

A Lot of Latitude

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CASEY
REA35th Parallel,
Unitarian Church,
Montpelier,
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naky ribbons of sound wind through the steady pulse of a hand drum, conjuring visions of bustling open-air markets and dusty, weathered faces. Harmony structures alien to the Western ear build, then fade away like a desert mirage. Listening to 35th Parallel, it's hard to imagine you're still in this hemisphere, much less the Yankee Northeast. Yet it's all happening right in front of me, at a rehearsal in Putnamville, Vermont. Mac Ritchey and Gabe Halberg call it a MediterrAsian journey — an exotic soundscape through which the central Vermont duo is a reliable guide.

String instrumentalist Ritchey, 33, and percussion whiz Halberg, 31, have been traveling the winding paths of Middle Eastern, Indian and North African music for more than three years. On 2003's critically acclaimed album *The Green Vine*, Halberg and Ritchey blended the styles of the East with the production values of the West. In live performances, their sound is often augmented by a horn section featuring members of the late, great jazz outfit viperHouse; the group's sonic alchemy fuses tradition and progression.

An upcoming show at the Unitarian Church in Montpelier — a follow-up to last year's well-received FlynnSpace performance — promises another evening of seductively hypnotic music. Turkish, Armenian, Indian and Arab traditions will be represented, as the group weaves through musical cultures along the latitudinal line for which they're named.

Mac Ritchey met his future musical partner Gabe Halberg in 2001, when the percussionist made an appearance as part of a live concert at Ritchey's world-instrument show in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He was so impressed by the young hotshot playing tabla (a traditional Indian handdrum) that Ritchey says a voice in his head told him to play with the percussionist. He invited Halberg to crash at his house; they stayed up until the wee hours discovering shared musical influences. The two didn't play a note that night, but a bond of friendship was formed that turned into a musical collaboration.

Ritchey's dexterity on a number of stringed instruments bears out his reputation as a "musical Swiss Army knife." His formative years were spent playing guitar in an '80s metal wasteland. "Oh, I copped the licks from White Lion albums, busted out some Metallica," he confesses. Later, Ritchey slogged it out in the trenches of Boston's rock scene, a lifestyle that eventually grew tiresome. "I burned out... I didn't feel like I had a team," he reminisces.

Things changed around 1989 when he first heard *Passion*, Peter Gabriel's Middle Eastern-infused soundtrack to the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Coincidentally, that album also inspired Halberg's first forays into ethnic percussion. The spring equinox of 2001 marked the beginning of their collaboration; they spent the rest of the year developing a working musical dialogue, and played their first show together that December.

A bright-eyed man of medium stature with stunningly orange hair, Ritchey hardly looks the part of an exotic minstrel. With his thoughtful, articulate speech and sensitive demeanor, he seems more like a

guidance counselor. As 35th Parallel's melodic center, Ritchey is comfortable with many Middle Eastern musical traditions. The oud, an instrument extremely important to Arab music, is one of his favorites. Transitioning from guitar wasn't as easy as he expected, though. "When I first played in front of my teacher," Ritchey admits, "he said, 'OK, stop, I get it — you're a guitarist playing an oud.'"

With instructor Alan Shavarsh Bardebanian's guidance and a lot of practice, a proper sensibility eventually emerged. "It's a whole mindset thing," Ritchey declares. "When you study an instrument, it forms your world-view about music through the eyes of that instrument... I have been working for the last year of my life to make it sound like I'm actually playing an oud."

Ritchey ornaments 35th Parallel's performances and recordings with turns on the bouzouki — a Greek instrument also used in Turkey and the Arab world — acoustic guitar and even didjeridoo, the droning Australian aboriginal wind instrument. Ritchey studied electronic music at Oberlin College from '89 to '91, where he began to recognize all sound as potentially musical. Experiences like this, combined with a degree in cultural anthropology from Brandeis University, provided the background for experiments in musical synthesis.

