

People + Opinion : Artists/Engineers/Producers/Programmers

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Dave Kilminster

Guitar virtuoso

Since winning a magazine's 'Guitarist Of The Year' competition back in 1991, Dave Kilminster has been riding a veritable virtuoso rollercoaster, playing with some of the greatest musicians on the planet, culminating in his current role as lead guitarist for Roger Waters. We chew the fat with him about wearing Gilmour's shoes, why practice always makes perfect and the importance of good posture.

Matt Frost

It would certainly be no exaggeration to say that the last 15 years have been something of a whirlwind for erstwhile IBM employee Dave Kilminster. Since first raising his head atop the six-string parapet with his '91 Guitarist competition success, he's gone on to be regarded as one of the most technically gifted axe players in the country. As well as touring and recording with a slew of top rock luminaries such as Keith Emerson, Ken Hensley, Carl Palmer, John Wetton and most recently Pink Floyd's Roger Waters, Dave has also found the time to record two critically acclaimed albums of his own, produce a string of instructional DVDs, as well as teach guitar to future movers and shakers such as Newton Faulkner and Reef's Kenwyn House. For as long as Dave can remember, music has always been the overarching passion in his life and to him every working day is a highlight, no matter the project or genre.

"I just consider myself ridiculously lucky to be playing music for a living," Dave says. "When I first got the job with Roger [Waters], I told my mum about it and she was overjoyed. She said, 'I'm so glad you've finally made it!' and I understood what she meant, but, to me, I made it as soon as I could actually give up my day job and make a living out of playing guitar. That was it for me and everything else is a bonus!"

Strings of convenience

Dave Kilminster's rise to the top of the pile certainly illustrates that hard work and dogged commitment pay off for any wannabe professional musician. From the moment he fell in love with the piano sitting in pride of place at his grandmother's house when he was a child, making music was the only thing that Dave ever really wanted to do. In fact, he only started playing the guitar because he didn't have a piano at his own home and couldn't stand restricting his musical activities solely to the weekends, when he was able to make the trip over to his nan's. The comparably portable guitar was just a much more convenient way for Dave to play music whenever and wherever he wanted.

"My best friend at school played guitar and I just thought, 'Well, I'll just do that for a while', as something else to do to create music on," remembers Dave. "And I guess that's kind of unusual, because most guitarists I know picked up the guitar because of a particular guitarist they'd seen like Jimi Hendrix on TV, or they'd heard Eric Clapton or Van Halen. But it was never that for me. I just wanted to play music and the guitar was always a second best [to the piano]. I guess that's probably why I worked so hard on my technique, to be able to make things sound like they were played on a piano. The guitar I found incredibly frustrating as an instrument. To get that kind of polyphonic stuff that is so easy on the piano is just a complete nightmare."

From the point he picked up that first axe in '76, Dave wholeheartedly committed himself to mastering the works of his favourite guitarists, learning every lick, chord progression and solo down to the minutest degree, but at the same time ensuring his playing displayed the same passionate intensity of the original performances. Indeed, his dedication to the cause and hard work ethics are ably illustrated by his response to an unfortunate go-karting accident when he was still a teenager. Having broken the wrist of his natural right fretting hand in the accident (Dave was born a southpaw), he point-blank refused to hang up his plectrum for the foreseeable recovery period, and instead thought it would be worthwhile relearning to play the guitar right-handed in order to develop his chops even further. Unbeknownst to Dave, the other wrist never would actually make a full recovery, and so to this day he still plays the guitar in a manner he describes as "the wrong way round." To have achieved the incredible levels of virtuosity Dave Kilminster has whilst playing — at least initially — in an unnatural way, should be an important lesson for any aspiring six-string axe hero. Never give up, always persevere and you've got a good chance of getting to where you want to be.

Career development

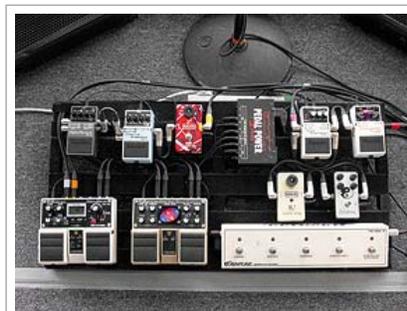
It's certainly the kind of hard work ethic illustrated above that has helped Dave Kilminster get to the point where he is today. Those long years spent studiously absorbing the records of his favourite guitarists — who in those early years included such diverse masters as Michael Hedges, Steve Howe, Pat Travers and Eddie Van Halen — ultimately paid off when he won Guitarist magazine's 'Guitarist Of The Year' competition in 1991. To begin with, however, his newly won status took more than a little getting used to, particularly when it came to live performance.

