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ERIC JOHNSON TOMMY BOLIN: *SPECTRUM* REMEMBERING PRINE AND PIZZARELLI

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## Tommy Emmanuel

Family and Fingerstyle

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A black and white photograph of Tommy Emmanuel, an older man with grey hair, wearing a dark leather jacket. He is seated and playing a light-colored acoustic guitar. His left hand is on the fretboard, and his right hand is positioned over the soundhole, ready to strum or fingerpick. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Tommy Emmanuel

## OF FAMILY AND FINGERSTYLE

**T**ommy Emmanuel's musical odyssey began the day his father, Hugh, a music-loving engineer with Australia's national science agency, brought home an electric guitar. While not a player, Hugh was keenly interested in its mechanical workings. But while he was day-jobbing, sons Phil and Tommy were sneaking off with it and teaching themselves to play. After debuting a rudimentary rendition of "Apache," their thrilled papa rewarded each with a Maton MS500 of their own.

BY WARD MEEKER

The quick-learning lads were soon teamed with eldest brother/drummer Chris and sister Virginia (following in her mother's footsteps) on lap-steel to become The Emmanuel Quartet, but the name was quickly changed to Midget Surfaries to avoid being confused for chamber music.

After winning a band competition in which first prize was a national TV appearance, producers told Hugh he should take the band on the road. A former Royal Australian Air Force airman who'd been shot down during the Battle of the Coral Sea, Hugh had just been diagnosed with an incurable heart disease and given a dire prognosis. Doctors told him he should make the most of his remaining time.

While keeping the bad news from his family, he took that advice. The family immediately sold their house, packed into two station wagons, and for the next six years traversed Australia as a road act. When his health prevented Hugh from traveling, Tommy and his brothers earned money by harvesting fruit. After Hugh's passing in 1966, their mother, Virginia, gave the kids the option of settling or staying on the road. They chose the latter – until the New South Wales

Department of Education accused the family of child labor violations and forced the kids to attend school. They settled in Parkes,

a small town about 220 miles from Sydney, and the brothers promptly formed a band to play pubs and dances. After finishing school, Tommy and Phil returned to the road, backing Anne Kirkpatrick and Goldrush (with Tommy on drums), as well as New Zealand/Aussie acts Tex Morton, Slim Dusty, and Buddy Williams.

In the '70s, Emmanuel mostly made his living in Australian recording studios, doing sessions for Air Supply (you'll hear his playing on "Lost in Love," "All Out of Love," "Every Woman in the World," and "Now and Forever"), Men at Work, and other acts, adding commercial jingles to fill his calendar. His hard work was rewarded with recognition as one of the best guitarists in Australia.

In '85, he joined a mainstream rock band called Dragon, which scored big with *Dreams of Ordinary Men* and its top-selling title track. But with that success came trappings good and bad – travel in chartered planes accompanied temptations like cocaine. It

Tommy Emmanuel: Alysse Garkjen



wasn't long before Emmanuel sought change and reverted to his early influences by focusing on acoustic music. But of course, he met with resistance.

"After I released *Up From Down Under* in 1987, the record company said, 'There's no market for that stuff.' So I told them I was going to create one."

He did just that, and two albums later, *Determination* became the biggest-selling instrumental album of all time in Australia.

The decades since have seen Emmanuel forge a path marked by perpetual musical growth and recognition as the world's foremost fingerstylist, along the way influencing players like Nashville-based superpicker Joe Robinson.

"I played a thousand gigs in Australia before I turned 18," said Robinson. "And at about every place, someone would say, 'I remember seeing Tommy and Phil in the '70s and '80s.' They'd recall some moment – could be Tommy playing a drum solo on the guitar or both of them playing Mozart on one fretboard, Phil playing distorted Bach on a Strat, or Tommy playing 'Yankee Doodle' and 'Dixie' at the same time, a la Chet."

"You wouldn't see an Angus Young or Eric Clapton poster in the Sydney Conservatorium of Music," he added. "But I saw a poster of Tommy. Back home, he's viewed as a maestro as well as a badass – the benchmark of a masterful player."

"Folks in Australia like to say we're a people allergic to BS. It's a rough-and-ready place; playing gigs as a kid, I saw teeth punched out, bottles smashed, PAs toppled, a Maton guitar broken over a biker's head – you name it (laughs)! These punters all know Tommy is the real deal. He's our own guitar legend."