In rehearsal, Gabe Halberg sits

upright on a stool like some kind of mystical praying mantis, his dark eyes closed in concentration. His long, lithe fingers tap out rhythmic riddles on curious-looking hand drums. With a coal-black mustache and goatee and a long nose, he could be Frank Zappa's younger brother. During a break, the soft-spoken, contemplative Halberg relates his initiation into the world of Northern Indian percussion.

He first heard the signature melodic thwack of the tabla while he was attending Goddard College in 1991. Instantly hooked, he decided to study the instrument at the Ali Akbar College of Music in San Rafael, California, as an off-campus Goddard student. There, he was exposed to the disciplines of Indian music by tabla guru Swapan Chaudhuri. After receiving a degree in tabla composition in 1995, Halberg returned to the Northeast.

By 1997, his focus and dedication had earned him the opportunity to study in New York City with Samir Chatterjee, a mentorship that continues to this day. Accompanying the master to Calcutta, India, for six weeks in '99 proved both an inspiration and a distraction, but Halberg remembers the experience fondly. "Calcutta was intense," he recalls, "but it was really good to feel more connected to the culture of the music that I'm playing."

Since then, Halberg has been experimenting with other percussive instruments, such as African frame drums. During rehearsal, Halberg tunes them with a placid concentration reminiscent of an ancient, meditative ritual.

A great deal of the music that 35th Parallel references is rooted in religious devotion. Strong ties between sound and spirituality exist in every country from

GABE HALBERG
AND MAC RITCHEY

which the music originates. Halberg and Ritchey are sensitive to these aspects of culture, but do their best to stress the universality of the musical experience. "For me music is a way of connecting to something spiritually greater," says Halberg. "When things are happening musically, I'm involved, but it's not necessarily originating from me."

Halberg's Indian gurus have taught him devotion — to the discipline of music. "One thing that has become clear to me over the years is that practice is a way of tuning the instrument that is me," he says.

kind of democracy that George W. Bush wishes existed in the Middle East. The horn section has been called in, and the whole crew is set up in Halberg's living room, spread out in a semi-circle. As the musicians work on arrangements, a dog wanders in and out; its bright orange fur nearly matches Ritchey's hair.

Entire segments are played, then played again, as Ritchey gives advice on the material's nuances. Baritone saxophonist Michael Chorney makes quick notes on his sheet music and discusses harmony choices with his horn-playing mates. At

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MAC RITCHEY

"The better a musician I become, the more able I am to let go." This may sound new-agey to some, but the attitude serves a practical purpose: Halberg and Ritchey strive to voice their music "in the moment."

In an era of racial profiling and cultural suspicion, playing "MediterrAsian" music might seem like a political act. Ritchey says they're not trying to make any overt statement. About those who would dismiss the art forms of foreign cultures he suggests, "People are used to just saying 'them.' Well, there's a lot more to a 'them.' There's an art form, there's a culture — there's people just living their lives like any of us... By playing the music that we do, we're saying, 'Hey, they have music, too — and by the way, you seemed to like it.'"

Ritchey bristles at complicated political situations that get in the way of art. "This is an Afghani tune," he says, addressing a mock audience, "remember that country that we bombed? This is the music they couldn't play for 15 years." Does the duo feel a responsibility for bringing this music to American listeners? "Ambassador is certainly a preferred word to imperialist," suggests Halberg.

35th Parallel's rehearsal showcases the

times it seems the band is over-rehearsing; the repetitious section-work seems to bely the music's ecstatic origins. But the mood is light, even occasionally frivolous. As with any band practice, musical in-jokes and gentle ribbing color the proceedings. Someone quotes the Derek and the Dominoes classic "Layla" — the horn players poke fun at the fact that the 35th Parallel song they're working on shares the same name.

Halberg condones a last-minute melodic change, expressing relief that "Now it doesn't sound like that Berlin song." The reference to the '80s pop band is met with puzzlement by a younger musician. After three-and-a-half hours the band breaks for pizza, but they'll keep going later.

Halberg and Ritchey plan to record a follow-up to *Green Vine*, but they have no idea what the finished product will look like. Will a horn section be involved? Possibly. Will there be more electronic elements? Potentially. The duo strives to "be here now," and they're open to any new ideas that may surface. Says Ritchey: "The process will let us know." ☺