



MARK KELSO

*Photography by Tasja Keetman
Interviewed by H. Candee*

Harriet Candee: Mark, music is your world! Please tell me about your relationship to it.

Mark Kelso: Music may not be my religion, but it makes the one I have more tolerable! I engage in music because I have to... for soul survival. Music is the language in which my soul speaks more than in English, or Latin, or Hebrew, or Sanskrit. I love chanting in all of those sacred languages, but honestly, it's the chanting itself I love the most. And, of course, throughout my life, there has been piano.

I am not a great singer, but I am a great lover of singing, especially when I can be part of a larger group. When I was little, I would just prance around the house chanting made-up words until it drove my siblings a bit bonkers. When I discovered as a teenager that there was a whole musical genre dedicated to the repetitive singing of simple phrases, it struck a chord, so to speak.

I have sung and/or played in Gregorian and Sanskrit chant groups, church choirs, praise and worship bands, and with Jewish folk singers. I've also attended Sufi

zkirs and participated in the Dances of Universal Peace. I probably chant, sing, and play music more out of necessity than inspiration. But at some point, the inspiration takes over and lifts me out of my habitual thought-stream.

How did music enter your life, and how did you discover its meaning and importance to your life?

Mark: My mom often remarked that when she was pregnant with me, she would feel my fingers playing against her insides. She figured I would be a pianist when I got a little more independent. My parents signed me up for piano lessons when I was eight, and though I had fooled around on the piano before that, the lessons began a practice that I follow in some form to this day. But to tell you the truth, I still don't like to practice nearly as much as I love playing.

Often, I would go into a trance state while playing piano. I would hear my mom calling me from very far away, it seemed, but she was easy to ignore because my inner world was just so compelling and blissful.

One of my favorite chord changes was from Donovan's "Hurdy Gurdy Man," and I would just play it over and over again, sometimes instrumentally and sometimes singing the same few lines over and over. From very early on in my life, playing music has been a way for me to center and to self-soothe, but also to connect with others and to touch into the divine reality.

I studied classical piano until I was 18. At my high school senior recital, my first piano teacher came up to me and said, "I never thought you'd make it," noting that I had primarily wanted to learn by ear and was always making stuff up rather than reading what was on the page. At that same recital, one of my friends, pianist and composer Joshua Rosenblum, noted, "You just made up the second movement of the Haydn piano sonata."

"Yeah," I replied. "I forgot what Haydn wrote, so I just made up my own version."

I also studied with a jazz arranger who had worked with Glenn Miller, and he introduced me to the world

of chord theory, the blues, and jazz improv.

I was a very sensitive kid who cried a lot, even in school, and I found in music a way to express my emotions in a relatively safe way. Also, I could make way more money playing piano than any of my friends could make slinging burgers at McDonalds!

I also played in the Methodist church: on piano for Sunday school and on the pipe organ for worship services. I only had one year of formal pipe organ lessons, and to this day I sometimes still peek at my feet!

My dad left when I was sixteen, and it became necessary for me to make money. I joined an AFL-CIO affiliated chapter of the Musician's Union and started playing in an adult band. I earned \$100 a night for those gigs; that was a lot of money for a teenager, especially in Appalachia in 1975!

I got my first real taste of musical theatre accompanying a touring Christian musical called Lightshine. A couple of years later, I turned down a gig at the Kennedy Center warming up for Earth, Wind, and Fire for an opportunity to accompany Stephen Schwartz's Godspell, which may have set me on my present course. We'll talk about my musicals soon, I am sure!

I attended Oberlin College and Conservatory where my life was changed forever by sitarist Roop Verma, whose approach to music as a spiritual practice touched me deeply. At that time I had decided to change my focus from physics, music technology, and composition to psychobiology and pre-med studies. Studying and playing with Roop, I began to understand how music could be both medicine and art. He was a protégé of both Ravi Shankar and Swami Kripalu for whom Kripalu Center is named. (I had met Swami Kripalu, who was an amazing composer, musician, and yogi when I was 19.) Ravi had given Roop some incense, which he passed on to me. I burned that incense at all of my early recording sessions out of respect for these inspiring musical giants.

