

“MARTIN-IZING”
MARTIN TILLMAN AND “SUPERHUMAN” –
A WELCOME RETURN TO THE LOST ART OF DISCOVERY

By CEJ

Okay, first of all what the hell is a “concept album”, ... and is it a fair designation? For the record (no pun intended) we’ve never felt so. For that seems to be - even within the world of the arts, where imagination rules the boundless horizon of the mind and the soul – part of that diametrically converse (yet all-too-human) need to “sum things up” easily and succinctly for transport and assimilation into that “barbaric and heathen land” of those who “won’t get it” by attaching to it a pithily remembered handle or label. But some things *shouldn’t* be easily dissected, “summed up” and cataloged for convenient (and conveniently understood) reference later. Some things should grow on you over time – evolving, maturing, metamorphosing over time as the audience / listener / viewer also matures.

Not to get to “cinematically pretentious” (though we *are* a film magazine / blog), but that’s always been the beauty of films from the likes of Kubrick, Tarkovsky, Malick, Leone and hell, to a certain degree even George Lucas - in that upon first viewing you come away with an initial impression / opinion; then later (sometimes *years* later) the “meaning” of the film seems to have changed just as has your own personal world view. 2001, 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, Bosch, Magritte, Warhol, Pollock anyone?), and certainly is the cornerstone of music in all of its forms – from the best classical, folk, rock, R&B, Jazz and more. All of which nicely 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 with.

While the inspiration for this diverse, yet at the same time thematically and tonally cohesive, 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 wonderfully 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.

A few days ago 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 store 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 (usually 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” version would be, while later ourselves working in both larger record emporiums like TOWER RECORDS as well as small independent book & record shops, putting on an obscure album – be it a soundtrack, Jazz, New Age, old school R&B album, or even something by a relatively unknown South American or Turkish classical composer, ... and having patrons coming up to saying, “Whoa! Who the hell is that!”; and you selling out of every copy of that album, CD or cassette in one night.

To us this was always the record store equivalent of browsing bookstore or 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, taking it home and reading. 30% of the time you’d regret the decision. And the record album equivalent might be that out of 12 tracks you’d love maybe four, like maybe another three or four, and dislike the rest. But the adventure of discovery was the exciting part. And sometimes with books, and more often with music, over time you’d find yourself warming up, ... and even falling in love with, that which you at first maybe had not much cared for. The *experience of discovery* became interactive. And this, more than anything, is what we were reminded of with Martin Tillman’s SUPERHUMAN.

While over the years certain individual songs like “I Don’t Know How To Love Him” and “Pinball Wizard” became Top Forties radio hit singles, their context within the larger concept of the rock albums (which later became films) from which they were taken - JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR (by Andrew Lloyd Webber) and TOMMY (by The Who) respectively, raised the depth of those individual tracks to an even more intriguing level. And therefore, for as much as we love iTunes and Amazon Music (“AutoRip” is a God-send!) we lament what seems to be the decreasing popularity of, and impatience with, taking the time to “browse” an entire conceptual work, and not giving it the time to creatively grow upon one’s psyche. Perhaps the contemporary way of thinking of it would be to refer to it as “binge *listening*” to an entire work by a musical artist in the same way we’ll now take an entire weekend (or even single evening) to binge *watch* one complete season of a beloved new TV series. We think Tillman is entirely aware of this present day musical lack of attention span. And his new release seems to be a deliberate attempt to counteract this trend.

When speaking with Martin Tillman the very first impression you’re greeted with is the exuberant energy of a kid in candy store filled with every kind of 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”.

Far from being only a classical cellist, after graduating from a Swiss musical conservatory, in 1988 a scholarship to attend USC’s School of Music was a dreamed fulfilled as he always knew he had to come to Los Angeles in order to eventually play with the musical legends whose names he’d come 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 CHICAGO TWENTY 1's opening track "Explain It To My Heart" (written by Diane Warren, and produced and engineered by Gatica) – an experience which Tillman to this day 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" 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 fascinated by* the unique timbre of the "electric cello", invited Tillman to be a part of the soloist ensemble at the heart of the score to John Woo's blisteringly entertaining thriller FACE / OFF – 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 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 numerous 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"

And 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) electric 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") – both excerpted below.

In the midst of this two-decade-long cinemusic odyssey Tillman would usher in the new Millennium with the release his first solo "concept album", 2000's world-music influenced EASTERN TWIN. Two of its tracks, "Odessa" and "Ceremony", would so enamor MANHUNTER and HEAT director Michael Mann that he'd integrate them into his 2001 film ALI starring Will Smit; both tunes were so tonally engrained

within the warp and weft of the biopic, “Odessa” would in the minds of many (certainly to us) emerge as the film’s defacto instrumental “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; 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 Martin 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 perhaps our personal favorite of the lot, LAST KNIGHTS, a clever action / adventure reworking of the story of THE 47 RONIN set in Medieval Europe. It starred Clive Owen, Morgan Freeman, Cliff Curtis and Ayelet Zurer.

A dark & brooding, yet elegantly lush 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 vocal solo work of Moroccan / Belgian singer Natacha Atlas, formerly of the world fusion group Transglobal Underground.

This lifetime of creative experience, upon which most would be content to retire, for Martin 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 a 2015 interview with film music journalist / archivist Daniel Schweiger, Martin acknowledged ...

