

DAVE KILMINSTER: Different Challenges

By *Amy Balog* on December 12, 2017



Dave Kilminster has toured with Roger Waters since 2006, having played lead guitar on ‘The Dark Side of the Moon’ and ‘The Wall Live’ tours, and the current ‘Us + Them’ tour. After recently completing the North American leg, they’re taking the show to Australia, New Zealand, Europe and South America in 2018.

In the past, Dave played with legendary progressive rock musicians Keith Emerson, John Wetton and Carl Palmer, among others. He also toured with Steven Wilson in 2015 and 2016, played guitar on his EP ‘4 ½’ and sang backing vocals on his latest album ‘To the Bone’. He released his most recent solo album, ‘...and the Truth Will Set You Free...’, in 2014 and hopes to record some new material soon. We talked to him about the ‘Us + Them’ tour and many other things.

You have played with an incredible list of prog rock icons. Which of these artists were you the most excited about being on stage with?

It’s a little difficult to compare the various experiences, as they happened at very different chapters of my life... For example, my first ever tour was with **John Wetton**, and so, of course,

that whole period was very exciting for me. I was a huge fan of his work with **U.K.** and loved a lot of the **Asiamaterial**, too, so that was a very special time.

And then, of course, playing with **Keith Emerson**, who was my childhood hero! My first instrument was keyboards, and when I started I wanted to play just like Emo... And so going out on tour with him and performing songs like “Tarkus” and “Karn Evil 9”... That was just a dream come true!

And being on stage with **Roger Waters** introduced me to huge audiences, playing these incredibly iconic tunes... The ‘Dark Side’ tour was just another level entirely! Performing one of the biggest selling albums of all time, in its entirety, in front of millions of people – just totally mind-blowing!

And as for **Steven Wilson**, I wasn’t really aware of what he did until I saw his show at the Royal Albert Hall. I just went along to see my friend **Guthrie Govan** do his thing, but I was just totally blown away! I went and bought ***The Raven That Refused to Sing*** album the next day, and couldn’t believe how good it was! It’s one of the best things I’ve heard in many, many years, and so of course I was absolutely thrilled to play and tour with him.



Dave Kilminster & Roger Waters (Photo: Keith Barlow)

Which tours have you found the most challenging and why?

I guess my first tour with **Steven Wilson** (for the *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* album) was the most difficult for me. I had a nasty car accident in 2014, and I was told I'd never play guitar again! Fortunately, I went to a private hospital and got another opinion, but essentially, I didn't play guitar for over nine months. It was a very dark period of my life; I thought I was going to go insane...

I had a difficult operation with a lot of physio afterwards, and had only been back to playing guitar again for about two or three weeks before we flew to Chile for our first show... After only two days of rehearsals! That was tough, as I felt for those first few months that I was still trying to catch up and get my technique back together – not to mention play these complicated pieces, sing backing vocals and cope with multiple patch changes on my pedal board, all at the same time!

Who were the easiest and the most difficult to work with?

I did a few European tours with **Guthrie Govan**, playing tracks from his *Erotic Cakes* album (along with a bunch of fusion tunes), and Guthrie's ridiculously easy to work with. We've been playing together on and off since about 1993 though, so I guess we just have a really good chemistry. The same with **Murray Hockridge**, who I recorded the *Closer to Earth* album with – we had this magical connection, right from the first time we played together. It just worked!

To answer the second part of the question, I don't tend to play with people that are "difficult" to work with... Life is too short, and music too precious. But if you mean tougher as in more disciplined, then both **Roger** and **Steven** are complete perfectionists, which is absolutely fine, because I am, too! But I guess **Steven** was the toughest to please, partly because he's also a guitarist, and so has a very clear vision of what he wants to hear... And it's generally the opposite of what I would do naturally!

Do you find it much less of a challenge to play Pink Floyd songs, compared to playing with artists like Keith Emerson and John Wetton?

I wouldn't say that it's less of a challenge; it's just that the challenges are very different. In some ways it's a little tougher, as the audience knows those songs and solos back to front, and so any mistakes are really obvious! Plus, the pressures of playing to *that* many people are pretty intense, and not to be underestimated... For example, if you play "Wish You Were Here" down at the Dog and Duck in Peckham and the guitar is a little out of tune or not working properly, it's not the end of the world. But add some lights, a huge video screen, a time code and the expectations of 20,000 people and it feels very different! Not to mention the fact that every time you play, you know it's being filmed or recorded by someone, and so all your mistakes are out there for all eternity!

So the challenges are still there... They just may not be so obvious. Actually, playing songs at such a slow tempo (to a click track) is a whole other discipline entirely. I remember when I recorded my last album (***The Truth***), the hardest thing to record was the rhythm guitar part on "Stardust" – partly because I'd written it about sitting with my mother on her death bed, but mainly because the tune is so slow. I was trying to play these arpeggios consistently (consistency is the key), and just a fraction of a second behind the beat, but when the tempo is that slow, it becomes a lot more difficult, as there's way more room for error.

If a song is less challenging musically, can it still be exciting and fulfilling to perform?

