

*Throw Down Your Heart: Tales From the Acoustic Planet Vol. 3, the Africa Sessions*, 2009, Béla Fleck, produced by Béla Fleck. Rounder/Umgd CDROUN0634. One compact disc. 32-page booklet with liner notes by Fleck and photography by Dave Sinko, Joel Hamburger, Dave Bergen, Sascha Paladino and Nicole Smaglick.

*Throw Down Your Heart* is a recent recording project by American five-string banjo player and composer Béla Fleck. The recording documents Fleck's musical collaborations during a two-month 2005 trip to Uganda, Tanzania, Mali and The Gambia. *Throw Down Your Heart* re-contextualizes the banjo, an instrument usually associated with rural white music of the southern United States. In juxtaposing the banjo with similar instruments such as the *ngoni*, *akonting*, and *njurkle*, Fleck highlights the West African ancestry of the American five-string banjo. By incorporating bluegrass banjo into traditional African musical contexts, Fleck underscores the African legacy of Appalachian music.

In his 35-year career, Fleck has re-invented the five-string banjo. In addition to playing American folk music, Fleck has adapted the instrument to jazz, fusion, pop, Latin, rock, funk, classical, Indian, Chinese and now African musical contexts. For over twenty years he has toured and recorded with Béla Fleck and the Flecktones, a pop-jazz-fusion group featuring electric banjo, electric bass, saxophone and drum synthesizer. Fleck also maintains various side-projects including recording sessions and concert tours with Chick Corea, Zakir Hussain, Edgar Meyer and Jean-Luc Ponty.

Among Fleck's primary musical influences is Earl Scruggs, whose virtuosic three-finger picking technique helped to galvanize the musical style now known as "bluegrass". Scruggs' technique, known as "rolling", is characterized by rapid streams of 16th notes, often phrased in groups of three within a duple quarternary temporal framework (4/4), thus setting up 4:3 rhythmic accentuation. Fleck has adapted Scruggs' rolling patterns to fit a variety of tonalities, time signatures and melodic forms. In addition to the Scruggs-derived technique, Fleck often utilizes the linear approach of a jazz-fusion guitarist.

Fleck's rolling banjo serves different functions in different songs. On Track 1 "Tulinesangala" with the Nakisenyi Women's Group in Uganda, Fleck's rolling provides a harmonic framework to the singing. On Track 2 "Kinetsa" with Madagascar musicians D'Gary on guitar and Xavier-Martial François on percussion and vocals, the rolling serves a rhythmic purpose: while François' handclaps emphasize a 6/8 metre, Fleck's banjo emphasizes a 3/4 metre.

In many of the larger African ensembles with which Fleck collaborates, there is little sonic room available for the addition of a rolling banjo. In some cases, such as Track 5 "Angelina" with the Luo Cultural Association of Uganda, the banjo combines with the percussion, flutes, bowed lyres and voices to create a joyous, if raucous, juxtaposition of musical worlds. In other cases, such as Track 9 "Wairenziane" with the Muwewesu Xylophone Group of Uganda, the banjo is somewhat incongruous, adding little to what is already a richly saturated texture of giant marimba, flutes, fiddles, singing and percussion.

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Some of the most successful music on *Throw Down Your Heart* highlights the complementary timbres of the banjo and the *mbira*, marimba and lyre. Tracks 4 “Kabibi” and 18 “Dunia Haina Wema/Thumb Fun”, which feature Tanzanian *mbira* player and vocalist Anania Ngoliga, are particularly gorgeous examples. Despite intonation differences, the two instruments blend beautifully, with Ngoliga’s playful singing floating across both. Another such example is Track 13 “Pakugyenda Balebauo”, with Tanzanian Warema Masiaga Cha Cha on vocals, bowed lyre and percussion. The lyre, which possesses an astounding tone quality reminiscent of the electric guitars and harmonicas used in urban blues music, blends seamlessly with Fleck’s Delta blues-inspired banjo playing.

Another highlight is Fleck’s tastefully ornate accompaniment behind vocalists. On Track 11 “Zawose”, Fleck juxtaposes a complex *ostinato* figure with the call-and-response singing of the Zawose Family of Tanzania, adding improvised interludes during breaks in the singing. My favorite item on the CD is Track 17, the duet with Malian vocalist Oumou Sangare on her composition “Djorolen”. On it Fleck plays piano-like accompaniment, complimenting but never overshadowing Sangare’s remarkable singing.

Of the traditional music on the recording, the Malian music shares the most common ground with Fleck’s other work. Many of these tracks feature 4/4 metre and modal tonality reminiscent of Fleck’s Americana projects. The musicians take turns playing fills and solos, much as they would in a bluegrass band or jazz combo. On Track 10 “Buribalal” with Malian guitarist and vocalist Afel Bocum and group, Fleck incorporates his jazz-fusion soloing approach, while introducing certain elements of Mande phrasing and ornamentation.

Also reminiscent of Fleck’s previous work are two co-written compositions, Track 16 “Mariam” with Malian guitarist Djelimady Tounkara and Alou Coulibazy on calabash, and the aforementioned Track 18 “Dunia Haina Wema/Thumb Fun” with Anania Ngoliga. Both feature astounding technical displays, as the musicians engage in a friendly sort of musical one-upmanship.

*Throw Down Your Heart* should be warmly received by Fleck’s considerable fan-base. One hopes that the lesser-known musicians on this recording will gain access to touring opportunities and music distribution, and that the better-known musicians will gain further exposure and recognition through their contributions. While listeners expecting a recording of traditional African music will be disappointed, those who embrace musical fusions and cross-cultural collaborations will delight in the unique and novel sounds of this recording.

Ben Krakauer, Tufts University