



Power of TWO

Guthrie Govan and **Dave Kilminster** are two of the world's most formidable guitarists – and together they are exploring the outer limits of guitar improvisation. They talk about how to transfer the solo in your head to the fretboard as easily and naturally as possible, why blues still rules – and serving up Erotic Cakes in spite of thieves...

Words: Matt Frost Pictures: Rob Monk

Guitarist has agreed to meet Dave and Guthrie in a remote rehearsal studio in deepest, darkest Essex – transformed, today, into a kind of Area 51 where bold new realms of guitar playing are being explored.

As we step over the threshold, the duo strap on custom Suhr guitars, then laugh and jam their way through a jaw-dropping array of tempos, times, tones, rhythms and styles. We're instantly spellbound.

Two decades have gone by since Dave and Guthrie won this magazine's Guitarist Of The Year award – in 1991 and 1993 respectively. Since then, each has made an incredible musical journey. Kilminster has gigged extensively with John Wetton and Keith Emerson, and as Roger Waters' lead guitarist has toured both *The Dark Side Of The Moon* and *The Wall*, filling the cavernous shoes of David Gilmour. He's even found time to release a couple of brilliant solo albums on the way.

Govan, meanwhile, has torn it up in the studio and on stage with everyone from Asia to Dizzee Rascal – while solo tours, countless clinics and 2006's *Erotic Cakes* album have cemented his reputation as one of the most astonishingly talented guitarists in the world, winning praise

from the likes of Satch and Paul Gilbert.

Dave and Guthrie first met 20 years ago at the Guitar Institute in Acton – and their numerous live collaborations have wowed audiences ever since. Firm friends, Guthrie and Dave are spookily attuned sparring partners on guitar – and talk about going beyond scales and sterile technique to play guitar as naturally as you might sing a tune.

Towards the end of 2011, they toured Europe again with the heavily improvisational *Erotic Cakes* band, which also features Guthrie's brother Seth on bass and Pete Riley on drums. All was going extremely well until numerous irreplaceable items of gear were stolen from the band's tour van in Rome last December. Although the loss was a heavy blow, we find the duo on upbeat form...

So what's the latest on the stolen gear?

Dave Kilminster: "We're still hopeful... but nothing as yet. The kindness and generosity of people since we announced it

has been amazing. People have been offering us free gear, which is really nice because – despite the rumours – we generally have to pay for what we use."

Guthrie Govan: "In terms of stuff we can never replace, there was Seth's wife of 22 years or so [a 1989 Warwick Streamer bass], which is like an old family friend. And then there's the footage we'd just had professionally recorded for a live DVD, which is of no use to anyone else. Please, gangsters, can we just have that back at the very least?"

Is there a unique element to the chemistry the two of you have when improvising?

GG: "With other people, it's rarer than I'd like it to be but it's always good when it happens. You need to feel total freedom to play whatever you feel is right, but there must also be enough of a shared cultural experience. If you've both listened to and enjoyed enough of the same kinds of specific music, your instincts are likely to have a lot of shared ground."

"I like to think that when we play together and are trading ideas, it almost sounds like one player"

Dave Kilminster





Guthrie and Dave are almost telepathic when improvising together

DK: "I think the way that we learned probably helps as well, which was actually by listening and transcribing. We're basically transcribing in real time when we're playing together. Guthrie will play something and I'll instantly play something based on that – either exactly the same or with a slight variation or a harmony version of it. I like to think that when we play together and are trading ideas, it almost sounds like one player. There's this logical flow to it like there would be if you were improvising on your own, but with two brains navigating it."

How do you make the most of dynamics when the two of you perform with the other guys in the Erotic Cakes band?

DK: "It is instant, it really is..."

GG: "I think if you have to make a

conscious effort to introduce dynamics then something is broken. It should be one of those things where everyone naturally wants to hear a variation and the dynamic is another axis on which to add variety. If everyone prefers to listen to music that has a dynamic variant in it, then these decisions should make themselves."

DK: "When we're playing off each other, it's not a question of even thinking about the techniques. You're just listening to the music. If Guthrie's doing some kind of picking thing, then I'll follow him with that. And then, if he starts tapping or does some silly noises with a whammy bar, I'll just try to keep up. There's also a lot of humour in what we do."

