



Bonamassa's 'Black Rock'

INVENTING THE NEW GREEK BLUES

By Barbara Schultz

Joe Bonamassa has built his career on the foundation laid by white blues/rock guitar legends like Stevie Ray Vaughan and Eric Clapton. He fell in love with this music very early in life—grabbed his first guitar at age 4, and was landing gigs near his home in upstate New York by age 12. Often associated with other guitar prodigies such as Johnny Lang and Eric Johnson, Bonamassa has developed a style that incorporates numerous blues idioms—a bit of Elmore James, a touch of B.B. King, etc.—but owes more to rock interpreters like Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix.

So Bonamassa is very well matched with his longtime engineer/producer Kevin Shirley, who has wrangled seminal performances from guitar bands like Aerosmith, Black Crowes, Silverchair, Iron Maiden and Journey. Shirley, who says his clients have affec-

tionately described him as “a nice guy, but one of the most bull-headed producers you could hope to meet,” knows how to capture wild guitars; he also knows he’ll get more compelling performances from artists if he keeps stirring things up.

“This is our sixth project together,” Shirley says. “When we started recording together way back when, one of the tenets of our working relationship was that we were going to push the boundaries. I recognize where Joe’s roots are, but we were going to take the blues to different places. So over the years, we’ve gone swampy, we’ve gone eclectic; in our conversations, we’ve recognized that there are different blues genres: Memphis versus Chicago, Delta blues, Appalachian music, New Orleans, and it’s all related—even back to Celtic music. We’ve always wanted

to explore blues around the world and see how all that fitted in.”

So Shirley saw a great opportunity when a friend, studio owner/engineer Kostas Kalimeris, mentioned that he was building Black Rock, a brand-new studio/villa in spectacular Santorini, Greece. Crystal-blue sea, historic architecture, a wealth of cultural/musical possibilities and a brand-new SSL 9080 J-based studio designed by Roger D’Arcy of Recording Architecture. It probably wasn’t too tough for Shirley to convince Bonamassa to bring his band to Greece to record a new album.

One of Shirley’s trademarks is that he insists on a lot of pre-production so that in-studio performances can happen quickly and be captured in the moment. Shirley helped prepare for Bonamassa’s sessions at Black Rock by auditioning YouTube videos that Kalimeris sent; he was able to choose a handful of Greek musicians and line them up before bringing Bonamassa and his bandmembers to Santorini.

Arriving while Kalimeris and his staff were still putting the finishing touches on the studio, Shirley and the bandmembers enjoyed the residential facility’s hospitality and daily dips in the Aegean Sea, while Bonamassa sequestered himself to write new material. Then Shirley arranged some front-porch-style sessions with just Bonamassa and the Greek musicians he’d selected.

“The first thing we did was have a session with these two Greek guys, Thanasis Vasilopoulos on clarino and Manolis Karadinis on bouzouki,” Shirley says. “Neither of them spoke English, and it was an interesting way of getting the music going. We actually recorded one track sitting outside on the patio outside the studio. At night it’s so quiet there, the recording was beautiful. These were different elements that we introduced into Joe’s sound.”

Kalimeris, the studio owner, also found those sessions particularly memorable: “That night was so peaceful, it made the recording really unique,” he recalls. “The vibe from everybody was fun and experimental.”

The introduction of folk instruments is especially effective in Bonamassa’s cover of Leonard Cohen’s inspiring “Bird on a Wire”—a song that’s been recorded by singular artists such as Johnny Cash and Joe Cocker, but Bonamassa makes it his own.

Shirley, who records all of his projects live, also took Bonamassa out of his guitar comfort

zone on this album: "Normally, Joe plays a Les Paul guitar, but on this album I wanted to try to challenge him, so I asked him to put away his beloved Les Paul and we recorded with him playing a Telecaster and an amplifier and nothing between them. Then I just I dangled a [Shure SM] 57 over the speaker, just trying to get an edgier live feeling. After five or six days of that, we went back to Joe's comfort zone; we put up the huge stacks and miked them up properly with

a 57 and the Beyer 201 and a Royer R121 and a Neumann 67 back into the room to give it a little bit of ambience."

Shirley's mixing process, done this time on the SSL console and listening through KRK VXT6s, also seems to be part and parcel of recording live: "We don't mix separately," he says. "I always mix as I go, and my rough mixes are what make the album. I feel that when it's coming off the console, you're right there, into the music, and you're aware of the minutiae when you're that close to it. When you wait until four weeks later, it's, 'Why did we put that guitar part in again? I know I had a good idea at the time.' The rough mixes really capture the way we heard the song."



Rehearsing outside at Black Rock, L-R: Joe Bonamassa (guitar), Manolis Karadinis (bouzouki), Rick Melick (keyboards), Thanasis Vasilopoulos (clarino)


Bonamassa and friends were so happy with what they heard at Black Rock that they named their album after the studio. *Black Rock*, the album, comes out March 9, 2010, on Bonamassa's own J&R Adventures label, and he and Shirley plan to return to Greece to record a follow-up next year.



Bonamassa playing a Resonator Dulcimer

"I love the studio; it's absolutely the most creative studio I've ever been in," Shirley says. "There's all this traditional Greek architecture with concrete, concave ceilings. Once you're inside these things, you get this amazing resonance and explosion of sound, which is a little uncontrollable, but it's fantastic. And staying in the place and being able to go in at 7 a.m. or coming back after dinner and cutting a track at 11 or 12 at night—it's a wonderful environment to be able to do that." III


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