

"MARTIN"- IZING: MARTIN TILLMAN AND "SUPERHUMAN" - A WELCOME RETURN OF THE LOST ART OF DISCOVERY

by CEJ

"Martin's album is an absolute blast to listen to. It combines his talents as an instrumentalist and songwriter with his unique abilities as a film composer, taking the listener on a colorful cinematic voyage that sparkles with reflection and absolutely reflects his passion for this project"

[Harry Gregson-Williams](#)

(Composer: THE MARTIAN, BLACKHAT, THE EQUALIZER, THE TAKING OF PELHAM 123,
THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE)

THE CONCEPT OF "THE CONCEPT"

Okay, first of all *"what the hell is a 'concept album', and is it a fair designation?"* For the record (pun entirely intended, ... *heh! heh!*) we've never felt so. For that seems to be, even within the world of the arts - where imagination supposedly rules the boundless horizon of the mind and soul, part of that diametrically converse (yet all-too-human) need to "sum things up" easily and succinctly for assimilation and transport into that "heathen land" occupied by those who won't *"get it"* lest you attach some pithily remembered handle or label. But y'know, some things *shouldn't* be easily dissected, summed up, and cataloged for convenient (and conveniently understood) later reference. Some things *should* take time to grow on you - evolving, maturing and metamorphosing just as the audience / listener / viewer does.

Not to get too "cinematically pretentious" (although we *are* a film magazine / blog), but that's always been the beauty of films from the likes of masters such as Kubrick, Tarkovsky, Malick, Leone ... and, hell yeah! (say what you will, but it's true) George Lucas, in that upon first viewing one can come away with an initial (call it "superficial") impression / opinion, then later (sometimes *years* later) the "meaning" of the film seems to change just as / and parallel to (coincidentally?) one's own personal changing world view. 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, SOLARIS and ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA are quintessential examples of movies which come to be "interactive" with each individual viewer over each individual's maturing years. The same has always held true for the visual arts (*Van Gogh, Magritte, Warhol, Pollock anyone?*), and it is certainly the cornerstone of music in all its forms - from the best classical, folk, rock, R&B, Jazz and more. All of which nicely (once again "coincidentally?" - *we think not!*) brings us to Martin Tillman's SUPERHUMAN - which upon first listen we enjoyed, but of which after repeated spins, we find ourselves falling more and more head-over-heels in love.

A few days ago of this writing Robert Townson, executive producer of soundtrack specialty label Varese Sarabande, in celebrating the anniversary of his first album production credit (and reflecting back on the joys of collecting vinyl), initiated a social media thread asking others to recollect their most fond record store memory. We had two - both of them recurring experiences over the years. 1) going into a shop, browsing the racks and finding a gem *you never knew even existed*; then having to immediately snatch it up lest you come back days later and it was gone never to be found again. And 2) entering a store, and attempting to identify (most often with an instrumental piece) who the artist was simply based on the "sound" and "vibe" of the tune playing.

The "other side of the aisle" rendition of this music store version of "What's My Line?" would be, while later ourselves working in both larger record emporiums such as TOWER RECORDS, as well as in small independent book & record shops, putting on an obscure album (be it a soundtrack, Jazz, New Age, old school R&B or something by a relatively unknown South American or Turkish classical composer) and having patrons continually coming up and exclaiming, *"Whoa! Who the hell is that!?"*; and you subsequently selling out of every single copy of that album, CD and cassette in one evening.

While the inspiration for the diverse, yet at the same time thematically and tonally cohesive, SUPERHUMAN album was / is as a tribute to the courage of Martin's loving wife Eva in her battle against M.S., it also manages to be a colorful and energetic "time capsule trip" of sorts through the last fifty-odd years of musical evolution – with loving nods to classical, funk, Jazz, New Age, the club dance scene, and last but certainly not least, as a nifty homage to genre bending film composition legends such as Tangerine Dream, Nino Rota, Vangelis, Wendy Carlos and more. While not fond of the phrase "concept album" we'll presently enlist the moniker to get across a "concept" of our own – namely that the concept of the "concept album" is no new concept at all. But how, in our present day world of instant downloads of single tracks, we more than welcome its resurgence.

