



REVIEWS & COMMENTARY

## **Zone Music Awards Show**

### **A Guided Meditation on the Zone Music Awards Show.**

The children and grandchildren of Windham Hill Records had a family reunion this weekend under the auspices of the Zone Music Reporter. That's an on-line music and radio trade magazine that grew out of the demise of the New Age Voice in the early 2000s. It's a home for musicians plying various brands of post New Age music, from neo-classical to ambient, solo piano to electronic, relaxation/meditation to groove/chill. In other words, a lot of the music that you hear on Echoes. Each year, radio programmers cast ballots for the best albums in categories like those above as well as Contemporary Instrumental, World, and Vocal. Among the nominees were Robert Rich, Hans Christian, Ludovico Einaudi, Kevin Keller, Chronotope Project, and Wouter Kellerman as well as artists from the sweeter side of New age, like Amy Faithe, David Nevue and Peter Calandra. In many ways these musicians outsiders: artists on the musical fringes. Some of them are on cutting edge, many are on the velvet edge dusted with Stevia®, but none of them could be considered mainstream.

From the opening meet and greet event, the affair had the feel of a high school reunion grafted onto a music conference. Musicians, writers, radio programmers, promoters and record labels were all reconnecting with old musical friends or discovering people they'd only known digitally for many years. Will Ackerman, the founder of Windham Hill Records, was the éminence grise, albeit a blonde one. I kept thinking of the Eric Burdon line from "Monterey": "Prince Jones smiled as he moved amongst the crowd." Except 10,000 electric guitars weren't groovin' real loud. Seven albums and artists Ackerman produced were nominated for awards. Three of them won.

At least as steeped in the New Age lore was Steven Halpern, looking dapper, a full head of white hair and beard, wearing a black suit, open necked white shirt and red scarf. He was the first to consciously make and market New Age music and he presented, with humor, the Best Album and Best New Artist Awards.

It was all on display at the 12th Annual Zone Music Awards show, which took place on Saturday, May 7, at the Joy Theater in New Orleans. Modeled after the Grammy Awards telecast, it featured live performances, awards and banter between hosts Bill Binkelman and RJ Lannan, writers for ZMR. Like the Grammys and Oscars, it also displayed women dressed to the nines in low-slung sequined gowns and

body-hugging cocktail dresses, with notable exceptions like White Sun's Santosh Kaur Khalsa, who was bedecked in a white turban and matching robes.

And the men? Well, other than a few wearing variations on eastern attire, the guys stuck to business suits with unusual ties. RJ Lannen claimed his baggy suit came from a Goodwill-type store. I believed him.

In-between awards presentations and the Lannan/Binkelman Show were musical performances. They ran the gamut from piano playing singers to nouveau flamenco guitarists to space music.

Much of the music had a hardcore New Age approach, including a guided meditation from Jennifer Zulli. You just don't see that at the Grammys. In that vein, Paul Avgerinos had a surprisingly affecting set. Fresh off winning the 2016 New Age Grammy Award, he played a set of chants dedicated to his guru, "the hugging saint," Amma. It hit me as corny and sappy at first as Avgerinos, Jennifer Zulli, and Darlene Koldenhoven began chanting, but I found myself drawn into their serene mantras, especially the "Om Mantra." Robin Spielberg dropped piano fairy dust with Jonn Serrie laying a synthesized carpet. Ron Korb floated some airy Asian flute leaves while Jeff Pearce laced it all together with his gently penetrating guitar sustains. Pearce was playing around the clock. He played a 90 minute, deep, deep ambient excursion for solo electric looped guitar the previous evening.

Ron Korb took the stage for his own set with his Asian flutes, playing melodies from his album, *Asia Beauty*, which would win for Best World Music Album. Even when he played to a backing track, it didn't diminish the channeling of ancient spirits through his flutes. To use an Asian, zen-like phrase, he is a monster player.

The most unaffected and pretension-free performance of the night came from Erik Scott. The former bassist with Alice Cooper, Flo & Eddie and Sonia Dada took the stage with just pedal steel guitarist John Pirruccello and some minimal backing tracks. He played music from his album, *And the Earth Bleeds*, deploying a deep, note-bending soulful sound and heartbreaking melodies. Pirruccello wove cosmic country glissandos around Scott's bass, while Jeff Oster stepped-in on a piece with some flugelhorn dressing. Even Scott missing a cue and forgetting to trigger a backing sequence couldn't mar it.

Seemingly dropped in from Caesar's Palace was Louis Colaiannia who looked and sounded like he should have been at the Las Vegas Music Awards instead, with slick songs that would have fit on the old Dating Game TV show. His vibraphonist Joey Glassman provided some relief with a driving solo. Colaiannia actually said one of his songs was "baby-making music." Nudge-nudge. Wink-wink. Know what I mean? He wasn't the only performer who one attendee thought was "cringe-worthy."

