



From the Roots

of a Redwood

by Randy Alberts

Sequoia Records co-founder Steve Gordon takes a look back, and forth, in a silver-anniversary interview.



You're hiking up a fern-lined trail alongside a sparkling mountain brook. The moss-cushioned

top of an ancient tree stump invites you to sit — a perfect place to rest. Your brother settles on a flat, round rock at the brook's edge, and the two of you naturally inhale and release one deep breath after another. The sweet air, bubbling waters, and birdcalls from the forest canopy lull you into an Eastern meditation. The frenetic city feels a million miles away. You're both keenly aware of the embedded tempo, melodies, and percussive patterns in nature's surround-sound symphony. It sounds like an improv jam: distant thunder are timpani drums, the birds' songs are muted trumpet and vocal melodies, the splashing brook is rolling cymbal fill, and an eagle's screech overhead is the perfect lead saxophone or guitar. Emerging from your meditation, an idea is born.

For David and Steve Gordon, in 1982, this experience beneath the towering redwoods of Sequoia National Park in California marked the birth of Sequoia Records. (Perhaps this natural scenario mirrors, in some way, a similar catharsis that led to your idea of opening a New Age book or gift store.)



Steve Gordon in his northern California studio, Winter 2007

Jamming blue jays

“We’d spend days meditating at the base of those great old trees,” recalls Steve Gordon from his Northern California studio. “One day we talked about perceiving the sounds of nature as the improvisations of a good jazz band, as a musical interaction between the birds, streams, and the rustling of leaves — all of it. That was the day we decided to record our own music to those sounds and, eventually, to start our own record label.”

The Gordons backpacked the southern Sierra Nevada range for years before their synaesthetic experience four hours north of Los Angeles. They’d been into meditation and Eastern thought long before graduating from Hollywood’s legendary Dick Grove Music Academy and working as session musicians in the busy L.A. studio scene.

Sequoia (the park, that is) was an enchanted place the Gordons visited often to “unstress” between gigs, and it is where they later backpacked in microphones and portable recorders to capture nature’s soundtrack. Back in the studio, they transferred those sounds to recordings and dubbed in acoustic guitar, piano, flute, and mellow synthesizer improvised parts to the rhythms in nature.

“One bird would go off on this riff, then another’s song came in like the counterpoint,” says Steve, humming a bird’s jazzy solo line. “We could hear the musical patterns and rhythms of nature in our headphones.”

The Gordons weren’t aware they were at the leading cusp of a new evolution in music. Those early sessions led to Sequoia Records’ first two releases in 1983 and 1984 and, deeply influenced by Brian Eno’s pioneering ambient music album *Music for Airports*, they paid homage to him by initially titling those two albums *Environmental Music 1* and *Environmental Music 2*. But the dry, technical nature of the titles didn’t fit the organic feel of the new music they’d created literally from thin air, so they renamed the albums the now classic titles *Misty Forest Morning* and *Peaceful Evening*, respectively. Several years later the term “New Age music” was applied to these and other like-minded musicians’ albums.

“People in cities are always looking to reconnect with nature,” Steve notes. “They need music created by people who are feeling and representing that connection in musical terms to reconnect to the ancient self — that’s at the heart of everything we do here at Sequoia Records.”

Twenty-five years since the founders’ redwood meditations, Se-

quoia Records continues to be a trailblazing company on the path of New Age music. The small, friendly staff in the company’s Northern (Sebastopol) and Southern (Encinitas) California offices work in close tandem with thousands of New Age stores, book stores, spas, holistic clinics, and boutiques. With each new musical trend they’ve helped foster over the years, they’ve partnered with New Age retailers in keeping the spreading flame of New Age music alive.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Steve Gordon in 1984, my very first freelance writing assignment at a time when Sequoia

Records was just taking off. With the label now up in the stratosphere of New Age music, my second opportunity to interview Steve is my first article for *New Age Retailer*. I spoke with him via phone in his Sebastopol, Calif., office and studio in the heart of the wine country an hour north of San Francisco.



David Gordon and Steve Gordon in California’s Mojave Desert, Fall 1993

Steve Gordon: This clearly illustrates we’re each still devoted to the power of music, and we’re both doing something right! (laughs) But one thing definitely has not changed: our shared enthusiasm and love for music.

