

THE PROG INTERVIEW

GORDON GILTRAP

Every month we get inside the mind of one of the biggest names in music. This issue it's **Gordon Giltrap**. The British guitarist and songwriter made his mark on London's folk music scene in the 60s, performing alongside Bert Jansch and Mike Oldfield, and released his self-titled debut in 1968. But within the space of a few years, he quickly found a welcome audience in the world of prog. Since then, he's enjoyed a lengthy career collaborating with members of Fairport Convention, Soft Machine, The Who and both Rick and Oliver Wakeman. His latest multimedia project, *Scattered Chapters*, finds him collaborating with keyboard player Paul Ward and *Harry Potter* film scorer Nick Hooper. He takes *Prog* on a journey through his past, present and into his plans for the future.

Words: Mike Barnes

Gordon Giltrap is one of the most respected and influential guitarists of his generation. Ritchie Blackmore has proclaimed him "One of the best acoustic players in the world" and even Jimmy Page has cited him as a major influence.

Born in 1948, Giltrap became a highly regarded teenage singer-songwriter and guitarist on the London folk circuit, signing to the Transatlantic label and releasing his self-titled debut in 1968. By his third album, 1971's *A Testament Of Time*, arranger Del Newman's strings had given his work a more orchestral feel and after *Giltrap* (1973) he switched from being the lead singer to making instrumental music. Although a latecomer to progressive rock, Giltrap made his name in that genre – and proved that it was not killed off by punk – by recording a landmark trilogy of albums: *Visionary* (1976),

Perilous Journey (1977) and *Fear Of The Dark* (1978), as part of a prog supergroup playing electric and acoustic guitar with former Caravan bass guitarist John G Perry, drummer Simon Phillips and keyboardist Rod Edwards. He



A true visionary! A cheerful Giltrap with staff at the offices of Decca in January 1977.

GRANT GODDARD/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

scored a hit single in 1977 with *Heartsong*, which was nominated for an Ivor Novello award.

Thereafter Giltrap turned his attention towards soundtrack and library music and, in 1995, released *Music For The Small Screen*, a compilation of pieces made for television. He's worked with myriad musicians including Rick and Oliver Wakeman, Brian May, Steve Howe, Midge Ure and

Neil Murray, Fairport Convention fiddler Ric Sanders, Soft Machine guitarist John Etheridge and classical guitarist Raymond Burley. He's played with symphony orchestras and contributed music and appeared onstage in Cliff

Richard's West End musical, *Heathcliff*, in 1997.

In 2009 he was also asked by instrument company JHS to design a guitar and his Vintage VE 2000 GG signature guitar was voted Acoustic Guitar Of The Year by the Music Industry Association. Gordon Giltrap has cited influences across a wide range of music and musicians,



Scattered Chapters is out now.

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including Bert Jansch, Pete Townshend, Julian Bream and English Renaissance composer and lutenist John Dowland. He was thrilled to be invited to play on The Who's *Who* album released in 2019. He also runs guitar workshops and in the New Year Honours of 2019 received an MBE "for services to music and charity".

Giltrap first collaborated with keyboard player Paul Ward on *The Last Of England* in 2017 and their second album, *Scattered Chapters*, is out now. When *Prog* caught up with Giltrap, he was still buzzing after returning from the Ullapool Guitar Festival.

What was your first guitar?

My mum bought me a Martin Coletti archtop guitar for 21 guineas. I still remember her bringing it into the house and the thrill I had of opening the canvas case and slowly taking out this sunburst thing of beauty. E minor was my first chord. I was so

PHILIP BARKER/GUITARIST/FUTURE OWNS

Gordon Giltrap: "a gift"
of a name and a very
talented musician.



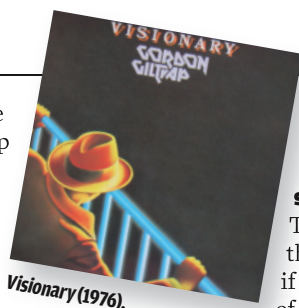
pleased – I thought, ‘Gosh, I’ve done it!’

On Starting All Over – taken from 1971’s *A Testament Of Time* – you sing, ‘Most of all my childhood I remember/Not the best of memories it’s true.’ Is that autobiographical?

