



A Chat With Ken Elkinson By Marco Piva

KEN ELKINSON is an American pianist who has until now released six albums: Midnight Conversation (1996); Revelry (2000); Opal (2004); Cue (2006); Borrowed Tracks (2008); Generations of Yuletide (2008). On his albums he plays piano, piano and then some piano – with the only exception of one only track from “Cue”, that features Tom Freund’s vocals. His website is www.kenelkinson.com. We have now the chance to exchange some words with him.

MP: Good day Ken, and thank you for having given MovimentiProg a chance to get to know you a little better.

MP: An obvious question: when and how did your passion for piano start? I am told by my parents that when I was about 2 or 3 years old I would walk on the keys of the old piano in our basement. My parents said that if I stopped walking on the piano, they would give me lessons. That sounded like a fair enough deal.

MP: When did you start composing your own pieces? When I was in my teen years, I competed classically – and had to beg my teachers to let me play popular and jazz. I did not start writing my own material until I was in college, when I had 24/7 access to baby grand pianos.

MP: I can read on your website that in your college years you played in a band. Did you ever think in the later years of going back to that situation, of playing in a band rather than as a solo artist? I still do think about going back to a band situation even to this day. The band I was in during my college years had an amazingly talented bunch of musicians. Everyone wanted to shine, and I think the way people went about it was to turn the volume up. My hearing definitely suffered as a result! When I lived in New York City in the early 2000’s, I played in another band, but that time around it was more of a folk/rock situation. I really enjoyed that, but there always seemed to be personality conflicts. Still, I really miss the band situation, because it tends to bring my playing to a higher level. I have little kids now, so it is really hard to find the time. However, living in Los Angeles there are tons of incredible musicians. I have one more solo piano record to release later this year – and I think after that I will get back into some sort of group situation. I will definitely keep you posted.

MP: Can you tell us something about how you compose? I usually don’t sit down to write with any pre-conceived notions. I am not one of those people who wakes up at 3 AM with music in my head. I just concentrate on riffs and ideas, and then expand them. I am listening to all different types of music around the clock, so I am always being influenced by a wide variety of artists and genres. Once I have an idea or theme, I work on it until it becomes a full song. Sometimes I will finish a whole song in a day or two. Other times, I agonize for months and end up scrapping the song. I record most of my writing sessions on mini-disc so I can go back later and review if there is anything worthy of expanding. However, I rarely seem to go back. I guess it is a comfort to me knowing all that material I have written is sitting on tape – yet I usually end up going with brand new stuff rather than re-hashing old material.

MP: How much of studio improvisation is there in the pieces we can hear in your albums, and how much has been carefully composed? With my original material, there is still quite a bit of improvisation. My pieces tend to evolve, even in the recording studio. I have a pretty good idea of what I intend to record, but I always go into the studio with the attitude that I am going to give it 1000 percent - even if it means messing up a lot. I have recorded a lot of my music on an incredible Bösendorfer piano. That piano alone inspires me to take chances I would not normally take when rehearsing. I can't really explain it that well - it is almost like the piano overtakes me! Even my improvised work - like my covers and Christmas CDs - I have an idea of what I am thinking beforehand, but sometimes I will try something new just to see how it turns out. A lot of the times, I end up keeping the stuff I made up on the spot instead of the material I had rehearsed and was planning to do.

MP: What effect did moving from New Jersey to New York to Atlanta and then to Los Angeles have on your music? All of those different places have such different vibes. However, I think for me it has been more about the space I have had to write my music. To this day never, I never had the space for a baby grand. So the large majority of what I have written has been originated on a Yamaha digital piano. I always seem to pick the most expensive places in the country (at least NYC and LA) - where you have no space. While I feel like I am getting to the end of my rope in terms of solo piano - I do often wonder what would have been if I had been able to compose primarily on a baby grand. I wrote the song "Afterglow" on my CD Opal on my mother-in-law's Steinway. While I am never a big Steinway fan, that is one of my favorite songs I have written, and I hope one day to have the space for a baby grand. So I think I will be inspired again. I don't think the place has so much to do with it, however to me New York City was so fully of energy and so crowded, I found it hard to write good stuff.

MP: Of course it is not easy to "translate" a well-known rock song into a piano-only piece, but you did it with "Little Wing" in "Revelry" and then in your "Borrowed Tracks" album. How do you pick which songs to cover, and how do you approach the task of rewriting them for piano? As I mentioned earlier, I am listening to music pretty much around the clock. I am always listening for interesting songs to cover. My goal with the cover songs is to pick stuff that leans more to the obscure side. Those seem to evoke a greater response from the listener. Like they say, "I can't believe you did that song, that's my secret favorite song that no one knows about." When I do the more well know stuff, I try to change it so that it is completely different, yet still recognizable. There have definitely been some exceptions, but for the most part - I try to make the take as interesting and thought provoking as possible. The other day I was playing around with the Police's "Wrapped Around Your Finger." Not sure if that will ever see the light of day, some songs just do not work no matter how hard I try. Dealing with the rights and permissions for cover songs is a total hassle - so I am not sure how many more I will do. When I go to license out my material, I can't license the cover songs easily - so that also makes it hard to put a cover or two on a mostly original album.

