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High-Tech's Missing Link

by Michael Kiefer

Is James J. Dilettoso a techno god or just another floppy disciple? Even he can't say for sure.

James J. Dilettoso stomps bandy-legged through a field in South Phoenix. The sheer volume of his graying, ponytail seems to bend his whole body forward as he puffs furiously on a cigarette.

The field has been recently plowed under; there's not a blade of grass clear down to the canal bordering Baseline Road, but Dilettoso sees studios and housing for movie directors and technicians, high-tech Hollywood in Phoenix, and he thinks he can help it happen with his own Hollywood contacts. It's a grand vision, perhaps grandiose, in keeping with his style.

Dilettoso, 44, is a small, wiry man with a big, soft beard. He favors baggy pants and sneakers, a tee shirt that says, "Everything I need to know I learned from television."

If he resembles a character in a Nintendo game, it may be because over the past two decades, he has bounced and beamed and hyperspaced through the rock and film and space subcultures. What all of those fields hold in common is that they are increasingly computer-driven; Dilettoso has a brain that can convert sound and images into the ones and zeros of computer programs.

He designed visual special, effects hardware and software for movies including *Tron* and *Blade Runner*-- and for the videos and road tours of such rock groups as the Moody Blues. He played keyboard for the Box Tops. He worked for NASA, and still investigates UFO sightings. He was one of the developers of the digital musical synthesizer, of digital film colorization. And he's now working on data compression technologies that will allow movies to be modemed over telephone lines, a feat he likens to "trying to send an elephant down a rabbit hole."

Often his stream-of-consciousness rap--delivered in the knowing and emphatic cadence of Hollywood--is so densely technical and philosophical it makes your head hurt. And makes you question his sanity. Clark Higgins, a film special effects expert who works with Steven Spielberg's LucasFilm, says of Dilettoso, "He's as sane as many of the creative geniuses running around. He runs at a very furious pace, but he's one of the most talented fellows I've ever met to bring abstract concepts into reality."

By virtue of his genius and his accomplishments, Dilettoso should be a wealthy man, but instead, he lives a seat-of-his-pants existence. He couldn't drive himself down here this morning, for example, because he has car trouble; seems he was a bit distracted pulling his homemade sports car out from his shop in Tempe and forgot about the median curb down the center of University Drive when he made a left turn. The little white vehicle lies dead in his parking lot with four flat tires and few vital parts scraped off the bottom, but when he gets a chance (and the cash), he'll get that taken care of.

He's having house trouble, too. The epicenter of the "smart community" he envisions is a ranch just off Southern Avenue, which he'll acquire just as soon as his investors come through on the computerized graphics service bureau he's setting up, and which he sees as the linchpin for Hollywood in Phoenix.

Dilettoso likes to have the companies he does business with pay the leases on the houses he lives in. It simplifies his life, he says--at least until the deal runs its course and the company stops paying and Dilettoso gets thrown out on his ear,

which has happened more than once. Just last month, he was tossed out of the Paradise Valley ranch he'd lived in for a couple of years and claims he was trying to buy, but a check bounced and the owner defaulted, and so on.

Clearly, his business sense is not as highly developed as his vision. He is charismatic, able to rope in investors with the scope and enthusiasm of his projects, and just as likely to piss them off a year down the road.

He can conceive of an entire marketing strategy, then lose interest in its execution. His computer programmers complain that he'll think up computer software that will do something no one else has been able to do, then give it away rather than exploit it financially. He'd rather have someone else work out the details just so long as he can incorporate the finished project into the next stage of a picture no one else can see.

"I think Jimmy is a perfect person to be paid X number of dollars and be put in a think tank," says Dr. Gary Berg, dean of faculty at Western International University. but it's not likely to happen, partly because Dilettoso is the sort to suffer "failure to thrive in captivity syndrome," partly because regardless of ability, he doesn't have the credentials. His persona and biography may be his greatest inventions.

Jim Dilettoso's bio is a tangled circuit board of fact and fiction, disputed achievements, inventions and connections that can't be documented, others he won't talk about. He claims he has a Ph.D: in biomedical engineering from McGill University in Montreal, but the registrar's office there never heard of him. He claims an undergraduate degree from the University of Hartford, but its records show he took a single math course there.

When confronted with these apparent fabrications, he first admits he'd never have the patience to sit through so many years of classes.. Then he just digs in deeper and deliberately raises more questions. On another occasion, he offers that these are notions put forth by others, left uncorrected, until by some logic, they become true.

A University of Hartford professor who served as Dilettoso's mentor simply says, "it's part of his being exceptional that all of the columns don't add up."

It's as if there's only so much room in a persona and if more space is devoted to intellect, then there's less left over for social convention. And clearly the capacity for abstraction and creativity comes out of open-mindedness. Another local computer graphics artist simply says, "All those superbright computer guys art into weird mystical stuff," as if they're bored with the merely terrestrial and looking for more complex puzzles to ponder.

Dilettoso certainly darts back and forth across the borderline between hard science and paranormal research, between the bastions of conservative science and the fringes.

