ARTISTS
William Ackerman, acoustic steel-string guitars
Alex de Grassi, acoustic steel-string guitars
Barbara Higbie, piano, violin, voice, and guitar
Alex Kelly, cello
Todd Boston, acoustic guitar

PROGRAM
A winter solstice concert featuring Windham Hill artists William Ackerman, Alex de Grassi, Barbara Higbie, and special guests.

Tonight’s program will be announced from the stage and will be performed with one intermission.

PROGRAM SUBJECT TO CHANGE. Please be considerate of others and turn off all phones, pagers, and watch alarms, and unwrap all lozenges prior to the performance. Photography and recording of any kind are not permitted. Thank you.
ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Guitarists William Ackerman and Alex de Grassi and pianist/multi-instrumentalist Barbara Higbie honor the season with a concert of original and traditional acoustic music drawn from the multiplatinum-selling Winter Solstice series as well as their many solo releases.

William Ackerman founded Windham Hill Records in Palo Alto in 1975. The label’s audiophile recordings were a runaway success with critics and audiences alike. Musicians including Michael Hedges, George Winston, Will Ackerman, Alex de Grassi, Barbara Higbie and Darol Anger and their group Montreux, Liz Story, Mark Isham, and Tuck and Patty quickly became internationally recognized. The name “Windham Hill” became synonymous with the best in acoustic music in the 1980s and 90s. Windham Hill’s 10 Winter Solstice compilation recordings, selling in the many millions, “changed people’s conceptions of seasonal music” (John Diliberto/Echoes radio show host). Tonight’s winter solstice concert brings the music of Windham Hill full circle. 40 years after it was originally conceived on the Stanford campus.

I grew up in Palo Alto, where my father was an Old English philologist at Stanford. I was a student there from 1967 to 1971. The birth of Windham Hill was arguably in an archway near the old student union, where I would play simply because of the reverberating sound. Friends who loved the music raised $300 in $5 bills for me to record my first album, In Search of the Turtle’s Navel, at Mantra Studios. I recorded it in two afternoons, heart pounding through my chest. My cousin Alex de Grassi and I grew up together in College Terrace…a neighborhood in Palo Alto. The original address for Windham Hill Records was Box 9388, Stanford, CA. It will be somewhat haunting to come back to play at Stanford, but I’m looking forward to it very much. I considered having everyone leave their seats and follow me to the old archway place from his adolescence in Vermont) was borrowed from his building company so that originally his business card read, “Windham Hill Builders/Records/Music (BMI).”

Will and his cousin Alex de Grassi toured Germany in 1979. While there, Ackerman began playing a cassette of piano music for those he met. This was the demo tape from a pianist named George Winston. Ackerman continued as the sole producer for Windham Hill with George Winston’s Autumn, which was released in 1980 and immediately garnered a four-star review from Rolling Stone magazine. To this day, Ackerman continues to produce 10 recordings a year. His productions have enjoyed more number one positions on the NAR/ZONE radio charts than those of any producer in the history of the genre. In 2012, Ackerman released a CD entitled The Gathering: A New Generation of Musicians Produced by Will Ackerman. The CD included the work of 22 musicians that he had produced and introduced the world to brilliant new music and musicians. The Gathering won Best Contemporary Instrumental Album and Album of the Year awards in 2012. Speaking from his recording studio in the hills of Vermont, he remembered:

Alex de Grassi is a Grammy–nominated, internationally recognized pioneer of the acoustic steel-string guitar. His 35 years of touring include performances at Carnegie Hall, the Montreux Jazz Festival, and the Bath International Guitar Festival. New York Guitar Festival Director David Spelman says, “Alex de Grassi is a treasure…his technical wizardry as well as his vibrant and poetic music making make him one of the most distinctive steel-string guitarists performing today.” His 1978 recording, Turning: Turning Back (cited by Acoustic Guitar magazine as among its top-ten essential finger-style guitar recordings), and his recordings Slow Circle (1979), Southern Exposure (1984), and the Grammy-nominated The Water Garden (1998) are considered classics of the genre. His most recent solo recording, Now and Then: Folk Songs for the 21st Century, features his contemporary take on traditional folk songs. In 2006 de Grassi was co-commissioned by String Letter Publishing (Acoustic Guitar magazine), along with violinist Jeremy Cohen, to compose and perform Three Themes for Guitar and Strings at Herbst Theatre. Now residing near Ukiah, de Grassi also remembers that time:

Alex de Grassi
I was born in Japan in 1952, and my family moved in 1954 to Palo Alto, where I grew up and attended Stanford Elementary School, Terman Junior High School, and Gunn High School. I graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in economic geography. My grandmother, née June Morgan, was a Stanford graduate and claimed to be one of the few women of her time to have a “Block S” for her participation in sports. My grandfather, Antonio de Grassi, was a native of Trieste, Italy, was a violinist with the San Francisco Symphony, had his own string quartet, and taught at UC Berkeley. My father was raised in San Francisco, won a state classical piano competition as a teenager, and later graduated from Stanford. My first cousin Will Ackerman won a state classical piano competition as a teenager, and later graduated from UC Berkeley. My father was raised in San Francisco, won a state classical piano competition as a teenager, and later graduated from Stanford. My first cousin Will Ackerman founded Windham Hill Records. We grew up around the corner from each other in Palo Alto, a few years apart in age. When Will went to Prep School in Massachusetts, there was a long period when we had very little communication. It was quite a surprise a few years later to learn that we were both composing and performing music for solo steel-string guitar. It was only natural that I should follow in his footsteps, recording my music (1977) on his fledgling label. One of my very first professional performances was upstairs at Tressider Hall. Later both Will and I would perform at the Stanford Theater and the Varsity Theater on University Avenue in Palo Alto.

