



An interview with Windham Hill's WILL ACKERMAN

by Jim Stiak

In 1976, Will Ackerman borrowed \$300 to produce the first record on the Windham Hill label—a collection of his guitar compositions. Last year, his company had sales of over \$30 million. Now with six albums to his credit,

Ackerman will be performing, along with Windham Hill artists Darol Anger, Barbara Higbie, Michael Manring, Mike Marshall and Phil Aaberg, at the Hult Center on February 28, in a benefit for the Oregon Natural Resources Council.

Between interviews and plane flights last week, Will and his "press agent," Otis Wollan, stopped by the Glenwood for some tea and conversation:

Jim: According to this information I've been given, Windham Hill has never had any failures, any releases that have lost money. What do you attribute that to?

Will: The marketing philosophy of Windham Hill is at odds with the industry in general. We didn't begin with any excess capital. Windham Hill Records was originally a hobby supported by my building houses.

Jim: You were a general contractor?

Will: Yeah, Otis and I used to build together in Grass Valley and Mendocino. We both dropped out of school when we lost our 25's. Now Stanford wants to give me a degree. First they told me to write a paper about Windham Hill 'cause it's an important life experience or something like that. Then I talked to their business school a couple times and basically told the kids to get the hell out while they could still think. And they said, just shut up and we'll send you a diploma.

Jim: Your head office is in Palo Alto?

Will: Windham Hill's office is there. Mine is in Sausalito, but I live in Vermont. Right now I'm trying to plant what I envision as a 14 to 18 acre apple orchard. Go into the apple cider-jelly business.

Jim: What problems did you encounter with Windham Hill's rapid success?

Will: Well, my blood pressure went

up to 120. As the tentacles went further and further out, I just had to back off. I was in the middle of what we call a board meeting, and things were going on and on and on, when suddenly I felt tremendously peaceful and got this big smile on my face and said, "I quit. I gotta go."

Jim: Do you perform much these days?

Will: Not much. We did do the summer tour, which was gruelling. Every time I go on stage my stomach's turning. Of course, once I get up there I love it, and I'll get off stage saying, "Let's do another one." Then a half hour later, it's like, oh, shh, I don't know if I want to do it.

Jim: How do you find inspiration for new songs?

Will: Who knows? I get up in the morning, go to work, talk to Shorty in the chainsaw department at Brown & Roberts. I've always regarded my own music as something purely avocational, just something I do when it happens. Producing and conceiving of new labels is what I do.

Jim: How do you choose new music, new artists?

Will: Certain decisions in this company have been made by walking out on the street and asking people, "Do you like this?" We have an official policy now that we're not accepting demo tapes, but in point of fact it's a lot of nonsense. We listen to maybe a thousand a week.

Otis: We've disposed of something like five cubic yards of demo tapes.

Jim: Windham Hill has branched out into videos recently?

Will: Yes, we've done four which were designed for Japan, they're called the *Other America* series. The average Japanese has as skewed an impression of America as we do of Japan. I travel there a lot now, and basically they know about L.A., New

York and money and Las Vegas. I wanted to show them something else. We were offered the opportunity to do the first audio/video laser discs in history, background video—basically nature scenes and music. We've since received a gold disc for sales.

We've also sent two crews to Tibet and China. That's more documentary, showing the aspects of Buddhism.

Jim: You also do films, such as *Atla*?

Will: We were involved in re-acquiring distribution for that. It was a way of entering the film business and learning how it works. Now there's no reason we can't make a good expensive film. We have the machinery, we have the knowledge, I'm just waiting for the right thing. I think I've learned the same thing I learned in the record business, that industry wisdom is a contradicting pair of words.

Jim: Like military intelligence?

Will: Exactly.

Jim: Do you do many benefit concerts?

Otis: The concert here is part of a series of seven. It's on the national forest policy. Fifty-five to 60 percent of every dollar that goes into the box is going right out into the field. Two-thirds of that goes to ONRC, and one-third to Friends of the Earth.

This business about the New Age, whatever you want to call it, sound being drivel that leads to soporific mush of the mind and some kind of neo-material yuppism is a lot of horseshit. Every one of these artists is totally committed to peaceful intentions, environmental sanity, cultural richness and heritage.

It's going to be a lot of fun. It's going to be over three hours long.

Will: I couldn't sit through a three hour show.

Otis: No one leaves without getting their money's worth.

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