MP: Why "Generations of Yuletide", a Christmas album? [take this question as you prefer] I really had no plans to do a Christmas album as I would say at least three quarters of all solo pianists have one, and for me the large majority of them are pretty boring and repetitive. However, I was approached by a few record labels who asked me to do one, and since I have no problem selling out to "the man" - I obliged. The funny thing is that I have not even presented it to the labels this first year, as I seemed to do fine without them. I decided if I was going to do a Christmas album, the critics could rip it apart however they wanted, but they wouldn't get me for being either boring or repetitive! I tried to pick some obscure songs, and for all of the tracks I improvised for part of each song. I ended up having a lot more fun than I imagined, and both the critical and "listener on the street" reception have been both overwhelmingly positive. There is a critic here in the US who calls himself the worlds leading authority on Christmas music, and he told that he hadn't heard of some of the songs I did - so I was pretty proud of that fact. While I am not lining up studio time to do Generations of Yuletide Volume II, I have no regrets on giving the world yet another piano Christmas CD.

MP: All your albums have very peculiar cover arts. What do you want to tell us about them? How do you pick them? I am not sure if I should take that as a complement! Since my first CD *Midnight Conversation*, the album art has always been an important part of the entire package. My general pattern is that on a whim I ask an artist whose work is way out of my price range to help me – never expecting them to say yes. However, I have only been rejected one time and that was for my Christmas CD where my first choice just did not want her painting used as a CD cover. Now that I think about it, my second choice was probably even better than anything the first choice could have offered, so no hard feelings at all. In the end of the day, I am not sure if it is by luck or begging, but I have walked away with being able to use artwork from some of the biggest artists in the world – like illustrator Dave Cutler, pop artist Romero Britto, the Mark Rothko estate and now for my upcoming CD *Chuck Arnoldi* – a Warhol contemporary who is amazing.

MP: Besides the six albums released under your name, I read that you also worked on several soundtracks. Anything else that you do on the artistic side? I also play guitar and bass, and most of the wind instruments. As part of my break I plan to take from solo piano, have decided to commit to getting better at guitar. I also have a terrible voice, so I have not ruled out voice lessons. My wife's friend told me about this voice lesson class where you have to get up and sing in front of everyone, which seems both terrifying and great at the same time. I would love to learn how to paint and draw – I guess that is why I place so much emphasis on the art – because it is something I can't do to save my life.

MP: If you were not Ken Elkinson, would you buy Ken Elkinson's CDs? And would you go to a Ken Elkinson concert? Why, or why not? If I were not Ken Elkinson, I would probably say to illegally download my music. Just kidding, I think I would probably buy Ken Elkinson CDs. I put a lot of work in my music to try to distinguish it from the tons of other solo piano out there. I really put stock in trying to make my music as thought provoking as possible. I also spend a lot of time on the packaging, so that every CD usually has a poem and entertaining credits. I want to give the listener as much bang for the buck as possible. In terms of the live performance, while I don't get time to do much of that, I would probably do that as well. I always am trying out new cover songs live, and play my songs a bit differently from the CD.

MP: As you know, *MovimentiProg* is a portal dealing with progressive music in all its incarnations. How do you think that your music fits in the genre? I would be lying if I said my music was similar to say progressive artists like Rush or King Crimson. However, I think in the solo piano genre, I try to make my music as progressive as possible. With so much of the solo piano that has been released, it seems that even a little child can predict the next chord. By no means am I saying that I have anything close to the compositional skills of Bach or Beethoven. However, when I do my writing and chord progressions, as I write each chord I try to think of the obvious choice for the next chord. Then I try some other options until I come up with something that will make the listener say, "I did not expect that chord, but the more I think of it – that totally works." Sting and Steely Dan are the master at that.

MP: What is progressive music, in your opinion? I think the word progressive gets most often associated with the rock genre, however I look at music being progressive in all genres. To me, the word just means something that is above the ordinary, something that turns your head (or your ear) and makes you think differently. Something that builds on what is out there, and at the same time creates a new path. I spend a lot of time thinking about the Beatles, and Nirvana and how they transformed music. I always try to think up new combinations, like rap and classical music. There is the expression that there is no such thing as an original idea, so to counter that – there is progressive music of all types.

MP: Is there any contemporary pianist you get inspired from? Whom? I really like this solo piano artist named Ken Pedersen. He did an album or two a few years back and has totally be missing in action. I also really like Keith Jarrett and Ludovico Einaudi. Of course there is George Winston. I really most appreciate the solo piano artists who bring a lot of emotions and feeling to their music.

MP: To conclude, ask yourself a question and give yourself an answer. How do you feel about the high amount of rejection that undoubtedly comes not just with solo piano – but every genre in the music business? I know this may sound like a lie, but I never have had issue with the rejection. And believe me, I get rejected a ton – whether it is with distribution, press, record labels, licensing, radio stations....you name it. I think the rejection makes the successes even better. I read that there is something like 300,000 new CD releases each year – 3,000 CDs alone in the new age/relaxation genre that my music often gets classified under. If I can get in the Top 100 of Radio Airplay without paying for a music promoter, I think of it as a huge success. I never compose music to please the critics and reviewers, but it is also a great feeling when they like your music as well. Your friends and family are always going to tell you they like your stuff – but when the critics do, it gives you validation!

MP: Many thanks to Ken Elkinson for spending some of his time to talk to us. You can find more about him and buy his CDs at www.kenelkinson.com