



A Visitor to Other Musics

By Hermon Joyner

Tim Connell, who makes his home in Portland, Oregon, is a talented and versatile mandolinist, fluent in Brazilian choro music, Jewish klezmer, Irish folk, jazz, swing, and even American fiddle tunes. His playing can be described as fiery and energetic, soulful and evocative. And when the multi-genre mandolinist is asked what his advice is to beginning mandolin players, his answer is a glimpse into his own experience and his own approach to the mandolin. He is in turns practical, encouraging, and even surprising.

Connell said, "Relax your left and right hands. Get a teacher first to make sure you're holding everything properly. Before you start practicing a lot and creating a habit, make sure it's the right habit, and you have to be really patient. It actually does take a long time to learn how to play the mandolin. Don't play too hard or too loud. Play as quietly as you need to, at first. I could have saved a lot of time by getting a teacher early on. Practice a little every day, don't practice too much, and take lots of breaks when you practice, but be consistent, practice every day."

Growing up in Philadelphia, Connell wasn't raised in a musical family. His mom had inherited a little-used piano, but once Tim came along, his attention to that piano became something of a lasting obsession. He would open up and go through the piano bench filled with sheet music, marveling at the lines of notes that filled the pages, and he began to play that piano. He was six years old.



Almir Cortes, Tim Connell, and Mike Marshall at the Mandolin Symposium

As he grew older, his interests and instruments began to expand. Connell's parents started him on piano lessons in the third grade and he continued those through middle school. In the seventh grade, he switched to the guitar and played that through high school, and continued with the piano as well.

By the time he was pursuing his Masters Degree in Music Education at the New England Conservatory of Music, he was quite accomplished on the electric bass. While he was at the Conservatory, Connell got his first taste of musical virtuosity on an unlikely instrument, the Irish tin whistle. Boston has a thriving Irish music scene and it wasn't long before Connell was gigging at Irish dances with his tin whistle in hand. He said, "I was really practicing a lot on this little seven dollar instrument, and there is a high level of technique going on in that scene. It's pretty intense." However, he was also experimenting with playing other instruments at those dances.

It was at this time that Connell began to think more about specialization; he wanted to find an instrument that he could devote his time to and explore his own virtuosity. "I've always wanted to play one instrument well. But I play jazz and I love all the styles of music that I can play on piano and bass, and I didn't think I could do that on the whistle. So what was I going to do? But I had started playing mandolin and tenor banjo in Irish music, not very seriously, so it was more just a logical choice. I discovered that I could play all the stuff I wanted to play on the mandolin."

And that's where his focus and full attention landed; and Connell got serious about the mandolin.

Connell had picked up an inexpensive A-model mandolin and was using it to play at Irish dances. The mandolin wasn't the most popular instrument for that setting, being relatively quiet, but he knew other Irish musicians who played it, so he was able to join in. But it was when he enrolled in a class on Jewish klezmer music, that he found a place for his mandolin.

"When I took the klezmer performance class, the teacher asked, 'What do you play?' The minute I said mandolin, he said to bring that; it'd be good. It turned out it was the same exact reason I liked playing Irish tunes on the tin whistle. It was interesting folk music with cool ornaments, except it was on the mandolin. I thought this could be it."

Within his Masters in Music Education program, Connell went on to specialize in ethno-musicology, which is the study of folk music traditions, and also devoted a great deal of time with a study that the Conservatory called Contemporary

Improvisation, which doesn't focus on any particular instrument or music style, but instead teaches people how to be a well-rounded musician through teaching ear training, sight reading, improvisation techniques and even solfège. Solfège is the traditional way of setting particular syllables to certain notes and intervals of music; the "do - re - mi" method of singing and reading music.

It was also during this time that Connell was first exposed to Brazilian choro. Connell explains, "When I was at Conservatory, I was playing mandolin, so one of my fellow students said that there was Brazilian mandolin and had I heard it? I think David Grisman had just put out the two Jacob do Bandolim collections, it was 1996, and this guy gave me copies of both of those. I couldn't believe this music. At the same time, I didn't learn how to play it, it was just something I listened to for years; cool, new music. It was just one of those things in the background, while I was playing Irish music and Bach and jazz on the mandolin."

