

Few bass players have an extensive a history as bass player and composer, Mark Egan – but here’s one for those that might not have heard of the man.

Egan is one of bass guitar’s most decorated and respected veterans. Throughout his career, spanning almost 40 years of bass playing, he has won three platinum and three gold albums to his credit. He has also reecorded with a whose-who of jazz and pop artists including Pat Metheny, both for his solo work and during the earliest incarnation of the Pat Metheny Group, Sting, Roger Daltrey, Arcadia on their 1985 album, *So Red the Rose*, and has performed with decorated jazz veterans and ensambles including Gil Evans Orchestra, [Marianne Faithful](#), John McLaughlin, [Sophie B. Hawkins](#) and many others.

His bass work has also been heard on many movies and television shows, including Aladdin, The Color of Money, A Chorus Line, NBC Sports, ABC’s All MY Children, CNN Headline News and many other award winning television publications and commercials.

Mark is co-founder of the group [Elements](#), along with Metheny drummer Danny Gottlieb. To date the band has recorded eight full-length albums and toured over twenty-seven countries. In 1992, Mark founded [Wavetone Records](#), an independent contemporary record company.

Mark returns this year with a brand new solo album, *About Now*. For this album, Egan reunited with drummer Danny Gottlieb and keyboard player Mitchel Forman after two solo releases with other musicians holding the roles.

I had a chance to exchange emails with Mark to discuss this new album, what’s new on the horizon with Mark musically and to reflect on some ideas pertaining to music and life.

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Mike Emiliani (ME): For this album, did you find yourself composing song exclusively for this album, re-hashing old musical ideas into new arrangements or drawing from complete old ideas that never made it onto past albums and into other collaborations?

Mark Egan (M.E.): For *About Now* I wrote new music exclusively for this album and for the players, [Danny Gottlieb](#) and [Mitchel Forman](#).

I composed many of the songs on acoustic piano. Even though I’m not a pianist I enjoy composing at the piano and this was the foundation for much of the writing for this project. I also compose a lot on the bass as well as in a DAW and sometimes just in my head.

Over a six month period before the sessions I was experimenting with different ideas as grooves, melodies, bass lines and chord sequences on the piano or synthesizer and documenting them. I had Danny and Mitchel in mind which really helped the focus since I’m very familiar with their playing styles and capabilities from having played together with them so much in the past.

Usually the writing process starts with an initial idea, bass line, drum groove or chord sequence and I continue to develop the ideas. I find it very helpful to have a recording device while I’m practicing so that I can document an idea that will later be used for a song.

I have a little program on my iPad called DAW and it's a basic multi track recorder that I can just use as a scratch pad for inspirations of the moment. As simple as it is, I sometimes use Garage Band for a quick sketch while the idea is still fresh in my head.

When it came time to put together songs for *About Now* I started listening to all of the ideas that I had collected and chose the best ones that I thought would be good for the trio with Danny and Mitchel in mind and started developing them into full arrangements with introductions, melodies, solo forms and outros.

Creativity for me comes in waves and I have to be ready to capture those precious moments and develop them into compositions. It really takes being open and not distracted which is becoming very difficult with all of the technology that is around us. When I'm composing I turn off my cell and house phones and go in on the music. If I'm writing ideas into music manuscript I try to write as much as possible to describe the feel, tempo, harmony, melody and some idea of an arrangement.

ME: As a corollary to the last question, were there songs that didn't make it to the album and songs that you had originally pitched to Danny and Mitch but were turned down or not rehearsed enough to make it onto the final cut?

M.E. We recorded most of the songs that I had composed for the project. There were a few that we didn't get to and we will be recording those songs along with new songs that I've written since then for a new trio recording to be released in the spring of 2015.

I love playing and recording with Danny and Mitchel. It's such an open trio and we can explore so many areas from all of the experiences that we've shared collectively.

I've been playing with Danny since 1971 and we developed as a rhythm section while we were together with the [Pat Metheny Group](#) playing 300 days a year for four years. We also have our group Elements and we've toured in 27 countries and released 8 Cds since the group started in 1982.

Danny and I have a very special chemistry as a rhythm section and can go many places musically.

Both Danny and I have played with Mitchel since 1976 in a variety of groups in NYC and worldwide. Danny and Mitchel played together in **John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra** and Mitchel and I toured and recorded with Stan Getz and many groups in the New York community.

Mitchel recorded on my first Cd, *Mosaic*, as well as our *Elements Spirit River* Cd.

So, as you can see we all have a lot of history together.

ME: Were there any albums that were particularly inspirational or albums that made you say, "I want that sound on this album" when composing for this album?

M.E. I was listening to **Medeski, Martin and Wood (MMW)** as well as the **Keith Jarrett trio** recordings since the instrumentation, grooves and focus on improvisation was similar to the spirit of what I was looking for. I really like the open grooves that MMW create and improvise over. I also am a huge fan of the Keith Jarrett trio with drummer, [Jack Dejohnette](#) and [bassist Gary Peacock](#) and enjoy the depth of their improvisational abilities.

