

**Banjoist-Arranger Jake Schepps Makes Musical Magic with the
East-Meets-West Stringband Sounds on
*An Evening in the Village: The Music of Béla Bartók***

The New Album, To Be Released October 6, Finds Common Ground Between the Piquant Beauty of Bartók's Take on Eastern European Folk Melodies and the Big-Sky Vibrancy of New American Acoustic Music

It's a marvelous thing when aspiration meets inspiration and a musician takes a striking leap, not only moving his art forward but raising the bar for those around him. Colorado-based banjoist-arranger Jake Schepps has taken just such a leap with his album *An Evening in the Village: The Music of Béla Bartók*, to be released on October 6, 2011, via Schepps' own Fine Mighty Records imprint. Devoted to arrangements of folk-influenced music by the great Hungarian composer and pioneering ethnomusicologist Béla Bartók (1881-1945), *An Evening in the Village* helps broaden the horizons of the stringband, proving that the scintillating mix of banjo, fiddle, mandolin, guitar and double-bass need not be limited to Americana tradition. The roots-music magazine *Dirty Linen* was prescient when it said, "Jake Schepps and crew are part of a growing modern stringband movement that uses bluegrass instrumentation but produces music without border."

An Evening in the Village sees Schepps and his virtuoso cohorts re-envision Bartók's modernist takes on old Eastern European melodies as if the collective were an Appalachian band jamming after hours in a Transylvanian town hall, the moods ranging from the gorgeously bittersweet title track and haunting full-moon "Melody" to the whirling, off-kilter hooks of "Ruthenian Kolomeika" and "Cousin Sally Brown," an old-time Anglo-American fiddle tune given an East-meets-West spin. The album was recorded in Nashville and Colorado, co-produced by Juno Award-winning banjoist Jayme Stone along with Schepps and mandolin ace Matt Flinner; the players include members of Schepps' band the Expedition Quartet and other top players on the new acoustic scene. The sophisticated arrangements and spirited performances capture the essence of the music – its mystery, humor and crooked, folk-art beauty.

"I think Bartók's music sounds like some of the best acoustic music I have ever heard: stunning writing, highly creative harmonic surprises, bold arrangements, twists and turns," Schepps says. "We tried to keep as much of that intent as we could, then be ourselves on top of it all. There's a certain rhythmic drive to Bartók's music, and a lot of his classical interpreters smooth that out with rubato and *espressivo*. But as a player of often groove-based American folk music, I felt an affinity for that sort of rhythmic drive and wanted to inject a little of that back into the music."

Schepps' previous album, *Ten Thousand Leaves*, established him as a figure in the new acoustic movement alongside the likes of Flinner, the Punch Brothers and other folk-bred stringband musicians who have stepped out to play adventurous compositions on traditional instruments. *Ten Thousand Leaves*, produced by Flinner, was judged one of the 10 best recordings of 2007 by *JazzReview.com*. The album included Schepps' arrangement of the avant-tango "Todo Buenos Aires" by Astor Piazzolla, as well as the banjoist's original three-part suite "In the American West," inspired by Richard Avedon photographs. *Bluegrass Unlimited* hailed the album as one "that intrigues, entertains and reveals more of itself with each play."

Although he was trained in the grand Central European tradition, Bartók was deeply inspired by the folk music of Eastern Europe, using the melodies and dance rhythms to seed his harmonically advanced compositions – particularly in such sets as *Hungarian Sketches*, *Romanian Folk*

Dances, Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm, Mikrokosmos and *44 Duos* for two violins (all of which Schepps drew upon for tracks on *An Evening in the Village*). Taking a stand for the value of folk music, the composer once wrote, "If [the musician] allows himself to surrender to the impressions of living folk music, and he can mirror the effect of these impressions in his work, then. . . he has recorded a piece of life."

Schepps steeped himself in the scores and recordings of Bartók's compositions and his transcriptions of Eastern European folk musicians, as well as biographies and the composer's letters. "I hadn't realized what a scientist Bartók was – he was doing field research, and developed an elaborate coding system for notating ornamentation, melody styles and scales," Schepps explains. "He was a city boy traveling around the countryside in 1906, carrying a gramophone and trying to persuade rural Hungarians and Romanians to sing into it – it was probably a lot of work just to do that and not come across like a man sent from the future. But he stuck it out, collecting more than 8,000 folk tunes; the Bartók archives are a national treasure in Hungary, so he's a hero beyond being the composer of all those great orchestral works and string quartets."

The more Schepps listened to Bartók's own works, "the more I learned about how he would take a simple folk tune and transform it into something more elaborate and rich," the banjoist says. "He would take a four-bar vocal melody and extend that for one or two minutes, and the stuff he put in there was harmonically incredible – and that was Bartók's voice. He often has this dissonant, acerbic harmonic vocabulary, and those harmonies sound wonderfully surprising underneath those folk melodies. Musicians gravitate toward Bartók's music, and I think that comes across on the album. Ideas flew around in rehearsal – switching off parts, rewriting ideas about where to solo. It was like a jazz session, working off charts but with a lot of creativity."

Schepps gathered extraordinary players for *An Evening in the Village*. Co-producer and mandolinist Matt Flinner's 1998 Compass album *The View from Here* is considered a watershed for the new acoustic music scene. Cellist Ben Sollee is a Sparrow Quartet member alongside Béla Fleck and Abigail Washburn, while bassist Greg Garrison is a former Punch Brother. Then there is the core band, consisting of Schepps' comrades in the Expedition Quartet: A classically trained violinist at the University of Colorado, Ryan Drickey moved into folk music and won the RockyGrass Fiddle Contest in 2007; he has also received a Fulbright scholarship to study Scandinavian folk music in Sweden. Drickey is "a wide-open musician, bringing this beautifully expressive touch to old-time and Irish music, jazz, tango, whatever he plays," Schepps says. Grant Gordy is "an astounding guitarist who has explored a lot of different music," the banjoist says, "but he virtually grew up on a diet of the David Grisman Quintet, so his home is that crossroads of chamber-y, bluegrass-y, jazz-influenced music." Bassist Ian Hutchison "graduated from the University of Denver with a jazz performance degree," Schepps explains, "and he plays jazz-standard gigs constantly. He came to folk music late, but he comes with a sharp, open ear. He also plays in the Grant Gordy Quartet, so those two have a deep musical connection."

Schepps will be touring with the Expedition Quartet on behalf of *An Evening in the Village: The Music of Béla Bartók* this fall, proving to listeners the potential of the stringband as a wide-ranging musical vehicle. He says, "Part of the premise for the Bartók album is viewing the stringband as a sonorous group of instruments that fit very well together, not unlike a classical string quartet or a jazz piano trio. But relative to those formats, the stringband is unexplored – so I want to explore the different places this sort of group can travel."

For more information on Jake Schepps and the Expedition Quartet, including music samples, tour dates, press kits and more, go to www.jakeschepps.com.