

Blurred Vision

GRAHAM COXON'S LATEST SOLO ALBUM SEES HIM EXPLORING SOME UNEXPECTED TERRITORY, AS DAVID GREEVES DISCOVERS

... If you haven't already, you'll be hearing a lot about Blur this summer. Following a reunion that once looked distinctly unlikely, the band is gearing up for a series of massive concerts in London's Hyde Park, not to mention headline slots at T in the Park and Glastonbury. But while tens of thousands will watch guitarist Graham Coxon strap on a Telecaster and run through the Britpop chart-toppers back catalogue, tonight he sits with an acoustic guitar in front of a few hundred expectant fans.

Coxon is midway through a tour of smaller venues, backed only by a drummer and bass player, to promote his new record. *The Spinning Top*, Coxon's seventh solo album, is a primarily acoustic affair. That might surprise those who associate the guitarist with the inventive riffing of Blur hits like 'Song 2' and 'Coffee & TV', but in an eclectic solo career Coxon has already explored lo-fi noise, minimalist folk, psychedelia, garage rock and power pop territory. Still, *The Spinning Top's* folky fingerpicking and confident, engaging tone suggest a reinvigorated guitarist filled with new enthusiasm for the instrument.

STACKS OF SONGS

Although *The Spinning Top* has been described as a concept album, following one man from birth to death, Coxon would seem to suggest that the whole thing came together very naturally. "I just had some songs and thought, I want to record soon. They'd been forming into two piles, these songs. One was electric stuff and the other was more acoustic songs that have come out of just mucking around with acoustic guitars – mucking around with tunings and fingerpicking and things like that." ➔



We mention to Coxon that he'd once described writing songs as a bit like needing to pee – an involuntary urge rather than a conscious decision – and he responds with a smile: "Yeah, I was being polite. Normally, it's like needing to have a number two! I mean, I'm not like ABBA – those two, who can lock themselves away and write an album. It's not like that. I think I go around absorbing my surroundings, absorbing the news, TV, people and just daydreaming. And when I've absorbed enough psychic clutter, I think, 'Shit, I think there's something there. I think I should go home to my demo machine and see if there's something there.' Usually there isn't, but sometimes there is."

"For example, something like 'Perfect Love' took 10 minutes and was just so easy to write. A lot of songs are really good when it feels like they've already been written. They're just sitting there waiting for you to pick them up. But others are a struggle. Songs like 'In The Morning' were ones where I just chose to spend about three days at the kitchen table with pots of tea and loads of fags, and just go round it, and round it and round it."

ACOUSTIC ROOTS

Dominated by acoustic textures, from Coxon's acoustic guitar to the legendary Danny Thompson's upright bass and a smattering of exotic Indian stringed instruments, *The Spinning Top* carries a strong flavour of the British folk boom of the '60s. Coxon's rhythmic fingerpicked lines form the backdrop to most of the songs, taking cues from the likes of Davy Graham and Bert Jansch.

Coxon is quick to credit these players as a major inspiration. "I'd been getting into a lot more fingerpicking and learning about what that is, this style that we stole from America and made British. I was interested in that process – the Anglicising of that American form, and how it applied itself to jazz and blues and all went through these groovy players. The folk movement – what Martin Carthy was doing, what Davy Graham was doing, John Renbourn, Bert Jansch – all these groovy people... These songs came out of that."

"I think I was 15 when I first worked out the basic fingerpicking pattern, and I don't do many

different patterns. I stick to the same sort of pattern really. But in a way it's kind of like banjo playing – it's what you're doing with the left hand as well, how you're trilling and hammering-on. That can all make it sound a lot more difficult than it is! But with this album, I was really trying to fingerpick in a grown-up way – trying to really do it with the steady bass. But I think that once you've got [Davy Graham's] 'Anji' right, then you've pretty much overcome it. Something has happened and you've managed to separate the bass and treble in your hand, with the steady bassline and the off-beat melody."

Coxon talks in glowing terms about watching the likes of Bert Jansch and Martin Simpson play, and he's at pains to stress that he doesn't consider himself on the same level. "It's funny, because people are talking about the fingerpicking on this record and I feel a bit like saying, 'Yeah, it's not that great. You should listen to Martin Simpson!' It's slightly ridiculous. I feel like I'm getting all this attention and there are other people that are just phenomenal at picking and playing the guitar. There

"I GREW TO DESPISE ACOUSTIC GUITARS IN A WAY... UNTIL I PLAYED A GOOD ONE"

are some journalists writing about my playing on the album that might not be aware of that fact, and that makes me slightly uncomfortable."