After a brief stint post-Oberlin as a professional musician, I moved to Kripalu, where I eventually became their first music director. I recorded many of my CDs of contemplative piano music while in that position, and for a time was on the EMI/Virgin record label Narada as one of their first pianists.

How has religion played a role in your composing?

Mark: Religion, or at least our connection to something greater than ourselves, has always been the main inspiration behind the great works of art. Not that I am as prolific as Johann Sebastian Bach, but I, too, compose for church every Sunday in addition to producing music and teaching students. I compose preludes and postludes, sometimes completely original, and often as variations on existing hymn melodies. If you check out my CDs (at www.muddyangel.com) or their corresponding iTunes versions, you'll notice that most of the titles have spiritual overtones. Even though religion and music often draw from the same source, I prefer music over dogma because it tends to be less separative. One can sing with people and join together much more powerfully than one often can by entering into religious dialog, which is where a lot of the arguments start!

One of my great loves, in addition to the sacred music of the West, is kirtan, which is the chanting of the Divine names, primarily in Sanskrit. They say the Inuit and other arctic cultures have all these names for the different kinds of snow. In Sanskrit, there are many names for the different flavors of Divinity—not that there are many gods but that the One Divine Reality has many aspects.

In my heart, however, I have not strayed far from my Methodist upbringing in Ohio. I love the old hymns, revivals, and I love Jesus, even though he was never called that in his life. That is still the divine name I have grown up loving the most.

You're a composer, and I have listened to your CD Cathedral more than 100 times and am still loving every note of it. It's a real gift to the world. How did this music come about?

Mark: Thank you, Harryet. That is very kind. After I left the EMI/Virgin/Narada label in the mid-80s, I contacted a recording engineer named Chris Brown who, at the time, was working with the Grammy-award-winning saxophonist and world music artist, Paul Winter. I had spent some time at Paul's farm in Connecticut playing music, and Chris had been impressed by my third album, A Candle for the Sun. He described it as "George Winston with brains." He said he'd like to help produce the next album and that we should record it in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine right on the edge of Harlem.

The Cathedral is the world's largest gothic cathedral and has amazing acoustics over its 600-foot length. So I called the Cathedral and asked permission to record there which was seemingly granted, and we hired in the security guards and other things they requested. But about 6 months after I had already recorded there, I received an official letter denying my request! I guess whoever thought they were in charge of the decision was overridden by a higher authority.

I was living at Kripalu at the time, and when I returned from the recording sessions in New York, one of my co-workers (who did not know where I had gone or what I was doing) told me of a dream she had had about me while I was gone. In the dream, I had gone into a huge church to play music and she was struck by the beauty of the music. About a year later, Cathedral had finally been released, and I was playing the music in the Kripalu dining room. My co-worker said, "What's that music? That's the music from the dream."

I do love Cathedral and have gotten a lot of great professional feedback— from actor Ben Kingsley, from pianists Dave Brubeck and George Winston, from composer Harold Arlen, and from a host of others.

I have begun listening to your musical, Luci, on CD. Can you describe what it is about to readers? What do you wish would come out of this creation you have so poured your heart into? Why Luci, Mark?

Mark: Good questions! Ask me again in about 5 years and I may have completely different answers. As I entered the Gershwin Theater in 2014 to see Stephen Schwartz's Broadway musical, Wicked, I got a text from an old friend who had been Harold Arlen's caretaker in the final years of that composer's life. (Harold, as you may know, among his many other accomplishments, wrote the music for The Wizard of Oz, upon which Wicked is based.) My friend had texted me a link to a wonderful piano rendition of Somewhere Over the Rainbow that he thought I might enjoy. As I walked into the theater, there was a life-sized statue of Harold Arlen! Walking out of the theater after the show, as I passed Harold's statue, I muttered "Someone should do a musical like this for Lucifer," who gets an even worse rap than the Wicked Witch of the West got in the The Wizard of Oz. A month later, Luci was conceived, and as I did my literary and Biblical research, I discovered that, indeed, due to a mistranslation from the Latin Vulgate Bible, Lucifer has been

associated in many people's minds with Satan, the adversary. Milton's Paradise Lost, has also done a lot to reinforce this idea. Given our current political climate, wherein entire nations and peoples have been demonized, including the U.S.A (the Great Satan), I feel the time has come to take on demonization and polarization as embodied in the popular notion of Lucifer as a fallen angel.

