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Interview: Deborah Bonham

4:59pm Friday 31st July 2009

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By Caroline Dutton »

ROCK nobility comes to Colne in the form of Deborah Bonham — sister of the late Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham.

Deborah will play the International Stage at 20th anniversary Great British Blues Festival with her band — and she can hardly wait.

"I'm really excited about it," said the singer/songwriter, who lives in West Sussex.

"I've not done the festival before, but this year they invited me and I'm thrilled. It's going to be excellent."

The Bonham family tree is firmly rooted in musical tradition.

Deborah was just six when brother John joined Led Zeppelin, but this powerful introduction to blues rock sparked in her an overwhelming desire to write and perform.

"I first saw Led Zeppelin play at Birmingham Town Hall with an audience of about 2,500 and I remember thinking: 'Oh wow, that's what I want to do.'"

"Their music was very much rooted in the blues, but they took it to another level. I'm sure that's where my love of that style of music comes from, though."

It wasn't until after John's untimely death in 1980 that Deborah decided to take the plunge and enter the world of music.

"The reason being there was no way on this planet he would have wanted me to do it," said Deborah.

"I studied very hard at school so I think he just wanted me to go and be a blinkin' doctor or something. It took me a long time to work out why he wasn't keen on me doing it, but now I've been in the business myself I know exactly what he was talking about.

"You've got to remember I was still at school when John died and he was just trying to protect me. It was the '70s and they were very heady days. Everything was very hedonistic and John saw things he probably didn't want his little sister to see. He saw people like Janis Joplin die of heroin. He used to say: 'No, you've got to stop at



Interview: Deborah Bonham

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school'."

But Deborah couldn't fight what was natural to her and it was John's bandmate Robert Plant who gave her a helping hand into the industry.

"I'd always sort of been writing songs and playing around, but a year or so after John died I phoned Robert Plant — he'd got a little studio in the next village — and I said: 'Can I come and have a little go and see what it sounds like?'

"So I went round and Jason (John's son — now a rock drummer who has gained success with various bands including Foreigner and Bonham) played the drums. He was so young, I remember him sitting in the corner eating Jelly Tots, but he was a great drummer even then.

"I did a few demos and Robert said: 'You've got to get out and pay your dues on the stage'. Twenty-five years later we're still doing that. But it was the best advice I could've been given though because that's what our band is all about, the live show. It's where we're most comfortable. It's raw and powerful and it's what we do best."

Deborah has opened shows in the Los Angeles 'House of Blues' with guests Slash and Terry Reid, as well as done two tours of her own.

Back in the UK and Europe, she has toured and performed with Van Halen, Paul Weller, Humble Pie, Donovan, Lonnie Donnegan, Foreigner and Paul Rodgers. She's also played festivals from Glastonbury to Donnington and twice at Fairport Convention's Cropredy Festival.

Her new album Duchess is her third and, impressively, her band is the same group of musicians she's been with since she started out.

"It's like going on tour with family," said Deborah.

"It makes it great because we all know each other so well and we know how to be around each other. It's all very natural and we love each other very much. There's a real good vibe. I know it's rare in the music industry and people are always asking 'How have you stayed together so long?' I always say: 'Because we're nice to each other, that's why, and we actually treat each other with a bit of respect'."

Deborah believes her brother would be eventually have come around to the idea of her career as a musician.

"I think he'd be very proud of what I've achieved musically. I know he would have got up and played with us, because it's the style of music that John would have loved."

I See the Deborah Bonham Band at the Great British R&B Festival, Colne, on Saturday, August 29, at 3.30pm on the International Stage.

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