PICKING GUITARS

While Coxon was exploring the British folk tradition, he was also developing a passion for the acoustic guitar itself. "Another



part of the whole acoustic thing was discovering about the guitars as well," he says. "The fact that there are some amazing luthiers in this country, and I didn't really know that, and the fact that there are OM-shaped guitars... All my old guitars were some kind of dreadnought. I had an old Harmony Sovereign for years, and although it was quite a nice one it used to kill my fingers. I wasn't interested enough in acoustic guitars to think about things like string gauges, because I wasn't any sort of player. I grew to sort of despise acoustic guitars in a way, until I played a good one and I thought it was beautiful.

"But then I discovered the OM shape and how lovely that was to hold and play, and then I realised that there were people in this country that made them. I think I was reading John Renbourn's web page and he mentioned Ralph Bown and I got in contact with Ralph, and then I noticed Fylde and Brook, and Alister Atkin in the end, though



TWEAKING TUNINGS

COXON'S LATEST ALBUM SEES HIM EXPLORE SOME ALTERNATE TUNINGS

We asked Graham Coxon to reveal how he tunes his guitar for the songs on *The Spinning Top*.

"The drop-D tuning is one that I used a lot because it made me get out of habits that I was getting into with standard tuning and made me use different shapes. When I first did that, I wrote almost a whole album around that tuning. I also use open G [DGDGBD] but I don't always put the thin E down to D – I keep it at E. Mainly it's that tuning I use, as well as standard tuning and then this other tuning I use on the song 'Home', which is the thin E down to D and then the B goes down to a G and the rest is standard. I did use some tunings to get extra twang where you tune two strings to the same note, so you can do some twangy stuff. That was me trying to get a sort of Middle Eastern feel."

Playing live, Coxon uses a thumb pick and fingerpicks for many of the songs. "I managed to grow my nails for the album," he says, "but I use the fingerpicks for playing live because of volume really. If I didn't, the monitors would have to be turned up so loud that it's impossible – I would just be



getting feedback. When I first started playing with them, I thought it was great because it's loud and pokey and zingy, but I would play so clumsily that I thought I would never get used to them. But I guess I just forced myself to use them."

Alister is now somebody that I count as a mate. These guys who make these amazing guitars – I think it's magic. I could never do anything so subtle and amazing."

On this tour, Coxon is using three OM-style guitars, made by Atkin, Bown and Fylde. "I like the OM," he says, "and I'm a fan of the old Martin slightly V-ed neck profile. The Fyldes have that sort of a neck, and Ralph [Bown] took that into consideration and made the neck on his guitar really beautiful, and Alister [Atkin] did a great job on that too. They all feel exactly how I want them. The ones I've had made have a slightly narrower neck than Martin OMs. The Martins have quite wide necks."

Coxon has also switched to light, 11 to 52-gauge strings, allowing him to bend strings more easily and creating a more zingy, jangly sound. "When I first got the OM-28V, which was the first picking guitar I bought, I did an impromptu song with Bert Jansch and Davy Graham when they were playing the Holywell Rooms in Oxford. Bert had a go on my guitar and said, 'Cor, these strings are thick aren't they?' And I thought, are they? I had no idea. I've got 11s on there now and I can bend a bit and get the action low. Some of these

acoustic guitars are easier to play than electrics, they're so comfy."

STUDIO TIME

After his blockbuster summer with Blur, Coxon hopes to take *The Spinning Top* back on tour again with an expanded band, though he won't be out of the studio for long judging by his enthusiasm for recording.

"I like it better than anything. I mean, I love playing live, but I actually like having something to do every day – going to a studio and making some noise. I think I still can't get my head around the magic of it, that you can do something and it's there forever, if you want it to be. That stuff that goes a bit funny but turns out to be great, stuff you weren't expecting, and it's captured there in a little butterfly net forever.

"Live is a different thing. I think it's about the moment really. Sure, I don't like it if I'm not singing in tune and I can't hear myself and things like that, but really it's about the whole experience – I don't think being in tune is much to do with it. I like the bits where I'm just sort of free to do whatever – the instrumental bits where I don't have to bloody sing and I can just play. I like those bits best." GB →

