

## Johnson to jam at Bank of America Pavilion for two nights

By **ANDRES CAAMANO**  
ASSISTANT EDITOR

**BOSTON** — For those who claim to be avid fans of rock guitar, heading eastward on Route 2 to Boston on either Aug. 25 or 26 or both those days should find it to be an easy trek, especially when one realizes who will be making an appearance in The Hub.

Eric Johnson, probably most acclaimed for his work on the "Ah Via Musicom" album recorded in 1990, which earned him a Grammy, will open for the Steve Miller Band at the Bank of America Pavilion on those two days.

As a location, the Bank of America Pavilion will be a familiar sight for Johnson.

"That's a huge outdoor facility where I've opened the show for a number of people, and that's a pretty nice place," Johnson said.

The guitarist has been on tour since last month, as part of the "Return of Big Texans from Outer Space" Tour, promoting his latest release, "Bloom," an eclectic wide-ranging collection of 16 new songs.

The tour, which began July 15 in Tinley Park, Ill., had Johnson opening that night for Sammy Hagar, the singer best known as having more than capably replaced David Lee Roth for so many years as Van Halen's lead crooner.

For Johnson, the one-night experience was particularly memorable.

"Their show rocked out of control...I thought I was Lawrence Welk opening up the show, and it was great to be able to be rocking with them by the end of the night."

Of the songs that Johnson did that night, there were a few that he noticed particularly caught the audience's attention.

"My brand new tune, 'Austin,' that got a good reaction, and 'Cliffs of Dover'...which people love I guess...as well as the remake of a Jimi Hendrix tune, called 'Angel,'" he said.

From that night outside Chicago, Johnson then had to take a couple of weeks off to work and rehearse with new bass player Roscoe Beck, before restarting his tour on Aug. 4. This is hardly new territory for Beck, though, as he was part of Johnson's rhythm section for 11 years, beginning with Johnson's debut album, "Tones" in 1986.

As part of a tour, which spans 22 days, Johnson will spend parts of 18 of them on stage, first with a number of dates down south, until recently heading north with three shows in New York state, one in New Hampshire (at Meadowbrook Musical Arts Center in Gilford on Saturday), and the tour's final dates in Boston. Of the 22 tour dates, five will be to open for the Steve Miller Band, including both Boston dates.

Working with the Steve Miller



TGN file photos

The Bank of America Pavilion stage, top, and the outside, bottom.

Band will be nothing new for Johnson, who has toured in support of Miller since 1991.

Commenting about the scheduled stops on the tour, Johnson said, "We've tried to go to places we haven't been before, and we were also trying to work around (Steve Miller's) schedule."

While some concertgoers may just want Johnson to play his most heralded tunes from years past, the guitarist who just turned 52-years-old, of which he said 40 of them have been occupied by playing guitar, sounded particularly satisfied with the results of his most recent work, completed in late 2005.

"I kind of like this one, it's the first time I've gotten a Grammy nomination for a complete work," Johnson said referring to Bloom's nomination in the Best Pop Instrumental Album category. Picking up a second Grammy wasn't meant to be, though, as Burt Bacharach's "At This Time" ultimately won in that category. "Usually I get it for one song, so it was nice to rebalance things," Johnson added.

Even with the critical success of "Bloom," Johnson was nonetheless very candid in his past struggles to try to complete his albums in a year or two, as many other musicians regularly are able to do.

In particular, Johnson detailed his problems in completing a follow-up release to "Ah Via Musicom," entitled "Venus Isle," which was eventually released six years later, in 1996.

"I recorded the whole record (Venus Isle) and then started over. I tried to figure what to do to follow up 'Ah Via Musicom,' since it was so successful," Johnson said.

In the end, the decision to scrap the first incarnation of "Venus Isle" might have not been

the best decision, Johnson admitted.

"I've got tapes of the original 'Venus Isle' that I think were better, since they had more vibe," he said. "It's a lesson that one has to learn, and some people's reaction was kind of 'What the hell?'"

Despite his recognition of those past struggles, Johnson reiterated how things are different with "Bloom," his fourth studio release.

"That's all hindsight, but with 'Bloom,' while that also took a lot of time, it was recorded a lot faster," said Johnson. "Especially toward the end, where it was cutting more live, and it was nothing like 'Venus Isle.'"

Even though he acknowledged a reduction in his production time for "Bloom," Johnson conceded that there was still room for improvement.

"It's totally possible to put out an attempt and put it out in more of a timely manner. I realize I've got to be more efficient and stay more on track," said Johnson. "I worked on the 'Bloom' record for a couple of weeks, then took a few months off, and I know I have to do better."

Johnson already has concrete plans on how to try to accomplish that goal on his next studio release.

"I want to start recording this fall, and want to shift myself to try to get more of a live vibe on the record," he said.

In looking at his most current work, "Bloom," Johnson chose to break the album into three stylistic sections, Prelude, Courante, and Allemande. In becoming familiar with the terms from dance classical music, Johnson said, "I wanted to separate sections of the record, instead of mixing them all together."

In those different sections, Johnson explained that the album contained a wide array of music, starting with the first six songs, for which Johnson cited fans of the song "Cliffs of Dover," from his "Ah Via Musicom" album would likely enjoy, to, for example, "Tribute to Jerry Reed," a country-style song.

