

## Acoustic Alchemy

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Interviewed by: Mary Bentley

Over the nearly 20 years they've been making music, Acoustic Alchemy has undergone many changes, but the constant, great music driven by the sound of two acoustic guitars has remained the same. On the eve of the last night of the **American English** tour, SmoothViews sat down to chat with band leaders Greg Carmichael and Miles Gilderdale.

**SmoothViews (SV):** *The first question is for Greg. How difficult was it to go on with the band after Nick's death?*

**Greg Carmichael (GC):** As it happened, the transition was smoother than anticipated. The day he actually died, we were just about to record **Positive Thinking**. Everything was set up in this sort of English country manor house, which was near where he lived, simply because he was very, very ill. It would be a lot easier for him rather than to travel up to London to record and rehearse if we got it as near to him as possible. We were quite tired. We were kind of rehearsing the album because the idea was that we record it, not live, but as more of an ensemble thing. And literally, the day that we were due to actually start recording for real, he died. That was very difficult. It was very emotional and a terrible thing, but we were kind of committed, if you like, to doing this album. And he would have wanted us to carry on, not just sort of pack up and go home.

**Miles Gilderdale (MG):** Yes, it's like seeing it through, the whole process.

**GC:** Yes, that is what you do, isn't it? Miles, at the time, was not doing the acoustic [guitar], Nick was doing it. I remember getting a phone call from Tommy LiPuma, who was the head of the record company at the time. He sent his condolences and sort of asked us what we were going to do. I remember him saying, "If you want to not do this, then I would understand perfectly." But we all felt that we should carry on. We got in John Parsons, who has a long association with Acoustic Alchemy. He's written a lot of stuff, and he's a fantastic guitarist. He seemed to be the obvious choice to play Nick's part on the CD, so we did that. We finished the CD, and then came the next step. We could've actually stopped there because we kind of fulfilled our commitment, but the next step, or the next question was, are we going to tour? That was probably the most difficult decision because we were all very nervous about that. Nick was quite a charismatic character. That was the biggest thing as to whether or not we tour, but we decided to do that. It was really the response of the fans as well because they were very upset. They were quite devastated by it, but they were actually quite glad that we were continuing because they liked the music. The first tour was a bit wary, but John Parsons came out and did it with us.

**MG:** I guess we kind of started that tour not knowing really... but by the end, although no one had said anything, we all sort of knew it was going to go on, just because of the feedback... sort of... the validation.

***SV: The next question is for you Miles. You took over the empty stool next to Greg. How hard a decision was that for you?***

**MG:** It was a scary one actually. I mean, it was scary because I had stood behind him and seen what happened. He was a big personality and a great player. But Greg was very generous. He just said, "Look, let's give it a go and see how it works out. Just do what you do." So, I sort of locked myself away with a guitar for six months, did some wood shedding, as you chaps say, and then gave it a go. I wasn't particularly great at first. I'm still learning now, really, about the acoustic.

**GC:** A lot of people can't appreciate that. They just think that a guitar is a guitar. They forget that the electric guitar and the acoustic are...

**MG:** ...very different animals. They are. [It's] the difference between a piano and a church organ. The notes are in the same place, but you just approach it very differently.

**GC:** I think what Miles has done is fantastic, because I wouldn't dream of picking up the electric guitar. I mean, I'd be embarrassed. And I wouldn't really like to play the steel string guitar. I know I do what I do. They are so different; the difference not only between the electric and the steel string, but between the steel string and the nylon. They're all different. So, it was quite something for him to do.

**MG:** I like a challenge! (laughs) And I sort of wanted to see if I could do it myself. I was prepared for the knockdown if it wasn't good enough, but Greg's just been super generous about it really. And it just sort of worked out in the long run.

***SV: I think it worked out fine. Acoustic Alchemy fans seem to be divided between the sound of the music during the Webb/Carmichael years and the sound of the music today with the full band. What do you say to both groups of fans regarding your music?***

**GC:** I think what happens is that initially people would come along and say they haven't seen Acoustic Alchemy for a number of years. Say they saw the old Acoustic Alchemy and then they come back as they do, five years later. Suddenly they've got the saxophone and just this whole much louder, funkier band. They probably think, what on earth has happened? And they might be slightly taken aback. Having said that, I think we've won a lot of people over who perhaps initially had not been quite sure. They've been drawn in, because it's still about the music, about what we're writing, and what has been written before.