TONE ZONE: GRAHAM COXON

The Soul Tree, Cambridge, 12th May 2009

GUITARS



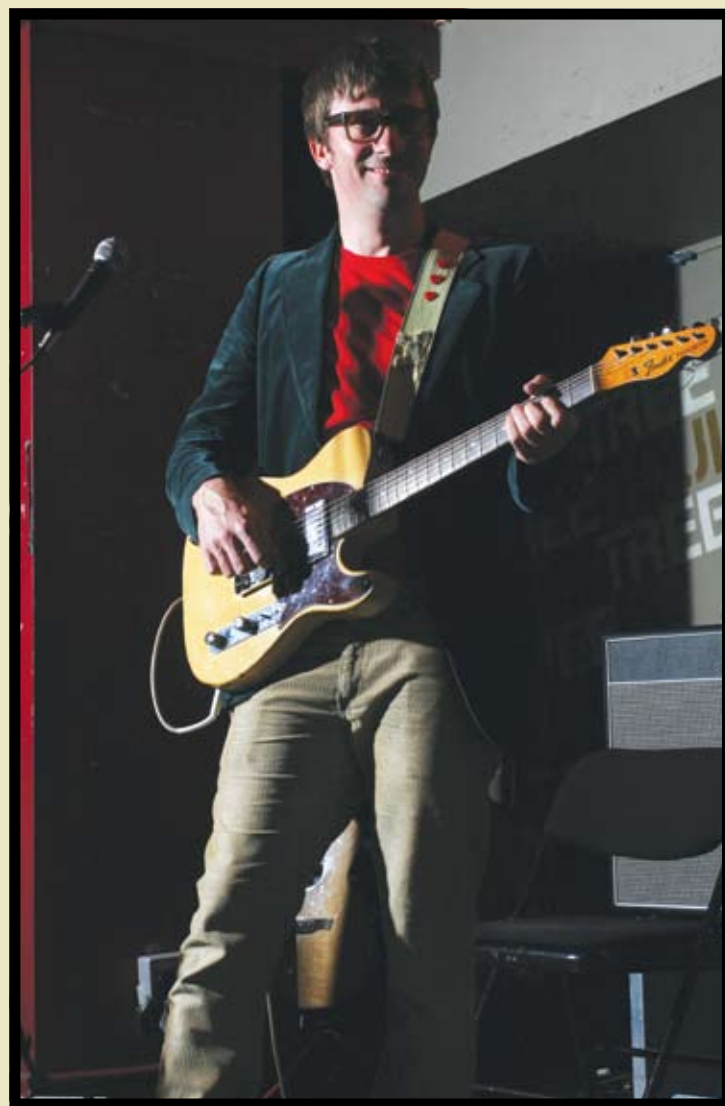
To cater for different tunings, Coxon alternates between OM-style acoustics custom-made by British luthiers Ralph Bown of Bown Guitars and Roger Bucknall of Fylde, and a third OM, made by Alister Atkin of Atkin Guitars (pictured on previous pages). All his acoustics are fitted with an L.R. Baggs M1 soundhole pickup and run through an L.R. Baggs Para Acoustic DI EQ/preamp on the way to the desk.

For electric duties, Coxon's trusty Telecaster, fitted with a Gibson humbucker in the neck position, is on hand. "I love Teles," he says. "They have a good rattle, don't they? I like this one with the PAF in there, because you can have the best of both worlds. You can get a really thick, warm, sort of bluesy sound from that pickup."

AMPS



Tonight, Coxon is using a Marshall 1962 Bluesbreaker, a 30-watt 2x12 combo, with a Marshall Power Break attenuator so he can crank up the amp in smaller venues. An Orange Rocker 30 has also been used on the tour.



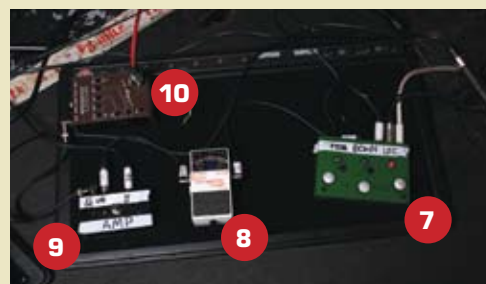
EFFECTS

"This is just something I've put together for this tour," says Coxon of the twin compact pedalboards he's using tonight, primarily for the electric numbers. "I need other big pedalboards made for the Blur stuff. I like chaining up a lot of distortion units together. I like sounds that go on forever, hypnotic sorts of sounds. I like making loops out of delays and tape echoes, flanges... I like all of these effects. I just like psychedelic music, I suppose – I think I always have. I just like all that space rock stuff – Gong and all that sort of stuff"



PEDALBOARD 1

- 1 ProCo RAT distortion
- 2 Boss TR-2 Tremolo
- 3 Boss BF-2 Flanger
- 4 T-Rex Mudhoney distortion
- 5 Boss RV-5 Digital Reverb
- 6 Akai E2 Headrush delay/looper



PEDALBOARD 2

- 7 Lehle 3 at 1 switcher
- 8 Boss TU-2 Chromatic Tuner
- 9 Signal splitter
- 10 L.R. Baggs Para Acoustic DI