

Seacoast Arts & Entertainment

By JOHN GRADY

When the Do'a World Music ensemble began more than 10 years ago, the band's acoustic, "new age" sound didn't seem to have a prayer of surviving in the slick world of contemporary music. But that's exactly what they did have — a prayer.

Do'a means "a call to prayer" in Arabic. The spiritual basis of the band, rooted in Baha'i principles of world unity, has proved strong. The world seems to be coming around to their beliefs.

Last year the United Nations declared an International Year of Peace, in which Do'a was a participant. They were invited to perform at peace festivals from San Francisco to Canada to India.

And today, it seems that even the record buying public is developing more of a taste for their "new age" style. Do'a World Music Ensemble members expect their fifth Philo Records album to be their biggest selling record yet. The album, scheduled for release in early or mid-summer, is now being recorded at a studio in Massachusetts.

The Seacoast-based band hasn't performed at home since appearances at the Portsmouth Music Hall and the Portsmouth Jazz Festival almost a year ago. On Saturday, April 25, they return to the Seacoast to play at the Unitarian Church, 292 State Street, in an 8 p.m. show featuring works from their forthcoming album "Global Dance."

One side of the new album is taken up by the three sections of the "One World Symphony," which the group debuted to a sold-out crowd at the Portsmouth Music Hall last year. It will be performed in its entirety at the upcoming Portsmouth concert. The composition is a musical kaleidoscope combining the spirit and emotions of the world's diversity.

"The album is dedicated to world peace," says Randy Armstrong, who co-founded Do'a with Ken LaRoche on that same principle back in 1974. "It's dedicated to the United Nations' Year of Peace, the culmination of our peace tour, inspired by the Baha'i Peace Statement issued from the world center in Haifa, Israel, in October, 1985."

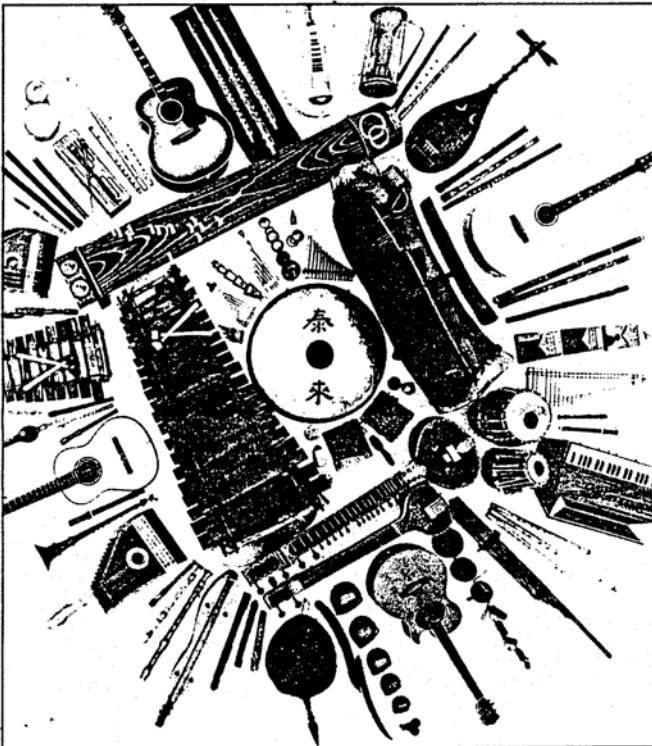
Do'a World Music Ensemble included in its concert tour a "peace booth" that distributed literature and information about world peace to thousands. At peace conferences and concerts in San Francisco, Chicago and Ottawa, Canada, "there was great response," says Armstrong to both their music and their message.

Maybe it's because of space travel, allowing the world to see an image of itself as a single blue planet in the blackness, or maybe it's the leaps in communication and other high technology, but there is more awareness of the world as one place. Interest in ending the pattern of armed conflict is growing. Do'a works with groups like Beyond War, the Earth Run and others that are springing up with similar goals.

"The arms race is a symptom of other problems that need to be addressed," says Armstrong. "Racism, nationalism, the need for equality of

A musical kaleidoscope

For Do'a World Music Ensemble, the path to peace is through music, but the band's new album may be a path to popular success as well. Music lovers will have a chance to judge for themselves in a rare local performance by the Seacoast-based New Age artists.



Do'a World Music Ensemble combines musics from around the world into an improvising, original sound. This photo includes many of the instruments used by the band, such as the xylophone-like African balafon, sitars, drums and a gong.



ments, including some strange-looking, foreign creations, fill the stage at a Do'a concert. Along with the gleaming flutes, guitars, piano and drums, there is a giant gong, a bamboo marimba, gourds, rattles and shakers.