When Danny, Mitchel and I got together for the sessions and started rehearsing the songs, it was clear that we had a very different direction than those recordings from MMW and the Keith trio, in an interesting way. The interaction, flow and communication from Danny and Mitchel interacting with the compositions gave

the trio a different direction, combining the groove influence with more depth of harmonic improvisation.

ME: What did you find yourself trying differently or experimenting with on this album that you hadn't on albums past?

M.E. I wasn't consciously trying to do anything different on this recording and approached it as a continuation of my bass playing and composing style.

I did want to make *About Now* a more intimate expression by recording as a trio with a good balance of groove and open playing. I also wanted to reach

backwards and orchestrate the arrangements with some of my different bass sounds such as 8 string fretless and double neck with a fretted 8-string bass.

Since my previous studio recording *Truth Be Told*, recorded in 2009, I've been continually touring and recording in a wide variety of styles and groups.

My previous solo project, *Truth Be Told* featured a quartet with Mitchel Forman, Bill Evans and [Vinnie Colaiuta](#) and had more of a groove focus for my bass playing and compositions.

On the new release, *About Now*, I was trying for more of an introspective expression featuring my fretless playing in a more intimate setting with eloquent playing of Danny and Mitch as well as trying to draw from production techniques from my earlier solo projects such as doubled 8-string melodies and multi-layered harmonics with sparse keyboard synthesizer layering.

The release previous to *About Now* was *Unit 1*, featuring drummer Karl Latham and guitarist John Hart. I love playing with this group. The *Unit 1* CD is a live high energy recording and it's a very different expression than the new studio release, *About Now*.

ME: What were the rehearsals like for this album between Danny, Mitch and yourself?

M.E. Two weeks before the sessions I sent very basic MP3 demos with full arrangements to Mitchel and Danny as references and a starting point for the recording.

I wanted to leave a lot of room for expansion and I was very open and sensitive to everyone's ideas and creative flow. The recording was done in three days.

When we got together for the sessions we rehearsed each song and within an hour or so we were recording takes. The rehearsals were to establish the feels that we wanted and to iron out the arrangements to make them flow and breathe.

Most of the songs were done in the first or second takes.

As we were rehearsing **Phil Magnotti, the recording engineer**, was adjusting microphone levels and getting rough mixes ready so that when we felt comfortable with an arrangement we started recording.

ME: How did your compositional process differ for this album than albums and collaborations in the past?

M.E. As I mentioned earlier I had the players in mind and wrote around their playing styles. In many ways it was a very similar composing process to other projects in that I gave a lot of thought to the direction of the

music and collected a lot of ideas about that concept as well as kept the musicians in mind that I thought were going to be on the sessions.

I started with an overall concept of the record and continued to build on it and keep imagining what the overall sound would be like. I usually try to have a good balance of up tempo songs and more impressionistic moods to keep it interesting for the listener.

As I mentioned, the most important thing for me was to establish what the overall sound and groove was going to be. After that everything seemed to flow within that framework. Danny and Mitchell made it very easy to realize.

ME: You brought back Danny Gottlieb for this album after 2 albums without him, 2010's *Truth Be Told* and 2013's *Unit 1*. How was it playing with Danny again? How did playing with him differ than playing with Vinnie Colaiuta or Karl Latham?

M.E. It's always great playing with Danny.

As I mentioned earlier, Danny and I have a lot of history as a rhythm section team since 1971 and our time with the Pat Metheny Group and Elements. It's always great playing with Danny and it's timeless, meaning that we pick up where we left off. Danny and I are always playing in different groups so there is always a strong connection.

We are in the process of doing a drum and bass record which is a project that we've wanted to do for a long time.

Even though we have our group Elements, which features artists such as Bill Evans, Clifford Carter, Gil Goldstein and David Mann, we also enjoy playing duo and creating soundscapes with just drums and bass.

How does playing with Danny differ than playing with Vinnie or Karl?....

All drummers have a different touch and groove and Vinnie Colaiuta and Karl Latham are great Drummers.

Danny has achieved such a high level of command of the hands from his experiences as a player and especially from his studies with the master, [Joe Morello](#).

Danny has amazing hand technique and a very special expressive touch on the cymbals and drum kit. He also has a tremendous amount of experience and understanding in many different styles of music.

We also have played so much together in a variety of groups and styles that we move as a team and it's always creative. Danny is always listening, complimenting and reacting. I can identify Danny's playing in a blind-fold test in a few seconds. That's how tuned into him I am and how identifiable his style is.

ME: One of your tracks is called *Tea in Tiananmen Square*. Is there an interesting story that goes along with that title? When listening to the track, *Tiananmen Square* was not one of the things that came to my mind!

M.E. Titles are so subjective right? The titles of my songs come from many different sources and usually inspire how I approach the composition.

I came up with the title, *Tea in Tiananmen Square*, while I was on tour in China sitting at a tea parlor in Tiananmen Square. I felt a very strong feeling from being at that place and I liked the idea as a song title

and wrote it down for a later song.

