

SUNDANCING

Dave Kilminster is the winner of our 'Guitarist of the Year' competition. His entry Sundance convinced the judges beyond any doubt that he was the right choice to carry off the prizes... Interview by Neville Marten.

Born in Eastville, Bristol, near to the Rovers' ground, Dave Kilminster moved with his family down the road to Yate, where he attended the local school. Kilminster comes from a long line of piano players, with two uncles in particular helping to shape his musical upbringing: his namesake, a good classical pianist, and his uncle Tony who was into the music of Emerson, Lake and Palmer, and more jazz-influenced things. "He knows all the black notes," jests Dave.

Although keen on taking up the piano seriously himself, the Kilminsters had no instrument at home, so Dave could only practise at school or when the family visited his grandmother at weekends. "But really I wanted to play something I could practise all the time," he says, "something I could take round with me. I mean, it's not exactly easy lugging a grand piano everywhere!" And so the guitar was the obvious choice.

As for early inspirations, "It was Queen, I guess," recalls Dave. "The first band I heard very much of was E.L.P., because my uncle Tony used to play the records, and play bits of it on the piano as well. But when I heard 'A Night at the Opera' I just flipped, and went out and bought the first three albums. 'Queen II', especially, is incredible!"

Did you immediately try to work out all the guitar parts?

No, it's strange, because I've never really worked out much of Brian May's stuff; it was more like listening to it and getting inspired by it, than wanting to copy it. That would actually have destroyed it for me, and it's all the more odd because he's really the only person who's had that effect. I also liked Steve Howe from Yes in the early days, although I can't really listen to him now. But he was probably my main inspiration for playing lots of different styles – classical, acoustic, jazz, bottleneck, everything I could – and now I'll just nick things from anyone...

You obviously moved to London at some point.

Yeah, I moved here at the age of 18. I thought I was going to be a mega-star by the time I was 21! No, in reality, it just seemed like if you were famous in Bristol, you were famous in Bristol, and that was it. Obviously London meant a much more nationwide kind of thing.

Dave Kilminster

PHOTOGRAPHY: James Cumpsty



No, I wasn't. I hadn't been playing that long - I didn't really play in that many bands in Bristol.

How did things progress once you'd moved to London?

Well, I moved in with a friend in Hammersmith and we got a band together; the band was called Duchess and we didn't really do much. Then I got another band together, called Wild, and we did a session for Radio 1's Friday Rock Show, but we couldn't keep together a decent line-up - people who actually looked good, could play well and who had the right attitude. I'm not interested in people who take drugs and drink all the time, and turn up to rehearsals late; if people want to do that after work that's up to them, but anything that gets in the way of the music is out of the window as far as I'm concerned.

I was then in a band called Crocodile Smile and we just rehearsed for *ever!* We did about three gigs and then split up. Again, it was hard work getting that band started. It's always such an effort getting anything started.

You're obviously a rock player; you look like a rock player, your guitar is a rock guitar. What made you think 'rock', as opposed to say jazz, or pop?

Well, like I said, I pinch stuff from anywhere, although at the moment I suppose I'm listening more to jazz than anything - people like Holdsworth and Frank Gambale - but Queen were the obvious rock inspiration.

So do you sit down and learn Holdsworth and Gambale licks, note for note?

Yes, I started doing that when the first Van Halen album came out. That was it really. That was just an amazing sound - amazing rhythms and riffs and stuff.

Were you aware of how he was obtaining his speed?

Yes, because I actually saw him the day before I got the album. Van Halen were supporting Black Sabbath in Bristol. I'd arrived late, because the buses weren't working properly, and I walked in and thought, 'God, Ozzy's on already,' because everyone was waving their arms in the air and I couldn't see the stage straight away. Anyway, I looked up and thought, 'Er? That's not Ozzy!' and of course it was Van Halen and it was incredible. He had this massive World War II bomb, or whatever, which he kept his echo unit and things in, which they trundled onto the stage, and when he started playing he was doing all that two handed stuff. So I went home and started doing it myself and I went out the next day and got the album. And that was a big inspiration.

