



BACK AND BLUES

Matt Frost speaks to erstwhile number one pop artist Sandi Thom about her new-found artistic freedom, her refreshingly rootsy third album and her love of all things 6-string

Until now, Sandi Thom will perhaps forever be ingrained in the public consciousness for her light a cappella folk-pop ditty, 'I Wish I Was A Punk Rocker (With Flowers In My Hair)', which shot to the top of the charts in June 2006, going on to become one of the biggest-selling singles of the year and paving the way for her first album, *Smile... It Confuses People*, to debut at the charts' summit just a week later.

In 2008, Sandi released her second album, *The Pink & The Lily*, but both the long player and its offshoot singles – perhaps unsurprisingly – did not manage to match the unheralded success of their predecessors, and Thom eventually became yet another victim of a major-label dropping exercise. After leaving Sony, Sandi opted to start her own company, Guardian Angels Records, and her third album, *Merchants And Thieves*, has just been released. The record marks a refreshing rebirth for Sandi, showcasing a mixture of folk, country, blues and bluegrass material, as well as some great guitar work courtesy of Randall Breneman, Marcus Bonfanti and her now partner Joe Bonamassa (on the single 'This Ol'

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World'), as well as sterling playing throughout from Thom herself.

Songs Of Freedom

Sandi is clearly revelling in her newly found artistic freedom. "At the time of the first album, I was young, naive and I'd just been taken on by a manager and was guided into a certain direction," explains Sandi. "It was like there was someone else's vision in mind, and this album really is the first opportunity I've ever had to just dig up what inspired me when I was growing up, and everything that's in me, and actually put that on a record. It's the first opportunity that I've had to really be as honest as I could possibly be. This has always been my intention and is how I mean to continue.

"It's such a great thing to go out and play the gigs and listen back to the album and be, like, uberproud of it," she continues. "I feel so comfortable and so

happy and so content that I can do this, sit down and talk about these songs, and then go on stage and sing them and play them and know that it's all coming from the right place. It's great to just be able to go out with all your conviction and all your spirit and pour your heart into it and say, 'Truly, this is very honest!' I think people respond to that and I think that's where the connection lies."

Brighton Rocks

Merchants And Thieves, the title of which was inspired by a lyric from Bob Dylan's 'Changing Of The Guards', and late American bluesman Chris Whitley's cover version in particular, was largely recorded by Gez Walton at Ironworks Studios in Brighton over the course of just a couple of weeks. The live vibe filtering through the recordings was very much a conscious decision on Sandi Thom's part.

"My memory of the second record was just the fact that we ended up recording over and over and over again certain songs," recalls Thom. "And it was at the want of people at the label wanting different versions and different tempos and different lyrics and different this and different that, and in the end it was just going over the same thing with another coat of paint. It was never-ending, and you get to the end and you forget what it was at the start, so I definitely wanted to be as far away from that process as possible. Basically, to me it was like, 'We're making a record – there's nobody telling us we can't do this and we can't do that, or you must sound like this or you can't write that word!'"

One of the real highlights on *Merchants And Thieves* is the instrumental title track, a guitar duet between Sandi and Marcus Bonfanti, a long-term collaborator of Thom's who is now a rising-high blues artist in his own right. The track is another example of Sandi's artistic independence.

"I started out with just these two guitar parts, and in the end I didn't want to write any words because I just loved the guitars," says Sandi. "And I thought, 'Well, nobody's



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telling me I can’t do this, so I’m going to bloody well do it!’ So we just left the track on there as an instrumental. I played my 12-string Duesenberg electric and Marcus was playing his [Gibson] Hummingbird. We just have these two counterparts, and then I play a melody over it with some reverse delay on there and Bob’s your uncle. It gets a bit hippy-trippy but it sounds really great and I love playing it.”

Rub Of The Green

Sandi Thom started playing the piano at the age of four and first picked up a guitar at 14, inspired by the riffs Slash was carving out across certain Guns N’ Roses tracks she found in her brother’s record collection. Her father has also always been a big influence on her, both in terms of his 12-string

playing and his love of blues legend Peter Green, a passion shared by Sandi herself.

