

Soft Music: What a Grind

Will Ackerman invented the sound that someone else called 'new age,' but the song has come to an end. He says it's time for real talk, from real people.

By N. R. KLEINFELD

DUMMERSTON, Vt. — In the clotted woods that surround Imaginary Road, Will Ackerman prepared to cut down a dead tree. He had to. It was turning cold and he needed firewood.

There was a fall tang to the Vermont air, and the sky brimmed with luminous clouds. "I'm not sure if this pine will fall downhill or uphill," Mr. Ackerman said with little mortification. "So I would stay close to the base."

He slipped on protective earmuffs. The chain saw erupted. The tree tumbled downhill. "O.K.," he said. "We live."

Mornings go like this. Anyone who knows him realizes that Will Ackerman has a pathological craving for physical work. He got his start, after all, building houses. The records were unintentional.

Mr. Ackerman is a guitarist and the vaguest simulacrum of a record mogul. He burst into national prominence as the father of new-age music (a catchall term that repulses him) by virtue of Windham Hill records, the company that he founded in 1976 in his living room in Palo Alto, Calif., and that grew exponentially. Windham Hill's recordings became the lulling music that aging 60's rock fans munched seaweed to, read their tarot cards to, fell asleep to. Then Mr. Ackerman grew weary of the music, sold the company this year and now, at 42 years old, has begun a label with no music, just words.

The new spoken-word experiment, called Gang of Seven, released its first recording in May. Six more have followed. Little of it is exactly normal. People talk about having their cats euthanized, lament about being stiffed for \$10 by Miles Davis, report on the sculpture of the Normal Family in Normal, Ill., tell you that whales become beached because AM radio really depresses them.

This idea fits Will Ackerman, who has an impish streak. Once, a Japanese television crew traveled to Vermont to interview him. During their stay, they pressed him about who his teacher was. He mentioned his father, some professors. No, his teacher! They meant in the spiritual sense. "Oh," Mr. Ackerman said. "That's Shorty Forrest." He

nurse it through 24,000 more miles so it will have covered about the distance to the moon.

Wood seduced Mr. Ackerman. He became the apprentice of a Norwegian house builder and then, in 1977, went out on his own and formed Windham Hill Builders in Palo Alto. He imagined he would pound nails for the rest of his life.

But there was always the music. Since he was 12, Mr. Ackerman has fooled with the guitar. He began playing a tennis racket, then won a warped 12-string guitar in a bet. Among other things, he became the biggest Kingston Trio fan ever. He had a beatnik baby sitter, and she and Mr. Ackerman would steal out to attend the trio's concerts. He played moody folk-type music, then evolved into what some critics have called "boring guitar." He never learned to read music. Today, when he has an inspiration while away from home, he will call himself up and hum a melody into his answering machine so he can pursue it later.

He sawed and he played guitar. Friends urged him to cut a record. What he did was drop in at their homes and record his guitar playing directly into their tape decks, a slow distribution method. Finally, in 1975, he asked his ragtag audience for \$5 apiece to pay for a record. Once he had \$300, he went to a recording studio. The owner liked the music so much he didn't charge Mr. Ackerman.

He called the album "The Search for the Turtle's Navel." When Mr. Ackerman was a young boy, a friend offered him a modest sum of money to find a turtle's navel. "I looked at a lot of turtles," Mr. Ackerman said, "until someone clued me in that turtles don't have navels. Discouraging."

One day, a record distributor asked him, "So what's next on your label?" Next?

He asked his cousin, a fellow carpenter named Alex de Grassi, if he would like to record an album. He saw no reason not to. A

label was invented: Windham Hill. Anne Robinson, who would become his wife for a year, became his partner. The label's phone number was Mr. Ackerman's home number: (415) 329-0647. (Even though Windham Hill now has significant corporate offices, it still uses the old number.) Mr. Ackerman edited his business card to read, "Windham Hill Builders/Records/Music." He may have been the only general contractor in the country who would also sell you a record album.

HE brought out an album here, an album there. The music — chiefly gentle, ethereal and instrumental — was hard to classify. "It was easier to say what it wasn't," Mr. Ackerman said. "It wasn't classical. It wasn't rock. It wasn't jazz. It wasn't folk." Some critics said it was little more than Muzak.

