

Béla Fleck

Master Picker picks Pro Tools

As hard to categorize as he is innovative, Béla Fleck has elevated the banjo to the status of a virtuoso solo instrument in an amazing range of musical settings. He has played and recorded on every corner of the musical map, with bands like Phish and Dave Matthews, jazz artists like Medeski, Martin and Wood, David Benoit and Ginger Baker, plus country star Garth Brooks, as well as with his own group, the Flecktones.

Having just won Grammy awards for Best Country Instrumental Performance and Best Contemporary Jazz Album for his latest release, *Outbound*, Fleck has been said to hold the record for Grammy nominations in different categories. "I don't know if that's true," he says, "but I've certainly been nominated in a lot of them — contemporary jazz, pop, country, contemporary folk, bluegrass, composition, world music, spoken word, and even Christian music, for a children's record we did with Amy Grant narrating."

A musical omnivore, Fleck isn't worried about fitting into any particular category; he's more concerned with communicating his musical ideas. "Make the music you feel good about, and see if anybody salutes," he says. That sentiment comes through on the *Outbound*, which nods in the directions of folk, rock, jazz, and classical music as well as traditional African and Indian musics. In addition to the multi-faceted playing of Béla and the Flecktones themselves, the album includes contributions from vocalists Shawn Colvin and Jon Anderson, guitarist Adrian Belew, steel drummer Andy Narell, and Tuvan throat singer Kongar-ol Ondar, to name just a few.

A jam-band approach to recording

Music comes first in the studio, too. Like many creative musicians, Fleck is more concerned with the musical result than with using any particular piece of gear. "The music we make is much more important than what we do it on. We can do it on Pro Tools with just as good results, and better in certain ways, because with Pro Tools you're able to refine the mixes over a period of time, and not spend \$2,500 a day in an expensive studio."

Fleck first got into Pro Tools for its editing capabilities. He says he first became interested in editing when he was working on his album *Tales from the Acoustic Planet*. "There were no band edits on any of the Flecktone albums up until that time. Once in a great while, we would fix a track in the studio, but we would sometimes leave awesome solos on the cutting room floor because it was really complicated to do that kind of thing.

"On *Acoustic Planet* we were working with musicians like Branford Marsalis and Chick Corea, who were only going to be in the studio for one day. So I decided, 'We're not going to fix tracks in the studio, we're just going to play as much as they'll play, and I'll take the tapes home and figure out where all the best stuff is and cut it together.' So I was committed to doing it that way, and it ended up being an incredibly expensive process.

"This was before Pro Tools, so we were syncing up these machines, compiling everything on digital tape from the analog machines. I ended up with all the right stuff on the record, but it was the slowest process you could imagine. I just realized after that experience that we really needed to be able to edit. Our next record, *Live Art*, was going to be a live album. We needed to compile different takes from different nights, and we had hundreds of hours of tape to go through.

"That's when a friend of mine named Leo Eilts, a Pro Tools dealer from Kansas City, called me up and said, 'I think you need Pro Tools.' I was like, 'Wow, this sounds like what I'm going to need for this live album.' And it sounded like the only way we could possibly afford to do it.

"So Leo came to town, set us up, and said, 'You'll be editing in an hour.' And I was. Our sound man and road manager, Richard Battaglia, is a Macintosh guy, and he just rolled up his sleeves and figured out how to work the stuff on a technical level. Then he would stand back and let me do all the edits, all the creative stuff, which is awesome."

The sound without the fury

The move to mixing in Pro Tools was a natural next step. "Before Pro Tools, mixing was hell, frankly. I mean, after you had been mixing all day, you were tired, but you had to make final decisions because you had the rest of the record to mix. You were just hunched over that console day after day burning out.

"From the beginning, I got used to mixing on the computer, and I don't have any problem with it. I don't have that studio engineer feeling like I can do it better with my hands. I like to look at the waveforms and see what's going on. Maybe you don't do such bold things that way, but eventually you get good balances.

"I've done some comparisons to my earlier records, and while sonically you could argue that the ones done on tape have a slightly more pleasing sound, the Pro Tools mixes sound better — the punchiness and everything is better in Pro Tools. I think it's better than the stuff we did on the Massenburg, on the Neve. And that was a little bit of a surprise." Fleck went on to produce *Live Art* entirely in Pro Tools, won a Grammy for it, and hasn't looked back since.

Taking the studio home

After that, all the Flecktones studio albums, including *Outbound*, were recorded at Fleck's home, entirely in Pro Tools. "We just got a 4-channel headphone mixer and used rooms in my house for a drum booth or a saxophone room. Then we got some baffles and put me in the corner."

Fleck's rig is centered on a Pro Tools MIXplus system running on a Power Macintosh G4, with four 888/24 I/O plus two Apogee 8000s for audio inputs. "We're mixing a DVD

in surround and we're using the new Pro Tools 5.1 software for that. It seems to be working really, really well."

Preferring to keep the signal path simple, Fleck does his processing on the back end. "We don't do any compression while recording and that's partly because of me. I mean, our engineers would kind of like to do a little bit just for peaks and stuff, but I just get nervous about something you can't take off. Since I'm so into the musical moment and I'm not in the room to listen to the takes, I'm more concerned about just getting it just good and clean and solid and do all that stuff later. I'm a purist in some ways — I like to get as little in the way of the signal as possible."

When it comes time to do processing in Pro Tools, some favorite plug-ins get used. "I really do like the DaD Tape and DaD Valve from DUY. I think those are cool. I did do one test where we took a 24-bit, two-track cut and ran it onto tape and then compared that to the DaD plug-in that does tape emulation, and the tape emulation won. It gave us the coloration but no loss of low end, you know, nothing dropped out. Everything was right there.

"We also use the Waves plug-ins quite a bit, the EQs and the Renaissance Compressor. And the L1s are fantastic. We use them for things all the time, whenever something needs a little bit of help coming through. We've used Metric Halo's Channel Strip a bit, and every time we use it it's worked great. I also like the Wave Mechanics Sound Blender. I wish they would make an outboard version of it, because there's some sounds that I get on sessions that I'd like to be able to get live.

"I'll also use Digi's Lo-Fi. I'll just barely turn it on as a thickening agent — not enough to notice any distortion, but just enough to fatten it up. And it kicks ass. We also use the Aphex Aural Exciter regularly. Sometimes we use it on the output mix, just barely."

The personal touch

Fleck says he has more control of his budget and his music since he started using Pro Tools to record at home. "Economically, the whole paradigm changed for me when we started recording at home. We used to spend 50,000 dollars on studio time. It's saving the band a lot of money when I do it this way. Plus, I'm turning into such a fanatic about editing and mixing and stuff, that I just love to do it. I've spent as much time on this as playing over the last few years and so I've actually gotten pretty good at it. I've gotten very fast at editing and I can make a lot of seemingly difficult edits happen pretty quick. And I can get it the way I want it, which is really the goal of all this, is to end up with music that you're proud of.

On the danger of having too much control, of tweaking the mix too much, Fleck says, "It's not about getting it perfect and getting it pristine as much as it is about getting it to reflect some kind of personality. That's what art is for me. I used to like to listen to Jerry Garcia play pedal steel guitar because he had a perspective, and he wasn't even close to a being a great pedal steel player, just as an example. If your personality can come through

because your hands are all over the music in so many different ways, than I think that can be a good thing."