

A Conversation with Abigail Washburn
by Frank Goodman (9/2005, Puremusic.com)

It's curious in the arts, especially music, that success or notoriety can sometimes come more easily to those who started late, or never even planned to be an artist in the first place. But perhaps, by the time that music seriously enters their life, people they've met or other things that they've done or been interact with that late-breaking musical urge and catalytically convert it into something that works, takes shape or even wings. And so many who may have played the same instrument or sung or composed the same style of music all their lives may never have been rewarded, or at least noticed, for a life's work. Timing, including the totality of what one brings to the table at that particular time, seems to be what matters. Or destiny, perhaps, if one believes in such a thing.

By the time that musical destiny came knocking at Abigail Washburn's door, her young life was already paved with diverse experiences. She'd gone abroad to China in her freshman year at college, and it changed her fundamentally. She became so interested in that culture and that tradition that it blossomed into a similar interest in her own culture when she returned, and she went deeply into the music of Doc Watson and other mountain music figures, into old time and clawhammer banjo music in particular. She'd sung extensively in choral groups already, so that came naturally. She was working as a lobbyist and living in Vermont, and had close friends who were a string band. They'd lost a banjo player and had a tour in Alaska already booked. Long story short, she learned quickly how to cover the bases and was on stage in a heartbeat.

Some time after that, she stopped on a long trip at the yearly IBMA Bluegrass convention, played with some fantastic pickers in the jam situations that are everywhere at such a gathering, and new possibilities of what might be next began to gather in her mind. She did happen to be a very good singer, and one whose sound was very suited to old time and bluegrass music, which was not lost on the pickers with whom she fell in.

Abigail came to Nashville, started writing songs, and joined an all girl string band, Uncle Earl. She got a job that entailed translating Chinese documents, and met Jing Li Jurca, a friend who would become her Chinese co-writer of songs. She wrote a song with Beau Stapleton of Blue Merle, "Rockabye Dixie," that won the Chris Austin Songwriting Contest at Merlefest. (Simple, right? She makes it sound simple, anyway.) A casual conversation in a coffee shop one day—with someone who coincidentally works for Nettwerk Records—led eventually to a record contract. Uncle Earl's debut record will soon come out on Rounder, and Abigail's impressive solo debut on Nettwerk is in the stores now, *Songs of a Traveling Daughter*, which we reviewed last month.

She's made subsequent trips to China for further study, and ended up playing concerts and workshops on the banjo all over the country. She's a study in serendipity, in carpe diem, and in penetrating study of whatever she puts her heart and mind to. A fascinating and lovely person, we bring you a conversation with the soon to be ubiquitous Abigail Washburn.

Puremusic: How is your morning going?

Abigail Washburn: It's good. I have [cellist] Ben Sollee here. We're rehearsing for—hey, Ben, play him a cool cello lick. [blue grassy cello comes through the phone]

[laughter]

AW: We're rehearsing for our first festival gig tomorrow, finally pulling together all the loose ends. We've rehearsed three or four times, I guess, but we've only had a day here and there. Now we've got to buckle down and get it all right.

PM: But didn't you guys just come from Telluride, too?

AW: Well, Ben wasn't there. I did a "tweener" as a solo artist. But it was Uncle Earl that was on the mainstage that time. [a tweener is a short set between sets]

PM: I see. So you do gigs as a solo artist as well?

AW: I do. I can't always have Ben there. But Ben and I are going to start being on the road together here a bunch, because I'll be touring just behind my solo project, so—

PM: Wow, and you'll tour as a duo. Well, I was going to save that question for a little later. But he's remarkable.

AW: Ain't he, though?

PM: Because, in a very tangible way to my ears, he's really tying the whole thing together.

AW: Oh, I agree. And well, the truth is, that's what I wanted. Being one of the producers of the album, the most important instrument for me to have on the album—other than the banjo, of course—was the cello. I said, "What I really want to do is tour with a cello." So we arranged the album so the cello was a really important voice.

PM: While we're on the subject of Ben, why don't you tell us where you ran into him and what kind of a guy he is.

AW: Here, I'm going to sit next to Ben while I talk about him. Ben and I met through our friend Rayna. Ben also plays in a band with Otis Taylor, who's really great.

PM: Sure, a blues artist, yeah.

