

Guitar Maestros - Series One (Sound Techniques)

The Guitar Maestros series, whose first six titles have just been released, endeavours to encapsulate a combination of new live studio performances by, and intimate conversations with, some of today's most celebrated and influential acoustic guitarists, revealing the real passion behind these talented musicians. In these six DVDs we're treated to a staggering variety of styles, approaches and personalities, together giving the widest possible perspective to the term "guitar maestro". Each of the DVDs follows roughly the same format: a conversational interview interspersed with a number of entire songs or tunes, then a series of between four and eight individually banded "additional tracks" of performances recorded in the same studio. Some of the issues also contain a further bonus section, which I'll come to later. The DVDs aren't in any way intended as technical instruction videos, but any reasonably experienced and competent guitarist will be able to glean loads of useful tips and ancillary information. Having said that, even as an enthusiastic and (hopefully) informed listener and not a practising musician I still found the more overtly technical parts of the interviews and explanations refreshingly informative and genuinely enlightening, rather than being just impenetrable jargon-ridden gobbledeygook. It's abundantly clear that even when "talking technical", each of the Maestros imparts both a total enthusiasm for his music and a casual, almost laconic view of his own level of accomplishment and yet refuses to talk down to his audience (now that's a combination of qualities I can readily admire!), and the end result is that mostly you're inspired even if (ever so nicely) intimidated by the guys' expertise. And in all but one case, I came away at the end of the DVD feeling that I'd gained either a significant amount of new knowledge or else a greater level of understanding of the music or the musician.

Martin Simpson

So let's take a brief look at the individual DVDs now. No 1 presents just over 2 hours spent in the persuasive company of Martin Simpson. This is probably the series' most exhaustive exploration of one musician's art, with the interview itself delving quite deeply into not only Martin's biography and CV, his extensive experience and mastery of many different playing styles (all stemming from the tradition, as he quickly points out) but also several aspects (technical and practical) of the various tunings he uses and the instruments he plays (and their ancillary technical accoutrements such as slides and pickups). As well as a fine selection of additional tracks giving a sensibly representative cross-section of Martin's repertoire (traditional folksong and tune, contemporary song, blues), this DVD contains a sizeable and generous bonus section which includes a performance using not guitar but banjo (House Carpenter), a demonstration of Martin's ritual string-changing procedure and a brief guided visit to Michael Sobell's workshop where Martin's guitars are made.

Michael Messer

No 2 presents Michael Messer, the Kent-born blueser whose CDs have been (rightly) so enthusiastically reviewed on this site. The DVD's 95 minutes kicks off with an interview in which Michael personally introduces us to the various instruments (National, Hawaiian, dobro) he uses as well as discussing his formative years and his major inspirations. Although Michael admits his main influences are the delta blues greats and classic Chicago blues, he's also an innovator, and what comes across strongly is his appealing open-mindedness and willingness to embrace other influences while remaining absolutely true to those basic blues roots. The interview provides insights into the origins and mechanics of "locally amplified" guitars, with much fascinating detail, and he also spends time describing the various accoutrements (slides, bottlenecks, etc) he uses. Highlights among Michael's 15 performances include the superbly poised Luna Hula and a magisterial Shine On. On some of the numbers, Michael's accompanied by regular musical partner Ed Genis.

Big Jim Sullivan

No 3 presents Big Jim Sullivan, that massively legendary session guitarist whose CV has got to be the most exhaustive of the lot, having played on literally thousands of chart records as well as almost as many album tracks. Big Jim describes himself - with impeccable modesty - as "first and foremost a musician", with no pretensions to stardom. During his 50-year career, he's worked with Marty Wilde and Eddie Cochran and Cilla Black, and been a 17-year-old mentor to a 14-year-old Ritchie Blackmore and a good friend to Elvis (Presley); lively anecdotes from these and other encounters liberally spice the interview here, as do snippets of classic solos as well as full-length performances of jazz and other standards throughout the DVD's well-filled 125 minutes. Playing an arch-top acoustic model, in conventional tuning, Big Jim nowadays (and here) plays predominantly in the jazz idiom, though he doesn't class himself a jazz guitarist! During the course of the interview he discusses ancillary topics ranging from his admiration for John McLaughlin to acrylic nails (!) and the psychology of playing guitar. The fun bonus section contains a "Big Jim's birdseye view" of him performing Bye Bye Blues (which is incorrectly credited as Cannonball Rag, by the way).

