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Dave Kilminster on playing with Prog Rock royalty



There are some gigs that are coveted even by musicians who are used to rocking stadiums; touring 'Dark side of the Moon' and 'The Wall' with Roger Waters could well be among them. Fortunately for us Dave Kilminster has done just that, and it doesn't end there. He's also played guitar for (among others) John Wetton, Carl Palmer and Keith Emerson - the last of whom credited him with inspiring him to get back on the road. He's currently playing lead guitar with Steven Wilson on his 'Hand. Cannot. Erase.' tour. With a CV like that we couldn't resist interviewing him...

MPS

You have played with some truly great musicians, who are you working with at the moment?

DK

Yeah, I've been very fortunate!! And the good luck is definitely continuing because I'm currently working with Steven Wilson! Actually we've just finished a European tour with two sold out shows at the Royal Albert Hall in London, so life is definitely good.

MPS

You played on the epic 'Dark Side of the Moon' and 'The Wall' tours with Roger Waters, the scale of these events were simply astounding, can you describe what it's like being on stage?

DK

Ummm... not easily! Actually I watched a YouTube clip of my solo in 'Comfortably Numb' recently, and it looked like the Second Coming of Christ! And I'm sat there thinking 'wow, that was actually me up there!' It's all a little surreal to be honest. At the time you're not really too aware of what's happening around you, you're just up there on stage trying to do the best you can, and get all your parts right. But I do feel very blessed to have been involved in such incredible productions. Did you know that 'The Wall' tour we did (from 2010 - 2013) is the highest grossing tour by a solo act ever? And the third highest grossing tour of all time! I struggle to fit all that stuff in my tiny head - I'm looking forward to seeing the DVD next month though!

MPS

Given these extraordinary experiences, can you pick out a favourite gig?

DK

Another really difficult question! There have been so many highlights during the last twenty years... the time when Keith Emerson was in the audience, and got up to jam for the encore!! Playing the Hollywood Bowl; Wembley Stadium attended by my two sisters; 'Live Earth' in July 2007; even playing an acoustic duo gig in a tiny little bar in Austria shortly after my mother died... and performing 'Hallelujah' with tears streaming down my face.... they're all very memorable for very different reasons.

But I guess if I had to pick one it would be 12-12-12. The concert we played at Madison Square Gardens, NY for the victims of Hurricane Sandy. The line-up was pretty ridiculous; The Rolling Stones, The Who, Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton, Bruce Springsteen, Bon Jovi, Alicia Keys, Billy Joel... and also (having previously checked the website) I was aware that it was being broadcast around the world to an estimated audience of over TWO BILLION PEOPLE! Not only that, but they were already taking preorders on iTunes for the soundtrack.... so I knew that if I totally messed up then it would just be out there forever!

So, I guess you could say I was just a tiny little bit nervous.... hahahaha.... but it went really well. For the climax of our set we played 'Comfortably Numb' along with Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder singing the choruses, and considering the pressure I played ok, which was just such a HUGE relief, as I really didn't want to let anyone down and I was so very proud to be a part of an event like that too... Raising money for people that are suffering.

I actually played quite a few fund raising events with Roger for various charities - from Alzheimer's research to looking after wounded American servicemen & women - and that's actually one of my favourite things about my job... being able to do what I love to do, and also help people at the same time.

MPS

You've toured with both Keith Emerson and Carl Palmer who are widely regarded as being among the finest instrumentalists of their generation, does this present an additional challenge for you?

DK

Well I always try to play my very best whatever the situation, so I think the only real difference with Keith was that I was playing music that I grew up with along with the guy that actually wrote it. For example sometimes Keith would just sit at a piano and start playing something from 'Tarkus' or 'Trilogy' and I would just melt, and was instantly transported back to being that shy and awkward teenager that grew up listening to his music... So I guess the additional challenge was just keeping it all together!

MPS

Apart from playing gigs you're a recording artist, songwriter, producer and you've even done some acting - what kind of work do you get the most satisfaction out of?

DK

Well I really love playing live and making people happy. That's always an incredible feeling and it gives you an instant high that you just can't get anywhere else. But actually what gives me the most satisfaction is recording my own music. Even though it's usually a long, difficult and drawn out process (due to my perfectionist nature) that feeling you have when you've recorded a new piece of music - something totally unique that's never been heard before - and hopefully something that will become a part of people's lives even after I'm gone. That's very special thing.