**MG:** I guess the people who have come in the last five years and don't like it have just stayed away and so we wouldn't really know anyway. Realistically, I suppose there have been people who just don't like the sound of the band currently, but hopefully I don't think it's that many. Certainly it's not like the numbers have gone down. We're not playing to small houses by any means.

**GC:** When we sign, a lot of people come and say, "Oh! I saw you in blah, blah, blah 15 years ago. It sounds great now."

**SV: That kind of leads me to another question. I'm going to read you something –**

**GC:** Did someone say [it]?

**SV: Yeah, someone did...I said it. (laughs) This is from the Blues Alley show last year, the Trio show. "AA fans are sometimes divided between the music from the original AA era and the music from the AA of today. I came on board with the new AA, but this trio concept proved to be a great experience. The Trio tour is a way of presenting the material in its original context. It is a gift to long-time AA fans and an opportunity for newer fans like me to experience something musically unique." Would you say that's a fair assessment?**

**MG:** That's a very nice one... a beautiful assessment.

**GC:** Yeah, I'd say that, beautiful. They are very different things. The Trio tour, although we call it the Trio plus One... it's a quartet, can't be quite as dynamic as the big band. It works best in small places. You'd be hard-pressed to put it in a noisy place, where as a band, you can. We like both. The trio affords more room for the guitars because it's not as loud. You can hear more of the dynamic range of the guitars because not all the frequencies are taken up by the bass drums, and the keyboards. Terry [Disley], our keyboard player, does a very different thing. He's sort of playing bass with his left hand. In fact, what it's really like is playing keyboard with one arm tied behind his back, because the other arm is doing the bass. It's very much like they're both different animals.

**MG:** We did both guises as it were. They're just nice for what they are. It's nice to get up there and have this kickin' rhythm section behind you. That's a nice thing to sit back on. Equally well, it's nice to have lots of air and room around what you're doing. You're playing with a different dynamic.

**GC:** Subtleties can be heard. At the end of the day, they are just acoustic guitars turned up loud. The subtleties of what we're doing can sometimes get a little bit lost. You approach it differently. You have to think differently.

**SV: When I was at Blues Alley, you played "Ariane" and then you played it the other night at the Rams Head, too, and it sounded great both times in both formats.**

**GC:** Well, you just kind of adapt. I really like both formats.

**MG:** And, in a way, it's also a test of the material. We spend a lot hours and days and weeks over the writing. We absolutely agonize over it. Greg's been doing it longer than I have, but it's always something we take a lot of pride in... the actual songwriting. And I think if you can't play it, the melodies and the harmonies, with a small combo, then it's just not a good piece of music really. (laughs) If you've written a groove, then it's different. If it's an exclusively groove track, then you couldn't apply those rules to it. But I would say 85% of the Alchemy material is melodies and harmonies, so it should survive in both formats. If it doesn't, then it's a failure! (laughs)

**SV: *That's a good point. This is the very last stop on the tour. You can go home and rest up a bit. How has this tour been?***

**GC:** Time is a very strange thing when you're on tour because you're traveling around. You can lose track of days, lose the feel of what happened last week because your brain goes.

**MG:** You can be hundreds of miles from where you were a couple of days ago. And also time zones. I mean, we come from England.

**GC:** It's like when you go on vacation. The first week seems long. Your holiday seems very long, but the second week, though, it speeds up. But it's been a great tour.

**MG:** It has been. It's been quite a lot of work. It's been very intensive. A lot of double shows as well. A lot of nights we've had to start early and do two shows.

**SV: *Yeah, that must be hard.***

**GC:** It's hard because of what we do. I think in some of the places where we do two shows, [like] the jazz clubs, it might well be the regular guys... the musicians who play at that club... approach it a different way doing two shows or three sets. They'd be a lot more laid-back perhaps, where as we try to give as much energy to the first show as the second.

