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I “met” Ken Elkinson about ten years ago when I reviewed his first CD, “Midnight Conversation,” for “Wind and Wire” magazine. He has released three albums since then, and is working on three more right now. Along with great music, Ken’s CDs have some of the most interesting cover art and liner notes I’ve seen. Here is our recent interview:

Ken was born and raised in New Jersey. The son of an insurance broker (his dad) and a public relations worker for a homeless organization, Ken has one brother, two stepbrothers, and a stepsister. One of his stepbrothers is a musician who goes by the name of Gonna Get Got. “He actually sampled one of my songs playing backwards and put it into one of his tracks. It is a mix of rap/punk/pop - definitely not safe for little children to listen to!”

KP: How old were you when you started taking piano lessons?

Elkinson: I was five. My next-door neighbor was starting college as a music major, and I was her first student. I read somewhere that if you start taking lessons at age five and someone else starts at age nine, you are both going to be at the same skill level at age ten, but I am not sure if that has been verified!

KP: I hadn’t thought of it that way, but I think that’s probably true in many cases. How long did you take lessons?

Elkinson: About thirteen years, starting with classical and changing over to jazz and pop in high school. I studied improvisation, composition, and recording studio engineering in college.

KP: Were you encouraged to improvise or compose by your teachers?

Elkinson: With my first teacher I was too young. My main classical teacher absolutely forbade it, and that was one of the reasons we parted ways. My jazz/pop teacher in high school encouraged it 100%.

KP: Do you play any other instruments?

Elkinson: I studied saxophone, clarinet, French horn, guitar, bass, and drums. I can play most of the woodwind and brass instruments, but I cannot get the hang of violin. I was in band, orchestra, and marching band. It was definitely not the coolest activity, but I’m glad I stuck with music - especially since the ladies seemed to appreciate it as I got older.

KP: Did you enter music competitions?

Elkinson: From about age nine to fifteen, I competed in classical competitions and adjudications. My piano teacher’s students would all pack into her fake wood panel station wagon and go to these competitions. I never seemed to get nervous and always did okay. I think it helped me develop the thick skin I have today in terms of critics. Looking back, it was probably not the healthiest environment for kids - to have their mistakes and flaws pointed out by a judge - but my parents never forced me to do any of this - I did it because I wanted to.

KP: How old were you when you started improvising?

Elkinson: I got a lot of fake books from my teacher in high school with the melody lines for the classics and improvised on those songs. That led me to start writing my own stuff.



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KP: How old were you when you wrote your first song?

Elkinson: I started working on the songs that became my first CD in the latter part of college, so probably around 20 or 21 years old.

KP: Did you play with any rock bands in high school and/or college?

Elkinson: I played with one band in high school, and another in college. The one in college was a super-talented bunch of musicians, but everyone had to play louder than the next person, and I think that has definitely damaged my hearing - we probably didn't play at Pete Townsend levels, but it is hard for me to hear people in noisy places.

KP: When did you know that you wanted to be a professional musician?

Elkinson: It is funny because I'm still not sure I would consider myself a professional. I have sold a good number of CDs, but never enough to support a family. It probably has not helped that I have lived in expensive places like New York City and Los Angeles most of my adult life. I like having nice things and being able to save for the future, so I guess, in a sense, I have been afraid to take the full-time music plunge. I could probably supplement my music earnings by teaching or being in a wedding band. While I have a ton of patience for kids, I don't think I have the patience for being a piano teacher and I don't want to give up my weekends to play for weddings!

KP: Who or what are your biggest musical influences?

Elkinson: I would probably need a few reams of paper to give you a straight answer. I listen to music almost round the clock. When I go into a parking garage and my satellite radio does not work, I switch to a CD immediately. I can't stand one second of silence. I listen to everything from pop to bluegrass to rap to gospel to country. I think I take bits and pieces from everything I listen to. For my own music, I'm definitely influenced by Chopin, Ravel, George Winston, Keith Jarrett, Rick Wakeman's solo piano stuff, and David Lanz.

KP: What inspired you to start composing your own music?

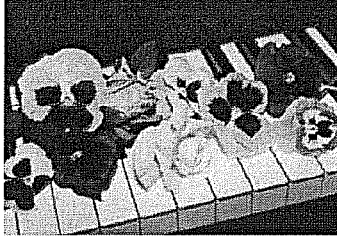
Elkinson: I'm not sure. My roommate in college could only fall asleep with music on, and a lot of the time, it was George Winston, David Lanz or Rick Wakeman. When I started composing, I probably had these composers in my head. Perhaps there was something subliminal. I know you are in touch with David Lanz - can we verify if there is any hidden stuff in his music??

KP: I'll have to check on that! Have you done any composing for films and TV?

Elkinson: I have had my tracks placed in some films and commercials - but I really don't have time to do any film/TV scoring. With so many TV and film production companies here in LA, I do try to get my tracks out as much as possible. When I first moved to Los Angeles, I was approached by an adult film company to do soundtracks for their movies. Luckily, I found a good day job before they sent me the full job description!

KP: That would have made a REALLY interesting interview! What has been your most exciting musical moment or experience so far?

Elkinson: I was in Italy and boarded Al Italia, and "Midnight Conversation" was the boarding music. Which reminds me, I think they still owe me money! With the huge number of CDs out there, I'm always happy when my stuff gets on the radio. I was also very excited when I was one of the first of my peers to license



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my music in Asia eight or nine years ago. Lastly, I get a lot of requests for help from fellow musicians, and it always gives me a good feeling to be thought of as someone who can be in a position to help others with advice. I never look at other solo piano artists as competitors, so I am always glad to help. I have been fortunate with people giving advice to me, so I like to "pay it forward" as much as possible.

