

# DUKE LEVINE

What makes a great professional guitarist? Excellent chops, world experience, all-round versatility, eclectic taste in music, superb tones and the ability to blend seamlessly into a new band – all talents of Duke Levine, who recently took over guitar duties in Bonnie Raitt’s band of premier musicians

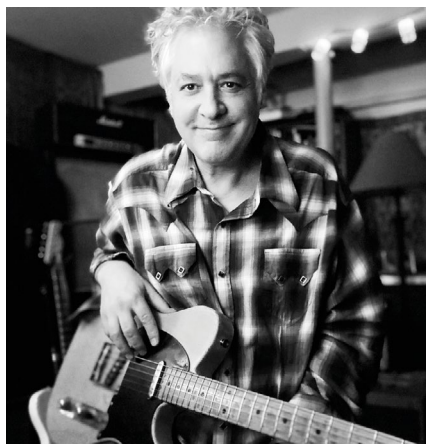
Words Bob Hewitt

**B**onnie Raitt has been a constant presence on the international music scene for over 50 years, collaborating with many – from Sippie Wallace to Mavis Staples, John Lee Hooker to John Prine – and boasts a long list of best-selling albums, with 13 Grammy Awards from 30 nominations to her name, as well as the honour of receiving the Lifetime Achievement Grammy in 2022. Not bad for someone who was discounted earlier this year as “an unknown blues singer” by a certain UK tabloid...

Her own core band has been by her side for over 30 years, including guitarist and sometimes co-writer George Marinelli, Ricky Fataar on drums and James ‘Hutch’ Hutchinson on bass, while keyboard player Glenn Patscha joined the band a few years back in 2018. When George Marinelli decided to take a break from touring, Boston-based guitarist Duke Levine stepped up seamlessly into the role.

## Getting His Groove

Having grown up in a house full of musical siblings during the 60s, Duke’s history with the guitar is a long one. “I have three older brothers and a sister, so I benefited from their record collections,” he tells us over the phone from a tour in Hawaii, “and a lot of it was good stuff: The Beatles, Stones, The Band, Paul Butterfield – but also Merle Haggard and Doc Watson. [My older brothers] all played guitars, so they showed my sister and I some chords to get us going – and at the same time my brother Rick had a country rock band that



rehearsed at our house most every day, so that was pretty cool to experience.”

As time progressed, Duke extended his musical tastes, listening to the Grateful Dead, The Allman Brothers, Little Feat, Ry Cooder and, ironically, Bonnie Raitt. He also expanded his interest in jazz music. By the time he was 14, Duke had taken on a part-time job in a local guitar store near his home in Worcester, Massachusetts, and he also took the opportunity to study with a guitar teacher, the brilliant jazz guitarist Rich Falco who instilled a love for jazz standards that would stand Duke in good stead for his future ambitions and virtuosity.

Duke went on to study at the world-renowned New England Conservatory Of Music in Boston, and following graduation took a dive into the deep end by hooking up with blues legend Otis Rush for a European tour.

“I always feel I had no business playing alongside Otis Rush at that age,” Duke admits. “I just wish I’d known as much about him then as I do now. Otis was super gracious, really cool and had a great rhythm section. It was one of those things whereby the piano player put the touring band together, and we did the European circuit of festivals like Montreux, North Sea and all that. It was the most amazing experience for me.”

