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Guitar Talk: Connecting with Leading UK Fingerstylist and Educator Tristan Seume





[Tristan Seume](#) has made his way into the top tier of acoustic guitar instrumentalists in the United Kingdom not only due to the extraordinary fingerstyle abilities demonstrated on his original and interpretative recordings, but also his penchant for sharing his skills. In addition to being in high demand to play on other musicians' projects, he is one of the top educators in his field. Seume, who is in his early 40s, is a regular contributor to several UK music magazines and a workshop teacher at major guitar festivals. His concise video tutorials are now making their way into American guitarists' feeds.

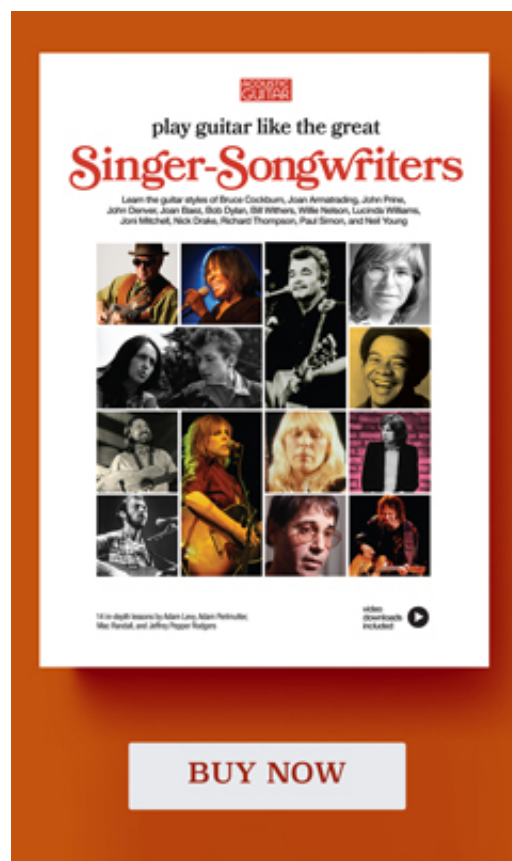
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During the pandemic last spring, I Skyped with Seume, a resident of Surrey, about 30 minutes from London. We discussed his affinity for '80s music, his main nonstandard tuning, and his prized battery of [Fylde](#) instruments, among other things.

How did you get your start in music?

My dad had a guitar and played in college for fun. I remember him buying a guitar at a yard sale. The family was just then moving to a new house and this guitar was literally the last thing to get in the van. I picked it up in boredom. My parents thought I took to it quite naturally, and I was just obsessed by the time I was around 12 or 13. I was starting secondary school, and there were a couple of kids in school who had guitars and I was quite competitive. It was the catalyst for my obsession. I wanted to be the best in my class and school.

Where did you grow up and go to school?



I grew up in Guildford, a half hour from London. I went to college down in Devon, in the West



studying.

When I was 21, there was a music college in Guildford that was just starting up, the Academy of Contemporary Music. The college took me on as a junior teacher. That was again fortuitous timing. I started teaching there and it led to other things. The college recommended me to Bath Guitar Festival, which is a well-known guitar summer camp, when they needed an extra tutor, and I started doing some journalism for *Guitarist* magazine, including features on techniques.

Were you playing both electric and acoustic guitar at that point?

Yes, but all the while I was increasingly interested in the acoustic guitar. I went to college as an electric guitar player thinking I'd play in bands, but I began writing instrumental music on acoustic. I was also introduced to Gordon Giltrap, who is a source of inspiration. I was brought

up on folk music. It was a natural thing. Gordon later became my mentor, which gave me great confidence just as I was starting out as a pro player.

What kind of gigs were you playing?

I'd been playing for [English folk singer and fiddler] Jackie Oates in her band for about ten years. She'd moved onto other projects, and I found myself without a regular gig, so it started me off on writing and arranging more for guitar. I've always loved some of the great songs from the '80s, so I started off with a Heart song sung by Nancy Wilson, "These Dreams," the lyrics of which were written by Elton John's lyricist, Bernie Taupin. People really liked my interpretation, and it was shared with Nancy, who emailed me that she loved it. I was a little bit starstruck by that.

When you were studying guitar, did you learn to read music?

I studied classical for a little while in secondary school, so I learned to read music. It started me off with some fingerstyle discipline, even though my classical teacher would have a heart attack if he saw my right-hand technique now. Being able to read is quite an advantage for scoring. I find it really useful for speeding up the arranging process. I don't fluently read a classical score, but I write in notation first to be able to interpret rhythms and counterpoint in particular. Then I'll convert it to tab to work out the most logical fingering.

What tunings do you work with?

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I am primarily using C G D G C D. The bottom three strings are in fifths rather than fourths. Like the bottom three strings of a cello, it allows you to play nice wide-open triad voicings much more easily than in standard tuning. For what I'm hearing in my head, I like to have open-spaced chord voicings. And it's really useful for playing with backing singers. It's a modal DADGAD type sound, and with the top two strings you can get some nice ornaments that can work really well. You can get a bit lost in open tunings, but I decided to rearrange everything I played in one tuning and be able to learn one tuning inside out rather than flying blind. I'm quite comfortable in a number of keys, because the top five strings are the same as sawmill banjo tuning, so I call it C-saw — sawmill over a C bass. Martin Simpson occasionally used it, and I think Nic Jones might have used it. It tends to have mileage if I'm teaching a class, as it's usually new to folks.

