

Scarlet, Track By Track: Dave Kilminster Revisits His Stunning Debut

Dave Kilminster walks Guitar Planet through the ins and outs of making and then remaking *Scarlet*, his landmark debut.

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After touring the world and sending jaws crashing to the floor at Roger Waters' side on the incredible *The Wall* live tour, Dave Kilminster decided to return to his debut album— to reorder and re-edit his most beloved work, *Scarlet*.

This week Dave Kilminster walks Guitar Planet through each track as we uncover the inspiration behind 10 incredible tracks and learn just how he achieved each ear bending sound – but we start by asking him why he wanted to rewrite the beginning of his career.



"I'm a perfectionist...sometimes it's a curse, but I just can't help it. And I knew when the first version of 'Scarlet' was finished that it wasn't quite right. I'd rushed to get it ready to sell on an Antipodean tour with Roger Waters, but once it was printed up I couldn't even bear to listen to it. It just didn't sound right.

After the tour I tried to forget about it and write new songs for a follow up album, but I just couldn't concentrate or focus on anything new, knowing that 'Scarlet' wasn't right, so I took the tracks to my good friend Jamie Humphries, and we stripped the whole thing right back down to basics."

So what was it like reassessing the start of your career in this way?

It's not something I particularly wanted to do, but I couldn't help it. I was so very unhappy with the mixing on the original version, and I figured if I'm going to have a successful career then it needs to be built on solid foundations.

So what kind of issues are we talking about?

There were some phasing issues with the guitar tracks. We recorded each rhythm guitar part using three (and sometimes four!!) microphones, and then when we mixed the album we just left all the channels open, but this can (and did) present all sorts of phasing issues (where some of the frequencies cancel each other out), giving the guitars an almost 'hollow' sound.

So Jamie and I went back, deleted all the drum samples and the extraneous guitar tracks leaving just the best sounding guitar channel, which was always the track recorded with a Shure SM57. Then we added some extra guitar overdubs and harmony vocals too, and it sounds sooooo much better.

So hence, 'The Director's Cut', as I felt like I finally had my way over the whole project.

Okay so let's get down to the track by track:

1. "Silent Scream" kicks off your debut album and is effectively your introduction to the world as a solo recording artist.

It's still as vibrant and spritely as ever, but what kind of first impression were you hoping to make?

One of my favourite ever albums is Jeff Buckley's 'Grace', and I've always loved the way the first track (Mojo Pin) starts out with subtle noises, backwards guitars and sound effects before this ghostly, ethereal voice appears. So I was looking for a very atmospheric intro - a sort of warm, mysterious place, which would envelop the listener, before the band kicks in with the heavy funk riff.

So one day as we're working on the album, the engineer brought in this pedal steel guitar that he'd found on a skip! Unfortunately the pedals weren't working and some of the strings were missing, but I tuned the remaining strings, plugged it into the Vox AC30 and it sounded great. It reminded me of an old sixties detective movie. So we recorded a whole bunch of stuff with it (including some *VERY* experimental stuff that we never used), and that's what you hear at the beginning of 'Silent Scream' (and also 'Big Blue').

I really love the outro when the string parts come in. In fact, for a 'first impression' first track I felt that the song pretty much had everything except a guitar solo; which I really didn't mind, as a lot of the music I was listening to at the time (artists such as Bjork, Imogen Heap, Joshua Redman, etc) didn't even have guitar.

2. Listening to “Static” what strikes you immediately is how your vocal plays against the bass. It gives your music a soul and funk feel even when you’re cutting loose on guitar. It feels like a then contemporary take on Rush. Was that something you were going for or am I way off base?

That's an interesting analysis. I did used to love Rush when I was younger, but I haven't heard anything from them since 'Moving Pictures'! No, I think the first time I was aware of anything vaguely funk rock was on the Pat Travers album 'Makin' Magic'. I loved that album to bits, but I remember that it was 'Need Love' and 'Hooked On Music' that had me dancing around the room. Then of course there was the Glenn Hughes era of Deep Purple, where he added this Stevie Wonder style soul and funkiness to songs like 'You Fool No One'. I love anything that's a little syncopated and funky.

The song was written very quickly in the studio when Pete, Phil and I were rehearsing for some upcoming shows with Keith Emerson. Phil suggested that we try and write an odd time signature tune for a possible Keith Emerson Band album, and I just came up with the riff on the spot.

I really loved it though, and so when I was putting 'Scarlet' together I decided to include it on my album instead.