To us the non-record store equivalent of Robert Townson's "vinyl memories" was something we enjoyed equally as much - browsing bookstore and library shelves, pulling out an interesting sounding title, reading the flap and, based on that alone, taking a "flyer" (a chance) on picking it up and taking it home and reading. 30% of the time you'd regret the decision. And the record album equivalent of *that* might be how out of 12 tracks on an LP you'd love maybe four. As for the rest, maybe you "*liked* but didn't necessarily *love*" another three or four. And maybe the remaining few you genuinely disliked. But the adventure of discovery was the exciting part. And sometimes with books (more often with music) over time you'd find yourself warming up to, and even falling in love with, that which you at first had really not much cared for. In between the time of each new listen (be it weeks, months, days, or *even hours*) you yourself had changed, even if but in unnoticeably subconscious and incremental ways.

Since the last listen you've had your heart broken or met a new love. You just missed being hit by a car. You saw something on the 6 O'Clock News. You'd purchased a new pair of shoes which were killing the sh*t out of your feet, ... whatever. Large or small, experience has altered your world view, and you now see (and listen) to things just a bit differently than you did during the LP's last spin on the turntable. You can't help but do so whether you want or notice it or not. And yes, we realize we're showing our age with that "turntable" bit. But because you were different (even in those subconscious ways) you then perceived *everything* differently (even if you didn't realize it), and suddenly found yourself (in life in general) "getting" someone you didn't quite "get" before; and (with music in particular) "getting *into*" a piece which earlier had left you cold. The *experience of discovery* became interactive. And this, more than anything - this old school concept of granting ourselves the room in which to experience discovery (something increasingly difficult to do with the downloading of individual musical tracks) is what were are reminded of with Martin Tillman's stunningly realized SUPERHUMAN - ironically both cinematic and musically *non*-cinematically "fringe" at the same time.

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When speaking with Martin Tillman the very first impression one is greeted with is the exuberant energy of a kid in a candy store filled with every confection imaginable. And that's exactly what Tillman is. Born and raised in Switzerland, where during the summer the boarding school run by his parents was transformed into a music camp, he fondly remembers ...

"... Growing up since the age of zero surrounded by cellos and harps and pianos and flutes and drums, it was really inspiring". And he'd jokingly add ...

"The reason I like so many (musical) styles is ... I'm not very focused. That's a great part of being able to switch. And I also believe when you play different styles you keep being fresh".

And far from being just a classical cellist, after graduating musical conservatory, in 1988 a scholarship to attend USC's School of Music became a dream fulfilled as Tillman always knew he had to come to Los Angeles in order to eventually play with the musical legends whose names he'd grown to know and love via the sleeve credits on albums collected in his youth – some of his favorites being those by Chicago, Toto, Pink Floyd, and Chaka Khan.

After graduating from USC Tillman's first real world introduction to the music industry was a four year recording studio stint as a combination receptionist / assistant / gopher / coffee boy and cable cleaner. It was here however where he first met two industry legends – iconic songwriter / producer / composer & arranger David Foster (EARTH WIND & FIRE, CHICAGO, the score to ST. ELMO'S FIRE) and his frequent engineer extraordinaire – the Grammy winning Humberto Gatica (CHICAGO, Michael Jackson's "BAD", Celine Dion's "MY HEART WILL GO ON"). Impressing both men, Martin's first major U.S. recording job was playing cello on the CHICAGO TWENTY-1 opening track "Explain It To My Heart" (written by Diane Warren, and produced and engineered by Gatica) – an experience which to this day he refers to as ...

"... the worst session I've ever done because I didn't know what to do; there were no sheets of music, and it was a very hard key to play in. But I did it, it got used, ... and one thing lead to another".

Among the "one thing leading to another"s were recording sessions and concert performances over the years, playing both acoustic and (at the time the little heard of) "electric" cello with artists as diverse as Air Supply, Sting, Elton John, Beck, Alison Krause, B.B. King, Elvis Costello, Tracey Chapman and T-Bond Burnett. Then in 1996 film composer Hans Zimmer, at the time unfamiliar with, *but genuinely fascinated by*, the unique sound and timbre of the "E" cello, invited Tillman to be a part of the soloist ensemble at the heart of his score to John Woo's blisteringly entertaining thriller FACE / OFF (1997) – it's music a radically complex amalgam of neo-classical orchestra and chorus aided and abetted by electronics and contemporary rhythm section.

