

Mood Music for the Eighties

A former carpenter has turned a tiny California record label into gold by featuring sounds ideal for meditation, weddings and natural childbirth.

By Jim Jerome

Two Columbia records and one A&M, please." Does it sound absurd, people buying music according to the label rather than the performer? It's happening—no, not yet with the majors, but with an independent label in California called Windham Hill. Retailers say that it's not unusual for a customer, after hearing one Windham Hill album, to enter a store and simply ask for another one—with little regard for the artist's name. What Windham Hill devotees are after is a sound—call it state-of-mind music—that they meditate to or do housework by, to cite two favored uses. It is a soothing, free-form, instrumental sound that has also been used for setting the mood at marriages, macrobiotic restaurants, natural-childbirth sessions and in a San Francisco hospital's program to ease the fear of death in patients who are about to undergo surgery. It has made the music industry look up from its pop-video screens and take notice of an offbeat, fringe-culture label that is charting a most unlikely course to the big time.

In its eight-year existence, Windham Hill has become to music what Apple is to computers, a small company that turned a back-of-the-garage idea into a major success. Never mind that the label's records are rather miscategorized as jazz on *Billboard's* best-seller charts; more significant, seven of them were listed there recently. *Autumn*, an album by pianist George Winston, the best-selling performer on the Windham Hill roster, is expected to hit the gold-record mark of 500,000 units this year. This is all the more astonishing when one considers that most jazz releases average 50,000 units, and that *Autumn* was flawlessly produced for a trifling \$1720. And with Windham Hill's recent accord with A&M to use the big label's worldwide distribution network, total sales this year are expected to hit the \$8 million mark—generated from only thirty-one albums. All this has made a happy man of William Ackerman, 34, the owner of

Windham Hill and the impresario of its distinctive style.

Windham Hill's success has developed without the usual music-biz stimulants. "We spend less than four tenths of one percent net on advertising," says Ackerman. "Our market research is worth about eighty-five cents. We look out at our [concert] audiences and see who is there." The people discovering Windham Hill, according to Ackerman, are "white, college-educated, mostly 25 to 40, professional—some campus age, but most with discretionary income." Ackerman is equally clear about the appeal that Windham Hill holds for its audience. "Our music is not jazz—which to me is black urban, tinged with swing and bebop and improvisation. It's white, impressionistic, pastoral. We never targeted the New Age market. But we have a lot of back-to-the-land things, a nature or seasonal theme in Windham Hill. Our people went through the Sixties, dropped acid, wanted desperately to hold on to the idealism, got miserable at the Vietnam War and Cambodia. Things went sour. They were, and still are, largely disenfranchised by the major dictates of the American mainstream and are probably very sorry to see the demise of the progressive FM format.

"I'm sure there's a meditative aspect to it," continues Ackerman. "Ours is an intensely profound music that speaks to our audience with remarkable intimacy, from the composer-musician to them. The theme of our label is a return to the natural, stable elements of life, not an examination of twentieth-century tensions. I like to see our music not as an escape but as a place to go for a while in order to return to the fight."

The man whose musical taste has largely wrought the Windham Hill sound was born in Germany and brought to the United States as a boy by his adoptive parents. Ackerman was reared in New England and California and attended college at Stanford, where his father was chairman of the English department; with one course to go before graduation, he dropped out in favor of two extracurricular passions, carpentry and playing the guitar. It was as a carpenter, building recording studios for small independent labels, that he first learned about the production end of the music business. In 1976, at the urging of friends who admired his guitar playing, Ackerman recorded an album called *The Search for the Turtle's Navel*, which attracted limited but favorable attention in the Northwest. Soon after, Alex De Grassi, Ackerman's cousin and a building apprentice, recorded his first album of folk-rooted acoustic-guitar music. By 1978 they had four LPs between them, and the Windham Hill contracting firm had become the cottage record label.

Ackerman's wife, Anne (now his former wife), ran the front office out of their home in Palo Alto when she wasn't working at the local bookstore.

Ackerman was in it not for the money, he says, but to help preserve the Bay Area guitar-music style he loved and learned from: the "primitive American" style of John Fahey, Leo Kottke and Robbie Basho.