As I strung together songs from the last forty years, a story started to unfold about a beautiful angel, acknowledged as God's favorite, who out of a desire to prove herself as special, falls from heaven to what becomes, in her descent, what we now call hell.

In the process of writing, I ran across entire websites dedicated to the belief that not only could Lucifer never be forgiven, but that all important angels are male! Since humans seem to be the ones assigning genders to the heavenly creatures who, presumably, possess no gender, I wanted to play with the idea of angels who have been transgendered as a reflection of the current cultural milieu. I mean, if angels get their gender assignments from humans, and humans are starting to question their own deeply held concepts in this regard, then that should confer a certain gender fluidity upon the heavenly host.

However, as I developed the musical and played with this idea that heaven is constrained by concepts held on the earthly plane, I realized that the musical Luci was becoming burdened by lengthy discourses on pronoun use, gender swaps, and even theology. And Luci is much more about what happens to us when we separate off from the source of love and whether forgiveness is available. Eventually, the whole gender thread was ported into the musical Mikey that deals directly with Archangel Mikha'el having undergone a gender reassignment from her earlier days as Michel, a much more feminine angel. (By the way, if you gaze upon the statuery of Michel/Michael in Europe you might well come to the same conclusion that she/he started off as way more feminine than we now envision her/him.) Mikey struggles to come to terms with how it feels to be constrained by human concepts of gender. In this trilogy, even the angels are confused by the gender pronouns.

The third strand of an idea to be pulled out into its own musical is about God attempting to establish a direct relationship with people rather than founding yet another religion. So God (I Am) incarnates as this Jewish guy, Yeshua (Yes-You-Ahh) in first century Palestine. At a time when many take religion seriously, I felt it was a good opportunity to laugh at ourselves for thinking we can truly understand Divinity. I think that for humans to discuss God and angels as if we truly understand is akin to ants in an anthill debating whether there are such things as humans, "and what is that thunderous noise above our world anyway?"

So I Am/Yes-You-Ahh looks at how heaven wants to wake up the human world so that heaven itself can operate with a bit more fluidity, instead of being so heavily constrained by human belief systems.

There's an interesting story of how Luci came to be divided into the trilogy now known as The Arc of Angels. The original musical was about 2 1/4 hours long with almost 50 musical selections. I sent it to my friend Joshua Rosenblum, who now teaches musical theatre at Yale (after 10 years as Miss Saigon's music director), and he gave Luci a good listen.

"The musical, while brilliant, is artistically, philosophically, and theologically too dense for most theater-goers," Josh wrote in an email a couple of years ago. *Continued on next page...*



Mark Kelso Photograph by Tasja Keetman

That very same week, an elderly gentlemen, who I thought might be a potential investor, came to the studio after requesting a meeting with me about *Luci*. (He had attended one of the early previews of the musical and had enthusiastically enjoyed it.)

Upon arriving at the studio, however, he very quickly confided, "I'm not quite sure how to tell you this, but my spirit guides won't let me sleep until I give you the following message."

When I inquired about his "spirit guides" he referred to one of them as "kind of like a feminine form of Archangel Michael," which obviously got my attention, given the gender issues with which I was grappling in the musical. "They want you to know that while your musical will be groundbreaking for the planet, you are writing four musicals, not one." Since I was already working on another musical at the time, I asked him if he thought this could be a trilogy.

"Well, the angels are telling me that your musical in its present form is artistically, philosophically, and theologically too dense for most people." And that began my process of unraveling what was originally *Luci* into the three separate strands.

Like most art, this project has had a life of its own, and, I believe, comes with the support to get itself into the world in whatever form it deems appropriate. I have had great opportunities to present it to folks like Stephen Schwartz (*Pippin*, *Prince of Egypt*, *Godspell*, *Wicked*) and his friend Jack Thomas (*Piece of My Heart*, *Tuck Everlasting*). Also, my friend and colleague, Karen Allen (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Animal House*, plus her own directorial debut, *A Tree, A Rock, a Cloud*, for which I provided music) listened all the way through and gave really helpful dramaturgical advice.

