



Randy Armstrong
Musician of the World
Fusing the Beat

PHOTO COURTESY OF RANDY ARMSTRONG COLOR PHOTOS FROM: DINNER ON THE DINER, PHOTOS BY JONATHAN GUILBERT

He's more than an expert. Randy Armstrong is an original.

Armstrong combined his love of music, his curiosity for different cultures, and a belief that the world should operate as a peaceful entity and started something new.

Now it's commonly called world music, a blending of instruments and styles from around the globe. But when Armstrong and New Hampshire native Ken LaRoche first formed a group named Do'a in 1974, the concept of world music was as foreign to Western ears as some of the instruments the two were playing.

Now 48 and living in Brentwood, Armstrong is caught up in a whirlwind of musical endeavors. He composes, arranges, teaches, and tours. In the number of instruments that he plays and the multiple ways he promotes his musical genre, Armstrong has become a virtuoso of versatility.

His aural view of the world is about to hit its biggest audience in at least a dozen years.

Armstrong composed, arranged, and played on virtually all the music that accompanies Portsmouth filmmaker Jonathan Guilbert's four-episode documentary "Dinner on the Diner," which premiered on PBS stations nationwide in June.

Armstrong's music is available on a two-CD box set by the same name. It includes a 64-page booklet detailing the songs' inspiration and influences, the documentaries, and the celebrity chefs who narrate the luxury train trips in South Africa, Scotland, Spain, and Southeast Asia.

It's been quite a trip for Armstrong, considering he started his professional music career as a 15-year-old rock guitarist from Columbus, Ohio. So how did he become such a leading force in the quietly dramatic and powerful melding of world musical styles?

Armstrong had something of an epiphany as a teenager when he saw the first images of Earth

as seen from the Apollo space missions. From that point, according to the liner notes of "Dinner on the Diner," Armstrong "could no longer view the world as a planet divided up into nations."

Complementing those views from the heavens was Armstrong's very grounded experience attending one of Columbus' first integrated high schools. "I was there having kind of a cultural experience, playing Four Tops as well as the Beatles, and it was those associations that really spurred me into getting into more rhythmic music. The seed crept into me at an early age. It wasn't until my early 20s that I jumped in with both feet," he says. "The seeds were there early, before the term world music even existed."

For 17 years Armstrong played with Do'a, which later became known as Doah World Music Ensemble. Their fifth and most successful album, "World Dance," reached No. 7 on the Billboard charts. In 1991 Armstrong co-founded the Armstrong-Nahrmann Group, formerly called Uno Mondo, with former Doah member Volker Nahrmann.

Armstrong owns approximately 200 instruments from around the world, but he doesn't just learn to mimic the sounds of native players. "What I play and what I create is world fusion," Armstrong says. "It's the combination of the music I've heard growing up in the United States, working with instruments that I've learned from all over the world for the past 25 years. That's what I've always done. I've never called myself a traditional musician."

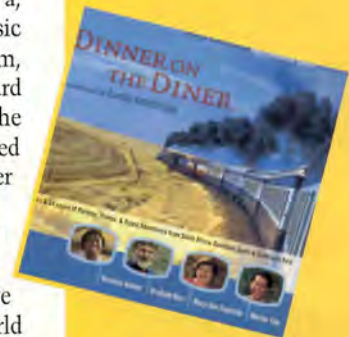
Armstrong teaches Indian sitar and West African drumming to many people, including students from around the world, as an adjunct faculty member at Phillips Exeter Academy.

Teaching is a critical part of a typical Armstrong 18-hour work day. As part of the storytelling, music, and movement duo Armstrong & Aichele: World Tales, with storyteller Genevieve Aichele, Armstrong has performed for thousands of New Hampshire schoolchildren. Hundreds of others have had the opportunity to learn first-hand from Armstrong through the New Hampshire State Council of the Arts' Artists in Education and Touring Artist Roster.

"My teaching has just grown because there's such a need," he says. "At Phillips Exeter, for example, I started with one single guitar student 10 years ago. Now I have 40 students who are studying West African drumming." **NH**

By Steve Craig

Part II of our Search for Experts and Eclectic Specialists



Armstrong created the soundtrack for the "Dinner on the Diner" PBS series which was produced by Portsmouth filmmaker Jonathan Guilbert and features the cooking skills of New Hampshire's Mary Ann Esposito and the music of the Phillips Exeter Academy Concert Choir and West African Drumming Ensemble.

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