**SV: *Any favorite places on the tour?***

**MG:** Yes, there are a lot of places we like coming back to. Places that you see on your tour sheet and you always think – ohh! It's all different. It's the variation of this as well, the fact that it's a theatre one day, or a funky little club the next.

**GC:** And you get to know the town if you've played there year-after-year.

**MG:** You know where to go.

**SV: *Absolutely. Acoustic Alchemy is celebrating 20 years as a group. Twenty years since your first recording and you're more popular than ever. Does this surprise you?***

**GC:** It's very nice. It's great. You never really know quite what's going to happen when you make your first album or CD. That's a landmark in itself, to go from being an unknown musician/musicians to actually getting a deal. That's a huge step. Then you make your first record and you think, "Oh! That's it! Great!" You've achieved something. And then, if that one goes, they want another one. There's always a thing where they say... the difficult second album. The first one is kind of a bit easier because you've had years and years of stuff, ideas.

**MG:** In a way, it's your life's work, up to that point, isn't it?

**GC:** Yeah. Up to that point and you just release it and it's all there. But then you have to do it again, and it gets hard. They're never easy. You worry about the next one you're going to have to write. And it can all end at any time. The record company could say, sorry, we don't want anymore, and you might not get re-signed.

**SV: Did you think you'd still be doing this 20 years down the road?**

**GC:** I wouldn't know what else to do.

**MG:** I think if anyone had said to you when you first signed, you're going to be doing this in 20 years, you would have thought, wow! But at the same time, you'd have hoped you would be. Neither of us have really done proper jobs. This is sort of what we've always done. The thought of getting a proper job is terrifying, but it might come yet. (laughs) But you keep hoping that you're going to hang in there. It's one of the difficulties that I think we have. When you meet the crowds, there are people who come from all walks of life who've been following the band long before the term "smooth jazz" existed. One of the great things is at the end of the show all of these happy people come and tell us how much they enjoyed it. And in a way, your job's done. Great, that's what we set out to do.

**SV: How difficult is it to get airplay?**

**GC:** We used to get a lot, an awful lot. It becomes more difficult, although this year's record, one of the tracks, "Say Yeah", is doing quite well. Radio stations vary in different parts of the country. What sounds good in Seattle may not sound good everywhere. Because of the way the format's structured, they're still thinking about singles, where as they used to think about what suited their audiences. They'd pick one cut or a couple of cuts from a new CD, be playing that, and somewhere else in another part of the country may be doing something different. I still think the music could reach more people, given the opportunity.

**MG:** People like to put you in boxes. We're put in the smooth jazz box.

**SV: Does it surprise you, in areas where they didn't pick up your music for a long time, that you still have such a great following?**

**MG:** It's also surprising if there's no radio and you get the people down to your gig, then that's a great thing. That's actually a grassroots following. If you've got that sort of grass roots thing, then that's a real plus. In these days, especially when stuff is just thrown out – get a bunch of guys together, throw a record out, and see if it works. But when you have a real following of people who want to hear it, it's almost like an investment

**GC:** That shows that we've got a really good fan base.

**SV: I've read that you're more popular here than you are at home. Is that still true? If so, why is that?**

**MG:** Better known, is what it is.

**GC:** The people that know us in England are as passionate as the people here. It's just that there are fewer of them.

**SV: But it's changing though, isn't it, as far as your popularity at home? The word is getting out. The music is getting out. You sell out Pizza [Express] every December.**

**GC:** That is because we had a good run with the radio station there. Jazz FM played us a lot, for a certain amount of time, and we just built up a following.

It's more difficult for us when we venture outside of London. Initially you need the radio, which is what we had in the early days, a lot of radio airplay. And that's why we're able to come over and play all these places across America, because all of those radio stations were playing us. In England, well, we hardly get any [airplay].

**MG:** The radio station used to play us, but it got sold.

**GC:** But when they did play us, that kept us going, as well as the word of mouth.

**SV:** *I want to go back a little bit and talk about The Beautiful Game. That was the first CD done with the new incarnation of the band. Was the songwriting process any different when writing for the whole touring band versus the original AA two guitar concept? Are there different thought processes involved?*

**MG:** Greg used to write with Nick and then you just started writing with members of the band. That's sort of how it starts off.