With the help of Joyce Peirce, Chelsea LeSage, Maizy Broderick Scarpa, Marisa Massery, Ben Buissink, and other Berkshire-grown talent, I have been able to construct a beautiful 2-CD set of the musical which is also available for free online. There is still so much work to be done on it, though, including scoring and arranging the whole thing.

You have over 20 albums of your own work out there in the world. Are any of them directly connected to the musical you are in the midst of creat-

ing, or just finished?

Mark: First of all, I don't know if the musicals will ever actually be finished! As they say, musicals are written, and rewritten, and rewritten, and...

There is actually material dating back to when I was sixteen that has found its way into the trilogy. There are many songs written over the past forty years that I never recorded because they were odd and had little context, but when placed into the musicals, they shine with meaning. *Luci* also contains a couple of modified songs from my albums *Grief* and *Grace and Human Heart*. In some regards, it is the songs like *Dark Angel*, *I Am* and *All I Ever Wanted* that gave rise to the musical in the first place.

And these are not the only musicals I have worked on. For a number of years, while my kids attended Mountain Road School in New Lebanon, I helped write, in collaboration with the students, the songs for the musicals we performed. I loved working with the gifted playwrights Cindy Parrish and Sarah Katzoff, as well as director Meg Agnew, and those successes may have given me the confidence to pursue these somewhat more grand visions!

What instruments do you work with and enjoy playing?

Mark: Lately, I have been drawn to the portability (and fun!) of small string instruments like guitaleles, ukuleles, mandolins, and banjos, but I am not that great on any of them. My favorite instrument of late is a steel-string Tacoma Papoose, which is a small guitar tuned up a fourth from the standard EADGBE of the regular guitar. And I have a couple of tambouras in the studio which are wonderful drone instruments from India often used to accompany sitar ragas or chanting. I also love to play percussion instruments like udu pot, djembe, dumbek, and Gaston, a large wooden frog guiro who “croaks” when you stroke his back with a stick.

Piano, however, as my first love, will always be my true love as well. It is the doorway to all of the other keyboard instruments I play: harmonium, pipe organ, harpsichord, electronic organ, pump organ, accordion, and assorted electronic keyboards.

What are some of the more exotic venues in which you have performed?

Mark: A lot of the larger venues, like Madison Square Garden, or with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra were not solo gigs but ones in which I played a more supporting role. With the DSO, besides playing piano, one of my roles was to play accordion on a little klezmer tune David Grover was performing about latkes, just because the first chair violinist refused to improvise!

One interesting solo tour, in Jamaica, had a warm-up act, a reggae band called Prince Tebah and the Sons of Thunder. They were lovely guys with a great groove and a huge spliff they offered me before the show, which I politely declined. Once, after playing a bit in Italy, I did an impromptu concert for a captive crowd in the waiting area at the Rome airport.

You have a music studio and help to bring other artists' work down to earth. How do you find people and how do they find you? Do they have to have some kind of fit to make it work?

Mark: For years after I left Kripalu in the early 90s, many of my clients were the teachers and residents, since I had done music production there. And many of those folks, like Todd Norian, John de Kadt, Jennifer Reis, Megha Buttenheim, Rudy Peirce, and Bhavani Lorraine Nelson, have done multiple albums with me. Often, other artists will hear those recordings and really like the depth of sound we have been able to capture. So the recordings themselves send folks my way. Many times now, I've had the experience of listening to some really great music and feeling almost jealous of some producer's ability to get such a great soundscape, only to realize a few moments later that I had recorded it!

Some of my clients, like Michael Fabrizio, whose first country album I helped produce over 20 years ago now, were former students. Others just find out about Muddy Angel through Google, or Thumbtack, or word of mouth. Normally, both the artist and I will know in an initial meeting if it is a good fit or not. It has been the rare project that hasn't worked out, once we get started on it.

In these days of file transfers between studios something might start at Muddy Angel and end up being ported to a few different studios before it is completed. Or the other way around. Most of the time that has worked out really well, to have other great ears and expertise weigh in on a project.

What do you see as your primary role with your

clients?

Mark: More than once, I have been listed as a “mid-wife” in the liner notes of an album. That says to me that someone already has something within themselves to which they are giving birth, and my role is to help them through both the difficult and blissful passages until the baby emerges. And then I completely let go.