In reference to "Tribute to Jerry Reed," Johnson said, "Yes, it's kind of out there, in respect to

the album. I chose to put one (significantly different) piece on the record, as it is one of my influences, and I enjoy playing that style. It's definitely as real as I can get it for the moment."

Then Johnson mentioned "My Back Pages," a song first released by Bob Dylan in 1964, that Johnson performs on the album.

"I've always liked that tune, and loved the lyrics, and chose to fool around with it," Johnson said. "I try to rock it out, since it is always done as a soft tune. It was really kind of an experiment for fun."

For Johnson, those two examples were simply about dabbling into a variety of musical tastes.

"I am the most happy when I keep the door open and try different styles," Johnson continued. "My focus is guitar and not rock guitar."

That last comment may disturb a number of his core fans, who particularly like his hard rocking style, but that didn't seem to concern Johnson significantly.

"I don't think it can hurt (playing the various styled songs). I think with 'Bloom,' I've been trying to get more eclectic. It's what people really appreciate," he said. "They will bring in different kinds of fans, and that will corner some new interest. Aside from that, it is for the artist to summon up something new and refreshing and it's my responsibility for me to do that."

In having glanced at some album reviews and comments regarding "Bloom," though, Johnson acknowledged that his concept of offering a number of different styles may not have necessarily hit home with all of his fans.

"Some people like it all, but some people like a part of it. Typically, the consumer-buying public is focused on the music they like," he said. "Maybe it's better to focus on one style of music, then to try a mixture of styles on one CD."

From this corner, one couldn't agree more, particularly since the first and fourth songs on the album are by far the best: "Bloom" and "Good to Me," both of which have roots to the rock guitar excellence long expected from Johnson after all these years. If there's anything unusual about the two tunes, "Good to Me" has an intriguing touch of techno influence.

Another noticeable difference when listening to "Bloom," compared to his earlier albums, is the number of songs that have Johnson providing vocals.

"I kind of want to write more instrumental (songs), but I don't know if it's good or not that I've been writing more vocals lately, even though I like fooling around with the vocal pieces."

That difference, Johnson acknowledged, has troubled some music reviewers.

"Most people comment on the vocals, but other than that, I really can't think of a bad review," said Johnson. "For the most part, they've mostly been pretty good."

Johnson sounded appreciative of being able to offer that variety on "Bloom," thanks in large part

to being signed onto his current label, Favored Nations, a label founded by another highly touted guitarist, Steve Vai. In addition, Johnson was mostly positive when recounting how the album has done in stores, but was less so when discussing the album's radio play.

"While it's been selling pretty well, I don't think the radio stations have been playing it," said Johnson. "I don't know if it's the type of album the radio wants to play."

At the same time, Johnson made it clear that he wasn't about to change his style to improve his chances of being played on the radio.

"If it happens, that's great, regardless the amount of guitar in your music," he said. "I have heard so many great records that have not been heard through the right channels, and with people having heard electric guitar for 50 years, the challenge is for them to hear something different."

For those who choose to take the trip to either Meadowbrook this Saturday or Bank of America

Pavilion for its two nights, hearing "something different" should not cause anyone to think that Johnson will not offer a good mix of the new and the old, particularly when expecting a solid rock guitar performance from him. With so much to choose from in respect to his earlier

albums, Johnson nonetheless did indicate that he planned to do four songs from "Bloom" on tour.

Aside from "Ah Via Musicom" and "Bloom," both studio releases, Johnson has also released a couple of live albums.

The one that is in virtually every rock guitar fan's collection was one in which Johnson teamed up with Vai, and other highly acclaimed guitarist, Joe Satriani, in a live album in 1997.

From that album, "G3 - Live in Concert," Johnson said, "Everybody liked it, since we had a spontaneity that is hard to capture on a (studio) CD."

While he acknowledged the good feedback he received from that album, Johnson said that there were no pending plans to do another album with the pair.

It isn't a case of all bad news, though.

For fans of that album, Johnson explained how he and Satriani recently filmed a show together at The Grove in Anaheim, Calif. From that per-



Courtesy photo from PARK STREET

Johnson

formance, he cited that it will be initially produced for HDTV, with plans slated for it to be edited into a half-hour DVD.

When the DVD is released, don't expect to see helicopter video shots of Johnson and Satriani, as The Grove is a small dinner theatre that provides an intimate atmosphere that only a few select venues provide. And with the show finishing in just under an hour, don't worry about the half-hour DVD's material being chopped haphazardly.

Aside from Vai and Satriani, Johnson looks to a number of other musicians for inspiration.

"I like to listen to anybody that plays well enough and uses that as a vehicle to play really cool music," citing wide-ranging examples from punk band Green Day, to flamenco player Wes Montgomery.

For all the success that Johnson has enjoyed in recent years, he pointed out how is able to keep going in face of the many accolades he receives from fans and listeners on a daily basis.

"While there's nobody so clear that isn't affected by (the accolades), you have to have the maturity so that you won't be destructed by it...you have to stay realistic," he said.

Finishing off the tour should provide plenty of realism for Johnson, who said about those who choose to make the trek to Meadowbrook or the Bank of America Pavilion, "Hopefully my attempt to make the guitar an interesting thing and to try to plug it into music that is enjoyable to listen to, works. That's the important thing."



Courtesy photo from PARK STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

Johnson works the strings on stage during a recent tour.



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