



Béla Fleck
January 2012

Béla Fleck is often considered the premier banjo player in the world. A New York City native, he picked up the banjo at age 15 after being awed by the bluegrass music of Flatt & Scruggs. While still in high school he began experimenting with playing bebop jazz on his banjo, mentored by fellow banjo renegade Tony Trischka. In 1980, he released his first solo album, *Crossing the Tracks*, with material that ranged from straight ahead bluegrass to Chick Corea's "Spain." In 1982, Fleck joined the progressive bluegrass band New Grass Revival, making a name for himself on countless solo and ensemble projects ever since as a virtuoso instrumentalist. In 1989 he formed the genre-busting Flecktones, with members equally talented and adventurous as himself.

Throw Down Your Heart, the third volume in Béla's renowned *Tales From the Acoustic Planet* series, is his most ambitious project to date. In on-location collaborations with musicians from Uganda, Tanzania, Senegal, Mali, South Africa and Madagascar, Béla Fleck explores the African origins of the banjo, the prototype of which was brought to American shores by African slaves. *Throw Down Your Heart* is a companion to the award-winning film of the same name, which Béla and director Sascha Paladino are currently premiering at festivals nationwide. Transcending barriers of language and culture, Fleck finds common ground with musicians ranging from local villagers to international superstars such as the Malian diva Oumou Sangare to create some of the most meaningful music of his career.

The music on the album is as adventurous and varied as anything we've come to expect from Béla, ranging from the tradition-based opening track, performed with a group of Kenyan women singers, to the exquisite title track, performed with the Haruna Samake Trio and Bassekou Kouate from Mali. Bassekou, who comes from a long line of Griot musicians, is an incredible improvising player who plays the n'goni, the Malian banjo. The music he and Béla make together is gentle and melodic. Equally modern is his duet with South African guitarist Vusi Mahlasela, who is simply known as 'the voice' (and what an awesome and expressive voice he has). His music connects South Africa's Apartheid-scarred past with its promise for a better future.

Nothing can quite prepare the listener for the sound of the giant marimba played by the Muwewesu Xylophone Group in Uganda. Says Béla, "The

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marimba is reassembled every day, and it seems to be played by a set group of men. Each one plays a certain musical part in the group. I think there are other people who know each of the parts in case someone is unable, or unavailable to play. Also there seemed to be kids who were being taught parts. But a spot in the primary team seemed to be a very coveted spot, and the men who played in this group were very serious and very good. The village did join in – in large numbers, singing and playing flutes and fiddles and percussion instruments. They also danced.” It’s a sound of pure joy.

Another highlight is “Djorolen,” a duet with singer Oumou Sangare, who delivers a vocal that expresses heartbreaking beauty and sadness. “As she points out in this song,” says Béla, “it is often the orphans, those who have lost their parents when they are young, who have the greatest problems in life.”

“D’Gary Jam” is a fascinating amalgam that exemplifies the spirit of the album. Béla explains, “This track started its life in Nashville. We had a great jam one day, which went for 22 minutes straight, the whole take was really cool.

This was in July, about 7 months before we went to Africa. I decided to bring the track along, and add people to it as we went, and even after the trip, a kind of science project, if you will. After things got added, I took some liberties with people’s parts and did a little audio sculpting.” Along with the great acoustic guitarist D’Gary, the track features, among others, Oumou Sangare, the legendary kora player Toumani Diabate, and Bassekou Kouyate.

As to the origins of the banjo, Béla comments, “When I went to Africa I found instruments and players that gave me a better sense of where the thing started. In Gambia and Mali in particular, I found what I was looking for!” This is especially apparent on the traditional song medley “Ajula/Mbamba,” performed by Béla and The Jatta Family from the Gambia. “The akonting could very well be the original banjo. Everyone around Banjul certainly seems to think so! Huge numbers of slaves came west from this area. We were told that the musicians were allowed to play these instruments on the slave ships, and that many lives were saved due to it.”

