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INTERVIEWS

Deborah Bonham, A Family Act

By Adam Vickery

Deborah Bonham is the youngest child of John Sr. and Joan Bonham. Raised in Worcestershire, Deb found herself becoming fascinated with the idea of performing music. Her eldest brother John had joined Led Zeppelin when Deborah was just five years old.

When Deb became a teenager, she would often sit and jam with her nephew Jason who was only a few years younger. They would write their own material and perform for family and friends. It's with a little encouragement and with the help of Robert Plant she was able to record a demo and have some success with her debut album For You and the Moon.

Today, Deborah has achieved great success professionally. Deb has always been goal oriented and she has pushed forward no matter what the circumstances. It's well known the tragedy of her brother John, who died back in September 1980 but, another grief-sickening moment came on January 14, 2000, when her brother Mick died suddenly of a heart attack. Mick was a good natured person, who in latter years chummed around with John listening to Motown music and getting into mischief about the town. It was after John's death that Deb and Mick became close often seen laughing or jamming together on a stage somewhere, enjoying life to the fullest.

Fast forward to August 2006. I caught up with Deb at Fairport Convention's Cropredy Festival. I dial Deb's cell phone and on the other end, a warm and excited voice answers, "Adam, hi how are you?" I'm speaking with Deborah Bonham. She has taken the time to talk to me in regards to her new album, plus discuss her family and a few things about Led Zeppelin.

Here's how it went.

AV: Deborah, you have a new album coming out soon. What is the name of it and how is it compared to The Old Hyde?

DB: First off, it'll be out in the first part of the next year. I've had to put it off because I've been so busy playing plus some other stuff. The title of which, I don't know nothing has come to me as of yet (laughs) so it's currently untitled. Compared to the Old Hyde it's like rock, blues, funk comes together. It's not a million miles away in comparison to the "Hyde" but, it now features Jerry Shirley of Humble Pie on drums where as Jason played on The Old Hyde.

AV: The Old Hyde received some really wonderful reviews; Do you hope to achieve the same or greater success with the new album?

DB: Yeah, I hope so. We've been working away at this. It's been a long hard slog and not an easy quick fix to fame and stardom. You know that would be great but, you become more level headed and grounded when you have to work so hard. We've been chipping away at this and we've developed a great following and the word is starting to get out. The festivals have gotten much bigger, I'm playing one here with 40,000 people, plus the shows are really starting to come together. On the next album I have some really radio-friendly songs I hope to hear on there, not that I wrote them for that reason. The one song "Hold On" came out of desperation really about how your life goes with all the negative stuff hitting you all at once and you have to hold on to what is really great in your life and if you open your eyes you'd find you're not doing so bad. (laughs). A lot of people have picked up on that track and felt it was radio-friendly so well, you know, we'll see.

AV: Now you are currently out on tour and you did some shows with Foreigner, was it nice to be out

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jamming with Jason again?

DB: Well I didn't actually play with him but, we did open up and it was fantastic, one of the best tours I've been on. You know I just can't say enough about the Foreigner guys, the management and especially the fans. Mick Jones made us feel so welcome, it was like being on tour with your family, rather lovely and we had an absolute ball. We'd open every show and then Foreigner would come and blow the audience away, they were absolutely amazing! I was knocked out, so yah it was brilliant.

AV: You just commented on the tour "like playing with family" Have you considered playing with Jason or Zoe on some sort of recording in the future?

DB: Yeah, you never know! My attitude is never say no, if the opportunity arises and it comes together then absolutely why not? It would be brilliant but, we are all sort of doing our own thing at the moment. I think it would need the right time for everyone to say so do you want to do this or shall we? Jason and I have collaborated a lot. He's such an amazing talent, he's more than just a drummer. He has an innate ability to find great melodies and for writing songs and harmonizing. He's a great singer himself. We did a duet on his album "When You See the Sun," plus on a radio station "The Battle of Evermore" which was amazing, I didn't know he could sing like that and Zoe, she has her own thing going and she's a tremendous song writer. She does her own one women show out in New York.



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AV: She was doing some DJ club sort of stuff, right?

DB: Yeah, she was doing a bit of that but, in her own right she is also doing her thing as a singer/songwriter. She's great in the sense that she'll just pick up an acoustic guitar and start playing and it's fantastic. I would love to do something with Zoe, maybe you could get it together. Jason is in America, Zoe is in America and I'm here in England (lots of laughing). We'll just have to coordinate it somewhere.



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AV: Easier said than done. (laughs) Now, you commented on Jason being a good singer in his own right and having heard some backing vocals on a few Zeppelin tracks, he must have got that from his father.

DB: John had a great voice he was very much a melodic person. Again, everyone thought he was this hard rocker. You know there was a lot more to John Bonham than that. He grew up listening to Motown and bands like the Everly Brothers. He loved harmony, he loved Crosby, Stills and Nash. His whole thing was about harmony and melody.

AV: John and Mick were into soul music, too, right?

DB: Oh God yes, without a doubt. When I was growing up with John and Michael, in around where we lived, soul and Motown is where it was at. James Brown, Aretha Franklin, it was just great music.

AV: You were very fond of your brothers John and Michael. Is there a story that sticks out in your mind, maybe one that the fans would not have heard about?

DB: Oh, well a lot have the stories have now been written in Michael's book "Bonham by Bonham, My Brother John," (the title has since changed) but, there is one in there where the three of us just took off and John was buying me a horse. As we picked him up, I thought he was the most beautiful horse I'd seen. We put him in the trailer and John was driving and I sat between John and Michael and on the way home I said I've decided I'm going to call him "Moby Dick" and John looked at me and said No, he's much too fine for that. Well what should I call him and John said, "How 'bout Achilles?" and I said, "Yes, that's It, Achilles!"



