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Musician and Former Resident Detours From Piano into Ambient Music in New CD

Former Livingston resident Ken Elkinson has been making music since he took up the piano at age five. Now, more than 30 years later, he has released his tenth CD, a boxed set of ambient music entitled *Music For Commuting*. It represents a new

direction for the musician, who concentrated on solo piano for his first nine albums. By contrast, ambient, which often incorporates synthesizers, is described as "focusing on sound and space rather than melody and form, intentionally created to be used as

both background music and as music to actively listen to."

Elkinson, who currently lives in Los Angeles, has a "regular day job" in the insurance industry, but maintains a healthy music career on the side, with an in-home studio. In addition to his CDs, released on his own label, "August Son," and distributed abroad by Universal, he has done a lot of work creating music for documentaries, television shows, and films, including programs on the Learning Channel and MTV, and the recent independent project *Touching Down*. His music will also be the background score of a forthcoming American Airlines video.

A 1990 graduate of Livingston High School, Elkinson moved from West Drive to Atlanta and New York before settling into a beachside home in L.A. He loves the warm weather and living near the beach, but the house he shares with his wife and twin four year old sons doesn't have much room for a full sized piano, he says — which helped fuel an interest in composing on synthesizers. "We have no room for a baby grand piano... It's hard to get inspired on a digital piano sometimes." But the digital instrument lends itself perfectly to ambient music, and although a radical departure from his earlier works, the detour into ambient was, he says, "one I really enjoyed. Frankly, after 33 years on the piano, I was getting a little sick of it and I wanted to try something new."

He found that ambient style came very easily to him. "When I sit down to compose on the piano, it's a very careful, precise process," he explains. "But the ambient... I just sat down and it sort of flowed." Unlike the methodical, sometimes laborious work of piano composition, Elkinson explains, "I usually started with a cool sound from one of the synths and took it from there. Sometimes I would come up with an idea, write some chords down and go with it. Many other times I improvised on the fly. Once the initial track was completed, I would go back and layer different sounds on top. While it is not 'Radiohead cool,' there is a lot of stuff going on in the background of most tracks. Most of my original

piano work involves painstaking advanced composition, so this was a total change in direction."

The whole process took about six months to complete, he says. "I got on a roll and ended up with 80 songs." Sixty of these songs ended up on the boxed set, which Elkinson decided to call *Music For Commuting*. The other 20 will be released in the near future. "When I started this process, I numbered each song or scratch idea. I ended up with a total of 168 individual ideas, probably about 80 to 90 full tracks. *Music For Commuting* contains 60 tracks, and there will be a 20 song out-take CD released in 2012."

Despite the collection's name, the music is not designed specifically to calm down irate drivers – as some albums are. "When I came up with the title, I meant it more as music for commuting through life," Elkinson notes, adding with a laugh, "I know, it sounds lame. I can assure you it is the deepest thought I had all year!" The title, he admits, is also a homage to Brian Eno's *Music For Airports*. "I would be lying if I said it wasn't. After all, Brian Eno is the godfather of ambient music. However, I really did not listen to *Music For Airports* until after I finished recording this project. What I did is more inspired by Pink Floyd and a lot of '80s pop music I grew up with."

Music For Commuting comprises a total of six different albums, the first five named for the days of the work week. As described by Elkinson, "*Monday* is dark and droning. *Tuesday* is also a little on the dark side, but brightens up at some points. *Wednesday* is filled with what I refer to as upbeat anthems. *Thursday* has the lion's share of what I call 1980s synth music. *Friday* starts to get surreal and futuristic. And *Beyond* is straight out of the 2050s – totally spacey." The genre often includes "samples" – bits of outside sounds looped in – and Elkinson remains true to the form: "I used one sample of some seagulls very faintly in the track 'Far Rockaway.' Don't worry – I got full permission!"

Elkinson says he has been questioned about the rather surprising monikers of two of the songs, "Steph-

anie Seymour" and "John Hughes."

"I am terrible at naming songs," he says, "so I farmed out the majority of the song titles to my friends and family. A friend came up with 'Stephanie Seymour,' which inspired me to come up with 'John Hughes.' The latter track reminded me of the background music in all his movies." Noting "it was a great loss when he passed away," Elkinson was happy to pay tribute to the late film director.

There is also a track called "Lancer." Was this a salute to his hometown high school? "Yes, I believe this is a bit of a Livingston reference. One friend from LHS came up with 'Lancer' as a name for the song, partially as a reference to our Livingston days, partially, I think, because it maybe had some medieval undertones." He adds, "I usually don't ask too many questions about the song names – I'm just grateful because it is one less song to name!"

One departure from the ambient formula for Elkinson was the brevity of his individual tracks. Ambient tracks tend to run long; ten, 12, 15 or 20 minute pieces are not unusual. Elkinson's, however, average three to four minutes in length. "I look at them as little sketches. Due to my schedule and all of the other things going on in my life, I could only make them three to four minutes each. That's because after the first main track was recorded, I went back and layered tons of extra tones and sounds on top... and three to four minutes was about the max amount of time I could sneak away without the kids noticing, as they like to press buttons and mess with my studio!"

Although he is not ready to abandon his piano roots – more solo piano CDs, including a collection of a lullabies, are in the works – Elkinson plans to do more ambient as well. He was recently tapped to create some ambient style Chanukah music for the Sirius satellite music network, and would like to expand that effort into a whole collection of ambient holiday music, encompassing Christmas, Kwanzaa and Eid as well. Also on the horizon is a vocal acoustic rock/folk CD, he says. "But I plan to take two years of voice lessons before doing that! I will probably return to more ambient music down the road, as I really enjoyed this project."

Music For Commuting and Elkinson's other CDs are available on iTunes, Amazon.com, CD Baby, and other retail outlets, as well as Elkinson's website, www.kenelkinson.com.