**GC:** The big difference for me was we used to write with one of these things [tape recorder], before being introduced to the computer. (laughs)

**MG:** The wonders of the computer. That's right. I had a computer set-up which I did all my recording on, and so we were putting ideas down, and making things sound a lot more like records straight away.

**GC:** And that influences you actually more than one thinks, because when you started with the two guitars, you imagine the drums, what it might sound like with the whole thing. Doing it with the computer, you get the ideas for the guitars but then you can put the drums straight away.

**MG:** Which is good and bad. There are definitely pluses and negatives with both ways. One is with the computer, you can say... I wonder what this would sound like with drums. Let's try it. Bang – I like it, I don't like it. Let's move on. It takes me five minutes, where as in old school, it would have taken a week to organize a studio and get it all right. And it would cost a lot to try it out as well. But the other side is that maybe a song can't be allowed to develop or grow in an exciting or different way – a way you never imagined. That's the nice thing about working with other people; the pleasure after when we've been writing a song, we've sort of mapped it out on our demo, we'll go to the studio and add in some real people. Say we've programmed a drum part and we've programmed a double bass part. Let's get a drummer and a double bass player. It's just so different. You think you've put drums and double bass in, you think you've covered that, but it's nothing like...it's so exciting getting a person in who's got their own interpretation, and they'll hear something else and then you'll get chemistry and it's all good. But maybe you might do the wrong thing. You might get, "My God! It's ruined! What are you doing with this song?" (laughs) But hopefully, if you go the other way and think, "By God! We would have never thought of that in a million years. It sounds great!" So, it's certainly a two pronged thing – a double edged sword.

**SV: And AArt. There was a strong use of horns and brass on that CD. What led to the inclusion of the strong horn section on that one?**

**GC:** Well, Miles is actually the brilliant arranger of the horn section.

**MG:** That was my background when I was at music college. Orchestration and arrangement was sort of my thing, as it turned out. And then, after I was at college, I was in a soul band, a big soul band like Tower of Power. Not as funky. Had it been Tower of Power, it'd be different (laughs), but it was that size of band. I always loved the sound of brass. I love James Brown and the Motown stuff – soul and funk. So, we just tried it out, wondering what it would sound like against the guitars, - acoustic guitars and brass. We thought...had anyone ever done that? No, not that we really know of, so let's give it a go.

**GC:** And it was very successful. Grammy-nominated. It is so funny at those Grammys because it's over in a split second. They say, "And the nominees are..." and they read them out, and the winner is so-and-so, then they move straight on to the next category. You're sitting there thinking, wait! Are you sure you're right? Because you're so geared up for this. You're so prepared with what you're going to say and it's over. And they've moved on. (laughs)

**SV: And Radio Contact. You used Chuck Loeb as a producer on that one. How did it happen that you ended up working with Chuck Loeb?**

**GC: Radio Contact** was kind of, almost a move against AArt. We'd done a horn section, but we kind of went more guitars and keyboards. We thought it would be interesting to get an American pair of ears. He produced four tracks on the project, but that was the idea – to get an American interpretation of these tracks.

**MG:** Just to see what it sounds like, but not just any American. (laughs) We wanted a killer muse-o in to see what he'd bring to it.

**GC:** He was great, actually. He's a very, very amazing professional in the studio. He's kind of what you want with a producer. Chuck came in and said, you do this, and you do that, and that's exactly what you want, what you expect in a producer – [to have] direction, and have an angle.

**MG:** He's a great guitarist as well. It was a pleasure to do.

**GC:** And he likes to work. He just arrived in Germany (because we did it in Germany), just got off the plane. We were about to sort of pack-up.

**MG:** We were all set to go to the pub, weren't we? (laughs) We were putting the guitars up.

**SV: And American English. You have some really great liner notes on that... very extensive... and it's obvious that you're influenced by a lot of different things. Places seem to be a big influence in a lot of your songs. What other things influence your songwriting?**

**GC:** I suppose also, **American English** was a deliberate move from **Radio Contact** to be a bit more like **AArt** was, with the horns, and a bit more up-beat and in your face, which I think it is. We went back to Richard Bull, who produced **AArt**, to record this one.

