

KALLE VILPUU

Music is a Language of Secret Codes

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Photos: Riina Varol, Kris Moor

Guitarist Kalle Vilpuu, who celebrated his 50th birthday in June, is in the form of his life and busier than ever before. He recently released his years in the making solo album “Silver Lining” and is engaged with two bands – Ultima Thule and Seitsmes Meel, both very much alive and kicking, that even musical laymen can associate the name of Kalle Vilpuu with. As his status befits, the musician brings to the interview his most beloved instrument, a Gibson Les Paul Goldtop.

Tell me about your guitar.

This Goldtop is my main guitar. It suits me, fits me ergonomically, and is a very sensitive instrument sporting good dynamics. A good guitar (and after 30 years of playing them I can recognize that almost instantly) can be attuned to oneself – you can listen to its peculiarities, sense its hidden qualities and potential. I fussed with my Goldtop for quite a few years until finally people started saying I had gone around the bend. In truth some bozo had done quite a number on that Les Paul – removed the original Tulip pegs, slapped some EMGs on it, all the metal parts were loose and rattling – there was nothing I

could do but set about fixing it up. Here I would like to thank Helmut Hark, who helped me restore the instrument to its original state. Ordering all the parts and figuring out what does what exactly takes a fair bit of time and is a rather expensive undertaking. However, I was rewarded with a guitar that is very dear to me.

Rumor has it the guitar wasn't your first instrument?

I initially played drums in a band started by boys three years older than me at the 1st Kohtla-Järve high school, where I went to school. I first took an interest in the guitar when I listened to Pink Floyd's “Dark Side

of the Moon” at the age of 11. I also listened to Yes, Camel, Led Zeppelin and Free and realized it touches me deeply. I learned my first chords from schoolmate Hillar Vimberg, who lived in my building. Later I took private lessons at the Jõhvi Music School, from there I moved on to school bands and other things like that...

You applied for the Georg Ots Tallinn Music School after graduating from high school?

No, after high school I spent a year working as a stage hand in Pärnu and taking guitar lessons from Igor Klimenkov. I studied classical guitar already on a deeper level with Igor. He was a renowned teacher and guitar

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maker who took orders for concert guitars from artists from all over the Soviet Union. Igor's wife was also a concert guitarist, so theirs was a musical family through and through.

From there I went to Georg Ots school, where I spent the first two courses studying classical guitar but switched to stage guitar under Riho Lilje by the time of the third. I realized that if you want to be really good at classical guitar, you need to do a lot of work, and that the academic world was not for me. I was already playing for the Seitsmes Meel by that time and my life was so incredibly busy that even my teacher recommended I switch specialties.

In hindsight I believe I did the right thing as it is easy to build whatever you want on a classical foundation. It gave me my tone and my fingering skills and a lot of other things I suppose I don't even realize anymore.

How did you come to play in Seitsmes Meel?

It is a peculiar story that still makes me smile. As a young Georg Ots school student I went



to one of my musician friend's wedding in Pärnu, for which a random collection of musicians had been assembled. We ate, had a few laughs, drank some vodka – all the things you do at weddings – and then after we jammed someone asked me whether I would like to play in a band. The band I was invited to was to become the Seitsmes Meel. A few days later I bumped into Henry Laks who confirmed that the position of guitarist was open. So the lesson here is to be in the right place at the right time.

The preparations had already been made, we took it from there – rehearsed feverishly, and people responded to our tracks, liked us, and as a result we had an incredible amount of work – I

checked my notebook, we had 28 concerts in one month of 1987.

Seitsmes Meel was the Estonian Consumer Cooperatives Voluntary Association's (ETKVL) freight station band, the conditions were very good for the time. We had a big separate rehearsal space you could walk in to at any time. We also had our own PA system built by band mate Toomas Leemets and sound guy Margus Rebane.

How did the creative process unfold in Seitsmes Meel?

