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Béla Fleck

Pickin', Grinnin', and Thinkin'

Thursday, October 4, 2007

By [Josef Woodard](#) ([Contact](#))

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CLAW-HAMMERED: From the Who Wouda Think files: Seventeen years ago, **Béla Fleck**—the uncommonly virtuosic and curious-eared banjoist—unveiled a strange variation on the fusion-band theme, involving twangy goodness and fiery jazz-rock-funky chopsmeister sounds. Rippling banjo mixed it up with **Victor Wooten's** thump-slapping electric bass and the digitized tones of a mutant e-drum invention called the “Drumitar,” which is played by the artist known as **Futureman**.

It seemed an endearing quirk, destined to be a short-lived idea from left field. Fast forward to next week, though, and **Béla Fleck and the Flecktones** continue their fluke trajectory into the future, working in a field of roughly one. On Tuesday, they

return to UCSB's Campbell Hall, whose rafters they shook a few years ago. Last year's Flecktones album, *The Hidden Land* (their thirteenth), won a Grammy for best contemporary jazz album, and the band's groove—and fan base—continue to grow.

Meanwhile, Fleck has been branching out into assorted special projects, including a collaboration with hero and influence **Chick Corea**, resulting in the album *The Enchantment* (Concord) and touring to come. From another musical place entirely, he is the not-so-humble second banjo (second fiddle?) in **Abigail Washburn's Sparrow Quartet**, which bedazzled SOhO last spring.

FRINGE PRODUCT: News of **Ann Magnuson's** appearance at the Contemporary Arts Forum (tonight at 7! for free!) sent pleasant waves of anticipation rippling over those who have experienced the witty, sexy artnik's work. And what work is that? The question gets to the heart of what makes her so intriguing and confounding. She has been a burlesque/vaudeville star, a performance artist, an actress on the big and little screens, and also a cerebral and cheeky singer, which is the mode in which she hits CAF tonight.

It should be a real hoot, evidenced by the snappy wry brilliance of her recent album, *Pretty Songs & Ugly Stories*. The album title tells much about the song cycle, which is full of gleaming post-pop splendor and clever narratives of a type one doesn't normally expect.

Art's tangy scent drifts through the wickedly funny spoken-word pieces "Art Professor," "Is This Heaven?" and the closing track, "Secret Track Shhhh!" But elsewhere on the album, Magnuson abides by the truism that you can get away with murder and eccentricity if you wrap it up in pretty melodies and great production values. The latter qualities are mostly supplied by her co-songwriter and music director/keyboardist, **Kristian Hoffman**. A Santa Barbara-bred musician and keeper of camp and punk flames, Hoffman has been in the Mumps and the Swinging Madisons, and was featured in that pre-reality TV, *cinema vérité* 1970s chestnut, "An American Family."

All dressed up in lush arrangements and 1960s-style pop tartishness, Magnuson sings of love and lust while questioning the nature of beauty in pearly tones reminiscent of Petula Clark and Julee Cruise. The song list is chock-full of goodies, including "I Met an Astronaut," "Hey There Little Miss Pussy Pants," "Old Enuf 2 Be Your Mom," and "Cynical Girl," which could be a postmodern answer to Madonna's "Material Girl." Magnuson may be cynical, but she sweetens it with sugar, or at least a reasonable sugar substitute.

SQUEEZEBOX PATROL: One of the more pleasantly ear-tweaking new "jazz" releases of late goes by the deceptively simple title *For* and is by the hard-to-categorize N.Y.C. band known as **The Claudia Quintet**, on the blessedly fringe-tending Cuneiform label. There's fire, wit, and more in this group, which is more or less led by drummer **John Hollenbeck** and features saxist/clarinetist **Chris Speed**, vibist **Matt Moran**, bassist **Drew Gress**, and—squeezebox fans take note—**Ted Reichman** on accordion. Amidst the blustery, free-improv and street-meets-chamber music charmers like "I'm So Frickin' Cool" and "Rainy Days/Peanut Vendor Mash-up," Reichman's accordion lends a distinctly colorful twist, proving once again that this mighty instrument deserves more love and better musical roles. Not quite jazz, not quite contemporary classical music, not quite artful noise, The Claudia Quintet has come up with a new mash-up aesthetic of their own.

(Got e? fringebeat@independent.com.)

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