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NEW AGE '89

Eclectic Indie Alchemists Search for Perfect Marriage of Spirit and Sound

By DEVRA HALL

New-age product continues to receive enough radio and retail exposure to help new-age indies make occasional successful forays into mainstream distribution channels. But even without hype or fanfare, true-to-roots indies haven't stopped exploring the multidimensional musical territory they've been pioneering since the '60s—as well as new terrain new agers claim as their own—to growing audiences and profit potential.

In a marketplace where new age can mean almost anything, Eckhart Rahn, founder of **Celestial Harmonies/Kuckuck Records**, and Ethan Edgecomb, president of **Fortuna Records**, based in Tucson, try to assist their customers by paying special attention to packaging, graphic design and proper annotations. "In a shrink-wrapped blister-packed and bar-coded society, you really don't know what you are getting," explains Rahn. "But we're doing the best we can with the graphic image and vocabulary used in the annotation. We are trying to create a cultural context, in the sense that the illustration, graphics, typefaces and credits create a feel." Upcoming releases include: a 20th anniversary re-recording of Terry Riley's semi-improvised contemporary work "In C" by the Shanghai Film Orchestra (Celestial); a reissue of Paul Horn's "The Traveller," with four bonus tracks from his "Jupiter" 8-inch recording (Kuckuck); and "Desert Solitaire," an electronic collaboration between Steve Roach, Kevin Braheny and Michael Stearns dedicated to the late Edward Abbey (Fortuna).

Of course, once upon a time, the term new age did not exist. As **American Gramophone** executive VP Steve Kalhorn points out, when Chip Davis started Mannheim Steamroller in 1974, there was no new age genre, per se. "Nobody could figure out what to call it so they called it everything from easy listening to classical. Then they called it new age, and when new age is gone, his music is still going to be around." The continued success of Mannheim Steamroller, whose two Christmas albums both went platinum, has created a spill-over impact of interest in the entire catalog. This, in combination with their new agreement to distribute Paul Winter's **Living Music** label, has led to a very good year for Omaha-based American Gramophone.

Paul Winter is one of many artists who focus their musical energy on communication and social responsibility. Such artists generally prefer not to be pigeonholed simply as new age. According to VP Cathy Cowels, "Paul feels that our music more or less defies categorizing." Winter is now working on "The Tree," a project showing how the tree figures as a symbol in 13 different cultures. Cellist Eugene Friesen's second album, "Arms Around You" was released last month, and other members of the Winter consort working on projects of their own include a new piano album by Paul Halley and a flute recording by Rhonda Larson.

"I think there is a fine line between what is new age, what is contemporary instrumental or what is jazz. I like to think that it's a reflection of people's internal worlds," comments Matt Marshall, president of **Higher Octave**, Los Angeles. Spirits are high this year as Marshall reports news on three fronts. Their first music video, William Aura's "World Keeps Turning," has been airing on VH-1; they have signed Himekami, a famous Japanese recording artist, brought him out of Japan for the first time and recently released his first U.S. recording; and they charted three out of four releases so far in the top 15 or better.

Soundings Of The Planet in Tucson celebrated its 10th birthday this year. Originally rooted in natural sounds and the peace of nature, the music produced by Dean & Dudley Evenson's label has evolved to include vocals and more rhythm. "Our purpose in music has a lot to do with creating inner peace, and then as an expansion of that, more of a global peace concept," explains Dudley. "So even though the tempo has quickened, we still come from a very positive and joyful space. Marketing director Chris Hawkins is looking forward to a new meditative instrumental release titled "Ocean Dreams" by Dean Evenson, a Christmas release titled "What Child Is This" featuring Singh Kaur, the vocalist on "Instruments Of Peace," and an international collaboration between acclaimed Soviet keyboardist Misha Alperin and Soviet-American saxophonist Keshavan Maslek.

A similar attitude prevails at **Sequoia Records**, Felton, Calif., where Dave and Steve Gordon prefer not to define new age by its instrumentation, rhythmic structure, dynamics or industry bin title. "New age music is basically music made by people who can draw on our spirit as human beings to get together and find a positive future," explains Dave. "It has that sort of positive approach to the dream of the future, that's what new age music is." Their next release will be a meditative recording by David & Steve emphasizing the natural environment, followed by the second release for their group **Solaria** with more upbeat material.

The most recent releases at **Real Music** in Sausalito, Calif. include "Feather Light" by Hilary Stagg and "Damacine" by Abacaxi. "We're getting back to what we call the heart of new age music," says label president Terrence Yallop, who feels that new age music has almost come full-cycle. "People are desperately tense and frustrated and they are looking for the really sensitive kind of music."

