

# Los Angeles Times

## **On a Road to Harmony**

**For Jordanian composer and pianist Zade Dirani, making music and advocating world peace go hand in hand.**

By Donna Perlmutter, Special to The Times  
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You want a career as a pianist and composer. You've attended Berklee College of Music in Boston. But you're a Muslim and an Arab — from Jordan. Then come the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and audiences for your New Age stylings are afraid of you.

"Do you know how to make a bomb?" one person asked Zade Dirani at an open forum in rural Maine two weeks after 9/11.

"I was as shocked and horrified by the tragic events as anyone," says the slightly built, fresh-faced Dirani, 26, who's in Los Angeles for a concert tonight at Royce Hall with a contingent of 30 singers and players of Western and other instruments, representing 15 countries. It's the last stop on a three-city tour dubbed "Roads to You: Celebration of One World."

"Of course I do not know how to make a bomb," he says. "Of course I'm not a terrorist. But 9/11 seemed to point the finger at anyone of Arabic descent. So I told them, 'Your very questions strengthen my faith and commitment to what I'm doing right now — bringing people together for their shared humanity through music.' "

In the years since 2001, Dirani (who pronounces his given name Zehd) has made two CDs that made the Billboard charts and just released a third album. He's also performed his music — which blends Middle Eastern flavors with Western influences and revels in a kind of exotic romanticism — for Queen Elizabeth II, Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama ("who gave me a big, two-minute hug"). In fact, his advocacy for world peace seems to have ignited his career.

When he was growing up, his mother and father — the latter a prominent architect in the Jordanian capital, Amman — assumed their son would eventually join the family firm. Once he began studying piano, however, picking out Eastern folkloric melodies and the French songs of Charles Aznavour and Edith Piaf, "there was no stopping my direction," he says.

So clear was his goal, he says, that in 2001, he left Berklee after three years without earning a degree — something he admits while ducking his head in a kind of mock shame.

To begin with, he toured the U.S. virtually nonstop, appearing in living rooms and other small venues, staying as his hosts' house guest, hopping on and off Greyhounds and Amtraks and taking his music-with-a-message to such heartland locales as Sullivan, Ill., population roughly 4,500. One year, he says, he logged 200 events and "lived on donations that came from passing the plate."

But in 2004, after movers and shakers at Berklee, where he had also studied business and management, saw his success growing, the school decided to sponsor the "Roads" tour. Jordan's Queen Noor is also an underwriter.

These days, he says, the biggest change in his life, apart from his expanding audience, is that he's no longer homeless.

And where has he landed a residence?

"Beverly Hills," he says, laughing half-sheepishly, explaining that work brings him to Los Angeles about

once a month and that the lure of "good restaurants for a young, single guy" is irresistible.

After all, he reasons, being a musician-activist doesn't require privation. U2 frontman Bono is only one example of entertainers who live well and do good.

"He's magnificent," says Dirani. "Someday I'd like to have Bono's influence, his clout — to be so accomplished, to have such a genuine, hands-on agenda, to be able to bring about that level of change. He proves that when the public loves your music, they'll listen to the causes you treasure."

Dirani suffered a tragedy in November while attending a cousin's wedding in Amman. The Hyatt, scene of the festivities, and two other hotels were bombed by terrorists, and among the people killed were his friend the Los Angeles filmmaker Moustapha Akkad (the "Halloween" horror movies) and Akkad's daughter, both of whom had flown in from the U.S. for the event.

The attack "came from nowhere," he says. Jordan is considered the most politically and culturally moderate of the Arab states. "Never had we witnessed anything like this in Jordan. We had always been perceived as an oasis of sanity in the desert of turmoil. It drove home the point that no one is secure. It sheds a whole different light when it hits home. For me, it's both homes — the U.S. and Jordan."

Now, although his upcoming concert dates are confined mostly to the U.S., Dirani has a five-year strategy to take his show to Europe, Latin America "and, God willing, to the Middle East, where it's most needed."

"It's going to be tough, we're going to be scared. But you have to break the cycle of violence, educate the younger generation. It has to happen through art, through music, through culture, through connections at the border.

"OK. Maybe all this is just a survival tactic. But if we lose faith, we've got nothing. You have to believe, otherwise what are you going to do?"