Before we knew it, Will was leading the charge and it seemed the whole world was following. It was a joyous time with a warm family feeling among the musicians.

I recall truly breathtaking concerts at Davies Symphony Hall, the Montreux Jazz Festival, in a castle in Italy, and in a grand palace in Stockholm. Will Ackerman at the helm of Windham Hill is the truest example of a visionary in action that I have ever witnessed. It’s an honor to be part of this historic concert, returning to Stanford with Will, Alex, Alex, and Todd. They are beautiful artists and truly good human beings.

Joining Ackerman, de Grassi, and Higbie tonight are two acclaimed instrumentalists: cellist Alex Kelly and guitarist Todd Boston.

Todd Boston represents the new generation of steel-string guitarists. His album Touched by the Sun, produced with Will Ackerman, was named Best Acoustic Instrumental Album of the Year at the 2012 ZMR Music Awards and charted number one on the World/New Age listening charts. In 2013, Boston, an in-demand producer as well as a composer/performer, collaborated on Peter Kater’s Grammy-nominated album Illumination. He spent 2012–2013 touring with singer Snatam Kaur as a member of her band. He has worked with Snatam Kaur, Ramesh Kannan (world-renowned percussionist), Tony Levin (legendary bassist for Peter Gabriel), Charlie Bisharat (Grammy-winning violinist), Jeff Haynes (Grammy-winning percussionist), Eugene Friesen (Grammy-winning cellist),

Barbara Higbie is a Grammy-nominated, Bammy Award-winning pianist/composer/singer-songwriter as well as a championship fiddler. The Los Angeles Times described her music as “a ray of bright sunlight,” and the San Francisco Chronicle calls her “full of life and brilliant in her playing, the most exciting musician we’ve heard.” In addition to being the first female instrumentalist on the Windham Hill label, Higbie has appeared with musicians as different as Santana, Bonnie Raitt, the Kronos Quartet, Milton Nascimento, and Spyro Gyra, recording on over 100 CDs. In 2011, she was the first-ever artist-in-residence at the prestigious jazz club Yoshi’s. A graduate of Mills College (where she was a student of Terry Riley’s) and the recipient of a Watson Fellowship, she collected traditional music throughout West Africa. At 23, Higbie recorded her Windham Hill 1982 duo release Tideline with violinist Darol Anger, which garnered a four-star review in Downbeat magazine. In 1984, she co-led a group with Anger including Mike Marshall, Andy Narell, and Todd Phillips to record Live at Montreux. The group became the Montreux Band (with Anger, Marshall, and Michael Manring) and toured internationally for 12 years. Higbie’s composition “To Be” became a radio staple of the 1980s, a TV theme song in Italy, and a video with heavy rotation on VH1. Her early Windham Hill titles have recently been reissued on Adventure Music. Higbie’s solo work has made the top-ten lists of the Washington Post and Performing Songwriter magazine. The most recent of her six solo releases, Scenes from Life, was recorded in 2014 at Lucasfilm’s Skywalker Sound. Higbie recalls:

When I first met Will Ackerman in 1981, it felt like I’d encountered a human cyclone. If Will became excited about music, true magic happened. I was working hard on creating my own style of music somewhere between classical music, West African, Joni Mitchell, Chick Corea, bluegrass, and Bartók. Ackerman heard one of my early compositions on Darol Anger’s Fiddistics album and said, “I want to make a whole album of that!” At the time, Windham Hill Records was in what looked like a garage in Palo Alto.
Deva Premal and Miten, Manose, Tina Malia, Shimshai, Donna De Lory, and Suzanne Sterling and has performed at prominent festivals such as the Wanderlust Festival Vermont and California, Earthdance, Harmony, and the 2007 Mac Conference. Todd Boston’s training included studying North Indian classical music with the late great maestro Ali Akbar Khan.

Alex Kelly is a San Francisco–based cellist, composer, and electronic musician. He composes and performs with major symphony orchestras, chamber orchestras, new-music ensembles, string quartets, cello quartets, big bands, jazz combos, rock bands, hip-hop crews, klezmer bands, world music ensembles, theater companies, radio productions, ballet companies, modern-dance companies, and circus troupes. He also composes film scores and video game music. Alex Kelly is the author of the cello technique book *The Seven Points*, which teaches fingerboard-mapping techniques. His live-looping solo show has been seen in a variety of venues ranging from Davies Symphony Hall to Yosemite mountaintops.

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