

Zade's Road

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by Tom Teicholz

How does an idea come to life? How is it that someone has an idea -- an idea that he or she believes will help change the world -- and it actually takes flight? I'm not sure anyone really knows how that process occurs, only that it does.

Just ask Zade.

Zade Dirani, 26, is a composer and musician who created the International Musicians Assembly, an internationally diverse group of musicians and future leaders from conflict-ridden countries who have recently embarked on their "Roads to You: Celebration of One World" tour.

The L.A. stopover kicks off at the Museum of Tolerance on May 31 (co-sponsored by The Jewish Journal). It's followed by a members-only performance at Sinai Temple on June 2, as part of the synagogue's 100th anniversary; and a concert at UCLA's Royce Hall on June 6, where the International Children's Peace Choir from Long Beach will join in.

The tour is the manifestation of Zade's vision of musicians as world leaders making connections through music and culture.

Naive? Unrealistic? Zade doesn't think so -- and he has the life story to back that belief.

Zade was born and raised in Amman, Jordan. His architect father had ambitions for him to follow in his footsteps, but early on Zade showed musical promise (he started composing at 13) and was accepted at Jordan's National Music Conservatory. At 18, he received a scholarship to study at the Berklee School of Music in Boston.

For the next few years, Zade traveled back and forth between the two. He appeared with the National Symphony of Jordan, where he first performed for Queen Noor, the American-born wife of the late King Hussein. In the United States, Zade organized a series of "house concerts" performing his piano

compositions in peoples' homes.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Zade was scheduled to give a concert in Maine at an American friend's home. When news of the attacks spread, the concert was postponed.

"After 9/11," Zade said, "I felt a tremendous responsibility."

As a Muslim and an Arab, playing in the homes of American families, Zade wanted to bring a message that culture could unite people. At the same time, he also wanted to send a message to his fellow Muslims and Arabs that, "You can be proud of your culture."

Zade threw himself into performing, grass-roots-style, in churches, synagogues and people's homes all over the country, playing as many as 200 concerts in a year. He discovered that through music, he made a personal connection with an audience. Like a latter-day Bob Hope, this performer embraced the role of ambassador.

Zade's performances had another unexpected side effect -- he developed a wide-ranging fan base. Zade's first recordings, self-released are now turning up on Billboard charts. His new album "Beautiful World" released on May 16 features compositions redolent of Middle Eastern rhythms as well as classical piano compositions. He has become one of Jordan's best-known artists, performing not only for King Abdullah and Queen Reina, but for such dignitaries as Queen Elizabeth II, Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama. Like Madonna, Zade has ascended to one-name recognition.

However, Zade wanted to do more. Working alone, he was delivering, in essence, a monologue -- about culture and heritage and the connections people can make between the two. What he wanted was a dialogue.

Zade sought out other musicians from conflict-ridden countries or regions -- talented musicians who also had leadership qualities and were interested in developing conflict-resolution skills.

He also quickly found three sponsors. His alma mater, The Berklee College of Music, agreed to be an educational partner; the Barakat Foundation, which supports culture and cultural exchanges and operates under the sponsorship of Queen Noor, signed on as philanthropic partner; and Seeds of Peace, an organization that brings together young Israelis and Palestinians, helps with conflict-resolution programs and leadership training.

The Jordanian embassy contacted other embassies to suggest applicants;

Berklee helped identify candidates as well. Over a period of many months, Zade assembled a troupe of 35 musicians, ages 18 to 30, from 18 countries, including Israel, Iran, Korea, China and Mexico.

Under the name The International Musicians Assembly, they perform Zade's compositions. The musicians also appear as trios, quartets and septets, frequently performing their own compositions. Particularly popular is the Abrahamic Trio, a constellation that featured Ali Bekrahdi, a Muslim from Iran, on santur (Persian hammer dulcimer); Perla Martinez, a Christian from Mexico on violin; and Jake Hertzog, a Jew from Michigan, on electric guitar. On any given day, eight different ensembles hold musical workshops and speak at schools and before other audiences about themselves, their countries and their music.

Zade has a five-year strategy. He hopes this group spawns many others, so that on any given night, somewhere in the world, a group of musicians/leaders are performing and opening people's hearts.

He already has inspired numerous others to get involved, including Dr. Nur Amersi, the honorary director of the International Musicians Assembly. The Santa Monica-based Amersi practiced veterinary medicine for a decade before committing herself to philanthropy, as the Western U.S. representative of the Aga Khan's Institute of Ismaili Studies.

"In these troubled times," Amersi said, "musical initiatives become tools that promote human and cultural pluralism -- thereby becoming an effective force of stability."

Music is no certain path to peace (i.e. consider the East Coast-West Coast rap wars), but Zade sees culture as a powerful positive force. Zade's mission calls to mind Isaac Bashevis Singer's saying that "the good life is not passive existence where you live and let live. It is one of involvement where you live and help live."

Zade, four years shy of age 30, already knows that.

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The Assembly is performing Wednesday, May 31 at 7 p.m. at the Museum of Tolerance's Outdoor Memorial Plaza, 9786 W. Pico Blvd., Los Angeles. Free. Reservations required at (310) 772-2528. Doors open at 6:30. For more information, visit www.museumoftolerance.com.

The Assembly is performing June 6 at 8 p.m. at UCLA's Royce Hall. \$15-\$135. For more information, call (213)-365-3500. For more information, visit

www.ticketmaster.com.

Contact Dr. Nur Amersi for more information about scheduling house concerts or performances by Zade or the International Musicians Assembly in your home, school, concert hall or house of worship at k2amersi@aol.com or through www.roadstoyou.com.

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