He worked for NASA out of a Phoenix office, and claims to have worked on top-secret projects for the agency out of Jet Propulsion Laboratories in Pasadena. Other former NASA employees have confirmed that claim, but calls to JPL to verify it sound like Monty Python routines: "Who do *you* think he is? Do *you* think he's telling the truth? *I'm* not going to tell you."

His invention of colorization is disputed as well. American Film Technologies, the company that holds the patent on the process, claims that his work was "a failed R&D attempt," while Dilettoso swears his technology was ripped off and he was paid mostly in worthless stock. However, the company executive who fired Dilettoso from the project confirms the importance of his contribution-though he stops short of confirming the allegations of theft for fear of legal retribution.

"He's fun to be around," says Michael Malin, a NASA scientist whom Dilettoso consulted while analyzing photographs of UFOs. "He's not at all crazy, but about half of what he says is bullshit and half of it is probably not far from the truth. The problem is trying to figure out which is which. He does tend to get involved in more fanciful notions than you or I."

Indeed: Dilettoso wonders if the iron in human blood contains human memory like a magnetic floppy disk, then posits at how to feed data into that memory. He claims that a Filipino faith healer once cured him of a deadly lymphoma by magically passing his hands through Dilettoso's skin and pulling out the tumors without leaving wounds.

The cast of characters that wander in and out of his home and his studio are equally peculiar: a retired Air Force colonel

who has the walk and affect of a spook; a blind TV director who has a show about UFOs.

Jeff Harris, chief sound engineer for a major Hollywood recording studio, recalls going to Dilettoso's ranch to meet a former Navy SEAL who claimed he had guarded alien spacecraft.

"When I got there, the man had his ear pressed up against the wall to hear if anyone was coming. He had weapons strapped all up and down his legs," Harris says.

Dilettoso keeps current with every government conspiracy to cover up UFO research that "would change the meaning of life." His girlfriend, Susan Gordon, claims to be a UFO contactee and lectures nationwide as to whether extraterrestrials are really angels.

One visitor on a recent afternoon is a man researching ways of electronically communicating with the dead--but he won't explain how, because the world isn't ready yet.

"Sounds funny, huh?" Dilettoso asks, straight-faced, almost as a dare. It raises a question as to where the line falls between genius and lunacy.

"I wish I knew," he answers. He thinks a minute: "I'm not marching to a different drummer," he continues. "Maybe I just have an octave on my piano that you don't."

Dilettoso began his career as a piano player. He was a musically precocious Connecticut punk who spent his high school weekends playing with bar bands in Greenwich Village; since he wasn't old enough to drive, let alone drink, his stepfather would drive him into Manhattan and wait as he performed.

He already had a flair for scientific sleight of hand; his mother remembers the robot he built as a child, but Dilettoso admits it was merely a vacuum cleaner adorned with various gadgets. In high school, he won science fairs with night-before throw-togethers that were supposed to be the culmination of a semester's research,

What better place to combine gadgetry and music than in the rock scene of the late 1960s? "By the summer of 1967, I had become a hippie," he says, living full-time in the Village. He toured with the Box Tops, ("My baby, she wrote me a letter") and other rock groups, until he realized he was draft bait, and enrolled in college, bouncing from school to school and taking courses he knew he could pass so that he could keep his college deferment.

He eventually wound up in Hartford and worked in a psychology lab at the university, dabbled in video production. In the mid-70s, he opened a pair of nightclubs in run-down Hartford movie palaces, but when the IRS read about their success, it realized he hadn't been paying taxes and brought him to court. The judge was lenient with the young entrepreneur, but when he was caught violating the terms of his probation by promoting concerts in Massachusetts, Dilettoso landed in jail.

He spent the bicentennial in a 200-year-old cell in Hartford wondering what he was going to do with the rest of his life. And, if he ever reached a decision, he keeps it to himself. The next decade of his life is deliberately murky, told in no certain chronology.

He wandered to Los Angeles and became a musical and electronic jack-of-all-trades for the music and movie businesses. He came to Phoenix to design speakers for Motoiola, and then was recruited into a three-man design team building the world's first digital synthesizer for a company called Micor. Until that point, all synthesizers produced sounds electronically instead of with a computer, and they weren't capable of playing as many notes simultaneously. .

He bounced back to California to do contract work at Jet Propulsion Laboratories and NASA. He claims he helped design flight simulators. He may or may not have been involved in the Voyager imaging, but certainly had access to the Voyager team, because in the late '70s, he produced a Las Vegas gala that featured live Voyager pictures of Jupiter projected on a big screen. And though other former NASA employees confirm that Dilettoso did in fact work on secret projects, it's hard to say how much, which is how Dilettoso likes the story told.

One of the consequences of life on the borderline is that neither side claims you as its own. One JPL scientist on the Voyager project scoffingly asked how anyone could take Dilettoso, seriously if he believed in UFOs and other such New Age claptrap. Yet Dilettoso claims that JPL sent him to work on analysis of the Shroud of Turin. And it's unclear whether he became embroiled in UFO research because NASA asked him to or because the UFO underground sought him out for his JPL contacts.

