

## Will Ackerman Biography

Universally recognized as the preeminent pioneer in the new age music movement, and the founder of Windham Hill Records, Will Ackerman's career spans more than three decades of remarkable vision, single-minded determination, fervent business savvy, and "a thorough love of the mystery of making music." The glory years at Windham Hill with Ackerman at the helm launched the recording careers of an abundant list of acoustic instrumentalists, many of whom became household names. The primary influence Windham Hill cast on contemporary music over the last three decades of the 20th century emanated from folk roots, the acoustic guitar, and the piano. This legacy remains with Ackerman in a uniquely prolific and peerless career.

From a distance, Will's life is anything but ordinary. Yet upon closer examination, the strongest, most colorful threads in the fabric of who he is are traditionally held values and pursuits almost anyone would consider commonplace. The reality is Ackerman's success is predicated on doing traditional things untraditionally well.

Will lives on a large spread of land in Windham County, Vermont outside Brattleboro. There, on sprawling acreage among well-tended, expansive gardens sits a coterie of New England-style buildings collectively called The Compound. Amid the primary residence, the barn, the bakery, Screen House, The James, The Dream Garage, the potting shed and The Tower, stands Imaginary Road Studios, a three-story structure and state-of-the-art recording facility.

Along with Corin Nelsen, Imaginary Road's chief engineer, Will built the studios in the early 1990s after clearing the land; felling and milling the timber; then using the wood in the construction of the building, floors and finishings. The structural design was scratched out on the back of napkins over bottles of wine - no blueprints were ever drawn. In fact, there are no blueprints for any dwellings Ackerman builds.

In 1972 he founded Windham Hill Builders, the sister company that chronologically parallels Windham Hill Records. Of his 40-year career as a builder Will says, "The vision of completely constructed buildings is so tangible to me, formal plans aren't really necessary." His vision for Imaginary Road Studios was designed around the breathtaking scenery of the West River Valley in full view from the studio's core creating a naturally serene chamber for recording sessions.

The walls of Imaginary Road are lined with gold, platinum, and multi-platinum records representing the millions of albums sold when Windham Hill Records rose to prominence. The first of these is George Winston's 1980 solo piano release titled, Autumn. This album played a pivotal role in Ackerman's life on a wide continuum speaking to the beginning of his career and the transformation of Windham Hill Records from a cottage industry into a corporate giant; but ultimately to Ackerman's gifts as a producer. His ability to distinguish music that resonates on a deeply fundamental level with a wide variety of listeners has never wavered; it's only gotten better with age.

Imaginary Road Studios is a feverish hub of activity, with a revolving door of acoustic instrumentalists from across the country, and increasingly, from around the world. Piano and guitar continue to be the most popular solo instruments recorded and produced under Ackerman's direction; and a stable of studio musicians are frequently called in to add color, texture, and depth to projects filling an increasingly demanding production schedule.

Among others, cellist, Eugene Friesen; violinist, Steve Schuch; and Ugandan vocalist, Samite contributed to Dana Cunningham's third solo piano project. "While recording my recent album, The Color of Light, I was inspired and empowered to perform in ways that were truly thrilling," she writes from her home in Maine. "The excitement that pulses through Will's entire being when a piece is played from that true place - the shared energy in the room - is unforgettable."

If impresario seems too strong a word to describe the unique abilities Ackerman brings to the craft of music making, it isn't far off. It's his reputation and the impressive list of recording artists who continue to seek him out that gives him carte blanche in taking projects through layers of development resulting in beautifully produced volumes of work.

Pianist, Patrick Gorman of Boston, says, " With Will, it's about the music ...clear and simple. One might suspect that someone with his level of success and experience would convey an attitude that he has "heard it all." Yet somehow this could not be further from the truth. In direct contrast, he can be found sitting in the room, eyes closed and smiling with the knowledge that he hasn't."

The results do not go unnoticed as many Imaginary Road Studio projects become award-winning standouts among the 3,000 or so new age recordings released each year. In 2005, trumpet and flugelhorn player, Jeff Oster won Best Album of the Year, and Best Contemporary Instrumental of the Year in New Age Reporter Lifestyle Music Awards for his debut CD titled, Released. A single from this album, "At Last" won the 2005 Independent Music Award for Best New Age Song, which Oster co-wrote and recorded with Ackerman. Oster's sophomore release, True, again won Album of the Year and Best Contemporary Instrumental Album in the 2007 Lifestyle Music Awards from New Age Reporter. Adding to that success, "Saturn Calling" the first cut from True won the 2007 Independent Music Award for Best New Age Song. True achieved an unparalleled ranking with two of the three highest reporting numbers ever reported by radio to New Age Reporter in the No. 1 slot for two consecutive months. This CD has charted in the Top 50 for ten consecutive months, and the Top 100 for 12 consecutive months.

