

Alison Brown

By David Jakubiak

Last November I had the chance to see Alison Brown and her Quartet perform at a private house concert. This was a rare treat, as I would later learn that Alison has only performed one other private concert. The intimate setting offered an opportunity to get up close and personal with Alison and her band, whose members include Alison's husband, Gary West, on bass; John Burr on piano; and Larry Atamanuik on drums.

In her younger years, Alison practiced her banjo for hours and hours, to the point where her parents would ask her to stop. All that hard work paid off, as Alison is now considered one of the best banjo players in the world. She is an internationally acclaimed recording artist, a record label co-founder, a mother, a Harvard graduate, a banjo virtuoso and Grammy award winner.

Alison's music career began in 1978 with her father and fiddler Stuart Duncan, as they toured the country playing festivals. After winning a Canadian National Banjo Championship, she was invited to play a one-night gig at the Grand Old Opry. She had just graduated high school when she and Stuart Duncan recorded the album "*Pre-Sequel*." In 1989, Alison received further recognition when Alison Krauss asked her to join Union Station. She performed with them for three years.

Alison's professional journey, however, was not entirely conventional. She attended Harvard to study history and literature, went on to earn an MBA at UCLA, and then worked as an investment banker. But she soon returned to music. In 1991 Alison was rewarded with the IBMA's Banjo Player of the Year award; the first female to do so. She participated in Alison Krauss's Grammy-winning album "*I've Got That Old Feeling*," and in 1990 her own recording, "*Simple Pleasures*," received a Grammy nomination. In 2001 she won a Grammy for her album "*Fair Weather*." In 2003 she founded Compass Records. Alison Brown's discography includes four releases on Vanguard as well as six on the Compass label.

While I have listened to Alison's music for many years, last year's concert

was my first opportunity to see her band perform live. The performance was inspiring, and exceeded my high expectations. As a banjo player I was primarily focused on Alison's playing, but the Quartet as a whole offered a tight, energetic and wholesome sound. To see John Burr and Alison blend complimentary melodic phrases demonstrated the banjo's versatility, as it relates to the piano or an entire jazz quartet.

A friend of mine who is a successful recording artist said that to achieve success in the music industry today, you need to be original. What makes Alison's music special is her blend of jazz, classical, blues, bluegrass, celtic and other musical styles. Her playing lets listeners know that the banjo offers more than what its preconceived image might suggest. On this particular evening I heard a rare blend of melodic jazz arrangements, all performed with a personal feel that is a signature of Alison's music. In addition to playing songs from her most recent album, "*The Company You Keep*," and some from the past, Alison even demonstrated her proficiency as a guitar player. After the concert, we sat down for a brief interview.

David Jakubiak: Tonight you performed the song *The Clean Plate Club*, which was very well received. Can you tell us about this piece and what inspired you to write it? How long did it take you to compose it with John Burr?

Alison Brown: John and I wrote *The Clean Plate Club* the night before the recording session. I've always been a fan of Larry McNeely's rendition of the old Benny Goodman tune *Slipped Disc*, and I used something like the intro figure Larry played on his recording to set up the feel for our tune. After that we basically just pieced together a melody that would be playable both on banjo and piano. We couldn't have spent too long writing it as we had three kids tearing up the house

around us—probably half an hour or so.

BNL: Who are some jazz artists that have inspired you in the development of your style?

AB: Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass are two that come to mind. I didn't have the



chance to study jazz growing up—I was too busy playing bluegrass—but I came to it later on. I really love the harmonic possibilities that jazz opens up. I think if you are an instrumentalist, it's an obvious direction to go because like bluegrass, jazz has a tradition of instrumentalists as band leaders. And for a writer, jazz gives you a lot more harmonic avenues to explore than bluegrass does. When I started writing my own tunes I found that they tended to lean in that direction naturally, and when I started trying to play my music live it seemed naturally to explore that direction. I met John Burr in 1992 when I recorded "*Twilight Motel*" and we've been playing together ever since. I think it's his participation in the band, more than anything else, which gives us a legitimate foot in jazz. Really, I'm a bluegrass banjo player trying to figure out the best way to present the tunes I write.

BNL: Can you provide some insights into your compositions and arrangements for jazz banjo? Do you improvise more

through the use of scale structure? If so, what type of scales do you utilize the most? Do you play within chordal arrangements with the use scales?

