

AN UNNATURAL GUY



Fingerstyle guitarist Guy Buttery has just released his first live album and will be touring locally and internationally from now until October. He chats to *Oliver Roberts* about popularity, lyrics, and his memories of cane fields

IHAVE seen Guy Buttery play live twice, and both times I have been entranced by his flawless guitar playing, and the serene, Zen-like energy he gives off on stage.

Buttery's avowal that nobody has ever come this far (600km from Joburg to Umdloti in KwaZulu-Natal) to interview him surprises me. For since releasing his first album in 2002, Buttery's instrumental composition and style have earned him legions of loyal fans, several SA Music Awards nominations (including a win in 2010), and considerable international acclaim — *Guitar Player* magazine deemed him "the most diverse and intriguing fingerstyle artist in recent memory". Not yet 30, he has performed sell-out shows in the US, UK and much of Europe, and written four more albums, the latest of which, *Live in KwaZulu*, has just been released.

But then I recognise my naïveté. That Buttery's regard is specific and underground is perhaps the same reason every second person in this ordinary world has read *Fifty Shades of Grey*, while the classics sections at bookstores remain largely untouched. Buttery is simply too nuanced to have broad appeal, and this is something he is typically at peace with.

"I just don't find myself making the comparisons too often," he says. We're in his car. He's driving barefoot. Van Morrison is wailing on the stereo. "But it seems kind of like that in every sphere — business, art, clothing and maybe journalism. The cheaper and nastier it is, the easier it is to sell. That is sort of the lowest common denominator theory. And I find that if I was to focus on these things, I would probably be a little bit more disheartened and discouraged than if I were to just think that the musical vision or idea I have feels honest and sincere to me. Like, that's got enough value on its own, you know?"

This is how Buttery usually speaks. He considers every question you throw his way as if it's the first time he's heard it, then ends almost every answer with a question mark or a "Do you know what I mean?" There's this sense that he's having

these little revelations all over the place and he wants to see if you concur.

Buttery's second album was titled *Songs from the Cane Fields* and we're in them now, KwaZulu-Natal's vast cane fields, driving slowly along the dirt paths that intersect them. Buttery has been coming to this particular area his whole life. The tall cane and the surrounding lush vegetation are a second home. His dad used to bring him out here in an old Kombi and let the boy Buttery sit on his lap and steer. Now, the man Buttery comes

roof of Buttery's Honda like it's a table. I ask him if the fields we're drifting past have inspired a lot of his compositions.

"A lot of the ideas, the pieces I put together, are quite haphazard and very much subconscious," he says, long hair fluttering in the wind.

"It's never a direct translation, but it's very much something that's filtered through. For instance, for most of my life I've been listening to a lot of West African music and I used to find it quite difficult to write in their time signatures because their rhythmical cycles are not Western. But then I found myself writing pieces using those same signatures and I thought, 'That's weird, I never learnt this'. It literally just permeated into my thread.

"Coming to the cane fields gives me the luxury of escaping or, if you like, re-entering reality very easily. It's a very humbling experience and it also reminds us that we're human on a planet that's got a whole bunch of amazing stuff going on right here to look at and be a part of."

Many of Buttery's compositions are an assortment of guitar styles. Listen closely and you might pick up something African, something Middle Eastern and something Indian all in one song. Watching him live is a thrill because he mostly plays in small venues so you're able to see the extraordinary liaison between fingers and strings up close. If you're new to Buttery, don't ask him why he doesn't sing.

"I get a little bit frustrated when people ask that," he says. "It's an understandable question, but I always feel like saying, 'Did

you feel like the music needed lyrics?'"