Solo pianist, Karen Marie Garrett released, It's About the Rose early in 2007. The CD was immediately named on the "Top Twelve List of Best Adult Contemporary Recordings of the Year." It's About the Rose was named Best Instrumental Piano Album in the 2007 New Age

Reporter Lifestyle Music Awards; and received the United Kingdom's Piano Heaven 2007 Gold Award. It's About the Rose held the No. 1 position on radio for three consecutive months. This album stayed on the Top 100 chart for 10 consecutive months.

Solo guitarist, Frank Smith won Best Instrumental Acoustic Album in the 2007 Lifestyle Music Awards from New Age Reporter in support of Gardens of Hope. From his home in Florida Frank has this to say of his experience. "Will was the guitarist who inspired me to begin my musical career and start writing my own music. No matter what relationship you have with Will, he is sure to change your life for the better."

Since the time he was 12 years old, music has played an essential role in Will's life, but he never intended to pursue it seriously. Folk music was a primary impetus and early influence. The Kingston Trio, Joan Baez, Leo Kottke, and John Fahey contributed greatly to Will's love for live acoustic music.

Will was 16 when he first discovered the music of Erik Satie (1866-1925), a major musical influence in Ackerman's life. The avant-garde French composer and pianist was a contemporary of Debussy, Ravel and Poulenc; and of the four, Satie was the most spare in his compositions. "While Ravel and Debussy were engaged in flowery romantic impressionism, Satie was like a Zen garden of simplicity," Will says. "Satie was, and still is unlike anything I've ever heard which is praise enough. His music is very brave. Stripped back and so essential, it haunts me."

Jim Baldwin, Will's prep school roommate, introduced him to open guitar tunings that later became the foundation for Ackerman's style of composition. Rick Smolan, who created the immensely popular, "Day in the Life" photography series for Time Life Books, was another prep school classmate responsible for taking the first photo of Will holding a guitar in 1967. Robbie Basho is credited with giving Will "the short version" of guitar lessons as a nice way of saying Will resisted learning to read music. Instead of forcing Will to learn theory, Basho put an emphasis on the emotional value of music. This is a lesson Ackerman apparently took to heart as he has always asserted, "Music, for me, is primarily an emotional experience rather than an intellectual endeavor."

Pursuing degrees in English and History from Stanford University, Will unexpectedly dropped out of school just five credits short of graduation and formed Windham Hill Builders in Santa Clara, California. Robert Ackerman, Will's dad, was an English professor at Stanford, and there was absolutely no question Will had been groomed for a life in academia. His sudden decision to become a carpenter was not only shocking, it was almost revolutionary. That he would pursue a physical trade as an occupation was a stunning and liberating turn of events that surprised everyone, including Will. "The idea of being trapped in an intellectual lifestyle before I had an opportunity to see what the world had to offer was more than a bit confining," he recalls. Windham Builders was a successful venture, and Will supervised and managed residential construction throughout the greater Palo Alto area, the Mendocino coastline, and Lake Tahoe.

During this time, he played music for Stanford University theater productions and developed a small audience who gathered for impromptu solo concerts in campus doorways and stairwells. The reflective nature of Will's instrumental music emerging in the post-Woodstock era, and just

prior to the heart thumping, electronic disco age was best captured in a Billboard review written years later. "The music of Will Ackerman has that timeless introspection that has made his music so enduring."

Will's instincts are so inherently acute; music history most definitely would have taken a different turn if his friends had not insisted he record *In Search of the Turtle's Navel*, in 1976. Those same people who gathered in acoustically reverberative spaces to hear him play on Stanford's campus gathered a \$300 collection of five-dollar bills to pay a session fee to record *Turtle's Navel*.

From the Palo Alto Yellow Pages, Will carefully combed through the listings until he scheduled recording sessions over two afternoons at Mantra Studios. Will tells the story of walking into the studio the first afternoon and passing a familiar looking guy in the hallway he chatted with briefly. "The gentleman was picking up a Christmas recording he'd made as a gift for family and friends." The man was Bing Crosby. Just as humble three decades after the brief exchange, Will asks, "Meeting Bing Crosby the first time you walk into a studio is pretty cool, don't you think?"

