

Acoustic Magazine

RITCHIE BLACKMORE



RENAISSANCE REBIRTH

For three decades he played riff-heavy music with the seminal rock band Deep Purple. Then he discovered 500-year-old music which changed his life (and trousers) forever. Joel McIver meets the acoustic scene's most unlikely figurehead, Ritchie Blackmore.

Few musicians possess an aura of mystery as impenetrable as that of legendary guitarist Ritchie Blackmore. His distinguished career has seen him compose some of the most enduring riffs in history (even tribes-people in the depths of the Amazon jungle can hum the main riff to 'Smoke on the Water'), scale the rock pantheon and retreat in recent years to the stubbornly niche area of traditional Renaissance music.

His CV is intimidating: he started life as a session player and then co-founded Deep Purple in 1968. After knocking out a clutch of classic rock albums including *Deep Purple* (1969), *Concerto For Group And Orchestra* (1970), *Fireball* (1971), *Machine Head* (1972), *Burn* (1974) and *Stormbringer* (1974) he left the Purps in April 1975. Rumour has it that his mercurial, almost lordly nature had led to dissent in the Purple camp, although he has rarely commented on the subject.

He then formed Ritchie Blackmore's Rainbow, through which a veritable who's-who of rock passed (Ronnie James Dio, Jim Bain, Cozy Powell, Purple bassist Roger Glover, Don Airey, Graham Bonnet) and which made him one of this country's most important rock icons. Admit it, you've hummed along with 'Since You've Been Gone' at some point – we all have. An 11-year sojourn in the reformed Purple between 1984 and 1995 left him tired of rock and its attendant demands, however, and when he resurfaced in 1997 with a new outfit called Blackmore's Night, no-one knew what to expect.

What we got was a remarkable band centring on Blackmore, now playing a variety of classical instruments (many of ancient design) alongside his wife, Candice Night. Their music, far from being a rock-mongous blend of riffs and percussion as in his previous bands, was mainly subtle acoustic classical-folk of obscure European origin. A cult movement has grown up around the band and the wider Renaissance scene, largely in Germany, where the band have even done 'castle tours' for that genuinely medieval vibe.

Blackmore seems to have found his place at last – he even dresses like a man born half a millennium ago. When Acoustic spoke to him for the hallowed spot of front-cover star of the first issue, we were uncertain what to expect. In fact, Blackmore turned out to be a humble, relaxed and self-deprecating kind of chap: can this really be the much-feared rock overlord of old? Let's investigate ...

Ritchie, for 30 years you were a rock god. What got you into playing mellow acoustic music?

What spurred me on was seeing a band in Germany back in 1985 and thinking, I have to do this. It moved me so much, I had to do it. And the better we get at it, the more bands there are cropping up doing Renaissance music. There are now 100 bands doing this in Germany. It's like a rekindling of the old music.

There was a Renaissance music scene in Europe ages before you showed up with Blackmore's Night. What do the established players say when they're asked to play with you, a so-called rock performer?

There's an incredible snobbery in this scene! They don't lighten up. On the

other hand, I know people who play Renaissance music and can't stand it any more and want to be in a rock band. It works both ways. If you're not playing it exactly the way it says on the score, you should be excommunicated!

Do you get Deep Purple and Rainbow fans at Blackmore's Night shows?

It's a bit of both. We seem to have acquired a whole new audience, made up of Purple and Rainbow fans from the old days. It's about 60-40 percent old and new fans, which is quite gratifying. I'm getting older and the fans are getting older, and I think their taste changes too, so they're not into hard rock quite as much any more. We do two or three hours and I play electro-acoustic guitars. We incorporate that at the end of the show as it's an electric and acoustic tour: the last half hour is all electric rock tunes, really. Rock versions of what we do.

What instruments do you use?

Unfortunately, I have about ten guitars on stage with me for every song. I have these guitars made for me by a Japanese guy called Kawakami, who used to be with Yari-Alvarez, but has now left and only does personal guitars, I think. He never accepts any money for the guitars he makes for me! He's made me three guitars based on designs which I draw for him. They're all single-cutaway designs, but the latest one has a lute on the top. They have piezo pickups under the bridge. Sometimes I use a Roland synthesiser which is incorporated into the guitar, with the controls all on the back so it doesn't take away from the acoustic look.

Do you get a decent acoustic sound out of the electro-acoustic instruments, or do they have to be amplified?

Well, the bodies are only about two inches wide, so they're very quiet, obviously, and suit the electric environment more than the acoustic one. I only use them on stage: when I'm off stage I use different acoustics. I also use a Fender Telecaster electro-acoustic: I think they only made about eight of them! I showed them to the guys at Fender the other day and they didn't know anything about it, even though it was only made about eight years ago. I think they just made a few and then got confused and went on to other stuff. It's an incredibly good guitar, though, with a very thin neck, which I like. It's just like an electric Tele except it's got F-holes, although it sounds nothing like an electric.

