



## BÉLA FLECK & THE FLECKTONES

Groundbreaking banjoist/composer/bandleader Béla Fleck has reconvened the original 'Béla Fleck & The Flecktones,' the extraordinary initial line-up of his incredible combo. Rocket Science marks the first recording by the first fab four Flecktones in almost two decades, with pianist/harmonica player Howard Levy back in the fold alongside Fleck, bassist Victor Wooten, and percussionist/ Drumitarist Roy "Futureman" Wooten. Far from being a wistful trip back in time, the album sees the Grammy Award-winning quartet creating some of the most forward thinking music of their long, storied career. While all manners of genres come into play – from classical and jazz to bluegrass and African music to electric blues and Eastern European folk dances – the result is an impossible to pigeonhole sound all their own, a meeting of musical minds that remains, as ever, utterly indescribable. Simply put, it is The Flecktones, the music made only when these four individuals come together.

"All the different things I do come together to make a new 'hybrid' Béla," Fleck says. "Everybody else in the group is doing the same things, collaborating with different people, and pursuing a wide variety of ideas, so when we come together and put all of our separate soups into one big stockpot it turns into a very diverse concoction." Fleck first united the Flecktones in 1988, ostensibly for a single performance on PBS' Lonesome Pine Special. From the start, there was a special kinship between the four musicians, a bond forged in a mutual passion for creativity and artistic advancement. Three breakthrough albums and a whole lot of live dates followed before Levy decided to move on in late 1992.

"I wanted to do other things and there was no time to do anything else," he explains. "We were probably playing 150 shows a year at that time – maybe more - and it was just too much for me. I've never, before or since, done any one thing that much!" Béla Fleck & the Flecktones persevered, playing as a trio and with many special guests, before saxophonist Jeff Coffin joined the ensemble. A succession of acclaimed albums and innumerable live performances continued to earn the band a fervent fan following around the world, not to mention five Grammy Awards in a range of categories.

Still, by 2008, the band had grown somewhat restive and embarked on a temporary hiatus. The seeds of change began with what Futureman calls the "paintbrushes of fate" as Coffin was invited to join Dave Matthews Band after the 2008 death of saxophonist LeRoi Moore. Fleck encouraged him to accept, believing the decision would rejuvenate both DMB and the Flecktones themselves.

"We were ready for something different to happen," he says. "We'd been in a kind of holding pattern. We had the same line-up for so many years that it was becoming 'normal,' we were all drifting into outside things for new musical invigoration, and we were taking more and more

time off between albums and tours.”

Each member had been quite busy with a variety of successful projects – including: Bela’s duet collaborations with Chick Corea, a trio with Zakir Hussain and Edgar Meyer (sometimes with the Detroit Symphony) and his expansive adventures in African music, documented in the acclaimed 2009 film and CD, *Throw Down Your Heart*. Victor’s solo band tours, camps, recording sessions, clinics and CD releases (including an incredible collaborative project with Stanley Clarke and Marcus Miller called SMV, which yielded the album ‘Thunder’), and Future Man’s creation of his amazing Black Mozart project, and continued development of new instruments.

Still, all agree that Flecktones music was beckoning them home. The band, which had always maintained a warm relationship with the gifted pianist/harmonica player, recruited Levy for a 2009 tour of the US and Europe, an experience he describes as “extremely invigorating and very energizing.”

“It felt just like it did back when we first started playing together,” says Wooten. “Just with a lot less hair.” Upon the tour’s conclusion, the four musicians agreed to further explore the band’s possibilities, sensing what Futureman calls, “an opportunity to revisit the original scene of the crime.” “There were a lot of unfinished aspects to this line-up of the band,” Fleck notes, “in that it stopped right when we were peaking creatively.” For Fleck, Levy’s return enables the Flecktones to follow through on the original concept of a band “where each person was reinventing their instruments, where every one of us was a kind of mutant.”

“There’s a special thing that happens when the four of us get together and play,” notes Levy. “We all have the same attitude of trying to do things that we haven’t done before and coincidentally, no one else has either.” One thing was certain, however. The ‘original’ Flecktones were resolute that their reunion would not be rooted in nostalgia. The goal from the get-go was to drive the music forward to places where it might’ve progressed had things gone differently.

“I didn’t want to just get together to play the old music,” Fleck says. “That’s not what the Flecktones are about. Everybody’s full of life and ideas and creativity. I was intrigued by what we could do that we had never done before.” “Everybody’s still advancing on their instruments,” adds Futureman. “Everyone has grown over these 18 years, so it was an opportunity to realize some of what we were trying to do in the beginning.”

In early 2010, Fleck and Levy first began working on new material, teaming up for collaborative writing sessions at Levy’s home in Evanston, Illinois. Fleck was determined to establish a more inclusive environment as far as composition, to give Levy a greater stake in the writing process. “We hashed out a whole bunch of ideas together,” Levy says. “He would play things that he was working on, and I would go back into my memory banks and say, ‘I have this incomplete fragment that might work well with the band,’ or we would just improvise things together. It was inspiring, I think, for both of us.”