Today the Windham Hill roster of artists includes seven guitarists. Besides Ackerman and De Grassi, there are Michael Hedges, Daniel Hecht, David Qualey, Bola Sete and Basho, all of whom play in fluid, finger-picking styles on resonant, custom-made guitars in "open tunings" that further enrich the sound. And there are lilting, buoyant duets by Darol Anger on violin and Barbara Higbie on piano, and by pianist Ira Stein and Russel Walder on oboe. Ackerman has produced two albums that give a representative idea of the house style: *Windham Hill Records Sampler '82* and *An Evening with Windham Hill Live*. Ackerman's insistence on a close personal bond with his artists and his faith in the Windham Hill sound keep the roster small. The first major stylistic departure has come with the signing of Shadowfax, a

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Calling the tune at Windham Hill: William Ackerman

(continued) veteran group that features the haunting lyricism and soprano sax playing of Chuck Greenberg, pulverizing bass work by Phil Maggini, and G. E. Stinson's six- and twelve-string guitars, in a sound that fuses R&B with esoteric Asian percussion.

As the producer, Ackerman puts his artists "through the wringer because I basically want to know every note and chord change that's going down. It can drive them crazy. We don't coddle egos here. I don't run a Boy Scout camp, but I won't sign druggies and drunks and schizophrenics. Our guys are eloquent, productive and can knock 'em out. De Grassi sat down one day in the studio, picked for a while and said, 'That's side one.'" Since last fall, Ackerman has passed on more than 2000 demo tapes. "I have never relied on commercial potential as a criterion," he says, "but only whether the music reaches my heart. I never want to proliferate to a large catalog. I know the core sound of what Windham Hill is, and I want to pay homage to that." Says Greenberg of Shadowfax: "He's phenomenal for the encouragement he gives us. That's very rare for a head guy to let you record things the way you hear them."

Ackerman's biggest discovery is George Winston, a onetime deliveryman and audiophile who in 1979 wrote to Ackerman about rereleasing an album titled *Ocean* by the Brazilian guitarist Bola Sete. Winston had also cut a piano LP in 1972 for guitarist John Fahey's Takoma label in Berkeley, but had let his musical career lapse after the album failed to generate much interest. In 1980, a year after the beginning of their correspondence, Ackerman performed in Santa Monica and accepted an invitation to Winston's home after the show. Around two o'clock in the morning, as Ackerman was dozing off, Winston asked him if he would mind hearing some piano music while he crashed. What Ackerman heard was, as he remembers, "a nearly perfect transcription of De Grassi's denser material and a piece from Bola Sete's album. When I woke up I said, 'George, it's an album—on piano.'"

Winston is now America's top "folk" piano recitalist. His lulling tone poems are a far cry from the work of Keith Jarrett, the pianist who held the same title in the Seventies. Jarrett syntheized pop, classical soul, jazz and rock into a strong-tempered, visceral improvisational style. The differences—as well as Winston's popularity—have prompted Jarrett to voice qualms about Winston's music, as noted in a recent *Musicians* interview: "If someone can fall asleep or meditate

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(continued) while the music is going on, that's not spiritually right."

And yet millions of Winston fans, with Ackerman at the head of the pack, believe that "spiritually right" is exactly what this music is. Mellowing out seems to be a critical element in the popularity of the Windham Hill sound.

If anybody embodies that affluent New Age consciousness and its attendant ironies, it is Ackerman himself. He is at the head of a multimillion-dollar alternative-culture enterprise and tools around in a new Mercedes, but his analysis of cultural "disenfranchisement" has the fervor of personal experience. There's the enlightened managerial style that calls for unsolicited year-end bonuses to staff members and artists, and one-album deals that allow any musician to pack up and leave anytime he or she wants (no one has). And then there's his blood pressure, which has risen to 190/120, and the breakup of his marriage, both attributed to the frenzied pace of the business. (Anne, now remarried, remains a close friend and still runs the office.)

Ackerman's strategy for a well-balanced life now includes such activities as scuba diving, hockey, backpacking, wine tasting and rooting for the San Francisco 49ers. But the most telling indication of his need for a respite from what he has created is a house—a retreat, really—that he built for himself last year in the middle of seventy-nine acres in Windham County, Vermont. This is where the bucolic images began flowing during childhood summers, and where he will be spending this fall, when the leaves turn, working on the house.

His immediate projects include ensemble tours in Japan, sound-track recordings, live shows for himself, a Windham Hill winery and guest lectures at the Association of Transpersonal Psychotherapy's annual conference and at the business schools of Yale and Stanford. ("All I'll tell them," he says of the school engagements, "is to get the hell out of there before they warp you.") And then, just before the end of the year, Ackerman will make his annual hike into the Sierras before winter closes off the roads. "You can feel the winter right there on your shoulder," he says with typical exuberance. "It's an amazing time. The wind up there can drive you crazy. A good portion of my inspirations come from Vermont and the Sierras. I'm not really into meditating or transcendence, but that's the closest I come. And that'll be plenty for another album." ■

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