

an undying thirst

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Randy Armstrong releases comprehensive Do'a box set

The collaboration between Armstrong and LaRoche lasted for 17 years, concluding with a concert at Harvard University in 1991. During that span, Do'a recorded five albums and played concerts all over the nation and world, helping to pioneer an all-encompassing style that has come to be known as world fusion. A sampling of the music's influences range from American folk and jazz to traditional African, Indian, Tibetan, Andean, Native American and Middle Eastern music.

Born in West Virginia and raised in Ohio, Armstrong was 22 when he came to New Hampshire seeking musical inspiration in the White Mountains. By that time, he had already studied jazz and classical guitar, as well as classical trumpet, and had played in a number of rock, Americana, funk and R&B bands.

After settling in New Hampshire, Armstrong embarked on a search for area musicians who shared his expansive musical vision. He found his counterpart in Peterborough, where LaRoche had immersed himself in avant-garde jazz. The versatile flutist had also played with the New Hampshire Philharmonic Orchestra, along with several folk and rock bands.

Armstrong said his musical kinship with LaRoche was immediate. "Ken was an excellent improviser and a great composer," he said. "One of the things that I found when we performed together is that we kind of understood each other's musical vocabulary."

The duo chose the band name Do'a, an Arabic and Persian word signifying a call to prayer, meditation, chanting and worship. They relocated to the Seacoast in 1976 and released their first album, "Light Upon Light," on Vermont-based indie label Philo Records.

With Armstrong on guitars, sitar, tamboura and percussion, and LaRoche on flutes, recorders, harmonium, kalimba and percussion (not to mention bird calls), the album features inspired instrumental breezes, constructing spiritual, new age collages of sound that wave like prayer

flags. More minimalist than future recordings, "Light Upon Light" illustrates the sonic chemistry these band mates would share for the next 17 years. The record even drew praise from jazz god Dizzy Gillespie, who called Do'a "one of the important contributions to the future of our music."

Although other musicians had taken a similar approach, world music was hardly a household term in the 1970s. Blending musical styles from around the world has become second nature to Armstrong, but it was an exhilarating challenge when the band first started branching out.

"At this stage of my career it's very natural. I hear textures and instruments and musical motifs being able to relate to one another," Armstrong said. "At the beginning of that, it was really an exploration."

The pair began touring the nation extensively and soon set to work on their second album. They recruited percussionist Marty Quinn, bassist John Hunter and Iranian string player Dr. M. Taraz for 1978's "Ornament of Hope." As the record gained recognition, Do'a continued to tour and picked up artist residencies at universities and cultural institutions around the country.

The band's next album, "Ancient Beauty," emerged as a digital recording on compact disc in 1981. Two years later, Do'a added Quinn, Hunter and saxophonist Charlie Jennison as fixtures of the band. The quintet recorded "Companions of the Crimson Coloured Ark" in 1983.

Do'a's fifth and final album, "World Dance," was dedicated to the United Nations' International Year of Peace in 1986. The recording, which featured German bassist Volker Nahrman in place of Hunter, hit number seven on Billboard's adult contemporary chart and became the ensemble's most popular album. That year, the band played concerts at Indira Gandhi Stadium in Delhi, India, and Civic Auditorium in San Francisco.

Although Do'a drew praise within several musical genres, the band's eclectic style did not sit well with everyone. Some critics said Armstrong and LaRoche were naïve to think they could adopt musical styles from foreign cultures. But he noted that many artists, from Miles Davis to Steve Reich, have faced similar accusations when they stretched beyond the traditional boundaries of their genres.

"There's always groups of people who think that if you're outside of your own culture exploring things, that it's not that true or that legitimate. It's a prejudice that you run into often," Armstrong said.

Both Armstrong and LaRoche continued their musical journeys after Do'a dissolved. In addition to teaching world music at Phillips Exeter Academy, Armstrong has appeared on more than 30 albums and film scores. He was appointed by former Gov. Craig Benson to the N.H. State Council on the Arts in 2003 and was reappointed by Gov. John Lynch this year. Last summer, he toured internationally in Croatia, Slovenia, Italy and South Africa.

Armstrong now owns and plays well over 200 instruments, including 15 guitars, numerous West African drums, North Indian stringed instruments and percussive devices from around the globe. During his world travels he has discovered that some elements of music transcend borders and translate to all cultures.

"What I find in my travels is this incredible need of all societies to have music as a fulfillment of their own growth and cultural backgrounds," Armstrong said. "The divisions of the notes from place to place are influenced by how people are living in their environment."

Armstrong's observations fed into the musical philosophy that defined his work with Do'a. Just as he and LaRoche were able to unify a geographic variety of sounds, he feels that people can find unity by reaching across cultural barriers. "Certainly, in the musical arts, people are sharing from genre to genre, from culture to culture, prolifically," he said.

With the new box set, Armstrong has used 24-bit mastering to reinvigorate each Do'a album and preserve the music for his three sons and LaRoche's family. The box set is available at Bull Moose Music and at CD Baby, as well as at Armstrong's Web site, www.randyarmstrong.com.

Armstrong also has other new projects on the horizon. Members of his world band Unu Mondo will unite with former Do'a members to record a new album this fall and embark on a subsequent tour. He is also working on a third volume of his "World Tales" series with performer and storyteller Genevieve Aichele, and he is close to completing a global meditation album. He has upcoming gigs in Deerfield on Saturday, Sept. 27, and at Elysium Arts Folk Club at the Salmon Falls Mills in Rollinsford on Saturday, Oct. 25. He will also play First Night in Portsmouth on Dec. 31.

After more than three decades on the Seacoast, Armstrong has witnessed firsthand the area's musical evolution. He still sees many of the same faces in the local scene as he did back in the '70s and '80s, including Ed

Gerhard, T.J. Wheeler, Harvey Reid and Ben Baldwin, and he has watched younger generations of talented musicians emerge.

But Armstrong said he has also seen a decline in the number of venues that host regional bands for live shows. As he forges ahead, he hopes the Seacoast will support local artists hailing from all genres.

“I really hope that some of our local sponsors and performance venues will showcase some of our regional artists more in the future,” he said.