MPS

You've recorded two full solo albums and collaborated with various musicians, can you tell us a little bit more about your solo projects?

DK

I've always wanted to be part of a really great rock band, but unfortunately I never found that unique chemistry that's needed. So 'Scarlet - The Director's Cut' was my very first attempt at doing pretty much everything myself. I sang lead vocals, played piano, played guitar (obviously!!), wrote all the music, lyrics and string arrangements. I even put most of the artwork together. And I'd never actually sung lead vocals before or scored strings, or wrote lyrics. It was a huge learning curve!

Anyway, it's a pretty eclectic bunch of songs which reflects my rather diverse musical tastes, but for '...and The Truth will set you free...' (my second solo album) I took the things I thought worked well on 'Scarlet' and developed a much stronger and more focused direction. I felt like I'd improved in all aspects for this second album and I also drew more on my early influences (Queen, Led Zeppelin, etc). You can definitely hear that in the multi tracked vocal harmonies (all of which I did myself) and the more expansive rock pieces. Actually I've just started work on my third album which I'm really excited about as I feel like I'm really developing my own 'voice'.

MPS

You've mentioned Queen and Led Zep, who else do you count among your musical influences?

DK

I'm really glad you said 'musical' influences as opposed to 'guitar' influences because to me the music has always been more important. Back in the 70's I used to listen to my little red transistor radio all the time. It was generally tuned to 'Radio 1' and in any single program they could play anything from Black Sabbath, Bob Marley, Michael Jackson, The Eagles, Steely Dan, 10cc, Marvin Gaye, AC/DC, David Bowie, ELO, The Carpenters, Stevie Wonder, The Beatles, Led Zeppelin.... and I loved it all. I never felt the need to differentiate between musical styles, to me it's all music. In fact, the idea of genre based radio stations seems a little backward. I don't really want to listen to ANY style of music ALL the time! Queen were the first band I got heavily into though. That was when I realised that playing rock music was what I wanted to do. But I was also listening to a lot of classical music too, like Debussy, Rachmaninov, Vaughan Williams, Holst, etc... so they're all in my music somewhere.

MPS

That's a good point; if you could go back to any musical era what would it be?

DK

I'm a child of the seventies and most of my favourite music comes from that period, so that would be an obvious choice. It was such an exciting, creative time with everyone experimenting and inventing new and incredible music. Nowadays everything is just soulless, computerised junk. I mean, isn't anyone fed up with autotuned vocals yet? It was ok as a little gimmick on a Cher single (Believe) back in '98... but seriously, the joke has gone way to far! To be honest, if I was growing up listening to the radio now then I probably wouldn't even play music!

MPS

What was your first guitar?

DK

It was a cheap and nasty Classical guitar. I painted it black and white (to look like Van Halen's on the first record) and took the frets out... I even set fire to it! By the way, that wasn't a 'Hendrix' thing, that was just my frustration... I've always found the guitar to be a very frustrating instrument to play. Even the fact that you can't actually tune it perfectly! My first electric was a 'Shaftesbury' copy of a Gibson SG. That was pretty rubbish too...

MPS

What guitar are you playing at the moment?

DK

My main guitar on the last tour with Steven was a Black Les Paul '88 Custom with pickups from Monty's Guitars. I got it for the 'Wall' tour as Roger wanted us to play black guitars on the front stage, but apart from that I hadn't really played it much at all. I loved the look of it though, so I took it along to the first rehearsals with Steven with the intention of using it for just one or two numbers. But Steven absolutely loved it (both the look and the sound), and asked me to use more often. It's my first 'Gibson' scale guitar for about twenty years though, so I'm still getting used to the shorter scale!

The other two electrics I'm using on tour are a Suhr (which I designed and had custom built), and a Tom Anderson Drop T with cream P90s. I also play a Babicz steel strung acoustic (on 'Routine') and a Godin fretless classical

MPS

Tell us about your Strymon pedals, what made you chose them?