3. Are you a natural balladeer? Other artists might have teased out the sound of “Static” and “Silent Scream” across the entire record, but instead you dive into “Just Crazy”, a sweeping climatic lament.



Yeah, I'm definitely a romantic at heart, so tunes like this come very easily to me. It's weird because I'm not even necessarily a fan of ballads, but it just feels very natural for me to write them. It was actually the first tune I finished writing for Scarlet. I'd bought a cheap Takamine 12 string as I had to record a version of 'Space Oddity' for Guitar Techniques magazine. So I was messing around with it one day (in drop D tuning) and that opening riff just appeared out of nowhere. I love it when that happens.

4. If you don't mind us asking who inspired "Angel" and is she still in your life 16 years later?

Well, I guess the beautiful actress Jane Seymour inspired this tune although unfortunately she never knew I existed. No, I saw a film many years ago called 'Somewhere in Time', starring Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour. It was a kind of romantic fantasy, and I really loved the idea behind it - not to mention the soundtrack music which featured Rachmaninoff's gorgeous 'Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini' - so the song is about her, or more accurately about her character. I even sing 'somewhere in time' in the chorus.

I love the way the track expands out from an intimate almost "Kiss From A Rose" style ballad into this luscious spectral mist - how did you get that sound and where did that finale come from?

I'm really proud of 'Angel'. I scored all the string parts (which I'd never done before), and then hired a string quartet to come in and play them. I also played piano on this track, as well as the acoustic 12 string, the electric (my '74 Tele) 6 string and the slide guitar part on the word 'Angel', and I really love the way that all these different parts interact to create this majestic soundscape. It could have sounded like a complete mess, but it actually turned out far better than I could ever have imagined.

For the ending though, I didn't want it to just fade out with me singing 'Angel'. I wanted somehow to take it to another level, but without spoiling the atmosphere. So I worked out some other chords I could play using the open B and E strings, and wrote an end section.

I was actually considering putting an electric solo on it too, but Pete and Phil played some amazing stuff at the end and I didn't want to play 'over' them. So I just put some little acoustic phrases in there instead.

5. I was wondering about the solo that concludes "Chance"? In a chicken and egg sense was that a piece of interpretive playing you came up with naturally to close the track or is it something you'd be working on and were looking to use?

The original idea was just another tune I was writing for a possible Keith Emerson Band project. I remember we even jammed it once in rehearsals. It's a really nice progression to play over, but I really don't think about 'solos' as such until shortly before I have to play them. I don't have a whole collection of scary lines and phrases, and I've never liked that approach of practicing difficult licks, and then writing a tune around them.

I just listen to the track, and see what it suggests to me. I think it's really important to keep yourself open to what's happening musically; you have to react to it, otherwise you're not really playing 'music', you're just showing off!

For the outro solo the first few phrases I play have a Mark Knopfler vibe about them, but the lines themselves are a direct reaction to what Pete plays. Rhythm is so very important to me, and I really love playing with a great drummer because there's this musical conversation that you can have.

For the overdrive part I used a Flying V (it's my manager's and he really wanted me to use it on the album), so I start with some fairly lyrical lines which I imagined in my head, and also plugged in my Vox Wah pedal. I don't think people know how to use wah pedals anymore, it seems to be a forgotten art - they just play loads of fast notes and move the pedal up and down to cover up all the mistakes. But people like Michael Schenker, Brian May, and of course Jimi Hendrix did some wonderful things with them. It's not something I've worked on enough yet, but I wanted to use a little of that vocal like quality you can get.

Again the ideas were pretty simple and melodic, letting the music breathe and not playing over the drums - until I start that insane tapping stuff. Ha I wanted something wild to come out of nowhere like that, almost like 'ok, that's enough with being tasteful, let's go crazy'.

6. Listening to “Big Blue” and Scarlet as a whole it’s clear how important melodies and hooks are to the record. When it came to releasing an album did you want to be a songwriter and artist first rather than a guitarist who happens to release LPs?

Yes, I'm not really a fan of 'guitar' albums. For me, the song always comes first, and the 'music' is the most important thing. And to be honest, I didn't really care what the 'guitar world' was expecting. I want to make music for normal people.

Hahaha... I mean, I think there's some cool guitar playing on 'Scarlet', but it functions as part of a song rather than being the whole focus.

I guess I've always loved songs, bands with great vocals and song arrangements and I think I'm probably different from most guitarists, as I didn't start playing guitar



because of hearing some particular guitarist or solo. I only picked the guitar up because I didn't have a piano at home, and I just wanted to make music all the time.