Synthesist Jonn Serrie capped the evening by tapping the lounge lizard side of his music with, like Colaiannia, a dose of Vegas. His outfit was a puffy, gold lamé blouse and tight black leather pants that might have left Rick Wakeman wincing. All he was missing was a cape, as he stood for most of his set facing the audience, poised with hands spread between two keyboard stacks. He had a whole prelude act that featured him as a commander of a spaceship taking off while his wife, Annie, stood on stage swaying to music from his more romantic, saccharine side. There were nice touches by Jeff Pearce and Jeff Oster, but when the evening called for an energized flight of grandeur to end the night, Serrie delivered something soporific and corny without a touch of irony. , .

Other performances included the out of tune operatic new age pop of pianist/singer Darlene Koldenhoven, joined by flutist Wouter Kellerman and violinist Josie Quick, some tricky nouveau flamenco by Terra Guitarra, and pianist Robin Spielberg.

Jeff Oster, who played with half the acts, was also the big award winner, taking home plaques for Best Chill/Groove Album and Album of the Year for Next. He brought producer Will Ackerman and engineer Tom Eaton on stage and among his thank you's, he gave a shoutout to Echoes as the first place he ever heard his music on the air.

Paul Adams, who we've been playing since his Various Waves album in 1990, took home Best Contemporary Instrumental Album, for his lush, New Acoustic outing, Imaginings, beating out two nice albums by Neil Tatar. But Tatar got his when he won the Best New Artist award. "Getting Best New Artist for New Age music is really incredible," he said, "especially at my age." He's 65 years old.

Bob Ardern's Eight Winds album had a surprise win in the Best Instrumental Album – Acoustic category. The little-known artist beat out some strong contenders like Peter Kater & Michael Brant DeMaria's Heart of Silence.

Another surprise was in the Best Relaxation/Meditation Album award: Sherry Finzer & Mark Holland's Flute Flight. Their wonderful CD of flute duets beat out new age pioneer, Steven Halpern and Lifetime Achievement Award winner, Deuter.

The Vocal Album category usually doesn't feature vocals in the traditional sense, dominated instead by chant and new age ballad releases, but taking home the award was Blackmore's Night, the renaissance-meets-Loreena McKennitt project of guitarist Richie Blackmore from Deep Purple and his wife, singer Candice Night.

The Best Electronic Album was a surprisingly weak category, especially for the ZMRs. Ken Elkinson's vaporous and amelodic – Music for Commuting, Vols. 7-12 won, while albums by the likes of Steve Roach, Robert Rich and Tangerine Dream didn't even make the final five.

The strongest category was Best Ambient Album. The robust field included Chronotope Project's Dawn Treader, Bryan Carrigan's Fall into Winter, Howard Givens & Craig Padilla's Life Flows Water, and one of the best albums of 2015, let alone best ambient album, Robert Rich's Filaments. The duo of Al Jewer and Andy Mitran took home the award with their lush ambient album, Surrounding Sky.

Best Piano Album – Solo award went deservedly to Fiona Joy for her Signature-Solo release, beating strong contenders from Robin Spielberg and Michele McLaughlin. With the exception of old Windham Hill stalwart Scott Cossu's Safe in Your Arms, the Best Piano Album with Instrumentation category was filled by parlor pianists, with Kathryn Kaye's Patterns of Sun and Shade taking the prize.

In the Best World Album category, flutist Ron Korb took home the award with his elaborately-packaged and beautifully produced Asia Beauty. He beat out last year's New Age Grammy Award winner Wouter Kellerman's Love Language among others.

Finally, I became part of the awards ceremony, even though I didn't personally win or present anything. Early in the day before the awards show, Kevin Keller had sent me an email talking about remixing his

Intermezzo album and remembering when we first met and recorded a living room concert at his home in San Francisco's East Bay. I jokingly replied, "Hey! I'm at the ZMR Awards. Do you want me to accept your award?" I followed it with a winky-face. He emailed back: "Actually...YES. Seriously." His album, La Strada is a masterpiece of ambient chamber music, was an Echoes CD of the Month, and was #4 on my Top 25 for 2015. But I still didn't think he could win over entries by Ludovico Einaudi and Yo-Yo Ma. But he did. Much to the surprise of presenter Jennifer Defrayne, who was told that Kevin wouldn't be there, I leaped on stage, took his award and said some nice things about this artist who deserved it and more.

This only scratches the surface of the ZMR Music Awards, the only institutional accolades out there for music like this. Producers Daryl Portier and Ben Dugas have done a remarkable job both in putting the awards together in the first place. The show which was nicely, if modestly produced, despite the frequently dead announce microphones on stage. But even that became a good running joke. This was a meeting of a tribe that doesn't necessarily get the respect it deserves, and certainly has trouble punching through to the mainstream. Maybe this ZMR Awards will help some of them get there.

~John Diliberto