We recently enjoyed an at-length discussion with the superstar.

**The story of your childhood reads like fiction; your family was essentially a bunch of gypsies thanks to you and Phil being guitar prodigies.**

Yeah, by the time I was six, we were touring. The back seat of dad's car was my abode. I'd



Emmanuel at age seven with his first guitar, a three-quarter-size Maton MS500 (top). He laughingly notes his large "Frankenstein hands" – they looked like they belonged to someone else. Above, Tommy takes a turn on lap-steel in The Emmanuel Quartet, with Phil (left) on his Maton, Chris on drums.

play guitar for half of the show, finish with a drum solo, then five minutes later be asleep in the car.

**What was your first guitar?**

My learner was a three-quarter-size Maton that in 1960 cost my dad £11 – expensive, but it was playable straight out of the box. At four years old, I had abnormally big hands, and I think that's how I was able to play at such a young age. I have a five-year-old daughter, and I got her a little guitar. She can't even push strings down, but she makes out like

she's playing along with me, and she just loves it (laughs). I look at her little hands and think, "How the hell did I play when I was six?" And in those days, there was no one around to set the action or straighten a neck.

**You and Phil used to sit with your backs to each other and guess the names of chords you were playing.**

Yeah, that's how we trained our ears. We'd say, "That's B to B minor to G," and we made a game, competing to guess chords. But it was really helping us.

**When did you first notice a song that had Travis picking?**

I heard Chet Atkins first; by the time I was 10, I had the *Best of Chet Atkins* and *Reminiscing*, his album with Hank Snow. I literally wore them out. Life was exciting when there was a new Chet record; I'd break out in a sweat, putting the needle down, almost swallowing my tongue (laughs). That's what it was like for me as a kid! A new Chet record would be full of new melodies, new chords... everything. It was so exciting. Where I was from, there were no guitar teachers and nobody who could play like that, so we worked it out ourselves. Phil would learn

chord progressions and show them to me, but the rest I had to figure out by my own ear.

**Was it a challenge?**

Well, being so young, I didn't hear all the detail and nuance. I heard the melody in the chords and I kinda fumbled through it thinking I was doing pretty well. But I was musically ignorant. I knew what a good song was and I didn't question anything. I just tried to sound like the record, and when I'd play for people, they'd be astounded. But I was just stealing from Chet.

**What other forms of music were you absorbing?**

Everything on the radio or jukebox. Jerry Reed changed my world. When his albums came out, it was just unbelievable what he was doing. It was fun, it was different, and it was so challenging, trying to work out what he was playing.

My mother tried to talk me out of listen-



ing to the Beatles. She'd say, "Don't listen to that rubbish." (laughs) Years later, when she came to see me once, I played "Michelle" and after the show she asked, "What was that beautiful song with all the harmonics?" I said, "That was a Beatles song, Mom!" (laughs). She sort of laughed it off, but she knew I remembered.

I was constantly trying to learn songs. It wasn't until I moved to the city that I was exposed to classical music, jazz, flamenco, and stuff like that.

**Few Americans realize that the mainstream bands you played in were a big deal...**

Well, Dragon, was one of the biggest bands of all time in Australia, aside from Air Supply or AC/DC. We never really made it, internationally, but we played to thousands of people every night.

**What was life like as a rock star?**

Pretty amazing. I was young, we were making lots of money and doing lots of drugs. We'd fly a private plane to shows outside of Sydney, and fly back after. I didn't have an apartment at the time – I lived in a five-star hotel.

**There's an interesting look at those days in a video of Dragon doing "Dreams of Ordinary Men" on an Australian TV show called "Hey, Hey, It's Saturday."**

Good heavens.... (sings) "These are the dreams of ordinary men. This is the world we're living in..." I remember it well.

**You're playing a rosewood Tele.**

Yeah, I had that for years. I eventually sold it because I needed some money.

**Which guitars did you use with Doug Parkinson's band, Southern Star?**

The only electric I had in those early days was a '66 Telecaster Custom with active EMGs – Strat configuration in a Tele. That guitar is in a museum in the Australian Country Music Hall of Fame, in Tamworth. They have my first Maton acoustic and that old Tele on loan.