Yeah, to a degree it was. When talking about those early albums I shudder with embarrassment because at the time I thought I could sing and write songs. And as a young songwriter you think you’ve gone through so much agony and suffering in life, but you haven’t.

I grew up in East Greenwich and in those days it was a pretty tough area and I wasn’t a street

kid at all. Having the name Gordon Giltrap is a gift. It looks good in print, it’s unusual, you never forget it. But when you’re a kid growing up and having the name Giltrap you’re just a target for people to take the mickey out of you. But I’m thankful I grew up in a golden age of both rock and folk music. It was an extraordinary time. In the mid-60s I used to share a residency at Les Cousins in Greek Street [in Soho] on a Wednesday night with John Martyn one week; the following week it would be me with Mike Oldfield and his sister Sally.



Visionary (1976).

And you landed a record deal with Transatlantic while still a teenager.

Transatlantic were the label to be with if you loved that kind of music. My two heroes at the time were Bert Jansch and John Renbourn, and they were on the label. I felt as though I’d arrived.

You recorded the tribute album *Janschology* in 2000. What drew you to Bert’s music?

We all wanted to be able to work out what Bert was doing. He had an original guitar technique and a maturity of playing that was just unbelievable for a young man, and his songs are works of genius. When I discovered Bert, and then John Renbourn, I didn’t know about fingerstyle, because I hadn’t seen many guitar players. Someone said that they played with their fingers or their nails and I thought, ‘Gosh, that’s novel.’ I was trying to play pieces like *Angie* with a flat pick! Then I thought, ‘How do you play two notes at the same time?’ And my little finger started to brush the adjacent string. I was using an upstroke, which gives you that clean harpsichord-type sound, and it stayed that way from the age of 17 until the age of 74. It’s an unusual two-finger technique – instead of using the thumb I use a plectrum and the little finger.

John Pearse was a guitar teacher on television in the 60s with a programme called *Hold Down A Chord*. He said, ‘Don’t you realise you’ve got the most extraordinary technique? I’ve never heard anybody sound like you. Guitar players can spend a lifetime trying to get their own sound, but you’ve got it even without thinking about it.’ That was an epiphany.

Why did you give up singing after 1973’s *Giltrap*?

Peter Robinson, who worked for Phonogram, pointed out that my strong point was my instrumental work. The term he used was, ‘When you really ring them bells.’ I’d felt like my songs were more important and somebody needed to tell me I was supposed to be an instrumental artist.

***Visionary*, released in 1976, was quite a change of style for you as it was out-and-out progressive**

rock. Was it true that you had to be cajoled into making it with a band?

Totally true. I’d got a band together, basically an early music ensemble, and the first incarnation of *Visionary* was a Baroque suite with harpsichords, crumhorns, rebec, recorders, viola da gamba and lute, although I did have a bass player on one of the compositions. When I then took those demos to [music production company] Triumvirate, they saw the potential in it for rock and I went along with it, thank goodness.

From *Visionary* onwards I had the finest production team, in the

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I said, ‘I’d like Bill Bruford on the album’ as I’ve always loved his playing. He was on tour but they said, ‘We found this great drummer. He’s only 17, his name’s Simon Phillips.’

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finest recording studio, and the finest musicians on the planet. I said, ‘I’d like Bill Bruford on the album’ as I’ve always loved his playing. He was on tour but they said, ‘We found this great drummer. He’s only 17, his name’s Simon Phillips.’ I was a bit disappointed, but when he came into the studio and started playing, I knew I was in the presence of genius. Years later I met Bill at an awards ceremony and I said, ‘Bill, I wanted you to play on my *Visionary* album, but you couldn’t do it, so I got Simon Phillips instead.’ He said, ‘Yes, damn him!’ [Laughs] Everybody knew how amazing Simon was. And John G Perry, who’s

