



Mark
Hillis

Acoustic
Environment



Mark Hillis

Musician, Photographer and Digital Artist

*interview by Kris Swenson
for Art Anomaly*

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Musical genre -
Acoustic/Progressive/Jazz/World

LA MESA, California
United States

Mark Hillis is a musician, photographer and digital artist based in California. He has been playing guitar for over 22 years, and has explored photography & the digital art medium for over a decade. He humbly refers to his musical genre "music for driving and thinking that doesn't suck". Talent, modesty and a sense of humor...very cool.

On Hillis' latest cd, "Acoustic Environment", the strings blend beautifully and smoothly with acoustic guitar into classical/progressive/jazz movements - all very fluidly interwoven. Graceful and well composed, the pieces travel in and out of different time signatures & feature succinct & perfectly resolved endings. The bass lines add a nice rhythm counterpart to build the impact of the music. These are beautiful compositions, and very organic. Mark Hillis (in the vein of California Guitar Trio, King Crimson, Trey Gunn, Tony Levin, and all the top progressive guys--too many to name!) has created complex and captivating compositions that are extremely intimate in essence & passionate in nature.

Newest cd, "Acoustic Environments" features –
Mark Hillis : Acoustic Guitar
Tiffany Modell: Violin
Bryan Kuban: Bass
Tom Griesgraber : Chapman Stick
Jeff Hurt: Trumpet
Mike Bromann: Percussion
Ike Van Atta: Bass samples and Synth (track 5)

Cover art by Jeff Hurt.
Insert photography by Mark Hillis.



1. *Thank you for agreeing to interview with us! I enjoyed your artist statement, I couldn't agree more that an artist's work should speak for itself. What is your approach when conceptualizing a piece from a technical aspect? Do you first consider instrumentation, then collect musicians to work with based on that? What is your writing process as far as that goes?*

:-) Good question....I think that even though my music can be very technical in nature, I tend to not approach writing from a technical angle....yet somehow it sometimes ends up sounding that way LOL. Generally, my best writing comes when I'm not trying to compose. For instance, when I'm just lost in thought with the guitar in hand, and really just "doodling" around. I think maybe the conscious mind lets the creative side take over then and things start to come out. I believe that also at this time the culmination of your "style" seeps through as it's basically all instinctual when you're in this mode as an artist. Once I have a basic framework for a song, then my left brain might kick in as I try to piece sections together or create new parts. I do however try not to look at things from a technical aspect and try to remain open to trying things that might not normally work. For instance, I might try fitting 2 sections together that I wrote months apart and seeing if they work together in an unforeseen way....kinda like "hey, your chocolate's in my peanut

butter..."...hey, that tastes good! (remember the old commercial for Reeses?) :-)

Even though my style might sound more like CA Gtr Trio or King Crimson, I think my writing approach is more akin to Brian Eno. There's a book out there written about his composition style called: "Brian Eno: His Music & the Vertical Color of Sound". It's very good stuff.

To answer the other part of your question, I love seeing what other creative minds can add to my stuff, so I enjoy leaving some of the composition "open" and letting a talented musician like Tom, Jeff or Tiffany take it and run with it. It's amazing to see your piece change flavors right in front of your eyes to something that you hadn't quite envisioned.

2. *You have been playing guitar for 22 years now - is that both electric & acoustic? If not, how long have you been playing acoustic guitar, and do you prefer acoustic to electric? Do you play any other instruments?*

Yes, I guess it's actually like 25 years now. Wow! At least I haven't hit the classic Monty Python "I'm not old, I'm 37" yet :-).I started with electric and I was determined to be like Eddie. There was and still is only 1 Eddie. Of course then I discovered Joe Satriani, Yngwie, Jimmy (Page) and all the classics and thus began my hours of practice. I discovered Robert Fripp much later and really got into Crimson, but much after my style had already been formed (or deformed) from all those rock guitar heros. My first CD, "Harlequin" was recorded in 1990 and featured vocals by Jerry Harrison of the metal band Icon. The CD had a very "Whitesnake meets Queensryche meets Dio meets Pink Floyd" feel.

So, to answer the actual question :-), I later gravitated to the acoustic guitar because of the pureness of the sound. I've been playing it since about '96 I guess. I really like the acoustic now, but do still really enjoy the electric even though I don't get around to playing it much.

3. There are some strong King Crimson, Porcupine Tree, Tony Levin & California Guitar Trio influences in that song that make it such a progressive gem. That's my interpretation, but who are your influences and which players today currently inspire you the most?

Yes, I've been told this and do hear most of those influences in my work. Some of the sound comes from the Stick and Tom's style on tracks 2 & 4, but some is definitely my compositional style for certain tracks. I never set out to make any particular "style" when I wrote the songs, but there's no denying the fact that I have been listening to most of the above musicians and they must be influencing me :-). I haven't heard Porcupine Tree yet, but have heard of them and will go check them out ;-)

4. Very poetic song titles, who names the pieces?

I named them...thanks for the compliment :-)

5. "Shades of Red" is a very classical sounding piece, very well performed and starts very stacatto & blends in ambient swells to build up the piece. Then, it goes from slightly Celtic sounding to almost Flamenco flavored. Do you listen to a lot of eclectic music of those sorts?

Yes, I'm kind of a music sponge, and over the years have listened to just about everything except Country, so I guess it all just seeps out.

6. You also do photography & digital art, who and what are your influences in these areas?

I've thought about this one, and honestly I have no answer. Visually, we all see so much every day that it's so hard to track where we get ideas from. I never had photographer heroes at all like with the music, so I have no idea where my visual style came from. Some say Geiger can be seen in some compositions, and I definitely loved Aliens, but never really studied his stuff or tried to emulate him.

7. Your photos range broadly in subject from introspective, blurred/brooding seductive nudes to dark, Geiger-esque outspoken-type digital art. What are your favorite photography subjects, and what is your digital working method?

I'll have to say that I really do enjoy the digital medium. There's so much you can do with it, but, on the other hand, there something really satisfying about making an "analog" shot where you're really just working with light, perspective and composition. I go through phases. Sometimes I work just from a visual standpoint and don't try to say anything specific with the piece, but other times like with "Purgatory" and "Gemini" there's a definite "idea" or statement. Another thing that comes into play at times with any art form and it happens with photography is the "happy accident". Sometimes a piece evolves almost exactly as you intended, and sometimes it doesn't quite happen that way, but comes together more as an "accident" and ends up looking better. This happens to all artists. If they say it doesn't they're either perfect, ignorant, or they're lying. I think it's pivotal for an artist to not get caught up in his ego and if something is happening that he didn't plan and it's good, to go with it and fulfill it to it's potential. Also, I will be found at CD Baby and itunes among others shortly....

>> Interview by **Kris Swenson** for Art Anomaly

Mark Hillis links:

<http://www.myspace.com/markhillis>
<http://cdbaby.com/cd/markhillis>
<http://markhillis.com/>



(photo credit - self portrait by Mark Hillis)