

Never Before Christmas Music

Ken Elkinson interview with Alycie Edrich

Ken Elkinson is a brilliant musician with a wonderful taste for music and it shows in everything he creates. Being a dabbler myself, I appreciate that his Christmas CD includes more than one genre. In my opinion, it spices up the album and makes it more enjoyable and less likely to grow old fast. I recently caught up with Ken for a quick interview and I was really surprised with his down-to-earth approach to the business. Unlike most musicians who have the "all or nothing" mentality, Ken likes working a full-time job and creating his music on the side-that's not to say that he's not okay with going pro full-time. But for now, he's happy to be doing what he loves and to be doing it on his terms. Just take a peek at what Ken has to say about his music, the industry, and how other artists can turn their love of music into a paying reality.

I understand that you recently created a new CD, *Generations of Yuletide*, that combines jazz, new age, and classical music-all on piano. How did you come up with the idea to combine such different musical styles onto one CD?

I don't know if it was on purpose! I never know how to classify myself. I improvised on all 16 tracks on the CD so there is definitely the element of jazz-more here than on my five other releases. When I was a child, I used to compete classically-so the classical genre is always imbedded inside me. As for new age, I have never liked that term-but my music always seems to be classified as that. *Generations* has elements of all those genres and I leave it to the listener to decide what he or she feels it most resembles. I am always open to new genre suggestions!

What do you hope your CD will bring to listeners?

I hope it will bring a fresh approach to the Christmas piano CD. Let's face it, there are a ton of Christmas piano CDs out there-and there is a lot of repetition and boredom. I picked some really obscure carols, and re-worked some of the more well known ones-almost to the point they are unrecognizable (hopefully in a good way.) I think my strategy is working at least initially, because one of the reviews I received was from a person who considers himself the foremost authority on Christmas music and even he was unfamiliar with one or two of the tracks!

Why did you choose to create your own music label versus going with an existing music label?

When I started writing my own music and releasing CDs (after I graduated college), there were only a handful of labels out there for my type of music-like Windham Hill and Narada. I found myself in the Catch-22 scenario of the fact that the labels wanted artists who already sold a lot of CDs, but no one provides any guidance on how to do that without a label. As I have gotten more established, I really appreciate the fact that I have been able to keep my publishing. With a strategic set of distributors and licensing agreements, I have been able to get my music into every major retail outlet. Especially with the rise of the Internet and digital music, that has really leveled the playing field. That's not to say I would never consider a larger existing label in the future, but for now I am fine with having my own independent label.

What have been some of the hardest things you've had to endure as a musician-business owner?

For me, it has been the fact that I have never been able to devote myself to music full time. I always seem to live in the most expensive places like New York City and Los Angeles, where it is just not financially possible for me to do music as a sole source of income. A lot of people have suggested that I supplement with teaching and playing weddings etc... However, while I really respect those two ideas, they are just not for me. I know it may sound "un-cool" for a musician to say, but I actually like my day job-with the stability, paycheck and benefits it provides. There is also the rejection level which is super high-but I think that is the case in most creative fields. It makes the successes even better-so I really don't mind it.

What is the best part about creating music?

I think coming from a classical background, I learned that even the hardest existing pieces of music are potentially possible if you are willing to devote your life to practice. Of course there is probably some innate talent required if you are going to reach the level of someone like Leon Fleisher. I certainly never got close to that! However, when you write your own material, there is the sense that you created something that no one else did. Sometimes when I listen to one of my more complex pieces, I say to myself, "Did I really write this?" There is also the part when people tell you that your music has helped them through a tough time, or that your music is the only CD their kid will fall asleep to. I don't write music to get a pat on the back but it is always nice when you get acknowledged. Even when a critic takes issue with something I have done/played, I am always appreciative because it means to me that the critic/writer is being honest.

What is the one bit of advice you'd like to leave new artists with?

Quite often I am asked for advice by new artists, and I am always happy to help. I have been fortunate that more accomplished musicians have generally been helpful when I have asked them for advice-so I am just "paying it forward!" What I usually tell them is to learn from artists doing similar music. Go to their websites, check out their live shows and see what is working for them. At the same time, try to find places for your music where no (or few) others have tried before. For example, if there is a brand new airline with only 2 planes, call up their corporate office and see if they will use your CD as boarding music. I like to tell them not to get discouraged, as it is a really tough business.