

Circa 1999 - Matt's Music (an interview by Matt Williams) - UK

MATT'S MUSIC: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVE KILMINSTER

By Matt Williams / Circa 1999

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Dave Kilminster started playing guitar on the 29th of April, 1976. He played left-handed for several years before switching to right-handed after breaking his wrist in a go-carting accident. In 1991 he won the European 'Guitarist of the Year' competition run by Guitarist magazine with the instrumental, 'Sundance'.

As well as teaching, Kilminster currently transcribes for UK magazines *Guitarist* and *Guitar Techniques*. He has worked with such talented British players as Mario Parga (notably on an unreleased classical album in the style of *Passion, Grace & Fire*), Fraser Thorneycroft-Smith (on the 1996 acoustic CD, *Playing with Fire*) and Guthrie Govan. More recently Kilminster was asked to join mega-vocalist John Wetton's (ex-*Asia*) band which resulted in world-wide tours and a higher profile for this virtuoso player.

Kilminster's style is highly individual. Certain aspects bear a minor similarity to the likes of Steve Vai; but, for the most part, he has an unique trademark sound.

'Everyone is a unique individual', explains the guitarist, 'with their own set of inherent traits, characteristics and disorders. Certain things feel very natural to me, and the way I feel when I play a certain note will be different to how somebody else might feel. So how can I not sound individual? I think the problem is that most people want to sound like someone else so they set out on this quest up a dead end street. Unfortunately the best that you can achieve when you follow that path is a poor imitation of someone else. It takes a lot of courage and self belief to stand up and say "I'm aware of all these other players around me but actually I play like this".

'When I started I wanted to be Van Halen but there comes a time when the inspiration has to come from inside, not outside. It's a very lonely path but I guess that's why there aren't too many players like Eric Johnson, Allan Holdsworth, Brian May, Yngwie, Vai, Beck, and so on.'

'Most guitarists play out of boxes and fret positions so they know what notes are going to work but they don't necessarily know how it's going to sound. They don't generally hear melodies before they play. That's one of my main ambitions: to be able to play whatever I hear, instantly. Man if you could hear this guitarist inside my head it would blow you away!!'

Winning the 'Guitarist of the Year' competition helped boost Kilminster's confidence, especially as he had only released a few demo tunes up to that date.

'I didn't really have that much stuff recorded, certainly nothing available in the shops. I was working on computers for IBM at the time and for the first couple of months after the competition I kept thinking "Any day now the phones going to ring..." Ha ha!

'The one thing it did was to make me more conscious when I was playing gigs. It's all right when you're completely unknown -- no one expects anything from you so you can be crap sometimes -- but all of a sudden I started to notice these guys at gigs standing with their arms folded by the bar. You could tell they were thinking, "Go on then, impress me" or "I could do better" or "I hope his amp blows up"!!'

In the early 90s Kilminster joined forces with UK shred-demon, Mario Parga (check out the amazing 1991 release, *The Magician*). As well as playing electric guitar together the two planned an acoustic album -- which unfortunately never came to fruition.

'Mario and I met through Phil Ansari of G-Force magazine. Mario had mentioned that he was looking for someone to play with and Phil recommended me. I have a copy of the stuff that we recorded together and it's OK. I don't know what happened ... we just drifted apart.'

Playing with Fire was an ambitious project: an all-acoustic album which incorporated modern techniques like speed-picking and sweep-picking as well as several more restrained numbers. After recording the unreleased acoustic project

with Parga, Kilminster searched for another player with whom he could double his ideas (all but three of the tracks were written by Kilminster); that person was Fraser Thorncroft-Smith.

'I met Fraser when he was studying at the West London college,' says the guitarist. 'I was giving him lessons there and I always used to schedule him last so that we had time to jam and hang out together. When I first met him it was like bumping into an old friend I haven't seen for ages. We got on very well but more to the point, we played well together. We had great telepathy and used to push each other in a really positive way.'

'I played him the stuff that I'd recorded with Mario and he really liked it so I decided to try the project again. I wrote some more tunes, showed him the parts and it really worked.'

'I regret that we didn't record a second album. For the follow-up we'd started to write tunes together instead of individually and it sounded very, very cool. We had most of it written and I was really excited about it; and then ... nothing.'

'After the CD was finished Fraser and I did a couple of gigs to promote it, most notably the music show at Wembley in November '96. The reactions were always fantastic but ... I don't know, we just drifted apart. I've seen Fraser once in the last two years!'

'Maybe we can go back to it one day. Sitting down playing classical guitar is the sort of thing you can do when you're too old to run around on stage like a lunatic!'

So what came after the acoustic project?

'Well, in 1997 I got a call from a friend of mine called Kala who was working as a bass tech. She said "I'm working for a guy called John Wetton at the moment. I don't know if you've heard of him but he's looking for a new guitarist and I've recommended you. Are you interested? I thought "Have I heard of him? The voice of Asia! The guy that played with Holdsworth and Eddie Jobson in UK!! Are you serious?"

'Anyway we met and he liked me (no audition) and I joined his band. In November '97 we started a tour of Japan and since then we've played in Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Poland and Finland, as well as doing some UK gigs, most notably the Shepherd's Bush Empire and the Astoria. My favourites were an open air festival that we played in the grounds of this old castle in Vigevano, Italy last July; and more recently when we played at the Sun Plaza in Tokyo which is the most incredible venue. The people there are amazing and the Japanese crew were so organised and professional. I was using hired gear and at the beginning of one number my amp went down. Well these guys rushed on stage, checked the fuses, took the back off the amp, changed a valve and three minutes later it was up and running for the next number. Totally fantastic.'

