

# Into the Heart of the Music: Music to Balance Your Life

A Conversation with Steve Gordon of Sequoia Records

by Mamaniji Azanyah

MA: *I'm very much interested in the history behind Sequoia Records. Why the name Sequoia?*

SG: David and I lived in LA and we liked to get out of the city every now and then and go backpacking in the mountains. One of the nicest areas in California is the lower Sierra Nevada, specifically Sequoia National Park. We were interested in meditation and Eastern spirituality and we would often spend time meditating by the river. We would just sit for a long time and meditate.

During one of these trips we were discussing how beautiful the nature sounds were and how much we enjoyed the sounds around us—the rivers, the birds, the sound of the wind. So we came up



## Sequoia Records Celebrates 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary!

Brothers David and Steve Gordon spent a lot of time together playing music and hiking in the Sierra Nevada mountains. They combined their love of music and reverence for the environment in creating a new kind of ambient music when one day they decided to record the natural sounds of the wilderness. In 1982 they founded Sequoia Records and have since earned a reputation as two of the most successful producers of albums in the New Age music genre.



with this idea to record the nature sounds on our next trip. Our idea was to take those recordings into our studio and compose music that would interact with the nature sounds in a natural way like other animal sounds or other nature sounds would.

We weren't sure what we were going to do with these recordings. We were just being creative in our time off from doing our session work. Around that same time period we met someone who was a therapist. She asked us to provide music on cassette tapes to use with her guided visualizations for her clients. And we said, 'Well, we have the perfect thing—recorded music with nature sounds.' She loved it, and we realized that if we were going to be creating albums for therapists to use, we might as well sell them. It was all very much a natural process.

We took the recordings to local record stores, but we found that we got the best reception at metaphysical bookstores. We started selling them to specific bookstores, and at the time there might have been two or three other artists. *Music for Zen Meditation* by Tony Scott was available. We had two albums so we were already really big artists. (*Laughs*) We found that this little cottage industry that we started sold enough numbers that we thought it would be good to do another one. Those first two albums, *Misty Forest Morning* and *Peaceful Evening*, are still available, and selling to this day.

MA: *So how long was it before you realized that you could do this full-time?*

SG: It actually took years for us to really feel like it could be a business, selling full time. We continued to do our gigs as working musicians for a number of years, and we continued to record albums. We recorded *Radiant Sea*, *Beside the Laughing River*, and *Oneness* . . . Once we had five or six releases out, then we began to see that this was something we could begin to put our full-time energy into and we quit doing our other work. We had decided earlier on to call the label Sequoia Records because that was where the inspiration for the music had come from.

MA: *Could you say a little more about the spiritual or philosophical nature of the work?*

SG: David and I both saw it as a way in which we could express our creativity and music as well as our interests in

meditation and Eastern spirituality—exploring consciousness through music. And the idea of balance was very important. Music with Vision—that was our motto. We were really interested in creating music that could enhance people's lives beyond being just entertainment.

MA: *I'm interested in the process you went through in listening to those sounds in nature. How did you go about translating them in musical terms? How did that happen?*

SG: Our experience was that we felt as though the music was already there. We felt like we could hear suggestions of melody and suggestions of chords in the background between the nature sounds. To us it sounded like an already finished composition when we would listen to the nature sounds and we could hear not just what would be good to play but what was in a sense already there.

MA: *How did the music evolve from there?*

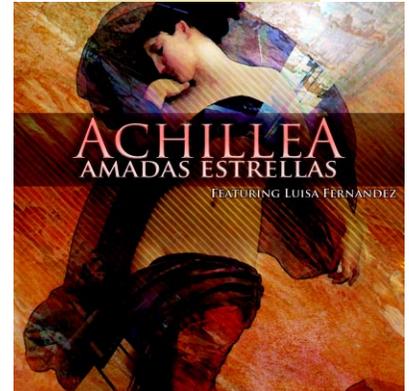
SG: For the first decade we focused most of our creativity in the direction of ambient music with nature sounds. We started getting interested in the idea of gardens. We were still creating music with nature sounds but instead of it being a wilderness setting it is a garden . . . So we created the album, which was our first big "hit," called *Garden of Serenity*, and with this album we began to experiment with different types of instruments. We brought in flutes. We worked with keyboards in ways that we had never worked with them before. We really took it to the next level. We continued to work in that way, with *Garden of Serenity II* and *III*, and then *Soothing Sanctuary*, also based on the idea of a garden.

