

Marcus Ford

Interview by Dave Gillan

I guess I have a tendency to think that, from the outside looking in, people possibly think that Scotland is a rather unlikely place for a thriving Jazz scene. Well certainly if the view is based on the imagery that we as a nation project to the world of a land of kilts, bagpipes, ceildh music and an endless flow of whisky (yes! that is how you spell it, without an 'e'). But you don't have to look too far to find that isn't the case. Martin Taylor being an obvious example, along with guys like Tommy Smith and Brian Kelloch. Significant figures in Jazz from a country that boasts a population of around 5 million.

Scotland is steeped in musical tradition, so it should be no surprise that Jazz has been absorbed into it along with most other styles. Neither is it true that this is a recent development. The Jazz guitar playing styles of Eddie Lang, Eddie Durham and Lonnie Johnson were adopted by a now legendary player of traditional Scottish music; Willie Johnson. Willie in the 30's created what has come to be an integral part of traditional music in Scotland and referred to as 'Shetland Swing' (more about Willie later)

There are a number of outstanding Jazz Guitarists in Scotland that I'd love to have the opportunity to interview at a later date. I thought that Marcus was worthy of some exposure in this interview not only because of his commitment to playing solo Jazz Guitar on a nylon strung instrument, but also because he plays with such feeling and warmth and I personally have a great deal of admiration for him as a player and a person. So I welcomed the chance to catch him on a quiet Monday morning in November to interview him at his home near Falkirk.

DG: Marcus, thank you for agreeing to the interview and for the coffee and biscuits being at the ready. I've enjoyed watching you work in lots of different settings, whether it be with a violinist, clarinettist, vocalist or solo. Do you have any particular preference regarding the line-up?

MF: Instinctively I'd say no, but given this is an interview I guess I'd better think before I commit myself. I've spent a lot of time working on solo guitar, so I suppose I like the exposure of that. You know, I feel it gives me an edge when I'm in a setting where there's nowhere to hide, it makes you far more focussed when you're playing, which usually means that the end result is very fulfilling. The problem I have is that I do love the interaction with other players and the way their expression can instantaneously make you hear and play something slightly different to what you might hear and play yourself. It's a very lonely business playing solo, rewarding, but I enjoy the companionship of playing with others. You could have started with one of the easy questions....laughs.

DG: Well, I know how much you enjoy being on the spot. To nail this one, what if I said that I hear a lot of self sufficiency in your playing that makes it sound to me that you don't necessarily need others around you to get the harmonic beauty of a piece across and that's something that I do not always hear players doing who expose themselves in a solo jazz guitar setting.

MF: Thanks for the complement regarding the solo playing. Yes I like the idea or feeling of being self sufficient, but what concerns me is when that spills over into playing with others. I enjoy that interaction so much but there's a point when I can find myself instinctively reaching for those notes, especially in the lower register, when I'm working with a bass player. You know, you hear it one second and before you can stop it happening you've jumped in and stepped on the bass players toes. Pianists too, they can be 'territorial' and don't think that the guitar belongs there. It really comes from having done lots of serious solo work or being in situations with people like Niki King where I'm entirely responsible for supporting her voice with as broad a

harmonic range as possible. I think most of the guys realise that when I'm in an ensemble setting that the hard work for me is concentrating on staying out of the way.

DG: Have you always played Jazz or did you start off playing other styles? It would appear to most people that they're watching/listening to someone who'd crossed over from classical playing.

MF: That's interesting, from where I sit, and knowing that I've never had any lessons in classical playing, the only common denominator is that I play a nylon strung guitar. I certainly don't have, or use, what would be recognised as a classical guitar technique. At times I think that may be a draw back, but that's how it is. Don't get me wrong I love classical music and do play some classical pieces but not like guys who have dedicated themselves to playing that style of music on the guitar. I just loved the sound of nylon strung guitar. Again I can read a bit but not on sight to the standard where I could put something complicated in front of me and play it straight off.

DG: You play more from ear then?

