

Ken Elkinson: Holiday sounds of chill

by Jonathan Maseng

When musician Ken Elkinson began receiving kudos for his Christmas album, he knew it was time to return to his roots. "I started feeling guilty that I was selling my people out," Elkinson, 40, said, speaking by phone from his home in Los Angeles. While he was in esteemed company among Jews who'd done Christmas albums or written Christmas songs — boldface names like Bob Dylan, Mel Tormé, Irving Berlin and Johnny Marks, to name but a few — Elkinson was ready to tackle Chanukah.

This year, Elkinson has become a double threat, releasing a pair of albums, "Chanukah Ambient" and "Christmas Ambient," for the holidays. Ambient, a style of music popularized by artists like Brian Eno, Vangelis and Tangerine Dream, features heavy use of synthesizers to create a very atmospheric, often mellow tone. It may be most recognizable to people who've seen 1980s movies like "Legend," "Blade Runner," "The Keep" and "Chariots of Fire," all of which heavily feature ambient pieces in their soundtracks.

For Elkinson, the choice to do ambient music was "more personal than musical." A longtime pianist whose earlier albums were almost exclusively piano music, Elkinson's children were a big part of his switch to ambient music — the form allows the composer to lay down one layer of sound, take a break to help out with the kids, and then go back into his studio to work. Elkinson said he also loves the depth of the music. "I like stuff where there's a lot of complex things going on in the background," he said.

Elkinson achieved some fame for his ambient compositions after his boxed set "Music for Commuting" was written up in The New York Times, The Washington Post and on CNN. "I'm still kind of baffled by it," Elkinson said of the album's wide appeal, which was heightened due to its release just before Carmageddon, the weekend-long closure of Los Angeles' hyper-busy 405 freeway in 2011. It was a lot of attention for an album that Elkinson says had its genesis in his own need to calm down while driving. "I can't stand watching people eat meals and shave and put on makeup and drive [at the same time]," the New Jersey native said.

Elkinson's "Chanukah Ambient" album is certainly different from most Chanukah albums on the market, and he's happy about it. "Some people are probably going to hate it," he said, adding, "I have really thick skin, I'm totally fine with it. I just got tired of hearing the same songs over and over in the same way."

Crafting the album became something of a learning process for Elkinson and deepened his understanding of the winter holiday. "I learned through this process that 'Ocho Kandelikas' is not a traditional Chanukah song; it's actually something that was written in the '80s," said Elkinson of the song written by Bosnian Flory Jagoda, which people often think is a classic melody. "I feel more proud of the Chanukah music."

Growing up, he said, he remembers Chanukah being a holiday that brought his family together, in a time before his parents divorced. "We didn't get fancy presents. I always wanted an Atari and a dog and HBO and sugar cereals; those are the four things I always wanted for Chanukah, and I never got any of that stuff." Like many former kids, he now remembers the holiday more for its gift of joy than for anything material. "It was a really happy time in my life."

Today, Elkinson is excited about celebrating the holiday with his own kids. "I like passing the traditions on that I had as a child," he said. And of course, there's also the music. "They sing the songs the whole year. It's funny watching them."

Elkinson hopes his own album helps "calm people" during a time of holiday stress and brings them a "different perspective" on the familiar celebration. "It's not like the Chanukah music you know," Elkinson said.

"Why just do another boring dreidel song?"

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