I think the garden idea appealed to us because a garden is like a temple or place of worship, and it connects in that way to our interest in meditation. It's a place you go to in order to feel spirit—to connect with inner truth and transcend the mundane. That's what we wanted to do with *Garden of Serenity*. We wanted to create an audio replica of that, and I think we succeeded.

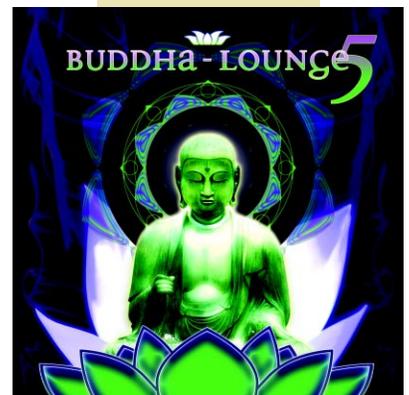
MA: *So basically you are providing through the music an opportunity to enter into a sound environment in which to experience the peace, the bliss, and the joy of meditation.*

SG: Exactly, and the music can be used as a focus tool, to sit down and specifically meditate, and can also be used in your environment while you do other things

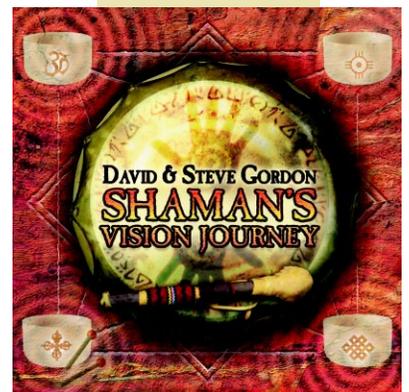
AMADAS ESTRELLAS by Achillea, \$15.98  
(upc727044712422)



BUDDHA LOUNGE 5 by Various Artists, \$15.98  
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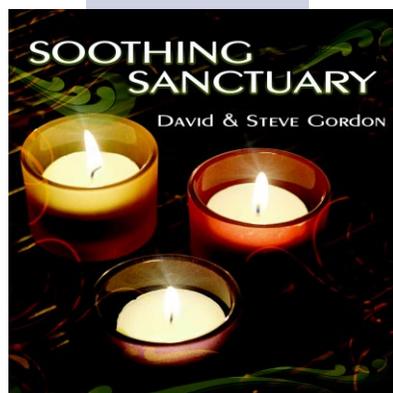


SHAMAN'S VISION JOURNEY by David & Steve Gordon,  
\$15.98 (upc727044780827)



"It's really been an organic journey. Everything that we've done has come out of what we love."

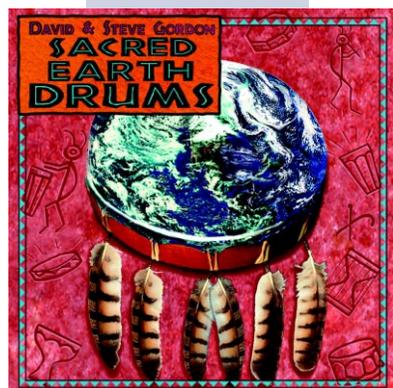
"It can be hard to switch gears from business to the studio and back again. We are still working to perfect this form of yoga."



SOOTHING SANCTUARY (The Art Of Healing series) by David & Steve Gordon, \$15.98 (upc727044770828)



CHAKRA HEALING CHANTS by Sophia, \$15.98 (upc727044711128)



SACRED EARTH DRUMS by David & Steve Gordon, \$15.98 (upc727044781121)

as a way to bring the peace of meditation into your life during times when you're not meditating.

MA: *You have also created a number of drumming albums. What inspired that shift?*

SG: We had been going with groups of friends and camping out in the mountains, and we'd bring drums to these gatherings. We'd have these all night drumming sessions. It's an amazing thing when you drum for hours like that. We enjoyed that a lot, and after doing that for a number of years we felt that we had achieved a level of mastery with the drumming where we felt ready to share it with our fans.

MA: *Was it inspired by any particular culture, any particular ethnic origin, or did it just come out of the energy of the moment?*

SG: The fire circles we went to had a number of influences in them. The rhythms were more African and Afro-Cuban, but the spirituality was based in Native American tradition. We have a very strong kinship to the native cultures of America, even though the rhythms are from other continents.