“[Peter Green’s] style of playing basically is still now what really inspires me,” explains Thom. “There’s a song on the album called ‘Gold Dust,’ where we deliberately sat down and said this song would sound great with that kind of ‘Black Magic Woman’ style to it. It’s my first solo on any of my records, and I guess that was influenced by the fact that I listened to Peter Green a lot. I played my Tele, which is just plugged into a [Boss] DD-3 delay pedal and a [Boss BD-2] Blues Driver with my Fender Hot Rod Blues Deluxe.”

When Sandi’s writing solos, she’s influenced by both the guitar players she collaborates with and the vocal melodies that reverberate around her own head. “It’s funny because I’ll sit down

with Marcus and I’ll sit down with Randall [Breneman] and I’ll sit down occasionally with Joe [Bonamassa] and I get people to show me stuff,” explains Sandi. “It’s amazing how quickly you can learn just from people showing you stuff or watching BB King on YouTube.

“I think, because I’m a singer and because I have a brain for melody, maybe I don’t know where the notes are, or my fingers don’t know where they’re going, but my head knows what I want to try and emulate. I think, ‘What would I sing at this particular point in time?’ and then I try and play it. I guess that’s my method. When we did the ‘Gold Dust’ solo that’s pretty much what I had in mind, and it’s got a little bit of a Santana vibe about it as well, but the whole song has quite a Hispanic feel to it.”

Sandi’s Axes

When it comes to acoustics, Sandi Thom favours a tobacco sunburst Taylor T5 12-string and a Gibson Songwriter Standard, which is a more recent purchase. The aforementioned Fender Telecaster

was the result of an afternoon’s walk down London’s Denmark Street with Joe Bonamassa.

“I went down with Joe and basically we went through all these guitars,” explains Sandi. “I didn’t really have a vast amount of knowledge but he suggested I get this particular guitar, which was a Japanese reissue Tele Custom, the Keith Richards model, and that was my first electric. It’s a great guitar and I was on a budget. I said, ‘I’ve only got this amount of money to spend on it, so let’s make it a good one!’”

Sandi also owns a 1965 cardinal red Gibson Melody Maker. “I play that one every night and that’s kind of like my main electric,” she explains. “That’s a great guitar but it does need a bit of love because it’s very old. I would never touch the tailpiece because it would just go instantly out of tune, but it is a great guitar. I bought it in a place called Rumble Seat Music in upstate New York. I love Joan Jett and she used to play a white Melody Maker, so I wanted a Melody Maker because of Joan Jett. You know what it’s like when you go in and play guitars – some



