



## Interview with Ken Elkinson

BT Fasmer (\*) of NewAgeMusic.nu has interviewed Ken Elkinson about his solo piano albums. Read his discography here.

\* I have noticed that your music, from *Midnight Conversation* (1997) to the *Cue* (2006), tend to be very positive and uplifting. There almost no melancholy and even the sadness is beautiful (like the song *Beautiful Sadness* on *Cue*). Is it your goal to create music with a positive vibe, or is this something that comes naturally to you?

Ken: I am not sure if I can take credit for that being intentional! I think by nature I am more of a pessimist, which is something I am always trying to change about myself. I think of my four current releases *Revelry* and *Cue* are lighter, and *Opal* and *Midnight Conversation* are more serious – though even there I try not to get that dark. It is funny because right now I am putting the finishing touches on my next original piano CD – and there is one tracks I am wrestling with taking off the CD because it is too heavy. I sent a copy to my first piano teacher when I was five, to have her help make the decision.

\*What inspires you? Describe your creative process. Do you write notes, use a computer, etc.?

Ken: I know this may sound hard to believe, but I am not usually inspired directly by anything when I compose. It is not like I write a happy song because my kids were born, or I write a depressing song because I got into a fight with a relative. I usually sit down and come up with a riff or an idea. Sometimes I am able to expand on the idea immediately, sometimes I agonize for months. I record all my “writing” sessions with a mini-disc player, yet I rarely go back and try to revive anything I have not turned into a complete song. I don’t use my computer at all in terms of my piano writing, but I do play around with creating some electronic music using loops. That stuff has not seen the light of day, as I am so busy with my piano music, I never have time to finish anything else. However after I release my next original CD I am planning on a break from piano to do other types of music.

\* This year you have released two albums with music composed by others, *Borrowed Tracks* and *Generations of Yuletide*. Still you have a personal touch on each track. How do you make a classical song, like *Eleanor Rigby* or *Send in the Clowns*, "yours"?

Ken: That is a good question, I am not sure. I listen to music pretty much around the clock, and I am always looking for songs to interpret on the piano. I have a pretty good ear, and that combined with all the free chord charts you can find on the internet – gives me a good start. I try to pick songs that have not been done a hundred times – but even then sometimes that is not avoidable if I love the song. What I try to do with the arrangements in general on a cover song is to make the song as different as possible, while still being recognizable. I really respect people like Sting who can take a song, change it almost to the point of not knowing what it is, and still have the song come out awesome.

\* Your new Christmas album is quite different from most other releases, with a historical selection of songs: it is like a travel in time and geography. Tell us why you choose to do it this way.

Ken: I was a little wary going into recording a Christmas piano CD – as there are about a million of them out there, and a large number of them are pretty boring and repetitive. I am not claiming my CD is like the Beatle's White Album of Christmas music, but I don't think you can call it boring or a re-hash of everything else out there. I got some ideas from friends who are really familiar with the genre of Christmas music, and then I found some sheet music books with a wide range of songs. I tried to find some songs that were fairly obscure. I scoured over the internet and iTunes to see how many versions I could find of some of the lesser known songs I did. I think I succeeded at least partially, as one reviewer who claimed to be the foremost authority on Christmas music in the world said he had never heard of one or two of the songs I picked. In terms of the order, I just decided to put them in chronological order. However, I gave my father-in-law a copy, and he said that he was much more familiar with the newer stuff at the end. In hindsight, perhaps I should have gone in reverse order. Maybe when I sell out of this printing, I will go back and change it up!

\* To record piano is not easy. What kind of equipment do you use? Have you received any help in the studio?

Ken: I recorded my first CD *Midnight Conversation* on a Steinway. I remember sending a copy to one of my solo piano contemporaries, someone who I really liked their music. He wrote back and asked my CD was recorded on a keyboard, because he thought the sound was not that good. I said from that day forward, there would never be that question again. I discovered Bösendorfer pianos and it was love at first play. The two affordable studios in North America that had Bösendorfers were in Saskatchewan and West Palm Beach. I hate cold weather (sorry Norway!), and I have a grandmother who lives in Florida, so I chose that. I did my next 4 CDs on that Bösendorfer with Neumann mics and very little effects. That piano does not really need much. It is a mother/son team who ran the studio, and both are amazing musicians and freaks for good sound. In the middle of recording my upcoming CD, the mother and son went their separate ways, and the mom moved the piano to New York City. I was a little nervous because the piano went from being in this immaculate studio to a living room that was not even sound proofed. The newer songs turned out fine, though you may faintly be able to hear a dog barking in the background. Just kidding! However, I did my Christmas CD on a Yamaha out here in LA, as with 1 year old twins, it was hard to find the time to get to NYC for a few sessions. The Yamaha also had a good natural sound, which was helped along by Trevor Saddler's mastering. He did a lot of the Narada stuff, and really knows how to get the most out of a piano record.

\* You have one track with vocal, *Beautiful Sadness* with Tom Freund. Will there be more vocal on your coming albums?

Ken: I definitely hope so at some point – not on my next piano CD, but maybe after that. I have been plugging away at some vocal tracks for years, but can't seem to finish them. My two biggest challenges have been that I have a terrible voice, and that I am really bad at writing lyrics. Since my first CD, I always want to do a vocal track. I was a big fan of Tom's work, and never thought he would agree to it. He plays with Ben Harper, Jackson Brown, Victoria Williams – all these great people and has amazing albums himself. *Beautiful Sadness* is actually his song, originally done with just guitar and vocals. I re-worked the song for piano, and he just breezed into the studio, did two or three takes and we were done. His timing is so great, he is like the Sinatra of folk/pop/rock. A few other somewhat well known artists have expressed an interest in doing some vocal tracks, so hopefully I can pull that together at some point.

\* What kind of music do you like? Do you enjoy new age music in general, or only solo piano?

Ken: I don't actually listen to that much solo piano, or new age music in general. My kids have a radio in their bedroom, and they listen to the Spa (Relaxation) Channel on Sirius Satellite Radio round the clock. So that is mostly where I am exposed to that type of music. In terms of piano and/or new age artists, I love Keith Jarrett, George Winston, Ludovico Einaudi – maybe a few others. The rest of the time I listen to a huge variety of music – from rock to alternative to bluegrass to rap to Hawaiian to Brazilian samba. Some of my favorite artists are Steely Dan, Bruce Springsteen, Jose Gonzalez, Tori Amos and Sting. I can't stand being without music for even one music, so if I go into a parking garage and my satellite radio goes out, I switch to CDs immediately!

\* Thank you for the interview, Ken. Keep creating great music!