In Between Days

He had a unique talent that placed him in the same breaths as Davey Graham and John Renbourn, and his debut album remains supernaturally strong, yet Dave Evans never managed to break out of the provincial folk scene.

Maybe, at 30, he was too old when he started, and too young when he released his fourth and final album aged only 35. Maybe playing a challenging instrumental on The Old Grey Whistle Test wasn’t the smartest promotional move. Or maybe he simply wasn’t interested in fame.

Michael Björn talks to friend and musician Steve Tilston, and producers/label owners Stefan Grossman and Ian A. Anderson to discover more about an unsung troubadour.

Portrait by Richard Walker
Born in Bangor in Wales in December 1940, Dave Evans joined The Merchant Navy after school, and spent five years as Third Mate on a cargo ship travelling across the high seas. He went to Loughborough Art College in '63, where he would later also run a local folk club.

"The first time I saw Dave he was harmonising the musician singing about this murderer who's about to be hanged," remembers Dave's early musical companion and friend Steve Tilston. "I thought, what on earth is this?" Dave was performing 'Sam Hall', a traditional song initially released as a single by Tex Ritter back in 1955 and recorded by Johnny Cash in '65. But now it was '67. Steve was 17 and the nine years older Dave Evans was about to book Steve for a performance at the folk club. "We just hit it off. I met some limitless guys who had literally been around the world. He had these great tales..." says Steve. "We were both Welsh as well. My dad's Welsh. And I think his mum was Welsh."

Another early favourite song was 'Mole's Moon' by American folk-blues singer and guitarist, Gruff Rhys - although Dave called it 'Mooch's Moon' and had heard it in Morocco. "David made it into this sweet piece, and it was just fast," says Steve. When Steve turned 18 he left home and moved in with Dave and his girlfriend Barbara in their flat on Cobden Street. "We spent the whole-time playing guitars and cooking curries," remembers Steve who started practicing guitar aged 12 and learnt curry cooking from his dad. But although Dave was older, he first picked up a guitar in his 20s, so they were both equally unskilled.

There were many clubs in those days, and they would tour Leicester and down to Northamptonshire and up to Northumberland as a duo, with Dave taking on lead guitar. Dave had the rare ability to immediately make friends wherever he went. "He just exuded a love of life and love of music," says Steve. "Quite a special guy." Dave soon developed a large network of contacts, and through those bands there was a competition at The Nottingham Playhouse. "There was every kind of folk singer and, and then there was Dave and I," says Steve. "We came last. But this guy came up and said we should have won. It was Wiz Jones!"

With financing from his mother, Dave had set up a pottery after having finished art college. But in '69, he decided to make his own guitars, and borrowed John Bailey's well-known book about guitar building at the library. "Wherever Dave turned his hand to something, it was always done so well," says Steve. "The guitar he built was no different. Instead of making a Martin or Gibson style guitar, he built something more akin to a classical guitar - but for steel strings. "It was very quickly," comments Steve. "Everything Dave did was quite quirky, that was his sort of genius, really." As if to prove that point, the next guitar Dave built resembled a box... Steve then moved to London to try to become a professional musician while Dave got a job as a designer at Hinton Pottery in Devon. Through Wiz Jones, Steve got to know many musicians at the famous London folk club, Cosey Taito, and as it happened, the most famous folk club outside London was The Troubadour in Bristol, remembered in the song 'Clifton In The Rain' by Al Stewart, to whom the club was almost like a second home. More or less run out of The Troubadour, Jan A Anderson had started a label called The Village Thing at the end of the '60s. Wiz Jones had recommended Steve Tilston to get in touch with, says Ian who set Steve up for a gig. "Funny enough, that was on the night of the very first Glastonbury Festival," remembers Ian. "We were all down there during the day because we were playing, and then we had to rush back to the club in the evening for Steve to do his set."

Steve was offered to make an album and wanted to get Dave to play on it. By chance he bumped into a school friend of Dave's in London, who knew which village Dave was living in. "We just decided to drive down and knock on a few doors," says Steve. "And the first door we knocked on, the guy sort of said, 'Yeah, let's three doors down.' - we had no idea who Dave Evans was, remembers Ian. "But 'yeah, of course. If you want to do that..." Dave was brought along, and as always, everyone instantly liked him. "Dave played some of his stuff in the club and we were bowled over."

"We did the recording in the wilds of Gloucestershire in a frozen farmhouse in the depth of winter," remembers Steve. "Not only was the building primitive, the Village Thing recording facility was also fairly limited. "But we had unlimited time, so it kind of worked," says Ian. "The resulting album, An Acoustic Confession, released in the early spring of '75 sounds quite remarkable, while benefiting greatly from the subtle guitar interplay with Dave Evans as well as his harmony vocals.

