

# ON THE EDGE - HIGHLIGHT

## AKIRA OTSUKA FIRST TEAR



Patuxent Music PX-CD 231

Anyone familiar with mandolinist Akira Otsuka knows the unsurpassed level of joy and energy he brings to his live performances. Here, on this his long-deferred debut, he succeeds in bringing that same spirit to a studio recording, one featuring nine original instrumentals and four guest-written covers, three of them vocals. His rhythm is propulsive, and his solos are brightly-articulated and full of rippling triplets and quick slides and a Bush-like attack.

That said, Otsuka opens surprisingly with "White Orchid," a slow, stately tone poem of lyrical beauty and shimmering notes and chords. Think of it as petals dropping in a Japanese garden pool. Immediately upon hearing it, you'll probably ask yourself, where is the energy and joy mentioned above? But listen deeper and as the intensity and the

atmospherics work on you, a switch will flip and you'll know. Subtle, yes, but powerful. "First Tear," his solo closer, works in a similarly subtle-but-powerful way.

By contrast his "Daddy Long Legs Dodging Raindrops" offers a funky rhythm in medium tempo, underpinned by Fred Smith's snapping electric bass line over which Otsuka spins a catchy, happy-go-lucky melody that underscores the title. You won't need to question the joy and energy there, nor that of "Pink Special #3" which follows. "Pink..." finds him trading solos with David Grier, fiddler Rickie Simpkins and electric guitar legend Bill Kirchen on a fast, jazz/boogie-like original reminiscent of Ellington's "C-Jam Blues." Eventually everyone's tossing four- and two-bar phrases back and forth, building steam with each round until the restatement brings it to a glorious close.

Elsewhere we're treated to the medium swing/strut of "Bash," the light-hearted Jethro Burns tribute of "Evanston Slide," and the ripping bluegrass of both "Node Conversion 18" and guest banjoist Mike Munford's "Line Drive." Guest singer Chris Stifel's uptempo original, "Touch Of Time," blending bluegrass and '60s rock and folk tinges that suggests everyone from Moby Grape to the Dillards, stands among the two or three best of an all-around eclectic and impressive recording.

Bassist Johnny Castle, fiddler Phil Bloch and guitarists Kenny Smith and Al Pettaway, among others and those already mentioned, contribute vibrant support both rhythmically and on lead. (Patuxent Music, P.O. Box 572, Rockville, MD 20848, [www.pxrec.com](http://www.pxrec.com).)JBW