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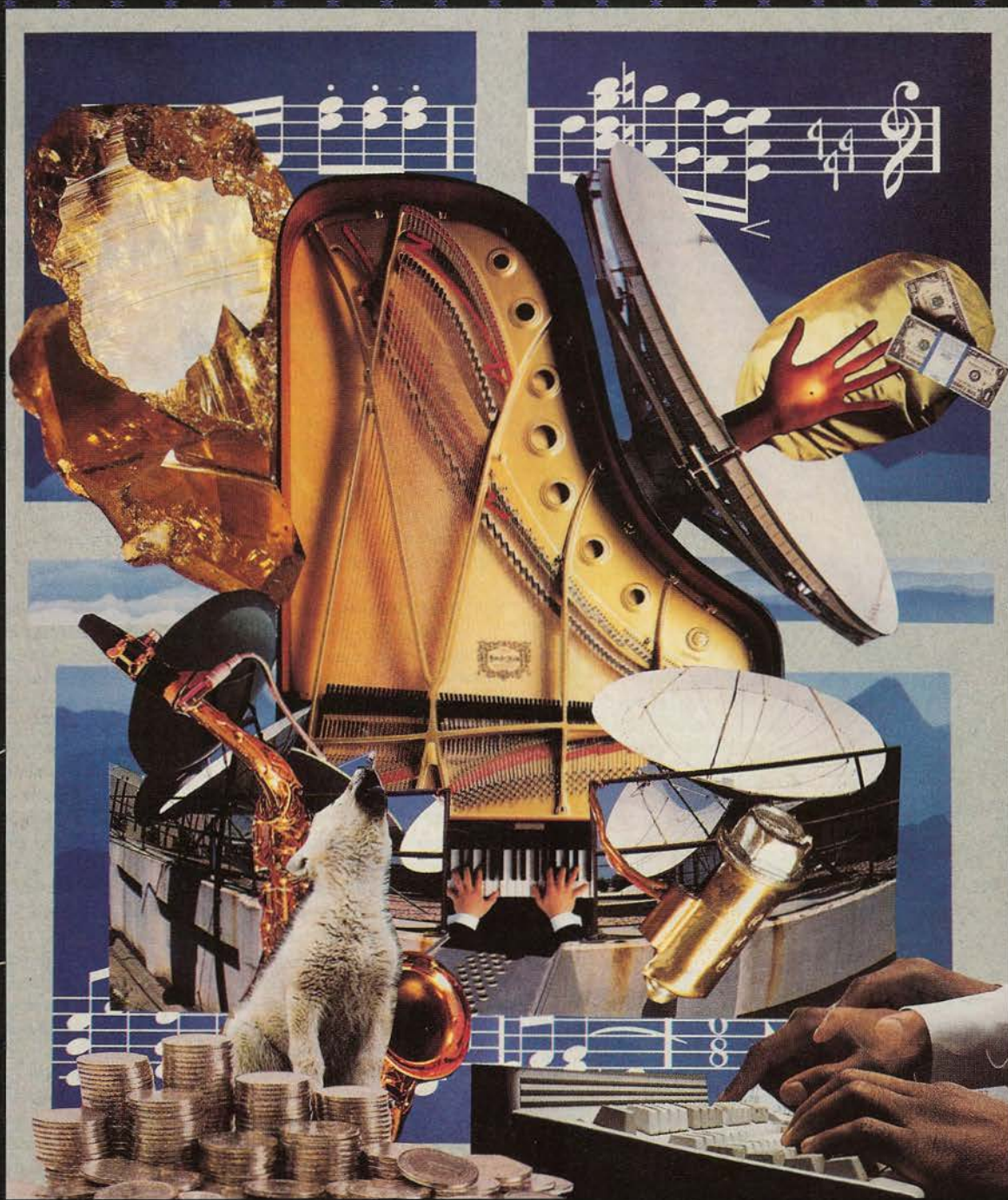
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# I Am Not a New-Age Artist

The new-age industry is having an identity crisis, trying to distance itself from the crystals-and-channeling pop culture which has long since overshadowed the music

By John Diliberto

*"If I find the guy who coined the term, I'm going to nail his forehead to the wall. I hate that term and always have."*

—guitarist William Ackerman, founder of Windham Hill Records

**M**ore than a decade after it began filtering into popular consciousness, four years since the New Age Grammy Award was initiated, and nearly three years since *Billboard* magazine began its new-age chart, musicians, media and listeners still have problems defining just what new age is and why they aren't. As the music expands and broadens, it's only becoming more difficult. ♦



"We have a clause in the contract trying to define the nature of the recordings that I will deliver to [Virgin Records]. Because I refused to say that I will deliver new-age recordings, because I felt that was very misleading."