But it wasn't just his solo playing; so

much about Van Halen, but they were all the rest of it - the rhythm playing in particular, which is amazing. But that was certainly something to aspire to. I don't know much about what he's doing at the moment, but if you had an Eddie Van Halen soundalike competition now, he'd lose!

You obviously have pretty strong ideas about your career and how it should go: your looks, your obvious ability, your attitude, the fact that you're not bingeing your life away...

Well, I know what I want. And that is to be part of a really great rock band - something that has the same sort of impact as Van Halen. Extreme are doing well at the moment; they've got a really good guitarist - again, someone who plays really good rhythm and gets a really good sound. But, essentially, what I've always wanted was to be part of a really creative band. And if that means making a solo album then that's what I'll do.

Do you think that approach will have been beneficial or detrimental to Mike Varney's Shrapnel boys, in the long term?

That's a good question. They're obviously catering for very specific tastes, and I wouldn't expect anyone other than a guitar player to buy those records.

But they all say, 'My next album's going to be very different...'

Yeah, they all say they're going to have vocal tracks on the next album. But what I want to do right from the beginning is to reach a wider audience than that.

Are you also a singer or frontman?

Well, I sing, but I have a very clean voice, not really a lead vocal voice. I'd prefer a sort of rougher sound - something with a sort of Rod Stewart or Bryan Adams roughness to it. But it's very good for harmonies because I've got something over a four octave range - which pisses my girlfriend off no end, because she's a really good singer! It's strange, because my bottom note is the bottom note on a guitar - I can actually get E₂ on a good day - and the highest is just over the range at the other end. When I was at school I used to sing in a barber shop harmony group, which was brilliant training: four people, four different lines, no accompaniment. So you really had to use your ears and block out what the other people were singing.

Your ability on the guitar suggests some formal training...

No, I didn't have any - apart from playing on my own, on the piano. The piano is so logical to me; I can play a note, hear another note in my head and find it straight away. It's very logical the way the piano is set out. But no, I've never had any lessons.

Do you read?

Yes, but not really quickly. That's actually ▶

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ear, because you read something once, or play something once, and you never need to read it again. So you never have that constant practice at reading. Normally I can work something out a lot quicker than I can read it.

In what form would you like to make it? As the guitarist in an established band or as a member of something totally new?

Well, I guess if Def Leppard or somebody phoned me up that would be interesting. But it would be really nice to get in at the beginning of something; be in at ground level, build up a following, get the first album done...

But not being in a band at the moment, you're...

Pissed off! Actually I have been doing quite a few sessions lately, although that's not the way I want to go. It's good money and it's enjoyable and it means I'm playing, and learning how to get a decent rock sound in the studio. And considering the technology that's available today that's still quite difficult. I mean, I still haven't heard anything to match some of the sounds on the first couple of Van Halen albums. In fact the closest I've heard recently is Nuno Bettencourt.

With all this stuff that's available you'd think everyone would have a great sound, but when did you last see a band that had a really good live sound? Queensrÿche get a consistently decent rock sound, but the two best live sounds I've ever heard were in Germany, at the Monsters of Rock festival. The first time was in 1984, when Van Halen were playing, and then last year, when a guy that I was teaching was in a band who were opening.

Tell us about your rather unusual looking guitars...

I have them specially built. I've always liked the Gibson scale length, ever since I started on a Shaftesbury SG, so I'm used to that scale and if I try and do any of the Holdsworth-type stretch licks I find it hard on the modern guitars, which all seem to have the longer, Fender scale. I just can't do it on those guitars and so I immediately feel limited. So as far as I'm concerned I don't care what it looks like as long as I can play what I normally play.

The other thing is, I would really like a Floyd Rose that had Gibson's string spacing, because if you put a regular Floyd on one of my guitars the E strings will just fall off the side of the neck! So I have to have the Floyds modified.

Who builds your guitars?

It's a friend of mine called Andy Mazurkiewicz, who's working in Austria for a company called Guitars Only. He built two guitars for me while he was over here and they're basically Ibanez Destroyer necks on bodies that he's made. The pink and white one is a mahogany body with a PRS HPS-2 pickup in the bridge position and a Seymour Duncan in the neck; the combination seems to work really well.

