



# Kit Holmes



*"I always see myself as an acoustic artist, a contemporary acoustic artist"*



Chris Nickson talks to rising acoustic star **Kit Holmes**, and finds out how she views herself as an artist, her take on touring, and why she loves her Taylor.

**K**it Holmes is one of the rising stars of acoustic music. Her album, *Seeing You*, garnered great reviews on its arrival, and she's been touring extensively with guitar legend John Etheridge. She's made a lot of friends along the way, and shown that she's a fretboard talent to be taken very seriously.

Although she seems to have come out of nowhere, Holmes has actually been working for a number of years to reach this level. It all began when "I did the violin at school, like a lot of kids do, and then the opportunity came up to do the guitar. I started playing when I was 11, doing a bit of classical, but I've always had an interest in lots of different guitar styles. I've always enjoy acoustic music, people like John Renbourn and Bert Jansch, and Leo Kottke is probably my favourite guitarist, I absolutely adore his stuff."

She turned briefly to electric guitar as a teenager, putting in some time in "a rocky girl band," before the siren call of acoustic music lured her back. From there she spent four years in the acoustic guitar duo Dark Lantern, which toured extensively and released one full-length CD and an EP before morphing into the more dance-y Osaka. The whole time she's been honing the skills, as both singer and instrumentalist, that define her solo career.

"I see it all as a development, not a change," she explains. "It's mostly been acoustic music, although I don't play as much fiddle, although on the new single, 'No You No Me', I do play strings, in a much simpler kind of way. I've always seen myself as a guitarist and a singer, not just a singer accompanying myself. In the set that I do there's as much emphasis in the instrumental stuff as the songs, which is true on the album, too."

*Seeing You* stands as a showcase of Holmes' breadth. There are casually poppy tunes like 'Cheapflights', smokier songs, and plenty of instrumentals that capture her ability, with several appearances by legendary bassist Danny Thompson. It's an excellent disc, but it highlights one of the problems she faces - you can't easily pigeonhole Kit Holmes.

"I'm not a pop artist and I'm not a folk artist," she admits. "I always see myself as an acoustic artist,

a contemporary acoustic artist, in the sense it's not traditional folk. I do realise it might be difficult to market, but I think there are a lot of people who might be into that out there. If you don't have a big record label behind you, it's a long process. But also they don't drop you tomorrow when people don't go out and buy your record. Still, now there are clubs springing up that might be more acoustic-based. A younger generation is taking over what would have been a folk club."

Her big break, touring with Etheridge, came about by sheer luck "because he played at a big guitar conference in Leeds. He stopped behind to watch everyone after his own concert, which was sold out and amazing. We got talking, and the suggestion came about that maybe I'd go out on tour with him. At first I was a bit dubious, I had to wonder if it would work. I think it works because his set isn't as jazz-orientated as you might think. He does a lot of stuff like Django Reinhardt and more popular stuff, but most of the set is blues and rock. I go on and do the first 40 minutes, then he does an hour and a quarter, then we do a couple of duets at the end of the show, which finishes it off quite nicely. It's been a big success. We've done 27 dates in 2006, and there will be a lot more in 2007. It's quite a varied audience, too."

Her appearance and chops onstage often take people by surprise. Even in these more enlightened times, many people are still taken aback by a female guitarist.

"People are a bit shocked, because maybe I don't look like I play guitar the way I do. In a guitar shop when I start playing there's quite a number of sideways glances. We do get females at the guitar workshops before the gigs. Because people see it's a female doing the workshop, it attracts a person who might have been scared off by a virtuoso like John. There aren't many females on acoustic guitar, which would be nice to change. I can think of quite a few classical players who are fantastic like Sharon Isbin, but no acoustic guitarists."

But Holmes is out to change that idea, and she loves her instruments. "I've got quite a few guitars - and I like to play them all onstage! The one that

generally gets asked about the most is my Baby Martin. It's got a huge sound, no-one can believe it when I play it. Then I have a Taylor, that's a 314E cutaway. I tried the Taylor Baby when I was looking for a Baby, but I liked the Martin better. The full size Taylor is very versatile. You can pick on it or strum, and you always get a really good sound. I've got a Martin 00016, which is a beautiful guitar, lovely for fingerpicking, a brilliant sound to it. And I've also got a Takamine nylon-string guitar. Those are the ones I tend to play. I use pedals with all the guitars. I've just got a new Boss Loop Station and I've been working with it - I can spend hours messing around with that, and I also use a Line 6, which you can use as a loop or delay. I plug everything into Baggs' Guitar System." And, like every guitarist, she has her own little tuning tricks. "I use open D tuning, and I tend to take that down to C#, which gives you that extra edge. That works well on the baby guitar, which is a bit of a trick when it sounds so deep and sonorous. Most of the time I just play in concert pitch."

She's at the stage where she's ready to make the leap into headlining her own shows, and she had a few in 2006, "one of them at the Purcell Room, with the International Guitar Festival, and that was fantastic. That can be one route, when you're part of the festival, with quite a large audience. I'm doing the Acoustic Festival of Great Britain in the Wirral with John. And I've got more solo gigs in the spring, but it's a slow process, I'll be bringing out another album in 2007, and with the exposure I'm hoping that'll find an audience. In two years I'd like to be playing the venues I do with John, but on my own. Not alone though, with a band, a trio, that would be nice."

And finally, does she ever see herself as a big star? "In a word, no," she answers, quite happily. "What I do isn't mainstream, because of the acoustic contemporary guitar stuff. I don't mind that. I prefer small things, if you will."

**Chris Nickson**

