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Music: Bonamassa's 'Black Rock'

Jan 1, 2010 12:00 PM, By Barbara Schultz

INVENTING THE NEW GREEK BLUES

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 Beyr 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."

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.

"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."

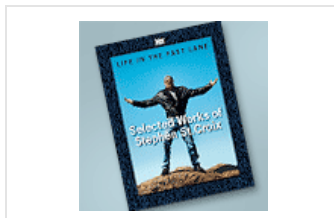
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Rehearsing outside at Black Rock Studios. Joe Bonamassa (guitar), Manolis Karadinis (Bazouki), Rick Melick (keyboards), Thanasis Vasilopoulos (clarino)



Kevin Shirley, Thanasis Vasilopoulos (Clarino and Nei), Joe Bonamassa, Manolis Karadinis (Bazouki)



Joe Bonamassa with a Resonator Dulcimer at Black Rock



Joe Bonamassa and Kostas Kalimeris, owner of Black Rock Studios



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Kevin Shirley at the studios local restaurant. Ta Delfinia. €20 will get you a gorgeous meal.



Kostas Kalimeris and Kevin Shirley

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