

Between Two Worlds: American New Age Music and Environmental Imaginaries

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Abstract: This article explores how American New Age music imagines the natural world. Through the lens of releases by composers Will Ackerman and Dr. Steven Halpern, I argue that the inherent flexibility and ambiguity of the New Age genre mimics the shifting positions of environmentally-related concepts such as the sublime, the wilderness, and anthropogenic climate change. By exploring two contrasting approaches to the genre, I will outline distinct narratives that provide opposing views of how environmental phenomena function within the New Age context.

Résumé : Cet article considère la façon dont la musique New Age américaine imagine le monde naturel. À travers le prisme d'œuvres des compositeurs Will Ackerman et Steven Halpern, j'avance que la flexibilité et l'ambiguïté inhérentes au genre New Age imitent les positions changeantes des concepts liés à l'environnement tels que le grandiose, la nature sauvage et le changement climatique anthropique. En explorant deux approches contrastées de ce genre, je soulignerai des récits distincts qui véhiculent des conceptions opposées de la façon dont fonctionne le phénomène environnemental en contexte New Age.

A listener unfolds a yoga mat on the living room floor. She has been suffering unrelenting pain through chronic arthritis. Her Bay Area naturopathic doctor has prescribed a strict vegan diet, an array of herbal supplements, yoga three times per week, and Dr. Steven Halpern's *Self-Healing 2.0* (2012). In the "Secrets of Relaxation and Sound Healing" portion of Halpern's liner notes, the ailing subject reads that "the body is a self-healing instrument." The listener is made aware of embedded messages such as, "You have the power, ability, and desire to accelerate your own healing." Finally, she is told to "take a deep breath, close your eyes, and let the music carry you into your own private oasis of serenity and inner peace" (2012).

Across town, a listener uses Spotify, a music streaming service, to search for releases on the Windham Hill label. He finds that only thematically organized samplers and greatest hits collections appear on the service. The themes, curated by label owner William Ackerman, are titled *Relaxation* (2004) and *Summer Solstice* (1997) and appear with soft-focus pictures of idyllic environmental scenes. *Summer Solstice* is familiar to the listener both visually and sonically: reverberating, overdubbed tracks of digitally recorded acoustic guitar and congas, glowing yellows and oranges emanating from the cover. He closes his eyes and remembers fragmented moments from summers past.

The aforementioned hypothetical scenarios hear New Age music ecologies at work as they transport listeners to places, and places to listeners. All along the way, non-human environments maintain a central role, taking the place of individual artists, and encouraging a sonically-engaged, communal relationship with the natural world. This form of functional music offers a space for listeners to grow, heal, or simply drift away.

In this article, I claim that the inherent flexibility and ambiguity of the New Age genre mimics the shifting positions of environmentally related concepts such as the sublime, the wilderness, and anthropogenic climate change. Through an exploration of two approaches exemplified by Ackerman and Halpern, I outline distinct narratives that provide contrasting views of how ecological connections between the human and non-human function within the New Age context. This exploration of the kind of environmental imaginary conceived by forms of North American New Age music is driven by an overall dearth of attention to the genre within music and sound studies. As scholars Omri and Marianna Ruah-Midbar put it, “The absence of a significant body of research on such a prevalent and influential phenomenon constitutes a political act of exclusion” (2012: 77). New Age’s perennial exclusion from critical musicological inquiry is further noted by another scholar who claims that “New Age music is somewhat unique from other music genres in its overwhelmingly negative deployment as a source of contrast from which authentic works are distinguished, as well as in its representation of a perceived way of life” (Hibbett 2010: 283).

In short, this article is an act of inclusion, placing the New Age genre in dialogue with conversations about the role of our species in a geologic age in which humans are having significant impacts on the fate of the planet. By listening to how this form of functional music imagines environments, I argue that New Age reflects and thrives on anxieties of the Anthropocene through its recurrent slippage between the amplification and erasure of the self. This argument addresses the following questions: How do the spiritual dimensions of New Age music harmonize with non-human environments as a means to shape consumer subjectivity? What are the consistent sonic and visual aesthetics

of New Age? What are the consequences of New Age subjectivity as it represents and consumes the natural world and its resources?

Studies in musicology and ecocriticism have converged in ecomusicology, a field that “considers musical and sonic issues, both textual and performative, related to ecology and the natural environment” (Allen 2011: 392). This article presses toward these guiding themes of ecomusicology, particularly resonating with ecomusicology scholar Jeff Tilton’s emphasis on listening through the lens of environmental crisis (2013). While neither approach to the genre clearly engages with environmental fragility, it is necessary to consider the ways in which these sounds reflect “how select composers understand the essential dynamic between humanity and the rest of nature” (Von Glahn 2011: 403). I contribute to this discourse by bringing specific New Age composers and their music into existing ecomusicological frameworks with the intention of expanding the conversation to include this oft-ignored, environmentally engaged music.

The first form of New Age I will explore, embodied through the music and writing of Dr. Steven Halpern, positions the natural world as a kind of vitamin to be figuratively ingested. The result is “sound health”: a balancing of the chakras, a holistic medication for a frantic world. Halpern’s brand of New Age speaks of a non-human environment placed in concert with cascading Fender Rhodes keyboard arpeggios that press toward a reality in which nature is there to be consumed. For Halpern, this musical medication fuels positive growth of physical, spiritual, and even monetary gains.

The second form of New Age finds music figuring the non-human world in reverse. The world of William Ackerman’s Windham Hill records presents an environmental imaginary in which nature dissolves, or consumes, the human. With artist anonymity and stock natural imagery as central promotional components, Windham Hill presents an environment where music functions as an escape into high-fidelity oblivion. While Windham Hill carries the wanderlust torch of exotica and other forms of easy listening, their projects take it to a new level: instead of escaping to an imaginary island populated by exoticized Others, or blasting off in a spaceship to the moon, Ackerman & Co. open the field for the listener to occupy a familiar but unknowable environment. It is the essence of a stock photo of nature. It is somewhere you might have been or wish to return to, but will never be able to find.

Healing Histories

We begin with a brief history of the genre. The sounds under analysis in this article emerged after the second-wave of American environmentalism in

the 1970s. As we will see, the New Age genre builds on earlier and parallel histories of music which emphasize utopian ideals of relaxation, inner-peace, and ecological harmony. Idealized depictions of the natural world are often used as visual, textual, and aural referents within the New Age context, drawing boundaries and enforcing particular conceptions of the natural world. Since its inception, the sonic system of New Age music has been loosely connected to pseudo-Eastern philosophical and visual aesthetics. This unique musical movement gained momentum in “alternative healing communities in the USA in the late 1970s,” touting beliefs “in the ultimate cultural evolution of human societies through the transformation of individuals” (Schreiner 2001). The genre’s resulting sonic qualities include, but are not limited to, minimal harmonic movement, reverberant studio production, and spare rhythmic motifs. Based in northern California, Dr. Steven Halpern and Will Ackerman released albums in 1975 and 1976, solidifying their roles as pioneering figures of the genre. These artists are not only sonically related but also share aesthetic connections in their marketing approaches through their consistent reference to the natural environment. By self-releasing and self-promoting their records, the artists spearheaded the sonic and visual aesthetics of the genre, developing the template for the soon-to-be ubiquitous presence of New Age music through the 1980s to the 2000s.