Yes, of course! Playing music is the fun part, irrespective of whether it's difficult to play or not. And, actually, sometimes when it's a little simpler, you can enjoy it even more. I used to play in a rock covers band, and knocking out things like "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and "Riff Raff" were just so much fun!

I have a certain level of technique that enables me to play most things that I want to play, but I'm essentially a rock guitarist at heart, so I'm more than happy bashing out power chords! In fact, playing "Sleep Together" on the ***Hand. Cannot. Erase.*** tour was always one of the highlights for me.

Which song in the 'Us + Them' show is your favourite to play?

Probably "Dogs" at the moment. It's an unusual tune, with three guitar solos and some **Allman Brothers**-type harmony parts. Plus, we get a break in the middle of the tune during the keyboard solo, where I get to drink champagne... What's not to love!

How do you feel about the political message of the show?

Well, to be honest, I'm not usually a fan of politics in music; I like the music itself to be the message, and to take you away to a different place. But in this instance, I was ok with it, partly because I don't even see it as a political message... It's not a 'red vs. blue' or 'Republicans vs. Democrats' message... It's a "wake the fuck up, America" message!

I mean, I truly love America! I've been touring there on and off for about 20 years, been to most of the 50 states and met loads of incredible people... But this present administration...

He reminds me of those dreadful TV evangelists, feeding on the fears, insecurities and prejudices of weak-minded and desperate people... "*Only I can save you, send all your dollars to me!*" He's so utterly ludicrous...

And yeah, I've already been told to stay out of US politics... But, unfortunately, that orange moron is threatening nuclear war with North Korea, unbalancing the Middle East and treating global warming as a "Chinese hoax", all of which affect planet Earth, which is where I happen to live! Actually, regarding the last point, I saw this meme the other day, which said something like:

“What if global warming is a hoax, and we create a better, cleaner planet for nothing?” [laughs]
That says it all, really.

But I must confess, it was nice to get to Canada, where the reaction was pretty much 100% positive. It feels a little weird playing music and hearing people boo, even if it's only a select few.



Steven Wilson & Dave Kilminster (Photo: Nicolás Papa)

What’s Steven Wilson like to work with onstage and in the studio?

I already mentioned that he’s a perfectionist, but **Steven** also has a very clear vision of what he wants, both on stage and in the studio, which I really admire. I tend to be a lot more experimental in the studio, and just see what happens... But he seems to hear the song complete in his head before he starts! It’s amazing... Paying with that band really was such an incredible experience; they’re all such wonderful musicians, and we had a great chemistry.

Do you think you might do something together again in the future?

Oh, I really hope so! I would have loved to do the new tour, but the **Roger** tour is just impossible to turn down...

Jon Anderson once said that prog was a “higher art form”. Would you agree that it’s in some ways superior to other genres of music?

A higher art form compared to what exactly? Cuban music? Indian music? Flamenco? Jazz? I think it a little presumptuous to say that prog is a “higher” art form – you can’t judge music by note quantity or levels of complexity. Music isn’t like a sport with a definitive goal.

That's like saying **Michelangelo** is a higher art form than **Lowry** or **Van Gogh** because there's more detail in his work! At the end of the day, if it makes you feel something, then that's all that matters, really. Although, to continue the "artist" analogy, I do find that most popular music nowadays is the equivalent of a cave dweller writing his name on a wall with his own faeces!

I heard a tune the other day called "Mi Gente", featuring **Beyoncé**, and it sounded like the producer said: "Okay, I'm looking to sample an asthmatic goat having a panic attack, and we'll just keep repeating that throughout the entire tune until people throw up!" Utterly hideous...

Do you think there could be a point in music where the importance of technique may hinder true self-expression?

That's an interesting question... Technique (for me, anyway) is just something I work on, so that I can express myself easier, and play more of what's inside my head. I mean, I know I'll never achieve the level of technique I would need to express what I actually *feel* inside... But that's what keeps you practising! It's not the destination, it's the journey.

I read an interview with tenor saxophonist **Sonny Rollins** recently, where he said: "*I dedicated my life to my music, and I never got it to where I wanted it be.*" So I know I'm not alone!

I mean, there are certain players out there that have ridiculous technique, but who have absolutely nothing "musical" to say... They just leave me totally cold. Whereas **Kurt Cobain** didn't have the best technique in the world, but you can't say that he didn't express himself. I guess, what I'm trying to say is that you can make great music, irrespective of your technical level or the lack of it.

Has your solo work been influenced in any way by the artists you've played with?

I'm sure it has... Playing **Pink Floyd** music has introduced me to the beauty of simplicity, and playing with **Steven Wilson** has reminded me of my prog and jazz rock roots – and that you can be influenced by that period but create something new and exciting, without sounding horribly derivative (which is how most prog bands sound to me nowadays).

Are you working on any new solo material at the moment?

Yes, I am. I always have far too many songs and ideas, but I'm currently trying to whittle it down to an album's worth. Although I've just got the dates in for the 'Us + Them tour' for next year, so I've no idea when I'm going to get a chance to record it!

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