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Béla Fleck

Nigel Williamson examines the extraordinary career of the versatile musician who has earned himself the reputation as the ultimate Banjo Man

There are only a handful of musicians who become synonymous with their instrument. To do so requires a rare combination of technical virtuosity, historical resonance, emotional empathy, a collaborative spirit, an ambassadorial calling and the imagination to boldly take the instrument across frontiers it has never previously crossed in search of new sounds and settings.

Say 'sitar' and you automatically think Ravi Shankar. Violin and Menuhin rhyme rather neatly and seem similarly indivisible. Tap the word 'banjo' into any internet search engine

and somewhere near the top of the list of results will emerge the name Béla Fleck.

If there is one adjective that is applied to describe the banjo more than any other, it is 'humble'; its scratchy, earthy sound conjures clichéd connotations of either black-faced minstrels singing 'way down upon the Swanee river' or hillbilly redneck escapees from John Boorman's movie *Deliverance*. But there's nothing humble about the banjo in the hands of Fleck, who argues that it's actually the world's most richly versatile instrument. To prove the point, he's won 15 Grammy awards

in country, pop, jazz, classical crossover, Latin and world music categories. He has performed with top jazz musicians such as Chick Corea and the Marcus Roberts Trio, worked as a duo with his wife, the banjo player and folk singer Abigail Washburn, recorded in West Africa with the likes of Oumou Sangaré and Bassekou Kouyaté, and composed and recorded a concerto for banjo and symphony orchestra. "Most instruments can be played in a lot of different kinds of music, but there is no instrument in the orchestra that has the sound of a banjo. It's a very distinct sound quite unlike anything else," he says.

Fleck takes his role as the banjo's foremost ambassador seriously. 'I've gotten to a unique place as a banjo player in the general music world,' he told *Songlines* (in #105) last year. 'I don't want to squander that position or let it go away too lightly. It was hard-won and it's an unusual position, which is also good for the banjo as an instrument to be taken seriously.'



Born in New York City in 1958, Fleck seemed destined to become a musician – his mother named him Béla Anton Leoš after the composers Bartók, Webern and Janáček. But his choice of instrument was perhaps less predictable; he studied French horn and was 15 before he picked up a banjo, inspired by Earl Scruggs' theme song for the television show *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Tutoring himself with the assistance of Pete Seeger's classic manual, *How to Play the*

5-String Banjo, by 1978 he'd made his first album with Tasty Licks, a Boston-based bluegrass outfit. His first solo album was released in 1979, reflecting his interest in both bluegrass and jazz, a style he pursued throughout the 80s during seven years in the progressive bluegrass band New Grass Revival, with whom he recorded five albums.

In 1990 he released his first album with his band the Flecktones, forging a thrilling fusion of jazz, pop, improvisation, rural Americana and exploratory composition. A further 13 prolific albums followed before he put the Flecktones on hiatus in 2012.

Meanwhile, Fleck's adventures in world music had started on a US State Department trip to India in the late 80s, when he met *tabla* player Zakir Hussain, who has since become a regular collaborator. Another seminal

moment came when he met the West African *ngoni* player Bassekou Kouyaté at a banjo festival in Tennessee. "He blew everybody away in the banjo community," Fleck recalls. "He understood the relationship between his African instrument and the banjo in a way that none of us did. It was eye-opening." Several years later Fleck made his first trip to Africa, where he recorded what became the 2009 album *Tales from the Acoustic Planet, Vol 3: Africa Sessions*.

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Since then Fleck has released a further five albums, including two recordings with a symphony orchestra, another with a jazz trio and, most recently, a set with his banjo-playing wife that

returns to the down-home bluegrass picking of the back porches of Appalachia. "It's like a big pot of stew," says the Banjo Man. "Having played with jazz, bluegrass, African, Indian and classical musicians, all of those things are intermingled in my music. The African influence comes out when I'm playing American traditional music and it's great if I can find an *ngoni* riff that works in a bluegrass song. It sounds like it belongs." ♦

+ DATE Béla Fleck performs with Abigail Washburn on November 14 at the Royal Festival Hall as part of the EFG London Jazz Festival

BEST ALBUMS

Tabula Rasa
(Waterlily Acoustics, 1996)
Fleck hooks up with the Indian slide guitarist Vishwa Mohan Bhatt and Chinese *erhu* player Jie-Bing Chen to create a set of textured string magic. "It's the sleeper – a favourite unsung album in my discography," Fleck says.

Outbound
(Columbia, 2000)
Fleck's eighth album with the Flecktones and one of the most adventurous, with throat singer Kongar-ol Ondar, plus Sandip Burman on *tabla* and Andy Narel on steel pans. The results earned a Grammy for Best Contemporary Jazz Album.

Perpetual Motion
(Sony Classical, 2001)
Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Scarlatti and Debussy played on the banjo – and stretching the instrument's range and Fleck's technique to the max to do so. Top names from the classical world including Evelyn Glennie, John Williams and Joshua Bell help out.

Throw Down your Heart, Tales from the Acoustic Planet, Vol 3: Africa Sessions
(Rounder, 2009)
This album was culled from his travels across Africa, and ranges from ensemble pieces to intimate duets. Features D'Gary, Baaba Maal, Toumani Diabaté, Bassekou Kouyaté, Oumou Sangaré among others. Reviewed in #65.

Béla Fleck & Abigail Washburn
(Rounder, 2014)
Just two banjos and Washburn's exquisitely keening voice on a compelling set of songs that range from trad Appalachian murder ballads to original compositions. A Top of the World review in #105.

IF YOU LIKE BELA FLECK, THEN TRY:

Bassekou Kouyaté
Segu Blue
(Out Here, 2007)
Fleck regards Bassekou as a musical soul mate and the Malian maestro's solo debut dramatically expanded the repertoire and range of the African *ngoni* in the same way that Fleck has done with its American cousin, the banjo. A Top of the World review in #43.