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The Columbus Dispatch

Travelogue soundtrack hits rail on the head

By Bill Mayr ²¹⁴⁷
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Who better to provide some traveling music than a world musician?

That was the thinking of Jonathan Guilbert, producer of a four-part PBS series featuring four chefs and great trains in countries around the world.

He tapped Randy Armstrong — a three-decade world-music veteran and 1969 graduate of Eastmoor High School in Columbus.



Randy Armstrong

Dinner on the Diner will air this month on PBS stations, including WOSU-TV (Channel 34).

The show promises to be a toothsome feast — a large serving of travelogue with a dash of cooking, dished up with Armstrong's music.

The recipe suits Guilbert.

"I saw Randy at a concert in '94 and I was just blown away with his music. He had an understanding of world music that I knew would fit in with what we were doing."

The first segment features chef Dorinda Hafner traveling through South Africa. The other combinations are Graham Kerr in Scotland, Mary Ann Esposito in Spain and Martin Yan in Southeast Asia.

Although the chefs cook in only modest amounts, they are ebullient commentators as their trains pass through lush, exotic locales.

Armstrong's challenge was to match music to images and emotions.

"He has a great sense of indigenous music and is tremendously creative," Guilbert said.

Armstrong, 48, has traveled in North America, Europe and Asia. He owns more than 200 instruments from around the world, "and I've played them all."

His passion for world music "stems from my view that the Earth is really one big country."

A product of the Columbus Public Schools music program, he played clarinet and trumpet. He got his first guitar when he was 12. In the mid-'60s at 15, he became a rocker, playing with groups such as the

■ *Dinner on the Diner* will air at 2 p.m. Friday on WOSU-TV (Channel 34) and at the same time the next three Fridays. A double-CD boxed set under the same name is distributed by Rykodisc on the Ellipsis Arts label.

Gears and Annie Oakley.

While touring, Armstrong fell in love with New England and eventually moved there. He lives in Nottingham, N.H., and returns to Columbus occasionally to visit his mother, JoEllen Scheitlin, who lives on the East Side.

Columbus memories include playing at Valley Dale Ballroom.

"That's a right of passage for every rock 'n' roller in Ohio," he said.

"I still once in a while get together with Mike Shoaf," a Columbus bass player.

Armstrong is cofounder of Doah World Music Ensemble and the Armstrong-Nahrman Group, formerly Uno Mondo. He's also one-half of Armstrong & Aichele: World Tales, a storytelling and music duo. He has five albums distributed by Rounder Records and two on the

Global Pacific label, plus an album of storytelling and music distributed by Family Planet Music.

For the PBS series, music was added toward the end of production.

"It came very naturally to me.

When I saw the footage, I knew

what was needed," Armstrong said.

He composed or arranged much of the music, and played many of the instruments.

Often the music captures the rapid revolutions of the engine's wheels or the rhythmic rocking of the coaches. In other places, instruments reflect passing scenes, such as the melancholy sound of a trumpet as the train travels through a vast stretch of southern Spain.

A choir and West African drumming ensemble, with which Armstrong has worked at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, are featured in some of the South African songs.

"I've been doing quite a few artist-in-residence programs at schools. There just seems to be an incredible need for this, to emphasize music and the arts."

He wants to show students a music career is possible.

"It's not just the 1 or 2 percent you see on MTV."

A veteran British TV producer, Guilbert has made more than 70 documentaries, many for BBC and ITV.

He and Armstrong live within about 10 miles of each other but had never worked together. Guilbert savored the coincidences.

"Here I am, an ex-Brit, living in New Hampshire, doing a series around the world, and just up the road is a guy from Columbus, Ohio, working in world music. It was a perfect fit."

A double-CD boxed set from *Dinner on the Diner* includes a 64-page booklet about the four train trips as well as recipes.

"I feel it's a stand-alone music piece," Armstrong said of the album. "Plus, you can mix African spoon bread."