GG: "I think if there's one particularly cool thing about all the stuff we do when we play together, it's the humour. In the field



of instrumental guitar music, so much of it is very serious and very focused on playing a certain string of notes in the right order and the challenge is, can you do this difficult thing without screwing up? I don't enjoy that because so often there's no personality in there."

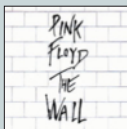
Do you divvy up guitar parts based around your own particular styles?

GG: "It's fairly fluid but it is good to have a guideline. If for some terrible reason we're not feeling inspired, and we're not using the force as much as we might be, then we'll just do the default arrangement. But the mission is, if you have any crazy idea, any way of disrupting the natural flow of things, go with it!"

DK: "I think the main difference is that Guthrie can cover any style that you throw at him but I don't actually have a style so I just mould into what's he's doing. We're playing together, we're not playing at each other. It's not that sort of gun-slinging attitude that guitarists generally have when they get on the same stage." >

Sound Of Wall

Dave Kilminster on 'being' Gilmour in Roger Waters' band



"Sound-wise, I think it's more important to play the parts exactly how Dave Gilmour played them rather than just using the same guitar and the same pedals. So much of the way he sounds is in his hands.

What I try to do is just play the notes exactly as he did although there's a few slight differences – like our vibrato... but I don't take liberties. I put my heart and soul into it but within certain boundaries so it's as respectful as possible to the original recording. [The Wall] album is almost like

a classical piece like The Planets and, if you go to a classical concert, you don't expect somebody to be going off in the middle and doing something completely different. David Gilmour does that when he plays the solos but he's allowed to because he wrote them!"



Above (Guthrie's pedals): 1. Dunlop DVP1, 2. Dunlop Jerry Cantrell wah, 3. DLS Versa-Vibe, 4. TC Flashback delay, 5. TC Hall Of Fame reverb, 6. Suhr KokoBoost, 7. TC Polytune Mini, 8. Guyatone Wah Rocker 5

Tell us about the Suhr guitars you use...

DK: "My main Suhr guitar [a Custom Classic T] is called Rose because I had some designs burnt into the body but that's currently residing in Australia as we speak, waiting for me to join her for the Roger [Waters] tour. I've actually got a few over there and they're all essentially the same with swamp ash bodies and maple necks. With this one, I decided I'd try something a little different, so this is a basswood body with a maple top."

GG: "I have three Suhr signature models. The first one was a bolt-on neck design with a mahogany body and a mahogany neck, a pau ferro fingerboard and a very expensive-looking piece of flamed maple on the top of the body. It's a great guitar but the one thing that always bothered me about it was that it looks so pretty and I look homeless! It's kind of an uneasy juxtaposition because I always look like I've stolen it!"

"So we moved towards the second signature guitar, which looks a bit more scruffy. It's a very basic finish and all mahogany again but this time with a set neck instead of the bolt-on. This thing over here is the newest signature model and it has a basswood body, a maple top and a maple neck that's roasted, which is some kind of strange tree voodoo they've been working on at HQ. It's awesome and it seems to be my main guitar these days, which is a little perverse because I've always sworn by mahogany. It's probably the most versatile guitar I've ever had, which is pleasing."

What amps and effects have you been taking out with the Erotic Cakes band?

DK: "I use one Brunetti Mercury 50-watt head and a 4 x 12. They're amazing-sounding amps and I love the clean sound on them. It doesn't sound harsh or brittle and the overdrive, when you crank the amp up, sounds like Van Halen I, which I absolutely love. With Guthrie recently, I just took a few effects: a BOSS CE-5 Chorus Ensemble, a BOSS Digital Reverb, BOSS tuner and Dunlop volume pedal."

GG: "My amp is a Suhr Badger which is a single-channel, 30-watt head."

I think it's better for the kind of tone I'm looking for to have a lower-powered amp that you can push harder. There is some extra trickery on that amp with power scaling so you can basically make it sound like it's on 10 but actually it's only kicking out two watts or anything in between."

What tips do you have for players in terms of improving the fluency of their playing and use of dynamics in solos?

DK: "It's difficult to teach someone taste! When I used to teach, you'd get into the teaching room and you could always tell when students had been on the amps because the preamp was flat out and the reverb was way up, giving you this horrible buzzy sound. There was no definition there."

GG: "Yeah, with a really saturated sound, there can be no dynamics..."

DK: "It suppresses the sound of the guitar and everything you play automatically becomes the same volume. We both have

Echo Effect

Guthrie's original 'tea tray' was stolen in Italy, but his pedalboard has risen from the ashes...

