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A Chat With The Guy Behind 'Music for Commuting,' Which Is As As Ignorable As It Is Interesting

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By [Peter Holstin](#)



Photo courtesy of Ken Elkinson

Friday, 5:30 PM. Los Angeles. I'm in my beaten-up Honda Civic, heading straight for gridlock traffic on the 110 South. I twist the volume knob on my CD player, and blissful sound fills my vehicle. Heavenly synthetic choir voices reach into the stars. Synthesizers burble and glimmer. In L.A., congestion and smog is a thing of legend. It causes road rage and innumerable accidents. But a local composer named Ken Elkinson has come up with a heavy-duty palliative to this most unholy of urban experiences—[Music for Commuting](#), a 12-volume album series designed to induce calm through ambient music. So here I am, eager to see if the medicine works.

Elkinson, 42, takes a populist approach to experimental music. Recent projects include ambient interpretations of Halloween music, Irish folk songs and American patriotic standards like the [Marines' Hymn](#). A committed self-promoter, one of his big goals right now is to convince *Parade* magazine—the Sunday supplement that appears in more than 700 newspapers across the country—to print a download link to *Music for Commuting*. He doesn't make much money off his music, and that doesn't bother him. But it seems he does want to reach as many listeners as possible, and hopefully offer them a suitable soundtrack for their lives.

"I have a big Wiccan following," he tells me. "They want me to come to their church in Minnesota and do a live show. I think they do, like, sacrifices or something."

The first six volumes of *Music for Commuting* came out in 2011. Around that time, a major stretch of L.A. highway was about to get shut down for repairs in an event that locals were calling "Carmageddon." To help them out, Elkinson released his albums for free on [his website](#), and the music won him so much media attention and fans that he recently decided to drop another batch. Vols. 7-12 came out in February, and each record is tailored for a certain day of the week. *Next Monday/Next Tuesday* are slightly moody, fitting for those dreary days just after the weekend. *Next Wednesday/Next Thursday* are more uplifting, to go along with that mid-week groove. And what about *Next Friday/Above Beyond*? That's the extra-potent stuff—dense synth tones and celestial ornamentations meant for only the most grueling of auto excursions.

In my car, I hit the gas pedal, gathering speed on the freeway. But soon I slow to a crawl as I enter a massive throng of cars lurching through Downtown. The sky is overcast, and red brake lights dot the cityscape. Occasionally the road will give way and we'll all inch forward, 10 MPH tops. All in all it's fitting that I'm listening to a track, "Lucid," whose alien synths and warm organs conjure the image of a space shuttle slowly orbiting the moon. Bored, I turn off at the nearest exit and make my way onto the slightly less congested city streets, eager to have an adventure by getting lost.

Drivers in L.A. tend to be aggressive. Switch on your turn signal, and they'll hit the gas so you can't pull in front of them. Roll up to a stoplight, and you might

need to slam on the brakes when someone jumps the gun making a left turn. I've only lived in the city since July, but already I've honed a list of pet peeves and verbal responses: "GOD DAMMIT!"; "WHAT THE FUCK!"; etc. etc. At some point I figure I'll eventually get over it and drive without spite. But for Elkinson, who's lived in the city for twelve years, the stress has only gotten worse with time.

"You feel like you've seen everything, and then once in a while you'll see something that's even crazier," he says. "I saw a bus driver from a city bus reading the paper—while he was driving a bus. Not a private citizen—a professional bus driver from the city of L.A., a Metro bus driver, full-on newspaper-on-the-steering-wheel while he was driving."

Elkinson works a day job in risk management, and every weekday he makes a 20-something mile commute from Venice to Encino. Depending on the hour of the day, this drive can take anywhere from 35 minutes to well over an hour, and by now, he says pretty much anything pisses him off—drunk drivers, motorcyclists splitting lanes, streets that get backed up for no apparent reason. "I'm always like, 'There better be blood to have this kind of traffic. There better be a car on the side on fire,'" he says. "And then there's not, which is ridiculous. What is it for?"

But Elkinson realized he needed something to chill him out when he started overhearing his kids parrot his angriest commuter catchphrases.

"I swear to God, I'd be at the supermarket and my little girl would be in the cart," he says, "and she's like, 'Move the fuck out of the way, grandma!'"

Music for Commuting doesn't have the elegant simplicity of that other album of designer calm, Brian Eno's 1978 classic *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. On that album, Eno took an open-ended approach, building theoretically endless pieces by weaving together different lengths of tape loops of piano, synthesizer, and voice. Elkinson's style is more straightforward, beginning with a lead part—usually played on one of his many synthesizers—and spiraling out from there. Still, he achieves the same goal that Eno once [set down](#), of making music that's "as ignorable as it is interesting." In an otherwise hectic environment, *Music for Commuting* provides a bubble of calm.

Making my way through Downtown and eventually into Hollywood, I become subdued by the music. My eyes are glassy, my neck muscles relaxed. Thirty, forty-five, sixty minutes pass, and I don't have a care in the world. In a way, it feels like my entire driving experience has been reframed. When I cruise by a hulking indoor mall, a track called "Architecture" comes on the speakers. The synths stretch out like vapor trails over an almost imperceptible beat, and my eyes widen to the sights before me. The long curved lines of the building. The glowing lights of the exterior. The escalators zigzagging down the side. "Wooooooow," I murmur. I feel like an interstellar traveler, passing an enormous starship.

Since putting out the first six volumes of *Music for Commuting*, Elkinson has heard from people all across the world, attesting to the power of this ambient epic. Naturally, not all of them live in traffic hell-zones, and the music isn't useful strictly for commuting, either. It's wonderful to listen to on headphones, rich with little details. And a couple of Elkinson's kids put the music on as they go to sleep—which, when you think about it, should serve as a reminder that while this music can calm you down, it might also dull your alertness, making it harder to anticipate roadway hazards.

“I haven't gotten any lawsuits yet, so I am thinking if it does dull your ability to drive defensively, it must not do it too excessively!” Elkinson says, when I bring this up. “I have read about 100 articles about the benefits of relaxing driving music, and only one that said classical music is the worst to drive to because it is too relaxing.”

For my last stop, I head into West Hollywood—a bustling, fashionable city that, in my experience, has always been an incredibly hectic place to drive through during rush hour. Interestingly enough, as I cruise around looking for particularly hairy intersections, nothing happens. Nobody cuts me off. Nobody speeds in front of me. I don't get upset or worked up. Maybe it's just an unusually calm Friday night. Or maybe, just maybe, *Music for Commuting* let me see the road in a benevolent new way.

Peter Holslin drives a lot, and he's also on Twitter - [@peterholslin](#)

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