New age pioneer Nick Sutphen started making subliminal tapes for himself in 1969. By 1976 Sutphen began to share his product with the public and formed **Valley Of The Sun** in Los Angeles which started as a mail-order company. Since then the company has grown to include a line of music tapes, as well as audio and video hypnosis tapes, in addition to the subliminals. According to marketing director David Latsko, "our music line has increased kind of slowly, but recently we've started getting back into music and we just put out a new line of 12 different tapes in association with American Audio."

Spirit Music in Boulder, Colo., is a new-age label that specializes in the therapeutic uses of sound and music not as a tool for entertainment, but as a tool for "entrainment." According to label head Jonathan Goldman (also known as recording artist Lyghte), "entrainment is a phenomena of nature in which powerful vibrations of one object cause the less powerful vibrations of another object to lock in step. This is how we can use music to induce states of meditation and relaxation." Recording artist Don Campbell ("Crystal Rainbows") shares the distinction of being one of the label's top sellers with Rosie and Joe, two bottlenose dolphins ("Dolphin Dreams—A Delphonic Birthing Environment"), and the Gyume Tibetan Monks ("Tantric Harmonics"). Future plans include the release of "Dolphin Dreams" on CD and the reissue of an earlier track entitled "Hermetic Harmonics" as an extended-play cassette to create a "shamonic trancing environment."

Classical music is commonly known to have a calming effect on people. It is therefore not surprising that music with a classical orientation, sometimes referred to as neoclassical, is now surfacing in the new-age marketplace.

Sundown Records in Newbury Park, Calif. is an artist-owned label featuring renaissance-style guitar and harpsichord. In business for five years now, co-owners Gilbert Yslas and Richard Searles have released five recordings which have reached over a half million in combined sales to date. Following this year's release, "Dream Of The Troubadour," Yslas announced that they are planning two releases for next year.

Sugo in El Granada, Calif. is an artist-owned label of classical orientation, which until recently had no plans to record anyone except its owner, guitarist Stevan Pasero. Now, following the recent release of Pasero's "Guitar Masterpieces," which includes guitar transcriptions of Beethoven's Fifth and several original compositions, VP Jeremy Hale says that their next releases will include a folkloric jazz collaboration between Pasero and percussionist Christopher Bock, and a piano sampler featuring several keyboard artists.

New Albion claims to be neither a new-age label, nor a classical label, nor a jazz label. Some of their titles by artists such as David Hykes, Pauline Oliveros, or Stuart Dempster resemble modern composition in the classical tradition, or new age, or even new jazz. Label president Foster Reed explains, "We make works that somehow address the poetic imagination of this period in time. They do not relate to the marketing slots that dominate the industry. In other words, we're more interesting but less financially flush."

In direct contrast are those labels that use the term new age solely as a marketing tag. "It was a convenient tag that allowed customers to find our product, but it didn't really say anything about the music," says **Music West** director of operations & national sales Gary Chappell. Based in Larkspur, Calif., Music West is going to be "branching out," and plans for the promotion of their latest release, "The Great Wheel" by London-based James Asher, to include the album rock market. "It's still instrumental music, but it goes in a lot of different directions." Meanwhile it appears that Ray Lynch's latest release "No Blue Thing" will top the success of his "Deep Breakfast" recording. Earlier this year, Jim Chappell followed his own successful release "Dusk" with his first ensemble work titled "Living The Northern Summer." All four recordings are still riding the new-age charts.

Carol Davis, president of **Visual Musik**, Omaha, points out

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the double-edged sword inherent in the new-age marketing niche. All the product from indie labels such as Visual Musik usually gets put into one category, new age. "On one hand that can be a problem because a lot of people think of new age simply as transcendental music or, in more negative terms, music for the granola set," explains Davis. "On the other hand, before this new age niche emerged, retailers scattered our product throughout the store. Now I can walk into any retail outlet and almost always find my product in the new age section." Current and upcoming releases include "Incommunicado" by Zurich, and four music videos which Visual Musik will soon combine into their second full-length video release.

According to Hyman Katz, GM for **Sonic Atmospheres**, Sherman Oaks, Calif., "we're looking more at the music as a personal statement, and we are definitely expanding the limitations that a new-age stigma has, even including the way the music is marketed."

