

# Has this musician found the cure for insomnia?

The synth pioneer Chuck Wild wrote for Michael Jackson and Max Headroom. Then he became a sleep music superstar



Chuck Wild

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**C**huck Wild is, in a way, just what you would expect from a man whose job is to put people to sleep. The 76-year-old sleep music star shows up at the airport near his Los Angeles-area home in a beige jumper, beige shorts, beige socks and beige shoes. “How was the flight?” he asks in a raspy voice with a wide smile, looking very much the part of the kindly grandfather.

But Wild, as the stage name implies, has lived a life that could not be further removed from what he does now, pumping out auditory Ambien for the sleep-deprived. To wit, when we climb into his very sensible Honda and head towards his two-bedroom bungalow on a quiet dead-end street, he asks that his city remain nameless. He’s had stalkers, you see.

These were not superfans of Liquid Mind, the name of his one-man band that has produced titles such as *Breathe in Me*, *Serenity* or *A Gentle Rain in My Soul*. Rather, the unwanted attention stemmed from his many years working with Michael Jackson. Wild recounts, in his best rendition of the high-pitched Jackson voice, what the king of pop told him after hiring him back in the 1990s: “He said, ‘Chuck, I want you to make sounds the human ear has never heard before.’ ”

But that is a whole other chapter in the extraordinary life story of Wild, lord of the slumber. These days, sleep is sexy. Meditation apps such as Calm and Headspace have built gigantic businesses by “appifying” sleep aids and meditation. Wild, a prolific keyboardist, producer and composer, has been at it longer than virtually anyone, going back to the late 1980s.

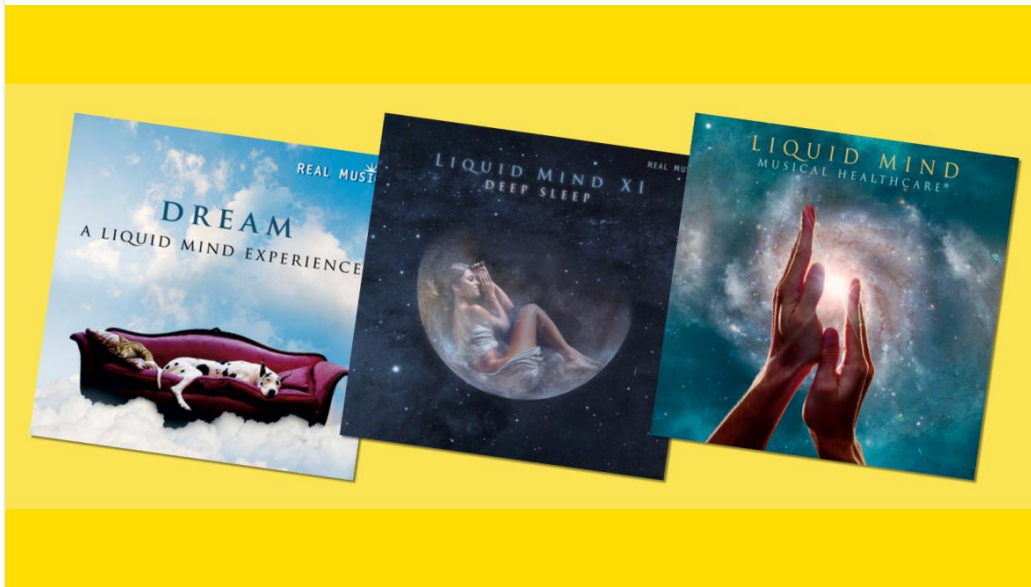
His tracks often top ten minutes and are not so much songs as long-held chords that bleed one into the next — a skill he honed playing the church organ as a child in Kansas City. His “zero

beat” music may be the closest human approximation to whale song or, as Steve Perry, the former lead singer of Journey, once put it, “No vocals, no drums, just ethereal synths.” Perry listened to Liquid Mind almost exclusively during a period of personal struggle in which he had fallen “out of love with music”.