When I was composing for *About Now* I reflected on the title and came up with the keyboard vamp that I developed into the song. The feel to me is very pensive and sad but with hope.

The parallel fifths of the keyboard riff are reminiscent of eastern harmony and the overall feel of the song is an impression of what I imagined was happening there at the time with the tanks. The bass solo at the end of the song, over the Phrygian mode, is very aggressive and speaks of my impressions of what the mood was there in Tiananmen Square.

ME: Many of your solo projects are usually quartets or trios. Is there any reason in particular for this?

M.E. I enjoy both quartets and trio instrumentations because I feel that there is a lot of room for everyone to have a voice and be creative. I like the concept of having space in a group and these ensembles provide all the basic elements of music.... rhythm, melody, harmony and improvisation. They also allow room for me as a bassist to play melodically. As a bassist and soloist I prefer smaller ensembles for my expression.

ME: Have you ever thought about adding additional musicians or working with larger ensembles for your solo albums?

M.E. I also enjoy playing in larger ensembles and have had many years of experience playing and recording with people such as the Gil Evans Orchestra, George Grunz , Dave Mathews and many larger NY studio ensembles such as the New York Philharmonic. I have been a NY session player since the mid seventies and those experiences have been with many large ensembles as well.

At the moment I'm arranging my original music for an ensemble in Schwaz Austria at the Outreach musical festival this summer. That group consists of two trumpets, alto sax, tenor, soprano sax, two trombones, two guitars and piano.

I'm also interested in recording my compositions in a new project with a larger horn ensemble similar to the Gil Evans Orchestra. There are so many sound colors available to a group of this size.

The great thing about playing with Gil Evans was that it was really like playing with a small group with many world class soloists. It was also one of the most creative music groups that I have ever experienced.

Remember, Gil was Mile Davis' mentor. To be in Gil's presence was very special and made me aware of many possibilities in music.

Gil asked me to compose for the orchestra and I wrote and arranged two original compositions that were on the Gil Evans' *Bud and Bird* recording which won a Grammy award.

ME: You mentioned in a past interview that while in Miami, you were a trumpet player before you switched over to bass. Do you find yourself ever "thinking like a trumpet player" when playing bass? For this album?

M.E. My first instrument was trumpet and I played from age ten until my mid twenties. I played professionally from age fifteen in the Boston area with jazz, R&B and rock groups. I studied music at the University of Miami as a trumpet player in the jazz department and switched my major to bass during my third year there. Yes, the trumpet and playing melodically is the foundation of my musical experience from my very early years.

I do think like a trumpet player at times while soloing and generally while playing however I am always responsible for the groove and whenever support is needed I'm there ready to supply the foundation of the music. It depends on the song, the group and the arrangement.

For this album there are some melodies that are very trumpet like only sounding down a few octaves. What I learned from trumpet and carried over to bass is the commitment to play a melody lyrically as if you're singing the melody.

ME: What are some of the projects on the horizon for Mark Egan? Any new collaborations in the works?

M.E. As I mentioned, we'll be going back into the studio with the trio in the early fall with Mitchel and Danny to record another trio record. We'll be expanding on the music from *About Now*. I'm working on those songs at the moment and very excited to go back in the studio with the trio.

Another album that will be released this fall is a quartet with Karl Latham, Ryan Cariaux-trumpet and Nick Rolfe-keyboards. We recorded the music of Bjork.

At Barber Shop Studios in New Jersey improvising on Bjork's songs as well as composing other songs to go along with the project. This is some very exciting music along the lines of Miles Davis's *Live Evil*.

I'm really thrilled to be a part of this very creative group and look forward to touring in Europe in the spring of 2015. The group name is Constellations.

As I also mentioned Danny and I are recording a duo project to be released in the fall of 2015.

ME: What is 1 album you're currently listening to and what is one book you're currently reading?

M.E. I'm currently listening to [Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Lady Land*](#).

I just played a concert in Warwick, NY with [guitarist Bobby Messano](#), [keyboardist Clifford Carter](#) and [drummer Karl Latham](#) and we played a lot of Hendrix songs so I went back in to listen to Jimi and he never let's you down.

Recorded 45 years ago it still sounds fresh and inspires me.

I'm reading the book [Light and shade...Conversations with Jimmy Page](#). It's a great collection of interviews of his life and musical career. I'm a big Led Zeplin fan and one of my favorite bassists is John Paul Jones. It's great to read the stories of the band and then go to You Tube to hear examples of what Jimmy is referencing.

ME: Lastly, what is one thing that readers might find surprising about Mark Egan?

M.E. I'm an avid fisherman and go on fishing expeditions in northern Ontario above the boundary waters. I've spent a total of eight months in the deep northern woods with my great friends Bill Evans and Tom Waterloo in search of monster fish.

You can purchase Mark's brand new solo album off of his [Wavetone Record's website here](#) or through [Amazon](#) or [CD Baby](#)

Mike Emiliani is the founder and editor-in-chief of Smart Bass Guitar. When he's not writing for Smart Bass, he can be found playing bass, producing music, studying business and watching basketball.

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