Mark Egan – Music in the Moment, July 2014 Issue

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Bass Musician Magazine, July 2014 Issue Featuring Mark Egan – Music in the Moment...

I distinctly remember the fumbling, uncoordinated confusion of being a beginning bass player. Having just started to investigate the bass, my fingers were barely able to obey the simple command to place one finger per fret. The notes on my bass were a mystery, with the land of the middle neck presenting itself as the Bermuda triangle, where flights would inevitably end in confusion, at best. How could anyone master four strings over what seemed to be an endless number of frets?

Trying to gain some insight into the bass, I picked up a periodical that featured several bass players and a paragraph long lesson from each. Accompanying each lesson was a photo of the player; most showcasing very "cool" poses with their instruments. Even though the lessons were above my head, I felt a sense of confidence through association with the others I saw wielding four strings.

And then I saw the picture.

The photo in the right, bottom corner was different. In this picture, the player sat holding a *double neck bass*. To boot, one of the necks was fretless! My young



mind could not begin to comprehend how anyone could manage such a thing. In retrospect, I'm just glad I didn't notice the fact that one of the necks had eight strings instead of the four that were defeating me.

The man holding this monster of an instrument appeared different from the others, also. The black and white photo exuded a quiet confidence, without the need for glitz or glam. He held the instrument, fingers on one of the fingerboards, and there was a distinct sense that the double neck instrument was not for show; rather, it was required

for his music.

That bassist was Mark Egan.



Indeed, the basses played by Mark Egan, regardless of the neck and string combinations, have been utilized to their full potential on a mile-long discography. On each recording, the same calm, confident sensibility that could be noticed in his photograph comes through in his playing. There is no doubt that Mark is capable of creating bass fireworks – slithering fretless lines, ringing harmonics, and rapid-fire fretted grooves can be found throughout his catalog – however, even the most pyrotechnic display from Mark comes with a sense that the technique is necessary for substance, not thrown together for attention.

Perhaps the most intimate look at Mark's playing can be found on his solo albums, which run from 1985's "Mosaic" to his most recent, this year's "About Now". On each, bass-centric listeners can delight in the plethora of tones and impressive solos, but the constant draw is the way in which Mark's playing fits every composition perfectly. The compositions are complex and full, creating canvases of sound that are then explored through improvisation. The results are songs that transport the listener through experiences such as (from "About Now") "Sailing", "Mckenzie Portage", and "Tea in Tiananmen Square".

The same bass sensibilities can be found on recordings by Elements, the group Mark co-leads with drummer Danny Gottlieb. The music of Elements speaks in a multitude of dialects, including jazz, fusion, rock, and world influences, among others. The interplay between Mark and Danny is particularly special, propelling every piece forward while exploring the compositions.

In addition to these two arenas, the list of Mark's recordings as a sideman is staggering and diverse. Artists with whom Mark has recorded include Cyndi Lauper, Joan Osbourne, David Wilcox, Jim Hall, Art Garfunkel, Sting, John

McLaughlin, Stan Getz, Pat Martino, Larry Coryell, Duran, Duran, and many, many more. Television, movie, and commercial sessions also are plentiful on Mark's list of credits. In true master session musician style, Mark has gracec hundreds of sound bites that have reached our ears, folding bass lines seamlessly into the music without arrogance or ego.

As if these accomplishments weren't enough, during his tenure with the Pat Metheny Group, Mark created groundbreaking music that altered the face of jazz. The band, featuring Mark, Pat Metheny, Danny Gottlieb, and Lyle Mayes, explored technical, challenging, explosive compositions that featured a spirit of playing in the moment. The two albums recorded by this lineup, 1978's self-titled "Pat Metheny Group" and 1979's "American Garage", received both critical and popular acclaim. The group truly pushed the bounds of what fusion listeners were accustomed to, infusing every performance with a relentless pursuit of creativity.

Looking back, the photo that shook my young perspective on bass is still awe-inspiring – much less so for the shape of the double neck bass, but more in realization of the amazing music that Mark Egan has created throughout his career on and other basses. When speaking with Mark, his passion for making the best, most creative music possible is evident.

Let's talk about the new record "About Now". The entire album flows through different soundscapes that allow you, Mitch, and Danny to explore. Was that what you were going for?