It wasn't until 2005 that Connell encountered choro music in person, when he attended the Mandolin Symposium, put on by David Grisman and Mike Marshall. "I met Mike Marshall at the Mandolin Symposium and he was there with a bunch of musicians playing choro in concert and there was a jam session, too. So I went to the jam session and I already knew all the tunes and they had the sheet music right there, which I could read pretty easily. So that was my take-away from my first Mandolin Symposium. I was going to learn this music and then come back next year being able to play it."

And that's what he did. And in the following year, Connell dove into the world of choro and was able to learn 15 new songs and then attended the 2006 Mandolin Symposium, where he first saw and heard Hamilton de Holanda. Connell was blown away. In learning and playing choro, he found the music for the mandolin that would allow him the chance to explore his own virtuosity and develop his own sound, and in so doing he looked to Mike Marshall, who has also played and promoted choro, for inspiration.

"Mike Marshall is probably the guy that I identify with the most. He said it himself, he's a visitor to other musics. He grew up in Pennsylvania, too, and coming to bluegrass was something new for him, just like coming to Irish music was new for me. And him just not being able to commit to one thing is a way I see him do bluegrass, but he also does choro music and jazz; basically taking the tools of harmony, melody, improvisation and rhythm, and being able to play with different people and still have his own voice."



David Grisman and Tim Connell performing at the Mandolin Symposium

"This is what I aspire to, so he is a good role model. When I play choro, there are a lot of other guys who sound more traditional and Brazilian than I do here in America, but I made a decision to sound like myself. That's why I don't need to have a bandolim. And Mike kind of helped me to do that because he plays everything on his one mandolin."

In finding his one mandolin, Connell chose to play an Arrow mandolin, made by Paul Lestock in Mosier, Oregon. He explains how he came to own it. "I met Paul at the Mandolin Symposium in Santa Cruz around ten years ago. And coming up here, I decided to get a good mandolin and he knew that, so he kept giving me mandolins. He'd say, 'Try this out and I'll pick it up in a month or so.' So when he handed me one that was good, I said this looks good to me. I've had it for eight years now. And I know it like I don't know any other mandolin. It's different from a lot of other mandolins, but to me it's the right sound."

Connell pauses and then tries to put that sound into words. "The first thing that people say, and then I notice, is the G-string and the D-string are deeper, lower, rounder, and more like a mandola. These are the words I've heard other people say. I just notice that there is a little more there. And my first mandolin was a Vega. Actually, I didn't know anything about bluegrass or F5s, so I just bought this Vega because I liked the sound of it out of all the ones in the store. It was an oval-hole, not a cylinder-back; it was just a simple little Vega with an oval hole. And when you have that, the G-string has this big, bassy, warm sound. So anytime I picked up an F5 after that, the first thing I'd say was, 'Where's the G string?' So Paul's was the exception to that. Here was the good G-string sound that I was used to. It doesn't have quite the chop that you need for bluegrass, and it has a little more sustain and less punch, but I've gotten used to it."

Like most working musicians, Connell spreads his talents far and wide, and is involved in a number of musical endeavors, though he is most known for his choro performances in his duo, Rio Con Brio, with guitarist, Mike Burdette. Connell is active in several other bands. In addition to Rio Con Brio, Connell and Burdette play in a swing jazz group, Stumptown Swing, along with Keith Brush on upright bass and Ben Blechman on violin. Connell performs in a duo mandolin group called Mando Planet with Jack Dwyer, playing a wide range of acoustic world/folk music.

Connell also plays in the Ger Mandolin Orchestra, lead by Mike Marshall and featuring other mandolin luminaries like Radim Zenkl, Avi Avital, and Don Stiernberg, which is modeled after a Jewish klezmer mandolin orchestra. These were common in Eastern Europe up until World War II. And he works with guitar virtuoso Eric Skye, whom he met in Portland, on a different sort of project. They are working up a set of new arrangements of fiddle tunes for guitar and mandolin and plan to record an album together this year. He said, "It's mainly fiddle tunes and a waltz here and there. It's sounding a lot like the first Tone Poems album with David Grisman and Tony Rice."



The Ger Mandolin Orchestra in performance with Tim Connell on the far right.

Connell is also pursuing a solo mandolin repertoire, inspired by Radim Zenkl and Hamilton de Holanda. He is finishing up 12 solo arrangements which vary from Beatles tunes to jazz and choro, including a few original tunes he's written. Connell plans to make these available as downloads later this year, with the option to buy the arrangements as sheet music.