By 1979, Mr. Ackerman found himself doing two jobs poorly. "I remember I had one remodel job and I was slow putting on the roof," he said, "and a rainstorm came and flooded the house and I had to replace the oak floor. That would not have happened if I weren't doing two jobs."

Despite his rapport with 2-by-4's, he elected to push music. In 1980, Windham Hill

released "Autumn," an album of piano playing by George Winston. It was the 12th Windham Hill release and the first that Rolling Stone magazine saw fit to review, in an adoring celebration. "That busted us out nationally," Mr. Ackerman said.

In 1983, a record distributing arrangement was secured from A & M Records, and Windham Hill took off. Some years, sales rose tenfold. The characteristic audience for the music was baby-boom yuppies who had deserted rock or had found that rock had deserted them. But there was no internal logic behind the music Windham Hill published.

"People later would write about how we did these sophisticated demographic analyses," Mr. Ackerman said. "Forget it. This was the most naive, most sincere experience. There was not a high-blown concept."

Someone looking to pigeonhole Windham Hill music conceived a handy term for it that quickly stuck: new age. Mr. Ackerman would love to meet the culprit. "If I ever find the person who coined it," Mr. Ackerman said, "I'll nail his forehead to the wall."

What irked him was that "new age" had echoes of communal living and a belief system. Letters actually flowed into Windham Hill from people who wanted to work the farms. "We weren't a commune," Mr. Ackerman said. "We were just a record label."

By the mid-1980's, big record companies

had caught the scent of new age and chased it. They started turning out new-age music — some of it miserable — and raided some Windham Hill stars. Mr. Ackerman admits he was doozy. "I got calls from our artists and they would say, look, I got offered this," he said. "I told them, hey, I'd go for that."

Through the late 1980's, the new-age genre was the fastest-growing segment of the music industry. Now, growth has slowed. Established stars continue to sell well, but it is difficult for an unknown new-age performer to find an audience.

Mr. Ackerman ran Windham Hill until 1986, when he decided he wanted to concentrate strictly on the label's creative direction. Anne Robinson became chief executive.

On a number of fronts, Mr. Ackerman was getting edgy. With its sales surpassing \$25 million, Windham Hill had become too corporate for him. New-age music had become stale to his ears. He became wary that the long new-age ride was ready to level off. So a jazz label and a vocalist label were added. Meanwhile, Mr. Ackerman immersed himself in building his house in Vermont.

IDEAS were still cooking. Two years ago, he went to Hawaii, where he owns land. While driving along the beach seeking waves to surf, he listened to four Garrison Keillor tapes. When he ran out, he went to Waldenbooks to buy other narrative tapes, but could find nothing but books on tape. "Few people write the same way they speak," he said. "I wanted first-person narratives. People used to take pleasure in banter and language. We've been bludgeoned into losing it. So I decided I wanted to do something where one human being was talking to another human being about his life."

He embarked on a lengthy trip across the country to take in storytelling festivals. Nothing seemed right. He jumped into a cab to go to the airport and the cabdriver began talking about law and order in Ghana. He switched on his tape recorder. This was what he wanted. "This was a person talking about his life," Mr. Ackerman said. "There was no artifice, no pretense."

Eventually, Mr. Ackerman journeyed 7,000 miles through 34 states, and



Kath Meyers/The New York Times



On Imaginary Road in Dummerston, Vt., above, Will Ackerman carries firewood for his home. Of new-age music, he said, "It doesn't work for me anymore, and I truly don't pay attention."

gave them directions to the Brown & Roberts hardware store in Brattleboro, where Shorty Forrett worked as a salesman. He had sold Mr. Ackerman all his chain saws. The Japanese crew spent 45 minutes interviewing Mr. Forrett. He told them a lot about chain saws.

Dummerston is near Brattleboro in southern Vermont. It is a picture-book town with neat clapboard houses and kill-for views. Will Ackerman divides his time between a roomy house he built here and Larkspur, Calif., where Gang of Seven is based. A ruddy man

He's driven
a lot of nails,
and he's driven
a lot of miles. But he's
lost the drive to lull.

of upper-medium height, he has straggly light hair, cool eyes and a lean frame.

