

# PSYCHIC SHIMYCHIC

*Why the Southern California Skeptics are, well, skeptical about channelers, psychic rainmakers and New Age crystals*

By Carla Kallan

Al Seckel recalls the woman who telephoned him insisting she could make it rain in her Seal Beach neighborhood whenever she wanted. "I asked her if her powers were absolutely infallible, and she said yes," recalls Seckel. "I said, 'Good. Make it rain tomorrow.' The next night she called back and said it didn't rain in Seal Beach because she accidentally caused it to rain in Louisiana by mistake."

Seckel is not a great believer in rainmakers. Or fire walkers. Or channelers. Or earthquake predictors—of the Nostradamus variety, at least. And yet he spends a good deal of his 16-hour workday associating with people who are. Actually, as president and founder of the Southern California Skeptics, it's one of the ironies of Seckel's job that he probably knows more about paranormal and psychic phenomena, from out-of-body experiences to telekinesis, than most of their so-called practitioners.

Seckel, a 29-year-old graduate in math and physics from Cornell University, founded the Pasadena-based organization three years ago after the burgeoning '80s fascination with New Age fads and pseudosciences finally got under his skin. "What ticked me off," he says, "was that the whole human species was facing some very complicated global problems. What we needed was clearer thinking, not muddled misinformation. I thought founding the Skeptics was the most profound contribution I could make."

Seckel started out with no money, a small newsletter and a telephone, which



RICHARD ARRINDELL

*Skeptic Seckel: "With the smallest amount of probing, you can show people that something they considered valid is invalid."*

he used to call everyone he knew. "I knew Murray Gell-Mann, a Nobel laureate in physics, because of my background in physics. I knew some other people and told them about my idea, and I eventually gathered the best academics around. Actually, I have to admit, I was met at first by a little skepticism myself."

Today the nonprofit group is loosely associated with the New Age-based Committee for Scientific Investigation and Claims of the Paranormal and boasts 2,300 members, from housewives to teachers, many on its credential-laden board of directors: Caltech's Gell-Mann; Al Hibbs, a senior staff scientist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory; William Jarvis,

president of the National Council Against Fraud; Edwin Krupp, director of the Griffith Observatory; KABC weatherman George Fischbeck; and the renowned magician James ("the Amazing") Randi. The group meets regularly the second Sunday of every month at Caltech, with additional meetings at Cal State Fullerton and Southwestern College in San Diego. Public lectures are free and cover topics ranging from UFOs and the not-so-mysterious Bermuda Triangle to astrology, a hot topic since the revelations about Nancy Reagan's predilection for the planets.

The Skeptics' first meeting was a real grabber. More than 350 people showed up