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# NEW AGE HITS MIDDLE AGE

CONFRONTING THE BETRAYAL OF NOBLE IDEALS

BY BOB DOERSCHUK

**B**ORN INSIDE A PYRAMID ONE brilliant moonlit night. Raised in a geodesic dome by a master of the holistic arts. Tutored by holy men in saffron robes. Friend to victims of linear tyranny on Earth. Fellow traveller with spirits who ride the astral winds. And chief accompanist to the celestial chorus, whose voices blend in hymns to the eternal order.

He's Captain Forever. And he's pissed off.

Perched on a Himalayan peak, on the lip of his favorite cave retreat, he scans the horizons. Shadows blanket the landscape, cast not by mountains but by the evil intentions of those who have betrayed his hopes. Only a year or two ago, patches of light shone in valleys below, glimmering like tiny sunrises at the end of a fearful night. But now the lights are flickering out. Mankind has shut out the dawn, preferring to live in darkness.

Captain Forever hunches against the icy winds. Optimistic bird samples peep from the meditation chamber in his cave, accompanied by soothing string washes from Freddie, his loyal sequencer. But our hero is deafened by the storm raging outside, and by the cruel howls of rejection that rings in his ears.

Over and over, in interview after interview, his former disciples have insisted to countless predatory journalists, "Me? A new age musician? No way, man!" Their voices were panicky, as if the press had accused them of kicking little dogs. "Hell, no! I'm a Contemporary Adult Instrumentalist."

Squinting back his tears, Captain Forever remembers when new age meant exactly that . . . A new age. New possibilities, not just in music, but in life. No more

fear. No more war. No more bebop runs or flat 9th chords. Humanity would drift toward enlightenment on clouds of synthesized fifths, or float heavenward amidst pentatonic chimes, whose tinkling would sparkle like soft rain amidst the silence of the spheres.

It seemed like a perfect tonic for an ailing planet. After surviving drugs, Vietnam, and the trauma of lost innocence, an entire generation was staggering toward adulthood, desperate for healing. Their cries moved Captain Forever, whose compassion animated the music of Tony Scott, Steven Halpern, Paul Horn, Kitaro, and George Winston. The music became a movement, beginning as a ripple, gently stirring shoppers in health food stores and book shops. Gradually it rose to a higher tide, lapping the summit of Windham Hill, coursing down the aisles of mainstream record stores and cresting on dozens of radio playlists. Suddenly, America was listening. Soothing itself in warm showers of sound. Tapping its feet to the beat . . .

That's when Captain Forever noticed that something was wrong. Somehow, when he wasn't looking, some of his followers had slipped a beat into the music. Nothing too heavy, of course. As Dick Clark might have observed, you could still massage to it. But there it was. Four beats, cycling by. Timelessness abandoned; time straitjacketed into 16-bar packages. Drum machine backbeats. Perky sequences. Hummable melodies.

Inevitably, the audience also began changing. No more harmonic convergences. Now they were hitting the freeways, racing traffic to the pulsing harp of Andreas Vollenweider. Power lurching after racquetball with Shadowfax jamming

in the background. Calling it a night in the glow of New Visions over VH-1.

A blight swept the land as musicians and listeners denied the dream together: "Me? A new ager? Hey, man, do I look like a fruitcake to you? Who do you think I am?"

No, sighs Captain Forever as he turns and trudges back to his cave. The question is: What might you have become?

**A**LTHOUGH NEW AGE MUSIC HAS arrived, it has also departed. No longer the province of a few off-beat initiates, it has become big business. More than \$100 million per year is spent on albums categorized as new age. More than a decade ago, Will Ackerman founded Windham Hill, the label most frequently identified with this style, for \$300. Last year, this same label grossed \$25 million—between 15 and 20 percent of the money earned by its distributor, A&M. A radio program with a new age playlist, *Music From The Hearts Of Space*, is heard on 244 stations. Other stations have jettisoned Top 40 or AOR formats altogether, to concentrate exclusively on new age.

So new age is happening. It's now. And, for that very reason, it's not new age anymore. Unlike most styles recognized by the Grammy gurus, new age and the music industry don't mix at the most basic philosophical levels. Classical music rests on Western concepts of order and control; rock and jazz infuse these concepts with neo-African exultation. Pop music as a whole is about celebrating one system or another. The successes of Journey, David Sanborn, and each new wave of piano

STAGGERED BY THE COMMERCIALOID'S FURY, THE CAPTAIN REELS.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY FEEFF



competition winners testify to the health of our culture's musical and cultural machinery.

Not so with new age. Back in 1964, when Tony Scott released *Music For Zen Meditation*, he was saying, in effect, "We live in times so twisted that we need to escape them for our own good. We need music that doesn't catapult you up and down predictable structures. In a society that emphasizes competition, this album is passive. Rather than try to carve each other like bloodthirsty boppers, these musicians improvise cooperatively. They prefer a peaceful stasis to a headlong scramble from cadence to cadence."

