

ARTISTS

William Ackerman, *acoustic steel string guitars*
Alex de Grassi, *acoustic steel string guitars*
Barbara Higbie, *piano, violin, voice, and guitar*
Todd Boston, *acoustic guitar*
Mia Pixly, *cello*

PROGRAM

A winter solstice concert featuring Windham Hill artists William Ackerman, Alex de Grassi, Barbara Higbie, and special guests.

Tonight's program will be announced from the stage and will be performed with one intermission.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Guitarists William Ackerman and Alex de Grassi and pianist/multi-instrumentalist Barbara Higbie honor the season with a concert of original and traditional acoustic music drawn from the multiplatinum selling Winter Solstice series as well as their many solo releases. William Ackerman founded Windham Hill Records in Palo Alto in 1975. The label's audiophile recordings were a run- away success with critics and audiences alike. Musicians including Michael Hedges, George Winston, Will Ackerman, Alex de Grassi, Barbara Higbie and Darol Anger and their group Montreux, Liz Story, Mark Isham, and Tuck and Patty quickly became internationally recognized. The name "Windham Hill" became synonymous with the best in acoustic music in the 1980s and 90s. Windham Hill's 10 Winter Solstice compilation recordings, selling in the many millions, "changed people's conceptions of seasonal music" (John Diliberto/Echoes radio show host). Tonight's concert celebrates the 30th Anniversary of the first Winter Solstice recording.

William Ackerman is a multiple Grammy Award-winning guitarist/composer/record producer and the 2013 winner of the Lifetime Achievement Award at the ZMR Music Awards. His impact on instrumental music in the last 40 years is unparalleled. Carpentry and building were Ackerman's first profession and the name Windham Hill (after an important place from his adolescence in Vermont) was borrowed from his building company so that originally his business card read "Windham Hill Builders/Records/Music (BMI)."

Will and his cousin Alex de Grassi toured Germany in 1979. While there, Ackerman began playing a cassette of piano music for those he met. This was the demo tape from a pianist named George Winston. Will continued as the sole producer for Windham Hill with George Winston's Autumn, which was released in 1980 and immediately garnered a four-star review from Rolling Stone magazine. To this day, Ackerman continues to produce 10 recordings a year. His productions have enjoyed more number one positions on the NAR/ZONE radio charts than any producer in the history of the genre. In 2012, Ackerman produced and released a CD entitled The Gathering: A New Generation of Musicians. The CD included the work of 22 musicians that he had produced and introduced; a collection of brilliant new music and musicians. The Gathering won Best Contemporary Instrumental Album and Album of the Year awards in 2012. Speaking from his recording studio in hills of Vermont, he remembered:

"I grew up in Palo Alto, where my father was an Old English philologist at Stanford. I was a student there from 1967 to 1971. The birth of Windham Hill was arguably in an archway near the old student union, where I would play simply because of the reverberating sound. Friends who loved the music raised \$300 in \$5 bills for me to record my first album, In Search of the Turtle's Navel, at Mantra Studios. I recorded it in two afternoons, heart pounding through my chest. Windham Hill Records grew from that very first recording to a large record company in just a few years. Alex DeGrassi, George Winston, Michael Hedges, Shadowfax and Darol Anger/ Barbara Higbie, were among the early artists. My cousin, Alex de Grassi and I grew up around the corner from each other in Palo Alto, CA. Before 2015, I hadn't been onstage with Alex for years. Sharing the stage with him again is a true homecoming."

Alex De Grassi is a Grammy-nominated, internationally recognized pioneer of the acoustic steel string guitar. His 35 years of touring include performances at Carnegie Hall, the Montreux Jazz Festival, and the Bath International Guitar Festival. New York Guitar Festival Director David Spelman says "Alex de Grassi is a treasure...his technical wizardry as well as his vibrant and poetic music making make him one of the most distinctive steel-string guitarists performing today." His 1978 recording, Turning: Turning Back (cited by Acoustic Guitar magazine among its top-ten essential finger-style guitar recordings, and his recordings Slow Circle (1979), Southern Exposure (1984), and the Grammy-nominated The Water Garden (1998) are considered classics of the genre. His most recent solo recording, Now and Then: Folksongs for the 21st Century, features his contemporary take on traditional folk songs. In 2006 De Grassi was cocommissioned by String Letter Publishing (Acoustic Guitar magazine), along with violinist Jeremy Cohen, to compose and perform Three Themes for Guitar and Strings at Herbst Theatre. Now residing near Ukiah, De Grassi also remembers the beginnings of the label:

"I was born in Japan in 1952, my family moved in 1954 to Palo Alto, where I grew up. I graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in economic geography. My grandfather, Antonio de Grassi, was a native of Trieste, Italy, a violinist with the San Francisco Symphony, had his own string quartet, and taught at UC Berkeley. My father was raised in San Francisco, won a state classical piano competition as a teenager. My first cousin Will Ackerman and I were close growing up but had a long period with very little communication when Will went to prep school on the east coast. It was quite a surprise a few years later to learn that we were both composing and performing music for solo steel-string guitar. It was only natural that I should follow in his footsteps, recording my music (1977) on his fledgling label, Windham Hill Records. We toured together extensively in Europe and the U.S. It's a pleasure to share the stage again with my cousin."