—Mark Isham, winner  
1991 New Age Grammy Award

At the Third Annual International New Age Music Conference held in April in Los Angeles, industry representatives tried to attack the problem from another direction by choosing the theme "New Age Goes Mainstream." "All the people who have been around for 10 years or so are making a transition by going into the mainstream record outlets," asserts conference organizer Suzanne Doucet. "I think there's a lot of things happening in media and retail outlets that are becoming more open." Doucet, who also runs the Only New Age Music store in Los Angeles, feels that more "spiritual" music is reaching the mainstream audience, even if that audience isn't entirely aware of the spiritual content.

But for many, "New Age Goes Mainstream" means a shift in the

music and an appeal to a wider audience. For those artists and labels, the INAMC conception of "mainstream" was a misnomer. "I think it's wishful thinking," says Stephen Hill, host of the *Music From the Hearts of Space* radio program and owner of the Hearts of Space record label.

"That's a nice sentiment," agrees Terry Wood, director of communications for Narada Records. "I'm not sure that was reflected in the type of offerings at the conference." Narada was among several major new-age-identified labels who chose to stay home.

"It's an incredibly limiting category. We've had so many different people in the concerts, whole families and heavy-metal people. We've had lots of Hell's Angels people, black leather and chains."

—Andreas Vollenweider, winner  
of first New Age Grammy Award

Most conferences begin with a few jokes, some solemn musings and maybe an invocation or prayer. But the Third Annual International New Age Music Conference began with the ring of Tibetan chimes and a few

minutes of harmonic overtone singing. It's the only conference where instead of being awoken by loud TVs or parties, you are roused by chanting from the next hotel room.

What's surprising is that these were among the few meditative moments in the four-day conference, during which even new-age savant Steve Halpern left at home his lighted crystal, so prominently featured on a recent *48 Hours* on CBS. Sure, there was a lot of talk about channeling music, about how "some of your tri-tones stimulate the third eye, others cause your aura to shrink," and how dolphins project sound waves to align your chakras. A booth from MC<sup>2</sup> displayed a system of light and sound that purports to "Relax, accelerate goal achievement and boost personal creativity." You put on a pair of headphones which produce a somewhat annoying tone that pulses back and forth in your ears while a pair of Sun Ra sunglasses project light pulses onto your closed eyelids, sending you to sleep or into a migraine headache. And of course the conference's version of the Gramophone and Oscar is the "Crystal Award," a phallic pinnacle of crystal. As Halpern points out, it's not the only

award out there made from crystal, yet it's another lightning rod for clichés.

"Look at how new-age music is described in the media, by and large: It's called yuppie Muzak or aural wallpaper, hot-tub music, drones; there's no structure to it; it's completely laid back and passive. All of that. Well that certainly doesn't describe my music in any way. It has nothing to do with my music."

—Ray Lynch, composer of the  
new-age hit "Celestial Soda Pop"

It was a conference that tried its best to shake the new-age image of crystal gazing, meditative ruminations, and metaphysical mumblings. What was most evident was the "hustle." Everyone was pushing tapes and CDs into the hands of record companies, distributors, radio stations and writers. You'd walk into a room and suddenly see a dozen business cards criss-crossing the table of the "International" panel. The talk was often less about music and more about commerce. "We're here so that you can go further in your business," said Richard Bochenek, one of the conference organizers. "This represents the new-age industry." At times it could've been a NAIRD or NARM convention.