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AV: You have a thing for horses and it was well known John had a thing for cars. What was his favourite?

DB: The Jenson, the Jenson Convertible. That was his favourite. It was a car he kept up until when he died. He had many cars, the AC Cobra, his Ferrari. My God he had cars. He always held on to the black Jenson. That was JB-7.



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AV: John, the rock star, was different at home, a down on the farm kind of guy, do you think John ever would have packed it all in and settled down?

DB: No, I couldn't ever imagine John giving up music or the band. It would have driven him to destruction, he loved being in Led Zeppelin. You know he found it hard touring. It is hard. I'm here today at this festival (Cropredy) with my dogs, my Mom, my sister-in-law Pat, John's wife, and I got my family with me. You know it's hard going away and leaving your family, but John he lived for that moment on drums. I couldn't imagine him packing it in.



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AV: You mentioned in Mick's book that you've seen Led Zeppelin live. What was your impression of the band or even your big brother?

DB: (Ecstatic laughter, Deb is thrilled with this question.) I was blown away! That is when I decided I've got to sing. God, it coloured my whole life. It coloured everything in the way I look at music, the band, my band, the way you play, the expectation on how good you should be, the grooves, you name it. It's just everything.

AV: Do you remember which show it was?

DB: Well, I first saw them when I was ten, at the Birmingham Odeon in the West Midlands. I'm going back a few years but, it was when they were first going. I saw them at Bath Festival, I saw them at Earls Court and I saw them at Knebworth.

AV: What did you think of the Earls Court show?

DB: It was fantastic, they were brilliant. There was a different style going on at Earls Court, if you watch John he's a lot more solid. If you watch the Albert Hall you can see he was such a showman. As he progressed he tried new techniques like playing from the wrist, I think he was phenomenal. The bass playing... I've always been in love with John Paul Jones, I just think he's...(giggles) You just need to hear him play "Ramble On" and it's all over.

AV: John and your brother were quite a duo when it came to the rhythm section.

DB: Oh, the grooves the two had, put that with Jimmy Page, the maestro, the man behind it all and Robert's voice and all that he brought to it and you have an amazing band. It's coloured my life in every which way you can think of.

AV: So interesting enough that you say that. It seems it was from that moment on you wanted to play.

DB: Yeah, that's where it's at for me now, playing live, I love the finish product of recording but, I'm very much a live person and I love rehearsing.

AV: So you prefer live to the studio?

DB: Yeah, this time in the studio I said "Right, we all go in sing it, play it and you record it." That's the way I like to do it. Of course, you do some over dubbing but, I can't deal with all that multi-tracking. I go for that live feel, much like the way Humble Pie use to do it. We did The Old Hyde like that although we had to piece it together because we recorded Jason at one place and the others somewhere else but, it was always sort of like one take like a live vibe when we did it. So, it's definitely a live thing for me, especially after watching Led Zeppelin.



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AV: It's been mentioned that John was always critical of his drumming; do you think he was pleased with his ability and even his performance of Moby Dick?

DB: Well, if I'd have been him. I'd be quite pleased. (laughs) I would imagine knowing John the way that I did is that he was a perfectionist, so he would have to be better and better every time. If he thought he couldn't perfect something then yes he would be critical of that but, then again I'm like that and so is Jason. I think any musician is like that if you are true to your art. So if you do a bit and you're not quite happy with it you would try and do it again a bit better so maybe that's what it was. I can't imagine John ever coming off stage and going "Oh, I didn't do that well!"

AV: Which album did John favour most?

DB: Hmmm, I don't know. Every time he'd come home and be more excited than the last. It's like every new album was the one.

AV: Which one do you prefer?

DB: I don't know! (laughs) It's hard I love Led Zeppelin I, I love Babe I'm Gonna Leave You, I just love it. I love Led Zeppelin II, one of my all time favourite tracks is Ramble On, I adore Since I've been Loving You, I love Led Zeppelin IV because of the Battle of Evermore and When The Levee Breaks and so on. Out of all the albums I couldn't tell you. The main thing I loved about them was that they were all different. There was such an eclectic mix of style. There just wasn't a bad album, they were all great albums the whole way through.

AV: Now, just out of curiosity you've been known to carry a copy of The Song Remains The Same with you everywhere you go. You will also watch it with anyone willing to sit down and watch it with you. Is this now the case with the new DVD?

DB: (Laughs) I've sort of calmed down. I went crazy on the new DVD for awhile but, I've since taken a break from Led

Zeppelin. I think it dominated my life for quite awhile. Today, funny enough of all days, is time I played them on the way here (on route to the Cropredy Festival) I was screaming and singing all the way here.

AV: So, maybe that will help inspire you on the remaining part of your tour.

DB: Yeah, absolutely! (more laughs)

AV: Speaking of the remaining part of your tour and the new album due out soon, do you have any plans for North America?

DB: I'm really hoping to come over to America next year and do it up. We really need to, we haven't done it this year, but, as the interest builds, we have one particular agent and label who is keen on having us out there and, of course, you can't do the States without doing Canada.

AV: Well, thank you Deborah, I should let you go now so that you can prepare for the stage and I would like to thank you for talking with me and answering a few questions.

DB: It's been lovely talking to you. It's been great and thank you. I'm going to go now but, I'll keep in touch and let you know where we're at. Cheers!

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