Wild, a former rocker, has quietly turned himself, over decades, into one of the world’s most commercially successful sleep musicians. He has released 18 studio albums. His music is played in hospices and hospitals, and is studied by sleep experts around the world. Liquid Mind ranks perennially at the top, or near it, of the Billboard New Age charts. On the American music streaming service Pandora, his tracks have racked up 1.5 billion listens. “My music is sedative,” Wild says proudly. “It helps people — and it helps me.”

But it is only now that Wild’s moment may have truly arrived. A growing body of clinical studies has linked lack of sleep to a cascade of health problems, from increased risk of heart disease and diabetes to higher rates of industrial and traffic accidents. The National Institutes of Health, America’s top medical authority, reckons that more than a fifth of Americans — almost 70 million people — have sleep disorders, describing it as a “serious public health concern”. Germany’s public health system

last month became the first in the world to approve a digital sleep improvement programme, under which “treatments” such as downloads of relaxing music and lifestyle coaching are reimbursed in the same way that pills are.



Wild's Liquid Mind series of sleep-enhancing albums began as a way to combat panic attacks. From left: Dream (2011); Deep Sleep (2016); and Musical Healthcare (2021)

In short, the science of sleep is finally catching up with the fecund mind of Wild — and the composer finds himself at the centre of an ambitious attempt to transform his music into medicine. Philip Moross, the 61-year-old British entrepreneur behind Cutting Edge Media Music, a television and film music label that has produced the scores for hits such as *The King's Speech* and *Stranger Things*, snapped up Real Music, the record label to which Liquid Mind is signed, in 2019. His plan: to put Wild's music through a battery of scientific trials to prove that it is, in fact, as good or better than a sleeping pill.

Moross's son, Freddie, 28, runs Myndstream, the Cutting Edge wellness label under which Liquid Mind sits. “When you look at music that's being relied upon in healthcare situations, it's not regulated,” he says. “There's no FDA [Food and Drug Administration] stamp saying this is music that should appear in surgeries. We want to try to accomplish this. What better place to start than with Chuck?”

Wild's conversion to the art of the soporific did not come by choice. It was, instead, the product of an acute personal crisis. Liquid Mind was his salvation. "I almost killed myself," Wild says matter-of-factly. He was not suicidal. He just almost worked himself to death.

For a time Wild lived the rock'n'roll dream. He was the keyboardist for Missing Persons, a rock band heavy on mascara, big hair and tight trousers; the lead singer, Dale Bozzio, was famed for her coconut-shell bras. They were regulars at the fabled LA music club Whisky a Go Go and played to crowds of tens of thousands. "We warmed up for David Bowie at the Us festival," Wild says. "It was incredible."

Wild rubbed shoulders with legends including the Allman Brothers and Quincy Jones, scored an Emmy-winning television