## It's a Small World After All

Jon Hassell, Paul Horn and others discern new age's once and future inspiration: world music

By Linda Kohanov

As the Beatles took the United States by storm, jazz artist Tony Scott took a deep breath and uttered the first notes of *Music for Zen Meditation*. Back then no one really knew what to do with a serenely exotic set of interactions between clarinet, Japanese koto and shakuchachi flute. Released on Verve in 1964, *Music for Zen Meditation* remained an anomaly in the jazz label's bebop and swing catalog until this subtle, cross-cultural venture was hailed as the first new-age album some 20 years later. If Scott would have come up with the same American-Japanese collaboration in 1991, he might just as easily have found himself under the "world music" banner.

*Billboard* magazine's 1990 new age issue contended that "in both artistic and marketing areas, NAM is rapidly being absorbed into the expanding world music market." The 1991 International New Age Conference in Los Angeles also seemed keyed up about the influx of cross-cultural sounds as the annual convention held its first "New Age World Music Festival."

"New age has a few more gold and platinum albums, but world music is closing in," observes Eric Lowenhar, manager for *Billboard's* new age and world music charts. The most confusing aspect of his job, in fact, is trying to decide which releases are appropriate for which chart. "One of the reasons is that there are a lot of titles that fall into that grey area between the two."

From the beginning, the new-age genre itself was a giant grey area where ethnic styles and instruments ran

amok—albeit in slow motion—through ethereal, spacially enhanced settings. Still, there's a big difference between classic new-age recording and current world-beat hits. The emerging international music industry emphasizes Afropop and Latin styles precisely because their exhilarating, dance-inspired polyrhythms exist within a European-influenced melodic and harmonic context. "The things that are struggling are the Middle Eastern and Oriental releases," reports Lowenhar. "This means that people still need to overcome the bias that our Western system of music is the best." When the average American listens to recordings based on the micro-tonal melodic meanderings and strange tuning systems of Eastern styles, the most common reaction is that the instruments have "an irritating habit of weaving in and out of tune" and the music "doesn't seem to go anywhere in particular."

The fact that people often lodge the same complaint about new-age music is revealing: The genre's early innovators were inspired primarily by Indian, Balinese and Japanese styles. "A lot of us took our inspiration from the Orient because it was the only place we found anything related to what we wanted to do," insists Steven Halpern, who helped usher in the new age with a series of "Anti-Frantic Alternative" albums in the mid '70s. "The origins of these musics were ceremonial, magical, healing, uplifting." With this in mind, spiritual seekers like jazz flautist Paul Horn and German multi-instrumentalist Deuter (influential albums by both are available on Kuckuck) went off to India and discovered a highly specialized series of traditions that emphasized music as a path to enlightenment. Though these artists studied and played Indian classical music in the late '60s and '70s, they emerged from the experience with compositional styles that combined the meditative essence of certain Oriental forms with Occidental (continued on 89)

"I don't know what new age is. You know, I think it's a marketing term."

—Chuck Greenberg of  
Shadowfax, winners of the New  
Age Grammy Award in 1989

The argument for new age going mainstream can be persuasive. After all, Yanni is attaining unprecedented sales, receiving a gold record with his synthesized updating of Mantovani, *Reflections of Passion* (Private Music). He was preceded by the synthesizer confections of Ray Lynch's chart-toppers, *Deep Breakfast* and *No Blue Thing* on Music West, an independent label. Add to that the mainstream penetration of Enya, Andreas Vollenweider, George Winston and Kitaro, as well as the mock-new-age dance music of Enigma, and you might think there's still a movement afoot.

Yet, none of these artists were at the conference. The best-known musicians present were Halpern, flautist Paul Horn and violinist Steven Kindler. The very labels that have had mainstream success, like Music West and Private Music, were absent. Windham Hill, which is in the process of converting itself into a mainstream label with rock, jazz and folk acts, was never present and hardly ever mentioned. Even Narada, which has usurped much of Windham Hill's initial audience, passed on



# “I don’t think new age is going mainstream, I don’t know why it would want to.”

Don Heckman, L.A. Times

the conference.