**What sort of music did Southern Star play?**

We played music for people to dance to in clubs and pubs around Sydney, everything from Sam & Dave to Marvin Gaye to Earth, Wind & Fire. We played funky music – funky R&B. And in those days you could take a solo for five minutes in a song. Doug Parkinson



The Midget Surfaris, with Phil (left) on guitar, Virginia on lap-steel, youngest sib Veronica on guitar, Tommy, and drummer Chris.

was a great singer – he's still is one of the best soul singers I've ever heard anywhere in the world.

At that time, I was a young man who'd moved to the city to play with the big boys. I was in deep water (laughs). It was great fun and challenging, learning Kenny Loggins songs and all kinds of music. It was a great period for me.

**Which amps were you playing through?**

I had a Peavey Mace in those days because Peavey wanted a poster boy. I was doing pretty well – we were on TV a lot, so Peavey gave me an amp. Before that, when I was in The Bushwackers with Phil, I used a Fender Super Reverb and a little Yamaha 1x12 with a parametric EQ that I slaved into the Super. It was a fabulous sound.

**Using the Yamaha as a preamp and the power from the Super?**

Yeah, four 10s. I'd crank it up and I put it right beside myself.

**In Dragon, what were you going for, stylistically?**

I was just trying to be a rock player. Some of my favorite guitar solos on rock records back then were by Steve Lukather, Larry Carlton on [Steely Dan's] "Kid Charlemagne" and stuff like that. But really, I was just trying to play the songs and maintain employment (laughs). I was also playing on a lot of other records, being a bit of a chameleon. I could imitate just about anybody – Wes Montgomery, Segovia – and that got me a lot of work. I was always busy; seven days a week, I was playing on something.

**What moved you away from solid-bodies and amplifiers?**

Well, I was releasing albums under my own name and seeing a lot of success, especially for someone who didn't sing; I had three platinum albums and was shooting videos and shows for MTV [Australia]. I was the only person who wasn't a singer to be nominated for an Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) Music Award, as Male Artist of the

Year – Australia's version of the Grammys. I got Chet's attention because people were sending him my albums and video clips where I'd brag about Chet and show people a bit of that style. I think he liked that I wanted to keep it alive, and in turn he became very supportive of me.

**As a composer, your approach has always been to tell stories without words.**

Well, back in the late '70s/early '80s, I was signed with ATV Northern Songs, Paul McCartney's label. They'd send me from Sydney to Los Angeles to co-write songs. I learned a lot, working with pop writers who had a track record of hit songs, so I started writing instrumentals that way; I never think like I'm writing a song for guitar. I'm thinking like a band when I write and when I play. I think that's why my music stands out a little.

**While composing a melody, do words flow through your mind even if they're not going to be used?**

Absolutely. Things like, "And tell me now, come to your daddy's arms. And tell me now, I'll keep you safe from harm..." (from "Angelina," a song written about his daughter). It works, and when I was writing songs back in the late '70s and '80s, I'd call Chet and say, "Hey, I've written this new song. Can I send it to you?" And the first thing he'd ask is, "Can you sing it?" So that was instilled in me, and because of where and when I was born, and music at the time. I was exposed to good melodies from the start.

**Listening to your songs, it's easy to hear how words would fit.**

Well, any time someone says to me, "Have you got words for that song?" that tells me the melody is speaking to them, and it's important that people can latch onto my songs straight away.





**The Best of Tommy songs includes new versions of 19 songs from your catalog, as well as five new ones.**

I mostly wanted to record the new songs I'd written – "Fuel," "Song for a Rainy Morning," "Timberland," "The Wide Ocean," and "Sail On." But also, there's a generation of young players who haven't heard my early stuff. Also, I'll never own the rights to my 1999 album, *Only*, so I wanted to re-record new performances – "Those Who Wait," "I've Always Thought of You," "Train to Dusseldorf," "Luttrell," and others.

When I recorded *Only*, it was a tough time. I had a baby on the way and a daughter dealing with epilepsy. I was broke and living in England, where nobody knew me. I could only afford two- or three-hour sessions, so everything was one take. I had to sell some guitars to keep going on that record, but I got there under all that pressure, and it brought out the best in me, I think. *Only* opened so many doors, especially in Europe. America exploded for me from 2003 onward.