'I think that most of the gigs that we've played have been bootlegged but there is an official live album from last year (in Poland) called Nomansland which isn't bad. Since it was recorded I've changed my amp set up (I'm now using some tweedy Peavys which are great). I've also started using some new pickups called Kinmans so I'm a lot happier with my tone at the moment. Also it's been tough because I've had serious hand problems for the last couple of years culminating in an arm operation last August. It's only been in the last two or three months that my hand has felt remotely normal and I've actually been able to practice again. Hopefully on the next tour in South America (in September) I'll be back on top form -- for the first time in years.'

'As far as other recorded stuff is concerned I played a couple of solos on Martin Darvill's progressive album The Greatest Show on Earth last year; there's also an album called Sub Rosa from an acoustic set that I played in Italy with John Wetton. This was the first ever acoustic show that we did. John's girlfriend had her baby the day before so we didn't have time for a rehearsal. So what you get on this album is the very first time we'd played like that -- ever! I didn't even know that the gig was being recorded but because we're always being bootlegged I try and play to the best of my ability every night. That's not the only reason but it's certainly a good incentive.'

'The bootleg thing is really getting out of hand though. When I was in Japan last week I noticed a record shop had four different ones with me on ... at about £35.00 each (about \$48.00)!! Someone's making vast amounts of money out of our gigs and it's not me.'

Playing with Wetton almost led to the fulfilment of every guitarist's dream: to join a reformed mega-band, record a major studio album and tour the world playing open-air concerts with a ton of exposure into the bargain. That 'almost-band' were Asia. But as Kilminster explains, it didn't quite turn out the way he expected...

'Back in January this year John called and said that he and Carl Palmer were putting the original Asia back together (with Palmer on drums and Geoff Downes on keyboards -- minus Steve Howe) -- and would I be interested? I said "Hmmmmmm, let me think about that ...OK"!!

'So it was all set up. A dream come true. The tour was going to start in Japan and then there were thirty dates in America followed by China, South America, Europe, a new album, money, success, all the women I could eat ... It was perfect.

'I spent the interim period sorting out a load of advance articles for Guitar Techniques and Guitarist, left my teaching job, ordered a new guitar, effects and a new amp set up, sub-let my flat, packed my suitcase...

'Then on June 12th (John Wetton's birthday) Geoff faxed the management company in the States and informed them that he wasn't going to do it. John and Carl tried for a week to contact him but he was obviously in hiding so the whole thing was cancelled.

'Carl has since rejoined ELP, John is wondering what to do next and me ... I'm still on the tablets!'

More recently Kilminster has been playing with another 'Guitarist of the Year' winner, UK player Guthrie Govan, someone for whom Kilminster has nothing but the highest praise.

'Guthrie and I met at a Phil Hilborne gig in Chelmsford but it wasn't until he started to teach at the Guitar Institute in London (where I used to teach) that we got to know each other. We got on really well and started to jam. I wish I had tapes of those sessions ... Guthrie is absolutely incredible and we seem to play very well together. It gives me such a kick to play with him. He's sooooo good! Definitely one of the best players on the planet and a really cool guy (can I have my money now Guthrie?!!).'

What sort of music does Kilminster listen to nowadays? Does anyone in particular impress him technique-wise? And are there any technical barriers he still wants to break down?

'I haven't had chance to listen to much recently,' he says, 'but I have pretty eclectic tastes. To give you some idea the last few CD's I bought were A Meeting by the River featuring Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, a new version of Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings, the latest Tribal Tech album Thick and Telegram by Bjork.'

'The guitarists that I like at the moment are Ron Thal, Greg Howe and Richie Kotzen. There are loads of others who are cool but I miss Michael Hedges ... I also saw Robben Ford twice at the Jazz Cafe in London a few weeks ago and he was great!'

'As far as technical barriers are concerned I don't feel like I have too many (sorry if that sounds arrogant). I use a lot of different techniques and it would be great to improve on all of them but I think my slap guitar playing could be a lot better; and if I could play slide like Sonny Landreth...'

Kilminster fans sit up and take note: future projects include a full-length solo CD.

Explains Kilminster, 'When I was preparing for the Asia tour I wrote a couple of tunes that I thought would be good for the next album. However since that particular boat has sunk without trace I've decided to record another solo album which will be finished and out by the end of the year.'

'It's going to be mainly funky rock tunes with me on vocals. There's going to be a couple of instrumentals on there to and I've asked Guthrie to play some stuff on it as well so we can have some shred wars!'

'There's going to be both electric and acoustic guitar, crazy drummers, loops and grooves, orchestras ... I'd also like to find a mad female violinist for one particular track called "Masquerade" so if you're reading this call me...'

'I'm really looking forward to recording it (probably in December). It's going to be a lot of fun and after all the stress and disappointment of the last couple of months (plus splitting up with a long-time girlfriend) it's just what I need....'

'Apart from that I'm still working on a commercial pop project with a fabulous girl singer called Chip. Things are starting to move on that now so you may even see me on Top of the Pops!!'