A decade before the experiments of Ackerman and Halpern, jazz clarinetist Tony Scott collaborated with Shinichi Yuize and Hozan Yamamoto to create *Music for Zen Meditation (and other joys)* (1965). This is often cited as the first New Age record, in that it melds the functional purposes of relaxation and meditation with ecologically oriented attributes of Zen practice. In the liner notes, British philosopher Alan Watts proclaims, “Zen is a way of living ... through which people experience themselves, not as separate beings, but as one with the whole universe, of which every individual is a unique expression” (1964).

The New Age movement conceives of spirituality in environmental terms, exemplified by Watts’ insistence that the Zen artist “puts both his skill and his instrument ... at the disposal of the Tao, the Way of Nature, so that his art becomes as natural as the clouds and the waves — which never make aesthetic mistakes” (1964). Watts concludes by honing in on the sensation of when the “separate ‘I’ gets rid of itself.” This emptying out of oneself intertwines enlightenment with environmental phenomena, thus creating a listening state wherein “hearing the sound of a flute ... lets the player play whatever tune he likes” (1964). Watts instructs the listener, through anthropomorphic language, to “[let] your mind go until there is no one to let go of it, but only *Waters flowing on and on by themselves; Flowers of themselves growing red*” (1964). This

posture of surrender places an explicit faith in the forces of nature, dissolving the human body and agency in the process.

Yet, as we will see, this meditational method of emptying oneself out is not the only option. An alternative proposed by New Age music is to fill oneself with musical sound, with particular musical intervals and timbres playing roles akin to that of a vitamin supplement. This ability for New Age music to go both ways underscores its salient characteristics of flexibility and multi-functionality, its unique ability to flow in, out, and through contexts of spirituality and commerce. Bound up in this dissonant counterpoint, the messages of New Age music often conflict in intention: the only way to peace is to purchase. From its earliest iterations, as heard and seen in Tony Scott's *Music for Zen Meditation (and other joys)*, this form of functional music remains flexible, prescribing specific uses as well as the opportunity for *other joys*.

Still, the term goes back even further, perhaps most famously emerging in the early 19th-century work of William Blake. In his preface to "Milton: A Poem in Two Books," Blake writes in a prophetic mode, announcing that "all will be set right" when the "New Age is at leisure to pronounce" (1997: 95). As Ryan Hibbett notes, Blake's argument for "the mythological and literary supremacy of the Bible over classical literature," works as a paradoxical call to move forward by reaching back to the earliest texts of culture (Hibbett 2010: 284). In this way, "Young men of the New Age" will achieve true spiritual insight (284).

These Blakean ideals of seeking spiritual truth through artistic expression, free from the shackles of contemporary fashions — "Suffer not the fashionable Fools to depress your powers" (Blake 1997: 95) — have resonated throughout the New Age genre since its inception in the mid-20th century. Yet, New Age music and its surrounding cultures have continually maintained a finger on the pulse of the "fashions of the day," innovatively adapting a diverse range of sonic and visual styles into its ever-evolving identity. Indeed, as Hibbett rightly notes, the concept of New Age as a broad system of aesthetics and beliefs has been in a "centuries long dialectic — as a persevering attempt to recode existing bodies of knowledge, such as religion and science, in a language that better suits a given population's needs" (2010: 287).

Record collector and visual artist Anthony Pearson illuminates this paradox of bodily presence and erasure evident in the work of Halpern and Ackerman:

Everybody holds back and creates this very even thing to sort of extinguish the self. So, you don't see the designers, and you don't see everything come to the forefront. Everything is kind of tapered

in this way. Which is very odd, because then the ideas behind it are always about trying to tend to the self: self-improvement, self-realization. There is this very strange conflation of the self and the non-self, or obliterating the ego. (2011: 53)

This article builds on Pearson's insights by considering how these multidirectional processes create different moods associated with the construction of environmental imaginaries.

As moods are central to all forms of functional music, we must consider how these affective signs and codes work in the spiritual-consumerist sphere of New Age music under examination. As Hibbett notes, "mood music ... assimilated various strands of music, from classical and jazz to Broadway and world music, to a mass American audience enjoying phonographs, televisions, and international vacations in the postwar era" (2010: 292). Mood music historically employs compositional tactics associated with Western classical music such as "large string sections and strong thematic continuity across an extended length of music" (Keightley 2008: 319). Alongside this tip of the hat toward "high-brow" culture, mood music firmly rests in the middle-brow by embracing a distinctly utilitarian, commercial aesthetic, generating LPs that were "frequently conceived as background accompaniment for activities that were highlighted and elaborated upon in the album's title, artwork, and liner notes" (319). Groups such as 101 Strings and The Ray Conniff Singers have been placed alongside jazz artists Chet Baker and Gerry Mulligan and exotica pioneers Martin Denny and Les Baxter to make up a wide definition of sounds that produce temporary states of feeling.

The trajectory of New Age builds upon and inverts mood music's penchant for assimilation by eschewing familiar tunes in the name of originals. In the process, it further domesticates the sounds of new electronic musical technologies by infusing their presence into an acoustic instrumental dialogue. This dialogue resounds with metaphorical overtones, touting promises of healing and recovery from the world outside the living room, thereby naturalizing relationships between technology, spirituality, and the environment in the process. As Joseph Lanza notes:

Beautiful Music supplies ghost tunes of originals ... space music [New Age] distills the ghost tune's mood, its sound, and a smidgen of its style and reprocesses it into an "original" composition once again, this time unanchored to any distinct emotional or historical context. (2004: 189)

Across the Atlantic, an equally spacious, more electronically oriented form of functional music emerged alongside North American New Age. Ambient music retains a focus on mood, erasure of human bodies, the presence of nature, and the development of particular states of mind, yet maintains a deeper tie to ambivalence. This is best summarized through Erik Satie's emphasis of sounds to be played in the background with his *Musique d'ameublement* (furniture music), and Brian Eno's coining of the ambient genre in the liner notes for *Ambient 1 (Music for Airports)* when he famously noted that "it must be as ignorable as it is interesting" (1978). While these genres contain a significant number of sonic similarities, with general emphasis on spacious production values and minimal harmonic movement, their distinguishing aesthetic differences lie in their philosophical relationships to doubt and the role of non-human nature. The playful and critical perspectives of composers like Satie and Eno embrace a deeply critical distance from prescriptive relationships with the natural world, whereas the general New Age environmental imaginary eschews critical engagement with the complicated idea of nature in favour of a utilitarian approach. The goal of making such music could be, for example, to heal a particular physical or psychological condition, or perhaps to revel in the melancholic nostalgia associated with the month of December.

