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East meets West: For their new album, 'Asian Fusion,' the group Ancient Future takes its inspiration from the Orient.

It's a small world of music, after all

By LAWRENCE GRAND
For the Courier-Post

Their multicultural music, much like their name, contains rather challenging contradictions. Using a diverse array of instruments ranging from sitar, Irish harp, Tibetan bowls and even sleigh bells, Ancient Future has been making world music since before that phrase was even coined.

Described by *Billboard* magazine as trendsetters, the San Francisco-based group has now turned its attention to the Orient with the recently-released CD *Asian Fusion*.

The group's sixth album weaves Chinese and Vietnamese

musical traditions into a colorful tapestry of sounds both Western and Eastern.

Group founder Matthew Montfort says the idea for the album took root not long after the group's performance last year at the Sacramento River Jazz Festival. It was there that Montfort, who founded Ancient Future in 1979 with a group of fellow college music students, was approached by the English-speaking husband of Zhao Hui, one of China's pre-eminent musicians. Eager to play with American jazz musicians, Hui honored Montfort's request to play for him.

"I was utterly captivated,"

Music/Ancient Future turning its attention to the Orient

Continued from Page 1C

Montfort recalls in a recent telephone interview. "I couldn't wait to take my scalloped fret-board guitar from its case and join her. The instruments blended beautifully and a genuine musical chemistry was immediately apparent."

The impromptu musical get-together inspired the band to focus an entire album on Asian influences. Montfort also recruited Vietnam native Bui Huu Nhut — who plays the Vietnamese dan bau, a long single-stringed instrument — to record with Ancient Future on the track *Ja Nam*.

While Asian music is still finding its audience in this country, *Asian Fusion* fits in with Ancient Future's goal of "encompassing cultures with a really broad palette," as Montfort puts it.

"When we (the band members) first met, we were all studying Indian music, and although we wanted to do something that wasn't classical Indian music, our first album (*Visions of a Peaceful Planet*) was really quite Indian," he recalls. "To Indians, it sounded like Western music played on Indian instruments and Westerners heard mostly the Indian influence. So at least we reached

our goal of combining things."

A native of Colorado, Montfort's early influences showed signs of his later diversity, as he listened to everything from Jimi Hendrix, Yes, and Chick Corea, to classical music. A college summer spent at the Ali Akbar College in Northern California changed his approach to music and promoted his withdrawal from the University of Colorado. Montfort's fascination with global music later led him to travel to Indonesia and Bali for additional study and he eventually wrote a music textbook, *Ancient Traditions, Future Possibilities*.

Ancient Future has been virtu-

ally impossible to peg in the music industry's scheme of things: They've been called everything from jazz to New Age, but Montfort says the band's direction is clearly "world fusion music." In its home state, the band's diversity and cultural appeal caught the attention of the California Arts Council, which awarded the group a grant to support its tours.

"Our music is raw and innocent...we strive to fuse different cultural styles and push music into new cultures," Montfort says. "Writing music that involves so many different influences will always fascinate me."