"One of the things I hated after winning that guitar playing competition was that I would go out and, while I still felt like I had a lot to learn, there would be a whole bunch of guitarists at these gigs just watching and expecting me to be wonderful," he laughs, modestly. "And I'd just think, 'Well, can't I just be a bit shit tonight?'"

However, it wasn't too long after the comp that word really began to get around and Dave suddenly found himself in a position where he was able to jack in the



Dave made an early decision to use Cornford Hellcat heads, in stereo with Cornford Richie Kotzen 4 x 12 cabs.



day job. He was offered (and duly accepted) a tutoring job at the Guitar Institute in Acton, despite having no formal music qualifications. Then a few years down the line, after treading the boards with a few of his own bands, he scored his first major tour, with former Asia bass man John Wetton and their new band, Qango. Over the next few years, whilst Dave continued his teaching — initially at Acton, and more recently at the Academy for Contemporary Music (ACM) in Guildford — his reputation as an energetic and maverick stage performer was really beginning to gain ground, particularly on the back of the slew of world tours he did with prog rock legend Keith Emerson from 2002 onwards, playing all those classic and technically complex Emerson, Lake and Palmer classics.

Dave's pedalboard for the Dark Side Of The Moon tour includes a CE-5 Chorus Ensemble, RT-20 Rotary Speaker Simulation, RV-5 Digital Reverb, MXR M-133 Micro Amp, MXR EVH Phase 90 and a Boss DD-20 Giga Double Delay pedal.

Audition hell

It was after three years of touring with Emerson that Dave Kilminster's manager received a phone call saying that Dave had been recommended as a potential lead guitarist for a forthcoming Roger Waters tour. Dave remembers the moment he heard about it very well, not least because of the fact he rather embarrassingly didn't know who Roger Waters actually was.

"When my manager told me about the audition, he said, 'Roger Waters is looking for a guitarist!' and I said, 'Roger who?'" laughs Dave. "I'd never heard of him and he's going, 'Come on, Pink Floyd. You must know 'Comfortably Numb!' And I said, 'Oh, that's a disco track, yeah! I don't mind that at all. That'll be kind of fun! [The Scissor Sisters had released a disco'd up version of the track in 2004] But the closer I got to this audition, I actually thought, 'This might be slightly bigger than I first anticipated!'"

The audition itself, which was for Roger Water's huge 2006-07 Dark Side Of The Moon global arena tour, turned out to be a comedy of errors for Dave, who was expected to not only play Gilmour's lead guitar parts, but also sing his vocal parts. Although Dave had technically prepared the tracks he'd been sent through the post to the nth degree, it was the equipment on the day that either let him down or helped cause a temporary loss of memory. "God, what a horrible day that was!" Dave recalls, fondly. "I don't like mornings at the best of times and I had to get up fairly early to drive into London. But [the audition] was just a whole catalogue of disastrous events.

The first thing that happened was I took my own amp, which decided not to work on the day, but fortunately one of the techs managed to get that going. Then I plugged in this acoustic, which I'd borrowed off my manager, and that wasn't working either. I had two electric guitars, two Tele-style guitars — one of them with 21 frets and the other with 22. The first tune we did was 'Money', and, of course, halfway through this tune I realised that I haven't actually got the right guitar, because to play the solo at the end you need 22 frets and I've got the guitar with 21 frets on! So I was like, 'Hang on a second, do you mind if we stop?' And I didn't realise that he wanted me to sing it as well — not being a huge Pink Floyd fan, I didn't know it was them both singing [Roger Waters and Dave Gilmour]. So then I'm trying to sing and play this very syncopated guitar part, and I was just feeling completely unprepared!

Then there was another part when we were doing 'Wish You Were Here', and I'd worked out the bottleneck solo and thought, 'Yeah, this'll be really nice'. So we're halfway through and we're just about to go into the bottleneck solo, and I'm thinking, 'Where's my bottleneck?...' And bear in mind everyone's looking at me. I just left feeling like I'd really blown it big time!"

Much to Dave's immense surprise, he was told he'd got the gig later that day. Despite the mistakes he had made in not having the right equipment and accessories ready at the required times, Roger Waters had made a very quick decision. Dave himself does have his theories as to why. "I think what did actually save my neck was when I did play the solos. For example, when I did the solo in 'Money' I just nailed it," says Dave. "I really went for it and there was a lot of attitude there because Roger likes that. If it's your solo spot, then go and sell it. You can't just sit there looking at your feet! You go out and you perform!"