To understand Gang of Seven, one must try to understand Will Ackerman. And good luck.

Version in his Gang of Seven biography: Mr. Ackerman is a German orphan, adopted as a young child by an American couple.

Version offered in a recent interview: "I was born in Swanson, Ohio, about four doors down from the train tracks. My father was in the Air Force and then opened up a small ice-cream stand. He ran into a man called Mr. Libby who wanted to start a glass company and asked my father about investing. He gave a modest amount of money that grew into a small fortune."

Or: Mr. Ackerman was born at the North Pole, the son of arctic explorers who hoped he would one day become a virologist in the Amazon basin. (Just a ridiculous guess.)

For reasons of his own, Mr. Ackerman refuses to delineate his life before the age of 12. He said the facts in his Gang of Seven biography are untrustworthy. As he puts it, "Everything about me before 12 years of age is mythopoetic."

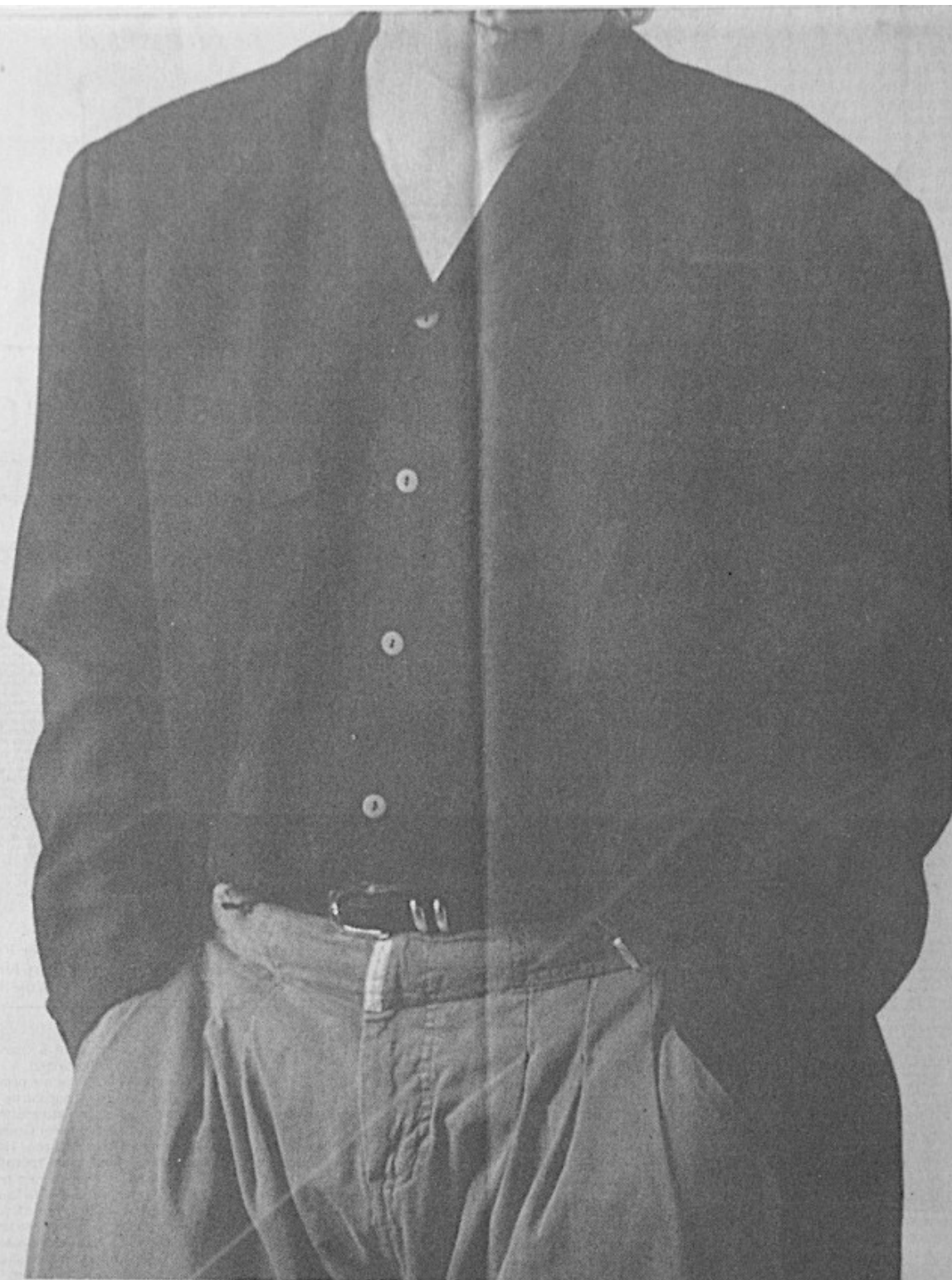
Why is it mythopoetic?