By mid-'71, Dave Evans had moved to Bristol, landed a job as a road inspector and, like many folk musicians, had a residency at The Troubadour. The original owner had left for Australia, and the nightclub owner who took over wanted more money than a music club that wasn't licensed to sell alcohol generated. "Friday night there was a rata of all the well-known people who lived in Bristol; myself, Keith Christmas, Sheleigh McDonald, Al Jones," explains Ian. "Everyone would take turns and not take a fee in order to boost the owner's profits. However, recording an album wasn't really in Dave's plans. "We persuaded him," says Ian. "He didn't sing for it. We said, 'Dave, you have to make a record.' And he said, 'Oh, really? Oh, okay, I suppose so.'" Ian thought the makeshift studio that Steve Tilston had recorded in would be too rigid for Dave Evans. "Dave would be much more comfortable in some way that was completely informal, so we set the equipment up in my flat in Bristol," comments Ian. The rooms had nice acoustics, and two good quality microphones were hooked up to a home reel-to-reel tape recorder. "Dave's guitar sounded wonderful," says Ian. "And it just really, really, worked. You can say that again. The resulting album, Words In Nouns, is one of those albums that makes you stop in your tracks the first time you hear it."

Although Dave Evans, according to Ian, sold more records back in the day, modern listeners will instinctively want to compare him with (respectively) era-defining artist Nick Drake. "All press reviewers always mention Nick Drake, and Dave nothing like Nick Drake," says Ian, clearly upset about this. "The only comparison I would make is with Joe Boyd, who produced the Nick Drake records, explains why Nick gets deserved fuss all the time: "His music is so individual, the recordings are good, and because it's not of the style that's associated with the particular era."

In other words, listening to Nick Drake or Dave Evans today is not about nostalgia. It is about experiencing something profound in the here and now.

Dave belonged to the school of folk music originating with Davey Graham's DADGAD tuning, and continuing with the light fingers of Bert Jansch, John Renbourn and the baroque folk of Pentangle. But Dave had his own approach. "At the '60s went on, people got a little finkier. Michael Chapman was using alpine, like, open-tune power chords, but finger picks, you know? Dave was definitely funky, the way he hit those bass strings," explains Ian. "Dave was completely original. He sounded like himself. There were two particular elements, one of which was the odd guitar. The other is the tunings that he used."

Additionally, an influence Dave very much kept from the original folk scene was the ability to play and sing even the most complex songs live, whether in front of an audience, or in the improvised setting of his living room. "I forget how long we took recording Dave's album, but it probably wasn't more than two or three evenings," says Ian. "I doubt if we would
ever have done more than a couple of takes. It wasn't needed.

Although a relative newcomer to Bristol, the release of Words In Between established Dave Evans as a central figure. "Dave kind of quietly became our guru," says Ian. "We looked up to him because he had life experience, and we would defer to him." He was somewhat older, had a stable relationship with Barbara (who appears on the album's back cover), a charming overweight Labrador dog called Corey, and was an excellent cook to boot. "They were a normal family unit," says Ian. "But he was very laid back, which didn't help his music career in the end." Despite the releasing success of his debut album, Dave wanted to experiment and not repeat the formula for follow-up Elephant Dance. He bought a tape deck, and played around with multitracked double-speed guitar, eventually resulting in the title track of the album. It was a little Sony reel to reel, which had two speeds," says Ian. "We took the tapes and dubbed them off to the studio." Dave's interest in trying new things however gives the band a band. With Village Thing, you got to record what you wanted to do," explains Ian. "It wasn't dictated by the label. He wanted to do this.

The Village Thing shared offices with musician/producers Plastic Dogs and their designer Rodney Matthews who made the Elephants coat also drummed in a prog rock band, so they ended up playing on the record. "Dave never really gelled in a band," says Ian. "The band tracks are okay, but they were not a future for him."

Lyrically, Dave Evans often wrote about everyday life. While deceptively trivial, there is an almost anthropological attention to detail in some of the texts. "He was a good observer," concludes Ian while explaining that Dave's job as a road inspection took him all around the area where he lived. Although he soon found ways to cut road corners and get his inspection job done in only three hours per day, it gave him the opportunity to wander around, observe people and see them regularly. "On the wonderful St. Agnes Park," he is putting himself in the position of the old guy who always sat on the bench in the park, reminiscing," says Ian by way of example.

After the second album, Dave joined a band called Canton Trig who were originally from London but had appeared on The Old Grey Whistle Test before then relocated to Bristol. They made some demos recordings allegedly produced by band manager Al Read's friend Paul Brett, although Brett himself only has vague memories. "They had played bass, which is kind of nuts," says Ian. "And I don't think the rest of the band added much to the songs that they did with him leading."

By '73 The Village Thing was winding down operations, and Ian moved to Farnham with then wife Maggie Holland to focus on their duo Hot Vulcans. "We were manufactured and distributed by Atlantic Records," says Ian. "Transatlantic had lots of problems. I just got fed up, so we folded the label up."