I sometimes also use a Godin guitar, which has very responsive pickups. I like the slider controls; they're handy when you're playing a solo on stage – you don't have to grapple for the knob. It's just a normal guitar off the shelf, there's no custom modifications to it. I also use mandolas and bouzoukis, which I get from Fylde, the English maker. The first ones I got from them were just standard instruments so I could see what they were like, but I've just ordered a custom double-neck guitar.

Do you have a large guitar collection?

Not as big as people might think. I have about 16 guitars. I've offloaded quite a few over the years – I like to give them to people who don't have guitars. I remember the days when I couldn't afford a guitar and I wished someone would give me one! I have quite a few Strats, most of which are stored under the stairs.

Do you still endorse Fender?

I do have an endorsement deal with Fender – I could bother them all the time and collect guitars, but I don't believe in that. I know some guitarists bleed the company dry, and go around to every guitar maker and say, "Oh, I wanna play your guitar", when they have no intention of it. But I do have custom stuff made up for me sometimes. I had a custom 12-string acoustic made up for me, but I

never played it. It doesn't sound right, which is the problem with custom instruments: even if it doesn't sound right you've still got to buy it and get on with it! I'm not a guitar maker, so there are things I don't know.

But I love 12-string guitars; I have a Halo right here by my foot which I was just playing. I don't use them on stage, though, because of the feedback. I used to get feedback on stage when I first started, until I started using the very thin guitars. The only way around feedback for me, when I'm playing particular guitar pieces, is to turn the guitar way down. It's completely the opposite approach to the electric feedback effect, where you need a lot of sound.

With an acoustic, I believe that the quieter you are, the better the sound is. Of course, when we're playing in front of a lot of people and I turn myself down, the sound guy tries to compensate and I tell him off. There's something about the acoustic that should be played quietly. It should not be cranked up like some kind of cheap electric.

Presumably the engineer could just turn up the house PA and leave the actual backline and monitors fairly low?

They do, but I also think that when people are seeing someone play an acoustic guitar, they should really listen. They should listen to the subtleties, rather than just have the performer trying to play over the local drunks by turning up the guitar! But luckily, among the people who turn up to see us, we rarely have people who are noisy.

Does the electro-acoustic show work better with smaller crowds than in a big arena?

You know, when you start getting over about 3000 people, you can compensate with the PA – but generally, the more people you have in the audience, the less they're gonna listen. In a big crowd there are always people who come just because they want to have a party. Which is fine if you're playing loud, but if you're playing quiet like me, it can come unstuck sometimes.

What amps do you use?

I use two amps on stage – a Trace Elliot, and out of the back of that a Fender Acoustasonic, which is a great amp for acoustics. I really like them, although they're quite expensive.

They give this kind of stereo effect, almost like a moving-speaker effect. I don't use pedals, because if I use too many effects things usually go wrong on stage! I always try to keep it as simple as possible.

What was your first guitar?

A Framus acoustic, for seven guineas, in 1925 I think ... no, this would be 1957, when I was 11 or 12. I bought it in Hounslow. My first electric guitar was a Höfner Club 50. I loved Club 50s, but I never see them advertised, ever. I wouldn't mind buying one if I ever saw one. No, I never look at eBay, it's one of those things that I think about but I never pursue. A bit like a Gretsch Jet Firebird – Candice said, I'll buy you one for your birthday, and I said no, there has to be something I don't have that I want.

That used to be the ultimate guitar for me. I remember going into Jim Marshall's shop in Ealing – Mitch Mitchell was working behind the counter! – before he made amplifiers. I went in with the intention of buying a Jet Firebird and I came out with a Gibson 335, because the guy in the shop told me that was a much better guitar. He said I'd thank him some time for it ... I was quite bewildered. I came out thinking, why am I holding a Gibson when I wanted that

Gretsch? But in actual fact it was a better guitar. He was one of these purist jazz players, you know. And ever since then I keep looking at them and thinking, God they look so good.

What instruments do you use when you're just jamming off-stage?

Usually Lakewood acoustics. We were touring in Germany once and this guy gave me one and I kept it. I didn't play it for months, and then suddenly I remembered it. It's made of Brazilian wood, I think, and it resonates very well. So I had three guitars custom-made by them, including a lute-guitar which I had made up. It looks just like a lute but it was a 12-string guitar. Then the neck got broken by somebody who dropped it on stage and wouldn't own up ... after it was fixed the 12 strings didn't work, so I just use it as a 6-string.

Do you experiment with tunings?

Just a little bit. But I'm still having trouble with the orthodox tuning! I quite often use a drop-D, but I don't go for fancy non-standard tunings very often. I do experiment with the bouzoukis and the mandolas a bit; I tune them in fifths instead of fourths.