Alberts: How much have things changed in the past ten years for New Age retailers?

Gordon: A lot. One thing some New Age retailers may not be aware of is that there was a time in the ‘90s when the big-box stores appeared and began selling the lion’s share of New Age music CDs. But that time has passed and, since 2000, by far the bulk of sales for this type of music are coming from New Age book and gift stores.

The growth for New Age music sales today is, in fact, once again back in the New Age stores. Even the new development of people downloading music has not changed this fact. While we have witnessed some sales of music downloads, it appears so far those sales are small compared with our retail sales.

Alberts: In *New Age Retailer*’s most recent survey, readers reported that music sales are on the rise. What do you think of those results?

Gordon: It’s great to see increasing music sales in a majority of New Age stores. This is where the music was born and where listeners first discovered and have supported it from the beginning. This music brings such wonderful enhancement to the stores, as well. We’re pleased the retailer survey reflects the same positive movement

Dancing in the aisles

Randy Alberts: It’s been 23 years since our last conversation — New Age music has changed a lot since then.

that Sequoia's sales are showing, specifically within the community of the New Age book and gift stores.

Alberts: Is there now a renewed niche in music CD sales for New Age retailers?

Gordon: Yes, for sure. I hope the retailers understand this, and they don't think they should cut back on their New Age music stocks based on the assumption that most of their customers are still buying their New Age music CDs at the bigger stores and websites.

A couple of the big-box stores stock mainstream New Age artists, such as Enya, Yanni, and Loreena McKennitt, but they don't stock the selection one seeks in New Age music. It's that deep selection of authentic New Age music that's really the ace-in-the-hole for New Age bookstores and gift shops. It's really important, both for labels and stores, that the retailers understand this key trend in the New Age music marketplace today.

This culture's growth in love for New Age music was, after all, a result of New Age stores in the first place. When a customer buys a CD from a New Age gift shop, that customer is engaged on a cultural level that's going to keep them engaged in every area of interest in the store. That unique experience will keep them coming back each time they listen to it.

Alberts: What's your experience today visiting New Age retail stores as a customer?

Gordon: You go to a New Age bookstore to buy a couple of books, a crystal, a music CD, and perhaps a figurine or jewelry. You'll read the book, then after it has enhanced your life, put it on the shelf, and perhaps you'll wear the jewelry for special occasions. All of these things connect with people in different ways.

The important part music plays in the picture is people get emotionally involved with the New Age music CDs they buy. When they listen to it dozens or even hundreds of times they remember each time the great New Age store they bought it from and they return there to buy other things with each visit. You just don't feel quite the same way about buying CDs from a big-box store or website.

Alberts: What about New Age retail stores that don't stock music CDs?

Gordon: Well, it's almost as if they don't have all the wheels on their wagon. If they leave New Age music out of the product mix, they're missing one of the major links in the mind, body, and spirit culture and the special way of giving their customers an essential part of what they need for their lifestyle.

You know the customers are always going to buy crystals so, in the same way, you also know they'll be buying more New Age music. It all fits together; it's all connected. Every time a customer hears a New Age album they think, "Oh yeah, I remember buying this CD at that little New Age shop down the street. I wonder if they have any of this artist's other releases."

Because of many factors affecting music sales in record stores today, this music has fewer places to be heard and purchased anywhere other than in those stores specializing in the New Age movement. The reason why Sequoia Records continues to grow is we focus on two things: providing our core customers with exactly what they're looking for while also promoting the next new genre and its affiliated artists.

Alberts: Let's talk about the relationship and teamwork between a New Age label and its retailers.

Gordon: Our close relationship with New Age retailers is one of the reasons we've retained our leadership position. Our sales team

makes personal phone calls to retailers to tell them about new titles and help them in any way possible. For instance, the way in which music is displayed can have a huge effect on sales. If CDs are placed on a shelf with just the spines showing, that dramatically lowers sales; if you don't allow customers to pick up and browse through the CDs, it's almost impossible to sell much music. Display CDs with the cover face out because the cover art tells the story of the style and mood of the music and is often the deciding factor in whether a CD is purchased. It's also a good idea to create small, informative signs for each of the different styles of music carried in the store.