The other one also has a mahogany body but it's got a maple top, because I was after the Les Paul sort of sound. Andy was really pissed off because the only bit of maple he had was this lovely piece of birdseye; he's such a craftsman, and I think spraying the thing pink broke his heart! They've both got scalloped necks and I actually did one of those myself...

A long and arduous job!



Well, I used three different files, one of which was really rough, just to get it down as quickly as possible, and the other two to do the final shaping and finishing. It took me about three nights' work.

I like to be able to do my own things on my guitar: change pickups when I want, refrets when they're necessary, fret stoning or adjusting the truss rods. I don't like having to take it to someone else in case you're at a gig or something and the neck falls off!

When I interviewed Skunk Baxter he was saying how having a mechanical understanding of his guitar helps him get the best out of it...

That's right. The first thing I do when I get a new guitar is completely take it to pieces! It's frightening really - I was in a music shop the other day and this guy came in with his guitar and said, 'The tuning's a bit loose...' and the guy who does the repairs said, 'Well, you just need to pop a Phillips screwdriver into there and tighten the heads up.' And the guy said, 'No, I don't know if I can, I'd rather you did it.' And I couldn't believe it!

Why did you enter the competition? I believe that, by coincidence, you'd just entered one for Guitar Player in the States...

I'd just got this Tascam 4-track, which is something I'd been after for a long while, and I did the tape for the *Guitar Player* competition. Then I saw the competition in *Guitarist* and thought, 'Great, I can use the same tape for that!' and then I read a bit further and realised I'd have to do something else. Anyway, one night there wasn't anything on the telly so I just started fiddling with the music, and I ended up with about ten minutes' worth of stuff.

Actually, I really enjoyed the restriction of using those notes in that order, having to reharmonise it and make it as interesting as possible in just three minutes. It was a good challenge. And as soon as I played the F over the A and C, and then I played the E over the D, it just snowballed from there. But I had to do some serious editing because I had far too many ideas...

A lot of the people who entered, yourself included, did show a variety of styles within their piece. Did you feel that was important?

Yes I did. Because it was open to all sorts of guitarists I thought that the majority of entries would be pretty rock orientated, so in order to stand out I decided to try and do something a bit different; like, I played the major version on the tremolo arm, using harmonics. I don't know why I thought this, but I imagined that ▶

some of the people who judged would probably be in (Jeff Beck...)

Because you thought we were all old... (Hysterical laughter follows from Dave, probably implying that my comment was accurate.)

No, I just thought it was a good idea at the time.

As I mentioned in my Editorial last month, what struck both Phil and me about your entry was that fact that you were prepared to be 'off the wall' and do things with a bit of daring.

Well, I wanted to get a performance down, as opposed to dropping in to get every note perfect, which I could have

couldn't get it fast enough. So I had to turn the speed right down on the 4-track, record the drum part and speed it up again. Mixing the thing was also difficult, because you've only got the four tracks and I had to have the bass on the lead guitar track, and things like that.

You said to me after your performance at the Guitarist Day at the IMS (the first part of the competition's three-part prize) that it was the most terrifying gig you'd ever had to play.

I was very nervous. I was nervous partly because I hadn't done many gigs recently and I was so rusty you wouldn't believe it, but also because I thought there'd be all



done with the little punch-in footswitch. It's the sort of thing where you can play it once and get a really good feel, and then think, 'I'll just tidy that bit up,' but you play it again and it's not the same. It was the same with mixes; I found that the first mix I did was the best - the ones where I'd tried to get the tones and levels better just didn't have the flow, didn't have the sound. So it was first take, first guitar bits, first mix. That was it!

What amps and processors did you use?

I just used a little Zoom 9002 for everything except the bass, which I plugged straight in. I actually borrowed the Zoom from a friend of mine, who's a bit inconsiderate because he's taken it back now!

Maybe that could be your first endorsement deal! (Dave laughs loudly at the prospect.)

It's a great little machine. There's a passage on the tape where I used it for playing harmony guitar, in straight fourths, just before the military drum beat starts...

That drum passage was very brave, too...

