

## Waging peace with music

# Boulder's Sheldon Sands releases Dead Sea Strolls

by Stewart Sallo ([letters@boulderweekly.com](mailto:letters@boulderweekly.com))

Among the arts, music has an unparalleled ability to reflect human culture and affect social change. Consequently, music and politics have been natural partners throughout history.

Songs like "Abraham, Martin and John," "Blowin' in the Wind," "Eve of Destruction," "For What It's Worth," "Imagine," "Ohio," "The Times They Are A-Changin'," and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" serve as recent examples of the endless list of musical offerings that call for fundamental changes leading to peace on a war-torn planet. But it's one thing to sing about peace and another to create a musical platform that integrates the very principles required for peace: respect, understanding, tolerance and common ground.

Boulder resident Sheldon Sands has done just that with the release of his ground-breaking CD, *Dead Sea Strolls*, and in the process has transcended the boundaries of musician and concert promoter and achieved the status of peacemaker. *Dead Sea Strolls* is an exceptional recording that unites some of the Middle East's most distinguished Israeli and Palestinian musicians in a collaboration that rises above cultural and political barriers. Conceived of while Sands participated in an artistic residency program in the Southern Israeli city of Arad during late '97 and early '98, the project took on a life of its own as the artist reconnected with his ancestral roots and discovered a deep well of musical inspiration.

"I'd be on a hike someplace in the desert, or I'd be in the streets of the old city of Jerusalem, and I'd suddenly get a tune in my head and start singing," Sands recalled. "Later, I'd write it down and compose it."

Soon, Sands had accumulated a wealth of material and felt that the time was right to begin recording. It was at this point that he began to develop connections with local musicians who, because of their diverse ethnic backgrounds, would ultimately transform his purpose from musician to peacemaker.

"I really wanted to do some recording, so I began to dedicate my time to meeting some of the top musicians. I'd go to a concert of a quite famous musician, and after the concert I'd go up and introduce myself and mention the possibility of doing some recording. I found a great deal of receptivity, so in the spring of 1998 I had a series of recording sessions."

The Tel Aviv sessions included percussionist Yinon Muelem and woodwind player Eyal Sela, both of whom will join Sands for a rare live performance at their CD release party, Thursday, March 14, at the Chautauqua Community Hall. A third musician, Waseem Bishara, contributed to the Tel Aviv sessions on Arabic violin and 'ud (a Middle Eastern lute).

With the initial recordings of his Middle East-inspired compositions in hand, Sands was ready to return to the United States, but not before another vision struck that led him in an unexpected direction: He was about to become a concert promoter.

"I had a very strong inspiration-in a sense an epiphany-during a week-long hiking and camping trip in the desert. One day we hiked to a very, very high summit. It was a very clear day, and you could see into Jordan and Egypt. I'd been wanting to bring something of this music and what it spoke to me back to my community. I first fell in love with the ethnic music that I was finding in Israel, just as a music lover. But since, I found incredible artistic collaborations between Jews and Arabs that had both deep historic roots, as well as contemporary relevance. And then it dawned on me-the relationship between that music and some sense of this being a very important tool for communicating the message of peace. And I got a really strong feeling about wanting to bring that to the West, both as a producer and as an artist, myself."

About six months after returning to Boulder, Sands received a call inviting him to produce a concert called The Poetry of Peace, which was held in Fall 1999 at the Boulder Theater. In this concert, the stage was shared by bamboo flute master Omar Faruk Teklibek, who is of Turkish and Egyptian descent, and an Israeli group called Davka, which is comprised of Arabic and Jewish Israelis. The next Middle East peace-oriented, Sands-produced concert featured Arabic Israeli violinist Nabil Azzam and Jewish Israeli pianist, Sasha Toperich. Most recently Sands brought to Boulder Yair Dalal, a world-renowned Israeli musician of Iraqi descent, who has devoted a good portion of his career to facilitating collaborations between Arab and Jewish musicians. Both Dalal and Azzam also made contributions to Dead Sea Strolls, as did members of the Israeli group Sheva, as well as several Boulder musicians, including members of Boulder's Middle Eastern and Balkan music ensemble, Sherefe.

Sands' journeys back to his roots in the Middle East-through a Tel Aviv recording studio, over the rocky terrain of concert production, and back to the recording studio in Boulder-have spawned considerable insights into the potential role of music in the peace process.

"Artists often stand on the periphery of a culture, reflecting, clarifying and revealing a community's values. I feel that music really achieves that, phenomenally. It's an important part of our psychology, and it is an important part of building bridges between

diverse peoples. That we play music isn't going to automatically lead to peace, but it's one of the best places to begin a process of bridge building and of understanding, which in turn can lead to peace."

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Sheldon Sands' Dead Sea Strolls CD release party will be held Thursday, March 14, at the Chautauqua Community House at 7:30 p.m., and will feature a live performance. Tickets are \$10 and may be purchased at the door.

To order a copy of Dead Sea Strolls or Sands' first CD, Across Many Oceans, log on to [www.sheldonsands.com](http://www.sheldonsands.com).