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Baby, This Teenager Can Sing and Play the Blues

Jonny Lang skips his senior prom to tour with Aerosmith

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BOSTON

Jonny Lang may still be in high school, but the Minneapolis resident is proving that anyone can sing the blues.

"Music doesn't see age or color. It's universal," Mr. Lang says in a recent telephone interview from Atlanta.

Currently opening for Aerosmith on its "Nine Lives" tour, Lang seems to be breaking the mold by singing and playing the guitar as if he has done it for 30 years instead of the past three.

His latest album, "Lie to Me," featuring the Jonny Lang Band, hit No. 2 on Billboard's blues charts, and both MTV and VH1 have given generous air time for his video "The Thrill Is Gone."

Lang, however, says he doesn't see the novelty of his success so early in life. "A million kids know what they like, too. I am just fortunate to have supportive people around me," he says.

His father, Jon Langseth Jr., introduced his son to the thrill of live music and also gave him his first guitar, a green Fender Stratocaster (the guitar of choice for Bonnie Raitt and Eric Clapton), for his 13th birthday.

Raised on a farm in Fargo, N.D., the family moved to Minneapolis to advance Lang's music career. His father, who accompanies him on the road, supports his son's decision to sing and perform all over the world.

How did young Lang learn to sing the blues? It has to do with his first guitar teacher who was in a blues band, he says jokingly.

"He told me basically, 'I am going to teach you how to play this or I'm not going to teach you,' " Lang says. That was more than three years ago.

He continues to play the blues, practicing all day long, because it gives him room to be creative and to incorporate his own style, which he describes as different and on its own.

"I wouldn't say that I was like a Buddy Guy or B.B. King, but rather a crossover of funky rock with a really strong blues root," he says.

Lang sings everything from classic blues hits such as Sonny Boy Williamson's "Good Morning Little School Girl" to some of his own collaborative songs, such as the title track song, "Lie to Me."

And what he lacks in experience, he more than makes up for while performing live.

"I think at first, people come out or don't come out because of my age." But after they see him perform, he says, it's the music that keeps them interested.

"I just go out there and do what I do. None of it is really choreographed. I just try to give it everything I can," he says.

Although Lang doesn't have a lifetime to draw upon, he has enlisted the prerecorded help of blues masters King and Albert Collins after learning the basics.

"Most of my best teachers are on CD. I kind of taught myself," he says. He has also developed his skills by performing live, first in smaller venues, then moving on to bigger theaters, opening for big-time performers such as Buddy Guy and Blues Traveler.

He also has no formal voice training. "I always grew up singing with my mom and sisters, singing along to old Motown," he says.

Most of all, Lang says he has learned a lot from the guys in his band, who all happen to be adults. "I guess what taught me the most was playing with a lot of guys [who played better than I could]."

TO break into the business, Lang's band at the time traveled to Memphis three years ago, where many blues greats such as King and Elvis Presley got their start, and recorded a demo. His band held a showcase in Minneapolis for prospective record labels and cut a deal. Lang currently holds a four-album contract with A&M Records.

As for the perks of his career, Lang has already met his inspiration, King, joining him on his tour bus for 15 minutes. "He was everything I thought he'd be," Lang says. "When you go up to your ideals and your mentors and when you are not disappointed by them, it's really cool."

Lang has already started his tour with Aerosmith with plans to tour Japan, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia.

He is also slated to record another album starting early next year. And Lang says he plans to stick around in the music industry for a while.

Working with a private tutor, Lang plans to graduate high school after the summer by testing for a GED. Although there won't be a senior prom for Lang, he says being involved in producing and playing his music makes it worthwhile.

* Jonny Lang will be touring with Aerosmith through August.



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