AW: And Rayna—she and I are both in Uncle Earl—she played some gigs with Otis Taylor, and played fiddle on his new album, as well, and toured a bit with Ben. So she knew about Ben, and I'd been saying to people for the past year that I needed the right

cellist for the album, and then hopefully to tour with. So I had my eye out. And there were names being thrown around—Rushad Eggleston and Natalie Haas, et cetera—but none of it felt quite right. And then Rayna told me about Ben. I called Ben. I said, “Hey, would you come down in a couple weeks and do pre-production for my album and sort of see how it goes?” And he came down, and was great.

PM: Came down from where? Is he a Boston guy?

AW: No. He’s in Kentucky—he studies cello performance at the University of Louisville.

PM: I see.

AW: Yeah, he’s amazing. Twenty-one, right, Ben?

PM: The quiet or the effusive type?

AW: Both. He’s perfect.

PM: We reviewed *Song of the Traveling Daughter* in the August issue. I think it’s a really great record.

AW: Thanks.

PM: Can you attempt a sketch of how the recording came about, what bricks fell into place first, or how the whole project came to be? For instance, what came first, the label or the record?

AW: Well, I’ll give you just a little bit more background before that. I never expected to be a musician. I never really expected to have this career. But I had a fated experience. I was traveling from Vermont down to Nashville doing a six-week road trip before I was going to move back to China to continue the ex-pat lifestyle. I had just taken an exam to be an official Chinese student in the university. That’s what I was planning to do.

Anyway, I was on this road trip down to Nashville. And I stopped at the IBMA, International Bluegrass Music Award Conference, because I’d heard about it, and I’d just started playing the banjo. And I thought, “Ooh, this would be really interesting. I’ll go back to China and tell everybody about the IBMA and what bluegrass is like.” And I was standing there in the hallway, and I met up with a couple of other young people who were there, Amanda Kowalski, Megan Gregory, and Casey Driessen. We just sat down and started playing together, because we were all young, and it was kind of exciting, and we all seemed like similar spirits. And I really couldn’t play much. I was sort of like, “What’s that chord, what’s that chord?” But I knew a few chords, so I could play on a couple songs. But mostly I just sang and sang harmony with Amanda and Megan. And basically, by the end of the night, we were offered a record deal with Sugar Hill Records.

PM: Wow.

AW: Yeah.

PM: And who from Sugar Hill was there that made that offer?

AW: Well, I mean, it wasn't a complete offer. See, the thing about IBMA is that a lot of the people from Sugar Hill come there. They have a showcase, and they're really scouting heavily at that. So they had everybody from the company there. And basically, I didn't know it, but we had all these people watching us before long, and I wasn't used to a crowd at all. I mean, when I sang, I was just singing with friends or hanging out. And so here's this big crowd, and it ended up that it was mostly Sugar Hill people, and they were all just buzzing about it, and they just loved it. And here were these people I just met. And they wanted, in particular, Megan and I, the two vocalists who were singing a bunch, to come down to Nashville and cut a demo and have them circulate it in the company. And we did cut the demo, it ended up in a record deal offer a few weeks later.

PM: What's Megan's last name, again?

AW: Megan Gregory, a wonderful singer and fiddler. And we ended up not taking the deal, largely because there was a disparity in our skills at our instruments. She's a bluegrass player, and she had a great band going—she's in the band Meridian—and she really wanted to do that.

PM: So you guys didn't take that deal.

AW: We didn't take it. But it definitely answered some questions for me, because there was a part of me questioning whether or not to go to China. I had a bunch of great relationships going in the States, and it seemed like there were good things happening on a lot of levels for me here. When I was offered this record deal, I thought maybe I should stick around Nashville for a while and just see what happens. Because I actually had this great fortune after that weekend. After Googling “Nashville” and “Chinese,” I made one call to the Chinese Friendship Association in Nashville. This woman picked up, and she gave me the number of a guy she thought might be looking for an employee. It ended up that he was, and I became the first employee of a biotech company that was based in Shanghai and Nashville, on my way to Nashville.

PM: Amazing.

AW: Yeah. And that job lasted maybe eight months. It was a really good way to be in Nashville. Every couple of weeks I'd go in and cut a song for a demo or something like that. I was just trying to understand the industry a little bit and see if it was a good place for me. And I just kept having good fortune, is all I can say. Like the stars were aligned, or something—because Sugar Hill kept their eye on me, and said, “If you ever come up with your own solo demo, we'd love to hear it.” And Uncle Earl found me at the Folk Alliance, which happened to be in Nashville that year. I never would have gone to the

Folk Alliance had it not been around the corner.