That's exactly what I was going for and what I usually go for with my different CDs. I wanted my compositions to give us a backdrop so that we would be able to express ourselves. Danny Gottlieb and Mitch Forman are such great improvisers and have such fluent styles on their own. I didn't want to inhibit them, but I didn't want it to just be a free session where it was total improvisation. I wanted to have some type of direction to have it be listenable to the public.

How did the sessions come about?

The way that this came together, similar to the way I did my past albums, is that I spent a lot of time with the compositions. In this case it was probably over the last year or so. I did a lot of composing at my new studio and a lot of it was at the piano. I'm not a piano player, but I'm an arranger's piano player - I can play chord changes, sequences, and melodies. I came up with a lot of songs and then I narrowed it down. I go through the songs and figure out which ones pull together and sound as a unit. I chose those songs and then I started arranging them with Danny and Mitch in mind. This wasn't the type of situation where I had songs that I had written just to write them, I really wrote them for Danny and Mitch, knowing it would be a trio. About the last two months before we recorded the session, I did some very basic demos of the songs with the melody, changes, and a little drum loop that was somewhat in the ballpark of what I was thinking. I made mp3s of those and sent them to Danny and Mitch a couple of weeks before, with the sheet music.



They had an idea of any type of technical parts that they might want to look at before they came, as well as an overall idea and scope of the project. That was about it. It was about a year of composing and then about 2 weeks ahead of time for them to get the music. When we got together we recorded for three days. We would play a song, rehearse a little bit, and then record it. Most of them were first, second, or third takes, mostly first or second takes.

The compositions come across very clearly, but there is also a sense of group improvisation.

Yes. This trio recording is a very intimate statement for me. First of all, I love the trio format and I've done this before.

My "As We Speak" record was a trio with John Abercrombie and Danny. I wanted to do one with Mitch on piano because it let me fulfill the melodic function as well as the bass function. I love the openness of a trio, but this trio with Danny and Mitch sounds like more than a trio to me.

On some things I did overdub bass melodies with my double neck bass and my eight string fretless. I also overdubbe harmonics, especially on the first tune, "Sailing". With the exception of some light keyboard overdubs, I went into this recording session not wanting to make it too produced. I wanted it to be more open and more raw.

There's a very natural flow to the album.

These were very special days in the studio as well as much attention to the mixing process. I can still listen to it and it is pretty rare to keep my interest. You have to remember that I've listened to it thousands of times by now! From composing to actually doing the session and editing, mixing, and mastering, I 've listened to it so many times. But I'm still enjoying it!

There is a lot there. The beauty of open, improvisational music is that there is a balance between the compositions and improvisation. In a trio, where people are improvising, everyone is reacting to each other. There is all of that mental energy and spiritual energy that's going around the room and to be able to capture that is special.

Let's talk about a few specific tunes from the album. The title track, "About Now" has a great groove.

The tune "About Now" was something that I wrote at the piano; it started out with just the intro vamp, which is sort of a solemn feeling, and I thought that it would be a great vehicle for Mitch and his brilliant piano playing. Mitch is the one who solos on this, but I didn't feel like I needed to solo, just play the melody and groove. It sort of reminds me of the Mark Cohen record, "Walking in Memphis", which I actually played on. I enjoy that straight eighth, acoustic piano, drum, and bass feel.

I thought it would be great to be called "About Now" because it's a song about being in the moment. I was going to put it at the opening of the CD order, but then I thought that "Sailing" kicked it off and put the album into motion a little bit more. I solo on "Sailing" a little bit more so there's more of a "Mark identity". But "About Now" is a very special song for me.

You just mentioned a great tune to talk about, "Sailing". This tune has a lot of bass content, including some overdubbed sections.

The harmonics were the overdubs. At the end of the song, I quadrupled the harmonics and then I played my eight string fretless for the melody on top. My eight string fretless Pedulla is something I've used on a lot of my records, from my very first solo record, "Mosaic". "Sailing" has a thread that goes back to the beginning of my solo projects. I like to write in that type of groove, a medium bossa. Then I figured, why not incorporate all of the basses and the sounds that I like to use? The Pedulla eight string fretless was perfect for the melody and I doubled the melody and panned it left and right. It's a real identifiable sound that I've used on many of my recordings so I kind of reached back and then pulled forward with "Sailing".