*Music For Zen Meditation* was subversive. It existed because Scott saw problems at the root of Western society, and concluded that music could help listeners deal with them only by going outside of our system of artistic and ethical values. Like the minimalists, who followed a curiously parallel path, the new age pioneers defined themselves in terms of what was wrong with their world, and what they could do to fix things up.

Steven Halpern, one of the most

influential leaders of the early new age movement, explained his musical approach in a recent issue of *Prevention*: "The foundation of Western music, especially classical, is one of tension and release. As a passage steadily builds in intensity, your anticipation level builds with it. You're waiting for the big payoff, the release. But when the climax finally comes, the tension starts building all over again . . . at a higher level."

Halpern's solution was to create a new type of music, free of the stress that's built into even the most mellow mainstream

styles. Implicit in his exploration was a criticism of Western beliefs, at least as far as using music to heal fractured psyches is concerned. Though these ideas appealed to many people, others took umbrage at suggestions that their values were bankrupt, and possibly even harmful.

Though Halpern is a significant figure in new age music, he was hardly the first to ruffle the establishment's feathers. While he was performing before projections of mandalas in the San Francisco Bay area during the mid-'70s, a German composer/synthesist named Peter Michael Hamel

## NEW AGE

was attacking Western preconceptions in his influential book, *Through Music To The Self*. Hamel's defense of drugs, including LSD, as catalysts to musical mind expansion only made the proto-new age movement more controversial:

"The musical LSD trip was able to help many a previously mindless note-spinner to achieve a pitch of self-knowledge that was to influence his whole subsequent output. A prolonged note would be heard across a new and much greater range of overtones. . . . Suffused by an overpowering sense of joy, one could submerge oneself in one's music, experience a grace and an almost holy awe. With other musicians one felt a marvelous oneness, while retaining nevertheless the feeling of one's own identity amidst the whole. This experience, which one could almost call mystical, culminated in spontaneous, deep insights into the relationship of man to the world of sounds."

In the past decade, since the appearance of Hamel's book, psychedelics have lost their allure. But the new age movement continues to bear a stigma. Like the fabled hippies of the '60s, its adherents pursue meaning outside of rationality. Their quasi-mystical doctrines draw potshots from nightclub comics and Christian apocalypticists. And their music, with its resolute simplicity and invitation to pas-

sivity, still drives critics—and unconverted musicians—crazy.

In analyzing George Winston's new age piano style, Keith Jarrett said in *Musician*, "The implications of his music are interesting, because it's used for meditating, for relaxing, for falling asleep, for having conversations during—the exact opposite of my reasons for playing. If someone can fall asleep or meditate while the music is going on, to me that's spiritually not right."

Yet many new age devotees cite Jarrett's solo piano improvisations as milestones in the development of their musical consciousness. Though Jarrett may bristle, his *Köln Concert* and many other '70s-vintage ECM albums have surfaced on new age playlists. So have Tomita's electronic variations on Western classical themes. And pop hits, including Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. And Philip Glass' busy minimalist adventures. Even John Coltrane's late free improvisations have been appropriated by some more creative new age programmers.

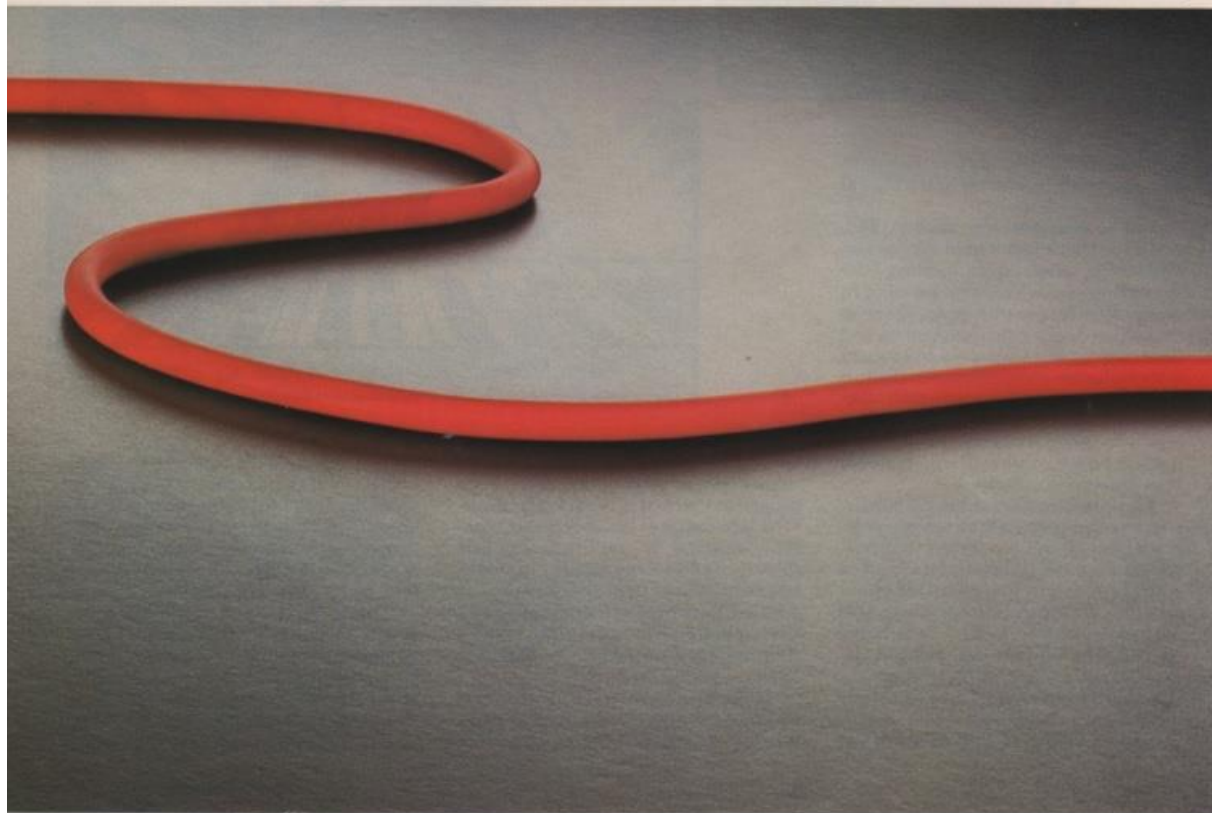
So what gives? What is new age music, anyway? Can we define it in musical terms? Is it simply a gimmick hatched by the industry's marketing wizards? Or does it boil down to something more ephemeral—spiritual essence, say, or the performer's method, or the positive ion count in the recording studio?