PM: Right.

AW: But I went, and Uncle Earl saw me and they said, “Hey, would you come play a couple of weddings with us in a few of weeks?” And I did, and before you know it I was just sort of in the band.

PM: And they wanted you as a banjo player or as a singer mostly?

AW: Mostly a singer. But I also played the banjo, and they just had faith that I’d get better.

PM: And you were playing in a clawhammer style, or also in a bluegrass style?

AW: It was a frailing style. It was clawhammer. I didn’t do much drop-thumb, I just didn’t know about it at the time. But over the past two years I’ve tried really hard to study up and learn a lot.

PM: Yeah, you’re playing pretty dang good clawhammer now.

AW: It’s coming, coming along. Long ways to go, but I’ve had some great people to study with. So I just had a lot of really great fortune.

I actually would say that the label came before the idea of the record, because I was not thinking I wanted to do music. So, Nettwerk Records... I was lucky enough to be in a coffee shop, and this woman told me she liked my shirt, and we started talking. She ended up being A&R for Nettwerk. And I didn’t have a demo at that point, but I had recorded three songs. And she said I seemed like a musician, because when she asked me what I did, I said, “Well, I work for a biotech company.” And I said, “Well, I also play some music.” She was like, “I like your vibe. If you ever want to send me some of your stuff...” She gave me her card. And it sort of became the impetus for actually putting together a viable EP.

PM: And who was the Nettwerk person, the A&R person?

AW: Her name is Janet Weir. She’s still at Nettwerk. She also manages.

PM: And what coffee shop did she find you in?

AW: Fido.

PM: In Fido, wow. [“The office,” as some of us call it.]

AW: Yeah. And we had some connections through bands that I knew and stuff like that, so there were some things to talk about. But yeah, so that basically made me buckle down

and finish up an EP. I sent her some tracks before the EP was done. And I never heard from her. So I just kind of figured, oh well. But then I finished the EP, and I gave it Sugar Hill, and they liked it. And so I said, “Well, I guess I’ll send it to that woman at Nettwerk again.” And this time it had graphics and everything, and more songs. And I heard back from her immediately. She called and she said, “Get a lawyer. We want to sign you.”

PM: Wow.

AW: Yeah!

PM: You must have flipped out.

AW: I totally did. I was still working at the biotech company, sort of trying to figure things out, and thinking, “Oh, any day I could drop it and go back to China.” That was sort of in my mind. I wasn’t terribly attached to it, which I think actually freed me up to be very open to whatever happened.

PM: Right. And it kind of eliminated any desperation factor that can get your antennae on the wrong way.

AW: How very true! I was making decisions purely on what felt good and right, and if at any time it wasn’t panning out, I was ready to do some other stuff. So at that point I had cut an EP and I started having some ideas about what direction I wanted to go in musically. At first I was very much in the old-time vein. But I was trying to write songs at the same time. My voice was starting to come out.

And then there was a bit of negotiating that happened between Sugar Hill and Nettwerk, and I ended up on Nettwerk, and suddenly I had a bunch of money. I’ve seen a lot of people make albums that are either hard to perform live or that they have to hire session musicians to perform live. And I really didn’t want to be in that situation. I wanted every song to be about who I am and what I’m capable of doing, alone or in a group. That became the core of the album: these songs that I wrote, and arrangements that I can execute. Some of the sparseness and the simplicity of it literally have to do with where I am musically.

I felt the important thing would be the team that worked on the album. Because I’ve been in organizations, I’ve worked for businesses, and I had a sense of organizational structure and dynamics. Especially when you’re doing something so emotional and creative, for me the team had to be a nucleus, sort of a family of people that I really believed in and trusted, and that every sound that came out of them I was going to like. The people were there to serve the music. But it was pretty easy, because I had met just the right people all along to ask to come be a part of it.

PM: Do you recall who you met first that actually became part of the record?

AW: Well, that one night at IBMA, I met Casey Driessen, Amanda Kowalski, and

Megan Gregory, and they're all on the album.

PM: And what an amazing trio to have met.

AW: Yeah, they're incredible. Megan did a bunch of the vocals. Amanda plays bass, and Casey is the fiddler.

