

# The Union Leader's **Weekend**

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## Randy Armstrong brings world music to Granite State

By GIL BLISS  
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**N**EW Hampshire is graced by the presence of working artists who enrich our cultural experiences while drawing inspiration for their own work from the natural beauty of their surroundings.

Such is the case with Randy Armstrong, 49, a guitarist who was drawn to the Granite State while working as a teenager in a touring rock band and has stayed here ever since, making a name with the world music ensemble Doah for 17 years and now making music with a former Doah member under the title of the Armstrong-Nahrman Group.

Living outside the usual hubs of the music world — New York or Los Angeles — requires commitment. Armstrong has a ready supply of that, making a living through his professional music career, while passing on his knowledge to the next generation as an adjunct member of the music



**RANDY ARMSTRONG**

faculty at Philips Exeter Academy.

Although Armstrong's horizons extend well beyond state lines to far musical corners of the globe, we still get to hear his work in local venues, such as tomorrow night, April 20, when he appears with his group for a concert beginning at 8 p.m. at the Newport Opera House.

Those musical boundaries most recently extended to Thailand, South Africa, Spain and Scotland when he composed the soundtrack for the PBS series "Dinner On The Diner," in which he collaborated with filmmaker Jonathan Guilbert, an Englishman living in Portsmouth who heard Armstrong perform in concert.

"He remembered me and gave me a call and it fit like a glove," recalled Armstrong.

Guilbert's series took the viewer on four famous train journeys, with Armstrong's music contributing a feel for the region through original compositions and adapted traditional music.

The resulting double CD on the Ellipsis Arts label is a reflection of Armstrong's current musical sensibility, an evolution of sound that began in the back rooms of music stores, learning from big band guitarists. That led to a critically acclaimed partnership with fellow Doah founder Ken LaRoche, a keyboard/percussionist, that yielded several

recordings and a wealth of memorable concert performances over 17 years.

"Some of my greatest musical moments were performing with Ken and with the ensemble," Armstrong said. "We were able to create a body of work and perform at a lot of fantastic venues."

The pair, whose musical collaboration would extend later to a larger group, were performing what is called "world music" long before the term became a buzzword in the music industry.

"When Ken and I began our world music exploration in the '70s, many artists were being influenced by world music, such as Indian music on pop music and the Beatles and Afro-Cuban influence in jazz," Armstrong said.

"When our (first) album came out, we were put in with folk music, which we really weren't or international, which was another genre," he said. "Then we were called new acoustic music and new age music."

"I call it world fusion music/

contemporary jazz because my sensibility harmonically is from the jazz repertoire, although ... I have a lot of influence from Western classical music, too."

Doah made a name for itself throughout the music world but like many of life's partnerships, people grow apart and that was the case with Armstrong and LaRoche when the group disbanded in 1991.

"I wanted to go more into contemporary jazz with a stronger emphasis on world music and Ken was looking at a more folk and classically oriented view of music and ... after having produced five albums, touring and working like crazy, it was time to change and go in new directions," Armstrong recalled.

An accomplished percussionist utilizing instruments from many different cultures, Armstrong leads an African drumming ensemble at Philips Exeter and teaches Indian music as well as basic guitar and sitar.

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**RANDY**

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Armstrong was born in West Virginia, so some of the first music he heard was mountain bluegrass. But growing up in Ohio and Washington, D.C., he was exposed to different cultures and that has affected his musical life.

"My basically white background came in contact with the African American community and I started performing and learning all about the music of that community, as well as the Beatles and the British invasion, which was a big influence, then later on, going into more fusion type of things, like Santana and Afro-Cuban influences," he said.

"I just realized that this is just one incredible planet and

we're in it together," Armstrong said. "As life went on, it became a part of my foundation as a person and I became a Bahai, which embraces the belief in the oneness of all humanity. It opened up my whole musical approach — looking at the world as one big country.

"I'm not trying to be an African drummer, but I'm honoring that culture and fully embracing the techniques of playing that style of music and incorporating it into my mix of cultural expression musically," he said.

His latest ensemble, the Armstrong-Nahrmann Group, was formerly known as Unu Mondo, with bassist/keyboardist Volker Nahrmann, and they continue to

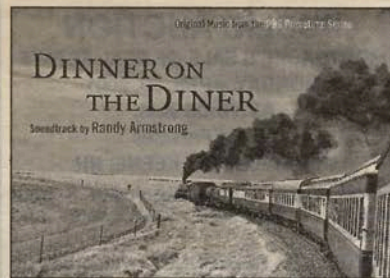
mine the vein of world fusion music.

"We enjoy each other's musical abilities and it's a complement, that's why we have a partnership," said Armstrong of his former Doah bandmate. "Volker's a trained classical and jazz musician."

Percussionists Marty Quinn and Steve Ferraris are also important group members, as is trumpeter Dana Oakes, who also performed on "Dinner On The Diner."

At the Newport Opera House, Armstrong will give two clinics during the day to area schoolchildren, followed by the evening concert.

Future projects include a second album with Nahrmann, and he's nearly ready to



ONE of numerous projects world musician Randy Armstrong has been involved in is "Dinner on the Diner," a PBS series for which he composed the soundtrack.

release his first solo album, which he describes as a guitar-oriented album, with world music influences.

For more information, visit [www.randyarmstrong.com](http://www.randyarmstrong.com). Tickets for his 8 p.m. Newport Opera House show are priced at \$12 and \$10. Tickets for the daytime shows, set for 10 a.m. and 12:45 p.m., are \$8. For more information, call 863-2412.