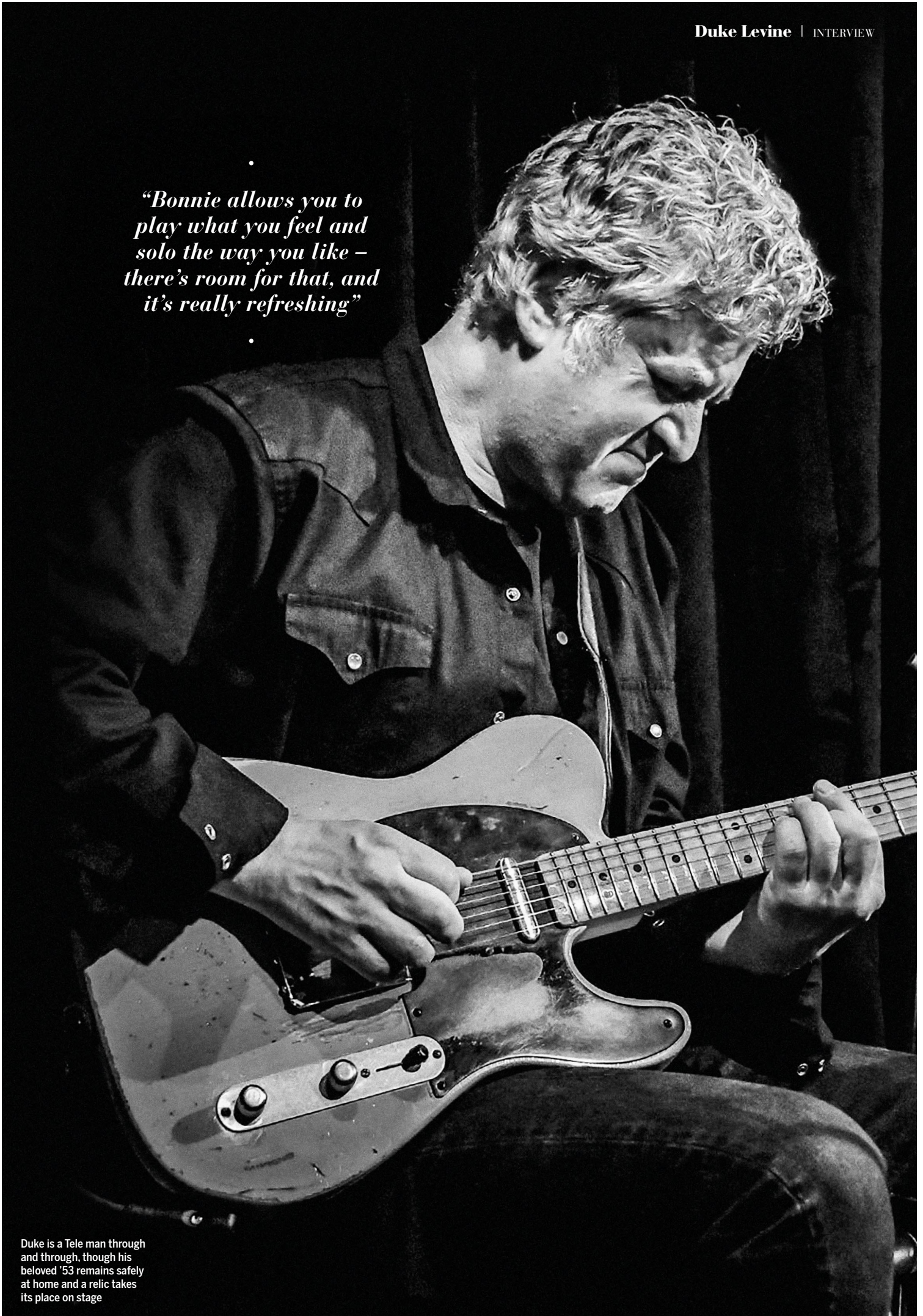
Tours followed with Leon Thomas, ‘the John Coltrane of jazz vocalists’, and jazz drummer Bob Moses in the band Mozamba before Duke joined Boston rockers The Del Fuegos on tour and began to explore the city’s session scene during the early 90s.

“There were so many singers and songwriters around Boston in those days,” says Duke. “People were moving in from outside the area to be in Cambridge [Massachusetts] because it was such a cool scene. Producers needed musicians to make records, so it was a great time to be right there and involved.”

“I also met my friend Mason Daring, who’s a film composer, and started working with him on a bunch of movie sets he was scoring [including John Sayles’ *Lone Star*, *Passion Fish*, *Sunshine State* and *Limbo*]. This was a really important time for me because he ended up putting out my first three records on his label – *Nobody’s Home* [1992], *Country Soul Guitar* [1994] and *Lava* [1997]. About this same time, there was still a little bit of jingle and advertisement business, too, so it was a busy time to be working around there.”

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Duke is a Tele man through and through, though his beloved '53 remains safely at home and a relic takes its place on stage



Duke continued his band and touring work during this time, playing with major label folk-rock duo The Story, which also connected him with five-time Grammy-winning singer-songwriter Mary Chapin Carpenter, with whom he played until the early 2000s. He then joined The J Geils Band's Peter Wolf in the studio and on stage until he got the call from Bonnie Raitt.

### Raitt Hand Man

"It's been a trip," says Duke, who started rehearsals back in January 2022. "Everyone has been so appreciative and supportive, welcoming the way someone new plays. It was a little daunting to come in after George [Marinelli] who has been with Bonnie for 30 years, but it's such a great band with Ricky [Fataar, drummer] and Hutch [bassist James Hutchinson] who have been there even longer. I've learned a lot and I love playing alongside these guys.

"Bonnie allows you to play what you feel and solo the way you like – it's never been a case of the artist wanting you to play the exact same thing every night – so there's room for that, and it's really refreshing. There's a ton of personality in George's playing, and we're pretty different as players, but I love learning what he did. All that being said, Bonnie was very welcoming and realised that we're not the same players with the same sound. For about half of the 2022 tour dates, it was the two of us in the band together, and it was great because I love playing alongside George. It was brilliant to see first hand the stuff that I'd be taking over on some of the songs. It was a real privilege to be on stage together – and I've made a great new friend."