**Why do you think it helped widen your recognition?**

Well, I think people loved the songs, the adventurous playing, and I think it came along at the right time because nobody else was doing that. In the '70s, you had Doc Watson and Leo Kottke, but there wasn't any others. I worked hard and I built an audience, by hand.

Emmanuel bought this '66 Tele Custom in 1976. Its mods and wear recall years of work on every session, song, album, and commercial until he turned to a solo acoustic act. His first Maton acoustic was this 808 he calls "The Mouse," used through his early years as a soloist.

**Are there any personal highlights among the new tracks?**

Well, the first, "Song for a Rainy Morning," is a simple melody, but it really speaks to people, and I'm really glad about that. "Fuel" is an homage to "Classical Gas," like a bookend kind of thing – I'm trying to inspire young guitarists to be more adventurous, not just play like everybody else. Don't just copy, do you do your own thing.

There are a lot of songs people write to me about, like "Lewis and Clark," which was about the hardest song I've ever written, and it was the most simple... but that's why it was hard. It had to be right. It's easy to put a bunch of notes together and throw a few fancy chords around and have people say, "Wow! Listen to that!" But it doesn't mean much. It's hard to write something that evokes emotion and tells a story.

**Broadly speaking, did you change much in the re-recorded songs?**

Not a lot, but I play them better now (laughs).

**Which guitars do we hear on the album?**

The one I used most was the Maton TE Personal. The other was the cutaway TE Traditional. There's a bigger-bodied one on quite a few tracks, too. "Timberland" is a baritone made by Tony Karol, in Toronto. And I used my Larrivée C-10 on a couple tracks, as well.

**What determined the guitar you would use on each track?**

It depended on which sound I was looking for. The Maton just about does everything; it's an amazing little guitar, but the Larrivée has a different midrange that really suited some things.

**When you play live, you don't use a setlist.**

Yeah, that's just how I roll now. Back in the day when I had a band and a crew, I had 12 or 14 guitars and did the same show every night. When the lights went off at the end of each song, everything went black and I'd have a different guitar when they came back on. That was part of the show. But when I do my own thing, I see what I feel like playing and go with it, because there lies the adventure. Sometimes, the audience is shouting requests and I'll play six in a row and have a bit of fun with the crowd, and that becomes a different part of the show. I don't always do that because I don't want it to be expected, but I try to keep it interesting for me and my audience.

**Speaking of interesting, you sing a cappella.**



I do. Sometimes I sing "Secret of Life" – a James Taylor song. Or I might do "Lonesome Road," (sings) "Walk down that lonesome road all by yourself..." which James Taylor also did. Other nights, it's "Today Is Mine," (sings) "Today is mine, to do with what I will, today is mine, my own special cup to fill..." That's a Jerry Reed song. I love Jerry's writing.

**You're sort of preaching.**

Well, I just want to remind the audience that life is not a rehearsal, so you better get on with it! It's my way of saying, "Don't forget to live, get out there. You've got this one life, get at it."

**So, as with the rest of the set, you're choosing on the fly?**

Totally. *Everything* is on the fly. I had a sound man for years, and he knew me so well. Just before we'd start, he'd say, "So, what's first?" I'd tell him a song but of course change my mind at the last second (laughs). He's no longer on the crew, but remains a close friend.

**Compared to 20 years ago, do you now approach playing differently?**

No. Every time I go onstage, I floor it. That's how I've always been. I [meet] 30 or 40 people before a show, which is great fun for me, and I take their enthusiasm and energy and give it back from the stage. Just before the show, I'm tuning, playing, and being very calm – that's important to me. I call that time the "balm of calm," because I cannot play well if my mind is racing, heart's pumping, and I'm all excited. When I walk out, I'm as calm as I've been all day. People ask, "How do you get jacked up for a show?" And I say, "You don't want to be. If you want to play well, you want to be very calm and in the moment."