As Tim Connell reflects on his many projects and the many musical genres he performs in, he finds that he spends more and more time thinking not about the technical virtuoso opportunities that drew him to the mandolin, but to the many chances he has to connect to other people through his music. For him, the siren call of technique for technique's sake is now seen, not as an end in itself, but as the way to achieve a greater connection with his audience.

"In every music I've played — Irish, bluegrass, choro, jazz — it's like how fast can you play? And that's something I've never quite enjoyed that much. It stresses me out. And I really enjoy tremolo, I love slow tunes. More and more, this has value, too. Civilian audiences, not pickers, tend to go for music that just makes sense, that's not an onslaught of notes. The more I play for normal people, who don't even know what a mandolin is, the more I tend to go for what I'm good at; the slower stuff, the more emotional stuff. It actually has a lot of value to other people."

After all, music is a language that connects the players to the audience, and that is a lesson that's not been lost on Tim Connell. ♪

Tim Connell Discography:

- Stumptown Swing* - Mike Burdette & Tim Connell (2014)
- Mando Planet* - Jack Dwyer & Tim Connell (2013)
- Caprice* - Rio Con Brio (2011)
- Fado/Fate* - Alexandra Coutinho with Rio Con Brio (2011)
- Vignettes* - Rio Con Brio (2009)
- Whispering* - Rio Con Brio (2008)
- Original Score for "A Midsummer Night's Dream"* - Tim Connell (1999)
- Tales From Last Summer* - Deep Ocean Project (1997)

Notes from Tim Connell:

I composed this choro as an homage to my friend Danilo Brito — one of the greatest mandolinists in the world, and certainly the greatest living example of the traditional choro style of Jacob do Bandolim.

The piece follows the rondo form and key changes common in choro: AABBACCA, with the A-part in a minor key (G-minor), the B-part in the relative major (B-flat major) and the C-part in the parallel major (G-major). Fingering in the A-part is tricky: sometimes it's best to put your pinky on the fifth fret, or even the fourth!

For Danilo

AABBACCA

Tim Connell

A 

Gm D7 Gm Ab7 Gm D7 Gm G7

5 Cm7 F7 Bbmaj7 Eb7 Ab7 D7 Gm D7

10 Gm Ab7 Gm D7 Gm G7 Cm7 F7

14 Bbmaj7 Eb7 Ab7 D7  1. Gm D7(#9) 2. Gm

B 

F7 Bb D7(b9) Gm Eb Ebm6 Bb

Fine



24 C⁷ F⁷ F⁷ B^b D⁷(b⁹) G^m

30 E^b E^bm⁶ B^b G^b B⁷ F⁷ 1. B^b 2. B^b D⁷(#⁹)

D.S. al ϕ

35 G^m D⁷ C G^mmaj⁷ G^mmaj⁷ G[#]o⁷ A^m A^m A^m(maj⁷)

41 A^m⁷ A^m⁶ A^m⁷ D⁺⁷ G^mmaj⁷ D⁷ G^mmaj⁷ D^m⁷ G⁷

47 C^m⁶ G^mmaj⁷ E⁺⁷ A^m⁷ D⁷ 1. G^mmaj⁷ 2. G D⁷(#⁹)

D.S. al Fine

Tim Connell & Mike Burdette

Stumptown Swing

Reviewed by Hermon Joyner

Stumptown Swing is the latest from mandolinist Tim Connell and guitarist Mike Burdette from Portland, Oregon, and instead of the Brazilian choro interpretations they are known for, this time they are exploring another form of jazz, the Gypsy jazz style made famous by guitarist Django Reinhardt. The musical transition from choro to Gypsy jazz is easily accomplished for these two assured performers.

In fact, guitarist Mike Burdette has a long personal association with this style of jazz and Tim Connell's own history of experimenting with many diverse forms of music includes years of jazz performance and improvisation. And so it's really no surprise at all that *Stumptown Swing* is a joyous, vibrant and emotive collection of fine and heartfelt performances that attest that there is still a lot of life left in this music and serves as a brilliant showcase for the talents involved in this project.

In addition to Connell and Burdette, two more musicians from Portland join in to form a quartet, Keith Brush on upright bass who also performs with the stellar, progressive jazz group, The Blue Cranes, and Ben Blechman on violin. Burdette on guitar and Brush on bass provide the rhythmic foundation of the group while Blechman and Connell handle the melodies and solo improvisations.