The songs of Seitsmes Meel came primarily from Henry's quill. Every time he brought something interesting to rehearsal, we started working on it. And then we argued, fought and made up in the process. As concerns gui-

tar scores, I always took a tape home and put it on – Russian tape-recorders also had the loop functionality – and then I worked on it until I hit the right notes.

Indeed, the band's guitar scores still feel well-composed and sporting an original knack, at the same time you played mainly pure tones, especially towards the beginnings.

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I had a Mark Knopfler type of sound in Seitsmes Meel, I used a lot of Compression Sustainer and mainly played pickup positions 2. and 5., where you get that additional twang. It felt right at the time.

I suppose you could find quite a few things today to criticize about the sound back then...

I have thought that perhaps one reason why we couldn't get that proper guitar sound back then is that the few Western amps we used had shot bulbs. We didn't have the know-how, nor the replacement bulbs; however, I believe better amps would have yielded better results. Today I believe that if you don't have NOS bulbs, in other words bulbs made in the 50s for the military, you just can't get the proper sound. The choice of stomp boxes was also rather limited back in the day, I had Compression Sustainer, chorus, delay and overdrive.

Seitsmes Meel broke apart relatively suddenly, at the height of its popularity.

There actually was no good reason for that. It remains a big question mark for me to this day – whence came the thought that we're not capable of anything else and that it's better to quit while we're ahead. In truth we could have kept going. We never even released an album.

Now, when Seitsmes Meel is together again, it seems the crowd is still pleased with us. The sound is different as one man is no longer with us (*keyboards player Tõnu Väärtnõu – ed*). Filling that void is quite a challenge also for me. We decided not to reanimate the old tracks one for one, we try to be a bit more modern in how we play. I also believe we will start working on some new material, the men are rearing to go.

After Seitsmes Meel you played in some rather different groups, like Gunnar Graps' Magnetic Band, Tõnis Mägi's 777, Saxappeal Band and Marju Länik's band. And yet they all seem like minor detours



Lavatagused trikid. Toomas Leemets ja Kalle Vilpuu (1988). Photo: Väino Siilm



Ultima Thule Jazzkaarel (2013). Photo: Kris Moor

compared to what joining Ultima Thule stood for.

That's right. Thule guitar is a whole other world. I was very surprised when I was invited to join Ultima Thule as I'm no blues player. Back then Thule was a lot more bluesy than it is now and it took me several good years to get settled. Of course I had come into contact with blues and also studied it, I learned almost all there is to learn, but I've not become

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a true blues man. Even though I have nothing but the deepest respect for pure blues guitarists, it does not touch me as deeply as hard rock, grunge or high-quality metal. But every guitar player must know how to play basic blues as it is the foundation for everything else.

Can the feeling of playing second fiddle be helped next to Riho Sibul, voted Estonia's best guitarist several times?

I've never thought to complain or even contemplate what fiddle I'm playing in the band. Scores are a matter of agreement and what I've learned in that band carries far more weight – I've learned to listen to colleagues on stage, delicately fall back during a colleague's solo, doing things in unison, the feeling of standing together... Thule is made up of first rate musicians, playing with whom is a great honor. It is like a good wine that improves over

time. Lately we don't really have to explain ourselves anymore, you do your thing and it's fine. We are regularly playing venues and I'm sure we will release another album as well.

In the mid 2000s you joined Erik Meremaa's band House of Games that released a record called "Rise and Shine" and tried to make it in Europe. What kind of memories do you have from that period?

I value that band as well as the whole experience very highly. We got out of Estonia, toured Europe – I grew stage nerves and stress tolerance. We played some pretty distinguished stages: London's Astoria, NY Heebie-Jeebies, Manchester Rock City and a lot of other places worthy of note. It even seems a bit incredible in hindsight. I got to try life on a tour bus, where you have to spend a lot of time with the same group of people during very long drives. I

felt childlike joy when people told us we were great. It was uplifting to read good reviews in foreign magazines, we were even featured in Metal Hammer and Classic Rock. If you don't talk about it, it is as if it didn't exist; however, it is a part of my journey as a musician. We worked like crazy, rehearsed four or five times a week, I started practicing eight hours a day. One can practice indefinitely. I don't really believe musicians who say that they've practiced so much they don't have to anymore. To keep your form you must do it every day, so that playing the guitar comes easily, to keep your hands sensitive and mobile, and so you could keep that good vibe.