With my students, that is a more long-term relationship, but still one in which my intention is to bring forth what is wanting to emerge from this particular individual rather than to impose my own agenda upon their process.

I have had students (Michael, Ian Evans, Geo Carter, and Maya Solovey to name a few) who burst with musicality but never learned to play Bach or even read music all that well. Each has a really distinctive style that may not even include playing piano that much anymore. Interestingly, those of my students who have gone on to careers in music were not the classical players and readers as much as those who could play by ear.

I have one protégé right now, though, who possesses almost my exact skill set. Phoebe Carry, who is now a high school senior, reads classical music, plays by ear, improvises, and composes. She wowed the crowd when she sat in with me recently at Gateways Inn in Lenox.

When I was working on Karen Allen's movie soundtrack, I put up the opening scene on the screen for Phoebe to try her own version. I liked her ideas more than what I had already composed for the film. In the end, Karen's artistic vision prevailed but I was so proud of Phoebe's efforts!

Ultimately, though, I just want to communicate how much fun music is. When I was teaching music at Mountain Road School, I was asked to give a presentation to parents on my teaching methodology. “Music is fun,” I said, as I stood up to address the parents. “And the more fun it is, the more we do it, and the more we do it, the better we get at it. And the better we get at it, the more fun it is.” Then I sat down.

Where have you lived other than the Berkshires? What did you do there?

Mark: Born in the hills of West Virginia (almost heaven), having moved across the river to Ohio (next to almost Heaven), and then to the woods of Pennsylvania, I have never lived too far from the Appalachians for any length of time. But I have pretty much always done the same thing: hiking in the hills, doing music both sacred and profane, playing with technology, meditating, and cooking (and eating!) yummy food.

Tell us your most treasured music memory.

Mark: I have been on stage or screen since I was very young, but one really formative experience came when I was playing with my friend John Sands, who still works as a world-class drummer for folks like Aimee Mann and Lisa Marie Presley. We were the co-directors of our junior class talent show and had arranged a piece of music I had written. I was wearing tails and white gloves with glitter fingernail polish. I remember coming on to the stage, removing my gloves, waving my nails under the spotlights, and getting a standing ovation with John before we even played a note!

As I begin a trill on the concert grand, a surge of energy entered my body and exited out my fingers filling the auditorium with sound and then moving through the audience back into my body until a visceral electrical circuit was created between the music and the folks filling that 2000-seat hall. I still hold that performance as my virgin experience of the thrill of circulating music within the relationship of musician and audience.

Is it difficult in today's world to make it in the music industry? What do you have to be trained in these days to at least get a good start?

Mark: I think “making it” is an interesting phrase. Sometimes I feel very successful simply because I have been able (barely sometimes) to support my kids into adulthood doing the Berkshire music shuffle: many of us piece together a living between teaching, performing, album sales, touring, recording, and producing other artists.

The loss of album sales, which has not been economically replaced by Spotify, Pandora, and iTunes royalties, has definitely cut into many of our abilities to make it as performers. However, the democratization of music, and the fact that one need not be on a major label anymore to get distribution, has opened up a lot of opportunities for less well-known producers, studios, and instructors as they support musical hopefuls.

What I hope to impart to the younger generation of musicians is:

- 1) Love it, because at the end of the day all you get is the love you have for your art. And what you love you will do more of, and what you do more of, you will get better at. I'd say, “Play, play, play even more than you practice, practice, practice!”
- 2) Be as flexible as possible: read, play by ear, improvise, and polish your business skills or get help from someone who has them.
- 3) Be someone who has something to say, rather than prioritizing technical proficiency over self-expression. This means exposing yourself to a wide spectrum of emotion and information, not just in the musical and technical fields. If someone loves playing music, even when they are not “making a living,” they have “made it” in my book.

How do you describe today's popular music?

Mark: I don't think pop music has changed a great deal since The Beatles, which says to me that those guys (along with George Martin) broke such fresh ground that we are all still planting seeds and reaping the harvest from that soil.

Last spring, my friend Jeremy Yudkin approached me about putting together a loose consortium of some of the great musicians in the Berkshires to perform the entire Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band album on the 50th anniversary of the album's release in 1967. That music, reinterpreted through 21st century ears, hands, and voices, was still alive with energy as we played to the SRO crowd at the Lenox Town Hall.