I just listened to your album "Mosaic" earlier and I can definitely hear that thread running between that record and "About Now".

There's a tune on that record called "Ocean Views" – "Sailing" is very similar in the feel of that song. On "Sailing", Danny plays an amazing groove solo at the end of that where we're all vamping. Danny plays some of the hippest drums – it is so subtle and so great. He's playing all of this beautiful, eloquent handwork and kick-snare ideas, but it goes by the radar because it's the vamp out.

Another tune is "Mckenzie Portage", which musically describes what seems to have been a very cool trip!

It was an amazing trip! I'm an avid fisherman and I go on fishing expeditions up in the boundary waters of Quetico Provincial Park in Canada with my good friends Bill Evans and Tom Waterloo. The first year I took one of the portaging trips was in 1989. The Mckenzie Portage happens to be the most difficult portage you could possibly take in this provincial park, which is made up of a thousand lakes. It was an extremely difficult portage to get to this one lake, Mckenzie Lake, where the fishing is incredible



because it is a virgin lake. The trails aren't maintained so for instance, you'll be walking and there will be a four-foot tree trunk that's in front of the trail. You have to lift everything over, then you're in mud that comes up to your waist, then it goes through a swamp. At one point the water was over my head and I was holding onto the canoe and I was underwater!

I've always wanted to write a song about the feeling of that trip. Mckenzie Portage is sort of maniacal, in a way. It has the Bernard Purdie shuffle groove that Danny plays so well. It turned out to be a funky vehicle to play on that I liked.

Danny will be a prime figure as we discuss the thread running through your career, but perhaps we should go back and talk about your roots. You started your musical path on trumpet.

Yes, I started to play the trumpet in the fourth grade. I played trumpet all through grade school, elementary school, junior high, and high school. I was in all of the school bands and the orchestras and I had my own bands. I used to play trumpet in a lot of rhythm and blues bands that played the music of James Brown, Wilson Pickett, and Sam and Dave. I started playing professionally when I was 15 in the clubs around the Boston area where I grew up.

While you were a young trumpet professional you also picked up a bass at some point.

At that time 1967-69 on the radio Motown had some of the top hits as well as Cream, Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles etc. In

Motown music, the bass was in the forefront and the bassist was James Jamerson, which we know now, but we didn't know then. For some reason I focused in on bass parts, even though I was a trumpet player. I remember going to see the Supremes in 1967 at the Brockton Fair Grounds in Massachusetts and I was just transfixed on the bass player. I just couldn't take my eyes off of watching him play. That got me going, so I took lessons with a guitar player, Mike Lalli, who was also in the same music teaching building as my trumpet teacher. We worked on how to make different patterns from chords and scales and where that fit with being a bass player. From the very beginning Mike introduced me to playing with all four fingers in my left hand, like a guitarist. This established my basic technique. I started playing in groups in my spare time, but I was still playing mostly trumpet professionally then.

In fact, you left home for the University of Miami to study as a trumpet player.

It was 1969 and I was accepted into the University of Miami School of Music as a trumpet player. Before that, in 1968 I had applied to the university to study oceanography! Even though I was a professional trumpet player, to me playing trumpet was all about having fun and playing in bands. I thought that I needed to do something that was more serious and something that I could earn a living at! I applied to the school of oceanography, which had a very good school. The summer before I was going to go away I expressed doubt about not really being a scientist or a chemist. I remember talking to my mother and saying, "I'm not really sure about oceanography as a career. What am I going to do?" She said, "You're a musician! You should play music!" I just needed that little shove and that acknowledgment. So I reapplied to the School of Music, which happened to be an amazing music school led by Jerry Coker, who was one of the leading jazz educators in the world. That's where I opened up and the whole world blossomed for me down there in Miami.

It should be noted that Miami's School of Music was very select.

There were only 30 jazz students, so it was a real one on one relationship.

Since you went to Miami as a trumpet player, how did the bass fit in?

I brought my Delray bass and Supro amp with me and I was just jamming with people. I was seriously into playing the trumpet. At that time, I was turned on to jazz giants- Miles Davis and John Coltrane and the whole lineage of jazz. You have to understand what was going on in 1969 in music – you had Jimi Hendrix really expanding the boundaries, Cream, the Beatles and Led Zeppelin came a couple of years later. But then Miles Davis came out with "Bitches Brew' and "Live Evil", so I was tuned into that as a trumpet player. That was a whole departure from traditional jazz at the time and I embraced it! I wanted to be into the cutting edge of current jazz but that also led me to go back to the roots of jazz, which I am continuing to study.

