



Muhlenberg grad creates music to chill out by

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By Steve Siegel, Special to The Morning Call

Your holiday guests have departed, you've just figured out how to program that Droid X smart phone you got for Christmas and you've survived another New Year's Eve party. Time to sit back and chill out.

Muhlenberg College grad Ken Elkinson might just have the medicine you need — "Music for Commuting," his just-released box set of ambient instrumental music. Although conceived as an antidote for that stressful drive to and from work, this spacey blend of synthpop, space rock and new age instrumentals is a soothing tonic for anyone finding himself or herself stressed out any time or place.

Brian Eno, a British composer, music theorist, and record producer, is generally given credit for first coining the term "ambient music." The album notes accompanying Eno's 1978 opus "Ambient 1: Music for Airports" defines it as "music designed to induce calm and space to think; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting."

Think of ambient music as therapy rather than entertainment, treatment rather than a treat.

Elkinson created a six "volume" collection of three CDs with 60 tracks, for a total listening time of well over 200 minutes.

"I just love the fact that you can just get lost in it, you don't have to think too hard with it, you just kind of mellow out with it," says Elkinson, 38, who lives in Venice Beach, Calif. "And when I put some of these songs on in the car, it just makes me less angry when some insane driver cuts me off."

Elkinson's ambient compositions have received airplay on more than 100 radio stations, in-flight audio programs and satellite radio networks. He's also recorded a half-dozen solo piano CDs of original material, as well as covers of some 1970's pop favorite such as Joni Mitchell and Neil Young, and a disc of improvised Christmas classics. His solo piano style is introspective and frequently tranquilizing, in the style of George Winston.

With "Music for Commuting," Elkinson takes the ambient theme and goes a step further, turning his set into something of a concept album, with each disc conveying a different sonic mood.

The first, labeled "Monday and Tuesday," is somewhat dark and menacing. The second, "Wednesday and Thursday," is more upbeat with 1980s-inspired synthpop anthems. The third takes off into the spacey and futuristic.

"I would be lying if I said the title isn't an homage to Brian Eno, although I didn't really listen to 'Music for Airports' until after I recorded the project," says Elkinson, who listens to everything from classic rock to jazz, gospel, rap, and even Frank Sinatra standards. What one does hear in a lot of Elkinson's music is the soothing integration of synthesized vocals and electronic elements evocative of many film scores, most notably James Horner's soundtracks for "A Beautiful Mind" and "Titanic."

There's also lots of sibilant bells, celestial gongs and lyrical anthems recalling the blissful melodies of groups like Alphaville and The Moody Blues. The track titles, with provocative names such as "Snowday" and "Solitude," are somewhat arbitrary, since Elkinson farmed out most of the songs to friends and family for naming.

"Definitely there's lots of film stuff in there — I really love movie soundtracks. Actually, when I first moved out here six years ago I got an offer — I'm not making this up — to do gay porn movie soundtracks. But I ended up finding a day job doing office work at Nestle, so I took that instead. I don't know which would have paid better," Elkinson says.

"Music for Commuting" is a beautifully packaged collection. The three CDs, each in its own vinyl sleeve, all fit into a nicely crafted cardboard box.

Paintings of the late Danish modernist Ib Geertsen grace the CD box cover, individual CD covers and liner notes. Elkinson says he plans to donate a portion of the proceeds of the project to the ALS Association, a nonprofit organization aggressively searching for new treatments for Lou Gehrig's disease.

Elkinson, who grew up in Cedar Grove, N.J., started playing the piano at the age of five. Bach and Mozart finally gave way to jazz and pop by the time he was in high school. "My parents never forced me to practice — they kind of used reverse psychology on me and said it was alright if I didn't. I guess it worked. I said 'Ok, I'll show them,' " he says.

In 1990 Elkinson enrolled in Muhlenberg as a business and economics major, but also took classes in recording studio techniques and music composition, even drum lessons from Douglas Ovens, now head of Muhlenberg's music department.

"The best thing about Muhlenberg was that the arts building had these practice rooms where you could literally play a baby grand anytime you wanted," he says. "That's when I started composing for the first time."

Elkinson's exposure to baby grands at Muhlenberg seems to have developed into an obsession, and in a roundabout way led to his ambient music project.

"I always wanted a baby grand, but we live in a really small house and there's no space. I just got tired of writing piano stuff on a digital piano and then going to a studio and recording it, so I thought I'd see what I could do at home. I started messing around with just one song, and before I knew it, in six months I had over 80 songs," he says.

"Messing around" for Elkinson means sitting down at his Nord Lead 2X synth and basically whatever comes out, comes out. "I play a lead track, then go back and layer stuff on top of it with five or six other synthesizers. I don't do a lot of editing of all the sound patches — I just kind of go with what's already there. The melodies aren't super complex — its not Radiohead cool — but there's a lot of stuff going on in the background, little beeps and pings, kind of like a cardiac monitor," he says.

For Elkinson, making music is more hobby than profession. His day job in risk management for an insurance company pays the bills and takes up most of his time. Yet his business courses at Muhlenberg have come in handy, especially in 1996, when he formed his own music production company, August Son Productions, to handle the distribution and marketing of his work.

"I wish I could support my music full-time, but with four year-old twins and a full-time day job, it's just not possible," Elkinson says. "I'm also realistic as to how much you can make in a musical career. I know there are people out there who do it, and I totally respect them, but the fact is I want to have a house, nice things, and not be totally in debt."

Steve Siegel is a freelance writer.

Jodi Duckett, editor

jodi.duckett@mcall.com

610-820-6704

'MUSIC FOR COMMUTING'

- What: Three CD-set of instrumental ambient music by Muhlenberg College grad Ken Elkison
- How much: \$20 for the box set; \$10 each for individual CDs
- Where available: <http://www.kenelkinson.com>, iTunes, Amazon, other web-based music stores