The days I spent with House of Games also taught me that I'm well-suited for such a lifestyle or daily structure: I spend time with my guitar, playing, practicing, looking for sounds, recording, experimenting, trying different

pickups – it is all the same. These things come periodically, also messing about with stomp boxes, cords or amp bulbs. At times, looking for a particular color of sound, I keep at it until I find what I'm looking for – that is also a part of playing guitar. If something swims to the surface, I record it, and if it is cool I keep working on it. Once these demos number high enough, you can start thinking about an album.

That is how you reached your solo album?

Basically, yes. People were already asking me why I wasn't doing something myself. I've done quite a lot of studio work for others, played guitar solos for people who have requested them and through it gotten acquainted with the computer and with music software. I gradually learned how it works and skill soon followed. I've never been one to settle for the ordinary, I've always pursued a slight glitch and sound tricks. Eventually you just get there, you learn to understand sound, listen to music, write songs, analyze music (including your own), construct musical forms to bring your tracks to life. Music is a language of secret codes. After a while you learn to navigate that maze, you begin to understand the language, what lies hidden behind the notes. It is a skill built over time and through experience.

I went for a slightly different strategy with my own record. I didn't want to make a certain number of songs to arrange later on. Rather I started chasing the dynamics of the material. What good is an album that gives in after only the third track? Studio work is insanely subjective, there

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Seitsmes Meel Pärnu Vallikäärus (2013). Photo: Kati Sihvre

is often no rational explanation for why some things happen. Sometimes people go to a lot of trouble to build up complex harmonies and the track itself only to have it not work at all. At other times you play two chords for three minutes and it just works. I came across a gap in the material while I was working. Everything else was already there, but I lost the dynamic at track seven and couldn't get the album back on track. I wrote new songs that all felt good but didn't connect with the album. Eventually I put in a track by a Western band and quite inexplicably the record worked again. I realized it had

been a matter of pace. So I based the missing track on that Western track's pace.

That is why it took me several years to put it all together and I was left with a lot of material that didn't make it onto the album. I wrote about 30 tracks, only 11 of which ended up on the album. I will definitely release another one in the next few years.

You didn't perform the album live at your jubilee event, instead the audience sat in a theater hall and listened to it while looking at a compilation of visualizations on a screen.

Kalle Vilpuu

Bändid:

** Seitsmes Meel (1986–1990 ja 2013–...)
 ** Ultima Thule (1991–...)
 ** Tõnis Mägi & 777 (1990–1991)
 ** Saxappeal Band (1992–1995)
 ** Magnetic Band (1995–1997)
 ** House of Games (2003–2008)
 Lisaks hulk ühekordseid projekte ja stuudiotöid.



Henno Kelp, Kalle Vilpuu, Andrus Lillepea. Photo from album "Silver Lining"

The thing here is that when I played it to my friends – you must share your work with someone, ask for opinions – it was suggested the music was spatial, colorful and that it triggered a series of images in people's imaginations. I also played the material to my good friend Peeter Metsik while I was working on it who then came up with a more

concrete plan of putting together a background of images for the music that could be used during concerts in the future. Clearly this is a costly enterprise. My friend sat on it for a few months and finally decided to go through with it. We hired arts academy master's candidates Hannes Aasamets and Mihkel Maripuu, who manufactured very cool 3D

computer graphics backgrounds for all the tracks.

I feel the album is somehow industrial, but how exactly is something I leave up to wiser people. For me the main thing is to have a record that sounds good and is honest.

Is there something that is different when one is 50?

I think so. I've found a new feel for life, a new breath, I listen to music differently and play guitar differently. Something that never happened before is that I forget myself for hours when I play guitar. It is like a drug and it has a magical effect on me.



Photo: Mats Õun.



Photo: erakogu.



Photo: Vahur Krouverk