



David Mead performing in Bath 2006

## If You Can Teach, Play Too!

He's a best-selling tuition book author, IGF tutor, GT columnist and even once-editor of this esteemed tome. **Neville Marten** talks to David Mead on the release of his debut CD, *Nocturnal*...

**A**s so often happens in the world of making music, the very thing you start out to do becomes sidelined by, among other things, the basic need to make a living. Some musicians move to London, live in a squat, write the first album and if it all works out, great. If not they go back to reality in the knowledge that at least they had a go. Others, like David Mead, have talents which make them valuable to others and which ensure the family stay clothed and fed, but which ultimately rob them of the time to be personally creative.

Having built up a large roster of pupils, in the 1980s David had a successful teaching

practice in Colchester, Essex. But the idea of writing for a living appealed and in 1992 he was offered the position of features writer on *Guitarist* magazine. David worked his way up to the position of editor and then moved over to the relatively fledgling *Guitar Techniques* in 1996, a position he left in 2001 to concentrate on an already burgeoning sideline as guitar tuition book author.

David was Sanctuary Publishing's best-selling music writer and now that the company has been taken over by Bobcat Books, still has various projects on the go.

As a musician though, it was always David's intention to release albums and play for a living. So, finally, 2006 sees the launch of his debut CD,

*Nocturnal*. A set of beautifully crafted fingerstyle acoustic pieces, some self-penned and others from the standards songbooks, *Nocturnal* has garnered excellent reviews and, potentially at least, set its creator on a different musical path from the one he's trodden for the past decade and a half...

**GT:** *You're well known as a teacher, author and a journalist; have you been hit by the 'If you can't do, teach...' stigma?*

**DM:** I think anyone in my position is hit by that to a certain degree. I've heard the other guys on GT say that people seem amazed that you actually have ability as a player, as well as being a known writer or teacher. I actually prefer Woody Allen's version of the saying anyway,

"Those who can, do; those who can't, teach - and those who can't teach, teach gym."

**GT:** *Why has it taken so long to get the album off the ground?*

**DM:** Circumstances, essentially. Back at the beginning it was always on the agenda for me to make an album and have a career as a player, but I was distracted into teaching and journalism via the simple fact that I had to make a living. I had my own jazz quartet during the '80s and would play solo as well; but that decade was notoriously bad for making a living playing the kind of music I play, and so I had to do something else as well. Eventually I was turning down gigs because I could make a better living by teaching - and the phone just stopped ringing because everyone thought I'd given up playing live.

**GT:** *How did Martin Taylor come to produce the album?*

**DM:** Well, I've known Martin for years and because we've worked together on books and magazine articles a lot in the past, we've become good friends. I was whinging to him one evening about how I missed playing and he suggested that I record a couple of things and let him hear them. So I went into a studio and put down a couple of tracks and sent them up to him and he phoned me the next day and said he'd produce an album."

**GT:** *What sort of advice did he give you along the way?*

**DM:** Martin's very 'Zen' with his advice, very subtle. He told me never to do more than three takes at once on any track because if you haven't got a good one by then, you're probably not going to get it that session - but not to worry about it because tomorrow's another day. Loads of advice about reverbs and just a general attitude to playing, really.

**GT:** *Were you at all intimidated at baring your musical soul to someone like Martin?*

**DM:** Fortunately we've played together before at book signings

or just messing around with guitars at his place or mine and so it wasn't really an issue. Martin's incredibly generous as a player and never makes you feel ill at ease or in at all inferior. I guess the only slightly grumbling bit was sitting there with him listening to all the rough mixes; it was a bit like doing an exam!

**GT:** *Martin agreeing to play on the CD was an incredible endorsement...*

**DM:** It's funny, but when I asked him to play on the album he said, "It's your album; if you want me to play on it I will..." I suggested that he pick a track from amongst the original demos and he picked Waltz For Debby because he hadn't recorded it before. We're both big Bill Evans fans anyway and so it was kind of appropriate, too. It's a difficult tune to play on guitar, having been written originally for piano, but I'm delighted at how it turned out.

**GT:** *The album is a mix of standards and your own originals. Have you been writing for years and years or is this something you've turned your attention toward recently?*

**DM:** I've always written music. Some of my tunes have cropped up on the CDs that accompany my books, for example. In fact one of them made it onto the album in a slightly revised form. When I started writing for the album I went back to some demos I've had hanging around for years and years and included at least one idea from back then on Nocturnal."