What guitars are you using and what strings for the C-saw tuning?

I've used Fylde guitars for quite a few years now, since meeting their maker, Roger Bucknall [see profile in the January/February 2020 issue], at Ullapool Guitar Festival in Scotland. I've played hundreds of guitars over the years doing clinics and demos, but nothing better than a Fylde—the level of craftsmanship is breathtaking, but never clinically so. There's always the sense that they're built by human hands. Roger made me a customized Goodfellow last year. It's a beautiful small-bodied fan-fret with a Brazilian rosewood body and a cedar top. It's probably the last guitar I'll ever own—it's perfect. I use Elixir .012–.056 phosphor bronze Nanowebbs, which sound really rich on that guitar. The combination is almost cello-like in warmth and depth. I also have another Fylde custom Goodfellow with a Cuban mahogany body and an Engelmann spruce top, a Fylde Falstaff, a five-string banjo, a bouzouki, and a banjola, all made by Roger.

What's your favorite environment for teaching?

Clinics. I wouldn't do them if I didn't love them. I've taught at colleges, but you're generally working to someone else's syllabus. If I'm teaching a workshop, it's nice to present what I think and believe. There are a number of events I do regularly in a year as a clinic teacher now. It also helped me gain confidence to be on stage gigging.

What are your plans going forward?

The advertisement features a dark background with a person playing an acoustic guitar. At the top, a white heartbeat icon is positioned above the main headline. The headline reads 'Never Miss A Moment' in large white font, followed by 'The handheld studio with 32-bit float' in a smaller white font. In the center, a TASCAM Portacapture X6 is shown mounted on a stand. Below this, a smaller image of the device is shown with its screen displaying a colorful interface. To the right of the smaller device, an orange banner contains the text 'Save \$100' in white. Below the banner, the price 'Only \$299' is displayed in white. At the bottom right, the text 'SEE THE TASCAM. PORTACAPTURE X6' is shown in white, with a small white arrow pointing to the right.

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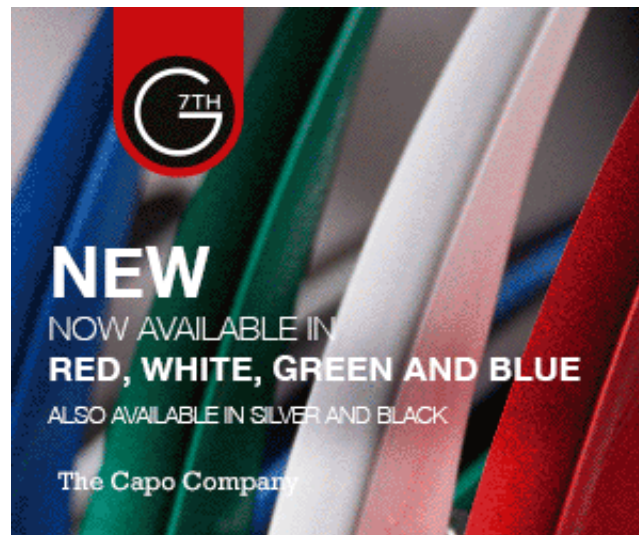
I'm back in the studio. I've got two solo albums out, and I've been working on a third for a little while now. It's predominantly traditional music and a few original compositions in that vein. I keep getting obsessed with side projects, like music of the '80s, but my plan is by the end of the year to have a new album out and get this '80s project tied up into an album as well.

People are so nostalgic for some of that music from the '80s now. When I grew up everyone was going on about '60s music, but there were some great songs in the '80s. Some were overdressed, but they translate well into acoustic instrumentals.

How have you been managing during the pandemic?

Obviously, it really put the brakes on everything—the creative sector being no different. Just like everyone else, all my gigs were zapped in one hit, which was pretty hard to take. During the early stages of lockdown I did a couple of livestream gigs, but I used the opportunity to raise some money for charity and also help out a few friends. My first Facebook Live raised £500 [around \$670] for Help Musicians, a charity that supports musicians in crisis in the UK—pretty apt right now! And shortly afterwards, I organized a live-stream with five other guitarist friends of mine—Clive Carroll, Tim Edey, Will McNicol, Söenke Meinen, and Jule Malischke. We all just shared the event with our collective fan bases and raised what seemed like a small fortune at a time when none of us knew how we'd make the rent that month!

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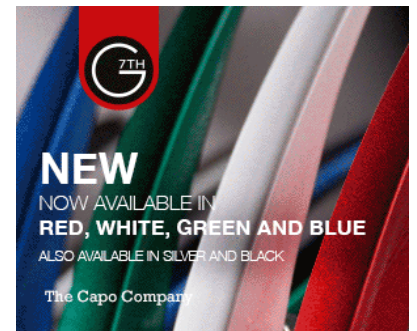
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