

A close-up photograph of a man with light brown hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. He is looking down at a vintage-style acoustic guitar with a worn, reddish-brown finish. His left hand is on the fretboard, and his right hand is near the soundhole. The background is dark and out of focus.

MIKKEL PLOUG
ALLEVIATION



MIKKEL PLOUG • ACOUSTIC GUITAR

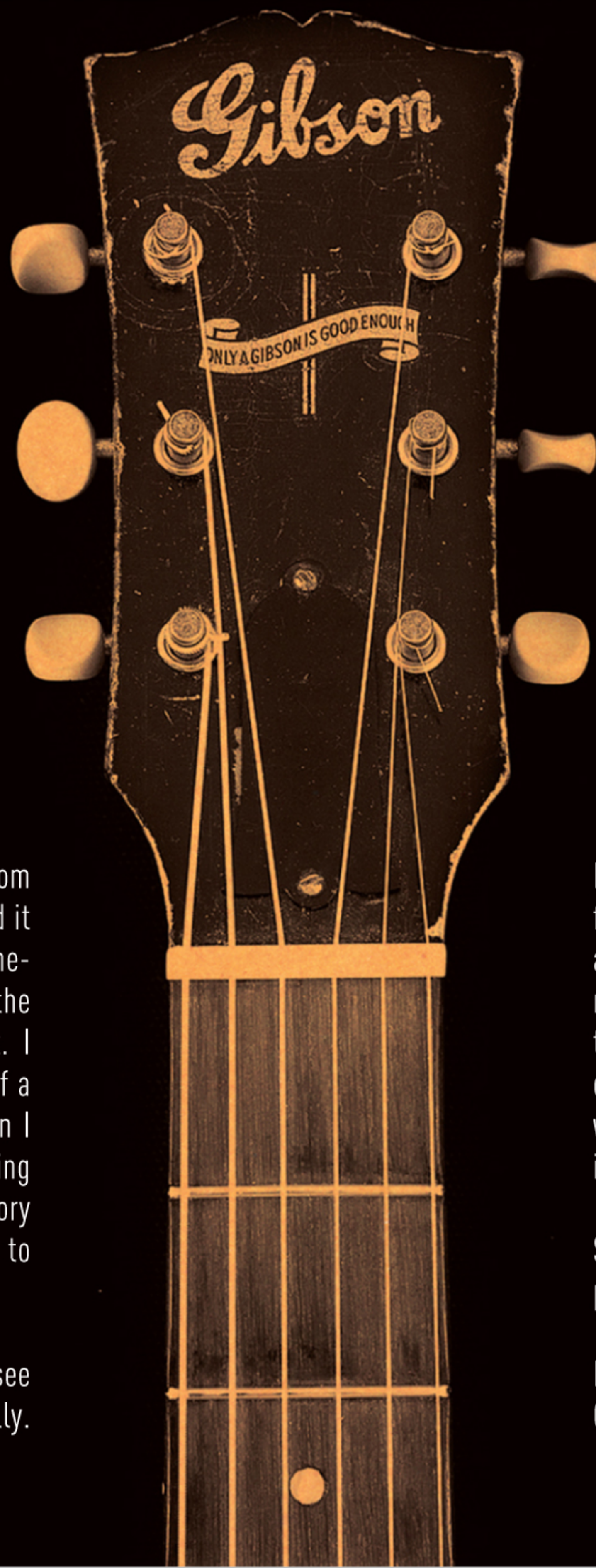
1. NIGHT SPACE (3:23) • 2. FLORESCENCE (3:40) • 3. WITH OPEN ARMS (2:57) • 4. ARABESQUE (3:01)
5. CIRCLE WIND (2:38) • 6. EINER (4:01) • 7. COULEURS D'OLIVIER (3:16) • 8. SAFARI (3:54) • 9. GRUNDTVIG
REFLECTIONS (2:28) • 10. LUMINOUS (4:11) • 11. ALLEVIATION (3:57) • 12. OVERSEAS (3:49) • 13. ROAD TRIP (3:53)

TOTAL TIME: 45:53 • RECORDED AND MIXED IN 24/192



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In 2016 I chanced upon an old Gibson bannerhead from 1945 while on tour in the US. From the moment I picked it up I had trouble putting it down again. There was something about the warm, resonating tone and feel of the instrument that inspired me to play and write on it. I couldn't buy the guitar at first as I was in the middle of a tour and had a number of flights in front of me. When I returned home to Copenhagen I couldn't stop thinking about it, and I started composing music with the memory of this guitar in my head. I finally found a way to get it to me, and we were reunited.

The next four months I played the guitar every day, to see what the instrument would spur from me compositionally.

I decided that anything that appealed to me was worth following up on. I didn't want to know where I was going, and I explored the spaces of ease and friction where myself and the guitar were challenged and where something surprising would jump out and ask for further development. I found it fascinating to write music that in many ways sounds very different from the strong blues and folk influence this type of guitar is normally associated with.

Sprung from these exploratory meetings came the 13 pieces of music found on this record.

Mikkel Ploug
Copenhagen, May 2017

Jimi Hendrix's wah-wah pedal. Wes Montgomery's thumb. Billy Gibbons's well-worn Mexican peso. Keith Rowe's motors and magnets. Guitarists all have some method of making their instruments sing, but Mikkel Ploug prefers to let his speak.

It's even better, he adds, when the guitar initiates the conversation.

