



PHOTO BY MARYANNE BILHAM

Rock 'n' roll with a woman's touch

Portland's Jennifer Batten talks sharing the stage with Michael Jackson, Jeff Beck, and on making it as a female rock guitarist

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Jennifer Batten didn't become one of rock's most accomplished professional guitar players with a waifish, coy girlie image. She got there by living, breathing and being music – by being a badass woman in an industry dominated by men. She did three world tours with Michael Jackson, and for several years in the 1990s toured with Jeff Beck.

She attended the Guitar Institute of Technology in Hollywood – later known as the Musician's Institute – at a time when women in the biz were few and far between.

She has produced three albums of her own music and currently tours worldwide – playing with bands and performing her own multi-media, one-woman show. When she's not on stage, she makes glass and steampunk art from found objects as an creative release.

Today, using the Portland area as her homebase, she teaches guitar classes on Truefire.com, tours the world with a rotating mix of artists, and also finds time for some Portland shows. Her next show is one featuring the music of Jeff Beck at Dante's in Portland July 18.

I asked Jennifer Batten about her time touring with the guitar legend.

Sue Zalokar: Jeff Beck was a major influence in your dream to become a guitarist as a young person. Tell us about the three years you spent touring with him?

Jennifer Batten: It was really, really

intense. I was coming from (touring with) Michael Jackson where I was one of six people and if I made a mistake or forgot something, nobody is going to notice. I went from that to being one-fourth of what's on stage and doing all of the rhythm, or comping, which was a lot more pressure.

It was 180 degrees different as far as the kind of music. With pop music, it's pretty much you play the parts that the audience expects, the parts that were on the hit record. Luckily, I was the only one who got to do any improvising on the Jackson tour. And then I came to Jeff Beck – it's all about improvising. He wants it to be different every night. He wants it to be fresh and new and he wants you to explore because that fires him up. So it was night and day different. It was intense for that reason because we were always pushing the boundaries.

S.Z.: You have toured the world, but settled in the Portland area. What drew you here?

J.B.: I was 20 years in L.A. And I finally escaped – with pleasure.

S.Z.: What drew you here?

J.B.: Number one, I wanted to be anywhere but L.A. I bought books on four different cities and read them and Portland won. Also my sister lives in Corvallis. She got here a couple of years before I did and the reports were pretty good.

S.Z.: Tell me about the guitar you're playing now. What kind is it?