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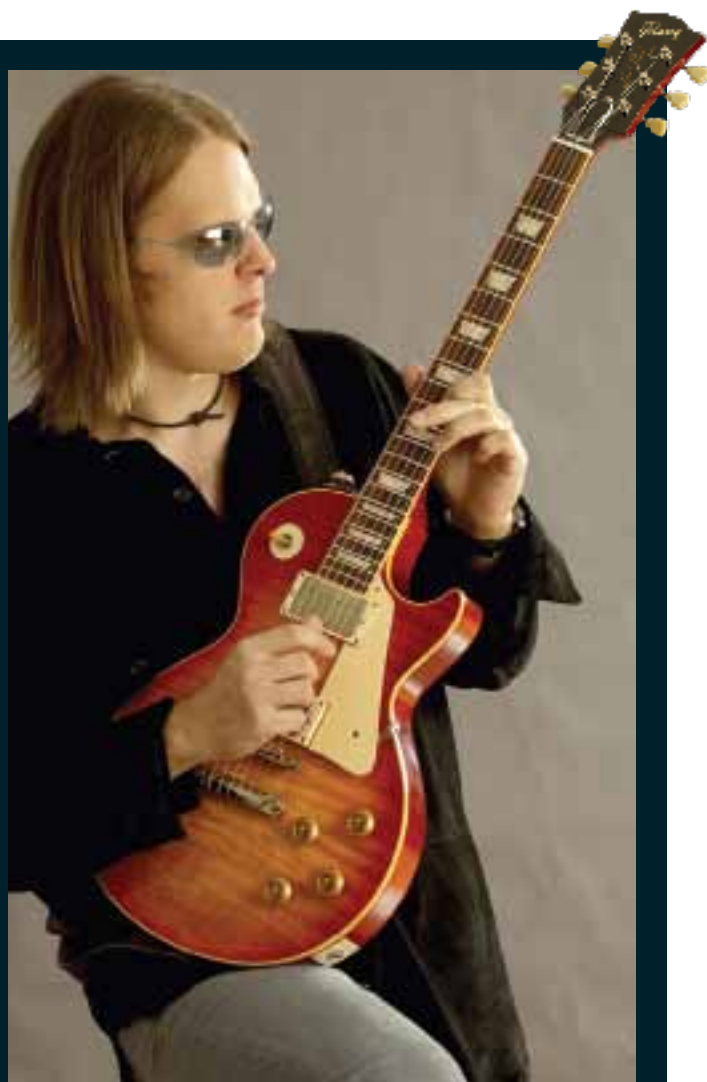
you just pick up and there’s something there. I don’t know why but you just do, and this is what happened.”

Guitars For Girls

With the release of her third album, the birth of her own record label and major tours of the UK, Europe and the US to come before the end of the year, Sandi Thom has a lot to look forward to in 2010. On top of all this, the year will also see the launch of a Sandi Thom signature guitar, courtesy of Farida guitars, a move that

Thom is understandably very excited about.

“I think that they basically approached me because they wanted to try and promote guitars to girls,” explains Sandi. “I guess there are not that many notable females. There are a lot of girls who play the guitar and strum along on the acoustic, but I don’t know if there are many girls that are really well-rated female guitar players. You’ve got Bonnie Raitt, you could say Joni Mitchell is in her own way a great guitar player, and Joan Jett was always noted for being a female guitarist, then in Britain there’s girls out there like Joanne Shaw Taylor, who play great guitar but they’re not in the limelight yet. It’s very much still a man’s world, so I think Farida wanted to try and start promoting more to women and they approached me, which is great. I’m alright but I’ve got a long way to go, so I think it’s pretty cool that people think that I’m good enough for that. It’s pretty amazing!” **GB**



HEY JOE!

Joe Bonamassa talks to us about his collaboration with Sandi Thom

“I was playing the same venue in Cardiff as Sandi in 2006. I ran across some posters and overheard the promoter raving how fast the show had sold out. So, this being the modern age, I Googled her, bought her album and really dug her songs and voice.

“I first came to work with Sandi in the most dire of situations for me. I’d lost my voice on tour due to the Pompeii plague I got from a couple of my band mates, and I had this big gig in Nice, France, that I couldn’t cancel. So I rang her up and asked if she could bail me out and she was awesome – she had never sang a note of my music and nailed it on four hours’ notice. I was very impressed and supremely grateful. Then in January this year, I sang and played on a song called ‘This Ol’ World’ on her new album, and it came out really great. I’m

honoured to be on it. Sandi is one of those writers that writes the ‘wish I thought of that’ lyric and melody. She has a natural ability to describe situations and emotions in very few words. That’s a talent you can’t teach.

“When it comes to guitar, Sandi seriously started playing lead around the same time she filled in for me last summer. She’d dabbled before, but in eight months I’ve seen her really dedicate herself to playing and improve to the power of ten. I can’t believe it’s the same person I heard noodling from her dressing room in Germany last summer. *Merchants And Thieves* is a great album. My favourite track is ‘Belly Of The Blues’ – blues with melody and hooks, and that’s really tough to achieve. I think this will be a watershed for her career and the beginning of ‘phase two’, so to speak.”