While many of these recordings were made in the field, in Uganda, Tanzania, The Gambia and Mali, the album is beautifully recorded. The lasting impression is that Béla Fleck has revealed many subtle facets of African music, from the fully modern to the deeply traditional. It is some of the most exciting and beautiful music he’s ever made. “[Fleck’s] reverence for his fellow players allows for the honey of the African sounds to seem that much sweeter. And the music, well...You’ll just have to hear it for yourself...”
-*Popmatters.com*

“The banjo sheds its image as the quintessential American instrument to

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reveal a symbol of deep African heritage and the collective wail of the European slave trade (the film's title derives from this heartbreaking historical chapter)." - *Austin American Statesman*

Just in case you aren't familiar with Béla Fleck, there are some who say he's the premiere banjo player in the world.. Others claim that Béla has virtually reinvented the image and the sound of the banjo through a remarkable performing and recording career that has taken him all over the musical map and on a range of solo projects and collaborations. If you are familiar with Béla, you know that he just loves to play the banjo, and put it into unique settings.

Born and raised in New York City, Béla began his musical career playing the guitar. In the early 1960's, while watching the Beverly Hillbillies, the bluegrass sounds of Flatt & Scruggs flowed out of the TV set and into his young brain. Earl Scruggs's banjo style hooked Béla's interest immediately. "It was like sparks going off in my head" he later said.

It wasn't until his grandfather bought him a banjo in September of '73, that it became his full time passion. That week, Béla entered New York City's, High School of Music and Art. He began studies on the French horn but was soon demoted to the chorus, due his lack of musical aptitude. Since the banjo wasn't an offered elective at Music & Art, Béla sought lessons through outside sources. Erik Darling, Marc Horowitz, and Tony Trischka stepped up and filled the job. Béla joined his first band, "Wicker's Creek" during this period. Living in NYC, Béla was exposed to a wide variety of musical experiences.. One of the most impressive was a concert by "Return to Forever" featuring Chick Corea and Stanley Clarke. This concert encouraged further experimenting with bebop and jazz on the banjo, signs of things to come.

Several months after high school, Béla moved to Boston to play with Jack Tottle's Tasty Licks. While in Boston, Béla continued his jazz explorations, made two albums with Tasty Licks, and at 19 years old made his first solo banjo album *Crossing the Tracks*, on Rounder Records. This is where he first played with future musical partners Sam Bush and Jerry Douglas.

After the break up of Tasty Licks, Béla spent a summer on the streets of Boston playing with bass player, Mark Schatz. Mark and Béla moved to Lexington, KY to form Spectrum, which included Jimmy Gaudreau, Glen Lawson, and Jimmy Mattingly. Spectrum toured until 1981. While in Spectrum, he and Mark traveled to California and Nashville to record his second album *Natural Bridge* with David Grisman, Mark O'Connor, Ricky Skaggs, Darol Anger, Mike Marshall, and other great players.

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In 1981, Béla was invited to join the progressive bluegrass band New Grass Revival, lead by Sam Bush on mandolin, fiddle and vocals. With the addition of Pat Flynn on guitar and NGR veteran John Cowan on bass and vocals, New Grass Revival took bluegrass music to new limits, exciting audiences and critics alike. Through the course of five albums, they charted new territory with their blend of bluegrass, rock and country music. The relentless national and international touring by NGR exposed Béla's banjo playing to the bluegrass/acoustic music world.

(During the 9 years Béla spent with NGR he continued to record a series of solo albums for Rounder, including the ground breaking 1988 album "Drive". He also collaborated with Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas, Edgar Meyer and Mark O'Connor in an acoustic super group called Strength in Numbers. The MCA release, "The Telluride Sessions", is also considered an evolutionary statement by the acoustic music community.

Towards the end of the New Grass years, Béla and Howard Levy crossed paths at the Winipeg Folk Festival. Next came a phone call from a friend who wanted to introduce him to an amazing bass player. Victor Lemonte Wooten played some licks on the phone for Béla and the second connection was made. In 1988 Dick Van Kleeck, Artistic Director for the PBS Lonesome Pine Series based in Louisville, Kentucky, offered Béla a solo show.