AB: I really don't consider myself to be a jazz player and I'm pretty unschooled when it comes to my knowledge of scales. The approach that works best for me is to think in term of chordal arpeggios as a starting point and go from there. Working with a piano player is a great experience too, as their way of thinking so linear—it helps me to think outside of the box of a chord shape.

BNL: What type of banjos you are currently playing? Are there any particular brands that are favorites?

AB: I've been using a Prucha Diamond Point banjo on the road for the past 6 years or so. I think it's a great sounding banjo and really well made. Jarda's craftsmanship is as good as it gets. Most of the time when recording I use my 1938 Mastertone, which has such an amazing voice anywhere on the neck. I've also recently been using a wood banjola that Ed Dick built for me—I played it on

the Indigo Girls last two albums—and that's a great variation on a banjo sound for tracks where the standard 5-string doesn't sit so well.

BNL: Do you play an electric banjo?

AB: I do. I have two that Tom Nechville made for me—one is a nylon string Aurora that we developed together, and the other is a steel string Meteor built to my specs: radiused fingerboard, Brazilian rosewood fingerboard, mahogany body.

BNL: What type of pick-ups do you install or recommend when playing live or with your band?

AB: A Fishman Rare Earth pickup and the Fishman platinum pre-amp.

BNL: What strings do you use?

AB: I usually use D'Addario strings gauges, 10 12 14 22.

BNL: I know it would not be practical to incorporate a bluegrass style with the Quartet, but do you ever foresee yourself returning to your bluegrass roots?

AB: I love playing bluegrass and I'm lucky to have a chance to do that outside the Quartet. I don't imagine I will ever not play bluegrass. But since my writing

tends to take me other places musically, the Quartet is a great vehicle for me, compositionally.

BNL: Do you do many collaborations?

AB: One of the advantages of having a studio across the hall from your office is that you do get to sit in on some projects! Recently I've recorded with Cherish the Ladies, and I got to play on a track on the new Gibson Brothers album. I also had a chance to play some great new bluegrass songs on a Louisa Branscomb project with Josh Williams, Dale Ann Bradley, Missy Raines and a few other folks. That will be out this spring.

BNL: Do you have any new albums coming out?

AB: Probably, but I don't know what yet. We did release our DVD "*Live At Blair*" in 2010, which was recorded at the Blair School of Music in Nashville. I'm starting to think about a new one but I've had my hands full lately. I just finished producing the new Peter Rowan Bluegrass Band record "*Legacy*," and I have a couple of other production things on the calendar. With kids, running the

Clean Plate Club

By Alison Brown & John Burr. Key of C. G Tuning: gDGBD. Tab by A. Brown

Intro

Part B:

photo by David Jakubiak

record label, touring some and doing some production, carving out time for my own music is sometimes a challenge. There are just so many hours in the day.

BNL: Did it take some courage to leave your former career as an investment banker to pursue music?

AB: It took some courage but I didn't quit thinking I would never go back. I think you can make big changes in baby steps. That was really very much my approach.

BNL: How long did you work as a banker?

AB: I was an investment banker for three years. But after doing it for several years, I could see that I didn't have the all-consuming passion for finance that many of the folks I worked with did. We started Compass Records 18 years ago. We have 600 titles in our catalog, 10 employees, a studio and an office. What I learned in business school and my experience as a banker has been put to good use.

BNL: Were your parents disappointed that you chose music over finance?

AB: Probably more concerned than disappointed. But I have no regrets. I needed to have that experience so I would know what I'm not missing! And it makes me better appreciate what a gift it is to create your own job, which is essentially what we've done with the label.

BNL: Do you still practice, or is performing considered practicing?

AB: I try to practice. We have a wonderful studio in our building, and when no one is looking, that's where I go to practice. Our studio is the room John Hartford recorded "*Aereo Plain*" and, though lots of amazing masters have been cut there, that's the one that means the most to me.

In closing, on this particular night, a small group of people had an opportunity to hear and meet one of the best banjo players of our day. The audience was also treated to the personal side of Alison, as she related a story that she received a letter from John Grunsfeld, a member of the Space Shuttle Crew, who indicated that he has taken Alison's music on mission flights and played it while orbiting the earth. So Alison's music is truly being taken to new heights. I, for one, can't wait to hear what the Alison Brown Quartet offers well into the future.

David Jakubiak has produced six books on CD for banjo, mandolin and guitar. He's played banjo since 1970 and has over 40 years of teaching experience. Check out www.Fretmentor.com