For the next near twenty years Martin Tillman would become a staple at the heart of such Zimmer scores such as MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE 2, the PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN and THE DARK KNIGHT film series, THE DAVINCI CODE, ANGELS AND DEMONS, BLACK HAWK DOWN, MAN OF STEEL and more; as well as a plethora of non-Zimmer filmic works including THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST, THE REPLACEMENT KILLERS, TRANSFORMERS, THE PROPOSAL, BAD BOYS 2, CONSTANTINE, TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE, 2012, UNSTOPPABLE, BABYLON A.D., THE EQUALIZER, Walter Hill's BULLET TO THE HEAD (for which he also composed additional music), BLACKHAT, the video game score CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS, the remakes of TOTAL RECALL, THE TAKING OF PELHAM 123 and many others.

Particularly enjoyable for Tillman, as well as perhaps most recognizable by general audiences, was his performance of Zimmer's "Jack Sparrow Theme" in the (to date) four PIRATES OF THE CARRIBEAN films. Written specifically with Tillman in mind, the cellist happily proclaims, ...

"I had a lot of fun performing 'Jack Sparrow'... being the drunken, humorous 'Keith Richards'-like character".

Arguably coming in a close second and third place (you choose the order) among his score performances most remembered by audiences are the heartrendingly tormented (yet gorgeously realized) "E"-cello solos opening both Zimmer's 2001 BLACK HAWK DOWN (the track "Hunger") and John Debney's 2004 THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST ("The Olive Garden").

ILIAD OF THE SOUL

In the midst of this two decade long cinemusic odyssey Tillman would usher in the new Millennium with the release of his first solo "concept album", 2000's world-music influenced EASTERN TWIN. Two of the album's tracks, "Odessa" and "Ceremony", would so enamor MANHUNTER and HEAT director Michael Mann that he'd integrate them into his 2001 biographical sports drama ALI starring Will Smith; both tunes becoming so tonally engrained within the warp and weft of the film that "Odessa" would to many emerge as the film's defacto instrumental "Main Theme".

It was also during this time that Martin made the leap to film composer, co-composing the scores to Melissa Painter's 2004 Dawn O'Leary adaptation of **ADMISSIONS** starring Lauren Ambrose, Amy Madigan, Christopher Lloyd and John Savage. This along with 2005's horror sequel **THE RING 2** (the original of which was scored by Zimmer), 2008's multi-award winning Israeli drama **MY FATHER MY LORD** (aka **HOFSHAT KAITZ**), and the 2014 thriller **DARK HEARTS** - the acclaimed feature film version of the downloadable **DSE** (Dynamic Story Elements) enhanced episodic thriller **HAUNTING MELISSA**.

Most recently in 2015 Tillman was responsible for the scores to **A BELL FOR URSLI** (aka **SCHELLEN-URSLI**) – based on the classic Swiss children's novel (text by Selina Chönz / illustrations by Alois Carigiet); and he was also behind perhaps our personal favorite of his scoring works - **LAST KNIGHTS**, a clever action / adventure reworking of the story of **THE 47 RONIN** set within Medieval Europe. It starred Clive Owen, Morgan Freeman, Cliff Curtis and Ayelet Zurer.

A dark & brooding, yet elegant and lush, musical work co-written with acclaimed percussionist Satnam Ramgotra (with whom Tillman had musically colluded on **BLACK HAWK DOWN**, **THE KITE RUNNER**, **THE DARK KNIGHT**, **ANGELS & DEMONS** and **MAN OF STEEL**), **LAST KNIGHTS** *the score* would mimic the international and "cross generational" flavor of **LAST KNIGHTS** *the film* in its amalgam of "classical meets contemporary" and "orchestra meets electronics" – all of it highlighted by the evocative solo vocal work of Moroccan / Belgian singer Natacha Atlas, formerly of the world fusion group Transglobal Underground.

