

ARISEN

MIKE FLORIO

...an honest self-expression
and exploration of craft,
while maintaining a rigorous musicality...

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Revisiting the Making of ARISEN

A look back 10 years later...

It was November 1998, I distinctly remember, when I decided to record a solo album. I was 33, and it seemed that for the better part of my musical life I was either trying to start a band, join a band or keep a band together. It was one frustration after another. Most musicians pay their dues working the local club circuit, trying to build a following. For me, it had barely gotten that far. My dues were being paid by placing and answering ads, going to or holding auditions, and investing in various “how-to” courses and books about the music business. But that was all I knew: if you wanted to make music, you wrote songs and formed a band. Looking back, I probably should have explored other avenues, such as film scoring, which is something I got interested in years too late when it seemed everybody was doing it. So, in the absence of a mentor or advisor, I plodded on with no real plan or direction, figuring that “rock star” was my only option.

However, it was also during these years when technology was making home recording an increasingly viable option for guys like me, and independent music was starting to find its way onto the internet. So, I decided to go ahead with my ‘Arisen’ project, and record my solo album.

Thus began my seven year trial-by-fire process. Not only was I going through some trying personal events in my life during this time, but putting together a studio, learning how to use it, and then finding the right musicians to work with was very costly and extremely frustrating. In addition to that, I started to believe I really didn’t have the musical chops to pull it off; that I would be found out for the fraud I really was, that I had no business doing this by myself. All in all, not a very healthy or productive work environment as you can imagine. Eventually my frustrations blossomed into a full-blown depression, which often put the project in a prolonged state of inactivity as I despaired over it. Still, I carried on not really knowing what I was doing or what else to do; being hampered daily by insecurity and indecisiveness.

Things started to look better when through yet another series of ads I came across Bill Thomas, who was the first guitarist I ever met who knew as much if not more music theory than I did; Dave Bailey, an incredibly solid bass player and fellow prog-rock head; and Steve Golden, a drummer who had an amazing discipline for holding back and letting the song speak for itself. I also met Paul Avgerinos, a brilliant composer and world-respected new age artist, who I knew I wanted to mix the album. It then became my task to put it all together and figure it all out along the way. I guess that's what producers do. Not that I was one.

Little by little I pieced the songs together. This was not a typical band project. I basically assembled sketch tracks for the other musicians to play to, and then they would come over to my studio individually to record their parts. There weren't any full band rehearsals and nobody really knew what the final outcome would sound like – especially me! All my years of frustration trying to get a bunch of musicians together and on the same page practically forced me into working this way. I felt it was the only way I could ever finish it, and that was the most important thing at this point – just finish it any way I can. So, since this wasn't a live band I was trying to present (and I wasn't naming the project as such, either), I had no qualms about adding lots of layers and overdubs. My hope was that it wouldn't *sound like* I was trying to simulate a live band, because I wasn't.

By the time the album was finally completed in the fall of 2005, I really had lost all sense of objectivity. To be blunt, I didn't know if it sucked or not. I almost wanted to re-title it "The Death of Mike Florio", hide it away, and not let anyone ever hear it. Almost; but I felt an obligation to the guys who played on it to at least put it out, in January 2006. I'm glad I did, of course, because the reception turned out to be very positive, which seemed to affirm the long struggle to see the project through to completion. Finally, the dark clouds lifted, and I felt excited to explore what might lie ahead.

I've always felt there are three distinct writing periods represented on Arisen. My "early" period (Bells, Pretending, Violent Moods), the "middle" (Binary World, Media Ride), and "later" (Paradise of Stone, Fractured). One of the challenges I faced was selecting songs which I felt were not only my best material to date, but also which fit together into a coherent whole; seeing as they were written many years apart in some cases.

The “early” songs are pieces I feel I almost couldn’t write now. I was young and just discovering the joy of writing my own music, as opposed to learning things off records. I loved to experiment with different chord changes – things I just hadn’t heard before. Of course, these songs evolved over time - with the exception of ‘Pretending’ which was written in one sitting at the piano when I was 19 and has remained the same ever since.

The “middle” period songs were conceived during a time when I was discovering the beauty of structure and form in pop music. I started to develop a very keen sense for how to best format a song so that it flowed effortlessly.

The “later” period songs were completely written after I started work on the album. I remember working out the middle instrumental section to ‘Paradise of Stone’ during lunch breaks at my day job; sitting in the backseat of my car and banging away on the battery-powered keyboard I kept there.

So, that’s basically it, as far as I can recollect. The seven years I was working on Arisen ('98-'05) have become somewhat of a blur to me now. Perhaps that's a good thing, because it wasn't a very pleasant experience. Looking back on the album, there certainly are a couple of things that continue to bug me about it, as well as a few things I think I got right. I still do feel that it's an enjoyable listen though. Who knows, maybe I'll revisit it one day and tidy it up with a remix.

Mike Florio
January 2016