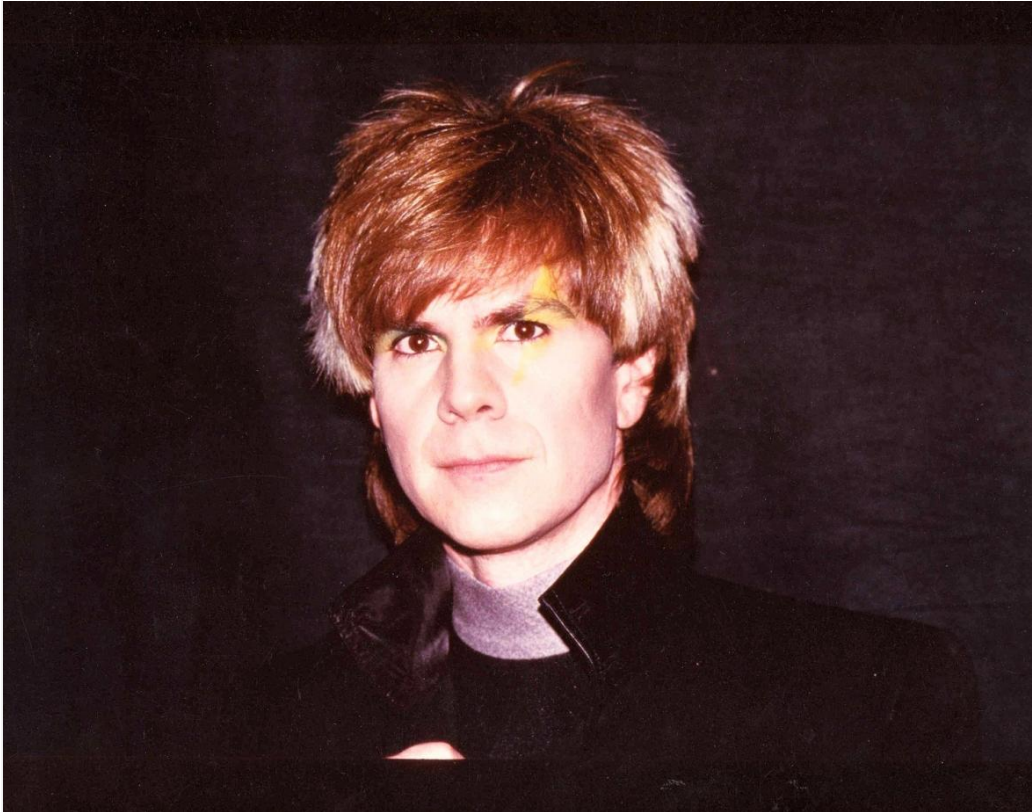
show, wrote music for the Pointer Sisters and, of course, collaborated with the biggest pop star in history. For a boy from Missouri who showed up in LA “with \$300 in my pocket”, it was the stuff of fairytales. But like any tale of Hollywood fame, it could not last. “All my music was fast. Everything I did was fast,” he recalls. “I couldn’t do anything that was slow.”

In 1988 Wild was hired to score the final season of *Max Headroom*, a quintessentially 1980s television show created by Channel 4 and sold into America. For a brief moment the programme, centred on the “computer-generated” character Max, captured the zeitgeist and Wild was working 20-hour days. He guzzled industrial-strength coffee and for months captured only fleeting moments of sleep. One day he found himself struggling to breathe. “I thought I was having a heart attack,” he recalls.

A friend threw him in his Porsche and sped to the nearest doctor. It was not a heart attack, the doctor told him, but a panic attack. “I’ll never forget this in my whole life,” Wild recalls. “In one hand, the doctor held up meditation instructions. In the other, it was a medication prescription. He said, ‘The two of these — it’s only one letter different. And they’re both as effective for treating anxiety. Your choice.’ ”

Wild took both, but neither helped immediately. Something in him had broken.

As a gay man in the 1980s, Wild had watched friend after friend die from Aids. “I stopped counting at 65,” he says, welling up. “We would go there and sit at these funerals, the group of gays. At some, the parents would look at us and tell us we needed to leave. None of us cried. I didn’t cry for four years.”



Wild played keyboards in the LA rock band Missing Persons  
COURTESY OF CHUCK WILD

That first panic attack was like a dam breaking. He would have several a day, rendering him a barely functional hermit. “I was insane,” he says. “When you are having a panic attack, you’re not very rational. Everything was jerky movements. It was, like, ‘I gotta eat really quick, I got to do this really quick.’ ”

As he slowly emerged from the fog, via meditation and therapy, his psychologist gave him an ultimatum: no more therapy until he took a single day for himself.



So Wild booked one night in a motel on the coast, ventured out to a rock and watched the waves break. He was 42 years old and had been in Los Angeles for nearly a decade, but had never gone to the beach until that moment. “All of a sudden I was feeling very relaxed and I thought, ‘What’s going on?’ I was sitting there and I said to myself, ‘I wonder if it’s the sound of the ocean? Maybe the sound of the liquid is relaxing my mind.’ ” he says. “Liquid Mind was born out of pain. It was born out of sleep deprivation. It was lemonade from lemons.” That was in 1988.

Walk into Wild’s one-storey, two-bedroom home and “cocoon” comes to mind. It is the middle of the day but all the blinds are closed. Soundproofing covers the doors. The windows are quadruple-paned — so as not to bother the neighbours. It is quiet and clean. The fridge is sparsely stocked: an unmistakable sign of Wild’s bachelorhood. This is not entirely by choice, he says. “At a certain point, I just decided to stop trying. All my boyfriends died.”