When it comes to tools of the trade, Duke is devoted to his Telecasters. "My main

guitar is a '63 Tele' and I use a '53 relic as well on stage, as I've left my real '53 at home," he laughs. "My Telecaster is the guitar I can play [pretty much] anything on – and I feel I've developed a sound of my own to some degree with that guitar. All the other stuff is great, and I've got some nice Les Pauls, an Epiphone Casino and some Gretsches, too. It's cool on a session to have a bunch of different guitars. But, more and more, I just feel it's a distraction to have more than a couple of guitars on a gig. I do enjoy lap steel, too, for textural sounds when required – a friend got me into a cool tuning, so I'm working on that to figure out some cool licks.

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"On the current tour, I have this Supro Dual-Tone that I love and I've had it for a long time," he continues. "It's kept in open tuning with heavy strings for a couple of tunes. I have a Strat, too, for a couple of things. But, really, the Tele is *the* guitar, and I can get whatever I need out of it. I also play mandolin and mandola on a couple of Bonnie's songs."

For his backline, it's a British influence with a twist as Duke's favourite amp is a Blockhead – a copy of the early Marshall JTM45. But on this tour he's opted for the

real thing with a late-70s Marshall JMP 50-watt master volume head, which fits in and suits the sound of the band, he says: "I'm just playing it through a 1x12 cab, which is isolated because we use in-ear monitors, and although my cab is on stage, it's baffled so I don't get it too much."

As for pedals, Duke's 'board includes a Mad Professor Royal Blue Overdrive, the Jam Rattler overdrive and Jam Harmonious Monk harmonic tremolo, plus a T.Rex Replica and Source Audio delay unit. There's also the Ethos TWE-1 from Vermont-based Custom Tones, who created a pedal based on Ken Fischer's famed Trainwreck amplifier.

### Instrumental Moves

When he finds time between his busy touring commitments, Duke performs instrumental arrangements with his band, the Super Sweet Sounds Of The 70s, alongside longtime friend and Berklee College assistant professor Kevin Barry, who has recorded with Paula Cole, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Susan Tedeschi, and played with Ray LaMontagne and Rosanne Cash.

Finally, there's Duke's solo instrumental work, on which you'll hear the hi-fidelity sounds and tones he created for albums such as 2016's *The Fade Out*. "I loved Hank Marvin on those Shadows records, so there could well be an unconscious influence for my instrumental recordings. But my early records had a lot of picking on them and country stuff as I was eager to show off what I could do as a younger person. I think at a certain point, even then, I always wanted to have tunes that were just more melody based – instrumental guitar music without having all the licks – so on my last couple of records, I think we're more in that direction." **G**

<https://dukelevine.com>



PHOTOBY SCOTT LEGATO/GETTY IMAGES

Duke plays alongside Bonnie Raitt on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* in June 2022

## RIGHT PLACE, RAITT TIME

*Bonnie Raitt on her new guitar sideman*

"In the beginning, we had George Marinelli and Duke Levine together at rehearsals," Bonnie tells us from California, "so Duke was able to watch and listen to the various guitar parts that George contributes to songs like *Need You Tonight* and *Livin' For The Ones*, and the different songs that we cover. George often overdubs two or three parts – and it's the same with keyboards, as there's often three or four keyboards parts. So when you perform live and you only have a four-piece band, you have to figure out which parts you're going to take.

"Deciding which part of the song deserves this particular guitar part, or how you can make it an artful mix of the three guitar parts, is something George has been expert at because he played on most of the records. Duke was able to check this out and see just what he was doing. The two of them were just fantastic together. They stayed [musically] out of each other's way, their tones and their instruments sound different enough – and then, of course, you've got my [slide] guitar added to the mix."

While Bonnie uses her slide playing selectively, she still plays the same Strat that she bought in 1969 for \$120. "The neck suited my hand – and it had no paint on it, which I thought was really cool..."

"As a musical director, it's a bit challenging to make sure we're not all playing the identical 'Strat sound' at the same time," she continues, "or playing in the same part of the neck! But we've all been doing this long enough and it was fun to see and hear how George and Duke played together.

*"I've been knocked out every night at the sensitivity Duke brings, as well as his ferocity as a soloist"*

There were certain parts when George would lead and Duke would hold back, then others when the roles were reversed and Duke would play – but without stepping on each other's toes.

"Duke is something completely new – his guitars, his tones, his pedals – and his tastes are different from George[s], so it's fun for us and the audiences to have a fresh approach. George and Duke are equally brilliant and such nice guys, too. I've enjoyed Duke's playing from afar for many years, and his reputation precedes him, so I was so pleased when he agreed to step in.

"I like Duke's soulful soloing and the inventive lyrical ways he blends with my own guitar style and around my voice on the ballads. I've been knocked out every night at the sensitivity he brings, as well as his ferocity as a soloist. Duke never overplays, which is important to me and one of the things I love about George Marinelli's playing. That's why I chose Duke because I think he's really tasteful, but he's got a lot of fire as well; he banks that fire and doesn't show off, which is what I like about him."