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PROGROCK.COM: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVE KILMINSTER

By Carla Huntington, ProgRock | July 21, 2007

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If you were to give guitarist Dave Kilminster a school report card it would consist of all grade A's and the comments, 'works well under pressure' and 'plays well with others'!

Dave Kilminster is a self made man in all aspects of his life. Voted 'Guitarist Magazine's Guitarist of the Year', Dave has rocketed into the limelight with a host of music greats like Keith Emerson, John Wetton, Carl Palmer, Ken Hensley and John Young.

Currently on tour with the Roger Waters-'Dark Side of the Moon' show, Dave was recently seen in front of a third of the world's population during the 'Live Earth' concerts. He reeeeeeeally kicked butt during 'Money' and I have seen the original many times!

I sat down with Dave while he got his coffee and breakfast in Boston recently. Not only did we get a good glimpse of his life and had a lot of fun hanging out and babbling about anything and everyone! He is a really nice man with a great attitude that matches his ability as a musician.

Dave has recently released his newest album Scarlet which features Anne-Marie Helder of Karnataka on background vocals, Pete Riley on drums and Phil Williams on bass. It focuses on original songs and lyrics by Dave and explores a variety of genres of music. In other words - it's pretty darn good, go out and buy it! ;)

So with his coffee and sausage/egg muffin in hand, we sat down to talk about Dave's musical life experiences...

OK, Saturday night, Live Earth Concert....there you are in front of millions and millions of people. What was running through your mind at the time? Were you more nervous in front of all those people?

DK: To be honest, you can only be nervous to a certain degree!! Obviously the TV. cameras are going to make you more aware. They estimated that over 2 billion people watched it all over the world, so I thought 'ok, that's over a third of the population of the planet!'

So your thought was - where is that lucky guitar pick of mine? smile

DK: Yeah... Those kind of things before you go up are all ready running through your head, and could frighten you quite badly, but actually before we went on all the rest of the guys could kinda tell I was a bit nervous, so they were like 'go do you what you do, it's great,' and that helped.

How was the crowd?

DK: They were amazing. We were on for 22/23 minutes and it was just like it went in a flash.

Did you call up all the family and friends and tell them to watch? Ring up all your old school friends etc?

DK: smiles...No I really didn't. I had some MySpace things just telling people about it, but other than that I just wanted to focus on it and do the best I could. I was supposed to do a radio interview while I was there but I just really needed to focus. It was just too much.

Yeah, overload. That would have been a lot.

DK: Yes, it's important to me. Not all the time but sometimes, just before a concert to have that little time to yourself. That little bit of quiet, you know to focus and relax.

Get in the 'zone'?

DK: Yeah!... laughs

Have you seen any of the footage of it yet?

DK: I saw a little bit of it on YouTube but it didn't sound great.

Yes, I guess YouTube hasn't been known for quality sound.

DK: Yeah, there's loads of stuff on YouTube I guess.

Well to change the subject a bit...I have a very nice quote that one Mr. Keith Emerson gave me about you...

'If it weren't for Dave Kilminster I would not have had a reason to form another band after ELP. In fact Dave formed it. Because of him I became unafraid of guitar players and interacted more on a musical and personal level within a band context. The guy is a warm lovely person. Bless him.' _Keith

DK: Wow... [big smile, looks down]

Pretty good huh? How did you get Keith to be comfortable with guitar players?

DK: I'm really not sure. I think he only had a limited experience with guitar players in general. He will be playing and saying something like 'this is a D chord' and it's like, I already know all that stuff!! Laughs... With any band that I play with I always come in with a great respect for the material and especially with Keith's stuff. It's what I grew up with.

How much input have you had? Did he let you put your own ideas into it?

DK: I put in loads of stuff. He trusted me which is amazing, and whatever I came up with he was like 'yeah, that's great'. In fact in some ways he spurred me on to do crazier things... I remember we were rehearsing one day and I just happened to be sitting there with the guitar on my lap playing Sabre Dance and I was kinda playing it like a piano, and Keith looked round and said 'that's great, that's got to go in the set!' I was like 'wow'! He was completely and totally unafraid of sharing the limelight.

Well personally from my experience, I think he just likes to have fun. He seems to be a real musician and just wants to play for the sake of making good music.

DK: Yeah, he's a real musician. It was such a nice experience. I have had experiences with other people where I have had to play down what I do, but he challenged me!! He let me do things out of context and the like, and his original writing is just amazing. He's great!

Does Roger Waters let you have any input?

DK: I pretty much have to stick with what's on the record. Pink Floyd fans will come up and tell me if it's not exactly the way it should be. [laughs] Before this tour I really wasn't all that familiar with much of Pink Floyd's music. The fans come up and ask if we're going to play this or that from 'The Wall' and I have to say that I really don't know what's on 'The Wall'. I've never heard it!!!