Driving sounds

It was now time for Dave Kilminster to get really busy, as not only did he have to learn verbatim Roger Waters' chosen two-hour-plus set of material, he also had to perfect Gilmour's vocal parts and develop the right axe rig capable of delivering that classic Gilmour Dark Side Of The Moon tone. It should also be pointed out here that the parts Dave was being asked to do were very much Gilmour's lead parts, as due to the large number of overdubs on the original recording, Waters had chosen, as on previous solo tours, to employ three guitarists in total. For the record, the two other axemen for Dave's inaugural jaunt were Snowy White and Andy Fairweather Low. As has always been Dave's favoured approach to learning new material, he wanted to absorb them both as whole entities as well as every individual minutiae. And exactly how did he do this? By jumping in his car and notching up hundreds of miles with the volume whacked up.

"They sent me two CDs with all the tracks on, and I just drove around and listened to it in the car," says Dave. "I do quite a lot of driving and I wanted to absorb them that way. I've got fairly good ears, so what it means is that if I'm playing a tune and I can't tell what the next chord is, my ears will probably tell me, and that's from transcribing everything ever since I first picked up the guitar. The great thing about transcribing is that you make that connection between what you hear and what you play so literally. Before I even picked up the guitar, I just drove around in the car and just absorbed the songs. And then when the time came, I worked them out."

When Dave goes through the throes of learning new material like he did for the Roger Waters tour, he likes to avoid making notes just as far as he possibly can. "I don't usually like making notes if I can avoid it, because the problem with making notes is you're always referring to them," he says. "I know loads of vocalists who will go out with the same lyric sheets they've been carrying for 15 years and they've never learnt it because it's on this piece of paper. I hate making notes, but there were a few bits of paper because there was so much material. And for example, the middle of 'Perfect Sense' is quite a complicated chord sequence towards the end."

If there was one thing that Dave was absolutely determined to do, it was to avoid anything even close to the mistakes made during his



Originally, Dave chose to use Fender Richie Kotzen signature Telecasters and Takamine acoustic guitars, although he has more recently been playing his Suhr Classic Telecasters.



original Waters audition. "I learnt everything," he says. "I even learnt what the keyboards did, I learnt what the bass lines did, and if there were two or three guitar parts I'd learn all of them. I just thought, 'Let's not mess it up this time. Let's go in completely over-prepared!'"

Great rig in the sky

When it came to choosing his rig for the Dark Side Of The Moon tour, Dave took along a load of stuff to the first week of rehearsals. "[The rig] all came together during rehearsals," he tells us. "We had two weeks of rehearsals before the first gig. The first week was just going to be the band and the second week was what they call production rehearsals, where they get in all the lighting cues and the video and all that kind of stuff. The first week, I just took 10 guitars and a whole bag of pedals to see which setup would work the best, and it did take four or five days before I started finally getting the sound together and getting the right combination."

Guitar-wise, Dave originally opted for Takamine acoustics and Fender Richie Kotzen Telecaster signatures, which he'd luckily just been introduced to. "They had slightly hotter pickups in them and a bit of a fatter sound, because Teles by nature can be a bit thin and twangy, which is not necessarily what you want for a Dave Gilmour solo. But these Telecasters, they're great to play because they've got big fat necks on them, and they were the ones that sounded best. To me, the sound is everything. If it sounds good, then I can play it!"

Dave has more recently been playing his Suhr Classic Telecasters, including a rather fetching axe customised with engravings by his singer-songwriter girlfriend, Anne-Marie Helder. As far as the amps went, Dave had made an early decision to use Cornford Hellcat heads, which he used in stereo with Cornford Richie Kotzen 4 x 12 cabs. When it came to pedals, Dave went through quite a bit of experimentation to get the sounds he wanted, ably helped by both his guitar technician and the FOH engineer, whose talents Dave had unwittingly experienced before.

"Most guitarists that I like, when I go to see them live, the sound's usually quite disappointing," says Dave. "And the sound guy was saying, 'Who have you seen that you think sounds really good live?' and I said, 'Well, definitely the best live guitar sound I've ever heard was Brian May at Wembley on The Works tour — a horrible cavernous place, but the guitar just sounded incredible!' And he said, 'Yeah, I did that!' He was Queen's sound guy for about 20 years and he's so good, he's got such great ears. So I said, 'Just tell me what you want!' Sometimes, he'd come up and say, 'That sounds a bit thin,' or, 'That sounds a bit muddy', or, 'A bit too much of this,' and we managed to nail it between me, him and my guitar tech at the time. By the time we started the second week, I was pretty happy with the sound I was getting!"