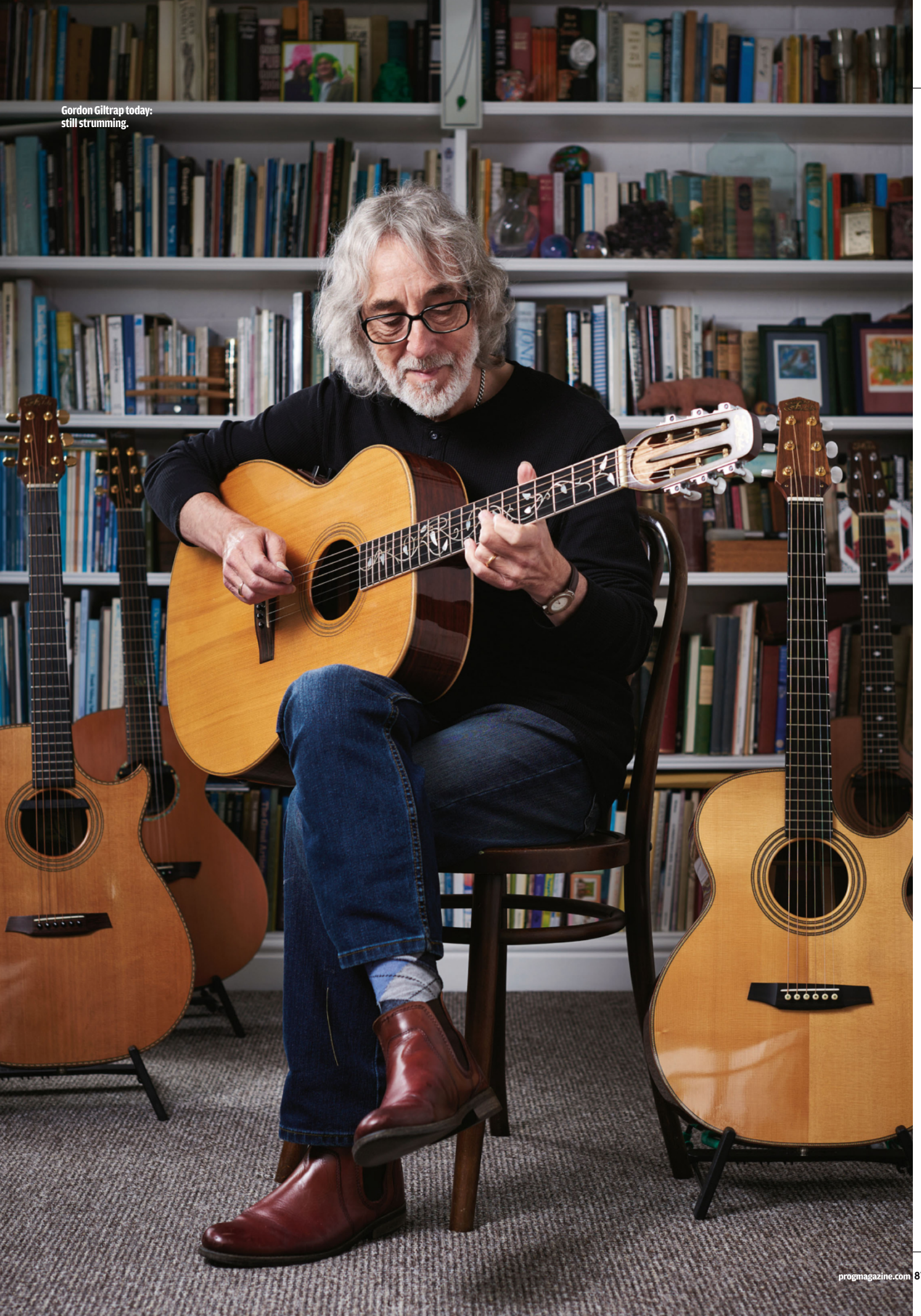


Have instrument, will travel: posing in Greenwich in 1968.

BRIAN SHUEL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

JOBY SESSIONS/GPA/FUTURE OWNS

Gordon Giltrap today:
still strumming.





Giltrap and Oliver Wakeman, who made him cry.

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a phenomenal bass player, and Rod Edwards on keyboards. On one track [producer] Roger Hand said, 'We need an electric guitar solo.' I said 'Great, who are you getting in?' I kid you not. They put a Telecaster in my hand and I realised I could do it.

It seems that you almost became a prog musician by accident. Did you like any other bands in that 70s milieu?

I was a great admirer of Yes. I loved the whole idea of these musicians being highly skilled virtuosos, coming together to create this amazing music. But I was also a huge fan of Vangelis. I was fascinated by synthesisers. There was a Japanese musician called Tomita; I love the way he approached *Firebird* and *Pictures At An Exhibition*.