It must be a really good experience on this huge tour.

DK: It's a great experience! Totally different musical feel... different crowds...

Was it tough to get this job?

DK: Well, I think a few people tried out for the job. Roger is very professional and he would sit down and listen to a bunch of peoples CDs, and would know in about 10 minutes whether he would want to see them or not.

Like American Idol?

DK: Yeah, kind of. As I said, Roger is really professional and a perfectionist. He isn't going to waste his time.

and he's spoiling you! laughs... Will you get your head to fit through the door on the way home??

DK: Yeah! Laughs... No, not really. It's not like that. I have a strong and realistic sense of where I am in the guitar world, and I know what I want to improve and work on... as well as vocals, lyrics and the like.

Like your new recently released cd 'Scarlet'? I just got it a couple of weeks ago and I do love it.

DK: Thank you!

I know this is cd number 2 for you and you had an acoustic album that you did first. I don't have it yet myself, but I guess this new one is quite a bit different. What type of message were you trying to get over to your fans with this new cd?

DK: I guess the thing about when I record albums is that I just have to do what feels right to me. I don't really think of anyone else on the planet. It's probably best!! For example the acoustic album, I was just messing around on classical guitar, which is the instrument I started playing on when I was young, and I just started writing all these really nice tunes... I played them to one of my guitar students (Fraser), and he really liked them so we worked out some harmony parts and it sounded great!! So I paid for us to go into a studio and record them all... I didn't decide like 'ok, the first album is going to be this and the second is going to be that'.

You didn't think 'ok, need a 3 minute song for radio,' or anything like that?

DK: Yeah, I recorded these things and thought, 'well I'm going to pay to make this into a cd and let other people enjoy it!' A lot of people have said they weren't expecting anything like this, especially after me winning the guitar competition shredding on electric guitar basically!!! I just have to do what feels right.

I also wanted to ask you about teaching. I read that you didn't have any formal training yourself so how did you get the gig with teaching?

DK: It was because I won the guitar competition. They just assumed that you actually know what you're doing! laughs..

So do you find that you missed out by not having that formal training?

DK: Yeah, of course. When I first started teaching I had to learn loads of stuff!! Most guitarists really don't actually know what they're doing and just know a few positions on the neck... But when you're teaching you got to know all your arpeggio's, all your chord voicings, all your scale shapes, whatever key you're in. You need to know all this stuff because you got to teach it. So yes, the first few months I was teaching I had to learn a lot of stuff.

So who taught you?

DK: Basically I had to teach myself. They would call me into the office sometimes and say 'Dave, can you cover my lesson tomorrow? You need to show them 5 positions of a minor seven flat 5 arpeggio, around the chord shapes.' So I would say 'yeah sure', and they would say 'ok, here's the sheet you're going to be working from.' On the sheet it's got the chord shapes and the arpeggio shapes, so that night I'm sat there trying to play it and learn it and then the next day I go in and I'm teaching it.

Wow, that's diving in the deep end!

DK: Well it's the best way to learn it. A lot of my life has been like that.

Scary.

DK: Yeah, when I started writing for this guitar magazine doing a lot of transcriptions it was again because I'd won this guitar competition so people think 'he must know what he's doing'. I was approached at this music fair by this fellow (Neville Marten) who was starting up a new guitar magazine, and he asked if I wanted to write for it. So I'm thinking to myself 'he obviously doesn't know that I can't read or write music', but it sounded like such a really good opportunity so I said, 'yeah sure'.

So how did you learn all that?

DK: I taught myself. I've always worked stuff out on records so that was the easy bit, it was just the maths of writing it out and putting it down. I spent a week over Christmas teaching myself how to read and write music. It was just one of those things, like I had to do it. I never bothered before because it just didn't interest me. It wasn't until someone said 'we'll give you money'!!

That always helps!

DK: So I said 'yeah', and he put me in this magazine every month. The first couple of months of transcriptions just took forever though.

Was the magazine Guitar Player?

DK: No, it was Guitar Techniques. It's available around Europe and it comes over to the States as well. This was about 12 years ago, I guess. So the first couple of months I didn't make any money what-so-ever because it took so long for me... not to work it out, but to figure out how to get it into bars and stuff. I had to figure out 12/8... and 3/4 it was like, where did the other 1 go? laughs...

Did anybody ever catch you out on any of this stuff?

