

DAMON JOHNSON & THE GET READY

Singer, guitarist and songwriter Damon Johnson is one of rock's greatest triple-threat talents from the last 30 years.

Now, on his statement-making new album *Battle Lessons*, with his trio The Get Ready, Johnson builds on that legacy.

Rock fans know Johnson's name from his years scorching stages as lead guitarist in the Alice Cooper band, and later with Thin Lizzy and the Lizzy-offshoot Black Star Riders. They remember him fronting potent '90s Southern rockers Brother Cane. They've heard his songs recorded and sung by stars like Stevie Nicks and Steven Tyler.

With *Battle Lessons*, Johnson returns to hard-rock, back to that original fire he first discovered as a teenager playing Van Halen and AC/DC covers in garage bands.

Battle Lessons is a nine-song collection of catchy-heavy gems. The tracks are just as much about clever lyrics and sticky melodies as eyelash-searing guitars. "These are as good of songs as I've been a part of creating, ever in my whole career," Johnson says.

That's saying something. As singer/guitarist, he was frontman of Brother Cane, the Birmingham, Alabama rock band that notched a string of '90s rock hits, including "Got No Shame," "I Lie In The Bed I Make" and chart-topper "And Fools Shine On."

Battle Lessons is anchored by a searing title track. The song "Battle Lessons" casts Johnson's gutsy vocals and razor riffs over presto grooves by The Get Ready drummer Jarred Pope and bassist Robbie Harrington. There's a supersonic guitar solo too. Johnson elite six-strings supercharge the *Battle Lessons* album. But the guitars always serve the songs and never just for flash.

"Earlier in my career," Johnson says, "I wanted to make my mark as a guitar player. Now I feel like I've sort of done that maybe, and I want to be recognized as a songwriter more than anything else. I still love to nerd out about guitars and amps and pedals, but nothing gets me off more than writing a great song. Nothing, man. There's no comparison."

"Battle Lessons" is one of several songs on the new album Johnson co-wrote with longtime collaborator Jim "Johnny Blade" Troglen. The lyrics are comprised of stirring couplets like: "Someday you'll suffer for

your sins/But right now I'm suffering from you." An anthemic chorus resolves, *"No battle lessons lost on me/Tomorrow can't come fast enough/I'm never giving up...I'm comin' after you."*

The song "Can't Clap Any Louder," another Johnson/Troglen cowrite, is metallic descendent of Ziggy Stardust-era David Bowie. Especially on the infectious chorus. *"I see you climbing to the top of the tower/I can't clap, clap any louder/I bet your mama couldn't be any prouder/I can't clap, clap any louder."* On sidwinding Johnson/Troglen collabo "Let The Healing Begin," Johnson warns, *"When you come out swinging/Try and take it slow/Because I'm not a scientist/I just throw rocks at windows,"* before unleashing some time-bending guitar licks.

Johnson describes his songwriting partnership with Troglen, who brings a blend of quirks and hooks to Johnson's electrifying riffs and relatable anthems, as, "Very special. And it's not like most other teams, where one guy writes the lyrics and the other guy writes the music and melody. We both throw all kinds of mud at each other, just to see what's going to come out of it. Most of these songs wouldn't exist if it weren't for us working on them together." The catchiest Johnson/Troglen tune on *Battle Lessons* might be "Lightning Bolt," which peppers punk/new wave energy into slinky rock.

Also on the *Battle Lessons* album, the Johnson penned tune "Talk Yourself Into Anything" bruises like classic AC/DC, as Johnson howls about *"the ecstasy in the risk."* Moody track "Shadow Country" slithers underneath the singer's vow to prepare for any challenge: *"Until we're ready to fight I'm staying out of the light,"* then building up to a thrashy guitar breakdown.

Battle Lessons is a solo record built through simpatico, like Johnson's songwriting partnership with Troglen, and the musical bond Johnson's carving with his Get Ready rhythm section, Pope and Harrington. Johnson has spent much of his career playing in quartets, like Brother Cane, quintets, including Black Star Riders, or sextets, like Thin Lizzy, which Johnson remains a member of. Now with The Get Ready, Johnson is in power-trio mode. Tapping into and adding his touch to magic made by trios like Cream, ZZ Top, Rush, Stevie Ray Vaughan & Double Trouble, Nirvana and Green Day. "The main thing for me is the dynamics," Johnson says of playing hard-rock in his trio. "I can take my hands off the guitar completely, just let the rhythm section rock the riff, and I can grab the microphone and articulate the lyric as clear as if it was an acoustic gig. *Because I want to get that across to people.*"

Battle Lessons is also shaped by Johnson's connection with producer Nick Raskulinecz, who's also worked with bands like Foo Fighters, Rush, Velvet Revolver, Mastodon and Danzig. Johnson and Raskulinecz first met in 2013, backstage at an Iron Maiden concert in Nashville, the city where both men reside. Like many people, Johnson initially became familiar with Raskulinecz after watching him in Dave Grohl-directed documentary "Sound City," about that iconic California recording studio.

