



The first time Sam Bush heard Akira Otsuka and his friends in the Japanese band the Bluegrass 45, he remembers a band that was well rooted in bluegrass traditions but not afraid to push the boundaries. Bush particularly remembers a version of Dave Brubeck's *Take 5*.

Though that was more than 40 years ago, Akira is still pushing the envelope, as he demonstrates time and again in his first solo project, [First Tear](#), on the Patuxent Music label. I almost let this little gem fall through the cracks in a flood of new music. You don't want to make the same mistake.

*First Tear* is one of those projects that offers something for everyone without coming across as contrived. There's some traditional bluegrass, some new grass, a bit of swing, a couple of jazz-inflected tunes that reflect that long-ago interest in Brubeck and a few short mandolin-only sketches (two minutes or so) that showcase Akira's range and taste.

As some will remember, Akira was a disciple of John Duffey, the late mandolin picker and tenor singer who co-founded the Seldom Scene. In fact, Duffey is, in a way, responsible for one of the high points of this 14-song collection, the song *Heartaches*.

This is a live recording from a tribute concert at the Birchmere music hall after Duffey died, featuring Tony Rice and Phil Rosenthal on guitar, Eddie Adcock on banjo, Tom Gray on bass and Akira's crisp, clean mandolin. This is as good as it gets – great picking by great musicians honoring one of their own. Kudos to Akira and to Patuxent's Tom Mindte for bringing this recording to light.

But the new music is worthy, too. My favorites are the grassier songs here – Chris Stifel's *Touch of Time*, Mike Munford's powerful instrumental *Line Drive* and *Long Black Jacket*, which Akira and Rick Watson wrote. *Jacket* is straight from the *Long Black Veil* genre of songs, in which the wrong man is framed for a death and pays with his life by staying silent.

*Touch of Time* is the real gem, highlighted by Stifel's plaintive vocal about a race we're all destined to lose – against “the cold hands of time.” As a songwriter, I classify the best songs as “terrific” and the very best as “man, I wish I had written that.” This one is clearly in the wish class. (It's also the title cut of the current album by Bill Emerson and Sweet Dixie, with Stifel, a member of that band, again doing vocal and guitar honors.)

But the non-bluegrass songs are also solid, especially the jazzy – and unusually named *Daddy Long Legs Dodging Rain Drops*, and *Pink Special #3*, which is pure country swing, featuring Bill Kirchen on electric guitar and Rickie Simpkins on fiddle.

Because Akira lives in the Washington, D.C., suburbs, I get to catch him now and again as first-rate sideman. (I swear he knows every Stanley Brothers and Flatt & Scruggs song ever recorded.) But I've never had the pleasure of hearing him like this, spreading his wings, broadening his range and taking all of us along for the ride. And a wonderful ride it is.

Here's hoping *First Tear* won't be this classy guy's only solo project.