



Tom Doughty

Some people are lucky – they are blessed with a name that fits their personality and outlook on life absolutely perfectly. According to the Cambridge Dictionary – the word ‘doughty’ means ‘determined, brave and unwilling ever to admit defeat.’ Tom Doughty would certainly agree with that, apart from the ‘brave’ bit – he has no patience with the notion of ‘bravery’ in terms of dealing with the teenage motorbike smash that left him wheelchair-bound and with restricted use of his hands. Chatting after his afternoon workshop at the Nantwich Museum as part of their annual jazz and blues festival, Tom calmly but firmly states his case about the physical aspect of his life as a gigging musician and teacher. ‘I’m not looking for sympathy, I’m absolutely not, and nor are my audience looking to offer it. Any media interest in me always wants to dwell on the ... irrelevant stuff, and it is irrelevant. No one wonders about Stevie Wonder’s musical ability because he is blind, or Itzhak

Perlman, the concert violinist, who has spina bifida – it’s not what matters at all. They have no interest in whether or not I am “a hero”, or “brave”, or “a problem solver” or even just a guy in a wheelchair. They are only interested in how good I am as a musician. The buck stops – and starts – there.’

So let’s turn to the relevant stuff, then – Tom’s life as a touring musician and a teacher of slide guitar, and his quest to open up the potential of the instrument for anyone who wants to see where it can go. Tom outlines his initial conversation with a new pupil. ‘I always start by asking them what sort of player they are looking to become. That means finding out if the person wants to be a solo player, or play in a band, or just play at home for their own entertainment. That initial conversation opens up an interesting dialogue because a lot of people come along to their first lesson without having really thought about what kind of player they would like to be, and that

really is fundamental in terms of what and how I teach each person that comes for lessons. Learning an instrument is a journey and it should never end, unless you choose to end it, or you are made to end it by circumstances.’

Tom’s own time as a standard guitar player ended with his accident, but he has taught himself his own unique slide style which allows him to tour and record. It’s a learning journey which he continues to enjoy. ‘In a couple of my recent gigs I have happened across a little trill which I am using – it gives me two new things. Firstly, it gives me a double-speed note, and secondly, especially when I play the National resonator guitar, it gives me far more tone and resonance. It’s not even a fingerboard action, it’s done by rotating the wrist one way then the other, while pulling the elbow.’

So what does Tom see as the appeal of the slide guitar? His reply comes with the enthusiasm he brings to his playing. ‘It’s the endless abilities and styles that you

can play with a slide guitar. I believe it has no boundaries or musical labels. Other people may label how and what I play – that’s fine for them – I am just trying to find the size of the musical medium, and I haven’t found any boundaries yet. I think it’s partly because when I was growing up my taste and influences were very very wide.’

What about a favourite guitar from his collection? ‘I really don’t have a favourite. I have around 20 guitars and I have been collecting them for about 20 years or so. For me, the great thing about instruments of a certain age is that they each have an individual voice, which makes favouritism difficult. I think that each instrument has its own strengths, and that by playing it you will be drawn to those strengths, for a particular style of music, or even just for a particular song. I gig regularly with the three guitars I have played today – a 1930 Hollow Neck National Tricone; the second is a Bear Creek Weissenborn copy, that’s about eight or nine years old,

and it's getting better by the week; the third guitar is one I had built for me by a guy in New Hampshire called Eric Solomon, who builds jazz guitars. It's a real Cadillac of a guitar; it's all whistles and bells. It has a bottom end to die for, and a real growling raw sound. It lacks the finesse of the sound of the Bear Creek Weissenborn but it is a fantastic-sounding guitar.'

Let's talk about the techniques needed to master the art of slide guitar. It's apparent from Tom's conversation that although the craft has similarities with its mainstream partner, the differences are considerable and need to be understood and embraced at an early stage. Tom explains: 'If you want to learn to play slide guitar you need to develop a really good ear, because you are playing an instrument that has no frets, and limitless pitch, so you need to have it where you want it to be. A good guitar will tell you when you are right on the note; you can feel it every time.'

'The first thing you need to familiarise yourself with on a slide guitar, whether it's on your lap, as I play, or with a bottleneck, is the change in sustain. If you put your slide or bottleneck onto the neck of the guitar the sustain alters, which you usually control with your fingers on the frets. The other



aspect to get to grips with is the pitch, and that again is normally done by the frets, but you have to learn where your pitch changes are without the aid of a fret to help you. The third and most important difference is that there is a direct relationship between your two hands as you play. On a standard guitar you hold down a string on the fret, and your playing hand reacts to that fret and finger action. With a slide guitar, that doesn't happen. There are an infinite number of changes you can make in the tone from the direction and force with which you pluck a string, and the force and direction you use with the slide, and that interaction has to be mastered if you are ever going to be able to

play slide guitar effectively.'