And you achieved a hit single when *Heartsong* from *Perilous Journey* reached No.21 in the UK singles chart in 1977...

I always played sitting down, but when *Heartsong* broke, they said, 'Can you try and play standing up? Because it's a lot more rock'n'roll.' That's when I started to embrace the rock thing a bit more. But I made a few mistakes, like when somebody persuaded me to have my hair permed.

Visionary, *Perilous Journey* and *Fear Of The Dark* are such a strong trio of rock albums, but that phase didn't last very long.

No, it didn't. I was filling out 1,000-seater venues, selling a lot

of records. But not being a singles artist, it was very, very difficult to follow up on; I didn't have another *Heartsong* recorded. The biggest mistake I made was following it with [Fleetwood Mac's] *Oh Well*. When I asked [guitarist and composer] Peter



perilous Journey (1977).

Green in a curry house in Putney in 1981, 'What do you think my version of *Oh Well*?', he leant over, looked me in the eyes and said, 'You can't cover a classic, man.' And he was right. And after that my record company, Electric, ceased to exist, so I was left without a label.

If I'd had a more logical, rational approach to my career, I probably would have got another band together. And I would've listened to the people who were trying to give me advice. At one point Jon Miller from Triumvirate said, 'We had Jon Anderson in last week – he said he'd love to work with you.' My reply was, 'I'm not good enough to work with him,' which was my insecurity. But

I can look back and I had the chops. I used to practise for 18 hours a day to get that good.

You then recorded an album called *The Peacock Party*, which was based on an illustrated book, the follow-up to *The Butterfly Ball And The Grasshopper's Feast*. Was there any connection with the 1975 Roger Glover album of that same name?

There was a sort of connection because [artist] Alan Aldridge illustrated the book of *The Butterfly Ball*... [and] he was doing a new book called *The Peacock Party*. He loved what Roy Edwards and Roger Hand and Triumvirate did with their version of *The Butterfly Ball* [also released in 1975, on Decca]. He preferred that to the Roger Glover one. So he approached them and said, 'Look, I've got a new book coming out. I love what you did with that. Wouldn't it be great if you could set this to music?' And they said,

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I made a few mistakes, like when somebody persuaded me to have my hair permed.

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'We're working with this guy called Gordon Giltrap. Is it okay if we go along those lines?'

People regard *The Peacock Party* as a groundbreaking album. But I was just going back to the music I loved – acoustic guitar with classical and Baroque influences. So it was more esoteric, although I had some great players on it. And then as time goes on, your personal life comes into play: my marriage fell apart, my mother



The Peacock Party (1979).



Giltrap with his latest musical collaborators, Nick Hooper and Paul Ward.

GORDON GILTRAP ARCHIVE

died. John Lennon said, 'Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans.' That's true and I never fully recovered career-wise from that.

I got a band together in 1983-84 with [winds player] Binbo Acock and Clive Bunker on drums. I had some lovely little bands, but it was small-time stuff. And then suddenly I couldn't afford to keep a band together and I ended up doing folk clubs for a pittance.

Heartsong was eventually used as theme music to the BBC programme *Holiday* and then your music was used on ITV's *Wish You Here*. What did it feel like to hear yourself on television every week?

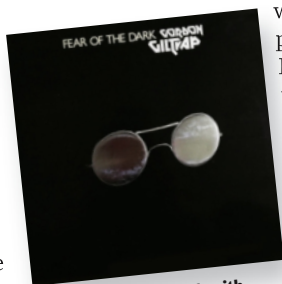
It felt fantastic, to be honest. It was a good feeling because every time a piece of music was playing, you knew you could pay the mortgage.

You've played with Iron Maiden drummer Nicko McBrain. They called their 1992 album *Fear Of The Dark* and their logo uses the same font you used in the 70s. Is that a coincidence?

Nicko is an old friend of mine, and played on the *Giltrap* album. In fact, he nearly joined the Giltrap band. We didn't invent that font, but we used it from 1975 onwards. Yeah, Iron Maiden liked it. They also liked that title. I was quite flattered, really.

One of your favourite albums is *Troubadour* (1998), which featured arrangements by Del Newman, who you first worked with in the early 70s. What makes it so special?

