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David Arkenstone's Middle Eastern Trek Takes the Route from New Age to Global Pop

The sonic adventures of David Arkenstone have a vivid, almost visual power -- think of them as the aural equivalent of a huge-screen IMAX movie. Ever since releasing his first album, *Valley in the Clouds*, in 1987, Arkenstone has enthralled listeners, inspiring inner visions of exploration and enlightenment. His musical escapades have transported listeners to celestial realms on *Another Star in the Sky*, on a heroic mission (complete with treasure map) on *Quest of the Dream Warrior*, through a Celtic year on *The Celtic Book of Days*, into Native American legends on *Spirit Wind*, and through the epochs of civilization on *Citizen of Time*. On his newest album, *Caravan of Light*, Arkenstone loads his tour bus for a modern-day trek along the caravan trade routes. Not content to evoke the memories of ancient civilizations, the talented composer charts his musical journey to include the brash and dynamic sounds of

today's world pop. Arkenstone spoke with Barnes & Noble.com's new age editor, Carol Wright, about the creative process behind his distinctive international blend.

Barnes & Noble.com: You truly are a multi-instrumentalist. What instruments do you play?

David Arkenstone: Looking around my studio, I see keyboards and computers, guitars, bouzouki, tons of flutes, percussion instruments, a mandolin, bass, and a new set of Moroccan drums. They're pretty ornate! I still have more boxes of instruments to unpack. I compose with keyboards and computer, so I have access to unlimited sound samples. But when I get the song structure the way I like it, I'll record the basic keyboard and drum parts, and then bring in a bunch of acoustic instruments for the final recording. I'm not totally happy with electronics and samples by themselves.

B&N.com: What inspired *Caravan of Light*?

DA: When one of the princesses of Saudi Arabia got married, I was asked to write a piece for her half-hour long walk down the aisle. I recorded the piece, but I didn't get to attend because it's rather a closed country and there were too many logistic problems. I've always liked the Middle Eastern sensibilities, and their culture's nomadic aspect intrigued me. Back before airplanes, if you wanted to see new things, you actually had to trek there. If you wanted a new fabric or spice, someone had to go get it. Culture and music spread along these trade routes, so this theme seemed like a good vehicle for me to do different styles of music, not just Middle Eastern.

B&N.com: The album has a really ambitious sound -- it doesn't just use keyboards and soloists, but whole vocal and instrumental ensembles.

DA: The album is full of friends. It makes you proud to be a composer when talented people come to play on your recording. When I just perform on keyboards, I get too wrapped up in it; everything blurs, and I can lose track of the overall composition. But using all these guest musicians, I could sit back and produce or direct to get the best performance out of them. I can see the composition bubble to the surface. This recording was extremely enjoyable in that respect.

B&N.com: Did you have a group recording session or lay down separate tracks?

DA: A combination. It would have been hard to schedule a full-time ensemble of 25 musicians, because half the time they'd just be waiting. We did have the full brass section and the vocalists together because they played on the same songs. For special solos -- like Karen Hwa-Chee Han on the Chinese *er-hu* and Charlie Bisharat on violin -- we recorded one at a time. These people brought the best parts of themselves to this project, and I am so honored to have worked with them.

B&N.com: How did you come up with the concept of combining Cuban-style horns and pop vocalists for a Middle Eastern concept album?

DA: I was raised with so many different musical styles, and they are all jumbled around inside me. On *Caravan of Light*, I wanted a modern-world pop feel, so I added the kind of horns they use in African and Cuban music. I did all the writing, but my arranger, Don Markese, brought that distinctive horn style to the table. He works with that sort of music all the time.

B&N.com: I could actually understand the lyrics on this album -- the vocals aren't Latin or vocalise, which seem so popular in new age these days.

DA: On *The Celtic Book of Days*, I used vocalise and gentle vocals. I myself don't have a strong voice, so I sing within my limitations. On *Caravan*, I didn't want to be limited so I brought in real pros to sing. It really adds a powerful element, and it's very pop.

Most people don't realize that pop is a big part of my musical palette. I was raised on pop and rock music and performed it for many years. When I did *Valley in the Clouds*, my songs were all over the map. They didn't fit into one category, so my label and I worked for months to find songs that could fit on the same album. You'll hear some pop elements even then, but pop took a back seat when that album became a new age hit. So I continued down that path. You work your whole life to get your first record deal, so you don't want to throw fans a curve right away. I've evolved over the last 13 years, but I have a fan base that will go on the adventure with me.

B&N.com: You've covered a lot of territory in your music and developed a lot of chops. How do you go about learning new styles?

DA: Every day I write something. I'm influenced by movies I see and by what I experience in nature. When I was in college, I studied music, but only jazz and classical. With the global music explosion of the last ten years, one can be exposed to a lot of indigenous music, although it is quickly becoming Westernized.

To prepare for *Celtic Book of Days*, I listened to a lot of Celtic music: traditional, the *Chieftains*, fiddle, pipes, whistles. What is it made out of? I dissect it and study it. Why does the horn section sound the way it does in Cuban music? It is like being an ethnomusicologist, but I take what I like and add it to my emotional response.

B&N.com: The album *Shaman* contains your music, but is performed by Troika. Can you explain this group?

DA: Troika is a group of three guys that I know in California who wish to remain anonymous. I've composed a lot of music that I never released, so they take it and do something fresh and new with it. The Troika releases tend to be more like the new age music I wrote earlier. I'm involved by overseeing and producing.

B&N.com: What CDs are in your changer right now?

DA: Some of the albums I have handy include the Putumayo collection called *Africa*, my own *Citizen of the World* album, the soundtrack to *The Green Mile* by Thomas Newman, and Hans Zimmer's soundtrack to *Gladiator*, which has Lisa Gerrard from *Dead Can Dance* singing. I wish I had scored that movie. I've done some documentaries for the History Channel and the Discovery Channel and would like to do more. I would have liked to have written the soundtrack for that nice little emotional movie *Snow Falling on Cedars* or some adventure flick like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

B&N.com: Though your music is now more worldly and adventurous, I still hear a spiritual core. Do you have a specific practice?

DA: Diane and I do a lot of hiking around here. There's a lot of spiritual energy in the southwest, and we soak that up. But for spiritual inspiration, the music itself is a powerful force. Last night Diane and I worked on a project until 3 am, and I woke up this morning at 8. I couldn't sleep because the tunes were bouncing around in my head. If I don't sit down and get them out, I go absolutely nuts. Writing music can be a bit technical, but the process is still a cleansing meditation, and the satisfaction of listening to the finished piece is like nirvana.

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