The dislocation of the human from a stable physical environment into a destabilized imaginary one has remained a characteristic of functional music throughout the late 20th century. Brian Eno's articulation of doubt along with exotica artists such as Les Baxter and Martin Denny taking listeners to imaginary lands and galaxies reflects such investments. While New Age mimics the otherworldly experience of electronic ambient music in which "the performer and the sense of music as performance are erased," there remains a crucial connection to everyday, domestic experience (Grove Hall 1994: 25).

Dr. Steven Halpern's Sonic Supplements

As tones ring out across a pentatonic scale played on a Fender Rhodes piano, reference to melodic hooks disappear. The steady pulse of pop music gives way to a floating cascade of pitches that drape across a consistent harmonic key centre. There is ample opportunity to relax to the sounds of Dr. Steven Halpern's *Chakra Suite* (2010), healing from the trappings of modern life, embracing and consuming the natural world in the process.

Halpern is considered one of the forefathers of the New Age music movement. His independently released *Christening for Listening (A Soundtrack for Every Body)* (1975) offers listeners two contrasting views of the composer.

Side 1 is made up of seven colour-coded tracks in various keys: “Keynote C: Red,” “Keynote D: Orange,” etc. Side 2 consists of jazz funk cuts with electric bass, Fender Rhodes piano (an electric keyboard which emerged en masse in the 1970s and was embraced by pop and jazz fusion musicians alike), and minimal harmonic movement, reminiscent of Miles Davis releases such as *Bitches Brew* (1970) and *In a Silent Way* (1969).

As a transplant from New York to San Francisco, Halpern began to experiment with intersections of music and healing by engaging with the New Age communities that have long existed in the Bay Area. As an integral part of the New Age infrastructure in the area, Halpern got his start in the genre as a performing musician at Big Sur’s Esalen Institute, recording his pieces after requests from guests began to flow in. These musical experiments were balanced by Halpern’s master’s thesis in psychology at Lone Mountain College. His thesis, “Towards a contemporary psychology of music,” provided the foundation for the composer-author’s future work.

Throughout Halpern’s broad discography of over 70 releases at the time of this writing, the composer has maintained a key investment in recycling his material. For example, his debut release, *Christening for Listening*, has been repackaged and retitled over ten times. This theme of recycling guides a brief overview of Halpern’s career and figures as a central philosophical component of Halpern’s approach to New Age music. By tying together spirituality, psychology, and medical terminology, Halpern has made a career out of positioning his Fender Rhodes drones as medicinal music. These tones are composed with the intention of achieving a form of “sound health,” which, incidentally, is the name of his second published book.

In Chapter 10 of *Sound Health*, Halpern takes up the subject of the “sound imagination,” noting the “healing power of imagery” (Halpern and Savary 1985: 101). As part of a guided exercise on “how to relax with inner imagery,” Halpern prescribes a particular series of steps (107). After finding a location and time to get in a comfortable position and close one’s eyes, Halpern suggests one play music and “allow your imagination to visualize pleasant surroundings — a beautiful meadow filled with flowers, a sparkling bubbly stream, the beach and ocean, or your own favorite scene” (108).

In the introduction to *The International Guide to New Age Music*, Halpern further articulates his image-centric visions of sonic health by braiding together images of spiritual dissonance:

People ... no longer believed the world could satisfy their personal life visions because they observed how they increasingly lost themselves in a loud chase for a very insecure future. Disharmony

ruled, interpersonal contacts became increasingly superficial, and people experienced a notable spiritual lack. In search of a counterbalance, an interpretation of life in which they could find themselves, many individuals joined therapy groups or practiced yoga and meditation. Here, too, New Age music was a balm that salved the wound, so to speak. (Werkhoven 1998: vi)

Here, Halpern conflates imagery (life visions) and medicine (salve) with sound (loud chase, disharmony). This nexus of multitextuality can be heard in the flowing tones of Halpern's composition "1st Chakra: Keynote C," the opening piece on his *Chakra Suite* album. This album contains the same pieces that appear on at least ten different Halpern albums, including *Christening for Listening*.

The piece itself opens with a low C that ascends via the fifth of G to an octave and begins a stair-stepping sequence through a major pentatonic scale. The warm tones emanate from his Fender Rhodes keyboard while a sustain pedal remains depressed through the three-minute affair, as a thin, sweeping synthesizer pad spans out through a heavily reverbed second track. The pad simply oscillates between two different octave pitches of C until it incorporates submerged chord tones of the third and fifth intervals at apparently improvised moments.

This sonic experience is intended to encourage a positive mood. The description above articulates, in theoretical terms, the sounds of contentment. This mood became a sonic commonplace through consistent audiovisual connections between major key tonalities and positive narrative moments with the inception of cinema in the early 20th century. Add to this the timbral character of the piece, with its shimmering echoes and vibrating pitches, and the listener is firmly placed in an aquatic, womb-like atmosphere.

To the trained and untrained ear alike, this sonic imaginary conjures up omnidirectional relationships to sound. As Western listeners have been trained to anticipate the predictable changes of verse, pre-chorus, and chorus in popular music, Halpern's brand of New Age seeks to obliterate this progression in the name of floating in all places at once. Though never acknowledged by the composer, Halpern's New Age works as a more consumer-friendly version of the progress-through-stasis achieved in Terry Riley's *In C* (1968). Additionally, Halpern's sonic supplements reflect psychoanalytic engagements with film music, which connect to this aural state of being, as the listener is soaked in a "bath or gel of affect" (Gorbman 1987: 5).

The 2010 *Chakra Suite* recycles 35-year-old compositions and presents Halpern's idiosyncratic brand of cover art. The album's cover image features the

vacant, shadowy profile of a human figure in a meditative, cross-legged lotus position with hands resting on knees opened to the sky. A vertical strand of seven circles, each colour-coded to merge the seven musical keys with the colours of the rainbow, is digitally overlaid on top of the body. A translucent treble clef floats between the body and the circles, re-emphasizing the connection between inner harmony and the apparently digestible tones which promise healing and recovery.