Ackerman intended his debut to be a limited run of 300 LPs, a notion fashioned somewhat after John Fahey's 1959 debut, *Blind Joe Death*, a limited edition of 95 copies. Through the efforts of Will's childhood friend, Michael Kilmartin, *Turtle's Navel* received heavy airplay on Seattle radio station, KZAM prompting Ackerman's first paid performance; and perhaps more importantly, the first new age concert. At the height of the disco era, 3,700 people attended Ackerman's solo guitar performance in the Seattle Opera House.

The unconventional success of *Turtle's Navel* laid the foundation for what would lie ahead. Windham Hill Records quickly became the consummate business model for the independent record business with other major labels attempting to capitalize on the overarching, multi-million dollar success Ackerman achieved through sheer determination and true grit. Windham Hill was David to the recording industry's Goliath. At every turn the industry smugly implied something couldn't or shouldn't be done, Ackerman made sure it happened his way, on his terms.

There is a story written somewhere about Ackerman meeting with Winston in the late 1970s to discuss a recording project for Windham Hill a few years after Winston's debut *Ballads and Blues*, on John Fahey's Takoma Records went unnoticed. Winston and Ackerman were negotiating a slack key guitar recording after a year of correspondence. At the end of the day, Ackerman ended up bunking on Winston's couch; and George asked if he could play some piano music before heading off to sleep. Ackerman instantly realized he'd heard folk piano for the first time; or what Winston now calls "rural folk piano". Ackerman immediately dismissed the idea for the guitar recording in favor of *Autumn*, an idea that took some compromise before the two agreed.

Ackerman's instincts were flawless and he produced *Autumn* which exploded onto the national scene after a review by Charles Young appeared in *Rolling Stone* magazine. *Autumn* reached multi-platinum status, and remained the top-selling title in the Windham Hill catalog for many years. Winston's *December and Winter into Spring* were produced by Ackerman as well, and received RIAA-certified platinum status selling over a million copies each.

Windham Hill's breakthrough success with Winston led to an international distribution deal through A&M Records exposing Windham Hill to the global music market. Japan became the most significant overseas market and the largest contributor to a striking number of gold and platinum-certified recordings abroad. These developments opened the door for Windham Hill artists to enjoy the privilege of Asian and European tours.

Will discovered another monster talent in acoustic guitarist, Michael Hedges, at the Varsity Theater, a Palo Alto cafe. Urban legend has it Ackerman immediately jotted out a recording contract on a paper napkin so impressed with what he'd heard. *Breakfast in the Field* (1981) and *Aerial Boundaries* (1984) both produced by Ackerman, are considered milestone recordings for acoustic guitar. *Aerial Boundaries* was nominated for a Grammy Award - a first for Hedges, and for Windham Hill as well. That Michael's music was organic, his own utterly free, genre-defying style is what Ackerman's brand has come to stand for.

In 1984, Ackerman contributed to the original soundtrack for the film *Country* starring Jessica Lange and Sam Shepard. Critic William Ruhlmann wrote, "Charles Gross composed and conducted this score, but it's played by several of the new age artists from Windham Hill Records, notably pianist George Winston, whose distinctive piano playing actually dominates the proceedings."

In the midst of Winston and Hedges' whirlwind success Ackerman created the extraordinarily popular Windham Hill Samplers, full-length recordings with tracks from various artists. He is also credited with the creation of the Windham Hill Winter Solstice series, the first of which was released in 1985. This LP reached platinum status and received the label's second Grammy nomination. The Winter Solstice concept turned into a perennially favorite national concert tour featuring a wide range of performing artists. The term winter solstice became the non-secular holiday mantra for a wide variety of new age recording artists outside the Windham Hill label.

Michael Hedges, pianist Philip Aaburg, and Ackerman created the soundtrack for the 1986 biopic, *Because It's There, The Naomi Uemura Story*, a Tora Tora film. This Japanese award-winning film documented the life of Naomi Uemura, an adventurer who climbed Mt. Everest, and was the first climber to make a solo trip to the North Pole.

Throughout this timeframe, Ackerman wore every conceivable hat a maverick record label exec could possibly imagine donning. Among his noted responsibilities were envisaging and developing the label's concept; heading up the A&R department; directing all PR and radio promotion for the label roster; personally overseeing the distinct graphic design for each album cover, a featured trademark of Windham Hill releases; and producing every single album for the first five years of the label's existence. Cumulatively Ackerman's work resulted in Windham Hill having record bins in every major record store across the United States, a marketing coup that branded the label, not the genre.