"The guitar goes into the [Suhr] KokoBoost, then a TC Electronic PolyTune Mini. Then there's a Guyatone Wah Rocker 5 or WRm5, and a DLS Versa-Vibe that's here because I thought it would be fun to try to do a tour with that instead of a chorus pedal. Then there's a Dunlop Jerry Cantrell Signature Wah, which is great and has exactly what I want because you can vary the top-most limit of the pedal's sweep. I also have my new favourite volume pedal in the whole world, which is the Dunlop DVP1. In the loop, we have a Flashback Delay and a Hall Of Fame reverb, both of which come courtesy of the good people at TC Electronic."

a similar attitude to how you should use amps. It's more about the power amp valves than the preamp valves."

Drawing from your teaching backgrounds, what would you say aspiring players tend to neglect technique-wise?

GG: "I think, if anything, the big problem is that guitarists focus too much on technique. There's a popular mentality among this generation of guitar players that you can measure your progress with a metronome. If you can play this scale 20 per cent quicker than you could a month ago, you're 20 per cent better!"



Guthrie's custom Suhr guitar and Suhr Badger amp



Dave's custom Suhr and Brunetti Mercury head

“And there’s a similar thing with theory – if I can just learn this scale in all 12 positions or in all 12 keys then I’ll be really good! But that’s just like learning the alphabet in various configurations. It doesn’t actually help you to speak. The big thing that seems like a revelation to a lot of people is that, when you play, you should be inventing something in your head and then playing that in real time rather than hoping that some shape you’ve memorised will guide you and give you all the right notes. It should just feel the way that singing something feels.”

DK: “I remember doing a Guitar Break a couple of years ago and talking about improvisation. I said, You have to hear what it is you’re going to play before you play it! And it completely baffled them.”

Guthrie, you’ve mentioned in the past that you’re wary of the shred movement. Could you elaborate?

GG: “I think shred is one of those terms that started with the best of intentions. I think 20 years ago shred represented being able to figure out every technical challenge on the guitar so that when you improvised, you could be so much more free – and whatever you heard in your

head, you’d be able to play. But now I think shred seems to have this connotation of technique for its own sake. It’s not enough just to be able to write the alphabet really, really fast, which in essence is what you’re doing if you practise new licks over and over again and get them up to some kind of world land-speed-record tempo.

“My theory is that music is a language, but do you want it to feel like your first language – English in our case – or do you want it to feel more like French? The way to make music feel like your first language is to learn it the way you learned to speak your first language, which is just by copying the sounds of everything around you.”

Do you feel the blues is still relevant to progressive-minded guitarists?

DK: “As far as the blues is concerned, it teaches you how to be more expressive with notes and how important being able to bend the strings is. All those little subtleties that you find in blues, you won’t necessarily get in other forms of music. I think it’s a great colour and there’s just something about it that moves people.”

GG: Blues is kind of the skeleton of what we do, isn’t it? I’m sure it informs the kind

of tone we’re trying to get and, certainly with what I do, I see that there’s a blues core and then there’s all the other stuff wrapped around that.”

DK: “The weird thing is that people don’t necessarily appreciate blues until later on. It’s almost like guitarists learn things backwards. They learn to play really fast to begin with and then, as they develop some taste, they learn how to bend, they work on their vibrato and make it all sound nice.”

What plans do you both have for 2012?

DK: “I don’t know what I’m doing after mid-July at the moment but, until then, I’ve got loads of Rogering to do!”


GG: “My calendar is looking worryingly full until July too. I’m going to be doing lots of gigs with my new project The Aristocrats. We try to go for a very raw filthy approach like, What would a rock power trio from the 1960s or 1970s sound like if they could play in 11/16? We’re coming to Europe in March and April.”

DK: “After July, I would love to do more [Erotic Cakes gigs]. It was just so much fun. Every night, you could see it was getting better and better! If we could be free enough to do it for a few months, then... wow!”

Is there a plan for a Kilminster/Govan collaborative album at some point?

GG: “There is now!”

DK: “It’s a very good plan. I love that plan. I think we should do it!”

GG: “Cool! A plot is tentatively being hatched even as we speak!” 

“Blues is the skeleton of what we do. It informs the kind of tone we’re trying to get, and I see that there’s a blues core and then there’s all the other stuff wrapped around that” **Guthrie Govan**