Henk Werkhoven, editor of *The International Guide to New Age Music*, who hired Halpern to write the introduction, considers New Age music as a respite, giving “its listeners the opportunity to, for a moment, leave this hectic, noisy world behind and enter a haven of tranquility and relaxation where they can take time to catch their breath” (Werkhoven 1998: vii). Contrary to

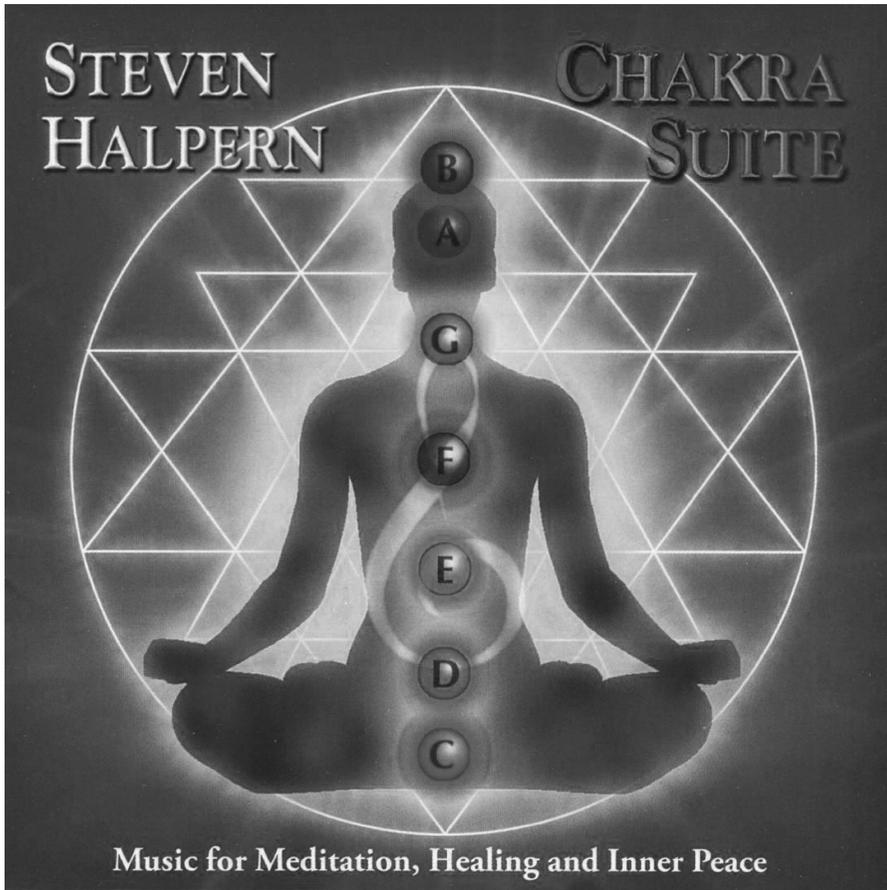


Fig 1. Dr. Steven Halpern's *Chakra Suite* (cover).

Halpern's positioning of music and the environment as something to ingest, Werkhoven positions the music as a "haven" to enter and where listeners can recover, ultimately contributing to "an increase in the harmony within and between people" (vii). In Werkhoven's view, New Age music allows the listener to escape the everyday world and enter a new reality through sonic immersion. Halpern, on the other hand, constructs a reality in which music is applied to the self as a topical salve or ingested like a vitamin. This idea of ingestion is further clarified through Halpern's articulation of New Age music's branding: "Truth-in-packaging is a concept that has worked well in other fields, including health foods and herbal supplements" (ix).

This sense of musical sound as a medicinal supplement to daily life is further expounded upon in another New Age music guide published ten years before Werkhoven's volume. *The New Age Music Guide: Profiles and Recordings of 500 Top New Age Musicians* by Patti Jean Birocik (1989) presents an exhaustive list of various sects of the solidifying New Age genre as well as an introduction by Halpern. In her preface, Birocik likens New Age to rock music's cultural influence, pointing out that rock "didn't merely influence, it sledgehammered its message" (1989: ix). She goes on to say:

New Age music is more subtle but no less effective; it is created by conscientious artists who are knowledgeable about the effects of sound on the mind of the listener. Instead of being taken as pure entertainment, New Age music can be "used" to induce a wide variety of mental and emotional responses. New Age music is the ultimate blend of art and science. (ix-x)

In Halpern's brand of New Age, this abstract notion of how to listen is further complicated by a sense of where the listener is conceptually located. The composer's emphasis on blurring lines of inside/outside sonic binaries is reflective of American experimental composer and accordionist Pauline Oliveros' "altered state of consciousness full of inner sounds" that inform her concept of Deep Listening (2005: xv). From the start, Halpern claims that "it is music that employs time, space, and silence as a sonic vehicle to get the listener into closer contact with his/her spiritual nature" (Werkhoven 1998: viii). Positioning the music as a vehicle applies a mobilized sense of the music, promising a "closer contact" with "spiritual nature." But where is this "spiritual nature" and how does it relate to non-human nature?

Halpern sheds light on the possible relationship between these particular human and non-human phenomena, quoting music critic Lee Underwood, saying that New Age music functions to provide "emotional, psychological, and

spiritual nourishment. It offers peace, joy, bliss, and the opportunity to discover within ourselves our own highest nature” (Birosik 1989: xv). Taking into account this model, along with the attributes of Halpern’s expansive healing tones and multilayered artwork, nature seems to be discoverable through ingesting *proper* musical material, which, in turn, leads to nourishment, peace, and, as declared in Tony Scott’s album title, *other joys*. In Halpern’s world, such other joys include “this healing power that has brought New Age music into common use in both hospitals and executive boardrooms” (Werkhoven 1998: xxi).

In this final turn of phrase, we find a strength particular to New Age: strength as a form of functional music that sutures contexts of commerce and recovery, healing, and upward mobility. As Halpern continues in *Birosik’s Guide*, New Age is a special form of organized sound that “encourages personal empowerment, earth connectedness, space consciousness, and interpersonal awareness” (1989: ix). The consistent conflation of the physical, consumer, and spiritual self steers Halpern’s vision of a form of music that, at every turn, leads to growth, success, progress, and development. These “consciousness-changing abilities can increase the mental and emotional health of those who listen to it,” shaping listeners into ideal New Age consumers, consumers who wish “to make educated, informed choices, and who are looking for a specific effect” (x).

In both *Sound Health* and *Birosik’s Guide*, Halpern prescribes the basic tenets of how harmony, melody, rhythm, timbre, and texture are to be used for maximum effect. Addressing the role of harmony, he notes that “most true New Age music is based on harmony and consonance, rather than dissonance” (Birosik 1989: xvi). Melodic content exists “without the sound ‘hooks’ that characterize virtually all popular music. When we eliminate the straitjacket of predetermined patterns, we open up new ways of organizing and experiencing sound for ourselves” (xvii). Halpern strategically gives no mention of deep histories of non-harmonic-based music from around the globe, such as ragas, chants, and other forms of meditative sonic practice.

In talking about opening ourselves up, Halpern reflects New Age DJ and record label owner Stephen Hill’s notion that listeners (and musicians) “enter the space by allowing it to enter us ... such music takes us beyond ourselves and through ourselves” (Birosik 1989: xvii). Halpern’s notions of rhythm, timbre, and texture continue the recurrent trend of imagining environments as fluid and consumable. The controlled timbres and predictable harmonic progressions of this approach to New Age music are shared across the philosophical spectrum of *how* this form of functional music is *meant* to function.

