

In A Class of His Own

'I was quite sceptical at first' he admits. 'I thought the internet would never really catch on.'

It's now eight years since Rick Payne founded the Acoustic Guitar Workshop website with Steve Elliott. Since then, it's grown from a one-page lesson in ragtime blues guitar to an Aladdin's Cave of courses and resources. 'The AGW' now offers face-to-face tuition, and there are plans for residential courses at a central location. As a qualified teacher in demand in schools and a leading blues and slide guitarist, Rick heartily endorses the adage that teaching is performance.

'You stand there and perform, but it's not the same kind of adrenalin rush as you get when you walk on stage,' he insists. It's quite exhausting at first until you learn how to manage that, but that's where the teaching course helped me, and my experience as a performing musician too. I'm not afraid of walking on stage now and I'm not afraid of walking into a classroom. If you're teaching teenagers, you pick up on their enthusiasm. You remember how it felt to be really interested in rock'n'roll. When you're teaching guitar to 12 year olds, you remember the way it all started. It's very difficult to lose interest with kids, because they bring you back to the basics. Even a little elementary fingerstyle is an eye opener when you get in there and explain how it works and where to put your fingers. Creatively and musically, you can get stuck in a bit of a rut when it comes to trying to expand the idea of a very simple chord progression, so I wouldn't say it's totally enthralling all the time. At least I'm hands-on with the guitar so it does help my playing. Rick employs a variety of teaching methods depending on the size of the group and the age and proficiency of its members. He enjoys hands on guitar playing with individuals and smaller groups, but the dynamic of larger groups usually necessitates a whiteboard.

'It's very difficult teaching a large group and constantly having to demonstrate with the guitar as you walk round the group' he sighs. 'So I use diagrams and words to help people through some technique ideas. If you're teaching adults, you can give a masterclass workshop where you sit and play and they look and listen and learn. The kids like all sorts of approaches, diagrams and colourful dots on boards or whatever to help them understand where to put their fingers. Adult learners like to see me as a performer, then do a workshop. Quite often, a performance in the evening might be tied up with a workshop the next afternoon, or vice versa, so a lot of the audience come to the workshop because they like to see the performer break down what they've done the evening before. Even though I'm doing lots of virtual teaching with the website, I'd definitely go for keeping the inspiration going by seeing the real person.'

As a writer and performer, Rick is best known for blues guitar, though he discovered the genre while studying classical guitar at the Royal College Of Music. He developed an early interest in roots music, and artists such as Ry Cooder, Bert Jansch and John Renbourn. 'John was a particular favourite' he recalls. 'But I thought finger style didn't have to be classical. I could do a piece by Bach or Albeniz, so why not 'Strolling Down the Highway'? I found I could pick it up quite easily, and I had a real affinity with it. Blues sounds very simple, but it's quite complex in its make-up and its movement. I was quite intrigued when I first started picking it out how difficult it can be. I think the classical training helped on that. Someone like Lightnin' Hopkins or Muddy Waters keeps a constant bass rhythm going and then works the syncopation out with the fingers. A lot of people can't keep one thing going and then work another thing with their fingers. Adults can't keep a four-beat pattern going with the thumb and then do something else with the fingers, but kids find it quite easy because no habits have been piled upon them.

Rick owns a variety of weird and wonderful guitars, but his workhorse is an early Takamine. It was made in the mid-70s but taken off the production line because it looked just a little too similar to a Martin.

'But it sounds brilliant!' he enthuses. 'The acoustic pickup is wonderful and it sounds great when you plug in, so its good for theatres. And I've just begun to use Elixir coated strings. I find them a bit strange at first but they warm into a nice tone after a few plays. Other than that, it's just a staple diet of D'Addarios; a 012 top, or sometimes a 013.'

'I've got a South African archtop called a Bellini' he continues. 'It's white and it's got this strange zebra pattern on the back! I use that at home and when I'm recording. I've got a Hoffner small-bodied round hole guitar which I use for it's resonance for slide guitar. It sounds like a National Steel but it's made of very thin cheap wood. I've still got my Giannini classical guitar, which I had when I was about 14, and an old American catalogue guitar made by Singer. It's just a bit of old wood with a hole, but it sounds wonderful for early blues and slide guitar. I've got a Variax endorsement guitar from Line 6. It's an acoustic emulator which does all sorts of bizarre things, so I pull it out at gigs and play a banjo piece or a sitar piece. It's good to entertain the audience with novelties and tricks sometimes.'

Rick uses different guitars to write in different styles. His instrumental pieces are often drawn from his classical background, but his blues tunes usually emerge from a simple riff, a fingerstyle pattern or a chord sequence.

'One of the things I've found recently is a very simple tuning' he begins. 'Take the D string - the 4th string - up a tone to E. It's something I've

messed around with in different ways for years. If you play an Am chord with that raised note, it sounds so wonderful. Or if you play another chord you get this lovely suspended sound. From things like that, the words start coming. With the Takamine, you go strumming and it creates some sort of tune if you want it to. You find the guitar leads you. You become its instrument rather than the other way round. I could be deemed mad for saying it, but you sit there and it plays you.

When you work with it so closely, it gives you so much back. An electric guitar can be quite cute and quite a desirable object, but it's not the thing I'd pick up to play. An acoustic guitar has got that little bit of added warmth to it. It has got to be the acoustic guitar in the corner of the room always'.

Graham Hazlewood