

FEATURES

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The gospel according to Tommy

Legendary Australian fingerstyle guitarist Tommy Emmanuel talks of the sacrifices made in his near-religious devotion to music

BY **P.D. BAILEY**
STAFF REPORTER

Tommy Emmanuel's *Live One*, is a masterpiece of what is called "fingerstyle guitar," the technique of playing a guitar by plucking the strings directly with the fingers rather than using a pick to play individual notes or to strum.

Called "one of the greatest guitar players on the planet," by the late great Chet Atkins, and named Best Acoustic Guitarist in a readers' poll by *Guitar Player Magazine* earlier this year, Emmanuel appears in Taipei tomorrow night at the Armed Forces Cultural Center (國華文藝活動中心). To understand his music, it's necessary to start with his roots — his musical roots.

Emmanuel's conversion to the gospel of fingerstyle came in his native Australia when he was 7.

"In 1962 I heard Chet Atkins on the radio and nearly did a dive out of the car onto the road," he says in a telephone interview from his home in Nashville, Tennessee on Wednesday of last week.

Emmanuel taught himself how to play guitar, mostly from recordings of Atkins and other country players like Jerry Reed. But even he has trouble explaining how he was able to do it.

"Have you ever heard of Ikea furniture?" he asks. "You know, the furniture that you put together yourself. Don't ask me to put a

chair together. I wouldn't have a clue how to do it. But I can hear how to play two songs at once. That's how my brain works," Emmanuel says.

Coincidentally, the story of Emmanuel's conversion to Atkins is much like the one Atkins experienced at 10 discovering his mentor, country legend Merle Travis. Emmanuel obviously takes the job of spreading the gospel of Atkins and Travis very seriously.

"I've been writing songs since I was 9 years old, and I'm 53 years old now," he says. "And it's so important to me in the last 10 years that I've written songs that part of them sound like ... a Merle Travis tune. And I do that on purpose to keep the roots of what I'm doing firmly in Travis, in Chet [Atkins] and Jerry Reed."

But Emmanuel does not merely recreate the music of his heroes.

"If you go back to the *Endless Road* album and listen to a song called *Son of a Gun* you'll find that the first part of it sounds like a Travis tune, and then the bridge section sounds a bit like Stevie Wonder," he says. "So I'm trying to keep the roots in the old school but bring ideas that will catch younger ears."

Emmanuel also seems to have a keen sense of how an artist's personality affects his art.

"If you want to know something about Merle Travis, listen to his music because his personality, and I think his personal beliefs, all came through in his music," he says.

"I liked the way he thought. He said if your life all goes to shit, and your woman leaves you, and your heart is broken, and you're not doing real well ... He says, 'Go and buy yourself a new Cadillac, find yourself a pretty girl and go get yourself a new suit — one of those real fancy western suits — and dress yourself up and pick yourself up.' And Travis did that all the time," Emmanuel says.

Emmanuel, who keeps an exhaustive touring schedule that will take him from Bangkok to Moscow to Munich, among other cities, and back to his native Australia before the year ends, finds inspiration not only in his musical heroes, but in just about anyone else.

"I get inspired wherever I go ... on my early album *Only* I put a message on there and the message was simple: My inspiration [comes from] the people I meet in the places I go," he says. "It may be a taxi driver. It may be a waiter. It may be a policeman. It may be an airline pilot. You never know who you're going to meet and the stories they're going to have. And a lot of my songs ... in fact probably 90 percent of my music was written on



Tommy Emmanuel, named Best Acoustic Guitarist in a *Guitar Player* magazine readers' poll earlier this year, appears in Taipei tomorrow night at the Armed Forces Cultural Center. PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOMMY EMMANUEL

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— Tommy Emmanuel, guitarist

the road, either at an airport or on a bus or waiting for a bus or waiting for a train ... I'm always on the move. And so my music has a bit of momentum about it, too."

That momentum can be seen in the positive energy Emmanuel radiates during his live performances, playing a road-worn guitar sometimes like a piano, sometimes like a drum kit and sometimes as simple accompaniment to his singing. (The first time I listened to *Live One*, I would have guessed I was listening to an orchestra rather than one man playing a six-string guitar in a live performance.) But Emmanuel has said that he never uses a set list and always tries to interact with the audience.

"Look, I'm a people person. I love people so much. And I could care less if the room is full of musicians ... As long as people come along who need a fix ... who need to get taken away from their life experience and go into another realm where there's joy and where there's peace and surprise and happiness. And that's where I take people when I play," he says.

"People say to me, 'What do you do for a living?' And I say, 'I'm in the happiness business. I play music and people get happy,'" he says.

But Emmanuel admits that his fame and accomplishments are the

product of sacrifice.

"In all honesty, my life is a dilemma," he says. "I live within a dilemma at all times. I love my children very much and I wish I could be with them, but I'm called to play the guitar ... I love being [at] my home in America. But I can't be there often because I'm called to play the guitar."

"But let me tell you, everything comes with a price," he says. "The amount of hard work that I've put in to get somewhere in this life and to honor my gift, it comes at such a personal price. Two marriages ended because I wasn't there. [There has been] a lot of emotional upheaval in my life. But it formed a lot of great music, you know. Sometimes you feel like you just want to scream and stop and say, 'No more. I'm finished.' But then you go out and have a show and it changes people's lives. And you go, 'Goddamn it, I got to keep doing this.'"

Emmanuel's philosophy about his art is surprisingly simple.

"I'm so crystal clear on this: It's my job to do the best I can — nothing more, nothing less — just go out and do it and have a great time ... and just stay out of the way of God's work. 'Let him do the work, you just play the best you can,'" he says.

Amen. Preach, brother.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Tommy Emmanuel
WHERE: Armed Forces Cultural Center (國華文藝活動中心), 69, Zhonghua Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市中華路一段69號)
WHEN: Tomorrow at 7:30pm
TICKETS: NT\$600 to NT\$2,000, available through ERA ticketing
ON THE NET: www.tommyemmanuel.com