PM: And he's just one of the best guys to pick up a bow in any state.

AW: He's so great. Yeah, so they became my first friends, and the musicians that I thought of to be a part of it. Then I had the really good fortune of meeting The Duhks, at the first Uncle Earl festival we ever played together. And I totally fell for that band. They're so talented—I especially fell in love with the playing of Jordan McConnell, the guitar player.

PM: He's really something.

AW: Oh yeah. And plus, we just became such good friends. He's a wonderful person. So I wanted him and his sound to be on the record. And truthfully, we sat down and did pre-production one time. He happened to be in town with The Ducks recording their record, and Ben had a free weekend. I thought the record would basically be the three of us, if things worked out well with Ben. And that is really the idea, the core of it: the cello, guitar, and banjo sound.

Everything else would sort of be a texture or something that was added. But I was very skeptical of bringing anybody in that I didn't know personally and didn't really love and believe in. Even if you hear great things about some player or something like that, I was like, "I need to know this is a person I love."

PM: That's a very interesting instinct.

AW: Yeah. And I think that's going to stick. It's a very strong one.

PM: Well, it seems to have worked, doesn't it?

AW: It's a beautiful thing. It's got to be a lot about love, and you can feel that energy on any recording.

PM: That's how I've become about songwriting. If they're not a friend of mine, I don't want to just get together and write a song.

AW: Yeah. And music is very much a heart thing.

PM: Yes, incredibly personal.

AW: Yeah.

PM: And so the label spawned the idea, the friends were already in place. Where did the two producers come into the picture?

AW: Well, my friend Reid [Scelza] was the person who basically said, “You should be doing a demo. I have gear at my house, you can just come over.” He was a person I met within the first week of moving to Nashville. And he said, “I’ve got gear at my house. I’d love to record you doing some of your stuff. You might as well get your music out there.” He’s constantly wanting to find people he believes in and record them and help them.

PM: I don’t know Reid. Is he a player also?

AW: No. He went to Belmont, and just decided he wanted to be an engineer.

PM: So he’s a young cat?

AW: He’s young, yeah. He’s in his twenties. He’s much more influenced by rock and indie rock and alt-country stuff. Acoustic instruments is a very new thing for him, other than maybe embellishing some alt-country ballad or something.

PM: So he probably had to go get some microphones that were really good for acoustic instruments.

AW: He didn’t, actually. We just used all the gear he had. It was a humble setup, but a good one. He did a really good job of preparing for it. We had tried out all his gear on the EP, so he knew what sounds we liked and what we didn’t. So everything was on the plate. I knew these musicians. Reid said, “You’ve got to do this.” And Nettwerk said, “We’d love to hear your stuff.” And so just throughout all that, I said, “Well, I guess these are pretty clear signs and the pathway is open.”

PM: Yeah. So how did Bela Fleck come into the picture?

AW: Well, he was sort of starting to dabble in the community of young musicians who are around. And we became friends. Then he was listening to everybody’s music in this group of people. And like I said, I’m hanging with Casey Driessen, and a band, Blue Merle, and people like that. And we’re just all here in Nashville and listening to each other and becoming friends. And he loved the music. He just really, really loved the music. I don’t know if you recall that he did a bunch of work with Maura O’Connell.

PM: Sure.

AW: She’s a great singer. And I think he was attracted to it in a similar way. He actually wasn’t involved in the very beginning. It wasn’t planned for him to be a producer. In fact, he wasn’t really included in the process much, but it just became very apparent that he had a whole lot to offer and was really interested in being part of it, and so we said, “All right! Come on in.”

PM: Right.

AW: So before the end we said, “You want to be a producer?” We split up our points a little bit more and gave him one.

PM: I see you’re being booked by the infamous Bobby Cudd of Monterey Peninsula Artists.

AW: Infamous, yes.

PM: He’s a fantastic ally to any artist.

AW: Yeah. I got interested in him through Old Crow Medicine Show. Those are some of the guys I also met when I first moved to Nashville.

PM: Oh, yeah. We’ve interviewed them as well. They’re a really incredible bunch of guys.

AW: Ketch [Secor] and I are good friends at this point.

PM: Yeah, it was Ketch I spoke with—he’s quite a character.

AW: Yeah.

PM: Before we get off into things Chinese, tell us, too, about your other band, Uncle Earl.

