



PHOTO COURTESY OF ABIGAIL WASHBURN

# Abigail Washburn

*The original blend of Americana and Chinese folk returns to Portland*

**BY SUE ZALOKAR**  
STAFF WRITER

If old-time Americana and traditional Chinese music were to meld and produce a flesh-and-blood child, the result would be Abigail Washburn. Combining the two musical genres with her ethereal writing and clawhammer banjo style, Washburn has established herself as one of the most unusual and otherworldly players to hail from Nashville, Tenn.

Washburn spent the first five years of her musical career touring with the all-girl American old-time music group Uncle Earl. She went on to focus on her first solo album, *Song of the Traveling Daughter*, in 2005. During the making of this album, Washburn met and developed a friendship with premier banjo player Bela Fleck of Bela Fleck and the Flecktones.

Together with Fleck, Washburn helped form the Sparrow Quartet, which blended East and West sounds. In 2006 — at the request of the U.S. government, the Sparrow Quartet toured Tibet, and went on to perform at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Her sound has captured the ears of Robyn Hitchcock and Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones. More recently, she was a guest performer at Pete Seeger's 90th birthday celebration.

In 2009, Washburn and Fleck married and set the stage for a banjo-playing heir that, if ever conceived, will surely be the grand ruler of all things banjo.

Her first songs were written in Mandarin, a

language that rolls off her lips as fluently as her native English. You won't find any songs written in Chinese on her latest album, *City of Refuge*. What you will find is a collaboration of a diverse "village" of players and contributors, catchy grooves, electronic loops and, of course, that old-time sound.

Washburn and songwriting collaborator Kai Welch will be headlining a show at Mississippi Studios on Sunday, April 1. Local groups, Calico Rose and Casey Neill are also on the bill. Doors open at 7:30 p.m., show starts at 8 p.m.

**Sue Zalokar:** *How would you describe your music to someone who has never heard you play before?*

**Abigail Washburn:** Whew. That's a hard one. I sit next to people on planes all the time and they say what do you do? And I say, "Well, I make music." And they say, "What does it sound like?" I usually say that I play the banjo and I sing. And then I say that I speak Chinese and I sing in Chinese. And I write lots of songs in both English and Chinese, and all of my music is very much inspired by traditional music. There is also an indie, folk, pop quality to what I'm doing these days and maybe a little bit of experimentation with sounds outside of the acoustic realm.

**S.Z.:** *You were heading to study law in Beijing and had not considered a musical career. How did your musical journey begin?*

**A.W.:** One huge turning point was hearing Doc Watson singing and playing "Shady Grove" at a party one time near the end of college. I had been so obsessed with China. The stuff of Roman traditions that we long forgot about in our modern culture are not long forgotten there. The inertia, the sheer energy of that history and the ancestral line of tradition and culture, it is insuppressible. It is in everything, and it's everywhere there. Even though the economy and the big city rush for wealth would try to make you think otherwise, it's there still in a major, major way. I didn't really know what was special about America. I couldn't really put my finger on it, and I couldn't find my touchstone of American greatness.

When I heard Doc Watson coming out of that record player, I was like, what is that sound? Who is that? Doc Watson was from the hills of North Carolina and he played what we call "traditional American music." I thought, this is the soul of the sound of America. This is it right here. It's hard to tell (by listening to his music) if he's black or if he's white. It was so groovy because of the syncopation of the banjo and it being, actually, an African instrument. And the words that come from probably Scotland or Ireland and then found their way into Kentucky and North Carolina and started taking on different word replacements and the melodies became more mountain. It was this

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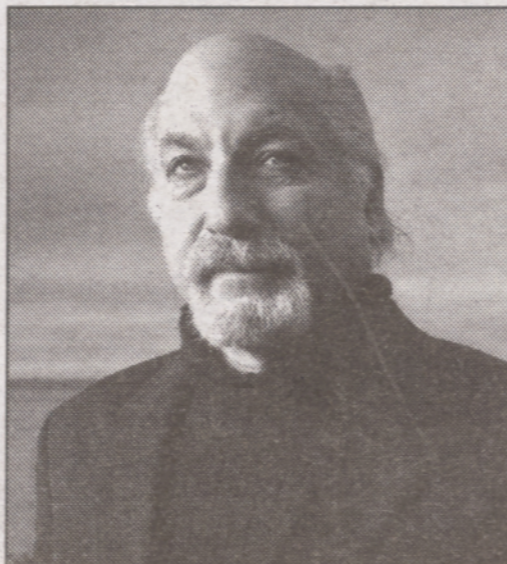
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