**MG:** I remember before we started this one, we decided that when we wrote the tunes, we wanted to be able to play every tune just on the two guitars. I remember saying, "let's make sure that the arrangements are around the guitars." We didn't want to have a tune written for full band with the guitars floating on top. We wanted to write the guitars right in the middle of it and have everything else sort of surround. It's a slightly off way to describe a slightly abstract thing, but that's why it is different from **AArt**. A few of the tunes in **AArt** where the melody lines are floating... and we wanted actually to engineer the guitars right back into the middle of the sound.

**GC:** I'm really pleased with **American English**. We really worked hard on this one. This is a lot of work. It took quite a long time. And it's always daunting. We put our heart and soul into it. When we go back tomorrow, we're going to start thinking about the next one. You can't just knock out a CD. Also, our fans... they'll say, "I really love your CDs. You're so consistent. You make such good CDs." So you just feel like you have to make every single one as good as possible. And that's hard. It's a lot easier, actually, for the gigging than the writing because writing is thought.

**MG:** It's just a wrestling thing, continually. Not only do you have to get that gem of an idea... well, it's raising a child, all in six months. You get this little idea and you think, "is it worthwhile working on this?", and you work on this for awhile. It could take the wrong way, and then you bring it back.

**GC:** We get very involved in that. Then you have to play it for someone else.

**MG:** That's right. You present it to somebody and in a split second they go, "Yeah. I don't like that one. How about this one?" It's ruthless! You sort of put these things out there and either they survive or they don't.

**GC:** The funny thing is that it's very different when we're listening to something that we'd just written, say, and we're playing it to someone else.

**MG:** You suddenly listen to it with very different ears.

**SV: *How much do the other band members contribute to the music?***

**GC:** Writing wise, they have done quite a lot. On this last one, not so much.

**MG:** All the guys sort of come up with ideas. They've come up with some great ideas, but they're not really guitar ideas, so that's hard for them. Fred will often give us six or seven tunes and say how about those for starters. We think these are some really good tunes, and they sound great on the piano, but it's very hard to translate it. The translation may not work. It's a tough one. Very often we'll think, "That's not really going to happen on guitar." It sounds fine as it is. I'd use that one myself, do something else with that. It's probably the same with Frank and GG.

**GC:** Some of the ideas are like a vibe when you listen to it. Frank might come up with a bass line and you listen to it and you like it. It's got a feel and a vibe and that spurs you on to tunes, harmonies, and other sections. That's also the hard thing about writing. Your first [step], then get all the rest – the middle and the end. Sometimes it's quite easy to get the first section, but then to get the next two.

**SV: *What does the future hold for Acoustic Alchemy?***



**MG:** Dim the lights and get the crystal ball out. (laughs)

**GC:** I guess, more of the same.

**MG:** The nice thing about, in a way, doing what we do... being at sort of the jazzier end of the market... is there's no credibility lost in doing it 'til you fall down, if you can make it last and work that long.

**GC:** I suppose it's also up to the fans, as long as they keep coming, isn't it?

**MG:** We just do what we do, and keep trying to do it as best we can. We always want to keep trying fresh and interesting things, otherwise there's no point there, isn't it? I can't understand people who do that in this sort of genre because there's no more money in it. You can make steady money in all sorts of jobs, so unless you actually do anything worthwhile, create something valid, then you might as well do something else.

**SV:** *I have one more question. At the end of the day, when the show is over or the CD has finished, what do you want people to take away? What do you want them to get from your music?*

**GC:** That they've had a good time and that they go away feeling elated, so they come back again.

**MG:** Just that it touched them in some way. People have all got their own favorite tunes from all the CDs, and they'll say [a particular song] is their favorite. The people who come and say, we played this at our wedding. Key moments of their lives and they're playing our stuff.

**GC:** We have those moments, too.

**MG:** Yeah, it's powerful stuff going on.

**SV:** *Okay. Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure talking with both of you tonight.*

**GC:** Thank you.

**MG:** Thanks a lot.

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