The way I look at it is that we're going to gather and drum around the fire and we're going to play rhythms that come from all over the world because we all come from the same melting pot of peoples and also we're connected to people through technology and through exposure to these other cultures. So I think the modern version of native music is more global—it's more of a fusion.

MA: *That's making me think of the idea that here you are engaged in this activity that is almost a timeless tradition, and it's like a doorway to these native cultures opens up by virtue of the fact that you're participating in that activity.*

SG: Yeah, it's not an intellectual thing. We called the drumming album *Sacred Earth Drums* because for us the drumming was a doorway to the connectivity of all cultures, of all native peoples, including modern-day peoples ourselves.

MA: *I guess that's borne out by the response to that particular release. As I recall that was one of your most successful releases.*

SG: Yes. *Sacred Earth Drums* was really a phenomenon. When it came out we were not prepared for the response. For us, it was like we discovered a universal groove. We didn't really set out to do

something new. People call *Sacred Earth Drums* a drumming album, but there's so much more than drums on that album. We took the shaman beats and put them together with Native flutes and a lot of the stuff we could do in the studio to make it sound expansive. We combined that with different keyboards and synthesizers, electric guitars and acoustic guitars and we just created this whole soundscape.

We followed that with *Sacred Spirit Drums* and *Drum Medicine*. *Drum Medicine* was our second best seller of all time. It won a number of awards like Best World Album, Best Album of the Year. That's when we started getting on the bigger charts like the *Billboard* New Age chart.

At that point we were just really enjoying creating this groove music we had found ourselves doing. It's really been an organic journey. Everything that we've done has come out of what we love.

MA: *So, how did you go about adding other artists to your label?*

SG: We had been successful selling our own music, and this friend of ours, Gary Stadler, had created an album of music for a play—and we just loved it. So we released Gary's *Fairy of the Woods* on our label and the same thing happened with Gary's music as with our music. It really struck a chord with people. The music has a similar magical quality to it as Enya's music. Gary has been doing an album every couple of years. We just released his collection of lullabies called *Fairy Lullabies*.

MA: *Based on your success with Gary, did you then open up to producing other artists?*

SG: Yes. Once we saw how well that could work we just remained open to other artists. It all kind of happens through friends. We produced the album *Chakra Healing Chants* with the artist Sophia whom we had met and performed with at various trade shows and events. We thought her music was beautiful. My brother David Gordon produced it. It also has been incredibly popular, one of our top sellers. Then another one of our friends, Michael Breene, is the mastermind behind Zingia. He had this idea to create this music combining drum grooves and tantra and the whole idea of goddess sexuality, and his wife Kathleen creates the artwork. They've done really well too. And more recently

we have developed a relationship with record labels in Europe. This all came about through an introduction between friends.

MA: *How challenging has it been for you and your brother as artists to develop and work the business side of the label?*

SG: I think that David and I have a natural inclination to own our own business as brothers and partners. It's pretty natural to us. It never seemed difficult to us to do whatever had to be done. That comes naturally to us. The problem has been balancing our time between running our business and creating more music.

MA: *That's kind of what I was wondering.*

SG: I don't think there's a real simple answer to that. It certainly is a balancing act. It can be hard to switch gears from business to the studio and back again. We are still working to perfect this form of yoga.

MA: *I'm interested in another recent direction that the label has taken, in the development of "the lounge sound," specifically the Buddha Lounge series and Hotel Tara. How did that come about?*

SG: Again, another kind of organic shift that happened. Through mutual friends we connected with some record labels in Europe, and one of the albums was called *Buddha Lounge*. It was this really popular hit album in Europe. We had gotten into electronica and chill lounge music and were discovering that this is a really exciting new genre of music when we had an opportunity to distribute *Buddha Lounge* in the United States. We adjusted the content by leaving off a few tracks that we did not think would work that well with our audience and then replaced them with a few tracks from our own artists as well as some of our own tracks and then we released it here [in the U.S.] and it did extremely well. It really surprised us. We also included new downtempo lounge tracks from David [Gordon] and from my new music project "Artemisia" that features electronica grooves with female vocals. The result was another huge hit for Sequoia which has now expanded to our current fifth release in the series.