Was there a specific event that turned the balance and transitioned you bass as your primary instrument?

The second year in Miami I moved into a house with a bunch of friends. A saxophone player came over to the house and saw the bass amp and said, "Who plays bass?" One of my roommates said, "Mark plays". Later that day he callec me and asked if I wanted to play this gig that night. I said, "OK!" After I got off of the phone with him I called the piano player who was going to play with him and I asked him what tunes he was playing. I got all of the lead sheets and went through them on bass.

I played and he liked it. He asked me if I wanted to play with him on a steady basis. I couldn't believe it; I felt like I was an imposter, because I could have sat in and played it on trumpet with much, much more ability than on bass. He wanted me to play bass, so I did and it became a steady gig. One thing led to another and I started playing other steady club gigs with other good jazz players in the Miami area.

Meanwhile, I was still a trumpet major at the university, but there was a lot of demand for bass. More and more people called me because I had a good feel. I played one finger bass – and I mean on the fingerboard I really only played with one finger! I gradually focused on the technique of the bass and started applying all of the knowledge I had learned from playing trumpet. I was studious on trumpet, because to be a good trumpet player you really have to

put a lot of time in and there are a lot of technique exercises. I was fully ensconced in that for trumpet, so I just applied that over to bass.

Do you feel it was fortunate to have started on trumpet?

In looking back, I think it just is what it is. I'm thankful that I played a melodic instrument first, because I think it really added to the sensibilities that I play on bass. I had to catch up a lot on bass as far as studying groove and really finding out what the bass function was. On trumpet you play a bit, then you stop; on bass, you keep playing and playing!

It's all about the groove. I tried to really feel the responsibility of being a bass player foremost and being the foundation. But I also learned from trumpet and from listening to people like Miles Davis where you can just play a few notes and it can mean so much. To me, it's all about the groove, on any instrument. If you can play an idea and it has the feel, that's it! You don't need anything else. The simplicity of it is what I go for and then I build from that.

While you were in Miami you met Jaco Pastorius, who you cite as someone who influenced your perspective of the bass.

I was fortunate to meet the meteorite, Jaco. The bass players that I was listening to before Jaco were people like Stanley Clarke, before Return to Forever, when he first came on the scene playing upright in New York. Then I met Jaco and it was a real turning point because Jaco had such a strong identity, not only as a player, but also as a composer and as a total music force. He really was an innovator. You don't run into innovators that often and especially on the instrument that you're studying. I fortunately was able to study with him a bit. We were friends and he used to come over to my house and we would jam. He'd play piano, I'd play bass; I'd play piano, he'd play bass. We play in a band together with two basses called Baker's Dozen led by Ira Sullivan and Vince Lawrence. I got directly plugged into Jaco in the early years, before he got famous and then before he had problems with drugs and alcohol. The great CD, "Jaco – The Early Years", that's when I knew Jaco. That's the Jaco that I was so influenced by and so inspired by.

From Miami, you made another transition, this time to New York.

I came to New York in 1976 with the gifted singer, Phyllis Hyman. In that band was Hiram Bullock, Clifford Carter and a drummer, Bill Bowker. It was only going to be a two-week engagement, but it became a fulltime job. That was my introduction to get to New York. A month after that, I got a call to play with the Pointer Sisters. I did a tour with the Pointer Sisters, then a tour with Eumir Deodato in Australia for a month. When I returned home David Sanborn asked me if I wanted to join his band. Hiram Bullock played with David Sanborn at the time and was the one who recommended me. I said, "Definitely!" I was doing studio work in New York and now playing in the David Sanborn band, which was a very prestigious bass chair. It was all first-call session players in New York, so that got me accepted playing on the New York session scene and playing records, movies, jingles, etc.

We did the first record with David Sanborn and he asked if I had any songs. We recorded one of my songs called "Heart Lake". That was a big deal! Right place, right time, with the right song.