In this next section, I consider an altogether different, but no less functional, form of New Age. This brand of New Age — and it is very much a brand — takes Halpern’s spiritualized sonic remedies and turns them inside

out. Such an aesthetic flip reveals a whole host of equally compelling visions of the non-human environment, ultimately figuring an ecological scenario devoid of human figures altogether.

Disappearing on a Windham Hill

Just down the road from Steven Halpern's Marin County studio, a Stanford University dropout was recording and peddling his fingerstyle guitar music to local New Age bookstores and friends throughout the San Mateo area. The guitarist and fledgling label owner, William Ackerman, was consumed by the innovative eclecticism of guitarists John Fahey and Robbie Basho, both of whom released records on his nascent Windham Hill label.

Windham Hill's initial release, *The Search for the Turtle's Navel* (1976), finds Ackerman laying out the aesthetic priorities of the label: reverberating acoustic guitar vignettes, digital synthesizer drones, and a general focus on instrumental music. Much of the label's output can be heard as a distillation of the more aggressively original sounds of Euro-American folk music. While Halpern has emphasized the healing properties of music, Ackerman and his Windham Hill artists take a different tack, retaining a more ambiguous posture. Intimacy, anonymity, and the fantastical are key characteristics that inform the Windham Hill experience. Song titles on a variety of Windham Hill releases reflect these aesthetics, often taking on surreal qualities: "What the Buzzard Told Suzanne," "The Age of Steam," "Dance for the Death of a Bird," and "Slow Motion Roast Beef Restaurant Seduction." With this mutated sense of ethical naturalism which binds together consumerism, wild nature, and machines, Windham Hill embodies environmental historian William Cronon's idea of the "domesticated sublime" (Cronon 1996: 75).

The domesticated sublime maintains a sacred relationship with the wilderness as defined by Thoreau and Wordsworth but replaces their notions of "a grand cathedral or a harsh desert retreat" with a "pleasant parish church" (Cronon 1996: 75). The transcendentalists' traditional, romantic sentiments about the wilderness stand in contrast to John Muir's musings on the Yosemite Valley. As Muir is perched "humbly prostrate before the vast display of God's power," fearless while drinking this "champagne water," he reflects a view of the wilderness as *accessible* and *approachable* (76). In this way, Cronon's idea of the domesticated sublime articulates the process of attempting to contain the unwieldy terror of nature at its wildest in order to package it for mass consumption.

As the 20th century came into view, a number of national parks such as Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and Yellowstone were established, drawing boundaries

and crowds alike. Along with this increase in tourism came increased levels of comfort with environments that had formerly been received in states of awe and piety. In short, the American environmental imagination was transforming. Along with this transformation came new views on what to do with these havens of the domesticated sublime. Were these spaces meant to be historically cast in plaster, frozen in time for eternity? Or were they to be continually open for consumption, regularly managed for planned use and renewal?

The former view mirrors historically preservationist views, a perspective advocated by Muir and others. The latter view is summed up in the conservation ethic, a call to produce from the forest whatever it can yield to man. At first glance, preservation and conservation viewpoints stand at ethical odds with each other. Preservation calls for an ideal of untouched authenticity, harkening back to an imagined purity free from the clutches of humanity. Conservation is explicit in its interest in environmental generativity for the sake of human progress. Yet, what often goes unnoticed are the consequences of preservationist approaches, consequences which historically displace large numbers of people in the name of capturing an ideal for the privileged to consume. Conservationist approaches, on the other hand, also speak to a perpetuation of anonymity amongst non-human environments. There is no postcard-perfect tree to behold. Instead, there are multiple trees to be filed into a cycle of growth and consumption.

Forester and politician Gifford Pinchot pioneered the conservationist perspective, and it is this approach to ecology that takes shape in the imaginaries produced by Windham Hill. The label's smoothed out visual and sonic aesthetic presents an analog of Pinchot's utilitarian ideals of reconstructing nature. Through the creation of a dependably commodified musical assembly line, Windham Hill conserves these comforting depictions of nature for sustained commercial production. Ecomusicologist Brooks Toliver's observation on Grofe's *Grand Canyon Suite* (1931) reflects a similar inversion of tendencies of domestication "to celebrate wilderness and to dominate it symbolically" (Toliver 2004: 342). The challenge posed by the Grand Canyon to narratives of mastery, as Toliver points out, is that the canyon itself is primarily viewed from above, in a state of immediate power. The shape of Windham Hill environmental imaginaries adds equal complexity to the idea of the domesticated sublime as the covers and sounds seem to derive their power from a controlled set of environmental abstractions that connote promises of a controlled evaporation of specificity.

The branding strategies and record production practices of the label are congruent with the music's sonic tendencies. *Artist anonymity* guides the Windham Hill experience. The music and its extramusical components speak

to the importance of visually and textually *framing* sounds in ways that subsume both the body and the musical content itself. Inevitably, the product for sale is a lifestyle that seemingly contains musical sound within the envelope of visual and textual components.

These ideas of sound as *contained* and image as *container* are contrary to sound theorist and composer Michel Chion's observation that sound is in fact uncontainable. Unlike the filmic image, which is contained by an actual frame, Chion argues that film sound, when listened to independent of the image, "feels like a formless audio layer" (2009: 226-227). He goes on to note that the "frame's pre-existence with respect to the image is specific to film: it does not adapt its format to what is shown" (227). This pre-existence of the frame "orients and imposes hierarchy on images and results in the image, the image that the frame has totalized and structured" (227). But imagery is always transcended by the shapelessness of sound. By emphasizing sound's uncontainable quality, we can approach the framing devices used by Windham Hill as attempts to contain the uncontainable.

Of course, Chion's emphasis on the "dissymmetry between what we see and what we hear" can be mapped into any multitextual sonic space (2009: 227). Yet, what interests me most in interrogating how this dissymmetry and shapelessness is manifest within the Windham Hill imaginary are the ways in which the label reverses the process, framing whole seasons and other environmental phenomena. Through this process, the role of the image is reversed. While filmic sound is often interpreted as working in the service of the image, the cohesive packaging and abundance of natural imagery which floods the Windham Hill experience positions the visual world as subservient to sound.

This asymmetry of environmental imagery, new musical technologies, and attention to intimacy places both the works of Halpern and Windham Hill in unique positions as highly personalized forms of functional music. While Halpern's miniaturizations personalize non-human environments in the form of sonic supplement, Windham Hill's brand of personalization takes shape through a kind of bodiless musical expression, a musical space opened for the listener to enter and where she can imagine the music as her own. This welcoming space is reflected quite literally in both uncluttered album covers and record production techniques that embrace heavy use of spatializing effects such as reverb and delay.

As media studies scholar Helfried Zrzavy points out, the cohesion of album art amongst such a diversity of thematic content reflects innumerable paradoxes inherent in the genre. The author notes five recurring characteristics of New Age record covers: 1) Stark white, black, or brown covers, which leave

significant space around a framed image; 2) The image is most likely a landscape photo or depictions of shrouded or out-of-focus urban or natural phenomena; 3) In lieu of a photograph, an abstract image which evokes natural phenomena; 4) Fantastical imagery evoking imaginary “scapes”; 5) The general absence of the artist on the cover (1990: 41-46). These characteristics support New Age music’s amplification of the general over the specific, such as the use of stock footage of nature in place of particular locales, which reflects the genre’s paradoxical homogenization of heterogeneous musical material.