This lifetime of experience, upon which most would be content to retire, for Tillman served merely as prologue to the most ambitious (and personal) endeavor of his career – the creation of his own "ultimate concept project" **SUPERHUMAN**. In 2007 his beloved wife Eva was diagnosed with MS (Multiple Sclerosis), the most common autoimmune disorder affecting the central nervous system, and which lays claim to over 2 ½ million new victims per year. In an interview with film music journalist / archivist Daniel Schweiger, Martin admitted ...

"It was just super stressful, and I came to a conclusion I couldn't continue life as it was. I thought the only way we'd survive was if I went into my studio and started writing music. Not music for other people, but music for us that would create a drive for survival and inspiration.

*Then in 2010 Eva told me that her birthday wish was for me to write her a happy melody, as opposed to the melancholy us Europeans tend to have. That was basically the beginning of **SUPERHUMAN** - a title that was all about good energy which is so powerful for Eva and me, while being able to touch other people in the same way. It was also a play on words, as I'd worked on all of these 'super'-type movies like the **BATMAN** trilogy, **IRON MAN** and **MAN OF STEEL**. Because as we know, a superhuman can do anything he, or she wants to".*

As with other "concept albums" such as **JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR** and **TOMMY**, **SUPERHUMAN** too would evolve from its original "listening only" roots to a more grand-scale multi-media event. Plans are currently underway to produce **SUPERHUMAN** as a world-wide touring concert experience encompassing (as its promotional material exclaims) "... *electronic, cinematic and rock music with symphonic orchestra in a spellbinding hybrid of music, state of the art light projection, modern dance and soulful vocals*".

Featuring Martin Tillman on "E"-cello, the ensemble will also include multiple DJs and guitars, bass, keyboards, drum, percussion, vocalists, and the Swiss Symphonic Orchestra all augmented with theatrical lighting design by the award winning Bart Kresa, the creator of similarly spectacular theatrical concert events for U2, Coldplay, the [2014 Dubai Apollo Gala](#) and more.

A NEW ERA FOR THE OLD SCHOOL ("SUPERHUMAN": The album review)

As for **SUPERHUMAN** the album / CD itself – a "review" if you will? A straight ahead by-the-numbers "*this is good, and this aspect works*" versus "*this is bad, and this does not*", ... sorry, but we haven't got.

We emphatically state that **SUPERHUMAN** is *beyond* good. In fact it's *damned great!* But as for what

works and doesn't, as we alluded to in that opening Kubrick / Tarkovsky / Lucas "creatively interactive" sense, very often, as it *should* be with music, one's reaction is going to be entirely relative / dependent upon the individual listener, and will very subjectively hinge upon what baggage (in the positive sense – with the memories, world view, etc.) they bring along during the musical ride.

And SUPERHUMAN is indeed an aural ride. Or perhaps more accurately it's an emotional "glide". The connotation of "ride" would seem to indicate an application of force, as if pressing an accelerator in order to "get up to speed" and enjoy the trip. Whereas "Glide" on the other hand (at least for us) more accurately describes being whisked away / along magic carpet-like by an invisible-yet-palpable energy. This is more akin to our emotional (and yes, simultaneously intellectual) response to Tillman's SUPERHUMAN.

A welcome return to that aforementioned era of discovery, ... a return to emotionally, mentally and spiritually browsing a complex conceptual musical world (the "record store of the creative soul"), we believe SUPERHUMAN's "throwback" musical nostalgia is entirely deliberate on the part of Tillman – who is not only the work's featured performer, but who composed, arranged and produced as well.

And kudos to that wondrous work as SUPERHUMAN rates more-than-deserved shelf space alongside many of those other great "concept albums" we (and many of you probably) remember growing up on. Keep in mind however that, while deserving all "props" and respect for reawakening memories of how we all felt listening to Jeff Wayne's WAR OF THE WORLD'S (1978), Pink Floyd's THE WALL (1979), Goldsmith's CHRISTUS APOLLO (1969), Kamen's CONCERTO FOR SAXAPHONE (1990), and even those damned enjoyable Windham Hill / Rabbit Ears kids albums of the 1980s / 90s Remember THUMBELINA ('94) – with music by Mark Isham and spoken word by Kelly McGillis, KING MIDAS ('87) – with music by Ellis Marsalis & Yo Yo Ma and narration by Michael Caine, and the others? Well, it's to SUPERHUMAN's credit that Tillman and his (call it what it is) *bad-assed musical posse* refuses to merely present to us a conveyor belt / buffet retro pastiche of well-loved, well-remembered musical styles. Far from it..