Their compositional collaboration resulted in a remarkable suite comprised of “Joyful Spring” and “Life In Eleven.” The former was originally conceived of by Levy while in his early 20s, while the idea for “Life In Eleven” had its genesis in the Flecktones’ first incarnation. The band had long wanted to explore one of Levy’s passions, the Bulgarian dance rhythm called Gankino or Krivo. “Almost 12,” a piece Victor and Bela wrote after Howard left the band had earned the Fleck-

tones a “Best Instrumental Composition” Grammy in 1998. Still, the goal of writing a Flecktone piece - with Howard - using the unusual 11/16 or 11/8 time signature was, to Fleck’s mind, “unfinished business.”

“When we got together, the 11 idea came back up and Howard came out with something very Bulgarian,” he says. “I said, ‘It’s really great but it’s really fast and jumpy and complex. What if, halfway through, we dropped into a gospel 11/4 feel that was so natural, that you didn’t even notice it was in 11?’ It was an idea I’d had in my mind for some time, a way of playing something in 11 that didn’t confuse new 11 listeners, due to it’s complexity”

Songwriting was, of course, not limited to Fleck and Levy. Futureman’s solo composition “The Secret Drawer” serves as preamble to Levy’s evocative “Sweet Pomegranates,” and Wooten brought “Like Water”, which Bela helped to complete, which stands as a majestic representation of his flowing, pianistic approach to the bass. For his part, Fleck composed a number of new pieces while also delving into his back pages for “Earthling Parade” and “Storm Warning,” a track that had been a highlight of his live sets when touring with Stanley Clarke and Jean-Luc Ponty. Though he had not previously considered either composition for the Flecktones, the new line-up inspired him to give them a second look.

“Those pieces now seemed more intriguing - with the original line-up,” Fleck says. “Not that they hadn’t been cool in other settings, but with Howard in the picture we could go quite deep into the complicated zone while still keeping them earthy and warm.” In September, the Flecktones met at Fleck’s home studio in Nashville for the first of two rounds of sessions. Where the band had customarily road-tested new material, working out the kinks in live performance, this time they did not have that luxury.

“We were writing some of the more complex pieces as we were laying them down,” Levy says. “But all of us have done so much recording outside of the group, where we’re used to seeing compositions take shape in the studio, that we were all comfortable with the process.” “We had to be very aware,” Fleck says, “because we were making final decisions almost from the start. But I think it yielded an improvised quality, an intensity, to the record. It was like, ‘Let’s make some good decisions and then commit to them.’”

In many ways, the album’s sound centers on the return of Levy’s piano and chromatically played diatonic harmonica, taking full advantage of the new melodic designs each brought to the Flecktones’ sonic palette. Known as “The Man With Two Brains” for his uncanny ability to play both instruments simultaneously, Levy has built a remarkably diverse resume over the past twenty years, including solo and session work, membership in Trio Globo and Chévere de Chicago, collaborations with classical violinist Fox Fehling, and founding Balkan Samba Records and the online Howard Levy Harmonica School. The equally restless Fleck hails Levy as “an incendiary player” who by his very nature forces the band out of their comfort zone.

“When we play together, Victor, Futureman, and I all have to step up our game,” Fleck says, “because Howard is going to throw something unexpected at us, which in certain ways, puts us in an uncomfortable zone, but due to that, we have to push through - into our higher selves.” While prior Flecktones collections have often featured inventive and innovative instrumentation, this time out the band opted to stick to the basics. Fleck plays an assortment of banjos, mostly vintage, though an electric Deering Crossfire can be heard on “Prickly Pear” and a prototype

10-string banjo is featured on "Joyful Spring." For his part, Wooten largely bypassed his famed assortment of bass effects, noting that the player is what truly matters.

"In my mind, the instrument is there to allow the musician to feel something and to express themselves," Wooten says. "The music doesn't come from the instrument, it comes from the musician. Whatever instrument allows you to express yourself the way you want to at that moment is the one you should play."

That said, Futureman took the occasion to unveil a new prototype Drumitar, his MIDI-based device that allows him to trigger samples using his fingers. A central element of the Flecktones sound, the first version of the notorious instrument was on its last legs after more than two decades. More significantly, new advances in technology allowed for the creation of a Drumitar more in line with the drummer's vision, featuring better dynamics and the ability to record his own spectrum of drum samples.

"Twenty years later, the fruit is really ripe," Futureman says. "There are things that I was trying to do back then but the sounds just weren't good enough. Now it's actually swinging the way I always wanted it to swing." For many Flecktones fans, the return of the original line-up allows a chance to see a band that many had never gotten to witness before. Indeed, a certain segment of the band's base discovered them during the Jeff Coffin era and may not even be familiar with Levy's membership.

"There are people who don't remember the very beginning of the Flecktones," Futureman says. "It's like people that started watching Star Trek: The Next Generation and never got to meet Captain Kirk. So here we go, the original crew of the Enterprise coming together on a new mission."

Visionary and vibrant as anything in their already rich canon, Rocket Science feels more like a new beginning than simply the culmination of an early chapter. Where the band goes from here remains undetermined, but all four members agree that the promise of Béla Fleck & the Original Flecktones has yet to be fulfilled. "We're going to have to have this experience together and see how everybody likes it," Fleck says. "I know that we haven't even come close to exhausting the possibilities with this record, but we sure went deeper than we ever had before."