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101 **BURRELLE'S**

# Dóah's Worldly Music

BY NOAH HERSCHMAN

**D**óah, a five-member "orchestra" of unusual instrumentalists, has been defined as everything from an adult contemporary act to a visionary world music outfit. The group blends together 75 different instruments to produce rhythmic, multicolored sounds with underlying spiritual and political meanings.

Two New Hampshire residents, 37-year-old Randy Armstrong of Dover and 36-year-old Ken LaRoche from Peterborough, are the ringleaders of Dóah. (The name comes from an Arabic-Persian word that signifies a call to prayer and meditation.) The pair benefits from similar musical and ideological visions, and it shows in their music. Armstrong plays acoustic and classical guitar, as well as West African balofon and adodo ("talking") drums, mandolin harp, Japanese biwa, Chinese yueh-chin, sitar, African mbira, and Bolivian charango. LaRoche plays flutes, piano, synthesizer, saxophone, North Indian bansri flutes, South African kalimba, and mbira. Their bandmates include Marty Quinn, Volker Nahrman, and Charlie Jennison, who also play a variety of unusual and conventional instruments.

Since its founding in 1974, the group has recorded seven albums, six for Philo/Rounder. The first two Philo efforts were recently compiled onto one CD, minus two tracks, on *Dóah: The Early Years* (see review, p. 102). The band's current disc, *World Dance*, was released by CBS-distributed Global Pacific.

*World Dance* (CDR 8/89, p. 46) offers stunning sonics and intriguing rhythms, melodies, and Eastern and Western sounds. "One World Symphony," the closing track, exemplifies Dóah's ongoing efforts to dissolve the barriers between cultures and musical styles. As Armstrong explains, he and LaRoche wrote this three-part suite "for the 1986 United Nations International Year of Peace. It was inspired by a book called *The Promise of World Peace*."

"One World Symphony" typifies Dóah's musical messages. The group has been intent on "dissolving the barriers between cultures and musical styles" since its first performing days in the early '70s. "At that point in our lives," LaRoche says, "we wanted to find a way to use our music as a positive force. So much of the music then had a down side, because it was reflecting a lot of the pain experi-

enced by oppressed black musicians and anger about politics.

"We were very open to what we might do. We wanted to keep our sound fairly tonal, fairly uplifting. In the past, I had backed up folk singers, started my own rock'n'roll band, and played in a very avant-garde jazz group. I wanted to put some of all of those



Dóah's lineup features (left to right) Charlie Jennison, Randy Armstrong, Volker Nahrman, Ken LaRoche, and Marty Quinn.

experiences into a group, but with a focus of playing music that would project a feeling of hope. That's what I was getting into in my life, having gone through some very difficult times and coming out of them realizing that there are positive things to work for."

Armstrong attributes the creation of Dóah to his instant synergy with LaRoche. "It was simply a matter of sounding good when we first played together. Our experiences, though different, were common enough to make us want to see what we could come up with. Between Ken's aspirations with bamboo flutes and modern Western instruments and my desire to move into that area, it became apparent that we had a fairly unified point of departure. That was 15 years ago."

Armstrong and LaRoche spent most of the next seven years—during which they recorded their first album, *Light Upon Light*—working as a duo.

"On our second album, *Ornament of Hope*, we began to hear larger orchestrations in our compositions," Armstrong says. "So we brought in musicians to perform with us for the recording. In 1984 we decided to expand to the quintet, which has been in exis-

tence since our fourth album, *Companions*."

After starting work on *World Dance*, Dóah began shopping for a larger label. "It's the difference of getting major-label retail distribution rather than through an independent distribution network," Armstrong says. "We're glad we were with Rounder, but we had several deals with different companies on the table. We went with Global Pacific because CBS is the largest record company in the world. They're in a position to make things take off."

The biggest battle for Dóah now may be one that all so-called new age acts face: classification. LaRoche admits "a love/hate" feeling about the term "new age."

"The summer of 1978 was the very beginning of new age, out on the west coast," he recalls. "There were a few tapes out there of mellow, inspirational music. We—Dóah and Philo Records' president, Bill Schubert—had a similar vision. We felt that we were in the middle of a spiritual or social renaissance. In that sense, we all agreed that we were entering a new age, so we adopted the term. Then it started getting a bad name, because a lot of people were slapping together very poorly recorded new age basement tapes."

"Right now, new age means nothing as far as artistic intent goes. It's become a marketing term. I like it if it helps us get our music to more people. I don't like it if it doesn't."

LaRoche admits that he and his colleagues are still searching for a word or phrase to describe their music.

"World music" is something we chose a number of years ago. But what we have found—and it's sad—is that for the general audience, the term "world music" is too confusing. We could call ourselves adult contemporary musicians, but that eliminates the fact that we get standing ovations when we play to high schools. We play a community concert and find half the people over the age of 60, sitting in lawn chairs, and they love it, too. So it's unfortunate that it has to be categorized."

"All music should be listened to for what it is," Armstrong adds. "When it comes down to it, music or art appreciation is between the listener or the viewer of the art and the work itself. What is it about music that we really like? What does it do? It either enhances or experiences something new, or it makes us relate to something in the past. It's either in tune or not in tune. It's a completely individual experience." ■

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Ancient Beauty (1981)

Philo CD-PH-9004

The Early Years (1977/79)

Rounder CD-11539

Companions of the Crimson Coloured

Ark (1984)

Philo CD-PH-9009

World Dance (1988)

Global Pacific ZK 40734