



Joe Bonamassa

Mr Post-Millennium Blues returns with a rough 'n' ready twelfth album that "will need to be played loud".

Words: **Henry Yates**

If recent soundbites are to be believed, and Joe Bonamassa really does intend to retire when he's 69, then the blues-rock colossus needs to crack on. Perhaps that explains why the 38-year-old tracked his twelfth album in a breakneck five days, with long-standing producer Kevin Shirley pushing his man to spare the polish.

"Kevin wanted me to be hungry for something more," Bonamassa says, "and angry at making the music sound right. Really passionate. He wanted less conservative tracks where I sometimes play it safe. That means I fought with the solos to really go out there and have that rough edge. The album sounds energetic and what rock music needs to be: less precise and thought-out. Of course the blues roots are there, but this record will need to be played loud."

Due for release on Provogue on March 25, the as-yet-untitled album was initiated last July. "I travelled to Nashville," Bonamassa recalls, "to write these songs with some of the best guys in the business: James House, Tom Hambridge, Jeffrey Steele, Jerry Flowers and Gary Nicholson. As far as the lyrics go, you'll hear your proverbial trains, planes, mountains, valleys, rivers and other blues references like heartbreak and loneliness, but there are some amazing lyrics about getting away from the stressful, crazy times and losing yourself with your special someone. I think anyone will be able to relate."

With the tracklisting settled, an extended band including two drummers, a brass section and backing singers assembled in late 2015 at Nashville's Grand Victor Sound studio. "The atmosphere was dynamic, all tracked live," says Bonamassa. "Since we recorded the tracks all live, you can tell it was all about the performance. Not many artists in the world still do live recording with all of the musicians playing off of each other. I think it will invigorate and excite the fans,

because they'll be able to hear the passion and edgy sound that Kevin and I were going for. The record embodies the energy of all the top-notch musicians in the room."

Such a seat-of-the-pants approach was not without its tests, the guitarist admits. "Really, all of the songs were challenging, because all of us musicians had to navigate the songs with each other without over-planning our parts. All the musicians are the best at their game, [but] everyone was pushed to their limits, face-to-face with each other and forced to deal with the songs head-on. I completely trust in Kevin. He pushes my musical ability by challenging me to not just rest on my laurels or settle for 'good'."

Bonamassa says the album should be measured not by sales or media plaudits, but by artistic merit. "We want people to see the evolution of a blues-rock musician, someone who isn't resting on his accomplishments, but pushing forward and thinking how music can evolve and stay relevant. The album was created with total regard to the fans and music lovers, so they can enjoy a new side – instead of the same *Ballad Of John Henry* riff over and over."

Following its release, Bonamassa will tour with his usual masochistic zeal, pursuing an itinerary that would make lesser road warriors weep. "2016 will be another long and busy year," he notes, "starting with another groundbreaking DVD shoot at Carnegie Hall, which will be all-acoustic with new, eclectic players. Then our second annual Keeping The Blues Alive At Sea music festival will launch off our spring tour, which will reach Germany, the UK, Australia and the US. I hope to get a few weeks off before the summer tribute tour that we're planning – it's going to be legendary. Then, during the summer, we hope to get back in the studio with Beth Hart for another collaboration album. Then more touring around the world."