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phenomenal fusion of the heart of American immigrant culture and the beginnings of it's own culture. So I decided I had to take a banjo to China.

The second thing is that before I left, I wanted to do some things in America that I wouldn't be able to do because I was going to be living in China for so long. So I took my banjo and went to West Virginia and North Carolina in my little red truck. I ended up in Kentucky at the National Bluegrass Music Association Convention. Out of the blue, as I was sitting there participating in one of my very first jams ever with a couple of girls that I had met at the convention, and this record executive comes up and invited me to come to Nashville to cut a record. So my whole life shifted. Talk about having a little slice of Americana before I go to China, I mean, heck yeah, I'll go to Nashville and make a record! And so I did. I went to Nashville and I've lived here ever since. It's nine years later. I've made my home in Nashville and obviously never went back to China — to do law, at least. That highlight had a huge impact on my life, too. Now I tour China, so that's a wonderful thing.

S.Z.: You speak fluent Mandarin, which is a tonal language with emotive expression, as is music, what was the process like for you to combine the two in your work?

A.W.: The interplay between the banjo and Chinese. I like to write music. I like to write songs in Chinese. And one of the things I noticed very quickly when I was writing my very first song in Chinese, "Song of the Traveling Daughter," was that the pluck of a banjo string mimics the sound of a Chinese word because there are the consonants — which you can think of as the way the nail hits the string — and then there's the resonance of the string which could be compared to the vowel — the open vowel sound at the end of most Chinese words. It's incredibly easy to write these words over banjo plucks. (laughs) Really natural. Anybody who cares about linguistics and language could see that that's really exciting. So there is a relationship there.

S.Z.: Can you talk a bit about recording the album *Afterquake*? It was in response to the massive 8.0 earthquake in China.

A.W.: That was so special, *Afterquake*. The idea was conceived when I went back to China to teach American traditional music at Sichuan University in 2008. I really did that because I knew about the earthquake. I was pretty heartbroken by what I was seeing in the magazines and on TV. I wanted to go see for myself how the few friends that I had left in Sichuan were doing. So that's what I did. My ticket there was going to be teaching American traditional music. And

when I went back, I was reunited with some good friends, ex-patriots who lived in Chengdu and they quickly asked me if I would want to go into a disaster zone and try to help kids. They had an organization called Sichuan Quake Relief, and immediately I thought, that's why I'm here. So we started planning these dates to go play for kids in relocation schools in the disaster zone.

At the end of my shows, I'd have all these kids come up to me and express how sad they were to be so far away from home, and they often wanted to share songs with me from their home. I was struck so many times by these incredible interactions I'd have with kids and I kept thinking, I wonder if there is something more I could do for them. There was a lot of post traumatic stress disorder that the kids were dealing with. I saw a lot of it when I was hanging out with kids playing basketball or soccer before the shows, I'd see that there was like rage in these Chinese kids that I had never seen in Chinese students before. We are very used to violence in schools in America, but it does not happen in China. It was just such a surprise to see that happening. It was so obviously PTSD, so that was heavy on my mind.

When I came back to the states after that six weeks, I just had the thought that it would be really cool to make a record of these kids voices and their stories. But I wanted to make a record that they would like — not necessarily one that I would like. I'd love to hear just a spare field recording of just a child with an instrument singing an old folk song. But those kids are totally not interested in that. They want to sound like the Asian pop star. I knew if I was really going to do a record in honor of them, their stories, I needed it to sound like Asia pop. So luckily I had recently worked on some remixes of my own music with (DJ producer) Dave Liang of The Shanghai Restoration Project, and he had done such a good job, and he had been so easy to work with even though I'd never met him in person. I called him and I said, "Hey, I'm coming through New York and I'd love to have lunch and I've got an idea to discuss with you." We met and I asked him to invest money to make a CD to help the kids in Sichuan with me. A month later, we were on a plane back to Sichuan and we spent the month there together and made a record with the kids. We came up conceptually with what we thought music and story-wise was going to be an important tale to tell in terms of selling this music back in the states and in terms of what we thought would be the most healing aspect of making music with these kids. So we ended up choosing traditional songs and stories that the children had learned from their parents or from loved ones that they had lost. We spent day in, day out with them for a week and recorded their voices, and then Dave set it

to Asian pop grooves. We came up with *Afterquake*. Probably the highlight of the whole thing was the making of "Song for Mama" which is a track that a young boy sings. He was singing, "I'm going to give my heart to the moon because I know the moon can see you even though I can't. And I'm going to ask the moon to shine down on you all the love that I feel for you."

We were just so touched by this. He's crying, we're crying. My god, he missed his mom so much. As soon as we recorded it, we knew it was so special, and we immediately tried to figure out where his mom was because we were thinking, "God if I was his mom, I'd want to hear this and I'd want to know he was doing okay." We were quite surprised, but it only took about a seven hour van ride to find his mom. We ended up finding all the children's parents throughout our time there and sharing photos of their children and also the recording of their voices singing with the parents. And then, in return, of course, they would give us a cup of tea and we would record them telling some stories about their time during the earthquake.

S.Z.: "Dreams of Nectar" is a song from your latest album, *City of Refuge*. To listen to it is beautiful, to watch you and Kai Welch perform it, is magical. Did the experience of recording *Afterquake* fell into influencing you on *City of Refuge* at all?

A.W.: That's totally accurate. I really had been purely an acoustic, folk-related musician up until working with Dave Liang. After working with Dave and seeing how he did electronica, I know that my heart and mind were opened up to the idea that this could be a cool way to make music. And I hadn't thought that before, honestly, because I thought, well, that's not my world. And then it became my world. So when I started envisioning (my next project), I think the making of *Afterquake* had a huge part to do with how I envisioned my future. I can't say that I wanted to work with somebody who looped, but I was definitely much, much more open minded about what kind of collaboratives I might be working with.

S.Z.: *City of Refuge* was recorded in Nashville and mixed by Portland-based Tucker

Martine (*The Decemberists*, *Mudhoney*.) What did Martine bring to the album?

A.W.: When I chose him as a producer, it was largely because he's not somebody who comes from folk music or old-time music. He has a lot of projects that derive a lot of their meaning and sort of rootsy quality form folk music like *The Decemberists*, *Laura Veirs*, *My Morning Jacket* or *Bill Frazel*. All of these people he's worked with, you can hear such a strong affinity for folk music in everything they do, even though it's like an Indie Rock sound. So I thought that would be pretty perfect. It was fun for both of us because he was kind of psyched to be working with somebody who is very much connected to the old-time community and strongly a part of the tradition and the preserving of it.

S.Z.: You blend traditional American and Chinese music in your work, but you also bring to each culture, windows into the traditions of the other. What is that experience like?

A.W.: It's so interesting because it seems like every single person I talk to or every single audience is in a different part of their evolution of their kind of realization or recognition of that other culture. The experiences are across the board. I'm dealing with the guy in Podunk, Mory River, Virginia and then a guy that's been studying China for his whole life in Beijing. At least in America and China, I feel like I have a really good cross reading of society — a huge spectrum of people. I feel almost well-equipped enough to consult government and people about where we're at.

S.Z.: Ambassador Washburn?

A.W.: (Laughs) I guess so. I've often thought that's not the worst idea. Not that I should be an ambassador because I really don't want to get my hands messy in economy and trade and those kinds of diplomacies that are expressed for the purposes of advancing our own power in the world. A true Chinese-American cultural ambassador? If we ever actually valued that enough, I would certainly apply for the job.

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