This tendency to offer up imaginary “scapes” as spaces in which to exercise the sonic imagination encourage the Windham Hill listener to move into the label’s consuming aesthetic. Anne Robinson, CEO of Windham Hill, further clarifies the label’s album cover philosophy:

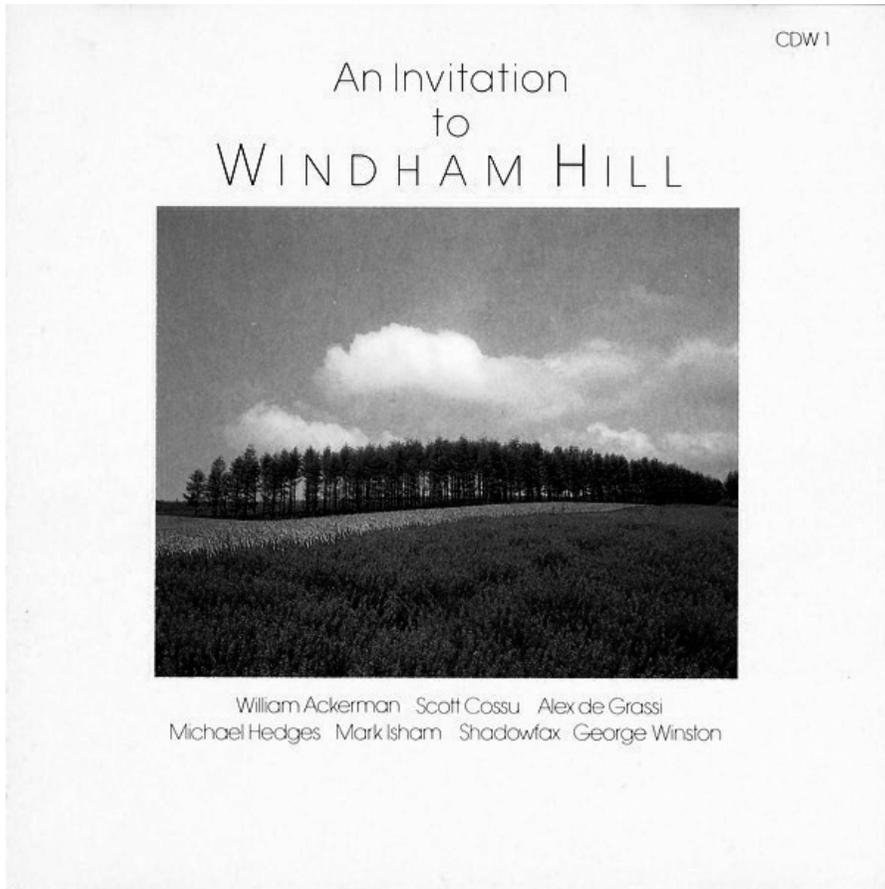


Fig 2. Anonymous environments and artists (Windham Hill cover).

We look at the jackets as objects that are there to entertain — and to create an atmosphere for the listener. They offer a beginning illustration of what the record and what the music is all about. I think putting an image of the artist on the cover keeps people from being able to think creatively ... about the music. I feel our records give the listener little vignettes — hints and suggestions — of the world of the musician, of groups of musicians, sees [sic]. We are really seeking to describe a mood with our records. (qtd. in Zrzavy 1990: 49)

By coupling a mood, or state of temporary feeling, with the ability to think

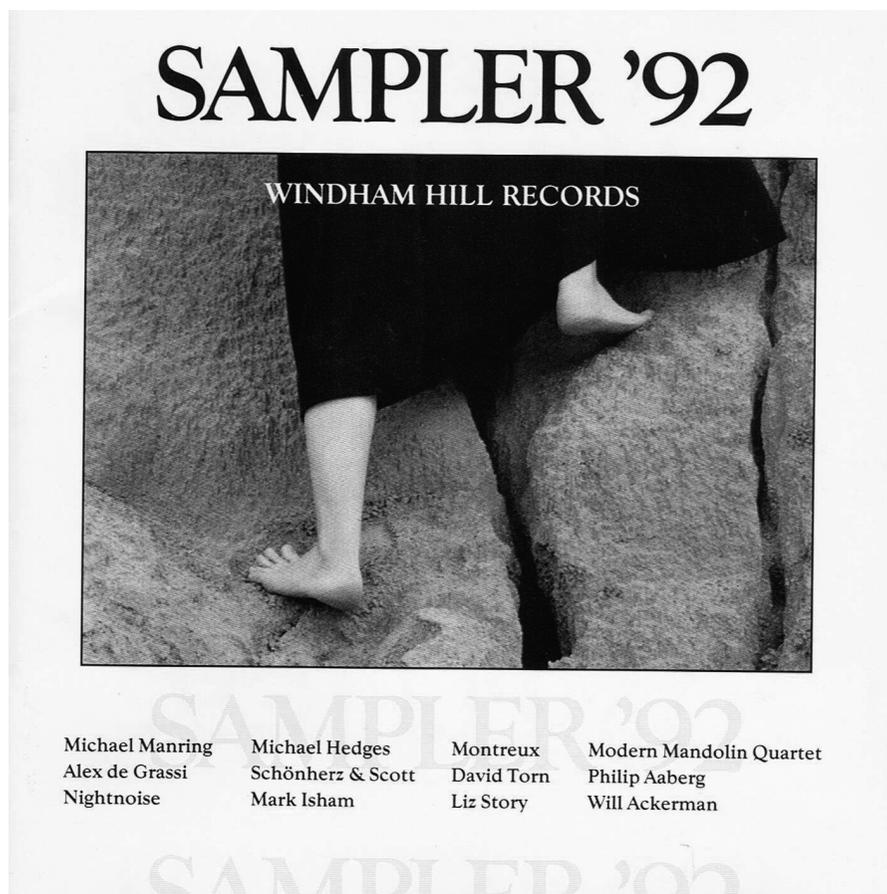


Fig 3. Climbing out of the frame (Windham Hill).

creatively, Robinson hones in on the need for ambiguity as a central tenet of the Windham Hill experience. Label co-owner William Ackerman connects this sweeping approach of “hints and suggestions” to the listener’s inner, or emotional, landscape: “I personally feel that the range of human emotions that are being attempted and communicated now are more subtle and intimate and personal” (qtd. in Karpel 1984: 206). Such covers feature natural worlds and even anonymous portions of human figures.

