

# **The Guitarist with real “Bona” Fides: an interview with Joe Bonamassa**



Photo Credit: Sven-Sebastian Sajak

Okee dokee folks... Last night I had a dream and Joe Bonamassa was in it. Weird, I know. I think it was something like a movie that Joe Bonamassa was in or some other odd assemblage of dream scenes. I really can't remember much else. I don't know of any Bonamassa movies but according to IMDB he is listed as an actor and has been in a few films. The guitar empire that is Joe Bonamassa has entered my subconscious. Not really sure why I dreamed about him other than the fact that I did do a phone interview with him the other day and have been thinking about what to write. It seems like every YouTube video I watch lately is prefaced by a Joe Bonamassa concert ad. I also received an e-mail for the Joe Bonamassa Blues-Rock Masterclass and In The Jam video series. Usually it's on PBS that I see Bonamassa, where his performances are played continuously during annual pledge drives. Joe is everywhere and that includes The Providence Performing Arts Center on Saturday, November 20. As I mentioned earlier I spoke with Bonamassa by phone just before he was to take the stage at a show in St. Louis.

Before I talked with Bonamassa I listened to his just released album Time Clocks. It is a collection of songs recorded during the pandemic which required a bit of ingenuity to accomplish due to travel restrictions and safety measures. The songs are riff strong, driving blues-rock with a couple of numbers such as "Notches" and "Curtain Call" that benefit from Middle Eastern influences. The album draws your ears in and keeps you listening until the last note of the last track.

Joe told me this tour is 33 dates and they are just about to finish the first leg. I was told by a friend in the business that Bonamassa handles all of his concerts himself. When asked about it he said, "It's called the Four Walls... We are the promoter, the agent, and the venue rep...it's all about betting on yourself." In addition to doing this he has his own record label for over 20 years that has released 45 Bonamassa projects as well as recordings by other artists. Some of those are Joanna Connor, Joanne Shaw Taylor, Jimmy Hall, and a new-to-the-label artist Larry McRae, who Bonamassa says, "is so fucking good and no one has ever taken a chance on him!"

Bonamassa has been playing guitar for over 40 years now and started playing at young age of 4. I wondered what kind of guitar was small enough for a 4 year old to play. He told me, "It was an Erlewine short scale travel guitar called a Chiquita, just like the banana... It was small enough that I could get my head, and hands around it." Joe's father played guitar and had a music store as well. Bonamassa came from a musical household and is a fourth generation musician. His parents were very encouraging about playing and he says, "I always wanted to play guitar, that is until very recently." I asked why that is so. His response was, "I have been growing weary of it by the day... But it's ok." I told him that I have been playing for over 45 years and he replied, "You're a lifer like me!" I also mentioned that I am nowhere as good as him. I asked if he has any hand issues after playing for so long as I am personally dealing with this. He told me that he was blessed with a good natural technique where he doesn't play hard, he plays loud but not hard. He compared it to a good golf swing: "You don't have to go up to it and crush it, it's the economy of the movement, the chances of your hands surviving are greatly increased."

Early in Joe's career he met blues legend BB King. He was encouraging to Bonamassa and helped him as well as others with their careers. Joe said, "BB was generous with his music, his time, his stage and so much more." I managed to make Joe a little jealous of me when I mentioned that I had met the legendary Muddy Waters when I was 16 years old. He commented, "What a thrill! What a lucky dude, man! I did shake Willie Dixon's hand once, I was a young kid opening for Buddy Guy and he came up to me and said, 'Hi, my name is Willie', and I thought to myself, holy shit I know who you are!"

I was curious to know what the most “awe-inspiring” guitar collaboration he experienced was. He remarked, “I think the night a few years ago when Eric Clapton came out and played a song with me at my first gig at The Royal Albert Hall would be very difficult to top...I’ve gotten to play with a lot of my heroes and gotten to know a lot of them as well.”

I had talked with Rick Nielson of Cheap Trick the day before this interview and we talked about his guitar collection so I had to ask Bonamassa about his stockpile of 6 strings. Joe said, “I know Rick” and continued with, “I have hundreds of guitars, I probably have somewhere around 450, I bought five guitars this week.” I asked him, “You collect guitar amplifiers as well, Fender Tweeds?” Bonamassa expressed, “Yup, about the same number of amps as guitars, I have eighteen lifetimes of musical instruments from the 50’s.” I exclaimed, “You must have a warehouse as well (referring the Rick Nielson’s warehouses of guitars and gear).” Joe came back with, “No, I decorate my houses with them, they are pretty much all on display.” As a guitar player myself I asked what his favorite was to play. He told me, “I am pretty much a Gibson and Fender guy but it very much depends on the song, most of the guitars I will play tonight and in Providence were made between 1951 and 1963, the acoustic I use is an Alvarez Yairi that I use to do this ‘PT Barnum type thing’ for the encores, it needs to be percussive and loud, I like the electronics in them.”

As for the Providence show that is coming up Bonamassa told me, “We’re playing stuff off the new album and stuff that goes back 20 years plus, and stuff we haven’t played live before, some of the brighter stars of the album we put out last year that we didn’t get to tour for, it’s a pretty good show. People who have seen me 25 times or more have told me it’s our best set list so far and that’s a nice compliment! We are looking at a straight 2 hour and ten minute show with no intermission and everyone can be home for the late local news!”

Joe Bonamassa will be at PPAC on Saturday, November 20th. For more about the show “Drive” over to: [PPACRI.org](http://PPACRI.org). That’s it for now, thanks for reading. [www.JohnFuzek.com](http://www.JohnFuzek.com)