

ACL review: Abigail Washburn and the Sparrow Quartet

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OK, here's the deal: One of the great bluegrass maestros of the age teams up with a young woman who sings Chinese folk songs — in Chinese. They hook up with an A-list cello player and fiddlers, and set out to play string band music that mixes Appalachian melodies with Eastern pentatonic scales. Are you with me so far?

If all that sounds off-putting or intimidating, rest assured that in the hands of Abigail Washburn and the Sparrow Quartet, it is anything but. Washburn, along with banjo virtuoso Bela Fleck, cellist Ben Sollee and fiddler Casey Driessen, provided a beguiling start to a musical Sunday as they wove their peculiar multicultural tapestry on the AT&T Stage.

Washburn fell in love with China and its people during a journey to the People's Republic in 1996, so much so she learned to speak the language and decipher the folk songs of Sichuan and other provinces. Moreover, she began to link Chinese folk music traditions to those of her own country.

Thus, the Sparrow Quartet, a group that can go from the delicate calligraphy brushstrokes of a subtle Eastern melody to a full-on bluegrass breakdown at the drop of a fingerpick.

Washburn's set began with a stately overture that segued into her own "A Fuller Wine," followed by a hot jazz turn on Blind Willie Johnson's "Nobody's Fault But Mine," which yielded to a Chinese tune that allowed Fleck to pop the clutch and blaze away.

If that kind of eclectic versatility sounds daunting to the average listener, onstage it came across as anything but. The four musicians shared an easy rapport both among themselves and with the audience. "This song is called 'Kangding Qingge'," said Washburn, introducing yet another Chinese tune, "but we like to call it 'Old Timey Dance Party.'" At another point, a Kazakh folk melody transformed itself into a vintage rave-up called "Banjo-Pickin' Girl" that Washburn made her own ("I'm goin' to North Carolina and from there off to China," she sang). And an austere, classical sounding string quartet instrumental resolved itself into a formal reading of the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby," which in turn gave way to a fiery duel of solos between Fleck and Driessen.

It was all...well, it was fun. And fascinating. And a journey in and of itself. For a few minutes, the ACL festival felt truly worldwide.