

REVIEWS

Photo: Jim McGuire



Abigail Washburn & Béla Fleck

BELA FLECK & ABIGAIL WASHBURN

Béla Fleck & Abigail Washburn Rounder Records 1161-36262-02



"This record was created by us in our basement," say Mr & Mrs Banjo, who, after a decade of shared gigs and five years of marriage, now deliver their first duo album, with foundations in ballads, gospel tunes, blues and other traditions from the American Bible Belt. "We didn't want any other instruments on there, because we're into this idea that we're banjo players, and that should be enough," stated Fleck.

In addition to their familiar five-stringers, the pair variously wield baritone, bass and ukulele variants, eschewing overdubs in favour of honest, direct performance. If this lack of instrumental diversity suggests a one-dimensional listening experience, think again. In Fleck and Washburn's hands, banjos riff like guitars on *Railroad*, ripple like pianos across Washburn's *Ride To You* and ring like harps on a set of two short tunes by Fleck's namesake Béla Bartók.

Washburn delivers the songs in the voice of an Appalachian angel. Her reading of *And Am I Born To Die* (accompanied by a solitary banjo) is enough to make a stone-hearted atheist weep, while *Pretty Polly* (in a version learned from EC & Orna Ball) chills the blood. The murder theme is continued through her own *Shotgun Blues* which sees a gender-reversal from the familiar protagonist / victim theme. *Little Birdie* is a new song with an old title, while Fleck's *What'cha Gonna Do* is a climate change *Which Side Are You On?* which asks: "what'cha gonna do when the land goes under the water?"

Instrumentals like *New South Africa* and *Banjo Banjo* showcase Fleck's justly-acclaimed virtuosity but, more importantly, are just terrific tunes.

Fleck and Washburn have created something very special in their basement. Celebrating the arrival of their first child and honouring the memory of departed loved ones and linking generations by making new songs old and old songs new, this album is musical testament to concentrating on what's important, keeping it simple, and getting the details right.

www.belafleck.com

Steve Hunt

Robert Plant



Photo: Ed Miles

KING AYISOBA

Wicked Leaders Makkum Records MR11 – CD



Forget modern afrobeat practitioners, this is the true succession to Fela. King Ayisoba is a young Ghanaian – well, he's been round for a while – who uses traditional rhythms and one of the spookiest voices I ever heard – a bone-freezing cross between Howlin' Wolf and the Clitheroe Kid, pure voodoo – to dedicate this album to all the bad leaders in the world. You have to wish him well. You have to check him out on YouTube, because the visual impact is almost as huge as the musical – King Ayisoba and his fierce face and two-string fiddle, two guys on percussion, a xylophone and a kind of horn somewhere between a wounded animal and Joshua bringing down the walls. It's brilliant. And as the album proceeds we learn that Ayisoba actually has several voices ranging from the terror screech / growl to quite a pleasant soulful sound. But the downright force of this album is something marvellous.

www.makkumrecords.nl

Rick Sanders

XYLOURIS WHITE

Goats Other Music OM 015-2



Crikey, what a fabulous racket. George Xylouris is a Cretan laouto player (the local long-necked lute somewhere between an oud and a baritone bouzouki), son of the legendary lyra-playing shaman and wild man Psarantonis (see *fR* 301) who sometimes gives the impression of having sold his soul to a goat at the crossroads. He spent some years living and raising a Xylouris family ensemble in Australia (see *fR* 192),

Photo: Manolis Mathioudakis



Xylouris White

where he met Jim White, drummer / percussionist with the instrumental trio Dirty Three and go-to man for the more left-field in modern music – your Nick Caves, PJ Harveys and Cat Powers – who want something a lot more adventurous and out there than four-square rock drumming.

Not an obvious pairing then, but White's often bustling, fancifully speculative and occasionally gloriously wiggly drumming just seems to blend perfectly with the thwacky, buzzy sound of laouto strings hit with unusual plectra and the decidedly non-rock time signatures of Cretan music. Almost entirely instrumental – Xylouris only sings on one track – it manages, implausibly, to sound both completely free and yet somehow like it has always existed, joined telepathically from birth. Both very ancient and very modern at the same time. How do they do that?

It's also superbly recorded, the laouto rich and present, the full tone of the drum kit and its constituent parts all clear, both beautifully seated together. Which is apparently what producer Guy Picciotto did with them, in one room without headphones: Joe Boyd would approve. You feel like you're having a private eavesdrop on some personal bonding. Which in all probability is what it is.

Possibly a one-off. If so it's an artefact worth owning. In the old days they used to put "Play this record loud" on LP sleeves to get over the fact that vinyl generally sounded crap and weedy compared with the studio original. This doesn't, but you still should.

We gave you a track on *fRoots* 51.
www.othermusicrecordingco.com

Ian Anderson

ROBERT PLANT

Lullaby And... The Ceaseless Roar
Nonesuch Records 7559-79537-3

Long-domiciled in the USA, the return to UK shores of golden god, multi-Grammy award-winning Americana artist and lifetime vice-president of Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club, Robert Anthony Plant CBE is cause for celebration in these parts, folks.