His living room is functionally the “studio”. It includes a grand piano piled high with papers and computers, two banks of keyboards, a central sound-engineering console and at least four sets of speakers, each with distinct characteristics. Wild still works a gruelling schedule — up to 12 hours a day. A single



album can take a year to produce, not least because he and his co-producer Jonathan, a university student, can only work on the actual music for a few hours at a time before one of them conks out.

Wild plays all the instruments and then painstakingly mixes them together so the chords blend seamlessly. “In music therapy you want to avoid what they call an ‘arousal response’. You don’t want to do anything that attracts attention,” he says. Why all the speakers? “Every speaker gives you a different message. Most engineers learn one set of speakers and they do brilliant work. I do this because I know that people listen to my music on ghetto blasters, on headsets, on telephones. I want it to sound equally good everywhere.”

There are plenty of studies that have shown music to be beneficial: for babies, for insomniacs, for students, for older adults. Indeed the practice of music therapy, for sleep and other therapeutic purposes, has been around for decades. If you count Tibetan monks, who famously use chanting to slow their heartbeats, it has been around for centuries. But now that sleep is “a thing”, both among public health officials and in popular culture, there is renewed urgency to find solutions. Sleep has been transformed into a metric to be tracked – by your phone, your smartwatch or fitness tracker.

At Myndstream, Moross has partnered with SleepScore Labs, a maker of sleep analysis devices, to carry out a longitudinal study of people with sleep disorders. Their patterns will be monitored for three weeks without intervention and then they will be exposed to Wild’s music. The study will also test alternative sleep music to see whether Wild’s outperforms.

This is critical. The dawn of so-called “generative” artificial intelligence has led to an explosion in computer-generated tracks. Scroll through Spotify or Apple Music and they are chock-full of sleep songs pumped out by nameless computer

programs. Tracks often clock in at just longer than 30 seconds — the minimum length to trigger a payout by the platforms. “The question when we bought this catalogue,” Moross says, “was whether AI would overtake ambient music. We took a pretty heavy bet that actually, you will never replace human creation.”



Wild on stage, left, with Missing Persons in 1984  
COURTESY OF CHUCK WILD

Wild’s music education started aged four, when he was diagnosed with Perthes disease, a hip condition that, in 1953, was treated by a year of bed rest followed by another year in a leg brace. Wild’s parents hired a caretaker who also happened to be a pianist. Every day she would carry him to the piano and teach him how to play.

He eventually got back on his feet, but stuck with the lessons through his teenage years. At church, he convinced the organist to let him sit with her during services and eventually to play. By the time he went to university, the Vietnam draft was plucking healthy young men from the population in their thousands and

sending them off to fight in the jungle. Wild's father, a former US army colonel, told him to join the ROTC, a university programme that offered part-time training and allowed cadets to enter military service at a higher rank. Wild spent four years in the navy, where he served as an admiral's aide. It was in the military that he first felt an acute sense of danger due to his sexuality. "I knew I was gay at the time, and being gay in the navy is a big no-no," he says. "I had seen all these people get court-martialled and dishonourably discharged for being gay."

When he returned to Kansas City, he fulfilled a promise to work at his father's insurance company but also started playing in cover bands at night. After a couple of years he went on the road and then into the music business full time. And then, eventually, to total burnout.

It was Michael Jackson who helped launch his new life. After his beachfront revelation, Wild had started to work on his "slow music" and, at first, it was a labour of love. "By 1992 I was giving away hundreds of cassettes," he says. "I just thought, 'This music is helping me.' I used to listen to it 24 hours a day at home." No one, however, was paying for Liquid Mind music back then.

He taught music to get by, but didn't make anywhere near enough to start his own label. An industry friend told him he'd need \$150,000 to get "Chuck Wild Records" off the ground.

Then, in 1994, Wild got a call from a producer friend who said he was working with "the Glove", as Jackson was known. "He called up and said, 'Michael wants you to make some of those great sounds like you did on *Max Headroom*.'" So he got to work. Wild hired a team of three people and sent them out across southern California, tape recorders in hand, to record hours and hours of ambient sounds.