Keith Brush is all you could ask for in a jazz bassist, demonstrating an imagination and innovation that creates moving and sensitive bass lines while maintaining a rhythmic grounding that the other musicians can work from. And Mike Burdette supplies the other half of the driving rhythm that moves the tunes along. His pulsing guitar work is supple and delicate while being at the same time, rock solid. Burdette is one of those players that gives his all in every performance.

Ben Blechman is an amazing violinist, neatly stepping into the role of soloist that was created by the great Stephane Grapelli with Django in the original Hot Club of Paris. His solos swing and soar through the tunes that alternate between sweetness and melancholy and are always perfectly rendered.

But it is Tim Connell that provides the revelation in this recording. With most musicians, you can point to certain recordings where everything comes together for them and they gel as performers and stylists, and this happens for Connell in *Stumptown Swing*. His technique on the mandolin has never been better and he coaxes tone by the buckets out of his instrument.

At times, the flurry of notes fly out of his Arrow mandolin like machine gun bullets and each one hits their mark. With this recording, Connell has announced his arrival as a world-class mandolinist. On its own, *Stumptown Swing* qualifies as one of the year's best jazz recordings, but for this mandolin fan, it gives me a recording that I will revisit for a long time to come.

Song List: *J'Attendrai; It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing); My One and Only Love; L'Indifference; Nuages; Pookster Swing; How Insensitive; Claire de Lune; Samba de Orfeu; Django's Castle*

Contact: CD Baby (www.cdbaby.com); 503-349-8873

Avi Avital

Between Worlds

Reviewed by Hermon Joyner

Avi Avital's first recording was an album of Bach arrangements that were brilliantly rendered and true to the Baroque nature of the music. For the virtuoso Israeli, Avital has now chosen for his follow-up project an exploration of the traditional folk roots of the mandolin. It's obvious that this is an attempt to showcase his versatility in a variety of musical settings and with *Between Worlds*, Avital has succeeded in a big way.

If there was any doubt that he is a force to be reckoned with as a mandolin player, this recording will put all doubts to rest. His talent is enormous and there doesn't appear to be a limit to his creativity and imagination. We are truly living in a golden age of the mandolin, in terms of builders and players, and Avi Avital is definitely one of the players that prove that idea.

There is a wide diversity of musical sources that fills this recording. There are familiar composers like Béla Bartók (Hungary) with a selection of his *Romanian Folk Dances* and Argentinean Astor Piazzolla (known for his tangos) and Manuel De Falla (Spain) and even Heitor Villa-Lobos (Brazil), but he also includes less well-known composers. There are a few tracks from Georgian (the one between Russia and Turkey) composer Sulkhin Tsintsadze, Israeli-American composer Ora Bat Chaim, Swiss-American composer Ernest Bloch, and Italian composer Vittorio Monti.

The CD even closes with a traditional Welsh tune, *Hen Ferchetau*. The majority of these composers are known for their affinity with the folk music of their own native countries and it is obvious that Avital chose them as a conduit to the folk sounds he wished to explore by using the mandolin as bridge between these different worlds.

Each of the selections achieves a sound by intelligently pairing Avital's spare and precise mandolin to a variety of ensembles. Monti's *Csárdás* simply puts Avital with an accordion played by Richard Galiano and for the closing *Hen Ferchetau*, harpist Catrin Finch accompanies Avital. The other tracks feature small ensembles ranging from two musicians to a small orchestra (the Kammerakademie Potsdam from Brandenburg, Germany).

Avital's mandolin is always front and center in the sound and he is able to vary the sound of the mandolin to fit the music. At times piercing and almost brittle, he plays with great power and projection. In playing Ora Bat Chaim's Klezmer-based compositions, his tone deepens and smooths out to balance Giora Feidman's raucous clarinet. Avital is very conscious of what he must do to communicate the essence of the music he is performing and in so doing changes up his sound and technique to match his intentions. And Avi Avital does it all effortlessly, as is the hallmark of the true virtuoso. This is one of the more interesting albums to come out this year and *Between Worlds* pushes the boundaries of mandolin music in a very good way.

Song List: *Sachido; Romanian Folk Dances; Bu imiš; Aria (Cantilena); Fuga Y Misterio; Siete Canciones Populares Españolas; Csárdás; Three Miniatures; Nigun; Freilach Ron; Hen Ferchetau.*

Contact: Deutsche Grammophon GmbH, Berlin, c/o UMG Recordings, Inc., 1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019; www.UniversalMusicClassics.com; www.Deutschegrammophon.com