



Béla Fleck
The Bluegrass Sessions: Tales from the Acoustic Planet, Volume 2
(Warner Bros.)

Although banjo badass Béla Fleck is releasing The Bluegrass Sessions as Volume 2 of Tales from the Acoustic Planet, the subtitle could be misleading. True, it chronologically follows his 1995 solo album, and it even includes many of the same musicians. Musically, however, a more accurate name might have been Drive Volume 2, after the 1988 album released before Fleck's

main group, the Flecktones, formed. Drive featured almost identical guest musicians as Sessions—Jerry Douglas on Dobro, Tony Rice on guitar, Sam Bush on mandolin, Stuart Duncan on fiddle and Mark Schatz on bass fiddle—and had a similar sound.

Of the three, Tales is the oddball. The lineup is the same as Sessions and Drive (without Schatz), but additional collaborations with Chick Corea, Branford Marsalis and Bruce Hornsby, as well as Flecktones Future Man and Victor Wooten, give it a mainstream jazz edge. The first volume of Tales was mainly an unplugged breakdown of Fleck's trademark compositional experimentation; Volume 2 is more conventional, with brief moments of modern weirdness, such as track 16, a trippy spoken word that asks, "Do you have room in your heart for the five-string banjo?"

The more classic vibe could come from traditional arrangements of "Foggy Mountain Special" and "Polka on the Banjo," but new tunes such as "Ode to Earl" have that same rootsy feel. Even the Latin-flavored "Spanish Point" and the mysterious "Katmandu" don't wander too far from that conventional down-home flavor. Fleck's less obvious song titles, such as "Maura on a Bicycle, Stout and Molasses, Way Back When," make total sense, because, as always, he brings his topics to life instrumentally.

Still, if you're expecting the Flecktones or another Tales, forget it. If you're looking for a trip back to bluegrass country and some fantastic storytelling by an accessible, well-respected banjo player, you've found it.

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