

Cliff Grassmick

Sheldon Sands strums a Turkish baglama in his Boulder studio

Composer's CD finds harmony in discordant land

**By Julie Marshall, Camera Staff Writer
January 18, 2003**

Walking the streets of Israel, Sheldon Sands was enchanted by the sights, the smells and most importantly, the sounds.

Carrying a small, concealed digital recorder, he ventured into the caves beyond the Western Wall to capture the echoes of Jews davening. He stood beneath church bells in the Christian quarter and ran to meet the call to prayer from the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

A blending of spiritual sounds, chants and prayers can be heard in Sands' new CD, "Dead Sea Strolls." Moments taken from holy sites are woven into the composition of the final work, a melodic prayer titled "Niggun: Prayer for the peace of Jerusalem."

"I was so moved by these holy places, all within a couple square miles from each other," says Sands, a Boulder pianist and composer. "It was very powerful."

Creating multiethnic music is nothing new to Sands or to the increasingly popular world-music market. But the endeavor of bringing cultures together to make music takes on greater meaning in these times of increasing violence in the Middle East and around the world, musicians say.

Nabil Azzam, a Palestinian violinist, is one of many musicians featured on Sands' new CD. His life is dedicated to bridging the divide of warring peoples, cultures and religions through music, he says.

"If you are a Palestinian born in Israel, and a musician, what (else) are you going to do?" Azzam asks rhetorically.

"Dead Sea Strolls" emerged out of seven months Sands spent in Israel on a 1997 artist-in-residency program. Living in an apartment on the southern part of the Dead Sea, Sands often found himself wandering the land. He enjoyed the rhythms of everyday life in the Arab and Jewish markets.

"I felt an immediate connection to this very ancient, beautiful land and a strong sense of ancestral roots," says Sands, who is Jewish and has family living in Israel.

Sands lived in a remote area surrounded by desert but took a three-hour bus ride to major cities to discover local musicians. In Tel Aviv and elsewhere, these musicians performed and improvised together, even though they did not share the same language.

He once ventured out to a Bedouin village and took lessons on the oud — a Middle Eastern flute. He bought a radio and tuned into the music flowing from Amman, Jordan. His surroundings all conspired to make Sands want to tell a story of the land, the people and their history in music.

"The music grabs you; it is deep and spirited."

"Dead Sea Strolls" — named for the days Sands strolled along the Dead Sea — is a blending of the oud, electric piano, violin with plenty of ethnic percussion instruments, such as the darabuka, an hourglass-shaped ceramic hand drum popular in Arab countries. Listeners also will hear the bright, twangy sound of the Turkish baglama, a guitar with a pear-shaped body and long skinny neck.

Eyal Sela, a Jewish musician living in a suburb of Tel Aviv, is the "star" of the CD, Sands says. Sela performs Turkish clarinet and an Indian bamboo flute called a bansuri; his "voice" can be heard in nearly every piece.

"I love ethnic music," the classically trained musician says. Playing Turkish music, for instance, can offer "much more than a window" into the Turkish people of thousands of years ago, he says.

"When you connect to cultures by music, you feel the essence of spirituality; you connect on a human level," Sela says. "Music affects emotion; it is very pure."

A musician since the age of 13, Sela was one of a handful of musicians asked to perform at the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993. The few years that followed were joyous for musicians, he says in a telephone interview from Israel. Jewish and Arab musicians played mutual concerts. Today such an event is rare and underground.

"I try not to think about it," Sela says, his voice heavy with a Hebrew accent. "How do I say it? In psychological terms, it's depressing."

When Azzam feels likewise demoralized, he can look at a paper label inside his violin and remember happier days.

Following the peace accords, the violinist chose to dedicate his instrument to peace and commemorated the event by asking Yasser Arafat, President Clinton and Yitzhak Rabin's widow, Leah, to sign a label for his instrument. They did, and so did he.

Azzam's commitment to peace through music continues today. "Dead Sea Strolls" is not only good music, he says, but it is a good mission.

Born in Nazareth, Azzam early on found his own world view at odds with what he calls propaganda against Jews coming from Arab radio.

"I lived with these Jews. I went to school with them."

As an adult, and a conductor of the Mesto — or Multi Ethnic Star Orchestra — in Los Angeles, he brings together a group of world musicians. They are Russian, Persian, Croatian, Jewish and Arab, he says. They play Middle Eastern, Bulgarian and Greek music.

"I know I will be misinterpreted as a guy wants to be a hippie playing music," Azzam says in his Arabic accent, "but it's not like that; I have very strong political views."

One of those views is that "the Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth" and so co-existence is the only solution.

In an effort to promote co-existence, in 1993 Azzam called up Arafat, he says, and suggested Palestinians needed a new anthem.

"He said to go ahead."

In a very romantic notion, but with musical integrity, Azzam borrowed five notes from Hatikva, Israel's anthem which means "hope" in Hebrew, and created a new anthem for Palestinians.

Arafat received the anthem, but didn't promote it. Azzam said he thinks the recording was confiscated by the Israeli military, along with Arafat's other possessions.

Azzam still hopes it will be adopted someday.

"Everyone talks about how we (Jews and Arabs) are so different, but we are not."

Sands agrees.

"Music has a way of cutting through all the politics and making our problems seem less formidable," Sands says. "The fact is, we are all unified, Jewish or Arab, we are all the same people and music helps us to understand this common sense of spirit."

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