The Sensational Space Shifters (Justin Adams, John Baggott, Juldeh Camara, Billy Fuller, Dave Smith and Liam 'Skin' Tyson) may be a new name, but the majority of its constituent musicians have worked with Plant, on-and-off, for the best part of a decade. While his contemporaries tend to stick to the tried-and-trusted to pay the central heating bills in their rock star mansions, Plant and his versatile crew fearlessly blend ancient and modern musical technologies, as bendir and djembe wallop alongside drum programming and loops, and riti, banjo and kologo nestle comfortably alongside electric guitars.

It's a pulsating record, which, for all its blues-groove, griot and trance elements, also shows that Plant's lost none of his fondness for a classic melody, with (Tyson's Britpop hit-makers) Cast recalled in *Somebody There*. He's in (predictably) superb voice throughout, supported by the Fulani vocals of Camara also on several tracks and the empyreal Julie Murphy, who guests with a Welsh language verse on *Embrace Another Fall*.

His maturity as a lyricist is evinced both in the knowing re-contextualising of lines from his Led Zeppelin songs in *Pocketful Of Golden* ("If the sun refused to shine...") and *A Stolen Kiss* – "the western shore," and in the confessional honesty of *Turn It Up* ("I'm lost inside America, I'm turning inside out. I'm turning into someone else I heard so much about").

There are a couple of folk songs here too, in *Poor Howard* (derived from the Lead Belly song) and exultant album opener *Little Maggie*.

One doesn't expect many surprises from rock's 'dinosaur' generation, but this album delivers. None more so than the sudden realisation that Robert Plant and his mates, tearing up final track *Arbarden* (*Maggie's Babby*), reminded me of absolutely nothing and no-one so much as Joe Strummer & The Mescaleros. Watch the BBC TV footage of Adams' son dancing on stage with the band under the Glastonbury Pyramid, and it's easy to imagine glimpsing a punk rock warlord, rocking approvingly in the wings.

www.robertplant.com

Steve Hunt

Chris Newman & Máire Ní Chathasaigh

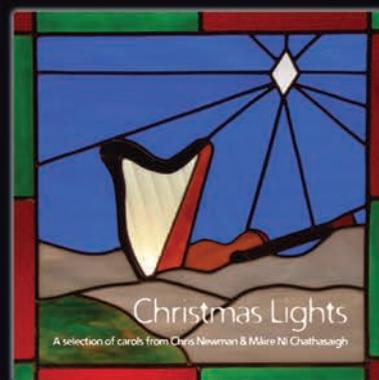
"One of the UK's most staggering and influential acoustic guitarists" *fRoots* with "The doyenne of Irish harpers" *Scotland on Sunday*

on tour with their stunning CD

Christmas Lights

"A delightful... satisfyingly original, often refreshingly unpredictable take on festive favourites... Joyful, gorgeous and uplifting" *The Living Tradition*

"Masterful playing... (ranging from) the entrancing and delicate to the wildly celebratory... This is one Christmas present to be treasured!" **** *Folk Wales*



Old Bridge Music OBMCD20

Distribution:

UK: **Proper Music Distribution** +44 (0) 208 676 5148
Ireland: **Claddagh Records** +353 (0)1 8720075

Tour Dates

for their Celtic Christmas Strings show:

November

Sun 23 **CRAWLEY** The Hawth 01293 553636
Thu 27 **RICHMOND** Barningham Village Hall 01833 621203
Fri 28 **WIGTON** Lindow Hall, Bowness on Solway 01697 351788
Sat 29 **SEASCALE** Calderbridge Village Hall 01946 841478
Sun 30 **MILLOM** Waberthwaite Village Hall 01229 717181

December

Wed 3 **KIRKBY STEPHEN** Soulbly Village Hall 01768 371396
Thu 4 **KENDAL** Levens Village Institute 01539 560534
Fri 5 **CARLISLE** Armathwaite Old School Hall 01697 472318
Sat 6 **HALTWHISTLE** Holy Cross Church 01434 320260
Sun 7 **HEXHAM** Wark Town Hall & Mechanics Institute 01434 230180
Wed 10 **ONGAR** Queens Head, Fyfield 01277 899231
Thu 11 **OAKHAM** South Luffenham Hall 01780 720687
Fri 12 **GAINSBOROUGH** Scotton Village Hall 01724 762636
Sat 13 **BOURNE** Morton Village Hall 01778 570370
Sun 14 **NEWARK** East Markham Village Hall 01777 871593
or 07816 351505
Mon 15 **CROYDON** Croydon Folk Club, Ruskin House 0208 660 5919
Tue 16 **NEW MILTON** Forest Arts Centre 01425 612393
Thu 18 **HALESWORTH** The Cut Arts Centre 0845 673 2123
Fri 19 **FAREHAM** Ashcroft Arts Centre 01329 223100
Sat 20 **SETTLE** Victoria Hall 01729 825718
Tue 23 **GATESHEAD** The Sage - Hall 2 0191 443 4661

CD / Book orders:

Old Bridge Music, PO Box 7, Ilkley, LS29 9RY, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1943 602203
www.oldbridgemusic.com
mail@oldbridgemusic.com