In 1988 Wild wrote a score for the satirical science-fiction TV series *Max Headroom*, attracting the attention of Michael Jackson

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Wild would then engineer the results into unique clips, drive to whichever studio Jackson might be recording at and play him his manufactured audio. It was painstaking work, for which he was paid handsomely. A few of his sounds made it into Jackson's 1995 album *HISTory*, but he couldn't be sure how many. "I never listened to the album," he says. "I have this thing

about not listening to my own music — except in the early days, when I felt it was saving my life.”

Over four years Jackson paid Wild roughly \$150,000 — the Liquid Mind nest egg. Wild recalls: “I said, ‘Michael, you know it’s your money that financed Liquid Mind?’ And he put his hand up to his chest and said, ‘That makes me feel good.’ ”

Today, at 76, Wild remains a man in a hurry. He estimates he still works 12 hours a day, but it is different now. “Although my routine is a lot of hours, I’m also doing work I love. It’s not stressful to me,” he says. “The [album] titles represent my life journey.” These titles reflect the soothing nature of the content, helping listeners to tap into a world of soporific calm. The initial Liquid Mind release, *Ambience Minimus* in 1994, was followed by albums including *Dream*, *Deep Sleep* and *Relaxing Rain & Ocean Mixes*.

After spending the best part of the day with Wild, he insists on driving me back to the airport. He doesn’t put on any music, and certainly not his — but not because of his aversion to listening to his own work. “Please make sure this is part of whatever you print,” he says. “You never, ever listen to Liquid Mind when you’re driving. It makes people sleepy. It’s music as medicine, you know. It needs to be FDA-regulated. I wish they would.”

They just might.

## **If that doesn’t work for you, try this...**

***Russell Foster*, professor of circadian neuroscience, shares his expert’s guide to sleeping soundly**



### **During the day**

- Get as much natural morning light as possible. The morning use of lightboxes can also help regulate sleep
- If you nap, ensure it is not for longer than 20 minutes and not within six hours of bedtime
- Exercise – but not too close to bedtime
- Concentrate food intake to the first and middle parts of the day
- Avoid excessive consumption of caffeine-rich drinks, especially in the afternoon and evening





## **Before bed**

- Reduce light levels about two hours before bedtime
- Stop using electronic devices about 30 minutes before bedtime
- Ideally avoid prescription sedatives/sleeping tablets
- Don't use alcohol, antihistamines or other people's sedatives
- "Wind down" before bed. Adopt behaviours that relax you: reading, mindfulness or a bath can be useful – and, yes, listening to relaxing music too





## **The bedroom**

- Ensure it isn't too warm (preferably 18-22C)
- Keep it quiet, or use "white noise" or relaxing sounds
- Keep it dark. Blackout curtains help if street light is a problem
- Remove TV, computers, tablets, smartphones
- Don't "clock watch" – consider removing illuminated clocks
- Don't take apps that monitor "REM" v "NREM" sleep too seriously. None has yet been endorsed by the main sleep societies



## **In bed**

- Keep to a routine — go to bed and get up at the same time each day, including weekends
- Ensure the bed is large enough, with a good mattress and comfortable pillows
- Keep bedside lights low
- Use earplugs or an alternative place to sleep if your partner snores. Ensure snoring is not due to sleep apnoea
- If you wake up, stay calm: consider leaving the bed, keep the lights low and find a relaxing activity, then return when tired

## **Is more sex the answer?**

How can sex, which is arousing — at least for most people — promote sleep? The basis for feeling sleepy after sex seems to be related to the release of a specific set of hormones. Sex increases the release of oxytocin from the pituitary gland. In the

context of sex and sleep, oxytocin makes you feel more connected to your partner and lowers cortisol, so reducing stress. Having an orgasm releases a hormone called prolactin, which can remain elevated for at least an hour afterwards and makes you feel relaxed and sleepy. The combined effects of oxytocin and prolactin mean you are more inclined to cuddle up to your partner and then fall asleep.

*Russell Foster's Life Time: The New Science of the Body Clock, and How It Can Revolutionise Your Sleep and Health is published in paperback on Thursday by Penguin at £10.99*