

Bela Fleck's African sound

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By Carrie Mehl

Béla Fleck, who has been nominated in more Grammy categories than any musician in history, is coming to Santa Fe. If you haven't heard of him, you should listen up. Fleck has played with artists as diverse as Victor Wooten and John Williams and he just added to his repertoire of impressive musicians with his Africa Project.

With his newest album and DVD, *Throw Down Your Heart*, Fleck searches for the roots of the banjo in Africa by playing with African musicians. These musicians range from Anania Ngliga, a blind, singing Tanzanian thumb piano master, to Bassekouye Kouyate, one of the foremost ngoni players in the world.

"With this album," Fleck said in a recent email exchange, "I hope to bring more of these great artists from the African continent into the light."

The album and DVD focus on the universality of music and communication through music, even through language barriers. Most people associate the banjo with bluegrass music, so it may come as a shock to some that the banjo originated in Africa and blends into traditional African music seamlessly. Fleck has successfully integrated the banjo into many "untouchable" genres such as jazz, pop and classical, and with his newest album, he has added Traditional African music to his list of genre conquests.

"I love the way it has changed my playing and given me some different thoughts to try," said Fleck.

Originally, Fleck conceived *Throw Down Your Heart* as a double album, saying "this stuff needed to be heard! I ran out of time to finish the first album."

Fleck even learned new instruments while filming and recording the new record.

“I did pick up the akonting (an African instrument, akin to the lute or banjo). I did better at learning their music on the banjo, though.”

Fleck has brought his friends from Africa to the United States for a special tour, which comes to the Lensic Performing Arts Center on February 3. The show will feature performances from Malian ngoni player Bassekuyé Kouyate with Ngoni Ba, thumb pianist Anania Ngoliga and guitarist John Kitime.

Fleck was very excited about his fellow musicians. “The moment I heard Anania Ngoliga, I knew we had to find him,” said Fleck. “When we did, he exceeded my expectations, which were quite high! The same goes for every musician I am bringing on tour.”

Fleck feels that the African continent is only talked about in the context of tragedy, but said he wants to change that. “There is so much vibrant culture in Africa and I wanted to show that with this album,” said Fleck.

Béla Fleck has achieved his dream of bringing traditional African music into popular music and will continue to bring new and diverse music to the table with every album he releases.

Béla Fleck’s Africa Project

7:30p, Wed., Feb. 3

Lensic Performing Arts Center

211 West San Francisco, Santa Fe(505.988.1234

\$36-\$54

Tickets: 505.988.1234 or ticketssantafe.org

belafleck.com