By this time, Dave Evans had already struck up a relationship with Stefan Grossman. After an attempt by producer Paul Rothchild to form a group in '66 with Janis Joplin, Steve Mann and Stefan that fell through, Stefan left New York for London in '67, to stay with Eric Clapton.

Although Stefan had initially planned on continuing to India, he was instead soon playing in folk clubs around England and making solo recordings. In '72, he then co-founded Kicking Mule, a label that specialised in finger-picking guitar LPs. Stefan got to know Dave when performing at The Troubadour and recognised Dave's talent. "He thought of himself more as a singer-songwriter, but he had these fantastic instruments," says Stefan. "So I asked him, 'Would you like to make an instrumental record for Kicking Mule Records?'" Given the label's focus, the idea was to include a tablature booklet so that others could learn to play the tunes.

"He was down in London and we recorded it all in one night," says Stefan. "After probably five hours we had enough material. If we hadn't been unfocused, Sad Pig Dance is instead laser focussed. The 14 instruments are almost homogenous despite their complexity, and sound richer than just a single guitar. The whole idea is to sound like different things are happening," explains Stefan. Thanks to the varied tunings, the tracks are also distinct from each other. "For others the tuning dictated what was being played on the guitar," says Stefan. "Whereas Dave tried to find the tuning that would enhance and bring out more of what he was attempting to do. He wasn't the one trick pony."

Sad Pig Dance benefits from a professional studio sound and comes replete with Dave's quirky, and somewhat acoustic age-orientated Records," says Ian. "It's a strange tale about a sad pig who turns into a car mechanic and a fly turning into a giant. I think it's one of the great instrumental albums that came out in the '70s," says Stefan, and it is hard not to agree with him, as it is simply sublime.

When Dave played on The Old Grey Whistle Test on BBC in late February the following year, he chose the album's complex opening track, fittingly called 'Stage fright'. Rather than trying to become popular with a national audience, his unusual choice was likely made for the show's presenter. "He was on there because Bob Harris, the presenter, was a big Dave Evans fan, who played him a lot on his radio show," explains Ian. Although Dave only intermittently raises his gaze to the camera lens in the performance, he does look a bit wary. But the TV audience doesn't see what Dave sees. "Just out of view is Lou Reed scoring out of his head, looking like he's about to fall in front of the camera. Dave managed to play that whole song, crazy, impossible thing with Lou Reed looming there!"

But Dave still had his mind set on being a singer-songwriter and had continued writing songs. Stefan felt that Kicking Mule was more of a specialist label and not the best home for a record of the kind that Dave wanted to make. "We made a demo, and I sent it off to all the record company people I knew," says Stefan. "We got a total negative response from all the record companies in England. No one was interested."

Stefan argues that a key reason for the lack of broader record company interest was Dave's vocals. "It wasn't the voice that one would say, 'Oh, well I really love that voice!'" As a last resort in the end, Stefan agreed to put out the album on Kicking Mule.

The '97 album was recorded in Livingston Studios in North London, together with the core members of Canton Trig, Robert Spensley on bass and Dave Fuller on second guitar, with both also providing backing vocals. For Dave's last proper record (he later contributed five tracks to the Kicking Mule compilation Contemporary Guitar Workshop) he came full circle back to his days in the Merchant Navy. The liner notes describe how his seafaring days had taught him the importance of cooking, both literally and as a life philosophy. The album title Ride 'Em Out Of Life was taken from a Polynesian proverb – 'Eat life or life will eat you.'

Although beautifully recorded, the frankly awful cover with Dave sitting on a cushion in a hand drawn environment makes it look more like an amateur release. And again, the inclusion of a tablature booklet probably doomed it to the special interests section in the record shops. At a result, despite being very good, it isn't well-known, and has never been reissued in any shape or form.

In the late '70s, Dave's wanderlust led him to move to Belgium. He had met a woman and the beer was good too! He settled in as an instrument repairer and caterer in the back room of a three-story mezzanine Brussels building that was the combined home, music shop and workshop of a luthier, Benoit Meurisse.

"You would never know from seeing him play because he was always smiling, but I think he got quite nervous playing," says Steve. "I think he much preferred making instruments to a living. Dave was also diagnosed with Depuytet's contractures, commonly referred to as Cold hand, a condition in which one or more fingers become permanently bent in a flexed position. In 2010, he played at the 40th anniversary gig for Village Thing at Cecil Sharp House in London. He was a bit rusty because he had terrible problems with his hands by then," says Ian. "He played a few songs and made a brave thing of it," remembers Steve. "Everybody was willing him on."

Dave would remain in Belgium and work on instruments until he passed away peacefully in his sleep at 3 AM on 4th April, 2021 at the respectable age of 60. "I'm going home. Those are the last words Dave sings on the final track on his final LP."

Elephants is out now on Earth Recordings.