

many small steps from a human, one giant leap for humankind

Randy Armstrong stirs the world's musical melting pot, 35 years and counting

by Jon Nolan

The world is a much smaller place these days. With the click of a mouse or the punch of a button on the TV remote, you can read a soldier's blog, swoop like a bird through exotic locations on "Google Earth" or watch world events happening in real time—just like millions of others half a world away. We're all experiencing the same things. All this new technology has just put an exclamation point on what musician Randy Armstrong has been saying in words and music for nearly four decades—the people of the world are more alike than not.

Armstrong was born in West Virginia, but grew up in Columbus, Ohio, in the 1950s and '60s where he attended a high school that was being racially integrated through busing. Soul and R&B music introduced by his African American classmates captured his imagination, as did the four mop-top lads from Liverpool. By sophomore year, he was playing professionally in rock 'n' roll bands.

"(Then) Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and there was so much tension," Armstrong remembers.

"I started realizing that people of this earth needed to get together."

A simple sentiment, yes, but Armstrong means it. The assassination would be one of the most important events of his life, as would the arrival of the first pictures of the planet Earth that came home with the Apollo 8 astronauts later that same year.

"Because my last name, I figured Neil Armstrong must be some distant relative," Armstrong jokes, "but watching 'Earthrise' was one of our very first exposures to this vision. That began my quest of looking at the Earth as one country, and looking at humanity of the citizens of that country. I decided to look at all traditions and I never turned back."

Sitar, Lakota flute, Koto, balofon, djembe, koto, charango and mbira are only a few of the more than 200 percussion and stringed instruments, from just about every culture, that he owns and plays. Between solo albums, ensemble records and considerable session

work, his discography is more than 30 strong. Even more discs will be added to the collection this year.

"Yeah, this is basically my coming out year again," says Armstrong, who has plans to release collections this year from his own Randy Armstrong Ensemble, a second collaboration with Genevieve Aichele, his co-conspirator in the Armstrong and Aichele storytelling project, and a disc of meditation songs which the performer will try to complete during The Wire's RPM Challenge this February.

"I still practice every day," Armstrong says. "At this stage it depends on what project I'm working on," he says. "Right now I'm mixing a story from Japan. So, building up to this, I've been practicing my koto and shakuhachi, embracing the motifs and practicing the scales. Guitar I pretty much pick up every day."

Armstrong landed in New Hampshire after visiting the state while on tour with one of the bands he joined in his youth. When he settled in the Granite State, he began his musical studies in earnest at The New England Conservatory.

"It was so exciting I could barely contain myself!" Armstrong says. "In studying sitar, I would practice four, six hours a day. Before that I studied jazz guitar, classical guitar and trumpet. But I had to know enough about these (new) instruments to be able to passionately fuse the musics."

Shortly thereafter, Armstrong discovered kindred spirit Ken LaRoche, and the two started Do'ah in 1973 as a duo of guitar and flute. Both shared a passion for music, different cultures and the Baha'i Faith, a world religion dedicated to the elimination of all forms of prejudice and the unity of the human race.

The group grew to become a four- or five-piece outfit, fleshed out over the years with the addition of saxophonist Charlie Jennison, bassist Volker Nahrman and percussionist Marty Quinn. They played major concert halls (including Carnegie) and universities, and

had recording contracts with labels like Rounder's Philo and Global Pacific/CBS records. Neither Armstrong nor LaRoche could have anticipated that the band they started together would bring them around the world to entertain many thousands of fans. From their humble beginnings in the Granite State, the group would go on to become one of the first bands in western culture to play world music, a term and a genre that they are credited with helping to create.

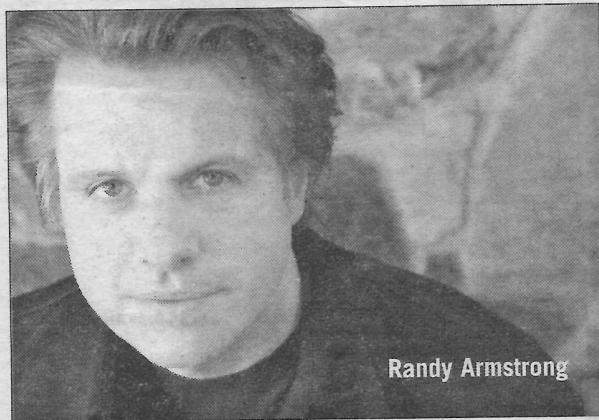
"Do'ah went from 1974 to 1991. When we were ending was when world music was just catching on!" he laughs. "But now it's a household word."

Just a year ago, LaRoche passed away after complications with a medical procedure, but Armstrong is determined to make sure LaRoche's musical contributions to the world don't gather dust.

"In the last year, I've acquired all the masters for Do'ah world music ensemble from both Rounder and Global Pacific Records," he says, "as kind of a tribute to my former partner." Armstrong is getting the artwork back together, and the albums have been digitally remastered so the music can be re-released. Armstrong continues to release his own music through DOMO Records, a company based in Los Angeles and Tokyo with international distribution.

"The digital age has brought people together in such a remarkable way," Armstrong enthuses. He discusses the user-friendliness of new digital recording technology and the ease with which musicians can avail themselves of music and culture from around the globe with a click. "There is certainly lots of (musical) cross pollination, and of course the Internet has created a complete international market no matter where you live. It's important to embrace the things we can do to make changes, whether it's inspiring through music, or direct activism through music. That's the calling for anybody."

The recent loss of his parents, LaRoche, and another close friend who died in a tragic hiking accident has refocused Armstrong on the concept of "giving back."



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