

Joe Bonamassa is, of course, one of the premier blues-rock artists of our time, a point driven home time and time again by the consistently fine music offered on "Joe Bonamassa - Beacon Theatre: Live From New York" (J&R Adventures). This is a two-disc set (concert on disc one, bonus tracks and features on disc two), and worth every penny of the asking price.

The first disc opens with a blistering acoustic guitar solo played in a subway tunnel. In a "stunt" that brings to mind the famous video of world-renowned classical violinist playing in a subway station, only to be totally ignored, Bonamassa likewise plays his heart out and no one seems to care. Obviously, people going from place to place have WAY too much on their minds these days; smell the roses, folks! Needless to say, no one in the Beacon Theatre audience has their mind on anything but the intense reverberations coming from the stage.

This is big, dramatic music for the most part, played by a powerful four-piece combo who have fully mastered their craft, their art, and their sense of the theatrical possibilities inherent in the blues format. These players are energetic, demonstrative, passionate, and creative. This isn't a superstar guitar innovator with a mediocre backup band, as we heard on the Roy Buchanan DVD. This is a UNIT, four musicians who know their individual roles, but with one result in mind. Bonamassa's style may be very different from Buchanan's, but he is another guitarist with the skills to easily focus all the attention on himself. But by hiring musicians as fine as himself and rehearsing them to the point of oneness, he has concocted a sound that listeners from many musical backgrounds should (and do) find irresistible.

In addition to some solid and very appealing original material, the cover repertoire is culled from a variety of sources, not just strictly hard-core blues, everything from Little Walter to Leonard Cohen, stopping to pick up tunes by early r&b giant Lowell Fulson and blues/jazz fusionist Mose Allison. Bonamassa also pays homage to his blues-rock forbears, with songs by Rory Gallagher and Gary Moore, two artists who drew from many of the same sources as Bonamassa, with results entirely distinct from each other, paving the way for the modern "heavy" approach to blues-rock.

Bonamassa and company also welcome three guest artists, two of whom (John Hiatt and Paul Rodgers) bring their own material with them. Bonamassa and Beth Hart have previously collaborated on tour and on CD. On Bobby Bland's "I'll Take Care of You," Hart lets out an attention-grabbing wail preceding Bonamassa's intense guitar solo, which may be the single most gripping moment in the entire concert. (Side note - I never realized Brook Benton wrote this song, and would never have guessed it.) Hart's other feature, Lowell Fulson's "Sinner's Prayer", may not have especially ribald lyrics, but she sure makes them SOUND raunchy!

John Hiatt's plugged-in hollow-body guitar adds a folkish Americana ambience to the proceedings. But who's to say that the melancholic lyrics of "Down Around My Place" are not blues, albeit of a different variety, even before Bonamassa's solo kicks in. "I Know A Place", in which Hiatt and Bonamassa share vocal honors, is more definably in a progressive-blues vein.

The last guest, Paul Rodgers, works out on two songs from his days with Free. His years with Bad Company may have fattened his bank account to a greater degree, but Free remains at the core of Rodgers' singing, which is just as gritty after 40-plus years. He is STILL "The Voice", as he just plain dominates the two songs he performs on. By the way, the titles of Rodgers' two songs are reversed in the booklet - "Walk In My Shadow" precedes "Fire and Water".

Do not, however, get the impression that this is one of those all-star affairs that relies on guest artists to make its impact. There are many other highlights throughout the concert. For instance, there's a rompin', stompin' "You Better Watch Yourself" in which Bonamassa illustrates once and for all why he's often called "Smokin' Joe". He turns

in a decidedly prog-rock direction on the driving "Blue and Evil." (I would have loved to have heard Robert Plant take this song on in the 1970's.) There are more ballad-like songs as well, such as "Mountain Time", with its taqsim-like intro. The concert ends with a rousing interpretation of the Mose Allison/Yardbirds classic, "Young Man Blues", which contrast Bonamassa's free-rhythm vocals with powerfully rocking instrumental segments.

The concert disc generously runs to 1 hour and 55 minutes, twice as long as so many concert DVD's. The bonus features on disc two include two more songs from the concert, which are not simply filler, some interesting backstage chatter between Bonamassa and David Crosby, who teaches our star a tuning trick or two, and a segment where Bonamassa talks about the busking experience which opened the film. There is also a photo gallery, not all of the pics relating to the concert.

Musically, and in terms of production, this self-released concert DVD is most definitely on a par with anything on the major music-DVD labels, by far bigger names. Bigger definitely does not equate with better in the world of music, and this is a set that definitely deserves to attract a major-label-sized audience.

<http://genecdvd.blogspot.com/2012/05/four-blues-dvds-moses-oakland-billy-d.html>