



JOE BONAMASSA'S "NEW" SOUND



BONAMASSA'S TONE STILL STARTS where it has for a long, long time—with his fingers on a fresh set of Ernie Ball strings. ("I use .011-.052 on Gibsons, and .010-.046 on Fenders, because Fenders have thinner frets.") His sound also culminates where it has for countless tours now—behind a ClearSonic acrylic sound shield. ("I can't play without the ClearSonic. It's arguably the most important part of my rig. The beat-down of sound that unshielded amps throw at you is just too distracting, especially if you are a singer.") Aside from his signature Dunlop Joe Bonamassa Cry Baby wah pedal, though, nearly everything else between the strings and the shield has recently been swapped out.

For starters, gone are the wireless systems. The first thing Bonamassa's guitar signal hits is a 40-foot Klotz Joe Bonamassa signature-series guitar cable. "Also in the chain is a custom boost pedal George Tripps made for me," says Bonamassa. "It's basically a modded Way Huge Green Rhino that I kick in for extra sustain."

From there, a T.C. Electronic Stereo Chorus pedal splits the signal left and right into Bonamassa's "new" amps: four Fender combos built nearly two decades before he was born. One side of the chorus hits two 1959 Twins, the other goes to a pair of 1958 Bassmans. Each amp pair is linked by a Lehle P-Split splitter box. "The chorus is set so low you can hardly hear it," says Bonamassa. "A very slight chorus helps tighten up the bottom end on tweed amps. The controls on the amps are all set identically. The Volume,

Treble, and Middle knobs are all set to 10—that's 10 out of 12, because tweed dials go to 12—and the Bass is at 0. The Presence is about halfway up."

While this setup is bigger and more elaborate than what most guitarists gig with, it's bare-bones compared to what Bonamassa is used to. "When I would listen back to the tone of the big rig on live recordings, I couldn't really hear the difference between the Dumble, the Van Weelden, and the Marshall. And if I'm not hearing it, the audience isn't hearing it either. Plus, there were always phasing issues and other technical stuff to work out with that rig. It's easy to chase your tail thinking you need a setup that's as complicated as The Edge's, but eventually you rediscover the beauty in plugging straight into an amp, with your only pedalboard being the knobs on your guitar."

At first, Bonamassa found it unnerving to play with a completely dry tone. "I was up there going, 'This is harder to play, and I'm not getting any help. There's no delay. I'm getting killed here,'" he says. "But when I listened back later, I realized I liked the tone better. I liked the sound of the *struggle*. You play better when you're not über-comfortable swimming in reverb-y goodness. I was actually nervous to play some of our own songs—like 'The Ballad of John Henry' and 'Sloe Gin'—at Red Rocks without my usual setup. But all my friends came up to me afterwards and said, 'Dude, that sounds so much bigger than before!' I was like, 'Cool. Done.'" —JUDE GOLD