Troubadour is one of the highest points of my career after the prog stuff because I was at the height of my powers as a composer. My guitar work was recorded in my house in Solihull with a pickup on the guitar as I didn't have an external microphone and I was recording everything to DAT. Every piece is a complete take without drop-ins. I had to get it right from start to finish. So at the end of 17 takes of *Down The River* I'd have a splitting headache! I took it to Del and he loved the sound. We copied the individual tracks onto a multitrack.



Fear Of The Dark (1978), with a font beloved by Iron Maiden.



Giltrap and his touring band *Strange Days* rehearsing circa 1976. L-R: Dave Ward, Giltrap, Phil Walman, Graham Ward and Eddie Spence.

CEMS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

It has some of the finest classical musicians in the country playing on it: double string quartet with a flute and French horn. And it was a masterpiece because of Del's arrangements. He produced it, he arranged it and he said to me, 'I was determined for your guitar not to be buried.' I love what he did.

You've played with Rick Wakeman and collaborated with him on the 2009 album *From Brush And Stone*. What's he like to work with?

I have to say that it was a real thrill and an honour to work with Rick. We've been friends a long time. He does all the synth stuff, but he really shines when he plays piano. I spent several months working out guitar parts to his pieces and I'm ever so proud of them. Rick works very quickly. I think he spent about three days in all working on my tracks. I don't think there's a weak moment in those piano and guitar duets. I was determined to make it really good as he's worked with brilliant guitarists like Steve Howe and Trevor Rabin.

You've also worked with Oliver Wakeman. How do their musical styles compare?

Oliver can't help it as genetically he's going to play like his dad. He's not ashamed of that, he says,



Giltrap's collaboration with Oliver Wakeman, *Ravens & Lullabies*.

'It's just the way I play,' and that's the reason why he was the perfect replacement for Rick in Yes.

And you recorded *Ravens And Lullabies* with him in 2013. How did that come about?

I thought it would be nice to do something really proggy. So I asked Oliver. I'd played with him on one of Rick's shows and we got on well. I knew how highly regarded was, but I didn't know that he was a brilliant songwriter, a brilliant arranger and that he was completely au fait with Pro Tools to technically make this stuff work, as we had a small budget. I didn't know what a perfectionist he is.

He kept coming up with his ideas and at times I found it a real challenge. In fact, once in rehearsal, I broke down crying. I said, 'I can't do this, I can't keep up.' He probably thought, 'I'm working with a madman here!' [Laughs] It was, at times, agonising for me to try and keep up with Oliver because I didn't want to let him down and I have my reputation. But I did it. I calmed down a bit and I've great memories of working with him. All that was an absolute joy.

Your most recent album, *Scattered Chapters*, with keyboard player Paul Ward, seems to encompass your solo folk and early music styles – and it also harks back to your prog era. Plus your old pal, Marillion drummer Ian Mosley, guests on it.

I've also gone full circle having Ron Edwards play keyboards on it. In the 70s I was the support act to a band called Darryl Way's Wolf. John Etheridge and Ian Mosley were in the band and they are still two of my dearest friends. I know Paul Ward regards Ian Mosley as one of the greatest drummers in the world and the work he did on *The Peacock Party* was immaculate. I said that I couldn't afford to pay him for playing on the album and he said: 'Just send some biscuits through or something.'

Scattered Chapters starts with *Starfield*. I bought a guitar from a car boot sale, a cheap Squire Strat that has a lovely neck on it and a lovely sound, and I went into my studio that day and wrote it in 20 minutes. The album has got my love of Irish music, with uilleann pipes player John Devine on *The Wounded Healer* and *Heartsong*. His playing is fantastic – I was very lucky to find him.

It's going to be a very difficult album to follow for personal reasons. I wrote the piece *The Melody Weaver's Son* in memory of Del Newman as he was like a father figure. And as time went on it occurred to me that it's also about me and my late son, Jamie. They're very powerful influences to put into a piece of music. But it's got a feeling of hope. There's also no hidden agenda, like: 'Somebody might like this,' or 'I hope the guitar players will like this,' or 'I hope it sells a million copies and I can retire.' It's music purely for its own sake. 🕊

Scattered Chapters is out now on CD via *Psychotron* and in book format via *Wymer Publishing*. See www.giltrap.co.uk for more information.