"Let's start with the beginning," Ploug says, in a Skype call from his home in Copenhagen. "I've played the same ES-330 Gibson electric for years, and I've written almost everything on it."

He stops, laughs, and corrects himself.

"*It* writes a lot of tunes," he continues. "I checked yesterday, and I think I have 210 registered tunes. And almost everything's been written on that guitar, acoustically—that is, not plugged into an amp. The 330 has quite an acoustic sound—and somehow, playing other acoustic guitars never really inspired me as much as this guitar."

For the typical guitarist, meeting a companion like Ploug's sunburst, hollowbody ES-330 is, at best, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Many more of us are instrumentally polygamous—or cursed with the perfect-pencil syndrome, constantly chasing the new magic tool that will allow us to carve air with inspired abandon.

Ploug, though, has met not one but two dream lovers. There's that ES-330, which can be heard on previous Songlines releases from his trio, Equilibrium. And now there's another guitar in his life, the only one you'll hear on the LP or CD that you now have in your hands. He calls it his "bannerhead", because of the golden scroll emblazoned on its headstock. "Only a Gibson is good enough," it reads. Ploug obviously agrees.

That boast is a tip-off that his new instrument, acquired in New York City in 2016, was made between 1942 and 1945, by the primarily female workforce that occupied Gibson's Kalamazoo, Michigan plant while their male counterparts were at war.

Its other salient feature—an unusual mahogany top to complement its mahogany neck, back, and sides—is a further consequence of conflict: the prime spruce that Gibson preferred had been commandeered by the military for light-weight boats and aircraft. It is, as guitar enthusiasts like to say, a rare bird. But what's truly singular about this particular flattop is what it brings out in its owner—beginning with the notion that any lasting relationship involves the recognition and acceptance of a partner's flaws.

"There's one thing about this particular guitar, which is that it's really, really worn—but it's worn in kind of an amazing way," Ploug says affectionately. "It's nicely evenly worn down everywhere, and all the lacquer is slightly broken... which makes it just feel warm and cuddly. There's something about the way the lacquer is broken, and also the way this big neck is worn down."

But finding Bannerhead proved to be more than just meeting a friend. It also led Ploug to pad his composition total, thanks to a shockingly prolific four-month span spent testing out his new familiar.

"When I started writing music on this guitar, I had the feeling that I could really just play three notes, and they would ring so full... It's hard to explain what that is, but if I pick up my other acoustic guitars and play a D chord—you know, in the same position—I don't get inspiration to start writing," he says. "But that just happened over and over with this instrument. Whenever I play a chord on it—and it can be a chord I've played a million times before—the sound spurs composition ideas, and they just kept growing."

Thirteen of those explorations, without overdubs and mostly without further elaboration—a few pieces, including "Luminous" and "Overseas", have improvised sections—are presented here. The piece where Bannerhead speaks most clearly is arguably "Circle Wind", which shows off the even frequency response of the mahogany top, which in turn allows Ploug's unshowy virtuosity to shine. And to rattle, clank, and sparkle: as the guitarist explains, the sounds some performers would try to eliminate are this piece's *raison d'être*.

"I liked the sound of that opening phrase so much that I decided I wanted to write a whole piece around this little statement," he says. "And then while I was doing it, I was moving around the fretboard and these fret sounds started appearing—these percussive, secondary fret sounds... I started exaggerating them and that became a huge part of the piece."

He wasn't just composing with the guitar; the guitar was also composing with him.

Other pieces address specific technical challenges. Both "Florescence" and the title track, "Alleviation", are built around an idea Ploug borrowed from Songlines labelmate Ben Monder: superimposing an odd-metre pattern on a straight pulse to achieve deep rhythmic complexity.

" 'Alleviation', for example, is in 3/4," he explains. "But you have these subdivisions of 5 that create this almost out-of-time feeling—yet it's very much in time."

And then there's the mysterious "Grundtvig Reflections"—so free it suggests a total improvisation, when in reality it's actually a

meticulous transcription of a prayer Ploug once heard delivered in an acoustically resonant church.

"I really tried to make 13 compositions that were going to be very different," Ploug says. "I think the extremes are 'Einer', the folk piece, and then 'Arabesque'. I kind of like the idea of having music that different coexisting on a record."

"The decider for what went on the record was basically my being satisfied with the composition and the sound of it," he adds. "Otherwise, it's pure guitar music, one person playing—and I was just trying to get as much out of this meeting with myself and the instrument as I could."

Alexander Varty

Alexander Varty is an arts journalist, musician, and guitar collector based in Vancouver, British Columbia



ALL COMPOSITIONS BY MIKKEL PLOUG (KODA) • RECORDED MARCH 9-10 AND 13, 2017 BY MADs BRINCH NIELSEN AT SAUNA RECORDING STUDIO, FREDERIKSBERG, COPENHAGEN • MIXED AND MASTERED BY MORTEN BUE AT ORANGE ORCHID, COPENHAGEN • PRODUCED BY MIKKEL PLOUG AND TONY REIF • EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: TONY REIF • PHOTOGRAPHY: FRIDA GREGERSEN • DESIGN: LEE HUTZULAK AND JORDAN BENT • WITH SUPPORT FROM DJBFA – COMPOSER AND SONGWRITERS PRODUCTION POOL AND KODA'S CULTURAL FUNDS • "EINER" IS DEDICATED TO MY FATHER.