Béla put several musical sounds together with his banjo, a string quartet, his Macintosh computer and also the more jazz based combo. Howard and Victor signed on for the concert, but the group still lacked a drummer. The search was on for an unusual drummer/percussionist. Victor offered up his brother Roy Wooten, later to become known as FutureMan. Roy was developing the Drumitar (Drum - Guitar), it was then in its' infancy. A midi trigger device, the drumitar allowed FutureMan to play the drums with his fingers triggering various sampled sounds. The first rehearsal held at Béla's Nashville home was hampered by a strong thunderstorm that knocked the electricity out for hours. The four continued on with an acoustic rehearsal and the last slot on the TV show became the first performance of Béla Fleck and the Flecktones.

Next came the self-titled CD, which Béla financed himself. The recording attracted the attention of the folks at Warner Brothers Records. It was released in 1990, dubbed a "blu-bop" mix of jazz and bluegrass, and soon became a commercially successful disc. The album was Grammy nominated, and their second recording "Flight of the Cosmic Hippo" followed suit. Howard Levy toured and recorded with the Flecktones till the end of 1992. After several years as a trio and touring with special guests, saxophonist Jeff Coffin joined the Tones. Famed for a non-stop touring schedule, the Flecktones have reached more than 500,000 audience members yearly from 2001 on.

Still releasing albums and touring, the Tones have garnered a strong and

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faithful following among jazz and new acoustic fans. They have shared the stage with Dave Mathews Band, Sting, Bonnie Raitt and the Grateful Dead, among many others, made several appearances on The Tonight Show in the Johnny Carson days and the Jay Leno days, as well as Arsenio Hall, and Conan O'Brian. Béla also appeared on Saturday Night Live and David Letterman's show as well.

Although the first Flecktones albums were created live-in-the-studio, the group went on to experiment with overdubs and guest artists on later albums, with contributions from artists as diverse as Chick Corea, Bruce Hornsby, Branford Marsalis, John Medeski, Andy Statman, the Alash Group and Dave Matthews. The Flecktones went on tour with Dave Matthews Band in 1996 and 1997, and Fleck is featured on several tracks on DMB's 1998 album "Before these Crowded Streets." In 2003, Béla Fleck & the Flecktones released the landmark three-disc set "Little Worlds" simultaneously with a highlights disc entitled Ten From Little Worlds.

In 2006 the band released The Hidden Land, which won the Grammy for Best Contemporary Jazz Album in 2007.

In 2008, Jingle All The Way, the band's holiday album was released, and in 2009 it was voted best Pop Instrumental Album at the Grammys.

Any world-class musician born with the names Béla (for Bartok), Anton (for Dvorak) and LÉos (for Janacek) would seem destined to play classical music. Already a powerfully creative force in bluegrass, jazz, pop, rock and world beat, Béla at last made the classical connection with "Perpetual Motion", his critically acclaimed 2001 Sony Classical recording that went on to win a pair of Grammys, including Best Classical Crossover Album, in the 44th annual Grammy Awards.

(Collaborating with Fleck on "Perpetual Motion" was his long time friend and colleague Edgar Meyer, a bassist whose virtuosity defies labels and also an acclaimed composer. In the wake of that album's release, Fleck & Meyer came up with the idea of a banjo/bass duo, which they developed and refined during a concert tour of the US. Live recordings from that tour are the basis for their latest Sony Classical recording "Music For Two" which also includes a bonus DVD featuring a documentary film by Sascha Paladino (Fleck's brother) that captures the duo's collaboration and crafting of repertoire while on tour. Béla and Edgar also co-wrote and performed a double concerto for banjo, bass and the Nashville Symphony, which debuted in November 2003.

The recipients of Multiple Grammy Awards going back to 1998, Béla Flecks' total Grammy count is 14 Grammys won, and 30 nominations. He has been nominated in more different categories than anyone in Grammy history.

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