“Narada always felt that this conference tends to represent more of the esoteric side of new-age music and we’re working diligently to make sure the consumer understands that new age is a mainstream music,” says Narada’s Terry Wood. He voices the thoughts of many in the “modern instrumental” music community. Wood appreciates the term new age as a marketing niche, but wants to get as far away from the culture surrounding it as he can. “We’ve worked hard at dismissing the crystal factor.” Narada isn’t the only one. Label after label either echoed Terry Wood, or in the case of Private Music, didn’t return my calls (perhaps thinking I’d channel its response, but I suspect it shares an affinity with most non-attendees).

Bob Duskis of Windham Hill Records mimics William Ackerman’s line. “There are the labels that have been identified with new-age music and there are labels that have proclaimed themselves as new age,” he claims, making a fine distinction. “Windham Hill has always been a label that has reflected Will Ackerman’s taste. It’s always been artist-driven.”

Those artists now include singer-songwriters like John Gorka, Chris Eberhardt and Christine Lavin, mainstream jazz players like Bob Sheppard and Billy Childs, rock groups like Dots Will Echo and electric guitar mutants like David Torn. If anyone is making the move towards the mainstream, creating an artist roster that entails many different genres, it’s Windham Hill.

Even labels that remain committed to modern-instrumental music look somewhat askance at the new-age label. Stephen Hill’s nationally syndicated *Music From the Hearts of Space* radio program, begun in 1972, has long been associated with the

new-age genre, but Hill himself has never called it that. “We never billboarded the program as a new-age program but a space-music program,” says Hill, who did attend the conference. “The reason for that is I’m not comfortable being identified with many of the attributes of the new-age lifestyle. It’s just music. It doesn’t need to be burdened with those complex associations.”

Hill’s Hearts of Space label has a mixture of adventurous artists like Robert Rich, Tim Clark and Kevin Braheny, as well as high-quality commercial ventures such as Bill Douglas. Yet Hill admits that no matter what he does, it’s hard to escape the new-age brush.

“We’re definitely perceived as that,” he concedes, and albums of tantric tone poems like Raphael’s *Music to Disappear in II* admittedly help the image along. “All we’re doing is trying to move over and be considered as contemporary or ‘modern-instrumental’ music.” Toward that end, it’s released an album by renegade composer Alan Hovhaness called *Visionary Landscapes*, which for all intents and purposes is a 20th-century classical recording. Future releases include a flamenco guitarist and a “bluesy” Chapman Stick recording.

Ethan Edgecombe formed Fortuna Records in 1982 and is associated with the German Kuckuck label and its American arm, Celestial Harmonies. Like Hearts of Space, Fortuna’s been noted for its discriminating artistic selections ranging from synthesist Steve Roach to minimalist composer Terry Riley, Celtic harpist Patrick Ball to the middle-eastern fusion of Brian Keane and Omar Faruk Tekbelik.

Edgecombe looks askance at labels who are abandoning the market. “These folks were the ones who benefitted the most from the term new-age music and they’re the reason why the industry took a hold of the name and went with it,” he charges. “Now that they’ve gotten something from it they want to jump ship.”

*Los Angeles Times* critic Don Heckman takes a different tack. “I don’t think new age is going mainstream,” he asserted. “I don’t know why it would want to.” That’s because beneath the widest new-age umbrella are artists who are pushing the envelope, creating new fusions of sound like Ben Tavera King’s southwestern flamenco-guitar landscapes, Steve Roach’s Australian evocations, Jai Uttal’s Indian fusion, Ingram Marshall’s shadowy sound collages and Mouth Music’s techno-Celtic meditations. Broadly speaking,



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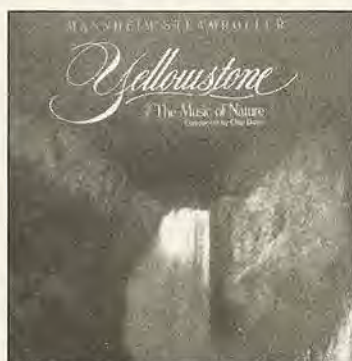


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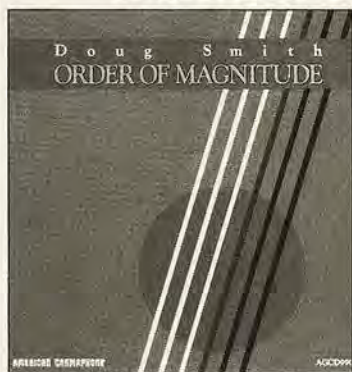


