

ATMOSPHERIC AMBIENCE

Getting to the spirit of New Age music with Nick Ashron and Jeffrey Wood

Over recent years New Age music has crossed boundaries to set itself firmly in the mainstream of contemporary music. The likes of such established figures as Rick Wakeman, David Sylvian, Brian Eno and the Cocteau Twins, producing music now to be found stocked under 'New Age' in many record stores has lent credence to a style of music that was once seen as part and parcel of the stoned hippie-rope sandals-muesli and beads brigade.

This year's Festival for Mind-Body-Spirit gave prominence to New Age music, both in its demonstration programme and, for the first time, in a series of evening concerts. Two of the artistes featured were Nick Ashron and Jeffrey Wood.

Both acoustic guitarists and keyboard players, English-born Ashron and American Wood are two of the musicians picked by Matthew Manning to feature in the recently-formed Cloud Nine Music catalogue; specially chosen for their creative ability to produce instrumental sounds geared to stir both the senses and inner spirit of the listener.

Although apparently on the surface two quite different personalities (Nick: enthusiastic, outgoing, loquacious; Jeffrey: quietly reflective, astute, deep-thinking), underneath they hold a common bond in feeling they have in some way been 'guided' to their meeting with Matthew and into joining the Cloud Nine stable of composers, and share a similar spiritual quest of wanting to reach, to move, to unite and to inspire through their music.

For a man who's waited almost 20 years to get where he is today, no one can accuse Nick Ashron of being either impatient or a flash-in-the-pan.

"I knew the spiritual pathway was a much harder one than the easy, get-rich-quick alternative - but I didn't think it was going to take me this long!, he laughs, "I've only just now started being able to do what I want." Having formed Wandering Minstrel Music as a vehicle to enable him to produce the kind of music he believes in (*The River Song Suite*, released at the end of last year, was their first credit; an album containing pieces strongly inspired by Nick's deep love of, and affinity with, nature), Nick is planning to form a duet with fiancée Tahnee (who supplied vocals on the Deva track on *Earth Dance*), based around the acoustic guitar and vocals, and will be touring around the country within the near future. Also on the cards are plans to put together a New Age rock group next year.

But, like the man says, it's been a long time a-comin'.

Brought up amidst a number of different cultures in various parts of the world (including India, Saudi Arabia and Borneo) through his father's work as a pilot, Nick developed an interest in music at 13, while still living in Aden. Arriving back in England at the age of 15 into the mid-sixties Beatles heyday, the young Nick was inspired further musically by the songs of Lennon & McCartney.

"Initially my first musical attempt was with the drums," he recalls, "because it was

rhythms that seemed to be the thing I picked up on first in music. I used to get out the cardboard boxes and a couple of bits of wood, and I'd be bashing away along to the music! On my sixteenth birthday, just before moving out to Borneo for four years, I asked my dad if he would buy me a drum kit. As he couldn't afford it, he asked would I settle for a guitar. So, I got this guitar and taught myself basically. I bought a book of chords and spent virtually all my time strumming away. At the time the Beatles were my favourite group, so I'd learn to play all their songs and sing them."

Encouraged by his parents to pursue his aptitude for art, Nick spent a year at art school after the family returned to England when he was 19. Following which, he spent the next fourteen years working as a freelance portrait artist. During this period came an important spiritual awakening which answered a lot of the questions and feelings he had had since early childhood - an explanation for the affinity he had felt with God, yet not strictly an affinity in the religious sense.

"My mother dragged me down - more as moral support than anything else - to a spiritualist church one evening, and there for the first time in my life I came up against mediums, clairvoyants, and healers. It was there that I was told by a medium that I had healing abilities. Now that fascinated me: the whole concept was more in keeping with the kind of ideas I had been formulating myself. It was an important moment for me because it confirmed a lot of other things too. From that point I started to read up on healing and began learning how to develop this healing ability I was told I had. I soon began to realise that this was the work I wanted to do."

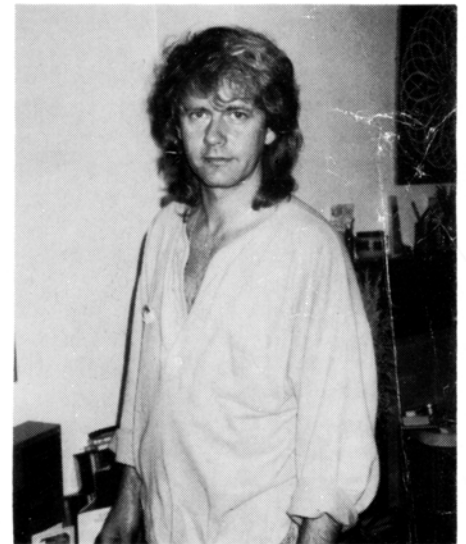
But with music always having remained a strong force in the background, did this not give rise to inner soul-searching: to become a healer or become a musician?

"Yes," Nick agrees, "it was very much a time of choice. On one hand I liked the idea of going out and doing the healing and making that my life's work; being able to, for want of a better term, 'benefit' humanity. On the other, there was music and if I looked at that then the choice was whether I was going to become just a commercial pop song writer, become famous, be a 'star' and all that - and I admit that it did appeal to me! - but there has always been that strong spiritual aspect inside, and it was like there was that pathway and there is the other: how about linking in the spiritual healing with music? I started to think deeply about this and finally decided that since music

reaches a lot of people, why not use that as a spiritual medium?"

With that in mind, Nick went on to form the first New Age rock group, Pegasus, in 1980. After three years and several changes of vocalists, Nick left in 1983. Over the next years he began focusing on writing his own material as well as learning to play keyboards. Then, in late '87, he met Matthew Manning and as a result of that meeting came *Earth Dance*, released in April. ("I feel I'm always pointed in the direction I should go.")

"*Earth Dance* relates to my respect and awareness of our planet; of our need to work with nature. That's what I feel this 'New Age' is all about: respect and co-operation with nature," Nick states emphatically. "Matthew gave me the opportunity to put this across and I'm extremely grateful. What's come through with *Earth Dance* is to inspire people into action in their own chosen way to bring about a planetary healing."



Nick Ashron

Each of the seven tracks on *Earth Dance* relates to a season of the year, as well as the spiritual growth cycle. For example, spring Nick perceives as the time of rebirth (capturing this on *Return of the Earth Mother* and *Valley of Flowers*); summer is the period of experience (*Dance of the Deva*); autumn, the season of reflection (*Lament for the Trees* being inspired by the devastating hurricane of last October, the positive aspect of the beauty of trees reflected in *Sea of Gold*); winter, the time of initiation, all that has gone before being now held, dormant and frozen (*Secrets of the Ice Mountain*). The last track, *The Earth Moves*, is a final summing up of life, as well as nature.

While some may decry both the 'New Age' and New Age music, Nick is more than happy to be associated with both: "I like the term 'New Age'. I feel that we are very much at the beginning of a new age. My concept of New Age music is that it's the Age of Aquarius - which is associated with

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