We believe in the power of in-store play to sell music and have a liberal, supportive demo policy that provides plenty of demos to our distributors for them to pass on to the retailers at no charge. We are also happy to send demos directly to the stores upon request. When playing music in a store, it's great to create a visible display with the CD being played at eye level and a "Now Playing" sign above or below it.

We also recommend retailers set up a small listening bar near their music selection with a library of demos, a CD player, and headphones. The listening bar can become social, too — it's not unusual to find customers making recommendations to each other as they notice the demos being sampled.

Perhaps most important of all is that a retailer have a staff knowledgeable about the music they carry. More music is sold from retailer



David Gordon and Steve Gordon in Los Angeles, Winter 2005

recommendations than in any other way. Following all of these tips ensures a store will have a thriving, profitable music section.

Past, present, and future

Alberts: Regarding the label's changes since 1983, describe Sequoia's most important signposts over the years.

Gordon: Until the early '90s our focus was music for meditation and healing, all inspired by nature. Around 1990 we became interested in hand drumming, perhaps the biggest early change in our direction. We'd get into some incredible spaces in drum circles and realized, as we became proficient at it, "Wow, drumming is really a great way to get into the meditative state." It's just a different kind of space. By 1994, it was a natural step for us to release *Sacred Earth Drums*. To our surprise, not only was it popular, but it eclipsed everything we'd experienced until then, including *Garden of Serenity*. Until *Sacred Earth Drums*, which depicts a shaman's journey, drumming was considered something not to do in New Age music — you know, "Hey, be quiet, I'm trying to meditate!" (laughs) But that album showed listeners drumming was another doorway into meditation and, thus, serenity.

Alberts: World, light jazz, electronica, trance, nu-grass, folk, chill-lounge, and even DJ-remix music now fit under the New Age umbrella. Help me define just what New Age music is today.

Gordon: New Age music has evolved to include all these genres and more, but traditionally it will always be deeply relaxing music for healing — though that doesn't necessarily mean it has to be slow or spacey. It is music made by musicians with an intention to enhance overall wellness and balance. Be it soothing music for meditation, chants for yoga, chill-lounge remixes for dining with friends, or driving rhythms for trance-dancing, it's all music that makes you feel good. New Age music today is becoming increasingly hip, too — it's an important part of the sophisticated holistic urban lifestyle.

Alberts: When did you first add other artists to the Sequoia family?

Gordon: Soon after *Sacred Earth Drums* we added Gary Stadler, a good friend of ours who'd written some music for a play about fairies. Now he's one of the most popular, top-selling artists in New Age music, as anyone into fairy mythology knows.

After that it became the natural thing to add more artists when it seemed like the time was right. We went on to add the yoga-chant

singer Jaya Lakshmi, one of the originators of modern sacred chant music; Sophia, a longtime favorite at sound-healing and tantra workshops; world-groove artists TYA and Zingia; and reiki master Shajan.

A year or two after Stadler's first fairy CD, we released *Sacred Spirit Drums* and *Drum Medicine*, each making Billboard's Top 15 New Age chart for weeks. It's important to point out we never

thought of these two albums as simply being "drumming albums" but rather as compositions with themes, melodies, and harmonies that featured a solid world-drumming groove. That combination turned out to be a very powerful thing for listeners, and, in a way, those albums were the initial sparks of the whole world fusion music movement that developed in the late '90s.

But we just looked at it as, "Hey, this is the universal groove," in which we combined Native American, African, Afro-Cuban, and Middle Eastern beats with Native American flute and other

instruments such as acoustic and electric guitars and synthesizers. That was when we first got into the beginnings of the electronica movement and trance-techno music, as well. I really think *Sacred Earth Drums* was somewhat influential to many of even the earliest electronica-techno groove artists, but we were just following our creativity — no differently than with the early ambient nature and healing and meditation music when we began the label. When we look back at it all we think, "Wow, we were honestly the first people to do that."

That global universal beat has been with us all since antiquity, anyway, and at Sequoia we really enjoy bringing together the ancient and modern. At the heart of everything, that's what we do.