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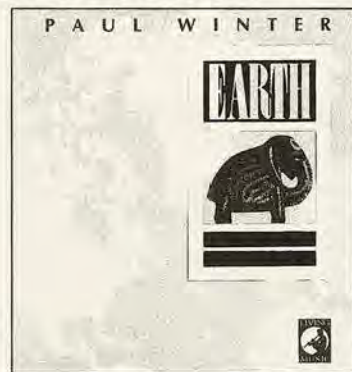


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the new age is Peter Gabriel's evocative world-music soundtrack to Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, titled *Passion*—winner of last year's New Age Grammy—and African kora player Foday Musa Suso. "In new-age music we can do what we want and get away with it," crowed Michael Hoppé, composer and artist consultant.

*"When I hear the words new age I reach for my gun. I disagree fundamentally with the premise of new-age things generally and about me being categorized that way because I think it's kind of [an] appropriation of something I hold very dear into a kind of genre or place that I know basically is completely antithetical to my concerns as an artist in modern America."*

—keyboardist/composer Harold Budd, whose 1980 album *Plateaux of Mirror* was subtitled "Ambient Music 2"

New age, as much as we can define it, is fragmenting into those artists who are following a personal artistic vision, those who are looking for commercial acclaim, and those looking toward the healing, meditative properties of music. It was artists from the latter camp and a few commercial aspirants who dominated the conference.

*"People used to say my music doesn't go anywhere. The point is, it's already there."*

—Steve Halpern on the "Artists" panel

For those who aren't trapped in the new age of meditation music and subliminal tapes, this conference was a reality check. In the mid '80s, the major labels snatched up smaller new-age companies and began their own designer labels. Now there's barely a new-age record released on a major. "The majors are the wrong place for this type of music," asserted Michael Hoppé on the "New Age Goes Mainstream" panel. "They don't have the time or the inclination."

Three years ago Frank Cody launched the WAVE format on KTUV in Los Angeles. He even won the first "Crystal Award" for radio in 1989. Now the WAVE's satellite format is off-air and the remaining WAVE stations play a confection of lite jazz and soft rock. Frank Forrest, of the commercially syndicated new-age radio program *Musical Starstreams*, declares, "Real new-age music was never given a shot and because the commercial networks failed, everyone thinks that new age has failed." He

promised a "true" new-age station by this time next year.

Conversely an interesting event happened when *Billboard* altered its charts recently. Instead of relying on verbal reports from stores, actual sales are now tallied by a point of purchase system called SoundScan. While many hip alternative bands plummeted down and off the charts, Yanni's *Reflection of Passion* actually rose from position 102 to 41. One conclusion that's being drawn is that Yanni was under-reported in favor of other music agendas, and that his support is much deeper than people admit.

*"I don't know why people have problems with this term new age. It's new age! It's better than old age."*

—61-year-old flautist, Paul Horn

The new age hasn't gone mainstream, it inhabits many streams, drawing as it always has from space, folk, classical and world traditions. It dwells in that sub-pop stratum of folk, jazz and new classical music where trends ebb and flow, popularity waxes and wanes, but the essence of the music and its creative source remains.

No one wants to be called a new-age artist, especially after the virulent critical backlash began a few years ago. But then, Charles Mingus didn't want to be called a jazz musician; Steve Reich, Terry Riley and Philip Glass will go to their graves maintaining they aren't minimalists; and John Lydon said that rock was dead.

*"I've spoken to people in the audience who come up to me, and [the band has] just been through heaven and hell, and bashing and smashing, and singing and sobbing, and spacing out, and they'll just give me a blanket response, 'Man, that was so beautiful and relaxing.'"*

—wind player Paul McCandless of Oregon

In the new age, as elsewhere, perception is often the uncomfortable reality. But the true story is that while the old ideas of new age live on in one circle, others are already pushing beyond the boundaries. "The good musicians will survive the backlash, like Andreas Vollenweider, Kitano and George Winston," says Windham Hill's Bob Duskis. "The good stuff is the good stuff." ■

John Diliberto is a freelance critic and producer/host of *Echoes*, a Nightly Music Soundscape distributed by American Public Radio.