“It was just super stressful and I came to a conclusion I couldn’t continue life as it was. I thought that 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 kind of 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”.

But, 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. At the time of this writing 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 core ensemble will also include DJs, 2 guitars, bass, keyboards, drum, percussion, vocalists and the Swiss Symphonic Orchestra, all augmented with theatrical lighting design by award winner Bart Kresa – creator of similar theatrical concert events for U2, Coldplay, the [2014 Apollo Gala in Dubai](#) and more.

As for SUPERHUMAN the album / CD itself – a “review” if you will? A straight ahead by-the-numbers “*this is good, and works; this is bad, and does not*” 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 creative sense, is (as it should be with music) entirely relative, interactive and dependent upon the individual listener. For us SUPERHUMAN is a welcome return to the era of discovery; a return to that era of emotionally, mentally and (yes) spiritually browsing a complex conceptual musical world laid out before us ... in some aspects akin to an old school record shop through which we can spend an afternoon strolling at leisure, picking up this, examining that, and spending time in the listening booth arguing with friends over which is the best track on the entire lp. We believe this “throwback” musical nostalgia (for want of a better term) is entirely deliberate on the part of Martin Tillman – who is not only the featured performer, but composed, arranged and produced the album.

SUPERHUMAN earns a well-deserved place on the shelf with many of those other great “concept albums” we (and many of you probably) remember growing up with. While reawakening memories of how we felt listening to Jeff Wayne’s orchestral / rock WAR OF THE WORLD’S (1978), Pink Floyd’s THE WALL (1979), Bradbury / Goldsmith’s CHRISTUS APOLLO (1969), Michael Kamen’s CONCERTO FOR SAXAPHONE (1990), and even those wonderful Windham Hill / Rabbit Ears albums of the 1980s / early 90s – incl. THUMBELINA (’94 – with music by Mark Isham and spoken word by Kelly McGillis) and KING MIDAS (’87 – music by Ellis Marsalis / narration by Michael Caine), Tillman and his musical posse refuse to merely unspool before us a conveyor belt buffet pastiche of well-loved / well-remembered musical styles. Uh uh! While certainly paying homage, and respectfully and lovingly doffing it’s cap to that which came before and inspired its creation, SUPERHUMAN uses the stylistic DNA of what came before merely as the genetic material from which to create a uniquely emotional listening experience all its own.

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 atmospheric with an infectious funk-groove which grows gradually from sprightly to thunderous. It’s a nice intro cuing us into how Tillman will be musically looking back *and ahead* 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, but with a purpose. In a recent interview with adequacy.net he says ...

“I am a late bloomer. I love EDM because it exudes minimalism...It’s a great canvas o 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 where the Superhuman-ness originates. This EDM (heart)beat is perhaps most strikingly used in “*Involuntary Midnight*” – the ethereal vocals of the popular acapella group Anonymous 4 hovering above the as if a spiritual vessel refueling the heart with much needed “go juice”; and in “*Celluloid Spaces*” – which begins with a trippy / bluesy Pink Floyd-like vibe in a minor key (as if we’re under the

influence of some dampening medication), but eventually breaking through to that more energetic and positive (and defiant) heartbeat motif in major, it carried off by virtuoso keyboard solo a'la Wendy Carlos.

Among the most cherished of our childhood memories was the spending of summer vacations traveling cross country with our stepfather who was an 18 wheeler trucker. As he was a fan of all kinds of music (he played guitar too, ... *he liked to think he did anyway*), there was always something new and different and genuinely fascinating (very often instrumental) playing in the cab. 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 an epically panoramic view of the landscape in all directions, and with music and one's own imagination to tell you stories and carry you of into emotional flights of fancy all the while observing Olympian mountains, vast oceans, endless skylines with forming tornado funnel clouds in the distance, and Christmas tree-like nocturnal cityscapes. 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 most energetically optimistic track "Unlocking The Locks".

For us conjuring images (and emotions) of travel, freedom, ... and even flight, it's the musical equivalent to Winsor McCay's famous turn-of-the-century character LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND – wherein we, just like the imaginative child Nemo, feel as though we're soaring through an endless sky on our magical bed. Yes, we admit, flowery prose to be sure. But not inaccurate in regards to the uplifting endless road / endless sky nature of Tillman's "*Unlocking The Locks*" – which we predict in coming years you'll start to hear in documentaries and TV sporting event broadcasts. When that happens, tell 'em all you first read that here.

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 (to quote 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 "nightclubby" keyboard splashes. But just when you think it all might 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 retro set, 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 who recognize 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 - of TERMINATOR: GENISYS and the mini-series THE BIBLE) is, as title indicates, a symphony of oceanic strings and brass with Tillman's solo cello the lone vessel evocatively navigating its way through the moodily lush seascape. But as beautifully realized as are those two pieces, our 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 plane of existence beyond the 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 “pain to healing to light” – which most tend to want to forget, but that they can capture it like bottled lightning, then use it to touch the soul of others perhaps presently enduring the same. In essence the working definition of the Leonard Cohen lyric (actually a rephrased quote by the ancient philosopher Rumi) reminding us that *“There is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in”*. Either way “Zero Gravity” boasts one of the most heartachingly gorgeous melodies (realized by 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 soul catcher, a heart stealer, 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 indicates) giving us a portion of their very own beating hearts. We offer you ours in return.

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