Marketing techniques at Sonic are much the same as for any pop artist, with posters, bin cards and independent promotion. Sonic Atmospheres is home to five new-age artists: Hiltzik & Greenwald, Michael Stearns, label owner Craig Huxley, and Don Harriss whose third album for Sonic, titled "Abacus Moon," came out this month.

For Steven Hill at **Hearts Of Space**, San Francisco, the key to indie survival in the new-age market is good distribution with realistic projections and expectations. "The independent distribution system, created completely out of grassroots response to the audience and the psychological function of the music, is still in place. It still works as long as you do not have delusions of grandeur and start spending money that you do not have and will never make. Quality is the only thing that survives." Constance Demby's "Set Free," Steve McDonald's U.S. debut, "Spinfield," and Robert Rich's "Rain Forest" are the latest quality releases from Hearts Of Space.

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Excitement and frustration go hand-in-hand when an independent alternative label begins to make inroads into the mainstream distribution system. "The biggest problem for an independent label is leverage," says Jim Moeller, president of **Serenity Records**, Upland, Calif. "In the mainstream market the indie does not have the leveraging power needed to get things done and to receive payment." Nevertheless it has been a good year for **Serenity**. Max Highstein's "Touch The Sky" was one of the most played albums in adult alternative radio's history. Recent releases include "Eternity" by the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra led by Shardad Rohani, and "Life at the Beach" by Gary Knox. Scheduled releases for later this year include a second symphony recording "The Winds Of Christmas," and a new-age/neoclassical release by Robert Whitesides Woo entitled "In The Light Of Love."

New age pioneer Steve Halpern, president of **Sound Rx and Halpern Sounds**, San Anselmo, Calif., foresees more blending of new age and pop. However, he feels distressed by his observation that many indies are "increasingly following the lead of the majors and going after the big-beat big-buck sale, rather than dealing with the integrity of the music." Halpern believes there are other ways to survive the current market glut and suggests being increasingly creative and tightening up existing procedures. "I find there is not enough timely followup on inventory checking, and there is a lot of room for new promotional ideas." Recent releases include "Gaia's Groove" by Halpern and Tony Selvage, and a compact disk version of Halpern's "Radiance:

Love Songs Without Words."

In the earlier days of **Silver Wave Records** in Boulder, Colo., their focus was on new-age music that crossed over into jazz. However, this Spring's electronic music release, "Mystic Waters" by Davol, and the recent acoustic release by Wind Machine titled "Rain Maiden," do not follow suit. Label head James Marienthal attributes the sales and charting successes of this year to "having a quality, not quantity, attitude. We're not trying to just put out more commercial sounding NAC-radio type music, and we have tried not to release too many things at once so each project is the best that it can be, top quality." Silver Wave's most current releases are Peter Kater's "Moments, Dreams & Visions: Original Soundtrack To Greenpeace Greatest Hits," and Steve Haun's "Midnight Echoes."

It was Native American flutist R. Carlos Nakai, who has helped to fuel the growth of **Canyon Records** in Phoenix and prompted its cross-over into the new-age market. Canyon, specializing in Native American music since 1951, signed Nakai about six years ago. The serenity of the solo Native American flute and mystical quality of the eaglebone whistle fit well into the relaxational and meditative sounds of authentic new age. When Nakai formed a group called Jackalope, Canyon crossed over once again, this time blending ethnic melodies and instruments with modern technology and urban styles. This November will bring a new Nakai release along with Canyon's first non-Native American release by guitarist William Eaton. Their first classical-oriented release, a con-

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certo for Native American flute and Orchestra by Prof. James DeMars from Arizona State Univ., will follow in January.

The **Nouveau** label from K-tel also shies away from the term new age. "Adult alternative music is for me the most satisfactory description because it's music, it's not teenage music, it's an older demographic and yet it's an alternative to the mainstream," explains Chuck Thagard, VP product development. "We wanted a label that if we found something out of the ordinary we'd have a place for it." A perfect example, slated for release by the end of the year, is a recording by Minneapolis singer/instrumentalist Tommy Wiggins entitled "Cool Saturdays." Celestial Navigations, the group who contemporized the art of storytelling by back-

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ing the spoken word with synthesizer music from the new age genre, will release "Chapter Two" later this year. Nouveau's latest electronic release is Bill Wolfer's "And It Rained All Through The Night."

Lloyd Barde, owner of **Backroads Distributors** and the **Shining Star** label, believes that being an independent is no longer a detriment. "We have managed to equalize the marketplace. Independents are no stronger or weaker, and releases by major labels and single artists are selling right next to each other without any regard for where they came from."