I was playing with David Sanborn and we were traveling all over the United States when I got a call from Pat Metheny, my classmate from the University of Miami. He said he was starting his band and he asked me if I wanted to join it. I was very reluctant, because it was a dream to be accepted on the New York studio and playing scenes, so my first internal impression was "There's no way I'm going to do this". I said, "Pat, I don't know, I'm really grooving on this New York scene with Sanborn." He said, "Why don't you come up and we'll rehearse once, just to play and just get a feel of the musical concept." We got together to play with Danny and Lyle Mays and it just clicked – it was really special.

It was a very difficult decision and I waited and waited and waited. I thought about it and talked to people and I finally came to the realization that this was the type of music that I wanted to play. My goal in music was to play cutting edge.

creative music and the Pat Metheny Group was a whole new direction, another type of music. I took a leap of faith anc just said, "Well, I have to do this!" We hadn't recorded anything with Pat at that time. What we were going to do, if I was to accept, was to go out in a van and drive all over the country and play for \$50 a night. I was in New York and playing all over the country with David Sanborn where we had roadies and were getting paid really well, then coming back and doing session work! So, it was a huge leap of faith and it was a really hard decision for me. I was losing sleep, literally. I couldn't sleep, I thought I was doing the wrong thing, I just said, "You know what, I gotta follow my heart and I have to do this, because I think it's a really different, creative musical direction."

That was a very special group that not only became popular, but the music evolved. I've done several hundred CDs with many, many artists since then, but that one is what people remember me by. It's interesting how you make decisions and what happens, but I really just said, "I gotta do this!"

Did the group feel like home immediately?

It did. I remember saying to Danny and Lyle, "I can't believe we're getting paid to do this!" It was so much fun and so creative. The compositions created a beautiful backdrop. They were very eloquent and were technical, kind of built around Pat's playing and Lyle's orchestrations, but it left a lot of room for Danny and me as a rhythm section. Pat is an incredible improviser; as is Lyle, so it was a big responsibility for the rhythm section to propel them, but at the same time keep a group dynamic. One of the big things about that group was the use of dynamics. Being able to go from playing *fff* to nothing, or how you develop a solo with dynamics – we were all very aware of that.

After two records with Pat, you left that band and formed Elements with Danny.

In 1980, I left the band. I wanted to go to New York and stay in New York. Pat wanted to use acoustic bass, so it was a mutual parting at that point. In 1981, Danny and I had the opportunity to go into the studio to do a duo project, which turned into the first Elements record. We had special guests Bill Evans and Clifford Carter on the first record. We've done eight records since then, with that group.

Elements blends a lot of musical styles together. Did you intentionally set out to avoid the "fusion" stereotype, instead opting for a mix of influences?

I think so. I think it was an evolution of how Danny and I play together, which has influences from jazz and rock and funk and blues and space music and Indian music and everything you can imagine. We wanted to keep it open and not too over composed, but I think that just by the nature of the instruments: keyboards and saxophone and drums and bass, and we sometimes used guitars as well, it would fit into a fusion format However, we're more ethereal, I think. A little more loose than a strict kind of fusion band.

While having the platform Elements provided for your compositions, what led you to start putting out solo bass albums?

Aside from Elements, I was experimenting with a lot of different basses from Pedulla. I have a double neck, which is a four string fretless and an eight string fretted. I also have a five string fretless and a ten string fretted. I was starting write compositions around the basses. I really wanted to do a bass record that orchestrated all of those basses and that's how "Mosaic" came about. Elements has more of drum and bass at the core of it, where the Mosaic record had the bass at the core of it.

That's how that evolved – it was multi-tracked basses for "Mosaic". Even though Danny did play on it, there are no cymbals on the record, which was an interesting aspect of it. I continued in parallel with working with Elements and with my solo projects in that time period, from '85-'88. I had a separate solo contract with GRP Records and an Elements record deal on RCA, simultaneously, so I had two full record deals at once. I had a lot to fulfill and I was very busy- I was still producing and still doing studio work, probably at the peak of my studio work. Around that time I was doing about 21 record dates a week in New York City. Four or five a day, something like that; just a tremendous amount of output.



And the studio work was very, very diverse!

That's right. I recorded a lot of commercials where they wanted the generic "Fender sound", so I have a '64 Jazz Bass that I played on many, many records. Some of the contractors and producers didn't know about my tenure with Pat Metheny, but then other people called me specifically to play fretless bass. I carried two basses to sessions most of the time.

