

For the Pantagraph

Inti-Illimani, a world music ensemble from Santiago, Chile, kicks off its North American tour at 7:30 tonight in the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts.

# Hardly a one-note wonder

## Eclectic group packs 30 instruments for musical feast

By Dan Craft

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Everybody together: Inte-E-gee-mane. There. We need to be able to pronounce the name of the subject we are about to discuss.

And the subject we are about to discuss is one of Chile's bona fide musical institutions, Inti-Illimani, the eight-man, 30-instrument band that kicks off its 2006 North American tour at 7:30 tonight in the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts (tickets are still available at the BCPA box office).

"Inti-" means "sun." "Illimani" is a mountain near La Paz, Bolivia. Both parts of the name hail from the Ayamara dialect.

The ensemble is often billed as "South America's ambassadors of human expression."

"Among those who've absorbed that expression into their own music are Peter Gabriel, Bruce Springsteen, Wynton Marsalis, Sting, Pete Seeger and John Williams, all of whom have shared stages and sounds with Inti-Illimani.

The group's leader, however, chuckles at the ambassadors label and, in mock protest, applies one of his own: "musical vampires."

Being musical vampires, it's safe to say the musicians in Inti-Illimani has sucked out some influences of their own.

In a very long-distance phone interview from his home in Santiago, Chile, group founder Jorge Coulon says the group, begun in the late '60s, began touring stateside back in 1974.

"I like very much the cultural experience," he says of the North American jaunts, even though that experience has evolved greatly over 32 years.

"In the last 20 years, the U.S. has changed enormously," he says. "The first years (we toured), the western influence was completely hegemonic. Now that has changed."

He finds Americans much more open to the many musical influences from cultures around the world, which is certainly the story of Inti-Illimani.

As ambassadors, the group has promoted Latin American folk music around the globe while incorporating

## At a glance

What: Inti-Illimani

When: 7:30 tonight

Where: Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts, 110 E. Mulberry St., Bloomington

Tickets: \$18.50 to \$24.50

Box office number: (866) 686-9541

sounds they've discovered on their journeys.

It all began, Coulon says, with a "passion for Andean music — that was very important, that was the 'big bang.' Then we began to expand and learn and make contact with other music from Latin America and worldwide."

Coulon, the only original member of the group, met his fellow band mates while they were students at Santiago Technical University in the '60s.

Though they were all studying to become engineers, they discovered they shared a love for the indigenous music of their continent, from Chile to Peru to Bolivia to Ecuador to Argentina.

But it was the Andean music and its ancient cultural results that, as Coulon says, set off the "big bang."

In one of the key developments in the band's history, Chilean President Salvador Allende was deposed while they were touring Europe in 1973. Because Inti-Illimani's musical tradition was one of protesting against oppression and social injustice, the band's members lost their passports and spent the next 15 years as expatriates living in Italy.

In the end, their extended stay paid off musically.

"We were in touch with many groups and musicians that had the same idea as our group," says Coulon, never mind that they were into native musical forms of their own, from Celtic to North African.

Absorbing these global influences into their own established take on indigenous Latin American music broadened and enriched Inti-Illimani's sound. By the time they were welcomed back to Chile in 1988, they had become national music heroes.

Moving back to Santiago in 1990, they have remained put since, and are consid-

## Meet the band

► **Jorge Coulon, founder:** guitar, tiple, rondador, zampona; hammered dulcimer, harp, vocals

► **Manuel Merino, musical director:** guitar, tiple, bass, vocals

► **Marcelo Coulon:** guitar, quena, piccolo, flute, bass, vocals

► **Daniel Cantillana:** violin, bass, zampona, viola, mandolin, vocals

► **Juan Flores:** bass, cajon, cuatro, quena, guitar, mandolin, sikus vocals

► **Christian Gonzalez:** flutes, piccolo, quena, sikus, cajon, bass, vocals

► **Cesar Jara:** guitar, tiple, bass, charango, vocals

► **Efren Manuel Viera:** congas, bongo, cajon, timbales, clarinet, sax, vocals

ered a national institution.

Besides crossing musical paths and borders with the likes of Springsteen and Gabriel, the group's music has found its way onto film, where, among others, they have scored the award-winning documentary, "The Devil's Miner," and a full-length animated film, "My Little World," created by "Iron Giant" alum Mike Nguyen.

Despite the group's world music influences, Coulon isn't a fan of the term "world music." "I don't like it," he says. "It suggests that Anglo music is music, and any other music is world music."

At the same time, the exposure to global sounds has broadened western musical horizons considerably, he agrees.

Currently, the eight-man band travels the world with a complex outlay of 30 instruments, ranging from the familiar (guitars, flutes, congas) to the decidedly exotic (zamponas, quenans, tipples, cajons and sikus).

"In our dossier, there is a magical number of 30," he says. "Fundamentally, it's a blend of the instruments from the Latin American tradition. We're always fighting the proliferation of instruments — there are 29 kinds of guitar's in Mexico alone, and every kind of musical region requires its own precise instruments."