**GT:** *The music is difficult to categorise - have you consciously avoided using the 'J' word?*

I've been advised not to use the word 'jazz' too blatantly because it's such an instant turn-off for people. But it's the music that I spend an awful lot of time listening to - my iPod is bursting with the stuff - and so I would say that there's a kind of jazz influence on there, but it's certainly not at the forefront by any means. I suppose you could just call it 'acoustic fingerstyle'

and let people make up their own minds as to where it fits in.

**GT:** *It's an acoustic album all the way through - were you tempted to use other guitars as well?*

**DM:** In the beginning I was, yes. I was going to use archtop, baritone, acoustic, classical, guitar synth... you name it. But I used an acoustic guitar to demo all the tracks - more for convenience than anything else - and when Martin heard them he suggested I unified everything by doing it all that way. The only track that crept through from the original grand plan was When It Was Yesterday, which I did on an Admira Elena classical.

**GT:** *Why did you choose Sentimental Mood as the band track?*

**DM:** A few years ago I heard the Ellington/Coltrane version of Sentimental Mood and it blew me away and so I wanted to put it on the album. I always heard it as a band track in my head for some reason, although I play a solo version of it live. So I invited two of my oldest chums down to the studio and we recorded it.

**GT:** *You played at the benefit concert last year for Eric Roche and surprised a lot of people who had never heard you play before. That must have lifted your spirits. Did it also spur the album on in any way?*

**DM:** I think there was some sort of catalytic effect, yes. It was the first time some of the album material had been aired in public and the response was a good one and that's always nice. Certainly the recording sessions started to happen more regularly afterwards and so I guess it spurred me on a bit.

**GT:** *All the same it was a very brave move - you must have been nervous playing solo acoustic guitar in front of Martin Taylor, Clive Carroll, Gordon Giltrap and others...*

**DM:** I was just out of the habit of playing live - that was probably the biggest hurdle to get over. But the atmosphere backstage was wonderfully supportive

because we were all there for Eric and so any nervousness was very quickly dispelled.

**GT:** *There were a lot of people there who obviously assumed that you could play, but were literally stunned by what you did.*

**DM:** Well I couldn't believe the number of people whom I'd known for years who were coming up to me afterwards and saying how much they'd enjoyed what I did. I think it made me more determined to get the album out there as quickly as I could.

**GT:** *So who are your influences as a player?*

**DM:** Initially, when I started playing it was the usual suspects; Clapton, Page and so on. I was first turned on to jazz by seeing Joe Pass on BBC 2 in the early '70s. I'd always thought that there must be more to playing chords than just the A and E

**GT:** *What instrument did you use on the album?*

**DM:** I chose the Yamaha LLX 500C because I reviewed one a few years ago and it was head and shoulders better than anything I'd played previously. So I made a mental note that if ever I needed a quality acoustic I'd go in that direction. When (engineer) Martin Holmes and I were talking about how we were going to record the album, he said he thought it would be better to get hold of a really good acoustic and just mic it sensitively to get the best sound, so I got on the phone to Yamaha and this lovely acoustic guitar landed on my doorstep.

**GT:** *There's a mega reverb on the album's title track? Where did the idea come from?*

**DM:** It comes from the original demo of the Dark Harbour track. Around that time - which was late '80s - I had borrowed an

## “ The album's title came about because I used to work on the songs in the dead of night ”

shaped barre chords I had been using, so this started me off on a lifetime's research. Along the way, I picked up on Wes and the be-bop crowd, but now I listen to guitarists like Jimmy Bruno, Howard Alden and pianists like Bill Evans and Esbjörn Svensson."

**GT:** *So here you are as a fingerstyle acoustic player - no one would have assumed this after years of hanging around with Strats, Les Pauls and other solidbody guitars...*

**DM:** I know. But I started off playing acoustic - nylon string, in fact - and so fingerstyle has always felt natural to me in a way. Over the past few years I've been playing either acoustic or archtop almost exclusively, and all the Strats have been put away in the cupboard.

Alesis reverb unit from a studio I was working for and became fascinated by what you can do with a 14-second delay on the reverb. The one we used for Nocturnal is an exact replication of the reverb characteristics of the great dome in the Taj Mahal!

**GT:** *Are you still splitting your time both writing and playing?*

**DM:** Yes, I've got two books and a DVD coming out later this year, but I'm definitely going to make time for performing and writing more. But it's a difficult trick to pull off; Nocturnal took so long to happen because I was so busy writing it didn't leave me any time to get the pieces together. In fact, the album's title came about because I used to work on the songs in the dead of night as it was the only free time I had!