The sessions would be anything from a very straight-ahead jingle for Purina Puppy Chow, to then going and doing a movie soundtrack where they wanted me to play fretless and fretted, to playing on a country date, to playing a fusion record, to a straight ahead jazz record, and all in between.

Everything feeds everything and it all goes back to my upbringing and experiences in Miami when I heard all of the different tunes and different styles of music.

When you talk about the different styles and projects, you can tell that you love just playing music, regardless of style!

Absolutely! I love being in the moment and nothing brings me more into the moment than playing music. It could be different types of projects or working on different concepts, whether it's practicing or composing or playing with people (which is my favorite). I just love being in that moment. That's one of the things that attracted me to change over to bass from trumpet, because you're always playing on bass. You're part of the eternal rhythm and I like being in that. That's what I really enjoy. I like being in that endless rhythm.

Along with all of your bass commitments, what else are you doing?

In 1992, we had some live Elements recordings from Japan; I decided to start my own record label. It's called Wavetone records and it was very early on for people to start independent labels. Through that I have about 20 titles that are on the Wavetone label. My solo projects are now released through Wavetone Records. I've put a lot of energy into that business entity over the years, since 1992; it's been 22 years already!

You were ahead of the trend of independent labels; do you remember why you wanted to take that on?

Absolutely! We did three records for RCA and one for GRP and they didn't pick up my option. I was free to do what I wanted to do. I had three volumes of live Elements that I wanted to get out. Basically, my experience with labels was that they would give you a small budget to do a record, they'll put it out, and you'll never see any other income. So I said, if I can just get the money to produce the record, why don't I put it on my own label and take the responsibility. If it doesn't get much publicity, that's on me, because I didn't do any. It's been a huge learning curve, trying to figure out the best marketing for the best way to get airplay, distribution, and publicity.

Further taking control of your environment, you also built your own studio, Electric Fields.

I built a studio in Connecticut and that's where I did this last record, which was the first record from the new studio. The studio was designed by the great acoustician/studio designer Francis Manzella from FM Design. The studio is a joy to record in and it sounds incredible. I think the record is a statement to that. I was really happy when I brought the master tapes from Fred Kervorkian mastering in New York – it's really a great playing and listening environment and very accurate for mixing. It's a personal production studio and I'll be doing projects that I produce for other record labels as well.

Defending control of your art has become very important.

It has, mainly because I know what I want to record. I've had situations with other labels where they've suggested I do things to fit certain types of radio airplay formats. My music falls in the cracks of various airplay formats. In some ways, my music is contemporary jazz, but in some ways it's coming from many different musical directions. I want to have an outlet for that and the only way I could do it was to have my own label. I know that I can put out a record of music that someone will listen to, if I'm just left to my own sensibilities. We have an audience from all of the different projects that we've done and there are people that want to hear our music. I'm flattered when people like the music. Right now, we're getting heavy airplay with the new record, "About Now", on 111 stations all over the U.S. and it is #13 on the Jam Band airplay charts.

What's next?

I'll be in the studio to record with Unit 1, a trio with drummer, Karl Latham and guitarist, John Hart. We will be recording cover songs of music from the 60's and 70's and twisting them in our own way.

The first Unit 1 record was a great album, full of great arrangements!

That was a top 50 pick in Jazz Times for last year and reached #18 on the Jam Band charts. In Brazil, it won an award for one of the best records of the year. It came about from some live sessions we recorded in New Jersey. It's a very dynamic trio that covers the entire spectrum of music while rooted in a jazz improvisational tradition.

I'm also going into the studio a few of months with Danny and Mitch to record another trio record. I have a bunch of songs that we didn't get to on the last record and I have some new compositions that I've been working on since then, so we're going to do a new record trio recording to follow up "About Now". That album will be released in about a year from now, in the spring of 2015.

In November 2014, there's a CD being released with the group Constellations, which includes Karl Latham, Nick Rolfe, and a great trumpet player, Ryan Carniaux. We play the music of Björk; we recorded our impressions of her very creative songs. It's a really special record, sort along the lines of Miles Davis' "Live Evil". It's coming out on a

European label, Double Moon. This label has a strong following and visibility in Europe. It will also be released in the States.

On the web:

- www.markegan.com
- www.wavetone.com