

Will Ackerman presents Windham Hill reunion concert in Napa

[DAN TAYLOR](#) THE PRESS DEMOCRAT December 17, 2019

The word “phenomenon” gets tossed pretty freely by music promoters, publicists and pop culture writers, but it’s probably safe to apply that term to Windham Hill Records.

Co-founded by guitarist and Palo Alto native William Ackerman in 1976, the label specialized in instrumental acoustic music and grew in popularity throughout the 1980s and '90s, thrusting Ackerman and the company’s other artists — pianist George Winston and Ackerman’s cousin, guitarist Alex DeGrassi — to international prominence.

“I certainly never envisioned a career, despite the evolution of the entire phenomenon of Windham Hill,” Ackerman, 70, said by phone from his home outside Brattleboro, Vermont. “I just wanted to play music I was interested in.”

Ackerman left Windham Hill behind in 1992 and moved to Vermont, where he continues to record and produce new albums by a variety of artists. But he reunites on occasion to perform with both Windham Hill alumni and new talent he has encountered.

He will perform Sunday at the Uptown Theatre in Napa as part of Windham Hill’s 2019 Winter Solstice tour, also featuring pianist, singer and composer Barbara Higbie and two relative newcomers, guitarist Todd Boston and cellist Mia Pixley.

“Old friends can reunite, and I am producing records by new artists and people I’ve worked with before. There’s a continuity here that is very real, dealing with another generation. I am actually busier now as a producer than I ever was,” Ackerman said.

The current touring ensemble delights him, making every night’s new performance a revelation, he said.

“There’s such spontaneity. We do some of our best-known pieces, but we do both old and new music,” he said. “We can do duets, trios and quartets. Every night, one of us brings something new to the table.”

One reason behind the ongoing creativity dates back to the earlier years of Windham Hill and the label’s distribution deal with A&M Records, also an independent company co-founded by a musician — jazz bandleader Herb Alpert.

“I was courted by every major record label in the country, but working with Herb made sense,” Ackerman said. “A&M wasn’t corporate-owned. All these artists we were signing suddenly had access to the world market. There was never a hidden agenda. We didn’t have to compromise. A&M facilitated.”

After PolyGram purchased A&M in 1989, Ackerman and Ann Robinson, at one time his girlfriend and also the co-founder of Windham Hill, began to consider selling their interest in the company they had started. Ackerman sold his half to BMG in 1992, and Robinson sold hers in 1996.

“It was 1992 when I found myself in charge of a corporation,” Ackerman remembered. “While I was gratified by the success, I felt compromised by commercial considerations. Windham Hill came out of innocence and a lack of desire to make it a business. The blessed thing wasn’t designed to be a business.”

So Ackerman shed his big business role and returned to what he had wanted to do all along — make music.

But please don’t call it “New Age Music,” as many did in the early years of Windham Hill.

“I bleed when I hear that,” he joked. “It’s just music I want to make.”