I've always felt more like a musician than a guitarist, and I'm just trying to create something magical - to move people emotionally, and provide a soundtrack for people's lives.

Saying all of that though, I do have a certain amount of notoriety as a guitarist, and in retrospect I was maybe a little too restrained on this album, but it's something I'll definitely rectify on the next one.

7. If I was handed Scarlet in 1997 and was told in a decade Dave Kilminster would be playing lead guitar with Roger Waters, oddly this is the track that would make me understand why. "Brightest Star" has a gorgeous sauntering sweep and it feels entirely comfortable in it's own skin at 6 minutes plus.

Did you always have a natural feel for creating expansive works that don't over stay their welcome?

Is it really that long? Wow... as you say it doesn't feel that long at all... ummm... so I guess the answer is, yes. I think I've always had a very natural feel and affinity for music. I've done a lot of teaching over the years, breaking music down into the basic fundamentals of scales, time signature, key signature, etc, etc... but so much of what I actually do is totally instinctual and without any reference or regard for theory whatsoever.

When I write I just listen very carefully to the music, to what she needs, and where she wants to go. And that way I find that the tunes are as long as they want to be - or should be - without having to force anything.

The middle section of this tune is one of my favourite parts of the album. I had so much fun scoring those string parts. It's one of the huge advantages of being able to write music down in manuscript. I can't actually play the violin, but I can write down the violin parts I hear in my head and get someone else to play them. It's very cool.

8. How did "Liar" come together? It seems to bring together a mix of tonally disparate elements.

'Liar' was actually an old riff that I'd had for many years and never done anything with but I wanted another up-tempo tune for the album, and I thought 'ok, let's see if we can make a

song out of this idea'. It came out pretty well, and I really like the solos in the middle. It almost sounds like a guitar duel between a normal and slide guitar, which I guess is a little reminiscent of the 'Head Cutting Duel' in the film 'Crossroads', although I've only just realised that, and it certainly wasn't intentional.

And then of course there's the Zeppelin style riff at the end, with the shredtastic guitar solo. It was one of the last tracks we recorded, and I guess maybe I was thinking that there wasn't enough guitar fireworks on the album; so I wrote that end section in the studio (well, it's only two chords), dragged out my manager's Gibson Flying V again and went just a little crazy.

9. And suddenly we're floating in space or in some rapturous light! "Rain (On Another Planet)" is one of the tracks where I'll just have to hand over to you. How did this track take shape?

'Rain...' was originally going to be an instrumental, But Pete (the drummer) said "this is great, you should make it into a song". At first I said 'you're crazy', but Pete is an amazing musician, and he always seems to hear the 'big picture' and so I went home and worked on it that evening, and wrote the chorus - which reminded me a little of 'Rumours' era Fleetwood Mac actually, which I guess isn't a bad thing.

Ok, so I now have a song, but I was also working on some keyboard parts for 'Angel' and 'Harkness' at the time, so I thought 'I wonder what this guitar intro (with the open voiced guitar triads) sounds like on keyboards.

Anyway I found this beautiful atmospheric sound with voices on my trusty old Korg Triton, and just floated off into the ether for the next hour or so. It seemed to take on almost religious overtones, and I had visions of Benedictine monks singing Gregorian chants. I could imagine hearing it in a church and being moved to tears, sort of like a John Tavener piece.

So now I have a song, along with a 'choir' intro and I'm in the studio with Pete and Phil, about to record the backing track live and I tell them 'this is just going to be a fade out, so let's just have some fun at the end...

But they played such wonderful parts on the outro that I just couldn't bear to fade it and I really did try! So instead I constructed a solo, which starts off fairly simply, and then gets progressively wilder and crazier. I think that it's probably the best solo I've ever recorded.

So all of a sudden, my little '3 minute instrumental' has become a 9.5-minute epic.

10. “Harkness” is Scarlet’s closer. Is ordering important to you and were you determined to start and end at specific points?

The ordering is very important to me. In fact I think beginnings and endings are important in everything: when you first meet someone and also how you say goodbye. Those are things that you always remember. Especially if (for whatever reason) you never see that person again.

And on a related subject, 'Harkness' is essentially about someone on their death bed and asks the question of how (if you had a choice) would you want to end your life, what things would you try to change or put right. Who would you want to speak to? What would you like to say? Who would you want to be there with you?

I just found the idea pretty intriguing, especially as I've had some very emotional experiences related to that.

It was the last track on the album I wanted to end it with that 'dying breath' too - possibly a little melodramatic, but it seemed to make sense at the time and felt like a nice way to conclude my debut album.