But being musical vampires, the temptation to feed on other tempting sounds is always there.

"I think it is very important that we have a continuous injection of new experiences ... and new blood," says Coulon.

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PHOTO: JOHN RITTER

## Inti-Illimani: The Beat Goes On

BY RANDY B. HECHT  
December 2005/January 2006

If you think inheriting money means responsibility, imagine inheriting a musical legacy. That's what the younger members of Inti-Illimani, a Chilean band started in 1967, face. But they have the help of Jorge Coulon, the last active founding member and the link between generations.

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### Preservation and Innovation

Most of the younger musicians grew up in the 1970s and '80s, when Inti-Illimani was exiled from Chile by then-dictator Augusto Pinochet. Though the group was forbidden from physically entering its homeland for 15 years—they didn't return permanently until 1990—its music traveled the airwaves, influencing future members from afar.

Manuel Meriño, a superb guitarist and composer who is now the group's musical director, recalls growing up listening to Inti's recordings and strumming along with his guitar to Inti's trademark mix of Latin American, Afro-Latino, and Italian sounds. Even after he learned to play and appreciate other styles, he continued to feel a strong link to the band's music.

"I think we, the younger members of the group, bear a fundamental responsibility to deliver a message, and we have to treat that with respect," he says. "That's very easy to do because the music lends itself quite naturally to incorporating new Latin American influences."

**'I believe the group at this moment is very modern; I would even say it's in the vanguard'**

**Toward the Past and the Future**

Coulon's brother Marcelo, who plays guitar, bass, and flutes, became a member in 1978. The others joined after 1994.

"I believe the group at this moment is very modern; I would even say it's in the vanguard," says Jorge Coulon. That's in part because the group's contemporary musicians enjoy an unprecedented freedom to mix musical genres in the style Inti-Illimani pioneered almost 40 years ago, he says. Still, he adds, "freedom carries a risk. ... What pleases me about this group today is that the creative risks it is taking are very much in keeping with our history while opening us to many perspectives, many possibilities."

The group's latest CD, *Pequeño Mundo*, released in October 2005, features Inti-Illimani at its best: daring, creative, and in tune with its past. The original compositions include works by Meriño, the Coulon brothers, and Juan Flores. Highlights include the jazz-flavored, percussion-driven "Rondombé" and "Buonanotte Fiorellino."

Meriño sees the recording of *Lugares Comunes*, Inti's 2003 release, as the point at which the newly configured ensemble came together. He says it was a "delicate moment" for him as the group's new musical director and the composer or co-author of about half the songs on the CD: "I felt I had to do something that would sound relatively new but not alienated from what has been recognized as the Inti-Illimani sound, and I believe that CD gave much consideration to the group's older sounds, recordings, and aesthetic."

As the band's sound continues to embrace new musical sensibilities, the younger Intis are mastering classics like "Lo Que Más Quiero" and "Candidos," which remain in the concert repertoire. But they don't feel constrained by the musical legacy they have inherited. Says Daniel Cantillana, a violinist and frequent lead vocalist who has collaborated with Meriño on some of the new material, "Rather, these songs establish an intangible aesthetic framework that lets us know whether a song can fit within what we do. It is our own identity, and if it determines what we do, it does so very subtly."

**Audiences may be awestruck by Inti-Illimani's extensive musical talent, but the band members' admiration for one another is perhaps equally impressive**

#### **Tools of the Trade**

Each member of the group plays numerous instruments that get passed around the stage in a mesmerizing choreography. Between them, the Coulon brothers play guitar, *rondador* (panpipe), *zampona* (panpipe), and *quena*, to name a few. Violinist Cantillana's talents extend to mandolin and distinctive vocal phrasings. Christian González, who plays a half-dozen Western and Andean flutes and bass guitar, has one of the most beautiful voices in a group with no shortage of vocal gifts. Efen Viera contributes seismic percussion performances and plays clarinet and saxophone. Juan Flores, master of an arsenal of Andean instruments, is Viera's accomplice in some of the band's more spectacular onstage antics. A percussion battle between the two during the 2004 U.S. tour culminated in Flores's one-man duet on *zampona* and *cajón*. The newest member of the group, guitarist César Jara, made his U.S. tour debut in 2004.

Audiences may be awestruck by Inti-Illimani's extensive musical talent, but the band members' admiration for one another is perhaps equally

impressive. "Almost always, a group is a metaphor for life, just as a small village is a metaphor for the entire world," Jorge Coulon says. "With regard to musical qualities, there are certain technical requisites, but many people have technical musical abilities. The people who have a plus, who have a connection to their world of values and their creative world, are much more scarce."

If you missed the Intis during their most recent U.S. visit, catch one of their 2006 or 2007 tours, marking their 40th anniversary and making sure the beat goes on for generations to come.

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