Steve Tilston

No 4 presents Steve Tilston, who differs from the preceding three Maestros in that he's equally revered as a songwriter as well as an expert guitarist. Quite casually, Steve is seen to largely (albeit not exclusively) eschew the multi-tunings of other maestros in this series, content to work mostly within standard tuning. During the course of the interview Steve enlightens us on juicy details of his "story so far", points out the unique design of his guitar (a walnut instrument, with 12 frets and a slope-away body), and plays and sings some of his most famous compositions (and even a brand new one, Archipelago) along with a few of his incisive arrangements of traditional songs. Steve is very upfront, honest and eloquent, with extra immediacy in the interview section particularly, although I do rather feel that his renditions of some of the selections have gotten faster over the years! On the additional tracks, Steve's sensitively accompanied by Chris Parkinson on accordion or harmonica. This DVD really does give the measure of the man.

Clive Carroll

No 5 presents a real connoisseur's musician, the young Clive Carroll. Not only is he one of the most self-effacing and personable of the six interviewees, but his performances are a triumph of astounding technique and intelligent musicality. All this comes despite his being the only one of the six to have undergone formal training (he's a composition graduate of London's Trinity College). Clive is totally at ease expounding the specifications and virtues of his instrument (a shorter-necked Triple O), as well as displaying his qualities as a highly consummate musician and composer. The 15 exceptional performances on this DVD, of mostly his own compositions (the exceptions being arrangements of the classic Albéniz piece Asturias and Willie Brown's Mississippi Blues), are absolutely jaw-dropping - almost literally in the case of the closing piece, Aerial Discoveries, which Clive plays standing up!; his technique is both incredibly sensitive and outstandingly proficient, and he possesses an effortless ability to move between styles and nuances within any given piece. Clive's equally in tune with, and adept at conveying the essence of, Irish traditional music and any degree of folk, blues, classical and ragtime stylings. His often quite impressionistic sound-world is very attractive indeed, though it arguably requires a greater concentration on the music's intricacies than with some of the more straightforward material performed by the other guitarists featured here (that's no reflection on their talents or tastes, incidentally!). In a nutshell, with Clive the very act of playing the guitar seems to come as naturally as breathing. I found this DVD the most musically stimulating of the series so far, with performances that I will wish to return to often I'm sure.

Wizz Jones

Finally, No 6 presents Wizz Jones. This DVD differs from the above five principally in that the interview element is conducted by Martin Carthy, but I'd emphasise that this departure from the "house-style" of the first five DVDs is not the reason for my considering this to be the least satisfying of the six, and even in some ways mildly disappointing. Firstly, the guitarist-purchasers are likely to be miffed that there's no discussion of Wizz's playing technique or any information about the instrument he uses, or of how he's considered to be an influential guitarist. Secondly, the interview does little more than reminisce (if appealingly so), and I learnt little I didn't already know about either Wizz the man or Wizz the musician. Sure, there will be folks who will find this a useful introduction to Wizz, and the 14 songs he performs (and in some cases also introduces) here are all proven classics of his broad repertoire. One other feature about the Wizz Jones interview segment where it differs from the previous five DVDs in the series, is the interpolation of archive photos during his performances - although this doesn't prove a distraction. On the "additional tracks" section of the disc, Wizz is accompanied by his son Simeon. Whatever this disc's comparative shortcomings, though, Wizz's renowned "gifted busking troubadour" character shines through, to demonstrate his wholly admirable dictum: "I'm not sure what it is I'm playing, but I'm going to go for it". Right-on!

As befits the professional standing of both the originating company and each of the individual musicians portrayed, the DVDs are produced to a high

standard, with excellent sound quality and generally faultless editing. Access to individual sections and/or tracks is easy and well organised. The camerawork is clear and undistracting, happily gimmick-free, although there were occasions when I felt I really needed to see the guitar itself (or at least fingers on the frets) rather than the performer's face (the opening section of Can't Keep From Crying Sometimes on the Martin Simpson release is one instance that springs to mind, and there are a few moments on the Steve Tilston too); also, I felt that at times the camera lingered a little too long on interviewer Trevor Dann's eagerly beaming visage. There were occasions when I felt that carefully chosen archive clips of the musicians' special inspirations might have enhanced or illuminated the points made in the interviews, but I can understand the potential logistical difficulties (not to mention licensing restrictions) of any such provision. And in any case, in the overall scheme of things none of the above observations is a serious drawback, and each one of the six DVDs has much to commend it. I'm really looking forward to the next six issues in the series!

www.soundtechniques.co.uk

David Kidman, June 2006