DK: For the first transcription I did, I asked my partner at the time (who played piano) to play it through before I sent the music off... and I noticed one or two errors in there which I corrected... but that was only for the first one. The second tune they gave me to transcribe was the Steve Vai track 'For The Love Of God'.!!! So I thought 'well, if I can write this out I can do anything!' And again, I spent about a week and half just trying to write these things, you know? Sometimes I would spend 2 hours on a particular bar!!! It was a major headache.

That's pretty scary. I give you major credit for that. That's really amazing that you can figure things out so quickly.

DK: It works for me. Being put on the spot gets me to think, 'yeah, I'll do that', and I just figure out a way. Otherwise I'd be too lazy and wouldn't want to bother. So I have always been good under pressure.

Since you have been playing with a lot of people, who would you love to play with living or dead? Your dream band?

DK: I'm a huge Jeff Buckley fan...I would love to play rhythm guitar for Jeff Buckley. Ummm...if Led Zeppelin got back together and they needed a second guitarist.

Oh, would you replace Jimmy what's his face?...laughs

DK: Oh yeah. laughs... Actually he's a really nice chap. I've met him.

What is the last cd you have been listening to?

DK: The last one is from a band called the Decemberists. They have an album called 'The Crane Wife', which I really love. It's not the normal thing I listen to but I really love it. It reminds a little bit of REM maybe... a little bit of Jethro Tull even?. Yeah it's a really great album, and I've actually heard one or two tracks in Starbucks over here. The other album I bought before that was Imogen Heap, Speak to Me. That's her latest album, and she's incredible with the most amazing voice. Really unusual style, technique... really kinda quirky. She did one or two tracks with Jeff Beck.

So speaking of lady singers, I hear your lady did one or two tracks on your new album Scarlet. What has she taught you about music?

DK: I think she has just given me confidence in my voice more than anything else. I had never really sung before. I'd sing backups but only occasionally lead. I sing a couple of tracks in the RW show as well but it still feels like a fairly new thing for me. I'm still learning about my voice.

Yeah, it's a whole different thing when they put a mike under your face.

DK: At first when we went to Japan with Keith and I was singing the lead vocal with him, it just seemed the pressure was completely different... All of a sudden you're in the middle of the stage!!!

Well I am also majorly impressed with your lyrics. They are really beautiful. Where does this come from in you? They are so descriptive. You can really feel the power, the emotion, smells, tastes, everything. Is this another side of you? Are these things in your life?

DK: Thank you. I was never really interested in lyrics until I heard Jeff Buckley... I loved the music and his voice... and the stuff he was singing about, I would think 'that's incredible, that's like an extra element I'd never even considered. I was into a lot of instrumental music and was into ELP and classical music and the like. You know you can listen to Barber's Adagio or whatever and it doesn't need words. It's just one of the most moving pieces of music ever. But then I thought 'well this is just one of those really nice things to add', so when I set off to make Scarlet I thought 'if I'm going to sing, then I have to sing about things that are important to me, and the words have got to be good'.

What I really like about your lyrics is that they are not the same old corny, cliché type of things. They're different, they are descriptive. Did you come up with the lyrics all at once or in bits and pieces?

DK: Again for me, it's the pressure. It's like you have 3 or 4 lines and you have got to go into the studio and sing the whole of that song this afternoon, so you better get it finished!! Actually the first lyrics 'Just Crazy', I finished quite a while ago when I was still with Keith.

My personal favorite is 'Harkness' and the photo's in the cd are good as well. (points to a beautiful scarlet sunset photo in the liner notes.) Who took this one, where is it?

DK: Actually that's me. That was right outside my house. The sky was just amazing and I grabbed my camera and ran outside!

I see this was recorded at Abbey Road?

DK: Actually it was mixed at Abbey Road.

Did you get good vibes from the place and all its history?

DK: No, not really. It's always nice to walk around that place. I have been there a couple of times and there's a lot of important musical history there. I think 'Dark Side of the Moon' was made there

Well my last question... to quote a very good lyricist... 'if this was the last day of your life, what would you do to make it right?' < (quote from Scarlet cd).

DK: laughs...Nooooooooooooooooo!... Someone else has asked me that one. I wish I never wrote that line now! I wrote the line because I was just intrigued by the concept. I think it all kind of goes back to when my father died suddenly at the age of 52 and I kind of thought "all the things I wanted to do and say and I actually never did any of it. So now I try to be, you know, if I like someone I try to tell them. As you go through life you really shouldn't have a lot of regrets.

So Dave is trying to live his life without any regrets and by that we are fortunately all included in his musical journeys. In this interviewer's opinion, that's a pretty cool place to be...

I want to thank Dave Kilminster for a wonderful look into the way he thinks. Extremely talented, intelligent and a fun person to hang around Starbucks with! I highly recommend his new Scarlet cd and hopefully we all will get to see him on tour again soon.