific run in 2000, dying suddenly of a heart attack. Deborah now has an album out, dedicated to the three men she lost.

When John died in 1980, Deborah was just 17. Possessed with a rocking blues voice that has matured beautifully, she was invited to Led Zep vocalist Robert Plant's house to cut her first demo. He advised her to send them to record

**WHOLE LOTTA MEMORIES:** Led Zeppelin, clockwise from top left: John Bonham, Robert Plant, John Paul Jones and Jimmy Page



companies under an assumed name to avoid promiscuous and she was soon signed to Carrere, a major label in its day. A friendly 1960s album, *For You The Moon*, followed in 1965 but the company never released it outside of Europe and complications ensued.

Unable to escape her contract and sign for anyone else, Debbie signed up to a temp agency providing work in the music industry and spent a decade leaving the business from the bottom up. "Eventually I learned about contracts while working at Warner's," she says, as if it was nothing. "I read my contracts again and found a loophole. I got out and got it all back. I thought, 'Right, start again!'"

The result is *The Old Days*, an album of original blues and some classic covers featuring her band—Robert Plant's guitarist Robbie Blunt and Douglas Eyles,

and her nephew, John's son Jason Bonham, an drums. Mick Fleetwood and producer Mo Foster (Jeff Beck, Van Morrison) also helped out. "I owe them all loads," she sighs. "It's paying everyone back for the rest of my life."

*The Old Days* arrives in the barbershop that the brothers and their father built in Colwell Green in Warrumshire. Her father was a carpenter and house builder and when John made it big with Led Zeppelin, he bought the dilapidated property and had family and friends renovate it with him. He moved in with his wife Phil and son Jason and later daughter Zoe, while Jack and Deborah moved in to the adjoining cottage. She grew up as a virtual sister to her nephew Jason, who was only four years younger than her.

Stories about John Bonham's debauchery are legendary. He has been

devoted to the status of the ultimate rock 'n' roll party animal by the myth and rumour that surrounded the band. Managed by the brilliant Peter Grant, Led Zeppelin never gave interviews at the height of their power in the Seventies. The mystique this created, along with the huge excess of their own private jet and stories of groupies and black magic, added to the band's allure.

The most notorious account of the band is Stephen Davis's biography *Warmer Of The Gods*, based largely on the statement of one Richard Cole, Led Zep's road



**READY TO ROCK:** Bonham was the "Number 1 fan" of Led Zepppelin. Now she has her own album out.



**FAMILY 'YES:** Debbie on stage and, right, with four daughters Juan, Juli, Jennifer with Patti, and her daughter Zoe, right.

manager for 12 years. Cole told a tale of Bonham's fights, hotel destruction and heroin abuse and the reputation he struck.

But the stories that emerged of her elder brother on tour bore no resemblance to the man Deborah knew. "I can't put a barb around John's head," she admits. "His head touring so lonely and that's why he drank and why he got wild and bad-tempered. But he loved being at home. He missed his wife and kids."

Michael Bonham was so fond of lazing the ramblers about his brother that he

wrote a book presenting John Bonham as a family man. It is a touching document of family scrapes and hilarious incidents. Those who know John's rock reputation will be surprised to see the pictures of him showing his girls Herenshulder ball, Bruno, or standing next to his son Jason on his scuba diving bike, racing for the kids' team that his father proudly sponsored.

"The problem is all these books," Debbie laments, "lovely because of The Guide and all that. There's such a lot of rubbish in those books. I was there and I

know some of the things that Richard Cole was saying about John weren't true.

"One time he was supposed to have smashed up an airport, but we were in the south of France. He was always supposed to be somewhere smashing something up and having a fight and he just wasn't."

Not that John was entirely angelic. "Jerry Shirley [drummer with Humble Pie] is in my band now and I asked him if he knew John well but he said, 'Yeah, and really I once saw him hit Steve Marriott [Small Faces and Humble Pie singer] but that was about it.' Apparently, John was swinging for Frankie Miller and Steve got in the way."

"Paul Stewart came up to me once saying, 'Are you Debbie Bonham?' I said you and he replied, 'Your brother hit me!'"

Deborah was just six when John joined Led Zepppelin in 1968. As they became famous, she was their Number 1 fan. "My

**"He found touring lonely - that's why he drank"**

bedroom walls were covered in Led Zepppelin stuff, they were up there with Steve Marriott and Paul Rodgers. I grew up on that stuff which was a big influence of John's and Michael's. I was a big Aretha Franklin fan at the age of seven and night - Otis Redding, Al Green. But Led Zep were my favorite band."

Michael became a photographer for the band but Debbie was always the little sister. "John was puritanical and quite strict. When I was 16, I used to bunk off school and go down to Swansea on the Led Zep office. I'd go straight in the office, where people like Maggie Bell, The Pretty Things and Bad Company were hanging out. Every time I arrived you'd see the staff going, 'Oh no, Bonnie's sister!'"

"John would be on the phone within seconds - 'Was my sister turned up there?' I'd have to drink and drive. I'd be drunk back home and John would tell me off."

"The office was run by Richard Cole and I look back now and realize why John was so angry. I must have got him through ball."

But Debbie will never forget the first time she really defied her brother when

she attended the giant gig that Led Zep played at Knebworth in August 1979 after a four-year hiatus. "John banned me from going but I got in a van with my friends and we bought tickets. I really had a strong feeling that I'd didn't see him then. I'd never see him play again."

"I was 16 John's about to play to 100,000 people and his sister's causing him grief. I don't know about him but I'd stop me now - it must have been horrendous for him."

She never had the chance to see her brother play again. The band met for the last time to rehearse for a US tour at Jimmy Page's house in Windsor on September 14, 1980. Bonham died during the night.

"My mother knew all day without knowing," Deborah recalls. "She was very distressed and couldn't think why. The next day, saying, 'Maybe I've missed someone's birthday.' It was a very strange day and when Michael died, our whole world turned upside down."

"He was such an integral part of the family - he seemed to be the catalyst. It was like a deck of cards bill. It just went mental."

"I really thought I couldn't handle it when Michael died. It hurt that much because I'd had John in 1986, my father in 1989, Michael in 2006. I just felt I wanted to get drunk all the time to take the pain away."

"But things have a way of coming back round and now Jason's doing really well too. He's playing with UFO, he doesn't drink, he's got a wonderful family but he's had some dark years."

As for Debbie herself, "It's taken a lot of counselling and getting my head together." But she is loving good again. Married to guitarist Peter Buck, she has devoted her life to music and raising horses. But her family are never far from her mind. The title of the CD *Mylo* is a poignant tribute to her brothers and father and the love they had. "It just came out and by the time I finished I was shaking."

"But the album isn't done and glorious," she says. "That song is one of goodwill and hoping I'll see them again - not for quite a while, hopefully. I need to get this album out and receive a few more letters."