



A Lesson with Davy Graham

In 1976, following a sabbatical from the music scene, Davy Graham began a weekly residency at the Half Moon in Putney, promoted by the club organisers as a comeback. Despite owning most of his early records, I had seen him live only once previously, towards the final days of the now legendary Les Cousins, when, despite being dressed in tie and tails, he had cut a somewhat reticent figure, even amidst an audience that clearly loved his music and knew it intimately.

Now, armed with a new repertoire, primarily consisting of Irish pieces in increasingly formidable time signatures, he seemed confident and rested, glad to be back, and played throughout both sets with clarity and authority. At that time I owned a copy of his first LP, *The Guitar Player*, which in a moment of what now seems psychotic generosity I later gave away. Conscious of its rarity even then, I approached him to ask if he would sign it.

It transpired that Davy no longer owned a copy of the record and so asked if I would make him a tape, writing his phone number alongside his autograph. We agreed to combine delivery of this to his flat in Camden with a lesson.

When the day arrived I found myself, more than a little nervous, 15 minutes early on the doorstep, Davy having assured me in the mildest tones that he was very relaxed about the exact point at which the lesson might begin should the vagaries of the London tube prevail.

The door opened to reveal an irate figure. 'You're early,' he barked. 'Every moment of my time is accounted for.'

A seemingly endless pause ensued accompanied a baleful glare of which I felt full focus. 'Still, I suppose you'd better come in.' Quaking and wretched I followed him into the bohemian environment of his living room. 'Play me something,' he said, still clearly unsettled by my lack of consideration. Sitting 3 feet from the originator of the British approach to steel string guitar, this was no small proposition.

Taking out the superb John Bailey Dreadnought, which I had borrowed in the hope of improving credibility, I played Blackwaterside, my version, in those pre-internet days, being a distant and ailing cousin to Bert Jansch's seminal reading.

'Bert Jansch, isn't it? Nice. What key are you playing in? and what tuning?' Then picking up his guitar, 'What is this chord? And what makes it a seventh?' I pointed to the two strings that did so.

'How do you know that?' Then interest, but not disapproval, when I explained that I had counted back from the end of the scale: 'Perfectly valid.'

After I had successfully identified a succession of increasingly esoteric examples the tension suddenly dissipated.

'You know, they sometimes come to me without even knowing their chords,' he said, somewhat wearily. I realised with relief that I had been accepted. But this was clearly no place for the dilettante.

The ice broken, Davy addressed the subject of ergonomics. 'Better not to rest your little finger on the soundboard: it will restrict the movement of the finger next to it and prevent you from playing other styles.'

I have always been particularly grateful for this advice, which assumed – unsurprisingly in someone who had reimaged the technical scope and repertoire of the steel-string guitar exponentially – that I would naturally aspire to play other types of music.

'Try to keep your instrument completely still. It will make your fretting more accurate. If you have to tap your foot, try tapping your toe within your shoe'. He also advised me to rest the guitar on my left leg, easier with his Spanish guitar than my dreadnought.

In retrospect, I find these suggestions revealing. As I got to know him better I developed the impression that his approach to the guitar was in

transition, with a pronounced movement towards technical rectitude, but perhaps in so doing sacrificing some of the fire and idiosyncrasy that made his early recordings so compelling. At the time he was having classical guitar lessons, which considering his stature said much about his humility towards the guitar and dedication to improvement. He was also increasingly playing nylon strings, preventing him, for instance, from playing ragas in live performance because of the tuning requirements. Perhaps in compensation, being rarely able to resist the stimulus of the exotic, he had also begun to study the oud.

The rest of the lesson consisted of a discussion about how and in which direction I could progress. I played him one of my own compositions to which he commented: 'Harmonically correct but boring – a musician should never be boring.' This sounds rather blunt in retrospect, but the way it was said was without malice, his rationale being that descending treble accompanied by descending bass throughout created little harmonic variety.

He next insisted that I should learn to read, recommending 'The Rudiments and Theory of Music' as a touchstone. Again sound advice. It was a rare folkie at that time who could read standard notation.

Finally, perhaps fearing that I might have found this emphasis upon fundamentals somewhat dry, he showed me some 'interesting chords' from his jazz repertoire, the lesson tapering into a less formal ending.

As I put away my guitar he asked me, somewhat shyly, if I would like some tea, and over mugs of Earl Grey he reminisced about the time he had spent a night in a Paris jail for busking. Having no concerns over temporary incarceration but fearing the loss of his confiscated earnings, he was surprised to be awoken by the chief of police who, beckoning for his guitar, beamingly played a dexterous version of Nuages and, 'was so

pleased with himself he gave back all my money'.

In retrospect, this initial meeting encapsulates the person I came to know, sadly relatively briefly, as a friend. I found Davy to be essentially a gentle soul, sensitive and refined in his interaction with others, but undeniably mercurial and eccentric. It is impossible to overestimate how seriously he took his responsibilities towards the guitar, and he was both academically rigorous and freethinking in a way that preceded the more integrated approach to the steel-string guitar that we now take for granted.

Many people have commented that he never fully realised how differently his mind worked from most others, but ultimately I feel he could not be other than the person he was. Perhaps the fame that many felt he deserved eluded him because a lifelong quest for innovation made him elusive, in the sense that he was innately singular and his musical path beyond categorisation. Once, sleeping on his living room floor long past midnight, I became aware of Davy's tiptoeing figure laying a pencil and notebook beside my head – 'In case you're inspired during the night'. Doubtless this said far more about his thought processes than mine, but it surely illustrated the intrinsic difference of those rare souls whose minds are continually creative.

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