That was the most difficult thing to do on the whole track! I could program the figure into the drum machine, but I

the guitarists who entered and *didn't* win standing there with their arms folded going, 'Go on then, impress me!'

But it wasn't like that at all. I walked on and there were lots of people cheering and they made me feel a lot better. Maybe they were all standing at the back with their arms folded and I couldn't see them!

Did you feel like your whole life had been compressed into five minutes?

Yeah, looking back on it I really don't remember doing the solo in the middle of it at all! I'd got some ideas worked out in my head as to how I was going to approach the solo, but I found I'd got through all those ideas in the first half of it! It was also my dad's birthday that day, and he's not around any more so I was playing for him as well. I wanted to call the song something to do with my dad because I knew that if I won I'd be playing on his birthday. But then I thought, 'I'm not going to win it,' so I called the tune *Sundance*...

The second part of your prize was your choice of gear up to around £1,000. You've opted for some rack equipment so you've obviously going for it in a big way...

Well, I've got the Marshall preamp and it's great for certain things, but I've gone

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flexible; you can do what you can do with the Marshall and a lot more besides. I also chose the Pro Hush noise reduction system to go with it. I really like the Marshall Jubilee amps though, and I'd like to get hold of one of those because some really good players use them. I've already got a Quadverb and I'll probably hook it all up to a little Rane mixer; I'll have the preamp and the Quadverb going into the mixer, from the mixer out into the Hush unit and from that into my Marshall 50/50 valve power amp. I've already got two 4x12s but I might get two 2x12s as well, for the little karaoke gigs that I do - I play in this karaoke band and it's very good ear training, because people come up and say, 'Do you know such-and-such...?' *The Green Green Grass of Home* or whatever - and you just have to go for it. It's everything from *New York, New York* to *Pretty Vacant!* It's a load of fun!

So what's the next step?

At the moment, plan-wise, I really don't know what I'm doing. I'm writing quite a few instrumentals and I've got this producer who's putting me in to do various sessions. He just got me something for

point.

Do you ever feel, like Albert Lee and Allan Holdsworth did, the need to move to America if nothing starts moving here?

It seems like every year for the last five or six years I've thought, 'Well, I'll just give it a couple more months and then I'll go.' I keep putting it off and putting it off, but it's getting to that stage where shortly I'm going to have to make a move if nothing happens. Unfortunately, it seems like anybody who wants to do anything has got to go to America to do it.

Do you have strong views either way on the G.I.T. scenario?

I do think it would be fun to totally immerse yourself in guitar playing for a year. I'd love to do that - even now I'd love to do it - because I'm always looking for new things to play on the guitar, like the eight finger thing that I do.

Can you describe that?

It's something that came about because I wrote a tune called *Frazzled*, but found that I couldn't actually play it. So I was finding techniques to use in order that I could. But it really is a good technique. It's all four fingers of both hands tapping on the fretboard at once - it's fingers all over the place, skipping strings, thousands of notes!

The basic idea was to play with one hand and make it sound like regular tapping, but then when you use two hands it sounds like it's being played at 78 rpm. I'm not just doing it to play fast, but it is good fun, and it's also musically interesting. There are a lot of people who play fast rubbish - and slow rubbish, come to that - but it only seems to be guitarists. I mean, you don't find pianists playing that sort of stuff, or violinists, or saxophonists; they wouldn't do it, because it's junk. What I want to do is to write stuff that would sound good if the L.S.O. were playing it. If I write a song and it needs a solo, I try to take the influence for the solo from the song, rather than thinking, 'I've got this really good lick that's going to fit in there.' A friend of mine said he liked my playing because it was completely unpredictable, and because he never knows what's going to come next, which is exactly the way I want my playing to be.

Taking the wider view, I'd just like to get into a really great rock band, tour the world and make music. Which is all I've ever really wanted to do...

And if anyone deserves to do well it's Dave Kilminster. He's a frighteningly good musician, he's innately musical as well as technically most able, he's interested and interesting, and possibly above all he's a nice bloke. Music Maker Records will be putting out a Cassette Single featuring both *Sundance* and Dave's entry to the 'Guitar Player' competition. The single will be available from *Guitarist* and other Music Maker titles very soon. ■