DK

Steven is very particular about the guitar sounds. He loves all those 'wobbly' effects like Lesley, Tremolo, Vibrato, etc... and I didn't have ANY of those! But I knew my good friend Guthrie (Govan, Steven's previous guitarist) had been using a **'Flint'** tremolo pedal on the 'Raven' tour so I thought I'd check it out. I was absolutely amazed at how good it was. Not just the Trem but also it has incredible reverb too. I was not only impressed by the sounds, but also the build quality which is very solid. And of course it looks great too, the black casing with the retro cream knobs.

I was also looking for a Leslie pedal, so as I was in the shop I thought I should check out the **'Lex'** pedal too. I know there are lots of Leslie pedals out there but most of them are absolutely HUGE. And the Lex (apart from sounding great) is also really nice & compact.

I also needed a specific programmable reverb pedal. I'd never actually used reverb live before (I always figured 'how much reverb do you actually need when you're playing Madison Square Gardens'?) but again I knew Steven would want reverb on certain clean tones (like the infamous 'Lonely Swede' sound, heard at the beginning of 'Drive Home'). So the obvious thing to do was to check out the **'Big Sky'**, which I absolutely loved too! Really easy and intuitive. A great colour (sorry but those things are important to me!) and also the dry signal path remains analogue, which is something I really like. So then of course I had to get the **'TimeLine'**, to complete the set.

MPS

What else do you have on your pedalboard?

DK

I have a Electro-Harmonix POG, just for a '12 string' effect in one number. A Malekko Omicron Vibrato (love the name!); a Black Suhr Riot; an EP Booster & SP Compressor; a Boss tuner; a Dunlop Jerry Cantrell Wah & Dunlop volume pedal; a GuitarSystems TrebleTool; a SourceAudio Soundblox Multiwave Distortion; and a Hermida Zendrive.

All the pedals are run through the incredible **G2 GigRig**, which allows me to select any combination of pedals, change pre and post gains, and also sends out MIDI too so I can change presets on the Big Sky and TimeLine. We actually had to learn around 4.5 hours worth of material for the last Steven Wilson tour, and so I'm up to 94 presets at the moment.

MPS

Is there anything you have parted with that you really miss?

DK

Well, I did once sell my beloved Blue Anderson Drop T because it reminded me of too much another guitarist that I really didn't like!! Hahaha.... but I bought the guitar back about two years later, and I'm so glad

that I did because it's amazing!! :O))

MPS

Can you think of anything that really changed things for you, and why?

DK

Yes. I have quite small hands and so I always used to use Gibson scale guitars: custom made, funny shaped things. Humbuckers, trem, scalloped fingerboards.... you know, the full on metal thing. But one day I was in a guitar shop and I saw this second hand Fender Pink Paisley Tele hanging up. I was looking for a present for my girlfriend at the time (who also played guitar) and I thought 'this looks pretty cool'. So I picked it up and played a little and it felt great! There was just something about it, even acoustically. It sustained for days, and it sounded really musical... it just sang. Right then I knew that I'd been missing out on something... so I bought the guitar for myself, and got my girlfriend a new amp instead!! Hahaha... :O)

But that guitar really changed everything for me. Even though it was tougher to play (because of the longer scale) it just sounded better. Which, at the end of the day is the most important thing.

MPS

Is there any advice you can offer to people starting out on their musical journeys?

DK

I was self taught and when I was starting out there weren't really any good transcriptions, books or magazine lessons. So, I had to sit with an old record player and just figure things out by ear on my own. This obviously took much longer, but it really helped to develop my ears. I'd originally picked up the guitar to play the music that was in my head, and this method of learning really helped reinforce the connection between my ears and the fretboard. I could work out most other songs instantly (sometimes without even using the guitar!) and also when improvising I could pretty much play any melodies that were floating around my brain.

Nowadays it's so easy to find lessons and transcriptions online for pretty much anything that you want to play. But unfortunately learning that way is akin to 'painting by numbers' whereby you're not actually listening to the notes so much as looking at your fingers and putting them on the right fret numbers. Not to mention the fact that most online transcriptions are pretty awful.

So my advice is to spend some time listening and trying to work things out on your own. Yes, it's difficult. Yes, it takes longer. But the more you do it the easier it gets. You'll start to 'hear' music in a different way, and the long term benefits to your playing and career are truly immeasurable.

Find out more about what Dave's working on at davekilminster.com

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