AW: It’s an exciting band. It’s all women, which I think is really great, and brings that kind of energy to the music. It’s very much based in tradition, more so than—have you heard the album, Frank?

PM: The Uncle Earl album? No, I’ve not had the pleasure, but I hope to soon.

AW: Yeah, it’s on Rounder, and it came out two days ago.

PM: And it’s a Dirk Powell production, right?

AW: Yes. I was definitely starting to fall in love with traditional music before any of this happened, partly because I had gone to China and came back wondering about American culture, and Doc Watson popped up, and I thought that was great. So anyway, that got me turned on to it. I started really falling for the traditions, and felt a lot of inspiration in it for writing songs. I would end up going to these fiddlers’ conventions on the weekends after work in West Virginia and North Carolina.

Before long, Uncle Earl became much more of a traditional band. As soon as Rayna Gellert became a part of the band—she’s an incredible Appalachian fiddler—as soon as she became a part of the band it became a real priority for us to play old fiddle tunes and old ballads. We were doing a bit of that before she was part of the band, but she really brought an element of deep knowledge of that stuff. And all of us already had a love for it. So Uncle Earl is really very much about holding to the tradition.

But then we do write originals, and it seems like there’s an evolution happening where all of our influences are in play. Because of the way we are, we play the music a certain way, and we’re starting to create fiddle tunes with words that never existed, or to use sounds that we heard in other things put together in a new way. It’s a really exciting band. There’s a real string band revival going on right now.

PM: No doubt about it. And Nettwerk certainly has its share of that energy going on.

AW: It’s very true.

PM: There are a number of bands on that label that come right out of the old-timey tradition in their various ways. And if traditions like old-time string band music are to continue with any vitality, the people have to take those forms and write new songs.

AW: Yep. That’s the truth. That’s sort of what’s happening for us.

PM: Aside from Rayna, who are the other ladies in Uncle Earl?

AW: A woman named Sharon Gilchrist who plays mostly bass, but also some mandolin.

PM: Oh, I’ve seen her play. She’s great.

AW: She is great. She’s the mandolinist for Peter Rowan and Tony Rice Quartet.

PM: Ah, I wondered where she went. Okay. That’s right. Yeah, because I saw her playing around town years ago with various people and wondered what became of her. That’s great.

AW: She’s wonderful. She did sort of hide out. She escaped to New Mexico for a while, and now she’s sort of back on the scene with us, along with Peter and Tony.

Then there’s Kristin Andreasson. She is living in Brooklyn, New York. She spent, oh, like seven or eight years dancing with Footworks Percussive Ensemble, going around the world and the country doing large dance groups, dance lectures and whatnot. She’s a wonderful dancer. And she plays guitar and she sings. And she plays the fiddle. Very multi-talented.

And then there’s KC Groves, and she actually founded the band, the first member along with one other woman. And she’s based in Colorado, and she’s a really great songwriter.

She plays mandolin in the band, although she's a very, very good guitarist as well. And we all sing.

PM: That sounds like a pretty sharp outfit.

AW: It's very fun. We get up there and it's very high energy. There's a lot of dancing, sort of as a group, around the microphone. It's exciting. It's a very different sound than what I'm doing for my solo stuff. It's more traditional, a group of five women, very much equal, and we all have an equal share in what happens creatively and everything. And my project, of course, is sort of my brainchild, and it has a lot more modern elements, and of course, the Chinese.

PM: How fluent a Mandarin speaker are you? One is led to believe that you're pretty dang fluent.

AW: As far as Americans speaking Chinese, I'm pretty good. There was a time when I would have said, "I'm fluent." But that was a couple years back before I decided to stay in Nashville and study banjo.

[laughter]

AW: I would say that I'm conversationally fluent. There's a lot I can talk about with a person. When I start getting into interview situations with Chinese audiences and Chinese media, I think I'm going to struggle, especially in the beginning, because there's a lot that I want to say that is deeply felt. And it's a little bit harder topic for me to express very well in another language. Plus sometimes these things come to my head, like I want to talk intellectually about the tradition, or whatnot, and there's a lot of missing vocabulary.

PM: You run out of words.

AW: I do. So that part is going to be a real challenge. But I've got sort of a long-term vision of all this, that in the next few years the competency in all areas will sort of rise to the same level. And my hope is that I'll be very fluent and playing a lot of music in China and working with Chinese people and interacting with the media all the time. That would be my hope.