I listen a lot to Leonard Cohen and to the albums of my friends and clients like Renee Harvitt, John de Kadt, Linda Worster, and Sherrie Howard. Then I go traipsing down memory lane, listening to early Jackson Browne, Elton John, and the Beatles. Plus, of course, I always have my students turning me on to the latest hits that they want to learn on piano, ukulele, guitar, or some other instrument.

And sometimes I will go back a bit further in time and put on some rendition of Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B Minor, or some of his keyboard works recorded by Glenn Gould. And the other day, I put on a 78 record of Debussy on my crank Victrola in the studio. Nothing digital about it!

Yes! The sounds of the past can go way back! You do have training in classical music, correct?

Mark: I have years of training in classical music but not a great aptitude! I consider myself a jack of all, master of none, kind of player, although I have been told I am *Continued on next page...*



Mark Kelso Photograph by Tasja Keetman

a dang good improviser. Once, as a teenager I had discovered a Hammond B3 organ in a local music store and was wailing away on some blues when one of the few black men in our white-bread Ohio town stuck his head in the door. "Damn!" he exclaimed, "You play some mean blues." I flushed with pride from this unsolicited compliment until he stuck his head back in the store with a bright smile for a qualification. "For a honky."

I have studied locally with Hilda Banks Shapiro, whose main comment to me was, "Mark, you are so good at what you do, why would you want to study with me?" My reply was that I wanted just a portion of her ability to bring sheet music to life. She is such a bright spirit and indeed, my time with her helped move me, into the possibility of "real music" springing off a page written 300 years ago by a now-deceased composer.

I think the most important thing is that we love what we are doing and communicate that to others. The particular style or era we draw from pales in comparison to the energy with which we play. So a great jazz player or great baroque harpsichordist equally rock, in my book.

What inspires you to make music, and can you do so even when you are in a negative mood? How does that all work for you?

Mark: Actually a negative mood may be just the ticket into the depth of the soul from which the music springs. Almost any intense feeling can move us into the depths and allow that flow of inspiration as long as we don't resist it. All energy contains the oscillation of negative and positive or it wouldn't be energy.

I have also come to trust the power of being desolate and depressed. I recall years ago lying in my hotel room in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, feeling full of self-doubt and missing my newborn son while I was out on the road. (This is in the days before cell phones.) Out of the blue, I received a call from Michael Jackson's Heal the World Foundation inviting me to be the musician for the week with Michael at his Neverland Valley Ranch out in California. That ended up being one of the most memorable weeks of my musical life.

So now, when desolation, depression, and chaos come to visit, I do my best to welcome them in and ask how they can wreck my current limited sense of self in order that something greater may emerge.

In terms of what inspires me, being touched by a great musical performance, or even a recording always helps. The Cathedral inspired the pieces I composed there. Reading a story in the Bible (the one where Peter is walking on water himself and then takes his eyes off of Jesus and falls through the waves) touched me so deeply that the entire For God Alone album pretty much emerged from that one inspiration. Or often, as was the case for Human Heart and Grief and Grace and The Only Real Thing, it is the death of someone close to me.

How did you come up with the name Muddy Angel Music?

Mark: I had just started on the Human Heart CD shortly after my mom passed away and I wanted it to be a benefit for the homeless. I asked a number of well-known artists to whom I was connected to sing my songs in this compilation, including Michael Jackson, Arlo Guthrie, Taylor Dayne, and Jerry Harrison of Talking Heads. It was suggested to me that my chances of striking deals with their record companies would be easier if I had my own corporation. But I needed a name other than my own.

At the time, my son Topaz was a year old, and I had started working more and more with kids in addition to recording world music. (The record label I had been on had focused on spiritual and world music.) So I was looking for a name that encompassed all of these dimensions without sounding too religious. My other idea was "Ear-Reverent Music" but Muddy Angel Music & Arts, whose acronym is MAMA seemed too perfect in all regards and was also a tribute to my mom.

Have you ever met any of your idols face to face? Is there someone you really wish you could have met?

