

# HYPNAGOGUE

ONE LISTENER'S OPINION ON AMBIENT & ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Interesting position to be in. On the one hand, I was a little daunted at the idea of tackling Ken Elkinson's three-disc/six-volume monster compilation, *Music for Commuting*. I mean, how much can you say in one review about this much music? On the other hand, a funny thing kept happening as I shuffled around my iPod review queue. It seemed like any time I'd come across something catchy, nicely developed and interesting, it was one of Elkinson's tracks. I finally took all three discs, 60 songs' worth, shoved them into one playlist, loaded it onto the 'pod and took a big running dive into nothing but Ken Elkinson's music.

When you consider that Elkinson is better known for CDs of solo piano works that have found their way onto various "Best of" lists put out by places like Zone Music, *New Age Reporter* and *New Age Voice*, and that he just sort of decided on a whim to throw his hat into the ambient music ring, you might figure that the results would be hamfisted or misguided. And you'd be wrong. He's on the mark more often than not with each of his themed discs. What's more, he does so without much evident straining or reaching.

The first disc (Monday-Tuesday) is filled with soft-edged pads and tinkling electronics, a perfect wind-down flow. I think the lead track, "Unfolding" is the weakest piece, but after that it all evens out, quiets down and gets quite smooth rather quickly. Certain moments rise up: the glisten-and-shimmer twinkling in "Incandescence"; the vibrating, melodic-like whisper in "Soleri"; the sense of longing that haunts the movement of "Far Rockaway (Gulls)." This disc makes for a good repeat listen at the end of any day.

On his web site, Elkinson refers to the music on the mid-week pair (Wednesday-Thursday) as "upbeat 80s -inspired synth anthems." I'm not sure that "upbeat" is the right word for most of this disc. These tracks feel somewhat lighter in tone than anything on disc 1, but are still laid back. It's 13 tracks before a solid rhythm kicks in. Until then, though, he does float majestically swelling swaths of synth in tracks like "Stephanie Seymour," "The Tapestry" and "Ascend," so I'll give him latitude on the anthem part. When he does get around to something punchier, beginning with "John Hughes," my old New Age ears pick up a memory of Ray Lynch gently percolating around the sound. It's even stronger in the feel-nice track "Solitude."

Thursday and Friday ostensibly offer Elkinson's "futuristic" take on things—but again, coming out of the gates with the relaxed keyboard melody of "Changes from the Sea" and the mesmerizing New Age-guitar softness of "Locusts," what you've got here is just more good electronic music in keeping with the flow that's come before. (Hmm...maybe I was better off not referring to Elkinson's web site!) Yes, there are sweeping washes of electronics mulling around in the background on some of the tracks, but the feel they impart is just good harmony, nothing bespeaking the future per se. That being said, I do like the whooshing spacemusic feel of "Flash Forward" and the robotic tapping at work behind the long pads of "Typewriter, Dentist."

Elkinson's pieces are all roughly pop-song length—three and half to four and a half minutes on the whole. They're quick hits of easily aurally digestible ambient goodness, but don't write them off as musical snack food. These are solidly constructed pieces, whole and well-formed and a pleasure to dig into. It became clear, a couple of listens in, that he's clearly paid attention to the way the music flows across the sets, lightening and shifting as it goes, picking up that touch of rhythmic texture. The week-long story becomes complete by the final track of the last disc. Whether you're listening to one or all three, it comes off as an impressive first foray into ambient from a very talented artist—to which I say: welcome to the neighborhood, Ken. I hope you'll stick around.

Available from Ken Elkinson's web site.

- John Shanahan