Deborah Bonham, a lot.
Sitting in her country home near Bognor Regis, memories are everywhere but she has learnt to deal with them. “You can’t go through what we have and not be scarred,” she ponders. “But things have turned around. I was spiralling down, out of control, and one day I thought, ‘This is no good. We upped and moved down here.”

Her eldest brother was John Bonham, legendary drummer with Led Zeppelin and alleged wild man of rock. Zeppelin memorabilia adorns the walls of her house. John’s famous gong, placed at the back of his colossal Ludwig drum kit, hangs ominously, as do a few of the band’s platinum discs. They are faded a little now, left too long in the sun of the conservatory, something Deborah regrets. Even the suite has a huge newspaper cutting of an American Led Zeppelin 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 Los Trios Bonzos. 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 1990, dying suddenly of a heart attack. Deborah now has an album out, dedicated to the three men she lost.

When John died in 1990, Deborah was just 21. Possessed with a rockin’ blues voice that has matured beautifully since, she was invited to Led Zep vocalist Robert Plant’s house to cut her first demos. He advised her to send them to record companies under an assumed name to avoid preconceptions and she was soon signed to Carrere, a major label in its day. A critically acclaimed album, For You The Moon, followed in 1985 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 learning the business from the bottom up. Eventually, I learned about contracts while working at Warners,” she says, as it was nothing: “I read my contracts again and found a loophole. I pursued it and got it all back. I thought, ‘Right, start again!’

The result is The Old Hyde, an album of original blues and some classic covers featuring her band – Robert Plant’s guitarist Robbie Blunt and Dougie Boyle, and her nephew, John’s son Jason Bonham, on drums. Mick Fleetwood and producer Mo Foster (Jeff Beck, Van Morrison) also helped out. “I owe them all loads,” she sighs. “I’ll be paying everyone back for the rest of my life.”

The Old Hyde refers to the farmhouse that the brothers and their father built in Cutnall Green in Worcestershire. 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 Pat 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 elevated 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 Hammer Of The Gods, based largely on the testament of one Richard Cole, Led Zeppelin’s road manager.
He found touring lonely—
that's why he drank

Bedroom walls were covered in Led Zeppelin stuff, they were my heroes along with Steve Marriott and Paul Rodgers. I grew up on the soul stuff which was a big favourite of John's and Michael's. I was a big Aretha Franklin fan at the age of seven and eight — Otis Redding, Al Green. But Led Zeppelin were my favourite band.

Michael became a photographer for the band but Debbie was always the little sister. "John was puritanical and quite strict. When I was 15, I used to bunk off school and go down to Swanage (the Led Zeppelin office). I'd go straight to 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, Bonzo's sister.'"

"John would be on the phone within seconds — 'Has my sister turned up there!? I'd have to drive and give. I'd be driven back home and John would tell me off.

"The office was run by Richard Cole and I look back now and really wish John was worried. He really should have put him through hell."

But Debbie will never regret the first time she really defied her brother when she attended the giant gig that Led Zeppelin 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 if I didn't see him then, I'd never see him play again.

"Poor old 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 slap 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 24, 1989. Bonham died during the night.

"My mother knew all day without knowing," Deborah recalls. "She was very distressed and couldn't think. She kept saying, 'Maybe I've missed someone's birthday' — it was a very strange day and when it came out, 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 fell. It just went mental. I really thought I couldn't handle it when Michael died. It hurt that much because I'd lost John in 1989, my father in 1989, Michael in 2000. 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 is doing really well too. He's playing with UFO, he doesn't drink, he's got a wonderful family. 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 feeling good again. Married to guitarist Peter Bullick, she has devoted her life to music and rescuing horses. But her family are never far from her mind. The title song of The Old Hyde is a poignant tribute to her brothers and the house they built. "It just came out and by the time I finished I was shaking."

"But the album isn't done and gloom," 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 rescue a few more horses."

The Old Hyde is out now on Track Records.