A particular tune that exemplifies these ephemeral characteristics of anonymity is Ackerman’s own “Visiting,” originally released on his 1983 album *Past Light*, and also featured on the 1985 sampler *An Invitation to Windham Hill*. The piece fades in slowly with Ackerman droning on his unfretted sixth string sounding as a C#. The composer takes cues from acoustic folk players such as John Fahey and Robbie Basho by exploiting the timbral possibilities of a non-standard guitar tuning. Tuned to BF#D#F#C#F# and capo’ed on the second fret, the guitarist rolls through ascending arpeggios as his instrument is lightly processed with digital reverb and chorus. After signalling the first section with a series of overdubbed harmonics, Chuck Greenberg enters on the lyrico, an electronic wind instrument which makes use of additive synthesis and was co-designed by Greenberg along with others at Computone Inc. Bathed in reverb, Greenberg’s main refrain descends from the fourth to third to root scale degrees, opening the space for fretless bass pioneer Michael Manring to provide an undulating foundation from the third to second to root. After two minutes of cycling through the repetitive A-section, players move toward the \flat VII signalling a mixolydian quality. The piece then increases in dynamic range cycling through an unstable IV-V-vii progression, avoiding the I to increase anticipation. The piece concludes unresolved, emphasizing a new centre, featuring the \flat VII as root, cueing the listener to the ephemeral nature of visiting particularly undefined keys, centres, and environments.

As displayed above, the Windham Hill aesthetic is paradoxical as it aims for intimacy through close-mic techniques bathed in echoing delay while shrouding the sounds in the infinite flexibility of stock imagery and song titles. As such, recording technologies play a crucial role in infusing the Windham Hill aesthetic with a technologized presence. These maneuvers obfuscate the role of the human, highlighting a broader focus on anonymity, a concept which challenges traditional postures of authorial domination. The following section highlights the centrality of anonymity to the New Age sonic communities under analysis. Michel Foucault’s work on the shifting role of the author sets up a foundation from which to explore the explicit and implicit use of anonymity in New Age marketing and compositional practice.

Making Space for Nobody

In reference to their unique marketing practices, Windham Hill executive Anne Robinson states that “with no people or specific places on our covers, these packages ask more questions than they answer” (qtd. in Zrzavy 1990: 49). This approach articulates the importance of avoiding specificity in order to free up listeners to immerse themselves in the personalized sonic environments designed by the label. The concept of anonymity is central to Halpern’s work as well as to the Windham Hill catalogue as a whole. But before exploring the specific ways in which anonymity figures into the works of the artists and labels under investigation, I will briefly address how the phenomenon of anonymity has taken shape and been interrogated in broader contexts of content producers and consumers.

Building on Samuel Beckett’s *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (1967) and the insistent question of why it matters who is speaking, Michel Foucault’s essay “What is an Author?” (1969) tackles romantic ideals of individual expression through writing. He argues that this necessity of individual expression and credit is reversed through the transformation of writing into “an interplay of signs.” This interplay is “regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier.” Such flexibility within the signification process forgoes “exalted emotions” in the name of “creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears” (Foucault 1977: 115).

This “endless disappearance” is followed by an acceptance of anonymity. As Foucault notes, literary texts have maintained oscillating relationships with authenticity based on the age of the manuscript. Basically, the older the text, the more its authenticity is related to the tracelessness or unknownness of the author. This shape-shifting obsession with authorial identity takes on a different form depending on historical and topical contexts.

Foucault points out how changing societal relationships and priorities are manifest within the history of scientific texts. In the Middle Ages, the legitimacy of texts hinged on knowing their authorship. Yet, during the Enlightenment, scientific texts were “accepted on their own merits and positioned within an anonymous and coherent conceptual system” (1977: 126). Different eras are marked by different associations between authorial identity and authenticity. Within the realm of Western Art Music, the historical picture is much more rigid, reflecting a culture of continued obsession with marking, coding, and cataloguing composer output and generic boundaries.

Foucault next criticizes the obsession within literary studies to locate the author at all costs to maintain the traditionally authoritative structure of author-reader. This one-way contract enforces a hierarchical relationship to content

production and reception. As an alternative, Foucault builds on Romantic era ideas of communally creative folk cultures, prompting us to “imagine a culture where discourses could circulate without any need for an author” (1977: 138). And it is here, in these European, folk-like sonic-cultural spaces, that the New Age entertainment complex resonates. The concept of anonymity is crucial to the production and reception of the New Age music here under analysis.

New Age music marketing practices hold paradoxical relationships to the role of the self. As record collector Anthony Pearson writes:

The idea of New Age is also a very social idea, and there is a strange conflation that goes on between “the self,” which you are supposed to get rid of, and “the self,” which is the constant preoccupation of the New Age movement. (2011: 50)

New Age records remove the current body in favour of opening a natural space in which an idealized body can be inserted. This subsumption of the human body within a nondescript, more-than-human sonic space indicates that New Age does the utilitarian work of reclaiming lost impulses, effectively bringing the garden into the machine (Marx 1964). The listener, then, is formed as a subject capable of transporting and being transported. This, in turn, speaks to the synthesizing function of New Age music to simultaneously dissolve the human into nature and nature into the human.

Fading Out

Intertwining environmental text and imagery with spacious, comforting sounds finds the aim of both forms of New Age explored herein solidifying vague notions of ecological abstractions. Such abstractions share equally anonymous traits with the role played by stock imagery and music, PowerPoint templates, and model homes. In each approach, whether painstakingly prescribed or encouraged to disappear, the New Age subject is pressed to embrace an ecological scenario of anonymity and spaciousness.

In a 1997 issue of *Billboard Magazine*, these aesthetics of artist anonymity are explored directly through how they relate to marketing practices (See Fig. 4). Throughout the issue, label owners and radio hosts give voice to the prevalence of artist anonymity as a marketing technique. Stephen Hill, president of Hearts of Space Records notes that “it has to do with perceived risk ... from a listener’s point of view, a compilation based on a concept they are already familiar with is a safer buying choice” (Diliberto 1997: 39). This “safer buying choice” provides

a comfortable space to first purchase then sonically immerse oneself. With no threats to specific bodies (of a specific sex and ethnicity), the listener can fully (dis)engage and trust their consumptive relationship with sonic environments.

Key to the New Age ethos is the delicate balance of emphasizing the personal and individual through anonymity and predictable musical choices. The aesthetic advocates mystery by way of maximum security. Music scholar

NEW AGE

THE BILLBOARD SPOTLIGHT



WHAT A CONCEPT

ARTIST ANONYMITY MAY BE A NEW AGE THEME, AS COMPILATIONS AND MOOD MUSIC TAKE PRECEDENCE

BY JOHN DILIBERTO

“I gotta have a gimmick” is the motto of the old-style, space-making ruckster—and in the music called New Age, now more than ever. As stress and labels gear up for the millennium, it seems concepts that go beyond impressive packaging are as important as musicians. Pick the right theme, and you can sell mid-six figures on a release. That seems to be the lesson from recordings like the “Celtic Twilight” series from Heads Of Space, the “Music Of National Parks” series from Real Music and a stream of concept collections from Narada and Windham Hill.