## SMALL WORLD from 86

instruments and ideas, creating a congenial bridge between the two worlds.

The danger of this approach, however, soon manifested itself in the form of musicians who jumped on the bandwagon of new-age music's growing popularity—without any real knowledge of the original traditions from which they were borrowing. The sublimely understated elements and trance-inducing repetitions of Eastern styles were watered down over time and literally washed right out of the fabric on releases by lesser artists. In many cases, the only thing left was this vague feeling that the music didn't go anywhere. Says Horn, "It's become quite obvious that there's a difference between a person who plays simple melodies and leaves a lot of space because they know what they're doing, and someone who's just playing simply because they can't do anything else."

In the late '70s, trumpet player Jon Hassell gave the genre a shot in the arm with the idea of "Fourth World music," an inventive approach to composition that united East and West, Third World and First, past and present, nature and technology to create "a coffee-colored classical music of the future." This ambitious ideal began to take a recognizable form on his 1980 collaboration with Brian Eno, *Fourth World Vol. 1: Possible Musics* (EG). Subsequent releases led to his most recent, highly acclaimed version of a kind of urban Fourth World sound on *City: Works of Fiction* (Opal, 1990).

Hassell's uncompromising methods still exist on the periphery of new age. Although he isn't comfortable with his inclusion in the category, his albums are often thrown in the record bins between the more subdued styles of Halpern and Horn. Yet philosophically, Hassell's fourth-world vision stems from the same sense of dissatisfaction with Western music and inclination toward artistic and spiritual integration that characterizes the best intentions of the new-age aesthetic.

"What I'm really interested in is a balance between body and mind," he stresses. "A lot of European classical music exists strictly from the neck up. There's a lot of prejudice against the sensual, strangely enough, in this culture. Not that there isn't enough below-the-neck activity going on, but there's always this dichotomy. The idea of having some

beautiful, sensual, sexy, yet sublime music like Balinese or Javanese in this culture is virtually impossible right now. It seems like you're either snoring in an over-heated hall listening to German concert music from 200 years ago or listening to music that's accompanying some stripper in some nightclub. The way this is treated in our culture is totally off center and will eventually be seen as mass psychotic behavior."

In the early '80s, groups such as Paul Winter Consort (Living Music), Shadowfax (Windham Hill) and Ancient Future (Sona Gaia) espoused a similar planet-wide unification process through music by adding earthy beats from Africa, Brazil and Middle Eastern traditions—thus closing the gaps between contemplative Oriental influences and Third World poly-rhythms. Ultimately rock star/world-music proponent Peter Gabriel won the 1989 New Age Grammy Award for his multi-cultural album *Passion* (Geffen/Virgin) in which ethereal echos of cabalistic music rites coalesced with fervid African beats. The album, incidently, features Jon Hassell, in addition to several well-known ethnic artists.

Since then, the gaps between the meditative, Far Eastern-inspired aesthetic of early new-age innovators and the beat-oriented, dancing frenzies of Afropop and Latin American styles have been closing. On recent releases like Michael Fluznick's *The Cradle in the Sun* (Sona Gaia) and Glen Helgeson's *Rising Current* (World Disc), the formula also includes a hefty dose of pop jazz riffs and Dave Grusin-like production slickness. As a result, some compelling new releases are falling through the cracks between these established categories. San Francisco-based jazz artist and Indian-music aficionado Jai Uttal's *Footprints* and South African guitarist David Hewitt's *An African Tapestry* are two prime examples. Some new-age critics assume these releases are in world-music territory, while world-beat writers hesitate to cover them because they're "too new age."

Oh well, such are the growing pains of new fusions based on fusions of fusions. ■

**PULSE!** new-age columnist Linda Kohanov is a contributing editor and critic for several national music magazines. She currently lives in Tucson, Ariz.

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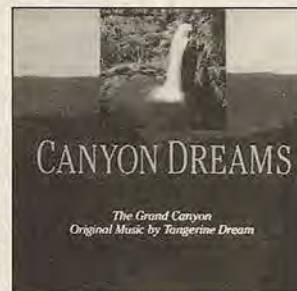
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