Dave's final pedalboard for the Dark Side Of The Moon tour includes quite a few Boss products: a BD-2 Blues Driver (as his principal overdrive tone), a CE-5 Chorus Ensemble, a DD-6 Delay, an RT-20 Rotary Speaker Simulation and an RV-5 Digital Reverb. He also has a T-Rex Replica Digital Delay, an MXR M-133 Micro Amp and an MXR EVH Phase 90. He has recently begun using a Boss DD-20 Giga Double Delay pedal.

Taking the click

Dave has been touring Dark Side Of The Moon on and off for two years now, but one aspect of the performances that really took some getting used to was the fact that everything is to a click track to ensure the incredible lights show, video presentation and other 'physical' aspects of the performance remain completely in sync.

"You can't treat it like a gig, because there are certain things where if it was a gig you might want to slow down in a certain section or speed up," explains Dave. "But this is just performing a suite of music, if you like, with such incredible visuals at hand and explosions and flying pigs and spacemen, and so you're basically just playing parts. So actually, playing with a click was fine and I don't think it ever sounded like we were playing with a click. But it would've been quite interesting just once to turn the click off, play a tune and see where we'd have all taken it! It was the first time I've ever done it, and it was slightly weird getting used to it to begin with because you're walking out on stage and all these people are screaming and shouting, and yet all you can hear in your head is 'Tick da da da, tick da da da!' These special in-ear monitors were specially moulded to our ears so they actually cut out a lot of audience noise as well!"

Frantic future

Although Roger Waters currently has no further tour dates lined up for the remainder of the year, Dave Kilminster is hardly complaining, as he has more than enough to keep him busy. He is currently remixing his debut solo rock album, *Scarlet*, which he originally released to coincide with the beginning of the Dark Side Of The Moon tour back in 2006. He is also currently co-writing for and will be recording a new record with John Wetton and Geoff Downes, has plans for some solo gigs, and also some G3 gigs with two other six-string virtuoso buddies, Guthrie Govan and Jamie Humphries. But what Dave is most excited about at the moment is the acoustic duo he has put together with up-and-coming British singer-songwriter Murray Hockridge. They have plans to gig right across the summer and also to take some of Murray's songs into the studio at some point, which Dave is very excited about.

"Murray's just amazing," he says. "He just has a ridiculously great voice. There's so much talent there and I just can't believe he's not been discovered or done anything of any note so far. I feel it's my mission at the moment to make him an international superstar. Taking me along with him, of course!"

Check out Dave Kilminster's official web site at www.davekilminster.com for details of upcoming releases and forthcoming gigs, including the residency he and Murray Hockridge currently have at the Riva restaurant in Peterborough. ■ PM



Preventing injury



Dave performs in an acoustic duo with up-and-coming singer-songwriter Murray Hockridge at the Riva restaurant in Peterborough.



In the past, Dave Kilminster sometimes found himself teaching for up to 10 hours a day with barely a break. This led to the development of some physical problems, which necessitated a lot of physio to get Dave back on the right track again. Breathing and posture have since been the first two lessons he teaches any students that come his way.

"Posture and breathing are the two main problems that guitarists suffer from. A lot of guitarists, when they're playing, they'll hold their breath. And unfortunately that doesn't help and causes problems with circulation, and it means your hands get cold and clammy, especially if you're a bit nervous. In a class of 20 people, there would be at least 19 of them holding their breath when they were playing.

And the guitar is just such an unnatural instrument to sit with. When you play piano and have lessons, they'll show you things like the Alexander Technique, so you're actually sitting properly and your hands are in a proper position. But guitar players are just so lazy as well. They'll sit on the sofa and play, or sit on a bed and play, but you've got your spine twisted, you've got your right shoulder way up in the air, your left shoulder is way down there and you're putting a stretch on your neck. It's the worst possible thing you could do and — especially if you're like that for hours — you could really cause a lot of problems. It's terrible. If you have classical guitar lessons, you have a footstool, and there are reasons for having the footstool. It puts your guitar in the centre of your body and it means your shoulders are both kind of even. I just practise standing up whilst, because that's the way you're probably going to play the guitar and it makes sense to actually be in a fairly similar position when you're practising as you are going to be when you're playing live!"

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