

## “A lunch with Tommy Emmanuel”

Original Dutch article by Robin van Wechem for *de Gitarist* magazine, March 2012

Translated by Caspar Steinebach. Edited by Wim, Bas den Herder. [www.guitaracademy.nl](http://www.guitaracademy.nl)

Foto's by Walter Goyen [www.h4p.com](http://www.h4p.com)



**Completely worn out, as if it is badly damaged by sand paper, that's what Tommy Emmanuel's Maton EBG808 looks like. Despite the looks of his guitar, the one-man band easily plays the bassline, drums and melody simultaneously. In January, Emmanuel was on his world tour. A perfect opportunity for guitar virtuoso Wim den Herder to invite him to give a workshop in Amsterdam.**

The big number of bicycles piled up in front of the Badcuyp music center shows that there is something going on inside. No less than 80 fans are packed in the small music hall, just a few yards away from the crowded market outside in the streets. They are waiting for what may well become their musical highlight of the year: An afternoon with Tommy Emmanuel a.k.a. 'The Fingerpicking Guru from Down Under'. "Tommy is one of my big guitar heroes together with Gary Moore, Jan Akkerman and Harry Sacksioni", Wim says. "I'm very excited to welcome him here today!"

### **Don't give up !**

Wim is also considered 'more than just talented'. He got his first guitar as a present for his sixth birthday. Four years later he composed his first songs. Two years after that, in 1994, he made his debut on Dutch television, where he played together with Jan Akkerman in a TV-show called "Geef Nooit Op" ("Never Give Up"). The 28-year old guitarist and entrepreneur has played an estimated 10.000 hours so far in his life, and is considered to be one of the leading dutch guitarists at this moment. "Tommy Emmanuel inspired me to follow my heart. To do what you know you have to do from deep inside. That's why I posted one of his movies at the website of my guitar school; 'The Guitar Academy'. I think Tommy Emmanuel is a role model for everyone who really wants to learn how to play the guitar."

Visitors are walking into the hall during the final soundcheck. Men in casual sweaters are chatting and drinking their coffees . Adolescent boys in hoodies and worn-out sneakers watch their stainless guitar cases. The tables are filled with croissants and sandwiches. People are walking by and fill their plates. This is lunch with Tommy; one hour Tommy solo, one hour of guitar workshop and one hour of playing together with the guests.

The afternoon starts off with Guitar Academy teacher Sietze Bouma. Wim introduces him as 'a funky fingerstyle guitarist from the Dutch province of Fryslan.' Being a real musician, Tommy intervenes: "If you take out the plug and put it back in again, the buzz will stop". Bouma receives his pick from stage manager Lars de Rijck, the 19-year old finalist from the TV-show "Holland's got Talent". When Lars starts to play later that afternoon, his generous smile turns his face into utmost concentration.



*Afbeelding 1: Tommy Emmanuel*

## **Maton**

"I first met Tommy through Lars", Wim explains, "He played with him on Holland's got talent, and because Lars and I already knew each other, one thing lead to another." Tommy Emmanuel is not the first celebrity that agreed to play at the Guitar Academy in the Badcuyp after Wim's invitation: "We had Michael Fix playing here in November. He got me into contact with Maton Guitars. I got an endorsement from Maton for the guitar which I will use to record my first solo-album, a Maton EBG808C MF."

Wim swears by a Maton-guitar/AER-amp combination. "Most of the acoustic guitars are made to play the rhythm sections, but at Maton's they make solo guitars as well. My guitar sounds like a concert instrument: it has a clear, loud and full sound. The tunes sound really pure. AER-amps are one of the most expensive amps per cubic meter. They are small and compact, but they don't compress the sound. They are simply the best choice in amps." Before every concert, Wim always changes his steel strings. "I learned that from Gareth Pearson, the sound is just so much better the first two hours." Laughing: "I should raise the price for every single show with 7 euros just to cover the extra string-costs."



## Work yourself to death

A few moments later, when Wim enters stage, he starts off with his own song: 'Karoshi'. He tells the audience that he wrote the song in 2009 when he was on the brink of a burnout. "Karoshi means 'working yourself dead' in Japanese". The buzz from the audience stops abruptly when Wim starts playing, picking his guitar with a speed that is almost unimaginable, and sweat is dripping from his forehead. The audience is in awe. This is someone from the outermost category, or as festival organizer Stanley Dijkhuis later states: "Wim is just the best guitarist that's walking around in Holland at this moment". Wim plays two hours a day: "When I'm studying, I try to focus. You have to restrict yourself to move forward. That is my philosophy. I'm a perfectionist. For example: I sometimes take 15 minutes to focus on four notes, just those four notes, until they are perfect. You have to get into a sort of flow." Wim says that there are only a few guitarist who practice that way. "They often think, 'I've got a guitar and I want to develop myself'. That may seem like a logical thought, but it may not always make you better. I'm trying to be the best in small parts, over and over again. If you do that, in the end, you'll be the best in every small part. That means, ultimately, you'll be the best in everything."



