

MONTANA SONG (1989 Essay on Montana)

By George Winston

Every year, or every other year, I tour Montana playing solo piano concerts. I spent most of the 1950's growing up in Miles City and Billings, and we've traveled to other parts of the state, such as Chico Hot Springs near Bozeman, Yellowstone Park and Glacier Park. A major highlight of traveling in Montana for me is listening to pianist Philip Aaberg's music while I am there. It's as if Montana sings its songs and Phil picks them out of the air and puts them perfectly onto the piano. I sometimes go to the places that he wrote the songs about and listen to the pieces there -- that is quite an experience. One time while driving from Billings to Miles City, I suddenly got the urge to hear the second song on side two on Phil's **HIGH PLAINS** recording. This piece, titled "*The Big Open*," totally captured and heightened my sensitivity to this location. I later found out that this song was written for this exact area. Although I could have inferred it from the title, I didn't realize this at the time. He has written other great evocative pieces about many other parts of the state such as "*Marias River Break-down*," "*Going-To-The-Sun*," "*Westbound*" (about traveling on the railroad line near Highway 2 on the Hi-line), "*Sweetgrass*" (about the Sweetgrass Hills), and many others. It's wonderful hearing his music in other parts of the world, but no matter how much I get into the pieces, I feel them more deeply while listening to them in Montana. Phil spent his first eighteen years growing up in the small northern town of Chester, between Shelby and Havre on Highway 2 on the Hi-line.

I play four of Phil's pieces: two on piano - "*Spring Creek*" and "*Before Barbed Wire*;" and two rearranged for solo guitar - "*Remembering This Place*" and "*No Wonder They Sing*" (written for the state bird, the Western Meadowlark). Phil's first recording **HIGH PLAINS**, reminds me of Montana in the daytime. His second

recording **OUT OF THE FRAME**, reminds me of Montana at dusk, and his third recording **UPRIGHT**, reminds me of the Montana night -- both of impressionistic scenes and of the Saturday night dances. Phil also did some great music for a Japanese film **SHAPE OF THE LAND**, about the late explorer Noami Uemura. Especially effective was the great piece **When it Snows**. I wish I could give Phil's recordings to everyone in the state. I wish visitors could get his recordings at a crossing stop when they crossed the border into Montana. The experience of listening to Phil and being in Montana is very purifying to me. He plays in Montana every 1 1/2 or 2 years, usually in Missoula, Billings, Bozeman and Havre.

The inspiration I get from Montana is both tangible and intangible -- it's hearing Phil Aaberg's music there; it's the fact that I grew up there; it's the beautiful topography; it's the great people; it's the unbelievably beautiful music of the Western Meadowlark, but it is something else that I can't put into words. It's the greatest feeling of love and inspiration I have ever had. Each Western Meadowlark seems to have a simple song and at least two different complex songs. Their music pierces right through me -- I not only hear it, I feel it. I have tried learning their songs from tapes at half speed, but they are just impossible to play. Each one often sings the same song repeatedly but I never tire of it. They are perfect songs -- I never think "why doesn't it sing something else." One time I suddenly realized I needed to find more clearly the music that was as natural for me to play as the Western Meadowlark's songs are for them. They sing very powerfully and can sometimes be heard up to a half mile away. It's amazing that such a small being can sing so loud. They are very sensitive and tend not to be seen if there are people or cars near them, but you can still hear them. Often they can be heard answering each other at various distances which is a very enchanting effect, especially if you can't see them. You will not see them if there is cold,

wind, rain or overcast skies. I have made quite a few recordings of them, some of which were used on the nature recording **MERIDIAN -- A JOURNEY OF SPRING**, compiled by bio acoustician Bernie Krause, for which Phil Aaberg recorded some background music. I would very much like to find out more about the Western Meadowlark, and if anyone knows of any in-depth articles you can write to me at: George Winston, P O Box 4287, Santa Cruz, CA 95061.

