

Cover Story: No Ordinary Joe: Joe Bonamassa – Keeper of the Flame

National Standards: 7-8, 11

Joe Bonamassa started playing guitar when he was four years old. He was a competent player at six and a wunderkind at nine. An aficionado of blues-rock and now 43 he has built a successful career as a performer who records regularly. The company he owns and built with a business partner has full control over his music, his recordings, his touring and all of his marketing activities.

Bonamassa is also an avid collector of guitars, amplifiers and music memorabilia, housing over 400 guitars and 400 amplifiers in two home/studio/museums.

Moreover, he's now the keeper of the flame for guitar-based blues, or "blues-rock," a style of music in which few currently play with his level of virtuosity.

Prepare

Have students listen to the music of a succession of blues artists. Start with Robert Johnson, then Little Walter and Muddy Waters, then B.B. King, then Eric Clapton and finally Bonamassa. There are many in between, there are vocalists, there is rich history to explore, but for this exercise, the progression will give a taste, and perhaps inspire further study.

Key points in the article:

- The blues developed from the music sung by slaves working in the fields of the American south
- The blues electrified when music electrified in the 1940s and 1950s, and British musicians heard it, prized it and incorporated it into their rock and pop, exporting it as a new sound, back to America.
- Joe Bonamassa was a guitar prodigy who enjoyed the music of British musicians playing their version of American blues.
- As he matured, he decided that he would control his recording and touring, creating a business model that allowed him to do so.
- He then became a collector of guitars and amplifiers, amassing a "world-class" collection.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- VIRTUOSO: a person highly skilled in music or another artistic pursuit.
- MAINSTREAM: the ideas, attitudes, or activities that are regarded as normal or conventional; the dominant trend in opinion, fashion, or the arts.
- SUPERGROUP: a musical performing group whose members have successful solo careers, are members of other groups, or are well known in other musical professions.
- DESCENDANTS: someone related to a person or group of people who lived at an earlier time.
- PRESTIGIOUS: Inspiring respect and admiration; having high status.

Discuss

Compare and contrast the benefits and drawbacks of working with big companies vs. starting one's own enterprise

Benefits could be:

- Controlling the creative process and product.

Drawbacks could be:

- Working without the creative input and support of others.

Play some of Joe Bonamassa's music.

Play the videos (from the links in the In Tune story) about Bonamassa's music, career and collecitons.

Ask

- Why is Bonamassa "the keeper of the flame" for blues music. What does this mean?
- How does "the blues" differ from "blues rock" and which kinds of music were influenced by the blues.

Play blues rock examples by Coco Montoya, Samantha Fish, Buddy Guy, Kenny Wayne Shepard and Gary Clark Jr. and compare them to Joe Bonamassa's music.

Expand

Discuss the theme of independence in contemporary music, particularly by those playing specialized genres. Who are the top artists today creating and playing reggae, classical, bluegrass, metal and jazz?

- Why do people collect guitars rather than pianos or tubas, for example?
- What makes a guitar particularly desirable to a collector?

Questions

1. How old was Joe when he first opened for B.B. King?
2. Who first inspired him?
3. Which famous producer/engineer helped Joe create his first album?
4. What famous British concert hall did Joe want to play?
5. Who is Joe's manager and business partner?
6. How many guitars does Joe own and what does he call his museums?
7. What is Joe's favorite guitar?
8. In what part of the U.S. did the blues originate?
9. How has Joe's foundation responded to the COVID 19 pandemic?
10. What is the name of the company that manages all of Joe's musical activities?

Answers

1. 10

2. His father
3. Tom Dowd
4. The Royal Albert Hall
5. Roy Weisman
6. 400 guitars; Nerdville East and Nerdville West
7. Gibson Les Paul Sunburst
8. The Mississippi Delta
9. It has given grants to hundreds of musicians who can no longer performsd
10. J&R Adventures