Sony approached the label in the early 1980s leading Windham Hill to become the first independent record label to record digitally. Windham Hill Records and Ackerman became co-producers of the first national (and perhaps the first global) digital radio simulcast, on San Francisco's KQED-FM. Thereafter, Ackerman negotiated a joint venture with Paramount Home Video and Pioneer Laser Disc netting some of the earliest experiments with digital soundtracks resulting in Gold Laser Disc Awards from Japan.

Under Ackerman's tutelage, Windham Hill Records became a leading brand of distinction, an unprecedented accomplishment for an independent label. Will was invited to lecture at the business schools of Harvard, Yale and Stanford. He taught independent seminars on the basic principles of the recording industry, as well as classes at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York

The minimalism and innocence Ackerman intended to capture in the work he produced at Windham Hill resounded worldwide. However, there is nothing simple or innocent about being a corporate executive in a global market. The opposing forces of basic business values, like handshake deals versus complex corporate dynamics became apparent one day as Will left a lunch meeting in Palo Alto. Stopped at a light Will saw a young vibrant woman on a bicycle across the street who met his gaze with meaningful derision. "I had just pulled away from a very nice restaurant, in a very nice car, wearing a very expensive suit. In an extraordinarily brief moment, this woman made me aware I'd sold out on what I really wanted, and who I really was. Before long I sold everything - the house, the cars, the company." In short order, Ackerman left Windham Hill, and eventually he sold his controlling interest to the German conglomerate BMG in May 1992. Ackerman retains the entire publishing catalog he amassed between 1976 and 1992.

Leaving California behind, Ackerman drove cross-country to Windham County, Vermont, a place that captured his heart two decades earlier while attending boarding school in western Massachusetts. Driving his 1972 Ford half-ton truck, resurrected from his days with Windham Hill Builders, and the only vehicle he used for several years thereafter, Will spent his time getting back to basics. Hard physical work was an antidote he had relied on many times in his life as a remedy to heal a weary spirit. Ackerman took the opportunity to reinvent himself on his own terms, working each and every day toward a more organic approach to living.

Over the next several years, a variety of creative ventures evolved incorporating an element rarely, if ever used in Ackerman's work: the human voice. Will produced the work of John Gorka and Patty Larkin on a new imprint of Windham Hill, High Street Records. The folk sensibilities Ackerman unveiled and polished while producing new age music was a shrewd match for singer/songwriters in the new folk movement. A little later, a non-compete clause in the final sale of Windham Hill Records restricted Ackerman from producing music that might impede the efforts of the very label he'd so successfully created. He hand picked six employees from the staff of Windham Hill and formed a spoken word record label called the Gang of Seven. Featuring projects with Lynda Barry, Wally Shawn, Hugh Gallagher, Tom Bodett, and the late Spaulding Gray, Ackerman set out to produce a series of monologues from known entities combined with a Blue Highways-styled format. The Gang of Seven traveled cross-country off the interstates, recording stories from rural America as an entrepreneurial venture that curiously did not achieve the immediate success Windham Hill Records amassed in its formative years.

Among his many accomplishments, Ackerman is a beloved, Grammy Award-winning recording artist with twelve recordings in his discography. Since his debut in 1976, Will released a new album about once every two to three years until 1992. The next three consecutive releases, *Sound of Wind Driven Rain* (1998), *Hearing Voices* (2001), and *Returning* (2004) were all nominated for Grammy Awards in the New Age category. On February 13, 2005, *Returning* won the Best New Age Grammy Award.



He writes, "Returning was an opportunity to capture my career as I hope it will be remembered. These are new recordings of my favorite pieces spanning 35 years of music writing. Over years of performing these pieces, they've evolved nuance that was invisible to me then. I honestly had to make this record for myself...the Grammy Award only proved to me that it had worked for others as well."

Will's Grammy sits beside the Grammy awarded to Corin Nelsen as co-producer of Returning. The symbolic gramophones sit on a cherry windowsill inside Imaginary Road Studios, encircled by a vine of ivy just outside the window.

Will's latest recording titled, Meditations, released in 2008, on Compass Productions and is distributed exclusively through Target. In July 2008, Meditations charted at No. 1 with the second highest reporting numbers ever recorded by New Age Reporter. This milestone is superceded only by Jeff Oster's True, which Ackerman produced.

**Personal Data:**

Will was born November 16, 1949, in Palo Alto, California, the adopted son of Robert and Mary Ackerman. From 1964 to 1967 Will attended Northfield Mount Hermon School, a private college prep school in western Massachusetts where he was a competitive swimmer, and a poet. He majored in English and History at Stanford University before founding his general contracting firm, Windham Hill Builders in 1972, and Windham Hill Records in 1976.

<http://williamackerman.com>