"When we put a West African balafon with a Japanese biwa, a North Indian tabla and a European concert flute together on a song, we're showing how the world can combine," says Armstrong.

Mixing styles and sounds from throughout the world in a mix of jazz improvisation is Do'a's "world music."

DRUMS ARE the most common element in the diversity of

dancing all over the stage. Even the normally serene jazz stylist Charlie Jennison, who plays sax and other instruments, excitedly shakes his rattle with a giant grin. Volker Nahrman drops his bass and joins in.

The furious drumming builds. The crowd gets swept into the delirious, primordial religious spells Do'a aims at. Barriers break down. People sway and move together.

Spontaneous, improvised music is a big part of a Do'a performance. While there are feelings of spontaneity on their recordings, the band's compositional and arranging skills are showcased more on record, especially the new album.

"Global Dance" reflects the growing maturity of the music and the band itself. "We've spent more time developing the material," says Armstrong. "We've been playing it for a year, fine-tuning it before going into the studio."

The "One World Symphony" opens with "The Awakening." At the heart of this composition are LaRoche's sweetly melodic flute playing and Armstrong's ringing guitar patterns, the same elements the duo first combined on their debut album "Light Upon Light," released in 1978.

The big change on the new album is the use of vocals on every cut. In the past, the group has made only limited use of the voice, confining it to brief chants or accents.

"The Awakening" makes full use of a choir, featuring the band's drummer Quinn, on a lyric that repeats the word "peace" sung in 39 different languages.

The second "movement" is called "19 Letters," for a variety of reasons. It's based on a 19-beat cycle, with an East Indian influence. The number 19 is also significant in the Baha'i faith, relating to the original 19 Baha'is. Also, there are 19 months of 19 days each in the Baha'i calendar.

The title cut, "Global Dance," is the final movement, and it begins with a charging drum beat. The driving ensemble sound gives the piece a jazz-rock fusion flavor, in the style of Weather Report. The vocals add to the pop quality of the piece, which twists and turns through a variety of international flavors. The band's improvised percussion solo drives the message of the title home.

"Rhythmically, it's more poppy," says jazz master Jennison, who is excited about the way the band is moving. While he hesitated calling it mainstream jazz, he did say the band is "stronger, less subtle." He is also pleased with the wider range of emotion and music on the new album. "Night-season" is my favorite song," he says.

Written by Armstrong last winter on High Road in Lee, where band members Armstrong, Quinn and Jennison live with their families, the song is a more moody, bluesy jazz tune. The disquieting tone is a departure from the band's normally optimistic and uplifting approach. It features some heartfelt sax by Jennison along with LaRoche's complicated and masterful African kalimba, or thumb-piano, playing. Exploring darker emotions in this way gives the band's sunnier tunes

IN PHOTOS, ABOVE, IN OCTOBER, 1985.

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"The arms race is a symptom of other problems that need to be addressed," says Armstrong. "Racism, nationalism, the need for equality of men and women and the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth - there will not be peace on earth until that is achieved."

For Do'a World Music Ensemble the means to peace is their music. Seventy different musical instru-

Do'a World Music Ensemble combines music from around the world into an improvising, original sound. This photo includes many of the instruments used by the band, such as the xylophone-like African balafon, sitars, drums and a gong.



Ken LaRoche of Peterborough (left) and Randy Armstrong of Lee co-founded the Do'a World Music Ensemble in New Hampshire in 1974, based on their beliefs in world unity. Today they are going stronger than ever, with those beliefs still at the center.

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DRUMS ARE the most common element in the diversity of the world's music styles. Exploring all the different kinds of music in the world has led Do'a to a mastery of percussive jamming.

During their show, all the members join drummer Marty Quinn on rattles, drums, blocks and gourds,

the title home.

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OTHER TUNES on the album include "Moth-like Lovers of the Light," featuring soaring flute riffs

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chin, sitar and others; Charlie Jennison, saxophones, keyboards.

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will give the band a much wider audience. He feels the band has hit its stride, and is ready for the mainstream.

"The new album is a total integration of acoustic instruments with high-tech synthesis," he says. "It's a more modern sound for our original concept." It was recorded on a 48-track, solid state computerized mixing console at Blue Jay studios in Carlisle, Mass., with an eye to digital disks.

Armstrong is also working on extending the range and capabilities of the strange and sometimes ancient instruments used by the ensemble. He now has a MIDI (com-

puter interface) microphone that attaches to acoustic instruments and enhances the signal through a computer, allowing a whole new range of sounds.

Seacoast listeners familiar with Do'a World Music Ensemble will be in for some surprises when the band unveils its latest efforts in the concert sponsored by Harbor Arts, an organization of the Cuzin Richard Entertainment Agency in Portsmouth. For those unfamiliar with Do'a, the concert is a must.