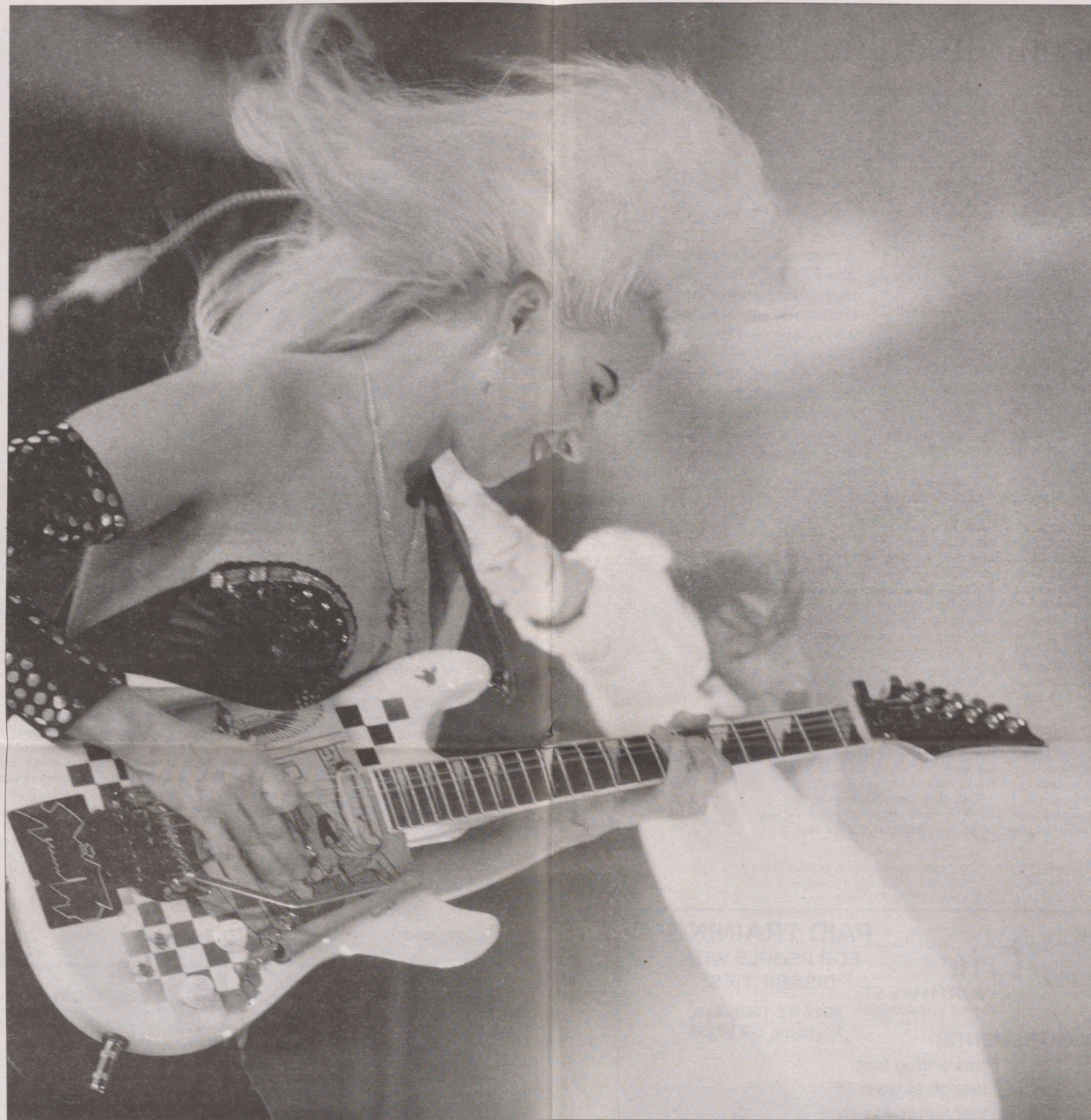


PHOTO BY SAM EMERSON

J.B.: It's by a company called Line 6. It's a guitar called Variax. It's a regular guitar but you can also engage it to make a bunch of different sounds. So essentially, it's like 20 guitars in one.

S.Z.: That must be quite a tool for a player like yourself.

J.B.: That's one reason I got it – as a workhorse – to be able to deal with any gig around the world. It's got virtual tuning as well. If people are tuned differently – like a lot of hard rock and metal bands will tune down a half step or whole step. Typically with a guitar like I've used for many, many years, it has a locking nut that makes it impossible to re-tune in any sort of hurry. Now I can just push a button and I'm there.

S.Z.: You attended and later taught at the famed Musician's Institute (formerly The Guitar Institute of Technology), a college of contemporary music in Hollywood California. You were greatly influenced by many

musicians. How old were you when you started at GIT?

J.B.: I turned 21 that year.

S.Z.: And how many other women were in the classes with you?

J.B.: Zero. It was kind of shocking at first. That's when I first realized how rare it was for women to be pro players. It was a little bit isolating. But on the positive side, I could always practice in the bathroom and get that reverb without being bothered. (laughter)

S.Z.: Music in the absence of lyrics. Your music is otherworldly – and the jams are long. What genres are your favorite to write and play?

J.B.: That's always been a tough answer because I like rock 'n' roll, but if you listen to me play rock, you'd say, "That's not rock." I like any musical style where I get to express myself. I like music that is powerful



PHOTO BY SAM EMERSON

At left, Jennifer Batten on tour with Michael Jackson. Above, Batten performs on tour with Slash.