To the contrary in fact, as, while certainly paying homage, and lovingly doffing it's cap to that which came before and inspired its creation, SUPERHUMAN's JUSTICE LEAGUE-like assemblage of personnel cleverly / artistically repurposes the "stylistic DNA" of the last half century of music to create a *new* and *unique* listening experience all its own.

Among SUPERHUMAN's musical LEAGUE are a battalion of guitarists including Davey Johnstone (known for his collaborations with Rod Stewart, Stevie Nicks, Meat Loaf, The Pointer Sisters, and particularly his decade long association with Elton John), Michael Landau (famous for his work with Pink Floyd, Michael Jackson, James Taylor and Michael Jackson), *Chemical Music* founder Aaron Steinberg, *Air Supply's* Graham Russell, and *Toto's* Leland Sklar. And percussionists include the iconic Vinnie Colaiuta (known for his Frank Zappa, Herbie Hancock, Sting and Chick Corea team-ups) along with *Looner's* Angel Roche' Jr.

Keyboards are handled by *Toto's* legendary David Paich and composer / arranger / conductor William V. Malpede (who recently orchestrated Tillman's A BELL FOR URSLI score for the Prague Philharmonic). Record label Harmonia Mundi's three-decade-strong female a cappella phenomenon *Anonymous 4* contributes vocals. Great Britain's Daniele Pianigiani and Italy's Michele Balduzzi (aka "Phonat") shape SUPERHUMAN's cinematically inspired sound design. And film composer Lorne Balfe (TERMINATOR GENISYS, KUNG FU PANDA 3) provides orchestral arrangements to the album's stirringly symphonic coda "The Invisible Shield Of Strings And Bows". *HOLY SHI ...!!!* We mean, ... "Wow!".

TRACKING THE TRACKS

While a love of the moodily hypnotic works of Tangerine Dream and Vangelis is certainly at the core of the opening track "*Notes Towards The Universe*", Tillman puts his own stamp on the atmospherics with an infectious semi-funk-like groove gradually growing from sprightly to thunderous. It's a brilliant thematic intro setting up the audience, and cuing us in early on, as to how Tillman will on this musical glide be both looking back affectionately while ahead towards the future at the same time.

"*Wonder*" displays the composer / performer's affection for EDM (Electronic Dance Music). Call it what

you will, “techno”, “house”, “rave”, “Jersey club”, whatever. Tillman admits it’s retro, yet with a purpose; in a recent interview with adequacy.net he acknowledging ...

“I’m a late bloomer. I love EDM because it exudes minimalism ... It’s a great canvas to build on. And my little mission is to help EDM to get more ‘orchestral, human, and personal’”.

And he does just that. First laying down a classic EDM beat in *“Wonder”* he returns to it in later tracks, using it as a pulsatingly defiant never-say-die “heartbeat” motif (see the album cover) indicating from whence the Superhuman-ness of the title originates. This EDM (heart)beat is perhaps most strikingly realized in *“Involuntary Midnight”* – the ethereal vocals of the popular a capella group Anonymous 4 hovering above said heart as if a mid-air refueling vessel of the spirit; and in *“Celluloid Spaces”* – the track beginning with a trippy / bluesy Pink Floyd-esque vibe in minor (as if we’re under the influence of some dampening medication), but eventually breaking through to that more energetic, positive and defiant heartbeat motif - it now stated in the major, and carried off at track’s climax by a virtuoso keyboard solo a’la Wendy Carlos

Among the most cherished of our own childhood memories was the spending of summer vacations traveling cross country with our stepfather, who was an 18 wheeler trucker. As he was a voracious fan of every form of music (he played guitar too, ... *or at least he liked to think he did*), there was always something new, different and genuinely fascinating (very often instrumental) playing in that Peterbilt cab as it thundered down the Interstate.