Meeting at that Maiden show led to Raskulinecz working with Johnson in Black Star Riders. Later, the Grammy winning Raskulinecz produced Johnson's 2016 EP, *Echo*, and mixed *Memoirs from an Uprising*, Johnson's spirited tuneful 2019 solo album, which was championed by rock tastemakers like Eddie Trunk.

"I really give Nick a lot of credit for the proper launch of my solo career, period," Johnson says. "And it's all rock with Nick. It has to rock. It has to be cool or he's just not going to be very interested." It was Raskulinecz's idea to add more wallop to "Brace for Impact," one of the more pop-leaning Damon Johnson & The Get Ready tracks, cowritten with Milton Davis. "I genuinely feel that Nick is someone I want to work with the rest of my life."

Memoirs Of An Uprising overcame an online crowdfunding company (Pledge Music) absconding with \$20,000 that Johnson's fans had contributed to the making of *Memoirs*. Johnson, as classy, hard-working and real as he is talented, still fulfilled every single order of physical copies, merch and other incentives his fans had ordered to support *Memoirs*. Fearlessly, Johnson once again chose to remain independent and worked with the U.S. crowdfunding entity Indiegogo to offer fans the opportunity to pre-order *Battle Lessons* as well as other unique incentives. This time, the process has worked "flawlessly".

To create the exciting guitar tracks for *Battle Lessons*, Johnson brought his array of Gibson and Epiphone Les Pauls, Flying Vs and a 100-watt Marshall amp he's had since even before Brother Cane. At Nashville's Rock Falcon Studio, he also plugged into some of Raskulnec's gear, including a Fender Tone Master amplifier conjuring skull-rattling tone reminiscent of late great AC/DC guitarist Malcolm Young. "I enjoy the entire process of songwriting, making demos, and working up arrangements with the band," Johnson says. "But the real fun starts when Nick opens his closet of badass guitar amps."

With *Battle Lessons*, Damon Johnson & The Get Ready have made an album that's tight and tuneful in a way that evokes classic Bob Ezrin-produced Alice Cooper albums. That's not an accident. Johnson says his six-year stint playing guitar for Alice Cooper informed the new album.

"I remember early in my time with Alice, where you're onstage every night playing killer riff after killer riff. Just relentless, man. It was a bit of a blueprint. If the songs are quality, you can still have the guitar featured front and center."

And so it is with *Battle Lessons*. Over the past three decades, Johnson's career has occasionally detoured from the classic-yet-contemporary heavy rock he's so gifted and natural at playing. He's done two acoustic albums, dabbled in alternative rock (with the groups Red Halo and Slave to the System, which featured former members of Brother Cane and Queensryche), and was in the country-music quartet Whiskey Falls, with Aerosmith keyboardist Buck Johnson. As a songwriter, he's cowritten songs recorded by stars like Stevie Nicks and Santana. Not to mention lending his guitar skills to albums by artists ranging from Sammy Hagar to Faith Hill to John Waite.

On the Damon Johnson & The Get Ready hard-rock album *Battle Lessons*, Johnson is swinging in his wheelhouse again.

It hasn't been without risk though. In late 2018, he departed Black Star Riders, an internationally touring band that had just wrapped a successful tour with Judas Priest, to start a career as a solo rock artist...not exactly a sure bet in a musical climate dominated by pop, rap and R&B. "Yes, there was some uncertainty when I left Black Star Riders," Johnson says, "A band that I love, guys that I love, songs that I love. But I felt like there was a window and it was time for me to forge my own path and get back behind the microphone. I was ready to do it, man."

That kind of without-a-net urgency fuels the fast tempos throughout *Battle Lessons*, Johnson says. "There's a lot of energy in these songs that absolutely comes from making that move (to go solo). Rolling up my sleeves, putting in the work and the time, surrounding myself with my talented friends, just to see what we can create. I mean, what a great life. It's just the best."