It was William Ackerman, the founder of Windham Hill Records, who arguably started the trend with the Windham Hill samplers. Ackerman says the plan was modest: “It was originally a promotional vehicle. When they sold in the hundreds of thousands, that was a tip-off,” he recalls.

Although the early releases weren’t conceptually based, Windham Hill had such a cohesive sound that they worked. The label samplers were followed by guitar, synthesizer and piano collections, and those evolved into the “Winter Solstice” recordings and the “Celtic Christmas” albums. By the time Ackerman left the label in 1992, Windham Hill was releasing the classical collections performed by contemporary instrumentalists.

KEEPING A LOW PROFILE

Ackerman is continuing that trend with his new label, Imaginary Roads, distributed by PolyGram. It features contemporary artists rendering the classical master’s themes, and “The Song Of Angels” is a collection of medieval

chants. The latter is performed by Schola Cantarum, but the packaging focuses on the concept more than the group. “The Schola Cantorum is one of the most phenomenal vocal groups on earth,” exudes Ackerman, who admits, “We need to lead the buyer to water.”

“It’s an easier way to market and has a bigger retail effort,” claims Jeff Payne, national sales director for Real Music. The label’s “Music Of National Parks” series has four titles, including Nicholas Gunn’s “Music Of The Grand Canyon” and Marc Lazar’s “Music Of Olympic National Park.” All of the recordings have sold into the low-six-figure range, according to Payne.

“It has to do with perceived risk,” observes Stephen Hill, president of Heads Of Space. “From a listener’s point of view, a compilation based on a concept they are already familiar with is a safer buying choice.”

Narada has succeeded with collections like “Celtic Odyssey” and “Guitar Fingerspinn,” but even its artist recordings have strong themes, such as David Aronberg’s recent “Return Of The Guardians,” based on a story by fantasy author Mercedes Lackey. “Every record should have a concept,” states Narada CEO Wesley Van Linda. “We try to extend the voice of the artist beyond the music.”

“It’s getting tougher and tougher to make the long-term commitment of breaking new artists,” notes Ackerman. “But that’s my history and logo, and that’s what I plan to do.” To that end, he’s also releasing “Sticks & Stones” by young guitar singer Rob Eberhard Young.

For two other Windham Hill refugees, Robert Duskis and Pat Berry, compilations are a way of bringing different musicians together. They launched their PolyGram-distributed Six Degrees label last fall with “Festival Of Light,” a collection of music for Harukiya whose artistic breadth might best be described as “eclectic.”

“We’re really interested in the idea of genre-defying projects that break down barriers,” says Duskis. “Festival Of Light” had 232 people like John Zorn and Don Byron, David Torn and Glen Velez on a track with Marc Cohn, and Byron with Jane Siberry—it’s very exciting to have those worlds meet.” Six Degrees will continue on this path with a release called “Heritage,” featuring new arrangements of Americana folk tunes produced by David Arger.

ANONYMOUS AMBIENCE

One might start wondering if the artist is becoming an adjunct to the concept and the packaging. Certainly, many genres already thrive on anonymity. Ambient and techno musicians try to remove personality from the equation completely, placing the emphasis on the music, not the personality.

In modern instrumental music, however, it’s less a cultural statement than a marketing concern. American Gramophone has been wildly successful marketing its “Day-part” CDs packaged with coffee, bubble bath and bathhouse sauce. Add in videos and other multi-purposing features, and the artist becomes secondary to the mood. It takes a detective to find the composers and musicians behind the JVC albums “Manne Stream: The Pacific Ocean” and “Ebbin’ Summer Fantasy” and the Wind label’s “Chinese Feng-Shui Music” series.

Continued on page 46

Fig 4. Foregrounded environments, erased bodies.

Helfried Zrzavy notes that an “examination of the New Age phenomenon is hampered by a general unfamiliarity with New Age artists whose names, unlike those of pop or rock n’ roll stars, largely remain subordinate to the record labels for which they perform” (1990: 35). Through a general lack of physical visibility on record covers, New Age artists on the Windham Hill label essentially dissolve into a bodiless environment.

A notable exception to artist anonymity in the New Age environmental imaginary is the Windham Hill pianist, guitarist, and composer George Winston. Along with artists such as Yanni, Enya, and Vangelis, Winston has been a top-selling New Age artist for the better part of four decades because his recordings and concerts attract listeners who associate a certain kind of music with him in particular. Yet Winston’s compositions share the New Age sound aesthetic. As Bob Doerschuk writes:

Despite their many differences in style and sound, all these artists [including Winston] share a love of soft textures and silent spaces, and a tendency to take a static approach — without a sense of movement toward cadences or of operating within traditional structure, where verse leads to chorus, and free of the tensions that these cadences resolve. (1989: 94)

This sense of moving but never arriving is found in consistent attempts to reflect particular times and spaces free from their broader contexts.

Winston expounds on these impressionistic tendencies in his album *Autumn* (1980):

The important thing about *Autumn* is that it’s about the autumn, not that it’s a piano record. It could have been a painting, or a guitar piece; it’s the autumn idea that I’m really into ... what I’m doing now with the seasons albums is sort of impressionistic — it’s music describing some idea or picture — and a lot of the music I listened to as a kid was impressionistic too ... they’re mood pieces. I’m trying more to create an impression of something than to produce an absolute piece of music that somebody might want to transcribe or analyze. (qtd. in Doerschuk 1989: 97)

It is this erasure of the artist and listener which founder and flagship Windham Hill artist William Ackerman touts as a central component of bringing people together, and which, despite Winston’s name-recognition, makes him a New Age musician. Ackerman notes: “We’d stumbled onto a sensibility. The wall

of sound [of rock music] was shutting people off ... Our careful miking [*sic*] ... and uncluttered recording technique restored a sense of intimacy between performer and listener” (qtd. in Karpel 1984: 200). Here Ackerman attempts to speak to the complicated balance held by the label in constructing a dialogue between performer, listener, and the broader environmental imagination.

As we have seen, the task of this article has been to interrogate how New Age music conceives of the environment as something to be consumed, yet which has the power to consume. Attempting to achieve this balance embraces and challenges long-held, white male-dominated narratives of how an awe-inspiring but controllable nature circulates in North American environmental imaginaries. The music under investigation presents acts of multitextual representation which attempt to make analogies to the natural world. In the process, the listener is shaped into an environmentally-attuned subject, hinging on circular philosophies of commerce and spirituality. The construction of this complex subjectivity is contingent on repeated interactions with such analogies, thus solidifying particular relationships to environments. Whether through specific, prescriptive means or generalized scenarios, New Age music’s processes of domestication naturalizes the co-presence of technologies alongside seemingly natural phenomena. In this way, New Age makes manifest its unique brand of ambivalence, a brand reflective of attitudes toward the current environmental crisis. 🌱

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