PM: As I mentioned to you yesterday, my brother is connected to a TV station in China. And when I was talking to his producer about you today, he was saying, "Well, let's try to do something different with Abby when we hopefully run into her in December. Maybe we could, aside from just doing a celebrity interview kind of a thing, or shoot part of a show, maybe we could get some footage of her talking to Chinese kids about music, and make a whole program out of it."

AW: I think it would be a lot easier speaking really comfortably in Chinese with a group of kids, talking about the music, or with a group of college students, or whatever, which is what I did a lot of. I did a lot of MC-ing, and hanging out with Chinese college

students on my last trip. That was a comfortable environment for me. I think having really sort of quick, savvy answers to questions asked by an interviewer is going to be a different skill. But I'll give it my best.

PM: Yeah. And you'd like this producer. He's in his twenties, too, from L.A.

AW: Cool. Is he a Chinese speaker?

PM: He is to some degree, but none of the crowd that's there or myself when I was there really had the opportunity to get into an intensive language situation. People had some tutors and such, but it was much slower going than an intensive language course would have been.

AW: Yeah.

PM: I think they've done some since then, but yeah, they're still very elementary Chinese speakers. And I can't believe that I missed you when you were over there playing the Cotton Club around the corner from my house. When was that?

AW: Well, that was last November. It was November 10th, I remember, because it was my birthday.

PM: Last November. Yeah, I was certainly there, then.

AW: Oh.

PM: That's a shame. Because I was playing at the House of Jazz and Blues over on Maominglu. Did you check that joint out at all?

AW: Oh, no, I didn't.

PM: It's a wonderful joint. It's kind of like a Midtown jazz club in New York.

AW: Cool.

PM: You ought to gig there when you go back. I'll try to put you together with the lady who books the club.

AW: That'd be great.

PM: She's bilingual, also lived in New York. I lived in back of the Xianyang Market—you know the Starbucks there on Nanchanglu?

AW: Oh, yeah, I know that.

PM: And I lived in the building behind that, walking distance from the Cotton Club

AW: Isn't that crazy.

[laughter]

PM: How did your bandmates like touring in China?

AW: Well, it was an interesting way that that came together, too. I knew I was going to go back to China, and I called my friend Jon Campbell who's a really great freelance writer, and he's been promoting shows. He's involved in the School of Music of in Beijing. And I called him, and I said, "Yeah, I'm coming back over, and I have all these friends I want to see. I should probably play a couple shows, since I'm getting good enough to do that." And he thought that was a great idea, so he started putting together ideas for a tour. Before you know it, he was playing basketball with one of the assistants to the General Consul of the Beijing Embassy. And they said, "Oh, my gosh, Abby—if she's coming over, we'll definitely pay for her to do some touring out west, and universities." And so before you know it, I had a three-week tour.

PM: Holy jeez.

AW: I know. And I was very nervous about doing it all by myself musically, like having hour-long gigs, or even club nights where I had to play two hours of music.

PM: Solo on the banjo.

AW: Solo on the banjo.

PM: Oh, my God, what a nightmare.

AW: It sounded like a nightmare to me. So I quickly was like, "Well, how much money am I going to make?" I decided that it was worth it to lose the money to bring somebody along. So I asked Casey if he'd come. So Casey became my band mate. And I said, "Between Casey and I, we'll do okay. This'll be good." And I know some other musicians in China who sat in with us from time to time, and I thought for certain we'd pick some people up.

But then my friend, Amanda, again, who was the bass player on the album, who I met that first night, she said, "I've always wanted to go to China." She'd saved up a bunch of money. She said, "Can I just come, and every once in a while I'll play bass if it makes sense?" And I was like, "Heck yeah!"

PM: Wow, and she just paid her own way.

AW: She paid her own way and she was great.

PM: Unbelievable.

AW: And then her boyfriend at the time, Tyler, who's a really great guitar player here in town, he said, "Well, I'm not staying back here. I'm going to come too." He had saved a bunch of money playing a really great gig, and he came too. And so they paid their way, and we had a four-person band. It was great. It was really great.

PM: I've seen the both of them play with Adrienne Young before. They're really good.

AW: Yep, they're great.

PM: And both seem like super nice people.

AW: Oh, they're wonderful. It was such a fun group to travel around with. And it's very difficult traveling. I mean, the touring was the most intense I've ever had. All of them said it was absolutely the most intense touring ever.

