

CURE FOR A HARD-ROCK HEADACHE

by Ben King Jr.

If you called Dr. Steven Halpern and told him you weren't feeling well, chances are his prescription would run along the lines of, "Listen to two records and call me in the morning."

Halpern doesn't have a medical degree. His doctorate is in the psychology of music and, as it turns out, a lot of people have heard his musical prescriptions — a series of records he has released during the past 10 years featuring music meant to relax the listener.

Danceable rhythms and catchy melodies are not a priority with Halpern. The idea behind his early instrumental releases, such as "Spectrum Suite," was that certain types of music, played in a distinct way, could actually have an effect on different parts of the body.

"My background includes a lot of state-of-the-art physics. As a part of my studies it became obvious that everything is related to vibrations. So it seemed like there was an obvious connection between musical tones and their effect on the body. It just so happens that different areas of the body react to these vibrations of the airwaves," says Halpern.

Cynics would say Halpern's idea is just another gimmick to help sell records, a gimmick in the league with the early Beatles' long hair or Ozzy Osbourne's mutilations of bats.

But the fact that Halpern stuck

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with his concept of "healthy music" for more than 10 years before it caught on with a national audience disqualifies it as a get-rich-quick gimmick.

Ironically, the soothing sounds of the electric piano, which is Halpern's trademark, arose from sounds he heard in his head while working in a jazz/rock band.

"I heard something completely different from what the rock band was playing. I knew that composers such as Mozart and Liszt had relied on this same sort of inner source for their music, so I knew I was on the right track and in good company," Halpern explains.

He began taping and analyzing his compositions, and noticed the music had more of a sense of space than most commercial music. Its rhythms seemed to be based on the way people breathe, rather than the usual rock rhythms.

In 1975 the San Francisco Bay area resident began circulating his homemade tapes among friends to get their reactions to his offbeat music.

"They said the music actually affected them physically and started asking for their own copies of the tapes," Halpern recalls during a telephone interview.

"**AT THE TIME** I had just completed my master's degree in the psychology of music and was working a day-gig as an elementary school music teacher in Palo Alto, Calif.," Halpern says. "On the side, I was doing concerts and making those private copies of my music for friends and others who requested them. But I was running out of time and money doing that."

Based on the requests for his homemade tapes, it became obvious to Halpern there was a market for his alternative music. But established recording executives disagreed. They showed no interest in Halpern's soothing sounds.

So Halpern started his own record label and began to dip his toe into the often-treacherous waters of the record industry.

"When the first shipment of 1,000 records arrived, they occupied half of my living quarters," he recalls. "I re-

alized they weren't going to leave on their own, so I took them with me to all the places that I like to go — health food stores, bookstores, yoga centers and holistic conferences. I also took them by hand to many other outlets," Halpern says.

Initially, Halpern's persistence proved as important to his success as his unique sound did.

"I was disappointed at first when health food stores protested that my recordings weren't vitamins or vegetables, or when bookstores told me that they only sold books. So I suggested to them that they were in the lifestyle support business and that people who shopped there would, in fact, rather buy 'healthy, relaxing music' there than at a chain store that blared loud rock music," he remembers.

HEALTH AND bookstores gradually bought Halpern's pitch. In the following years Halpern produced more than 40 titles featuring his mesmerizing sound.

New age record fans aren't the only people buying his music. It's also used in a variety of hospital settings, such as burn units and birthing rooms.

Within the last two years, Halpern has begun reaching an even larger audience through a distribution deal with Gramavision Records, which makes sure his records are available in nearly every record outlet.

Working with Gramavision gives Halpern extra muscle in his crusade against most of the commercial music played on the radio.

"What you're seeing now is a tyranny where only one type of music is being played. Consequently, what has happened is that people are addicted to the big beat and playing music at loud volumes. This in turn causes irreversible hearing damage," Halpern says.

"I've spoken with a lot of specialists in the hearing field and they say they're seeing more and more people who are under 30 with the ears of 70-year-old people. If people aren't given some sort of listening option they will eventually be trading their headphones for hearing aids." ■