NEW YORK In the sprawling new age field, Paul Winter is credited by many as one of genre's original architects. Still, he and partner Richard Hill realize that their label, Living Music, cannot survive on laurels alone in what has quickly become a glutted market.

Thus, Living Music has just reshaped its 9-month-old manufacturing and distribution deal with Windham Hill. But Winter's creative strategy remains unchanged.

"I kind of get a kick out of seeing this big deluge of imitation come along because I've seen it so many times—it's inevitable that that would happen," says Winter, looking back on a 25-year recording career. "But the music that's got an enduring quality will sail right on through that, I feel, and survive nicely.

He can point to the landmark Winter Consort album "Icarus" for proof of that conviction. Since 1972, it has sold some 200,000 copies, modest numbers by pop standards but "pretty good for an album that was expected to kind of disappear a year after its release," says Winter.

Through a licensing agreement that Living Music signed with Epic, the title's original imprint, "Icarus" also has the rare distinction of being sold simultaneously on two competing labels.

Perl, Living Music's president, says he rearranged the label's Windham Hill accord because "the market is so flooded with what is being called new age music that tapes are buying one or two copies per title instead of eight or 10. There's only so much this market will bear."

The new deal, which began April 1, is a production contract and lowers Living Music's overhead. At the same time, Perl says Winter's 8-year-old label can concentrate solely on producing "quality music," while relying on Windham Hill's growing staff—and its ties with the RCA/A&M/Arista Distribution network—to pull its product through to the market.

One of the first titles to benefit from the new pact is "Whale Songs," a collaboration by Winter and Consort keyboardist Paul Haar. Inspired in part by the movie "Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home," Winter says 10 of the album's 11 songs were "composed" by humpback whales. It features narration by actor Leonard Nimoy and tapes recorded by Dr. Roger Payne, a consultant for the recent "Star Trek" epic who released the early 70's cult album "Songs Of The Humpback Whale."

Other recent releases include debut solo albums by two longtime Consort associates: guitarist Oscar Castro-Neves and vocalist Susan Osborne. Winter is also reading "Earth Beat," a new Consort album due for June release.

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