

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH BELA FLECK



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Interviewed by Marc Fields

Marc Fields : I heard recently that you've become very interested in Indian music.

Bela Fleck : I was playing a show at Wolftrap in Washington D.C. , and a tabla player, Indian musician, came up to me after the show and said, you need to play with me. I was interested in Indian music, I had heard the stuff John McLaughlin did with Shakti. Definitely had heard some Ravi Shankar, but my Indian music knowledge was limited to those things, I knew very little about it. But I knew it was incredibly complex and incredibly interesting.

And I opened up to this guy and invited him to Nashville . He started teaching me some things, his name is Sandeep Bermin, a great tabla player. And we ended up touring together, doing, I don't know, maybe eight or ten duo concerts playing Indian things. Well, I mean a lot of it was stuff I just wrote in a particular time signature and he just learned it and we played it rhythmically on the tabla... But with the raga, he actually said it would really be good if you actually really learned, even just a small raga, just a simple one, and this is one of the ones people start with, it's not that hard.

Like a lot of things, there are a lot of areas where I've touched on it enough to learn that it can be done, or I can do it. But...I wouldn't call myself an expert in these kinds of music. For instance, the classical music that I've done, I did this album of classical music and, basically, I learned twenty pieces, and that's the extent of my classical abilities, those twenty pieces and I can't even play all of them on command. I would have to re-learn them and had to learn them to record 'em, and that's it. And yet I won a classical Grammy for it, but you couldn't say I'm a classical musician now. I would never be so bold as to say anything like that, but I know these pieces and I play them the way I play them, and I've learned a lot out of the experience.

MF: What about jazz?

BF: Same way, you know, playing jazz and stuff, I've still don't know if I'm a jazz musician or not. I know that I'm very inspired by the music and that I'm an improvising musician and a lot of jazz concepts find their way into my playing. But I could say I was a bluegrass musician, an extended bluegrass musician. I do know how bluegrass works and I feel pretty confident about that. Irish music, you know, I've played enough of it to play certain things convincingly, but I couldn't consider an expert. So, lots of different musics creep into what I do and it's fun for me to see if I can make the banjo work in that context.

MF: How do you respond to purists who question whether that's really bluegrass?

BF: Well, you know, that would be almost like a jazz musician of today saying you're only allowed to play the blues -- you can't play any songs with extended changes because nobody's playing that way anymore. Because the truth is before bluegrass, there was a lot of stuff going along with the banjo that was much more complex, in harmony and a lot of areas.

People were playing classical stuff on the banjo in the late eighteen hundreds so, why should the bluegrass community say to a musician that they shouldn't be allowed to play... when, I mean, if bluegrass is supposed to be a tradition, how come the people that invented it are, some of them are still alive. Indian music is a tradition, you know, it's centuries and centuries old. Irish music is a tradition. Bluegrass is a music that remains to be seen, although it has traditional roots, but it's a great polyglot music, it's a beautiful thing, it's such a powerful thing that so many people are playing it. It's gonna go on, I believe it's going to become a tradition.

But sometimes I find people who are, you know, hard-core about what you should and shouldn't do and you're basing it on what somebody did in the nineteen forties. That's just not, I can't go with that. Besides, too many people whose music I love don't play that way. Tony Trischka, for example. Bill Keith, when he first came in, was such a shock to the system for the bluegrass community that someone was playing that way...

And I think of myself a lot more in terms of the world community of musicians than I think of myself in terms of the community of banjo players, in terms of what I'm trying to learn and grow as a musician. I want to know how I fit in, you know, what do people play jazz like? What do people play classical like? What is the level of musicianship that the great musicians have?

MF: What are your memories of the first time you heard bluegrass?

BF: My first memory of bluegrass was at my grandparents' house in Queens when I was maybe six or seven, I'm guessing, maybe even younger. They let us into their bedroom to watch a re-run of "Beverly Hillbillies," and we were flipping around and it came on, and I

was just like, what is that, you know, I could not believe that sound. And my brother, it had no impact on him whatsoever, but for me it was a galvanizing moment.

And then, I said, well wait, wait, it's going to come back on in the end [of the program]... And I said, there it is, there's that sound. I always remembered that day, but I wasn't quite aware what banjo was, I just knew I liked that sound. It wasn't 'til "Dueling Banjos" came out when I was fifteen, or fourteen, that suddenly, everybody knew what a banjo was and everybody saw that movie and you couldn't escape that song.

So that's when I got my first banjo, and it was in upstate New York . It was in Peekskill , where my grandfather lived. He brought one home from a yard sale... I think it was for my brother because I was already playing a little bit of guitar at that time, so, I'll just give this to Louie, because you already have a guitar. I picked it up and I never put it down. It was the day before I started high school. I was fifteen.

MF: You must have felt very out of place, given where you were living and the music your peers were listening to...

BF: Yeah, there wasn't anybody else my age doing it, that's for sure... I was in the High School of music and Art, which is a sister school to Performing Arts, so I went up to Harlem everyday on the bus. By junior and senior year, I would bring my banjo to school a lot, too, because I couldn't bear to be away from it. And so, if I had a break between classes, I'd be playing. If I had lunch, I'd go outside, out front and play. Eventually, by the time I got to be a senior, I would cut classes and go play at City College , which was a few blocks away. So, I was pretty ate up with it, as they say in the South.

But there were musicians around. I mean eventually I was able to study with Tony Trishka, you know. So how lucky could I possibly be to end up in his, 'cause he was, and in a lot of ways still is, one of the most creative forces that the banjo has had...I was lucky enough to be around him, and I just soaked up everything Tony was doing.

MF: With all the different styles of music one can play on the banjo, and its long history, what is it about the banjo that makes it so evocative to so many different listeners?

BF: I look at it that there are certain archetype instruments and they are simple ideas. You know, blowing through a hole to make a long tone, or plucking a string, stretching a hide over a gourd... So, they come up in every culture. Banjo comes up in every culture, everywhere I've been around the world, there's some kind of banjo. You go to Africa , of course, you go to India , definitely, you go to Mongolia ... China ...it's there, it's everywhere. So, it's just a natural idea...

MF: [part of a longer discussion on Earl Scruggs and other banjo "heroes"]

BF: When I heard Earl Scruggs, I think of it as a high-tech primitive sound, you know. And so that's a little catch-phrase I sometimes think of, high-tech primitive, because the sound is primitive, but when it's played on a high level of technical prowess it sounds

almost like a computer, it's so fast -- how could you possibly play that fast? But, it still has that earthy quality, so I think you have a combination of earthiness and high-technical facility. It's an unbeatable combination...

You know, people talk about who was the first person who does things and they become all picky about, well, did Earl start bluegrass banjo or did somebody else start doing three finger stuff... Well, it kinda doesn't matter, because he [Scruggs] was so good. He was a musician, it wasn't just the fact that he used three fingers. It was that he did something that spoke to people in such a powerful way, that everybody wanted to play that instrument, because he was a great musician. He had the soul of a great musician, and so there could have been other people who, who did things first, but it wouldn't matter... Did Eddie Adcock really show it to Don Reno, I don't know. It doesn't matter, they both play the music that they play with it, and they're very different from each other. And then the melodic style led by Bobby Thompson, Bill Keith, you know. I don't really care, I just wanna hear the guy play.