KP: Are there any specific pieces that you feel say the most about who you are as a person?

Elkinson: That's an interesting question, because I see myself as a completely detached/separate entity from my music. If something sad happens in my life, I don't sit down and compose something downbeat or vice versa when something happy happens. I usually start with ideas and themes, and sometimes I start out on guitar. Some of these themes get expanded, and sometimes they sit around unfinished forever. I record most of my playing with a mini disc player so if I work on a theme or idea, I can go back to it. As a person, I am always joking around and being silly, but my music is pretty calm and serious. Go figure.

KP: Do you have any favorites of your pieces?

Elkinson: "Afterglow" from my CD, "Opal," and "After Sun Clouds" from "Revelry" are probably two of my least complex songs, however they are amongst my favorites because they bring up a lot of emotion and feeling when I listen to them. I know that may conflict with what I said about being detached from my music, but the detachment is much more from a writing standpoint. Sometimes I listen to my more complex pieces like the title tracks from "Opal" and "Cue," and I wonder, "Did I really write this?"

KP: Is there a particular philosophy that you try to convey in your music?

Elkinson: I'm not sure if you could call it a philosophy, but what I like to convey is a little hard to put into words. Think of it this way: You are listening to a piece of music. As the chords change, you are anticipating the next chord in your head. What I like to do with my writing is to not take the obvious choice for each chord, but something that totally works and is very thought-provoking. Instead of a C to an F, maybe a C to an A-flat. Does that make sense? I think my style has led some critics to say that my music is not an easy listen. However, I'm ok with that as I don't think I would be satisfied writing boring, trite stuff.

KP: Do you play your own compositions about the same each time or are they constantly evolving?

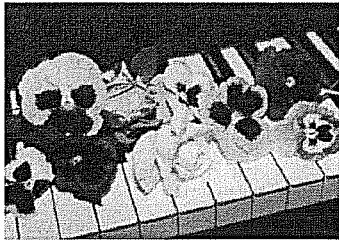
Elkinson: I never have a song defined to a "T" when I record it. I have a very good idea of how I want to play a song, but in the studio I like to take chances to see if I can pull off an especially difficult chord sequence or run. Later, when I revisit the songs for the now rare live appearances, I will play them a little differently as they continue to evolve.

KP: Do you write out your music or just keep it in your head?

Elkinson: I write out the chord progressions and some notes in my shorthand that I can generally understand in the studio.

KP: It's hard to believe so many years have elapsed since I reviewed "Midnight Conversation" for "Wind and Wire" - your first album and one of my first reviews! What have been some of the ups and downs of your musical career since then?

Elkinson: Wow, I didn't realize that was the beginning of the reviews! For the record, I am totally on Team Parsons as opposed to Team Solo Piano Publications. It is like the Angelina/Jen/Brad Pitt of the piano review



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world.

KP: Thanks, Ken. I have really appreciated your support through the transition.

Elkinson: I think the ups for me have been along the lines of getting my music in places where there are very few independent artists - like the airlines' in-flight audio. I also think over the years, my writing has evolved to where I have the ability to compose more complex pieces. I would say the downs are when I read stuff about The O'Neill brothers (a/k/a the Piano Brothers) and a few other piano artists who have sold millions of copies of their CDs, and I am totally baffled about how to get to that level. I'm not even close. I feel that the sound quality and compositions are there, but I have not figured out that magic sales formula. I'm sure it would help if I toured, but that is just not possible with my life now.

KP: What is your other job?

Elkinson: I am the risk and insurance manager for a large cement and concrete company. It's a great job! It's funny because even if I had an amazing opportunity to tour with my music, I would really think hard about leaving. I have this business side of me in addition to my creative side, but unless both are active I get bored very quickly.

KP: How has being the father of twins affected your piano and composing time?

Elkinson: I tried to get a lot of stuff recorded before they were born because I figured I would not have much free time afterwards! I was right, but now that they sleep very well at night (knock on wood), I do have time to compose. I have a 1960's Wurlitzer electric piano in our living room, and it is hilarious to watch the kids walk up, reach really high, and bang on the keys. (It would probably be even funnier if the Wurlitzers didn't keep appreciating in value so much, because mine is taking a pounding!)

KP: What kind of work does your wife do?

Elkinson: She does public relations for health care companies and worked out a deal where she works three days a week for an awesome company. She is also an amazing mom to the twins, and definitely makes up for my lack of skills in that area!

KP: Do you have any hobbies?

Elkinson: My wife and I love watching TV. We are suckers for home shows like "House Hunters," cooking shows like "Everyday Italian," and I will totally admit to being a regular viewer of "Gossip Girls," "The Office," and "30 Rock." Since we bought our house a few years ago, I discovered I like to garden. In LA, it is sunny about 325 days a year, so having a ten-minute walk to the beach is a great thing.

KP: What do you like to do in your free time? Besides waiting for a truck to drop a Bosendorfer outside your door!

Elkinson: Yes, generally I wait by the door for the elusive Bosendorfer, which is always one of my holiday wishes - selfishly ahead of world peace and tolerance. Now that Bosendorfer is owned by Yamaha, I think I may learn some basic Japanese to woo the new management. With sixteen-month-old twins, there's not much free time outside of them, work, and my music.

KP: Who are your favorite composers?

Elkinson: From the classics, definitely Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin, and Ravel. From the more modern