MF: Yes I do. I think it's a great facility to have but don't get me wrong I wish I had more time to spend on reading. I'm really into the music, chords and progressions. I don't really think of myself as a Jazz Guitarist. I make music, and have a particular affinity with jazz music but I also love other styles too.

DG: Were your family musical?

MF: Laughs....you'd never believe it. My father played and taught guitar. He played nylon strung guitar in Calypso, Latin, and Bosa styles in the 50's and 60's. I didn't want to learn, I don't know why really. He never forced it upon me and I guess I thought it was his thing. I used to sneak into his studio though when he was around and look at all these Laurindo Almedia arrangements. So I guess that's where that love of the nylon strung guitar came from. I was probably always destined to have an affinity with it.

DG: I know you've had a long association with Martin Taylor. Can you tell us a little bit about that and how much Martin has influenced your playing?

MF: Martin has been a huge influence. When I was younger I knew in my head the kind of music I liked but didn't know how to get access to lots of different players. I used to listen to Charlie Bird a lot, but there was no internet in those days so you couldn't just type in jazz guitar or something and come up with every name under the sun. I first saw Martin playing with a clarinetist. During the concert he did a solo guitar piece, I was mesmerised. I couldn't believe this guy was playing all that on the guitar, and he had this huge luscious sound. I was so inspired I had to run straight home and pick up the guitar. Later I ended up becoming Martin's UK tour manager for a while. I'd been involved in arts administration and theatre management, he needed someone to organise things for him on the road. It was a great experience.

DG: I know you've also been influenced greatly by Gene Bertoncini. What in particular is it about Gene that appeals to you?

MF: Yeah, Gene and Lenny Breau. Gene plays such a great variety of music and can turn anything into an astonishing arrangement. I think for me he has it all. His voicings and whole approach to harmony is in a class of its own. Whenever I'm working on an arrangement, whether it be a solo piece or to back a vocalist, and I get a bit of 'writers block' I always think "What would Gene be thinking, how would he be approaching this?" So he's a source of inspiration, he really holds up everything I aspire to. I'd really love to have the opportunity to meet Gene and thank him for opening up a whole world of possibilities to me on the guitar. Last year the phone rang and it was Gene calling from a guitar festival somewhere and Martin Taylor knowing I was a fan of Gene got him to call me, we had a nice talk. And of course there's Lenny, I believe Gene had lots of admiration for Lenny and I can understand why. I really shouldn't forget to mention George Benson, what incredible style and tone he has, and when you watch him play it looks like he has all the time in the world. Everything looks so effortless with George. But

most of all I love tone. I love the tone that only guys like this can tease out of an instrument. A good tone is a big factor in what I strive for as a player.

DG: Since you've brought up the subject of tone, it's probably a good point to ask you what your setup is. It's always something that interests other players. And you have a very distinctive tone yourself, round and mellow I'd call it.

MF: Well, obviously I've used lots of gear over the years. I used AER for a while but I never really got the sound that I had in the past with Trace Eliot. I'm really happy with the Acoustic Image Clarus though. I use it with a Raezers Edge NY8 cabinet, the little one with the single 8" speaker. That's a fantastic combination, especially from a portability point of view. The Clarus is a really accurate reproduction of the instruments sound, and how they get that range out of a small cabinet I'll never know but it works so well.

The guitar I use is the one I've used now for sixteen or seventeen years. It's an Ovation deep bowl classical, great workhorse, you just take it out of the case and play. It stays in tune really well which is very important to me when I'm working so much in live settings.

You know I've tried to find another guitar, because I'm certain that there are ones out there that have a tone that's closer to what I hear in my head, but the problem is I try them and they just don't stand up. I've had an instrument sent to me from a well respected maker that I was convinced would be fantastic. I took it out of the case, put it straight back and carried on with the Ovation. The guitar that Gene uses looks and sounds great, but I'd be so reluctant to order an instrument to be made, you know I really think I need to hear them first. Unfortunately there aren't many instruments around here like that. What I'd be really interested in is an archtop with 'f' holes and nylon strings. I don't know if anyone does that type of guitar, perhaps it doesn't work, but I have this idea that it may produce that mellow tone.