*Afbeelding 2: Tommy Emmanuel with the founder of Guitar Academy, Wim den Herder*

That philosophy brought him his own style of guitar playing; the so-called 'wimpicking'. "Wimpicking is like playing as a band with only one pick. I play two or three parts simultaneously, just like any other fingerstyle guitarist. The difference is that I play with one pick. Using this technique will get you in a huge groove". When I play wimpicking style, my hand constantly moves, because you have to pick every string individually. Nevertheless, the parts sound like one smooth unit of sound." After Karoshi, Eddie van der Meer and Cavit Evren enter the stage, seemingly untouched by Wim's guitar-wall of sound. They are fourteen and twelve years old, and by far the youngest performers on stage, that

afternoon. Huddled over their guitars, they are fully concentrated on their own, still nameless, composition. Later that evening they will be playing together with Tommy Emmanuel. They receive a standing ovation from the audience.

After a short break, Tommy Emmanuel, the Guitarmaster himself, gets on stage, addressing a few words to the audience: "When I was the same age as these two little fellows here, my brother and I were the only people in our neighborhood that could play the guitar." He states: "In the whole of Australia, you could only find two records of Chet Atkins, which were not even that good. That's all we had. This new generation has so much more tools. In my opinion, there is no excuse why you cannot become good at playing guitar nowadays."

If Tommy did not merge with his guitar, than nobody did. He was four years old when he touched a guitar for the first time. Two years later, at the age of six, he was already touring through Australia with the rest of his family to make a living. He does not know any better. "I'm an example of someone who makes a living out of playing guitar" he says. "Today, I see a lot of young people whose destiny it is to play the guitar. I live in the real world. I'm not thinking about royalties all the time and I don't have a Porsche parked in front of my garage. My children go to college, my family depends on me. My message to all of you is that you have to take good care of yourself. On the other hand, I'm also an example of someone who lives his dream. Amen to that" he adds with a smile.

With his short, grey hair, his black leather boots, jeans and black fleece sweater, the Australian indeed does not look very glamorous. He looks more like he just stepped out of his jeep after a long day in the outback, only without muddy clothes and with a guitar hanging around his neck. His sparkling eyes and his natural charisma reveal an experienced showman. The atmosphere he creates around him is nice and cozy, not unlike a congenial uncle, or a good old friend.



*Afbeelding 3: Two talented guitarists Cavit and Eddie performing original. Tommy is sitting in the audience in the right upper corner*



## Human Metronome

“When people ask me: ‘Tommy, how do I become successful?’ I always answer ‘Become good at what you do’. Study until you can’t play anymore” When we ask him why his timing is so perfect, he answers: “This man here talks about the groove. I had to learn that too. Just like everyone else. You can impress people with technique, but this is not forever. I move with the rhythm when I play. I’m like a human metronome.” He shows a small box to the audience, tuner and metronome in one. He continues: “I play with this thing for 52 years now, it makes you focused and free at the same time. I have a bad day sometimes, as if I’m back in time fifty years, but sometimes I don’t even hear it. That’s how I feel the rhythm.”



*Afbeelding 4: Tommy talks about the groove*

He picks up his guitar to further explain his point: “I’ll play a few tunes to let you guys feel the groove”. After those words, Tommy plays a solo which clearly has the pulsing rhythm of a drum in it. He talks about his drum skills with a kind of nonchalance: “I stole them from as much drummers as I could. I’m a man without much brains, I have to keep it simple. I think in a quadruple time; four with the right hand, and three with the left. You add some sounds with the left hand. “, he says while playing a swinging guitar solo over a drum part. “It all fits together magically.”

The afternoon ends with a few sessions by Guitar Academy teachers and fans of Tommy who get the opportunity to play next to him on stage. One of them is Karlijn Langedijk, a small girl who started her own YouTube channel. She clearly did not expect being called on stage to play a few tunes together with Tommy Emmanuel. A little bit shy and nervous, with her long black hair covering her face, she starts to play. Her hero jumps in, with a fatherly smile on his face. The last songs that afternoon are played by Tommy and Wim together. The showman and the virtuoso, together on stage. Amps at full volume, let’s rock!