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GLOBE PHOTO / BARBARA HOBSON

Randy Armstrong, with his various instruments, cofounded the groups DOAH World Music Ensemble and Unu Mondo.

'There's a ton of talent in the musical world'

DOVER, N.H.

If it's a strange-looking instrument from a far-off corner of the world, chances are Randy Armstrong has played it. A teacher, composer, and cofounder of the popular groups DOAH World Music Ensemble and Unu Mondo, Armstrong, 47, has been responsible for turning American listeners on to a host of new sounds.

As an adjunct faculty member at Phillips Exeter Academy, he plays and teaches North Indian sitar and tabla, and West African drums. And in Unu Mondo - along with bassist/keyboardist Volker Nahrman, and German percussionist Bertram Lehmann - it is not unusual to see him switch from guitar to Native-American Lakota courting flute, to Japanese Koto, or Biwa in a single piece of music. He spoke recently with Globe correspondent Mark Dugotino from his home.

I believe that there's virtually no music, going into the next millennium, that hasn't been influenced from one culture to another. In popular music, in new music composition, in jazz - the influences are strong.

In the beginning, for me, I think it was primarily a spiritual and philosophical way of looking at the world: Why not truly embrace and look beyond oneself and one's own environment? It came from people like Martin Luther King Jr., who was a tremendous influence on me as a young man, in my teens, because I played in interracial groups as a high school student. I just became more and more exposed to other cultural influences, and so then I embraced that in my early 20s.

Back in the early '70s, there were certainly people who were exploring world music. But now the exposure has been so great that kids are going off to college and becoming ethnomusicologists. There's just a ton of talent out there in the musical world. I see younger players getting better and better by the minute, because the exposure is so great.

In the mid-'80s, individuals like Peter Gabriel, with WOMAD, and Paul Simon, with West African and South African musicians on "Graceland," gave worldwide exposure to

other cultural musics within the context of pop and rock. Of course the experiments with those influences have been going on for many, many years with great musicians like Babatunde Olatunji, beginning back in the '60s. And jazz, which is literally two cultures coming together in music anyway, has been exploring the use of world music for decades.

If all the flowers in the garden were just one color, it would be pretty boring. So I look at the musical palette,

the influence and textures that now take place - because, for example, I can drive to Boston and take a lesson with a master djembe [a type of drum] player from Guinea.

You go to Berklee College of Music now and you can study West African drumming, in more than one tradition. You can study Brazilian music. You can go over to New England Conservatory and study world music for sitar if you want to. That's just the way it is. Even on the high school level, students can do a lot more independent projects. I have a lot of young people coming to me seeking information for international studies, and influences on music, and things like that.

To me, this kind of study and understanding is what's going to help save the world.

Voices of New England

RANDY ARMSTRONG

And, on the drums — everybody

Growing enthusiasm for rhythms shows in jam sessions, classes

By Mark Dragostino
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

NEW HAMPSHIRE WEEKLY

ARTS & PEOPLE

Randy Armstrong, co-founder of the wildly popular DOAH World Music Ensemble and frequent First Night favorite Unu Mondo, has been a front-row witness to the growing enthusiasm for rhythms and cultures he first started exploring in the 1970s.

"Most of the '90s there has been an explosion of people being interested in drumming," Armstrong says. "I think a lot of it was brought to the forefront by people like Mickey Hart of the Grateful Dead, and people like Babatunde Olatunji — he's one of the grandfathers of the drumming movement."

Armstrong, a world-music specialist who writes music in the jazz idiom and plays the sitar, among other things, teaches youth and adult drumming classes at The Bell Center in Dover. He also has more than 30 drummers under his wing each year at Phillips Exeter Academy, where he collaborates with a guest choreographer for a dance-and-drum concert every May.

His classes, like Benoit's classes, are very different from a drum circle in that there is little to no improvisation allowed. Students learn multiple rhythm patterns, and work on specific traditional "tunes" in the West African tradition — tunes such as "Koukou," from Guinea, and the almost universally known "Fanga," which was popularized by Olatunji.

"I feel that people have a sense of community by playing together," Armstrong says. "Even in this little group, they get together outside of class, and drum."

Some students are trying to get involved in music for the first time, and see drumming as a way in: "I feel rhythm is the basis of music," Armstrong says. "It's where everything comes from."

Some students are dancers or theater people looking for a way to improve their art.

Some students are jazz drummers looking for the roots of all those complex rhythms they play with sticks on a kit.

But however they start, Armstrong says, "it's infectious. It's pretty hard to stop. You go further and further because it just becomes a deeper and deeper experience."