I think it was one of these situations where we were a little bit ahead of the curve in the new age marketplace . . . The *Buddha Lounge* series did so well we decided to do a sister series called *Hotel Tara*, the intimate side of *Buddha Lounge*

with just a little bit more of a mellow vibe.

We've also been really fortunate to release the music of Achillea with Jens Gad, who is one of the co-creators and producers of the group Enigma. He's just an incredibly talented and influential musician. His first release [with us] is called *The Nine Worlds*. It's a gorgeous blend of electronica and female vocals. He's just an amazing musician. We released another project of his called *Le Spa Sonique*—it's just a gorgeous album of music that's slightly between new age and electronica. A new album will be coming out in February 2007. It's called *Amadas Estrellas* and features the vocals of Luis Fernandez, who is a pretty well known pop star in Spain and Europe. It was recorded on the Spanish island of Ibiza and it's a beautiful, sensual chill lounge album.

MA: *You are celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sequoia Records. Are there releases planned specifically around that event?*

SG: Yes. The most recent Dave and Steve Gordon release came out just last April and it's called *Shaman's Vision Journey*. Since it came out the year before the anniversary we won't have a brand new album out for our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but

we are planning to release two compilations of the very best of David and Steve Gordon. One is called *Into the Sacred: The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collection, Volume One*, and that will include the very best of our five native drumming releases. It's also going to have a bonus DVD in the package and the DVD will feature incredible nature footage from the Southwest, canyons and mesas. *Volume Two* of the *Anniversary Collection* is going to be called *Peace Here Now* and that's going to be the very best of all our ambient music—our music of nature, serenity, sanctuary, things like that.

MA: *In terms of the future, what do you have in mind?*

SG: As we go from here we're continuing to expand into new directions. On our last album, *Shaman's Vision Journey*, we actually slowed the tempos down and the idea was to create a native drumming album with longer length tracks and slower tempos that you could really meditate to or use for shamanic journeying. For the next album David and I will be taking our drumming music and turning up the tempos, creating what will really be a true trance dance album. We'll combine the influence of the na-

**New from Sequoia Records**

- AMADAS ESTRELLAS by Achillea, \$15.98 (upc727044712422)
- BUDDHA LOUNGE 5 by Various Artists, \$15.98 (upc727044792028)
- CELTIC LOUNGE II by Various Artists, \$15.98 (upc727044792127)
- CHAKRA HEALING ZONE by David & Steve Gordon et al, \$15.98 (upc727044791724)
- COMING HOME AT LAST by Christina Lux, \$15.98 (upc727044712620)
- HOTEL TARA 2: The Intimate Side Of Buddha Lounge by Various Artists, \$15.98 (upc727044791625)
- OCEAN OF SILENCE: Music for Reiki & Meditation Vol. 3 by Shajan, \$15.98 (upc727044712729)
- SHAMAN'S VISION JOURNEY by David & Steve Gordon, \$15.98 (upc727044780827)
- YOGA MOODS by Various Artists, \$15.98 (upc727044791823)



tive drumming with the influence of the electronica and chill lounge music so that what you have is a trance dance groove that has an organic native drum low end and an ethereal electronica high end—combining the ancient with the modern, the organic with the electronic, just combining all those things into one.

One more thing I want to mention is that we're going to release an album in

2007 by Christina Lux, who is an exceptional singer/songwriter. The album is called *Coming Home At Last*. This is another one of our hunches. We believe that this type of music and this particular artist is going to receive a very warm reception with new age bookstores because she sings of her own personal healing journey. I think that her music has a warmth to it that is really going to give people a glow. And even though it's music that is a little different than they are used to hearing, I think that they're going to love it.

Other than that we're just going to continue to change. That's one of the things that's kept us here and will keep us here for the next 25 years—we don't stay still.

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**Mamaniji Azanyah** is an accomplished musician on stand-up bass and electric bass guitar. His musical style is informed by the African-American Improvisational Tradition, World and European Classical musics, with an emphasis on spiritual expression. He is the founder of Path of Light Records LLC, whose website at [www.pathoflightrecords.com](http://www.pathoflightrecords.com) presents his complete discography as well as that of other like-minded artists. Currently at work on several projects and a new solo recording, he performs regularly with Ultimate Universe at the Lush Life Cafe in Atlanta, Georgia.