Mark: I would have loved to have met Leonard Cohen before he died. John Lennon, too, although I DID get to sit on his couch in the Dakota and use his Manny's Music discount card to buy equipment when I was the

music director at Kripalu. And I got to play piano with and give a lesson of sorts to his son Sean when he was a kid. And working with Michael Jackson gave me a greater appreciation for his quirky genius than I had had before, but I was never a huge fan. He and I were almost exactly the same age, even emotionally, I think!

Tell me, what is the present challenge that you are most involved with mastering?

Mark: I don't think I will ever master this current stage but when I listen to my music, even though it is passionate in places, it is still a bit too "safe." Because authentic music mirrors our soul expression, I can hear places in my music where I am afraid to cry out from the depths of anger or rage. Like many who have experienced the violence of rage first hand, I am hesitant to touch into its pure energy and to express it. So instead it shows up in the people close to me or in other people's art, not my own.

My current musicals (and there are five in different stages of development) demand that my larger-than-life characters be at home in their rage, their passion, as well as their love. My music tends toward the more pleasant emotions of peace, love, and joy, which comprise only half of the human experience.

So I would like to move from passive-aggression and premature transcendence toward clear assertiveness and humble integrity. Any and all prayers welcome!

To whom do you listen when it's just you in your quiet space?

Mark: My intention is to listen to the voice of truth, wherever it comes from. I often will chant or sing an invocation and then listen in the stillness. Sometimes I actually listen to my own music from years ago, because even though I have been somewhat limited in my self-expression around the darker emotions, my recorded music still carries such power and presence for me. It's a reminder from my past self and from the Divine to remember who I am and what I am doing here.

Mark, what is a normal day like for you? What do you do?

Mark: It is always my intention to start the day with prayer and meditation and for over forty years I pretty much did that. Right now, my life is topsy-turvy, but still I try to “don’t just do something...sit there!” Singing often helps me settle down so I can see just how crazy my mind is. It gives me a lot of compassion for the folks who have to deal with me.

Next, I eat a yummy breakfast, Then I head to the studio where I might be producing an album for a client, followed by teaching a few composition or piano students. I do my best to start each work session with a prayer and am sorely reminded by reality if I forget! Sometimes the prayer is simple, like “Help!” or “Thank you.”

I try to get out for a walk or hike but often save that for the end of day if I am on a roll. At some point in the day it is essential for me to be close to the earth from whence my body emerged. My human mother is long gone, but Mother Earth holds and nourishes this earthly body as surely as my mom once nursed me.

Lunch is normally something light and simple at the studio and I often take that time to catch up on texts or emails that have accrued over the course of the time that my phone was in airplane mode.

And a few times a month, of course, I need to dig into the financials of the business, the invoices, bank deposits, bills, etc. I have this amazing admin assistant, Deb Carter, who is a wonderfully creative artist and singer, and she comes in every other week to keep me a little caught up in this regard. Having the studio ready for her (or my taxes for my accountant!) is a true act of self-discipline for me. It is so much more compelling to work on music than finances. And then there is studio and instrument maintenance and repair. And I may have a rehearsal for an upcoming concert or church service, or, if time allows, another rewrite or re-record on Luci.

If I have no social or family obligations (which are a lot less now that my sons are grown), I often find myself working well into the evening on less pressing matters: a new song, a recording for a friend, maybe singing with someone who has stopped by the studio. It’s so easy for me to lose track of time in there! Then I head to wherever I am laying my head that night for a late dinner or snack and then off to bed to start again the next day.

Also, a lot of people ask me to pray for them during the course of the day. Yesterday, for example, I received three prayer requests in a row. I love being reminded of how helpless and fragile we are, and to turn our concerns on a daily basis over to Someone or Something that can do a hell (or a heaven?) of a lot more for folks than I ever could. I am always amazed at how our prayers actually make a difference in peoples’ lives and not just by the placebo effect since sometimes the folks (or animals) being prayed for don’t even know till later that they were being held in prayer.

Do you think of musical sounds as having color?

Mark: I think less in specific colors than in shades of brightness and hue. For example, a piece on my CD For God Alone, written in the Lydian mode (a major scale with the fourth note raised a half step) is very bright, or uplifting, and then it will go into something in the Aeolian mode (the natural minor scale) that is much more dark, or somber.