**How long is the "balm of calm?"**

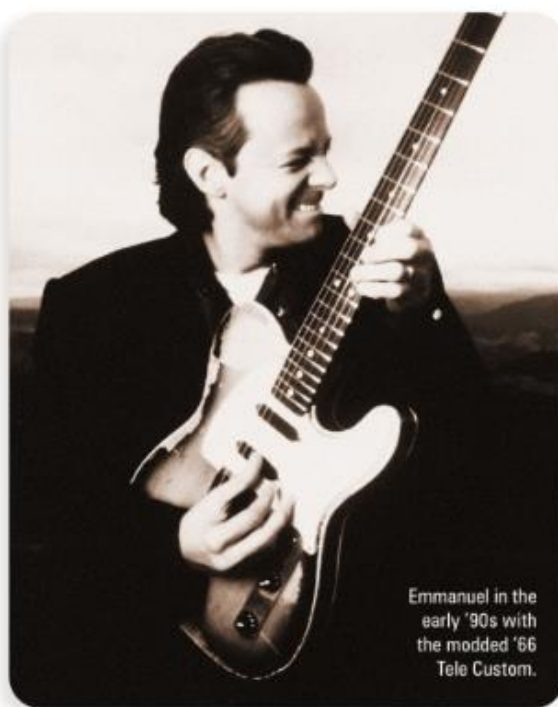
About 10 minutes. But really, I'm always relaxed. I don't let stuff stress me out.

**Do you follow a dietary or physical regimen?**

I just don't eat big meals. I eat good things. I drink coffee until lunch time, then don't the rest of the day. I like real simple things – good vegetables and fruit, eating healthy things. I don't eat donuts and s\*\*t like that.

**Not a lot of candy bars.**

Well, I like chocolate, definitely. I'm an ice-cream addict. But I try not to eat too



Emmanuel in the early '90s with the modded '66 Tele Custom.

**"I rarely sit around listening to guitarists. I want to hear good songs, and some of my favorite music is everything from Merle Haggard to Sinatra to Joe Satriani."**

much of anything, really. A bit of this and a bit of that.

**Have you ever experienced carpal tunnel syndrome or other physical issues related to playing?**

No, and in my opinion – which means nothing – people who get carpal tunnel or other repetitive-strain problems are probably doing something wrong – basic stuff. If I happen to play someone's guitar after they tell me about some problem they're having, it's usually difficult to play. Even Trey Hensley, who's a brilliant bluegrass player, good singer, and can play the hell out of the guitar. He said to me, "My hands are really sore and my forearms hurt when I play." I said, "Trey, have you actually felt your guitar lately?" The damn thing was so hard to play

I couldn't even push the strings down. He plays it all day and all night, and plays hard.

I want my guitars to be beautiful to play and have a beautiful sound; you've got to have good action to get all the detail and nuance.

**How are yours set?**

I like it low, but not too low; I like to get under the strings a little. If you ask me measurements, I can't tell you, but I like a flat, low action.

**Do you listen much to other guitar players?**

Well, there are many great players out there, but I rarely sit around listening to guitarists. I want to hear good songs, and some of my favorite music is everything from Merle Haggard to Sinatra to Joe Satriani. I have wide, unusual tastes. My guitars are around me, and I'm playing a lot of the time, improvising and working on stuff. In the car, I listen to the Beatles channel or '70s on 7, '80s on 8, that kind of stuff – regular pop music for an old fart like me (laughs).

**That '70s pop-folk – Poco, Seals and Crofts, and all that – had great melodies, which ties back to your approach to composition.**

They sure did; (sings) "Summer breeze, makes me feel fine..." And my friends from the band, America – Dewey Bunnell and Gerry Beckley; (sings) "I've been through the desert on a horse with no name..." All that stuff. I love that music.

**You're emblematic of artists who've had to postpone or cancel a tour due to Covid-19. When did you last play for an audience?**

The last show was in the Tennessee Theater, in Knoxville, on March 12. Everything else had to be canceled or postponed, and I have no idea when I'm going to work again. So, I'm just playing everyday and maybe writing. I'm also doing what I've never had the chance to do – be with my daughter every day. It's the greatest experience in my life, and means more to me than anything. In that way, I'm grateful to this pandemic.

**What would you suggest other players do with their down time?**

Learn some good songs. Make the most of this, and whatever you do, don't worry. Have fun with music. That's what it's there for. We all need to work on our skills, but that's not everything. Having a good song to play is just as important. VG

