

## CD REVIEW

**'Crossing Painted Islands': 35th Parallel crosses geographic and musical lines**

By Art Edelstein

ARTS CORRESPONDENT

**H**ere's a geography question: What lies on the 35th parallel?

If you said parts of the Middle East, North India, North Africa, the Mediterranean and the United States, give yourself an A.

If you said an innovative duo of musicians playing music that combines the styles of the above geographic areas you'd also be correct.

35th Parallel is Gabe Halberg of Plainfield and Mac Ritchey from Hampton Falls, N.H. Together the two – Halberg on percussion and Ritchey on a variety of stringed instruments – have produced their second CD, "Crossing Painted Islands" and it's a winner.

Even if you've never heard an Indian raga, ventured into Armenian folk music, or tapped your foot to a Turkish beat, there is something to enjoy on this CD.

I suppose it's the sheer uniqueness of the sounds emanating from all these unfamiliar instruments that contributes to its universality. Here Greek bouzouki and tabla drumming intersect with saxophone and trumpet. The melodies wiggle and jiggle across the sound palette as oud or acoustic guitar melodies mesh with horn parts while the various percussion beats cement it all together.

Close your eyes and visions of Little Egypt belly dancing across Saharan sands come to life and Indian Maharajahs consort with raven-haired beauties in sensual song as the Ganges flows languidly by.

Listening to "Crossing Painted Islands" is an aural adventure

The world-fusion group 35th Parallel celebrates the release of its new album, "Crossing Painted Islands," in a concert on Friday, March 24, at 9 p.m., at Positive Pie 2 in Montpelier. The show will feature members of the duo's expanded group—the MediterrAsian Jazz Ensemble. Cover is \$3 cover; call 229-0453.

into far off map locals. It's a Google Earth for the ears and it's very successful.

In the 1970s, fusion rock, the melding of rock rhythms with jazz themes as performed by guitarist John McLaughlin and his Mahavishnu Orchestra, widened the palette of those who created rock music because it included jazz elements in its performance. 35th Parallel is doing the same for acoustic world music and jazz, forging a new sound that, given enough air time might also catch the ear of a wide public audience.

Halberg, a Goddard College graduate, said he met Ritchey five years ago at a concert he was playing in New Hampshire produced by Ritchey. There was an instant musical connection and the two have been a duo ever since.

Tabla, a tunable North Indian drum, was not Halberg's first instrument. "When I was at Goddard I first heard tabla recordings," said the former jazz piano player. "I was amazed by the variety of sounds I could get out of a percussion instrument and the melodic variety."

So enamored was he that he went off to California to study tabla playing with an Indian master. "It's a unique sound in the percussion world," says Halberg.

This two-drum set of wood and metal bodies with goat skin tops

can be tuned. If you've ever listened to a Ravi Shankar recording of sitar playing you've heard tabla accompaniment.

Halberg also plays the tar, a tunable frame drum that originates from North Africa and the Middle East.

Ritchey plays a variety of stringed instruments including the oud or Arabic lute, a six-course 11-stringed instrument. He also plays Greek bouzouki and acoustic guitar.

How a musician who has played reggae and adult album alternative rock found his muse on the oud is a story.

"You get to playing oud by first falling in love with Peter Gabriel in high school on the 'Passion' album soundtrack for the 'Last Temptation of Christ' which was produced in 1989," says Ritchey who is 34. He called that music "heavily North African and Middle Eastern pan Arabic fusion with Gabriel's signature soundscapes."

That sound whetted Ritchey's interest and he focused his listening on more of Gabriel's world music record label, which includes Pakistani devotional music, Egyptian folk music and Moroccan music.

"These cultures have the oud in it," he explained. "As a guitar player I could relate to it."

Ritchey plays bouzouki because, "it has a much more crystalline tone and is more sparkly. I can mimic the style of playing modally in Middle Eastern music with a lot of droning." Ritchey said he and Halberg, who is 33, "have a solid foundation and friendship," that



Submitted photo

**35th Parallel – Gabe Halberg of Plainfield and Mac Ritchey – will celebrate its new CD Friday, March 24, at Positive Pie 2 in Montpelier.**

allows this different style of music to flow.

"It is natural we play music we love to play," he explained.

Together the partners compose melodies based on themes from the cultures the music originates from. "We don't claim to be doing a special representation of a traditional genre," he said. "We draw from those cultures and make our own music. Even though a lot of the songs are from that region, the songs seem to translate very well to people who are not students or general listeners of the music. Audiences relate well to the music."

What makes this CD so inter-

esting is the addition of the horn section consisting of Michael Chorney, Zach Tonnisson and Brian Boyes, former members of the popular Vermont jazz-rock band ViperHouse. Together the band is called the MediterrAsian Jazz Ensemble.

If you've never heard Middle Eastern trumpet and melodic saxophone lines here's your chance. While this music might sound hokey, if you have in mind the music from a Bob Hope and Bing Crosby getting lost in the desert on a road show movie – this is a far cry from what you'll hear.

The horn section works

because the music is fresh, the arrangements interesting and it all cooks thanks to Halberg's lively beat.

All this music comes together on Friday, March 24, at Positive Pie 2 in Montpelier where 35th Parallel will have a CD release party with the full band performing.

So good is "Crossing Painted Islands" that I suspect if the many warring factions in the Middle East could get their hands on a copy and play that from their minarets there'd be a lot less fighting. They'd all be having too much fun dancing to fling IEDs at each other.