I also have a 1958 Harold Peterson. It's a concert classical guitar that belonged to my Dad, so it's very special to me. I had it restored recently by a guy here in Scotland who's made a fantastic job of it. I'm using that for studio work it's got a remarkable sound, but it's not something I'm particularly keen on using to gig with. Besides all that I use D'Addario Pro Arte hard tension strings. No effects apart from a bit of plate reverb.

DG: I know you've had a pretty busy year, especially since the release of the CD you made with Niki King. Tell us a bit about that.

MF: Niki is going to be huge on the Jazz scene, well she is already very popular, but I mean BIG. She's got a fantastic voice and is a great listener. Niki had heard me playing at a gig and we got together afterwards. She was convinced that my style of playing would work well with her voice. We've toured Europe together and launched the CD at Pizza Express in London in June. The album's called Azure and is mainly duo guitar/vocals. It's very intimate and I'm pretty pleased with the way it turned out.

DG: Any plans for a solo album?

MF: Well in fact, you heard it here first. Yes, solo album on it's way. We'll you know I have recorded some stuff but this particular album has been kicking around in my head for a long time and I'm finally doing it. It should be out in the Spring of 2004. Bill Evans arrangements is basically where it's coming from. Best say no more about it until I've done the hard work.

DG: You're a busy player though. Any regular spots?

MF: Not really. I don't have a residency or anything like that. I do play every second Thursday night at Henry's Wine Bar in Edinburgh. I enjoy it because I kind of see it more as a night off with friends. This is a place I've played regularly for 15 years so it's nice to have a gig every couple of weeks that I feel is just fun, not work. Obviously I have my commitments with Niki

and I also work with a violinist called Alex Yellowlees. Alex is fantastic, it's a Hot Club type thing but I don't really play in that authentic style. It's really just the spirit of the thing more than replicating it. Nigel Clarke plays lead guitar in the group, he's a fantastic player. You know he's got all the chops, especially for doing the Django style thing. Hmmmm did I say it isn't authentic Hot Club? Well perhaps I'm the only one in it that isn't authentic. Anyway, it's a great sound and we all enjoy it.

DG: Plans for the future?

MF: The solo album, another one to do with Niki too. It would be nice to get a tour organised for the solo album. That's going to be busy enough I think, trying to promote two albums next year. Oh, pilots licence, I almost forgot. I've just done my first solo flight so hopefully I'll get that in the bag next year.

DG: Pilots licence? I probably don't need to tell you the company your in with that one. I spent a while earlier this year talking to Johnny Smith about his flying, and just about everything else. On the subject of lessons, are you doing any teaching these days?

MF: No, it's a shame really in a lot of ways I enjoy it. You know you feel like you're putting something back into music by passing things on, but I just don't have the time. I did do a thing in Shetland that was more like workshops and gigs combined. Myself and John Goldie, another great Scottish player who worked with Martin in the Spirit of Django band, did these workshops and it was great fun. That's where I met this legendary guitarist, who must be 90 years old, Willie Johnson.

This was the guy who back in the 30's was listening to Eddie Lang etc. and incorporated their style of playing into traditional Shetland folk music by playing their accompaniment style along with fiddle players. They call it 'Shetland Swing', imagine still being around to hear everyone playing a style of music you were responsible for establishing, that has now become part of the culture.

He came to hear us play and insisted that I use his guitar. I couldn't really refuse. So he came along to a gig with his guitar and handed it to me. You can imagine my horror when I saw the action, it was a mile high and with heavy gauge strings. It was a real battle for me to get a tune out of it, especially when I play nylon strung. Of course I felt honoured, although I couldn't help getting the feeling that Willie must have been thinking to himself "aye they don't make guitarists the way they did in my day".

DG: That's a lovely story Marcus and it's been an absolute pleasure talking to you. Wish you all the success you deserve in the future, and look forward to that solo album next year.

MF: Thanks Dave.