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magazine

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## WILL ACKERMAN

### Acoustic Artisan

**A** defining idiom of '80s guitar, the Windham Hill label captured a certain audio sound and style of understated acoustic music, lamentably categorized as "new age." One of its founders was William Ackerman, the gifted fingerstylist, producer, and Grammy winner. Now an independent artist, Ackerman just released *Positano Songs*, an introspective gem of open tunings and melodies that are hard to forget. VG caught up with the acoustic innovator in his Vermont recording studio, Imaginary Road.

**When you're writing, you videotape yourself playing.**

Yes, I like to have a video recording even as I'm experimenting with a new tuning; I have a number system and I've probably generated hundreds of tunings at this point—pretty much every piece has its own tuning. I don't know if it would make sense to anyone, but it's the nomenclature I've used for 48 years. I've used opening tunings pretty much from the beginning—even in high school I was experimenting with them,

influenced by players like John Fahey, and even more so by Robbie Basho.

**Which guitar did you use on this album?**

For decades now, my primary recording instrument has been my Froggy Bottom K model. Michael Millard now offers a Will Ackerman signature guitar based on the evolution of that instrument, which has really defined my sound. Most of my lead playing is on the Steve Klein jumbo. I've evolved into a decent lead player, the result of having done lead work for some of the many musicians I produce here at Imaginary Road Studios. Lastly, I continue to write on the Martin parlor guitar that Michael Hedges gave me years ago. I saw it leaning against the wall of his studio, and I picked it up. He told me to take it home—so Michael!

**How do you mitigate finger squeaks on steel strings?**

Obviously, you're never going to eliminate squeaks entirely and it's always a battle, but one does learn to lighten up as you're moving up and down the neck. That comes from years of learn-

ing how to instinctually, gently lift your fingers. After 60 years, you hope to get pretty good at it.

**Describe the sound of the room where you record.**

I've always been a reverb guy, and the Imaginary Road studio is purposefully muted with soft walls, gobos in front of windows, and hard surfaces. My style as both a guitarist and producer is recording in very close proximity to the microphones. I have a collection of insanely rare and expensive matched pairs of vintage Neumann mics, rebuilt by Klaus Heine at German Masterworks. When I sold Windham Hill Records to BMG in May of 1992, my accountants made it clear that I needed to spend a lot of tax-deductible money in a hurry. Investing in these very rare microphones, along with the equally rare preamps, has been a wonderful thing—it's part of the reason we command the respect we do in the recording world. On the other end of the spectrum, AKG 451 and 452 models are excellent mics, and they're affordable.

**Some contemporary artists and producers use plugged-in acoustic/electric guitars on albums, and it doesn't sound too good. Why aren't engineers miking acoustics as much anymore?**

I wish I could explain it. It's simply ridiculous. **Is it harder to produce yourself?**

I'm so glad you asked. *Positano Songs* is the first album of mine where I turned over the job of producer to my engineer, co-producer, and dear friend Tom Eaton. This was the first time I'd been able to experience what I hope to give to musicians when I'm producing them—being able to concentrate on finding the emotional essence of the pieces without your brain needing to be on guard for mistakes. Freeing up the heart and allowing yourself as a musician to make the music expressive is the job of the player. All the rest of this is in the hands of the engineer and producer. It's been revelatory for me to actually experience what I've tried to do as a producer for others my whole life.

**One aspect that makes your recordings stand out is discipline. It would be easy to add garnishes of electric instruments and electronic keyboards—and extra notes. How do you resist the temptation to add more?**

I try to be on guard against layering for layering's sake. We do get into some complex recordings with six or seven instruments, but we like to balance an album with solos and much simpler productions, as well. I use a bell-curve metaphor—solo pieces on one side, five-instrument productions on the other, then simple duets or trios with light percussion in the middle. That said, we still specialize in solo recordings, which are the hallmarks that have defined my career. —Pete Prown VG