I think it's just happening now partly due to the digital age where young girls can dial up Youtube and see some amazing women playing. It is not as socially unacceptable as it used to be.

Especially with rock 'n' roll, lead guitar playing has to be kind of an aggressive sport.

Typically women grow up being conditioned to think that being aggressive is un-ladylike. But having a few role models out there helps kick that mode (of thinking) in the ass.

S.Z.: There are many girls who have a dream to be a bitchin' guitar player or drummer or whatever ... and now there are role models out there for them.

J.B.: There is a degree of respect that comes with that as opposed to Miley Cyrus twerking on stage.

S.Z.: Oh god.

J.B.: You know, that doesn't take one ounce of talent. Not one. It's been so done, it's boring. I might be further along if I had done that, but it just wasn't my thing. That really has nothing to do with music.

S.Z.: You were one of hundreds of guitarists to audition for the BAD tour with Michael Jackson in 1987 and, at 29 years old and as a relatively unknown female guitarist, you got the job. When you joined the tour he was at the peak of his career, selling one million records a week. What was that like for you?

J.B.: It was a whirlwind. It was a paid vacation. It was just awesome. Once we started rehearsals, it was very, very intense for a straight two months. It was pretty much nothing but get up and play. It was exciting. I can't imagine having a better boss.

S.Z.: I can imagine a lot of the blessings came with that gig. Was there a curse to touring with the King of Pop?

J.B.: There's probably a downside to everything. It didn't compare to the good side, but the downside would be the hyper judgment of people who were jealous. Who wouldn't want that gig? It was the dancers too, we shared stories and it was the same, when you're on the same level trying to get a gig, everybody's homies. But once someone really jumps ahead of the group then there's a tremendous jealousy and you find out who your friends are.

There were a million things on the positive side: being able to play with some of the greatest players in the world and to see the world and get paid for it. That doesn't happen for too many people.

S.Z.: What are your impressions and memories of Michael Jackson?

J.B.: He was very kind and very sensitive. He was a creative tornado. Pretty much

everything you saw on stage, including the transformation of my "look" was his idea. He was a kid at heart. And he really wanted to surprise people every tour. He wanted the newest, innovative thing to wow people and give them the greatest show on earth, so to speak. He was a big fan of Barnum and Bailey.

I think in order to be an artist that was as creative as he was you have to be ultra, ultra sensitive also. All the flames and arrows he took were probably ten times more difficult than it would have been for the average person.

S.Z.: There always seemed to be controversy surrounding him. Did you have any sense of how that affected him, or did he ever confide in you about that?

J.B.: It destroyed him. The higher you climb, the harder you fall. He was on top of the world. I believe it was all a set up to take him down. ... He had a line of people trying to get his money. And he knew – in fact – he was paranoid about being killed because he was worth more money dead than alive. And it (his death) certainly has generated millions and millions of dollars.

S.Z.: You're just back from a European tour.

J.B.: It was great. We went to Spain and France and Italy and Poland.

S.Z.: In the past, you've done a one-woman show, but now you tour with a band. How is that?

J.B.: I do it all. With the bands that I play with in Europe, I usually get a three- to four-hour rehearsal. So to get a really good 90-minute show is tough. I've been choosing to open the show for 45 minutes with my multi-media (one woman) show and then bring the band on.

In fact the show I'm doing at Dante's on July 18, they asked me if I wanted a third band because they usually do three bands in a night. I told them let me just do the middle slot as my film show. I've got a lot of new material and then I'll do the Jeff Beck tribute.

S.Z.: If you were going to speak to a young girl with dreams of becoming a world famous player, what would you say to her?

J.B.: The number one thing is music. A lot of kids have these crazy dreams of being famous and watching American Idol. That might work out for them and it might not, but to become a good musician all you need to do is focus on the music.

Jennifer Batten will be performing at Dante's in Portland on July 18.