Barbara Higbie is a Grammy-nominated, Grammy Award-winning pianist/composer/ singer-songwriter as well as a championship fiddler. The Los Angeles Times described her music as "a ray of bright sunlight," and the San Francisco Chronicle calls her "full of life and brilliant in her playing, the most exciting musician we've heard." In addition to being the first female instrumentalist on the Windham Hill label, Higbie has appeared with musicians as different as Santana, Bonnie Raitt, the Kronos Quartet, Milton Nascimento, and Spyro Gyra, recording on over 100 CDs. In 2011, Barbara was the first-ever artist-in-residence at the prestigious Jazz Club Yoshi's. A graduate of Mills College (where she was a student of Terry Riley's) and the recipient of a Watson Fellowship, she collected traditional music throughout West Africa. At 23, Higbie recorded her Windham Hill 1982 duo release Tideline with violinist Darol Anger, which garnered a four-star review in *Downbeat* magazine. In 1984, she co- led a group with Anger including Mike Marshall, Andy Narell, and Todd Phillips to record *Live at Montreux*. The group became the Montreux Band (with Anger, Marshall, and Michael Manning) and toured internationally for 12 years. Higbie's composition "To Be" became a radio staple of the 1980s, a TV theme song in Italy, and a video with heavy rotation on VH1. Her early Windham Hill titles have recently been reissued on Adventure Music. Higbie's solo work has made the top ten lists of the Washington Post and *Performing Songwriter* magazine. The most recent of her six solo releases, Scenes from Life, was recorded in 2014 at Lucasfilm's Skywalker Sound. Higbie recalls:

"When I first met Will Ackerman in 1981, it felt like I'd encountered a human cyclone. Before we knew it, Will was leading the charge and it seemed the whole world was following. I recall truly breathtaking concerts at Davies Symphony Hall, the Montreux Jazz Festival, in a castle in Italy, and in a grand palace in Stockholm."

Joining Ackerman, de Grassi, and Higbie tonight are two acclaimed instrumentalists: guitarist Todd Boston and cellist Mia Pixley.

Todd Boston represents the new generation of steel string guitarists. His album *Touched by the Sun*, produced with Will Ackerman, was named Best Acoustic Instrumental Album of the Year at the 2012 ZMR Music Awards and charted number one on the World/New Age listening charts. In 2013, Boston, an in-demand producer as well as a composer/ performer, collaborated on Peter Kater's Grammy-nominated album *Illumination*. He spent 2012-2013 touring with singer Snatam Kaur as a member of her band. He has worked with Snatam Kaur, Ramesh Kannan (world-renowned percussionist), Tony Levin (legendary bassist for Peter Gabriel), Charlie Bisharat (Grammy-winning violinist), Je Haynes (Grammy-winning percussionist), Eugene Friesen (Grammy-winning cellist), Deva Premal and Miten, Manose, Tina Malia, Shimshai, Donna De Lory, and Suzanne Sterling and has performed at prominent festivals such as the Wanderlust Festival Vermont and California, Earthdance, Harmony, and the 2007 Mac Conference. Todd Boston's training included studying North Indian classical music with the late great maestro Ali Akbar Khan.

The newest member of the Winter Solstice ensemble is cellist, **Mia Pixley**. A native of Austin, TX and graduate of both New York's Columbia University and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Pixley has worked and studied with such stars as Fantastic Negrito, Meredith Monk, Mark Summer and Anssi Karttunen. She has performed in Off-Broadway shows, in the SFCM Orchestra and the Trio Mosaique chamber ensemble. Mia, under the solo project name "Baeilou" recently released her first critically acclaimed solo EP entitled Inside Under, "[a] captivating sliver of baroque jazz both fresh and original." (*Songwriting Magazine*) Always an effervescent and en pointe ensemble player, Pixley is an up and coming star who adds the dimension of a strong solo artist to her group performances. "Taking the cello to new and exciting places." (*The Bay Bridged*)

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