PM: So your time in China so far, some of it's been gigging, but how much has been schooling?

AW: Okay, let me see—probably nine months has been schooling, and three months at Fudan University in Shanghai. You probably know that place.

PM: Yeah.

AW: And then the technical university in Chengdu in western China and Sichuan. I spent six months there studying Chinese.

PM: And you really worked the hell out of your Chinese, right?

AW: I worked hard. There are students who do and students who don't. And it was really, really important to me. And I spent two summers at Middlebury College in Vermont—

PM: Another great language school.

AW: Oh! It was great. I spent two summers doing a nine-week intensive program where you're not allowed to speak English.

PM: Wow!.

AW: And I did that on my summers off from being a political lobbyist at the state capitol.

PM: [laughs]

AW: The legislature met a third of the year, so I actually had summers off, so it worked

out really nicely. One summer I went back to China, two summers I spent at Middlebury. And then I even took a six-month stint in between two sessions to go live in China and work for a consulting firm.

PM: Wow. What city were you living in?

AW: Beijing at the time. I really was like an ex-pat in Beijing, and I was loving it. But I ended up coming back. And it was shortly after coming back—I did one more lobbying session, one more session, and while I was back I was studying hard for the Chinese exams, which I had to go up to Montreal to take every couple of months. And that's when I did that road trip, the American Culture road trip, and I ended up staying in Nashville.

PM: The road trip that made you a musician.

[Here we talked a while about a Chinese instrument called a san xian (san shen), something I'd seen in a folk/classical production that reminded me of a gut string banjo.]

AW: Though I've not seen that particular instrument yet, those kinds of instruments are definitely going to be included on future albums. I think the direction this will probably all go is that Ben and I will start being more and more creative together about the banjo cello duet, and that will probably lead to a lot of material for albums. But also I would love to collaborate with some Chinese musicians on albums, too.

PM: Well, good. I hope that my brother and his producer and some of our friends will be some help to you.

AW: I would absolutely love that, yeah. I would love any opportunity to see where things can go in China for what I'm doing, and then also just generally what's happening in the music industry there, because I'm fascinated by it.

PM: I'd like to know what banjo players you learned from, in person or from their records?

AW: Okay. One of the first people I learned from was a man named Dwight Diller, who's a banjo player from West Virginia. He's in Pocahontas County. And he learned from the Hammon Family. So I sort of learned a West Virginia frailing style from him. And it's very much a full sound with playing more Irish and Scottish sounding melodic kind of tunes. Then I learned from a man named Ron Mullenex, who was living in a different holler in West Virginia. And he had a pretty different style, actually quite melodic. And he seemed to get more notes out of his clawhammer than Dwight had. And I really liked his versions of some of the tunes. He's particularly involved in preserving some West Virginia Appalachian heritage.

PM: And he was very melodious.

AW: Yeah, he really was. And some time went by, and I listened to albums a bunch. Of

course I love Dirk Powell's playing. But then I finally got in touch with a man named Riley Baugus, who's really been a major mentor in forming my banjo style.

PM: Where does he live?

AW: He lives in Walkertown, North Carolina. He's in Surry County. And he learned from the playing of Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham. They're famous for really being the sound of the Round Peak style. Round Peak is actually in Virginia, but it's sort of the northwest corner of North Carolina and the southwest corner of Virginia. You'll hear a lot of people at the Galax Convention playing the Round Peak style banjo. It's a particular style that totally changed the way I played. Again, I heard about him from my friend Rayna, the fiddler. I said, "Rayna, whose playing do you love?" And she said, "Riley Baugus." So I got one of his CDs, and I listened to it, and it was amazing.

You would have seen him on the Cold Mountain Tour, he was part of that. And he plays a bunch with Dirk. He's really grounded in the tradition. It's what he grew up doing. He lives in a trailer in Walkertown, North Carolina, at the end of a dirt road. And I went out there and hung out with him in his trailer for four days, and then went back for another four days a couple weeks later, because I just couldn't get enough. And then I followed him to a camp in West Virginia and took his Advanced Round Peak Style class.

PM: You're really something.