In 1977, Wendelle Stevens, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, a former intelligence officer who had been looking into UFO sightings since the 1940s, came to Dilettoso to help sort out the case of a Swiss farmer who had taken photographs and home movies of flying saucers, and who claimed to have had hundreds of encounters with humanlike extraterrestrials.

Stevens, who is based in Tucson says, "We were looking for a team of scientists and university types are too closeminded." Dilettoso's work on the case is documented in the book *Light Years*, by Gary Kinder, who portrays Dilettoso as a go-between for Stevens and scientists at NASA and Jet Propulsion Laboratories, and as a bit of a true believer who truly wanted the farmer's photos and movies to be real. None of the tests were conclusive, because the photo prints were not made from the original negatives, which fits well into the mystic and somewhat paranoid world of ufology.

In the mid-1980s, Dilettoso still worked for NASA, running an information center out of his own Computer Graphics Lab at ASU's downtown computer institute. He shared space with ASU because he had helped obtain a Cray Supercomputer for the ASU center, and he used it for his own work on movie special effects and medical imaging hardware and software. He was promoting and producing musical road shows and creating video special effects for acts that included the Moody Blues, Todd Rundgren, Tote and Pink Floyd.

Dr. Gary Berg is now dean of faculty at Western International University, but back then he headed the ASU computer institute. When Dilettoso would forget to pay his rent, Berg would try to convince the landlord not to evict him because of the computer spectacle he provided for the institute.

"He could make sounds come out of the computer that shouldn't have been there." Berg remembers. "One night I went to see him and he had this graphics program he had developed. All of a sudden, on a PC, he's demonstrating the ability to run interactive graphics that the rest of the world hadn't been able to do yet. I went away wondering why he could figure that out with no formal training and no one else could. He just did it."

Dilettoso has no answer to the question. "About ten years ago, I came over a technology hump where it all became clear almost at a zen level. It all kind of came into focus," he says.

By 1986, Dilettoso was working on film colorization for American Film Technologies, which provided the process to Ted Turner. Until that time, most colorizing attempts required that every frame be hand-tinted. Dilettoso figured out a way to colorize digitally.

AFT now downplays his contribution, but Joseph Mintz, who was president of AFT at the time, says, "Jim definitely developed the first stages, the basic early technology required to do what ended up being American Film's coloring system. Jim is extremely bright and charismatic, just bubbling with ideas. He went forward in his quest to figure this stuff out with all the enthusiasms of the early American inventors."

Dilettoso claims he received \$75,000 for his efforts, the balance paid in worthless stock. However much it was worth, he probably would have blown the money anyway.

Downtime at Dilettoso and Company. An erstwhile employee is out back fiddling with a small furnace he's rigged up to smelt an alloy of platinum and other semiprecious metals out of bags and bags of what looks like dirt. Depending on the day of the week, the story is that they're going to sell the platinum to finance other projects and/or use the smelting process to plate circuit boards.

Inside, computer graphics flash across a video screen wild colors, animation, a melange of images that Dilettoso and his

programmers designed or that other artists created using Dilettoso's software.

Dilettoso is tooling at a keyboard of another sort, a synthesizer he's set up in the back studio of his building. Over and over he toys with a descending series of chords with an organlike tone, at once New Age and slightly sinister, as if he were the phantom of the laboratory. He and his girlfriend, Susan Gordon, and a third musician have formed a New Age band they call UFaux, and they've just come off a gig in San Diego.

He's thinking about an upcoming Billy Idol tour he's supposed to work on. Mostly, he's wasting time because he recently moved into the building from a studio down the street, and the telephone's not hooked up yet. Meanwhile, three big deals are threatening to erase themselves from the hard drive of his schedule. He's fiddling while circuit boards burn.

A producer from the TV show *Unsolved Mysteries* is trying to reach him for a long-in-the-works segment about the Swiss UFO case. Another producer is trying to telephone him about an interactive audio project involving Fleetwood Mac, and so are the Maryland investors lining up the cash to set up a computer graphics service bureau.

The bureau essentially will make it possible for people with ordinary personal computers to send still and moving images to each other over telephone lines-- rapidly--through Dilettoso's supercomputer, "To get from my medium to your medium, or from my head to your medium," as he puts it.

Maybe this is the project that will make a rich man out of Dilettoso. The Maryland investors think it will; they see it developing into a system to provide video on demand--movies sent to your TV and your TV only over the telephone lines.

Dilettoso's not sure. "Why should I make it easier for a couch potato to watch TV without driving down to the video store?" he asks. He's walked away from projects before, most recently a video telephone that is allegedly better than AT&T's. He doesn't talk about it, but the investors have seen it and were blown away.

His technovision goes into fast forward, imagining a day in the near future when a news reporter at a remote location could record an event with a hand-held video camera, digitize it with a laptop computer, modem it through a cellular phone and beam it to a satellite with a hand-held antenna to be picked up by his network. He has been negotiating with the inventor of just such an antenna, he notes.

He envisions the day when all music will be recorded directly into a computer, and rather than imprinting it on tape or CD, it will be sent directly from the computer to the radio station or to a speaker in your home.

He's got other plans, too, nothing sinister, but he won't say what because we wouldn't understand.

[[Jim Dilettoso](#)]

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