

Akira Otsuka: *First Tear*

Reviewed by Hermon Joyner

Akira Otsuka is part of the second wave of bluegrass that started in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, which included people like David Grisman, Ricky Skaggs, Tony Rice and Sam Bush. The bluegrass group he is part of, Bluegrass 45, was formed in 1968 in Kobe, Japan, by two brothers, Saburo (banjo) and Toshio (bass) Watanabe.

It wasn't long before Akira (mandolin) and his brother, Tsuyoshi (guitar) Otsuka joined Bluegrass 45 and in 1970 they released their first album, toured the United States and appeared on the Grand Ole Opry. Bluegrass 45, including Hsueh-Cheng "Ryo" Liao on fiddle, have played together, with minor changes and various career interruptions, ever since. They played at the Wintergrass International Music festival in Belleville, Washington, this past February.

Akira was close friends with John Duffey, also part of that second wave of bluegrass and played one of Duffey's two Duck mandolins. Currently and on this CD, Akira is playing Duffey's modified Gibson F12 mandolin. As you can hear on the CD, *First Tear*, despite some wear, this Gibson is still going strong and so is Akira.

His playing varies between delicate and emotive to muscular and aggressive, as the music requires, and a sense of humor is never far behind. And he is not playing bluegrass music here, but delves into newgrass, swing and jazz. He proves to be just as adept with these genres as he is with bluegrass. One of the most tasteful mandolin players around, Akira is definitely not a one trick pony, he seems to do it all.

There are several wonderful tracks on this CD and most of the best are written by Akira. *White Orchid*, the opening number, is haunting and beautiful. *Evanston Slide* is a tune written with one of Akira's heroes in mind, Jethro Burns. It's short and sweet, and filled with subtle and playful humor. It manages to capture Jethro's personality perfectly. *Line Drive*, written by Mike Munford, the banjo player from Frank Solivan's band, is a straight-up bluegrass tune and is delivered with energy and drive, so to speak. Excellent track.

Akira Otsuka is a phenomenal mandolin player and composer, but has managed to stay out of the limelight for too long. With *First Tear*, he has the chance to get some well-deserved recognition. This is an exciting recording and it's a great example how bluegrass has escaped beyond the boundaries of the US and has become an international music.

This is one of the best mandolin recordings in recent memory and is, of course, highly recommended.

Song List: *White Orchid; Touch of Time; Daddy Long Legs Dodging Raindrops; Pink Special #3; Bash; Prince George's Mandolin; Node 18 Conversion; Long Black Jacket; Evanston Slide; Line Drive; Blue; Time for New Green; Heartaches; First Tear*

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