

Track recording

Elkins native writes music for PBS series about train travel, cooking and cultures

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World music artist Randy Armstrong spent his childhood summers with his dad in Elkins. But by the time he saw the 1969 moon landing and the photographs of Earth taken by Apollo astronauts, an event he says inspired him to pursue his line of work, he had moved beyond those visits.

Still, West Virginia influenced him a great deal, said Armstrong in a cell phone call from the side of a road in Nottingham, N.H., a state he adopted because the hills reminded him of home. That includes Elkins where he was born and where his father, Gerald, still lives, and where he visited grandparents in the nearby small Randolph County towns of Mill Creek and Adolph.

"I think of my earliest remembering of listening to music in West Virginia, with my uncles playing bluegrass mandolin and listening to the country music my parents were playing on the stereo," said Armstrong, who grew up primarily in the Columbus area with his mother after his parents divorced.

Armstrong has spent the past 30 years as a member of various ensembles and bands, including Do'ah, Unu Mondo, the Armstrong-Nahrmann Group and Armstrong & Aichele.

But television viewers will be able to hear Armstrong's latest project, a solo endeavor that allowed him to conjure the hills of Scotland and the savannas of Africa, with Asia and Spain mixed in, on the soundtrack he wrote to the upcoming public television series "Dinner on the Diner."

The show, which will air 7 p.m. Friday, June 9, 16 and 23 on the West Virginia Public Television cable channel 9, and at 3 a.m. on those same days on the broadcast channel 10, will combine geography, food, music and trains

as well-known chefs travel in a particular area and are inspired to make a compatible dish.

Music by the multi-instrumentalist Armstrong will set the tone, with flamenco-themed fare in Spain, bagpipes in Scotland, and acoustic guitar throughout.

"I think it's a dynamite combination," he said. "It's got a little bit of everything. If you're not so much into trains, there's always the food."

Armstrong's compositions can be heard throughout, as a train carrying chef Martin Yan rolls through Singapore and Bangkok while he makes risotto with seafood. Chef Mary Ann Esposito gives bullfighting a try in Ronda, Spain, before creating sea bass and salmon baked in salt. Dorinda Hafner attempts to ride an elephant in South Africa; while Graham Kerr whips up prime fillet with Yorkshire pudding crepes aboard the Royal Scotsman.

"It was not just about what took place on the train or just about the food, but also the cultural exploration," Armstrong said. "Graham Kerr — the Galloping Gourmet — when you go back to your family roots, as he does when he goes to the Kerr family castle, that's a pretty powerful experience."

The "Dinner" gig came to Armstrong through a bit of serendipity. Producer/director Jonathan Guilbert attended a performance by one of Armstrong's groups in New Hampshire.

"He really loved the music I was doing — a fusion of cultural musics from around the world, steeped in jazz and western classical music," Armstrong said. "When he landed the series, he was looking for a composer, and he thought of me and gave me a call."

"He needed somebody who understood these four cultures and how to write music that could be listened to by Western ears."

Armstrong has a collection of

more than 200 instruments from around the world. He teaches sitar and tabla (an Indian stringed instrument and drum, respectively) and West African drumming at Phillips Exeter Academy. He found one of his favorite instrument stores in Berkeley Springs back in the 1970s during a tour.

"We were going down Interstate 81 and we literally saw the sign on the door and flipped out," Armstrong said. "He had hundreds of instruments, and I spent about all of the money I made on that tour there. It's a fond memory."



'Dinner on the Diner'
The program will be broadcast at 7 p.m. Friday and June 9, 16 and 23 on WVPTV channel 9, and at 3 a.m. on those same days on channel 10.

LEFT: Elkins native Randy Armstrong plays several instruments on the soundtrack for the PBS series "Dinner on the Diner."

BELOW: South Africa's Union Limited travels across Kyrman's river crossing during the first episode of "Dinner on the Diner."
Train photo by WAYNE KEET



His versatility shows up on the "Dinner on the Diner" soundtrack. He included an Atenteben bamboo flute from Ghana, the native country of Hafner. He also wrote music for specific scenes, which he saw by watching the completed video of the series (as opposed to, say, hopping on the Oriental Express himself).

He wrote "Capetown," in the South African segment, to go along with a segment in which Hafner skips along the beach.

Armstrong adapted some Robert Burns tunes for the Scottish segment, and used a song called "Akiwowo (Chant to the Trainman)" by Babatunde Olatunji. Otherwise, he wrote all the songs himself, even the ones that evoked Malaysia and Thailand.

"I'm familiar with Javanese music, but I wasn't as familiar with Thai and Malaysian music," he said. "I had to spend quite a bit of time learning what the music was about and about the style."

The entire project sounds like a tall order — especially after he got some not-easily-quantified instructions from Guilbert on what the director wanted.

Jonathan wanted me to create a deeper emotional impact to

the film," Armstrong said. "I remember him saying to me, 'I want you to capture the sadness of the land, of Africa and Scotland.'"

"That's what I really tried to do — create that sense of depth and emotion, of when somebody goes traveling to some foreign place or back to their roots. There's also a deeper experience that people have when they travel that expands them as human beings. That's what I tried to capture in the music."

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