In addition to the valuable advice from a teacher, players should always remember that interaction with other musicians is always valuable, and most important of all, it's free. Tom is in full agreement. 'I believe that I have always learnt more in an environment where I can sit with other like-minded people and just play, and listen, and watch. If I won the lottery, I would hire a large list of great players to come to my house so we could sit around and just talk, and play music, and that would be my perfect learning environment.'

New converts to Tom Doughty's style and technique can enjoy his work through his two albums, *Running Free* and *Have A Taste Of This*, both recorded on a budget, which meant that space for Tom to play was limited – which was workable, if not ideal. Tom is as philosophical about budgetary limitations as he is about everything else in life. 'If the budget doesn't permit, then you have to go with what you can get. In an ideal situation I would record in a nice big room, put ambient mics in to pick up the room sound, and not have my guitar mic too close so it didn't record all the pick and slide sounds, but that wasn't available. You need a room for recording to be "live" or "dead", and in this case



the "dead" room was the option.'

It's time for Tom to head for home after the workshop, which lasted several hours in a small and rather hot room in the Nantwich Museum. Tom is pleased that even allowing for the temperature, and the additional distractions provided by other venues around the town, he kept the majority of his audience through to the end. Tiredness is creeping into his voice and his eyes, but his sense of wit remains as awake as ever. 'It was a long time, and it was hot in the room as well, and they can only focus on me, there is no one else to look at. Add to that the fact that I don't do fingerstyle or plectrum playing because I can't do that, I'm pleased that people stayed through to the end. I am tired, but hey, I'm still ready for a bottle of whisky and five loose women ... On second thoughts, you'd better make that a nice cup of tea and a ginger nut!'

Andy Hughes

Live Review – Tom Doughty At The Museum, Nantwich. 23rd April 2011



Slide guitarist Tom Doughty possesses a level of communication with his audience that is by no means limited to his guitar playing. By the time he plays Randy Newman's 'Real Emotional Girl' he has created an atmosphere of intense concentration – it would almost be possible to hear the proverbial pin drop. It is the required skill of the acoustic musician to create a bond of intimacy with his audience, and Doughty has learnt this aspect of his craft well. It feels like a large collection of friends have called round to Tom's place for a chat and some songs, and that kind of rapport works perfectly in the intimate surroundings of today's venue.

As a technician, Doughty has overcome the limitations placed on him by the loss of dexterity after a serious road accident and replaced them with a set

of customised skills that make his slide playing never less than fascinating. Ironically, the limited use of one hand, and virtual absence of use in the other, has made the intricacy of his playing even more pronounced and delicate than it otherwise might have been.

Tom Doughty, like a lot of acoustic musicians before him, has never been afraid to use his music to provide some pretty direct social commentary through his lyrics. This has apparently led to emails from President Robert Mugabe's 'people' asking that Doughty cease playing his song 'Zimbabwe' which they had found on YouTube, which referred to the president as a 'killing machine'. The kind of spirit that would place a lyric like that in a song is unlikely to be dissuaded from playing it to his audiences on the basis that some people take exception – and so it proved, with the atmosphere of ringing social injustice present in both vocal and guitar delivery this afternoon.

The juxtaposition of such committed political comment alongside a wonderfully sweet instrumental version of Hall And Oates' 'Every Time You Go Away' is what makes Tom Doughty such an interesting performer; the alternately rousing and reflective aspects of his music mean that there is something for everyone to enjoy today.

The breadth of styles that Tom Doughty can play

and sing is considerable, with material from Tom Waits and Ry Cooder being given attention, as well as his own compositions, including 'Maggie's Pies', an instrumental which showcases his personal technical skills as a slide player.

Taking requests, a sublime slide standard, Santo and Johnny's 'Sleepwalk', was given the individual Doughty treatment, as was the soul gem 'I Heard It Through The Grapevine' which rounded off proceedings. Altogether, this was an intriguing insight into the craft of slide guitar, delivered by a musician whose ability really should ensure that his concert and recording audiences are bigger than at present. A visit to any of Tom Doughty's performances should provide proof, if any is still required.