Having said that, there are definitely times when a passage or musical texture will come across as more green (soothing and natural), or red (passionate and

fiery), or purple (high vibration and spiritual.) And when I compose for film, the color on the screen affects the tone color of the music for sure.

What is the most interesting fact about yourself?

Mark: I probably haven’t discovered it yet. And many “facts” turn out later to be myths. For example, I was told, and grew up believing, that I was 1/16 Cherokee from my mom’s side. I knew my dad was a Mayflower descendant and that some of his forebears were Revolutionary generals or other officers. My mom had jet black hair that she sometimes wore in braids and had all of this silver and turquoise jewelry. But when I did the whole ancestry thing, I found that I am of more than 99% European descent. I am glad I did not try to get one of those Native American affirmative action perks!

Maybe it’s interesting that, from an early age, I have seen people’s thought forms almost as streams of color and have had what we now call auditory hallucinations, which I assumed, growing up, were just the angels singing. Sometimes, I would respond to people’s thoughts that they were thinking, assuming that they had spoken them to me. I also have had my share of out-of-body experiences and been able to collect information non-locally that turned out to be accurate. And my sense of where I stop and where others start is somewhat different from other people’s.

But recently I found out that these are all symptoms of a lesion to the temporal lobe, which I also possess. The neurosurgeon I met with at Mass General said that, given that I have had many of these symptoms my
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Mark Kelso Photograph by Tasia Keetman



Mark Kelso Photograph by Tasja Keetman

whole life, removing the tiny abnormality might likely remove what makes me who I am. I try not to make that an excuse for why I am the way I am, but it is tempting!

What is an important thing for people to know about you right now?

Mark: That I could really use help right now in the form of investment in Luci and the other musicals. I find that to be a hard ask because the ROI for musicals

is comparable to buying a huge lottery ticket. I have a royalty-sharing model in place but have not yet formalized it as even that costs money that I don't currently have. The folks who invested in Hamilton or Book of Mormon, however, are still laughing all the way to the bank. But many musicals are like boats, holes in the water into which one pours money.

I also belong to an umbrella arts organization called The Field that allows folks to make tax-deductible donations to support the work. That might be a better re-

turn than a formal investment for folks needing those kind of deductions. I have been so touched by those who have been able to help in that way. Prayers, connections to producers, donors, and investors, all of these things help!

What in life do you find most pleasing, aside from music related things?

Mark: I love a good meal, a good laugh, a good hike, and a good poop! But my favorite activity is meditating and praying.

Listening to your music brings hope and a journey filled with beauty. You're very positive. Are you always such a positive message giver?

Mark: I don't want to write or sing anything I wouldn't want humming through my own subconscious, but I prefer to think of the messages as offerings of my own foibles and insights rather than anything particularly positive. I am glad it comes across that way though!

Where can we hear you play locally?

Mark: The easiest (and cheapest!) place is always the Richmond Congregational Church on almost any Sunday morning that I'm not on the road. I have been the music director there for over 20 years and love playing there on my own Steinway (plus a harpsichord and a pipe organ) in the sanctuary.

Every couple of months, Sherrie Howard and I lead kirtan at the Kripalu Center. Our next kirtan is at Berkcircque in Great Barrington on September 14, at 7:30 PM. For folks who want to venture out of the Berkshires to hear us, we will be playing the Lovelight Festival in Reisterstown, MD, on Sept 21-24, and at Sacred Roots Healing Center in Easthampton, MA on October 12 at 7:30 PM.

I also play from time to time at the Gateways Inn in Lenox. I'm often joined by friends or students of mine who like to sit in for a song or two, or more.

When owners Eiran and Michelle Gazit started the piano lounge, they were already familiar with my music because they owned some of my CDs from when they lived in Israel.

I also do try to keep a list of my out-of-town gigs on my website at www.muddyangel.com. And one can follow links from there to iTunes, CDbaby, and YouTube. There is also a site dedicated to Luci, called www.iloveluci.com with links to download the work in progress or to watch a YouTube of the first reading in New York City starring Chelsea LeSage as Luci.

Most of my out-of-town appearances of late have been Luci-related or have been kirtans with Sherrie Howard. She keeps her website a bit better up-to-date, however, so check out www.sherriehoward.com for where we will be next.

Thank you for all of your great questions!

Thank you, Mark!