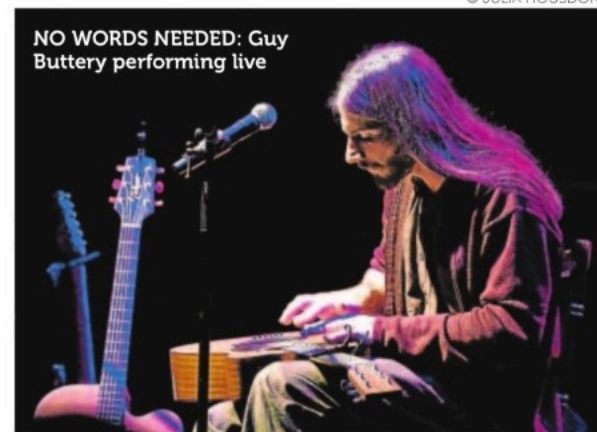
We've stopped on a hill overlooking some violently tropical greenery. Just beyond it is the Indian Ocean. Every now and then a fish eagle calls in the near distance. Buttery is plucking pieces of long grass from the ground and chewing on their ends as we speak. He's a very tranquil man, you could even call him a hippie, so his heightened reaction to the lyrics issue is telling. "People see a man or woman holding a guitar and they just anticipate that there's going to be some voice accompanying it," he says.

"It's like asking a writer why there isn't music to his words. It's just never been a strong point for me. Also, from a young age I always felt like the guitar and other instruments in their own solo capacity, or within the context of an ensemble, really spoke to me more than anything else. I remember, as a boy, listening to Led Zeppelin and feeling like the singing verses were just the gaps between Jimmy Page's solos."

Buttery started playing guitar when he was 10. He would learn three or four songs a day and retain them. But ask him about natural talent, and he is cagey.

"I don't even know what that means," he says. "I don't think I am naturally talented. I just think I am very eager. It's almost kind of ridiculous that I'm actually still doing what I do. I'm constantly impressed when people come to hear me play. I'm humbled by the fact that I've been able to make a career out of a style of music that is so far from something commercial. It's instrumental and it's got elements of so many styles so it automatically becomes something that's difficult to market.

"To still have people interested enough



LET'S JUMP OUT THE WINDOW A LITTLE BIT, I NEED SOME FRESH AIR

here alone to look for his music in the restrained roar of the cane.

"Let's jump out the window a little bit," he says. "I need some fresh air." Steadily, Buttery gets up off his seat and perches himself on the driver's side door so the top half of his body is outside. He steers with one hand, his bare feet controlling the pedals. I lift myself out of the passenger seat. Now we're chatting across the silver



FINGERSTYLE

FINGERSTYLE refers less to a style of guitar playing and more to a technique.

Originating in Europe, fingerstyle has its roots in techniques used to play the lute and the vihuela, a 15th century instrument very similar to a guitar. Modern players usually play with steel or nylon-string acoustic guitars or solid-body electric guitars.

Fingerstyle involves the plucking, slapping or raking of the strings using the fingers rather than playing with a flatpick, or plectrum. Many practitioners use their fingernails as picks, meaning they have to keep the nails at a good length and condition. The wrist and sitting positions can also be varied, and the player sometimes uses artificial harmonics, and hammers or slaps the strings for different effects. By ditching a plectrum and freeing up one hand to be used in more ways, a fingerstyle guitarist is able to play multiple parts of a musical arrangement, such as bass, harmony, melody and percussion, at the same time. Some of the greats include Michael Hedges, Alex de Grassi, Pierre Bensusan, Preston Reed, Don Ross, Andy McKee, Jon Gomm, Erik Mongrain, Tommy Emmanuel, Jeff Beck, Thomas Leeb and Kaki King.



DID YOU FEEL LIKE THE MUSIC NEEDED LYRICS?

to talk about it, to write about it, to come listen to it and buy the album, I am totally humbled and honoured, I really am."

Perhaps Buttery is right — the concept of natural talent is speculative at best. But then, instead of being a natural, Buttery is perhaps an unnatural. Unnatural for his ability to amalgamate several musical styles into one harmonious composition; unnatural for being able to seize subconscious thoughts and pattern them into chords; and unnatural for driving a journalist into a labyrinth of cane fields because it's there, within that subtle bellow, that he derives his art from.

We get back into his car for the out-of-window trip back through the fields. Ray LaMontagne is on the stereo now. Midway through the drive, there's the sound of the fish eagle calling again. Buttery looks up at the sky for a moment and squints into the sun, then turns his attention back to the dirt road. "Funny," he says, facing into the wind, "you can hear it, but you can't see it."

• For information on upcoming performances go to www.guybuttery.co.za