In tracking down a definition of new

age music, we thought we'd start, logically enough, with *The New Age Dictionary*, published in 1976 and now out of print. Here, we learned that new age is "a movement devoted to making Earth a happy place to live, of Sufis, yogis, shamans, native Americans, macrobiotics, Theosophists, organic farmers, peace activists, environmentalists, alternative energy people, particle physicists, radical educators, holistic healers, human potentialists, psychotronics and physical investigators . . ." Not a word about whether 16-bar structure or diatonic harmony fits into the scheme.

So we took the next best step, and checked out what some of the musicians identified with the movement had to say. Unfortunately, though much of what we encountered evoked vivid images, it left us equally unenlightened: George Winston talks about "sound incense." Eddie Jobson, whose solo piano recordings on Private Music earn him a place on new age playlists, suggests that this style is a "sound-track for the movie of the mind." Andreas Vollenweider, winner of the first Grammy for Best New Age Recording, calls it "space to work with, space to use, space with no danger. With this music, you can build a bridge between conscious and subconscious."

Hmmm. Not much to work with here. Maybe Captain Forever, or a musicology doctoral candidate in search of a disserta-



tion, could straighten all this out. Until we hear from them, however, our vote for the most authoritative view of the subject goes to Suzanne Doucet, president of Beyond Records, founder of the New Age Music Network, owner of the Only New Age Music store in Hollywood, and an outspoken enthusiast for this style.

"First of all, new age music is instrumental," she insists. "This is because instrumental music bypasses the intellectual center, going directly to the right half of the brain, which is more intuitive and imaginative than the left half. It has something in common with jazz, in that both styles are improvisational. But jazz is not designed to relax; instead, it builds up tension toward a climax. New age music is the opposite. It relaxes and heals. You can expand your consciousness by listening."

Doucet adds that the phenomenal success of this style has triggered a crisis. In a recent issue of *Billboard*, she warned that "the popularity of new age music presents quite a paradox. The irony of the push for its economic success becomes apparent when one examines its original purpose, which is to slow down the listener, to relax, balance, and heal. . . . In direct contrast, almost every success-oriented business, including the music industry, operates by overstimulating and exciting the intellect and the senses, focusing on performance and personality, concerning itself with numbers rather than quality. New age

music, now a major part of the music industry, has become subject to the disease it was trying to heal."

In Doucet's view, the impact of new

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age on pop music must therefore be analyzed in spiritual as well as musical terms. But, she acknowledges, the commercial corruption of the new age theology also brings musicians face-to-face with eco-

nomie questions. "If you don't have a well-defined product, you cannot do the right marketing," Doucet insists. "All the major companies who are distributing new age labels are frustrated because the music is not selling as well as they wanted it to. The major mistake they made is in marketing. You can't market real new age like pop music or jazz or classical."

Stephen Hill, host of the radio program *Music From The Hearts Of Space*, agrees that the interests of new age purists and music industry hustlers seldom intersect. "One of the healthy things about the new age genre is that it took the emphasis off of the virtuoso tradition in music," he points out. "But as soon as you get record companies trying to maximize their sales by pumping up their artists and sending them out for live performances, you're back to virtuosity, performance values, charisma, and all that other stuff that focuses on the individual artist. Although some incredibly fine work is still being done, there has been a dilution of the original intentions."

It's happened before: Songs sung to spark rebellion are now co-opted for the greater glory of selling beer or shoes. But the growth of adult contemporary music is perhaps an even greater misfortune. Ripping off new age is like taking a balloon from a child. Musical devices once embraced by visionary innocents as tools of self-discovery have been cynically seized by fading superstars scrambling for air



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