In 2005, we added a truly amazing world-class artist to the label: Jens Gad. He is the former co-producer and guitarist of Enigma, a multi-platinum-selling group the past 20 years and one of the pioneering groups in electronica music. His new project is Achillea and the album is called *The Nine Worlds*, and he released a solo album called *Le Spa Sonique* in April 2006, which is his electronica music. But it's not New Age music — rather, it's serene, beautiful global electronica music perfect for spa treatments. In February, we released his second Achillea album, *Amadas Estrellas*, featuring a well-known Spanish singer named Luisa Fernandez who sings entirely in Spanish on that CD.

Alberts: Sequoia has ushered in numerous new developments in



David Gordon in his southern California studio, Winter 2007

the New Age music market.

Gordon: Well, each time we try something different, something new, it's nice to find out people respond to it in a positive way. With the success of *Sacred Earth Drums* and the other CDs that followed, our next idea was to combine the two types of music for which we'd become well known. We wondered, "What would happen if we made a healing, meditative drumming album that's more entrancing and includes chants from several different shamanic cultures?" *Shaman's Vision Journey* is already doing so well our next project is an upbeat trance-dance album.

Alberts: Trance-dance?

Gordon: The trance element of electronica is very much like the trance element of what New Age music listeners have been into for many years. Hey, it's all about entering a meditative trance, right? It's about your mind becoming entrained and centered.

We're going to take compelling dance grooves that really make you want to get up and groove, and combine it with electronica — world and earthy native drum rhythms with modern dance grooves. It's also important to point out there are many people into trance-dance music that also are into yoga. There's events happening around the country now called "trance dances," a budding small new movement we're interested in pursuing musically.

Alberts: You folks also introduced the whole DJ-remix thing into the New Age market, right?

Gordon: Yes, seven years ago that was the third major stage of Sequoia's development. Each time we come to one of these new stages for the label, we're pushing a new envelope the New Age stores and bookstores haven't been to yet. In 2001, for example, we came out with our first Buddha-Lounge CD and there hadn't been anything like it in a New Age store until that release. You could find it in the dance section of major record stores, but it was very rare to find any of those DJ-driven mix CDs in a New Age store until *Buddha-Lounge*.

At first the stores said, "What the heck is this chill and lounge stuff?" But they listened and decided it wasn't really too big of a stretch musically from the world and electronic-fusion music they'd long since embraced. *Buddha-Lounge 5* came out last year and has been another huge seller.

We've also done a number of DJ compilation remixes for our Sequoia Groove brand, such as the Tropical Chill, Café de Luna, and the Hotel Tara series. We perform as DJs cross-fading songs on these albums in a way similar to how a DJ creates a live DJ set. When we compile and mix electronica in this fashion we perform under the artist name The Gordon Brothers, and we also contribute our own chill-lounge tracks to these Buddha-Lounge electronica compilations. Dave (Gordon)'s songs are credited to him, and my songs are listed under the group name Artemisia that features guest vocals from mesmerizing female vocalists.

Alberts: So, what's next, Steve?

Gordon: Every five or six years we start getting restless to try something new here at Sequoia. In addition to the trance-dance

project, we're again going in a new direction.

In February 2007, we released our first folk singer-songwriter album by an artist named Christina Lux called *Coming Home At Last*. She's been heard on the Fox TV show "The OC" and is an incredibly pure-voiced, sincere writer exploring the healing journey in her own life. We think that folk singer-songwriter music with deep soul-searching lyrics can be a very good fit for New Age retailers. We released Christina's album as a seed we believe will grow to become just as popular in New Age book and gift stores as the past changes we've initiated. We're always looking to bring offerings of new music that inspires and enhances life.

Looking back at what we have accomplished in our first 25 years, we can see our path has been one of staying true to music that inspires and motivates us. Our intuition for creating and discovering music that deeply touches and moves people is the center of our organic growth as a company. For the years ahead we're excited about expanding our original vision of music of earth and spirit.

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Randy Alberts is an independent music journalist, book author, and musician who has interviewed top recording artists, producers, and sound designers from all genres of music since 1984. Before going freelance (www.randyalberts.citymax.com) he worked at *Keyboard, Mix, EQ, Electronic Musician, and Radio & Records*.