



ECHO IN THE VALLEY

Béla Fleck & Abigail Washburn

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With one eye on using the banjo to showcase America's rich heritage and the other pulling the noble instrument from its most familiar arena into new and unique realms, Béla Fleck and Abigail Washburn's second album *Echo in the Valley* is simultaneously familiar and wildly innovative.

"Some of the most interesting things in the world come together in strange and unique ways and show our diversity," reflects Béla, a fifteen-time Grammy award winner who is often considered the world's premier banjo player. "The banjo is just one of those things. It's a great example of how the world can combine things and create surprising hybrids," a reference to the ancestral African roots of the banjo combining with Scotch-Irish music in Appalachia.

Echo in the Valley is the follow up to Béla and Abigail's acclaimed, self-titled debut that earned the 2016 Grammy for Best Folk Album. This time around, the mission was to take their double banjo combination of three finger and clawhammer styles "to the next level and find things to do together that we had not done before," says Béla. "We're expressing different emotions through past techniques and going to deeper places." The results are fascinating, especially considering their strict rules for recording: all sounds must be created by the two of them, the only instruments used are banjos (they have seven between them, ranging from a ukulele to an upright bass banjo), and they must be able to perform every recorded song live.

Fleck and Washburn met at a square dance and began playing music together a dozen years ago, beginning with the Sparrow Quartet. They married shortly thereafter and became parents to a cute little tot. They've been touring the globe as a duo for years, almost nonstop but for each other's performances with various other musical iterations: Béla with the likes of Béla Fleck and the Flecktones, Chick Corea and Chris Thile, among many others, and Abigail with Wu Fei (a master of the ancient 21-string Chinese zither), The Wu-Force and Uncle Earl.

With the exception of a few restyled traditional tunes, all tracks on *Echo in the Valley* are originals, and are largely co-written - a different creative approach from their first album, where songs were mostly his or hers.

"This time, we really wanted to truly write together," Béla adds. "We spent a lot of our time on the lyrics, deciding what we want the songs to communicate, both literally and under the surface."

Echo in the Valley reflects relevant issues while simultaneously connecting us to our past through wild re-imaginings of traditional pieces. New original tunes range from "Over the Divide," a song inspired by Hans Breuer, who worked to ferry Syrian refugees to safety, to "Blooming Rose," inspired by Native American voices and lamenting a continual distancing from nature, and "Don't Let It Bring You is an emphatic mantra for hard times.

With "I don't wanna cry, cry, cry, oh, "Let it Go" is ultimately about release from the pain of transition, surrendering to growth. The song acknowledges that we must let our children grow up; the concession that youthful innocence will one day give way to adult cares and worries.

Clarence Ashley's "My Home's Across the Blue Ridge Mountains" has been turned into a rural blues, and Béla's well-known piece "Big Country" is framed by the traditional Appalachian tunes "Sally in the Garden" and "Molly Put the Kettle On," a medley Béla and Abigail performed hundreds of times on stage before recording. "'Big Country' is one of the most beautiful melodies I have ever heard played on the banjo," says Abigail, who takes the lead on this version.

"Come All You Coal Miners" is the point-of-view of coal-miner advocate Sarah Ogan Gunning, whose passages remain poignant and powerful today. "This song came from a very emotional, mother-driven, daughter-driven, wife-driven place, and there are not many songs throughout history from that perspective, so I am incredibly moved by her," says Washburn.

As the story goes, Béla was struck by the sound of Mr. Earl Scruggs' banjo when hearing the Beverly Hillbillies theme song. He got hold of a banjo, took his musical namesakes (Béla for Bartok, Anton for Weburn, Leos for Yanecek) to heart, and has since continuously broken new musical ground with his instrument. Fleck has the distinction of being nominated in more categories than any other instrumentalist in Grammy history, and has brought his banjo through scorching hot newgrass, traditional bluegrass, otherworldly funk, modern jazz, African originals, transatlantic Celtic, and classical realms, with two self-composed banjo concertos to his name (*The Impostor* and *Juno Concerto*), with a third one in the works.

Abigail was similarly jolted into life as a banjoist, but for her it was hearing Doc Watson

perform "Shady Grove." "I was proud to discover that I came from a country where you can hear that ancient sound - from Africa, from Scotland, from Ireland - all mixed up in this beautiful new sound, with those ancient tones in it," Abigail reflects. "The ancient sounds of our culture remind us who we are, and in them, we see a constellation of who we are becoming."

Washburn has imbued this philosophy in all aspects of her work, from the string band Uncle Earl to her acclaimed solo albums, *Song of the Traveling Daughter* and *City of Refuge*, and her semi-autobiographical theatrical work, *Post-American Girl*, as well as in her musical ambassadorship with China, a country with which she has a long, profound history. Abigail is deftly following in the footsteps of the founding mothers of folk, and has become a prominent voice of old-time in our time while bringing to light those ancient sounds of American and Far East cultures in new and exciting ways.

Béla and Abigail's creative process on *Echo in the Valley* is sonically made manifest in the record's major themes of harmony, empathy and surrender. As Abigail explains, the intense, intimate collaboration that Fleck and Washburn put forward on this project required "a spirit of staying strong, but also a willingness to release into the other's ideas to create something new," possibly something bigger and more beautiful than one could do on one's own.

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