"It just is."

So, Mr. Ackerman refuses to confirm whether he was born in Germany or Uganda, at the North Pole or on Mars.

Once he turned 12, it gets easier. He confirms that his father, Robert Ackerman, was an English professor at Stanford University. Summers, the young Ackerman split wood and washed dishes at Windham Hill Farm in Vermont. He attended Stanford but dropped out in 1971. "I was writing a paper on comparative religion," he said, "and I couldn't squeeze one word out of my typewriter. I had some massive block."

He spent money intended for graduate school on a dark green Ford pickup that he still owns. It has 214,000 miles on it. The engine mounts have rusted away and the engine jounces around a lot. He wants to



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

ple had to say. A man in a small town in North Carolina told about how many years ago he went to New York, rented an apartment, went out to look for a job, couldn't find his apartment, boarded a train and went back to North Carolina. A woman told about how she was cleaning her motel units in Pennsylvania when a 14-inch fish fell out of the sky. Things like that.

Around this time, BMG, part of Bertelsmann A.G., the German conglomerate, came along offering "a bucket full of money" to buy Windham Hill, and in the spring Mr. Ackerman sold his stake.

To start off the new label, Mr. Ackerman wanted some recognizable names. So there is Spalding Gray, the monologist; comics like Rick Reynolds, and authors and commentators like Lynda Barry and Tom Bodett. There's also Hugh Gallagher, who is just 20 and seems to be an emerging comic force. Next year, Richard Stolley, the editorial director of Time magazine, will have a release in which he will chat about covering Marilyn Monroe's death and getting the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination. Later will come the cabdrivers and motel owners.

The new label — to be distributed in record stores and bookstores — may take some time to feel its way. "I went into some stores," Mr. Ackerman said, "and they said: 'O.K., great. I think we have a bin behind polkas of the world.'" On the other hand, Robert Olsen, the manager of the Tower Records store at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, said: "So far we're doing tremendous with them. I'd say they sell along the lines of a good classical recording."

Tom Bodett was on the phone. He lives in Homer, Alaska. How big will this Gang of Seven become? He said he was hoping really big because his voice on Motel 6 radio ads has led people to think of him as "kind of stupid, someone who can wax poetic on the weather and that's about it."

"This will help people realize I can speak in whole sentences," he said.

Hugh Gallagher was on the phone. He is a junior at New York University, studying dramatic writing. "I think this will be really interesting," he said. "As for me, I'm going to try to graduate college and then maybe I'll be a fireman."

Will Ackerman drove into Brattleboro and had lunch at the Back Side cafe. He ate a cheeseburger and had a glass of milk. He said he no longer listened to new-age music. "I don't think it's a cutting edge for new musicians anymore," he said. "It doesn't work for me anymore, and I truly don't pay attention."

With his own music, he has been playing recently with a young guitarist named Buckthead, whom he describes as a "screaming fast, metal, rock-and-roll guitarist."

"He's great!"

After lunch, he bought some tea and then ducked into Zanna, a women's clothing boutique, and bought two coats for his girlfriend. He fingered some of the other clothing. "Whenever I go into a woman's lingerie store or something, I get asked if I want a job," he said. "I am just so comfortable around women's clothing."

He got in the car to head home. The sky was drear. "This weather really gets to you," he said. He added that he planned to run. There was no music on the radio, none at all.