Who are your favourite guitar players?

My favourite acoustic guitarist is probably Gordon Giltrap. Also John Renbourn, who is excellent. I saw him play the other day; he came out and grunted at the audience and got on with it, without any showbiz at all. Absolutely excellent! But when I started playing guitar, the people you listened to were the Hank Marvin's and Django Reinhardt's of this world. I also went through a Wes Montgomery period of about six months. Les Paul and Chet Atkins were heroes of mine too.

What about the Delta and Chicago blues players?

I was never a big blues fan. I liked BB King, but I was either more into pop or classical. I like to play the blues now and again, but I find it a little bit limiting. I loved some of Eric Clapton's stuff with Cream – I think the solo on 'I Feel Free' is brilliant – but other than him I just didn't get it. Although with Hendrix, I could see what the fuss was about. Then again, he would have made it had he not even played the guitar, I think – he just had that ambience around him. The man was from the moon.

And the folkies?

Bob Dylan is my hero, but not because of his guitar playing. There's just something about him that hits the soul when he's singing. Candice can't figure out what the hell I see in him.

So how did the classical influences, which have come to the fore with Blackmore's Night, come about?

When I started the guitar, my father insisted I learn to read music and play classical stuff by Segovia and Bach, which I failed miserably at. But the melodies and the discipline stuck with me, and once I'd got the feeling of the guitar I went back into that area. Not as a purist, though: I couldn't really sit down to play and I'd forgotten how to read music. I couldn't play the preludes and things any more, but they were still there, at the back of my subconscious, I think. I was never a particularly good pupil at school.

Has your grasp of classical music theory been useful?

Well, I do a lot of guesswork. I love listening to classical and Renaissance music, so I don't approach it from an academic point of view – I come to it by ear, so to speak. When I studied Bach, I thought that some of his organ works related to the guitar very well: they had that sort of power. Some of his work

had incredible trills in it which bothered me at the time: a bit like playing an F major for the first time, which took me six months! Every time I got to an F when I was playing I had to stop, and the teacher said, "Don't worry, you'll get it." Any barre chord I did was just a clonk.

Studying classical guitar must have been good for your plucking-hand technique?

That's right. I've changed my style a lot over the last ten years, because it was all playing with a pick before that and the Renaissance stuff is all fingerpicking. Now I have to grow my nails, which is a whole headache, because they always break just before a show, and I can't put on fingerpicks because I always find them too bulky. Luckily Candice showed me these things called acrylics which you paint on your nails. It's quite smelly stuff but it works. It's amazing how important the nails are, because if I break a nail all you can hear is the fingertip. I didn't realise that nails were such high maintenance!

You're based in America. How do they take to Renaissance music?

Well, over here they only really know about rock and jazz and blues. There are only one or two bands over here, like the Terra Nova Consort, who play this kind of music, so to find the music you have to go to the back of the record store to the part marked 'throwaway items'! Luckily, I know what to look for because I know the instruments that are being played. They have crumhorns and shawms and hurdy-gurdies ... now that's an instrument. I have two hurdy-gurdies. Do you know what they are?

That's where you turn the handle, right?

And the monkey jumps up and down, yes! That's the instrument I'd play if I didn't play the guitar. It's great. I'm still a novice, though. I play it through an amp on stage and it sounds unbelievable: I think if the rock'n'roll 18-year-olds of today heard a hurdy-gurdy played properly through an amp, with some echo, they'd probably buy that instead of a guitar. It has even more of a roar than a guitar. It has amazing sustain and it sounds like an elephant. But they don't look cool and they're not the 'in' thing to play, so you never hear them. You have to turn the handle like an old woman.

Anyway, I live in America, but in England it's also difficult to perform this kind of music. They don't understand why a rock performer would want to play to 500 or 1000 people in a castle when I should be in a rock band playing to 50,000. We've spoken about doing the festival circuit, but again, there are a lot of closed doors there and a lot of political stuff with the folkies. Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull said once that he had the same problem: because he played some rock, he encountered some snobbery. I thought that was ridiculous!

Would you like Renaissance music to become more popular, or would you like it to remain in its niche?

Good point, I've often thought about this. I have a bad habit of liking anything that other people don't. If it was extremely popular I don't know if I'd like it so much. There's something about the unattainable and the hidden that turns me on.

Maybe the gothic-rock kids into Evanescence and Nightwish would get into it if they were exposed to it.

It does border on that. The guys in Nightwish are friends with Candice and they do similar music sometimes. They add more of a rock thing to it though.

Are you still in touch with the other Deep Purple guys?

I'm in touch with Jon Lord [keyboard player – Ed.], yes. Tell him it's his turn to

buy dinner. I bought it last time!

Info: www.blackmoresnight.com

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