Regarding my own solo piano recordings, **AUTUMN** is mainly about Miles City, and **DECEMBER** is mainly about Billings, but also has Miles City in it. **WINTER INTO SPRING** is about both places. I also did an earlier solo piano recording **BALLADS AND BLUES, 1972** which has the song "*Miles City Train*," about riding on the now defunct passenger line which used to run through lower Montana. "*Thanksgiving*," on the **DECEMBER** recording is also a Miles City inspired song, as is ironically, "*Woods*" on the **AUTUMN** recording (the big cottonwoods all around Miles City seemed like a forest to me, especially in contrast to the eastern Montana plains). Although I am mainly Montana inspired, my influence is not quite as pure as Phil Aaberg's because he spent more years there. My next recording will be about the Spring/Summer seasons in Montana and should be out in 1991.

I also play solo guitar, and I am very inspired and influenced by the solo fingerpicking guitar styles of Hawaii called slack key guitar. This way of playing began around 1830 when the guitar was introduced to Hawaii by the Mexican, Portuguese and Spanish cowboys hired to manage an overpopulation of cattle. This music is particularly imbued with the spirit of *Aloha*, or love. It is the music, impressions and emotions of the Hawaiians put on solo guitar. The other kind of guitar playing that I do is what I call "Montana Guitar." This is partly a combination of several influences: slack key guitar (I play quite a few of Hawaii's slack key guitar pieces as Montana pieces -- some sound more like Montana than Hawaii to me -- in fact, when I go to the

Big Island of Hawaii I get a feeling similar to being in Montana, both for the diverse topography and for the feeling of being off the beaten trail); Irish music; American folk songs and fiddle tunes; western cowboy pieces; the great western songs of singer/songwriter Mary McCaslin (she has many fine albums, especially inspiring have been **PRAIRIE IN THE SKY** [Philo 1024], **THE BEST OF MARY McCASLIN** [Philo 1075], and **SUNNY CALIFORNIA** [Philo-Mercury SRM-1-3772]); TV and movie western themes and soundtracks; the work of solo guitarists/composers Daniel Hecht and Pierre Bensusan; the works of harpists Patrick Ball, Kim Robertson and Andreas Vollenweider; and of course Philip Aaberg's piano pieces. However, Montana guitar is a style that I have had to mainly make up, which is more difficult than tapping into a vast tradition such as Hawaiian slack key guitar. Montana guitar, the way I play it, has a bit more impressionism yet starkness than slack key guitar and has more minor chords. (The Hawaiians, very ingenious musicians, don't need minor chords to express feelings of melancholy, longing or pathos. And they are the all-time greats in composing beautiful, simple melodies that haunt the listener). Evolving this style has been a long, slow process and I am grateful for the outside influences, but mainly it has to come from my own feelings. I am very grateful for having spent a lot of time growing up in this beautiful state and I can say that the modest, workable level I have managed to get to, both musically and spiritually, would not have been possible without the inspirations and feelings I get from Montana now, and from my memories of growing up there. Some of my greatest memories (besides the huge skies) include: looking up through the green trees against a particular shade of blue sky that is unique to Montana, with those puffy white and grey clouds; the blazing yellow cottonwoods in the fall in Miles City, and the deep autumn there; the seemingly multi-dimensional Pioneer Park in Billings with its many cottonwoods; the incredible Miles City spring after winter is finally over; the

distinct differences between each of the seasons; going back to Miles City after 25 years and finding it hadn't changed; the winds in the non-summer months with many visible shades of greys and browns; and the stunning quiet of rural Montana.

It is a privilege to be able to play the tours, and to do them as benefit shows for the Montana food banks which are doing a great job of helping folks who are down on their luck. It's nice to try and give something back, although I feel I could never give back a fraction of what I've received. I gave myself a year off last year to make myself miss Montana even more, which is good for the music. I toured Colorado instead, which was of course very beautiful and inspirational, but it wasn't the same. It is great to be back in Montana this year.