From then on we fell in love with, and to this day *remain* in love with, the concept of the days-long road trip with a panoramic view of the landscape in all directions; and with nothing but music and one’s own imagination spinning stories and carrying you off into emotional flights of fancy all the while you observe Olympian mountains, vast oceans, endless skylines with forming tornado funnel clouds in the distance, and Christmas tree-like nocturnal cityscapes always seemingly just out of hands reach from one’s passenger seat window. In other words – the ultimate real-world IMAX 360 movie in your own head, fueled by the music at hand. All of which brings us to perhaps SUPERHUMAN’s two most energetically optimistic tracks - *“Future Dawns”* and *“Unlocking The Locks”*.

Conjuring images (and emotions) of travel, freedom and even flight, these two tracks are for us the musical equivalent of Winsor McCay’s famous turn-of-the-century character LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND – wherein we, like the imaginative child Nemo, glide through an endless sky on that magical bed. Okay, yeah, we admit, flowery prose to be sure. But not inaccurate in regards to the uplifting endless road / endless sky nature of Tillman’s *“Future Dawns”* and *“Unlocking The Locks”* – both of which we predict in coming years you’ll hear gracing the soundtracks of documentaries and TV sporting event broadcasts. When that happens, just remember to tell ‘em you first read that here, okay? Much obliged.

Already soaring on the positive vibe of *“Unlocking The Locks”*, the title track *“Superhuman”* immediately follows and, on a scale of 1 – 10, cranks up the energy to (quoting SPINAL TAP) level #11. Beginning with an intricate Harold Faltermeyer-esque keyboard solo, Tillman’s own slicing mini “E”-cello solo swings the proceedings back into the EDM heartbeat groove – this time augmented with a series of deliberately retro 80s “night-clubby” keyboard splashes. But just when you think it all may settle for being a “Studio 54” homage, at the halfway point a beautifully transparent string arrangement (both acoustic and sampled) enters the fray to emotionally warm things up; the track not just (as Tillman stated earlier) helping *“... EDM to get more ‘orchestral’, ‘human’ and ‘personal’”*, but becoming downright inspirational. It’s certainly the thematic high point of the album.

Hardly an album just for the techno and retro sets, SUPERHUMAN’s final three tracks should warm the cockles of any film score aficionado or fan of traditional music. *“Translated to Beauty”* induces a grin to those recognizing its sweetly tongue-in-cheek nod to 60s era Nino Rota and Ennio Morricone. And the final cut *“The Invisible Shield of Strings And Bows”* (orchestrated by composer Lorne Balfe) is, as its title indicates, a symphony of oceanic strings and brass with Tillman’s solo cello the lone vessel evocatively navigating the melodically lush seascape. But as beautifully realized as are these two pieces, our hands down favorite track in the collection remains its second-to-the-last cut – *“Zero Gravity”*.

Musically capturing the inner longings and yearnings of the human soul is an elusive endeavor, probably in the end having something to do with magic, elixirs and ancient alchemic reagents, or deals brokered with

angelic beings – offering some kind of trade in exchange for a brief glimpse into that spiritual "meta" plane of existence beyond the every day physical.

Either that or, more down-to-earth like, it's evidence that the artist not only remembers the all-too-human experiential process / progress of "from pain to healing to light", ... which most tend to want to forget, but that they can also capture it like lightning in a bottle, then use it to touch the soul of others perhaps presently enduring the same. In essence the working definition of the Leonard Cohen lyric (a rephrased quote by philosopher Rumi actually) reminding us that "*There is a crack in everything; (and) that's how the light gets in*".

Either way "Zero Gravity" boasts one of the most heartachingly gorgeous melodies (here realized with cello and keyboards played elegantly in sync) ever captured.

We won't presume or pretend to know from which mystical hidden valley of the soul this delicate, almost swathing lullaby-like bit of musical magic originated. But it's a heart stealer, a soul catcher, and a tear inducer.

Kudos to all involved in Martin Tillman's SUPERHUMAN - what we believe at year's end (and years from now) will be one of the most fondly remembered releases of 2016. And special thanks to lovely souls Martin and Eva Tillman for (as the album cover itself indicates) giving us a portion of their very own beating hearts.

We offer you ours in return.

CEJ