AW: I just followed *him*, man. *He's* it! I just think he's the best. And he's become one of my best friends, and he teaches me a lot of what I know. A lot of the playing on the album has ended up being sort of a combination of what I've learned from Riley and the Round Peak style and maybe a little bit fuller sound. And I certainly grew up listening to a lot of rock 'n' roll and folk bands, and really got into the more dramatic indie rock kind of stuff. So that also influences kind of the fullness and the texture that I want to get out of the banjo when I play. And so my style is somewhere in between everything I know and what Riley has taught me. [find out more at www.rileybaugus.com]

PM: Wow. Well, it's a liability of talking to fascinating people that I've taken a little more of your time than I meant to.

AW: Well, I start talking and then I just go on. I'm sorry. I have this tendency to yap at the mouth when you ask a good question.

PM: No, it's very interesting. Are you what you'd call a spiritual or a religious person?

AW: Oh, very much so, yes.

PM: Any special orientation?

AW: I would say I'm a Christian, heavily influenced by Judeo-Christianity—although I have some philosophies about Christianity that are extremely nonexclusive and would

probably be kicked out of a lot of clubs. But yeah, I'm very much a person of faith. I pray a lot, which is a lot of the reason that I was open enough to let my life go in directions that were unexpected. Sometimes I have little ego breakdowns where I go, "Oh, my gosh, this isn't what I'm good at." It's like, "Why am I playing music?" And then I get reminded that there are more divine things at play.

PM: Yeah. And it sounds like you're good at quite a few things.

So, with 1.3 billion people, there are certainly mindblowing possibilities in China for a person like yourself. Do you plan to write more songs in Mandarin, and perhaps tour there in the future, singing more in their mother tongue, perhaps, even than in your own?

AW: Absolutely. I think one of my big goals, as soon as I find the right person or group of people, is definitely to go to China and really spend some time. I would love it if Ben wanted to be a part of this, if we, hopefully, continue to be a duo. I would love to just go, be in a place for years. But in order to keep this career going, that would be unreasonable. Still, I would like to at least spend a few weeks in one spot with a folksinger that I just fell in love there. Sort of like with Riley—as soon as I found Riley, I just followed him. [laughs]

So I'm looking for that to happen in China. And I've met enough people that I feel this might happen this next time around. While I was there this last time, I met the baritone for the Shanghai Opera, and he and I got together. I'd go to Shanghai to be with him, and we did a little bit of studying back and forth. And I went out west and did a back and forth sort of teaching—teaching the music students about Appalachian music, and they taught me about their folk music of western China and southwest China. But I would really love to go back and just study closely with someone from a particular folk tradition.

You're probably familiar with this from living in China, but there are folk songs that everybody knows, but they're actually quite modern, and they've sort of been absorbed by the pop culture. I would really love to dig in to one tradition somewhere. Suzhou style of singing might be a little too ornamental for me, I might go for something more northern. Like up in Xiang Tsi there's a specific area where there's acoustic string-bandy type of music, and a lot of things that remind me of Appalachian music. There are particular ornaments they use, but it almost reminds me of the black and white traditions meeting in Appalachian ballad singing, and things like that. So I would love to go find that place and be there for a while, and let that heavily influence what I do.

But in terms of songwriting, I found this amazing woman in town here, Jing Li Jurca, who I write with. We actually sat down together a couple of days ago and came up with the concept for the next album, which is exciting. And we're just coming up with a bunch of ideas for songs. She's also a very spiritual person, that's probably our big connection.

PM: And she's a Nashville person, right?

AW: She lives in Nashville, but she's from Hanzhou. She grew up in Hanzhou and went to school in Beijing, and was a broadcaster journalist in Beijing. And she was doing very well. I think she came to Nashville to go to the Indiana School of Broadcasting, or something like that. I can't remember. But she ended getting married and staying here, and she lives in Nashville.

She and I were lucky enough to meet when I was trying to translate a warehousing contract. She was working at the Center of Foreign Languages. I met her through helping with this translation. Anyway, we really hit it off, and started writing songs together. Now she's one of my best friends and we're writing songs.

PM: Well, I certainly hope that when we're both back in Nashville that we can sit down and have a cup of coffee. I'd love to Jing Li Jurca as well, sometime.

AW: Yeah. I would love for you to meet her, too. She's really a secret weapon, man. She's amazing. She helps me know when I'm on to something really good in the language. Creatively she's real important to me. I'd love for you to meet her.

PM: Well, thanks for your time today, Abby. What a fascinating person you are. I'll look forward to running into you in town.

AW: Sounds good, Frank. Thanks a lot.

●