Summer tours help bands pay bills

By Jefferson Graham, USA TODAY

DEER VALLEY, Utah — One week in July, Béla Fleck performed with his band, the Flecktones, at three zoos in the Pacific Northwest. By Saturday, he had moved to Deer Valley to sit in with the Utah symphony. Then he was off to Interlochen, Mich., to start the Midwest leg of the tour. He'll play this weekend in Ohio and West Virginia.

Summer touring season is the working musicians' version of retail's holiday shopping season: a chance to reap bigger dollars from more people in a compressed period, before students return to school.

A look at banjo master Fleck and how he runs his business in the digital age shows how drastically the industry has changed. A new CD release gets attention, but with many young customers bypassing CD purchases for free pirated songs on the Internet, touring pays the bills. Fleck says concerts reflect 70% of the band's income, records 20% and merchandising 10%.

Fleck will realize 40% of his yearly touring income crisscrossing the country to perform with his jazz/bluegrass/world music band at amphitheaters, auditoriums, amusement parks — even a farmer's market in Kansas City. In summer, audiences swell from 1,000 to 2,000 people nightly to anywhere from 4,000 to 20,000. The Deer Valley show sold out, at 4,000 tickets.

The Flecktones' summer bounty includes "protected gigs" at parks, zoos and festivals where the music is part of the admission price.

"They're the best to get," says Fleck, 46. "They can be big dollars, and you're not at risk. Your own draw isn't in question."

Fun and affordable

The touring business has been hurting this summer, but not for Fleck.

Several high-profile tours were canceled — including Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and the Lollapalooza all-star festival — as consumers rebelled against high ticket prices. Business
dropped 20% to 50% in April, from the same time a year earlier "and has yet to come back," says Gary Bongiovanni, editor in chief of trade magazine Pollstar.

ESSENTIAL FLECK

If you're new to Béla Fleck and the Flecktones, here are four great places to start.

•The classic: Live Art. Classic Flecktones. Recorded during a four-year period in the 1990s, the 20-song collection includes many of the band's most enduring songs. The jazz fusion meets bluegrass Blú-Bop, slow blues shuffle The Flight of the Cosmic Hippo, and ballad Sunset Road, are still played often in concert, and audience favorites. Fleck was inspired to play banjo by hearing bluegrass pioneer Earl Scruggs plucking away on the theme song of The Beverly Hillbillies as a child, so a definite highlight on this CD is hearing him play the classically themed Early Reflection and toying with the audience as he casually slips into a fast-paced and note-perfect The Ballad of Jed Clampett. Like most of their releases, Live Art is chock-full of guest stars, like jazz legend Chick Corea, pop's Bruce Hornsby and mandolin master Sam Bush.

The big band: Live at the Quick. The definitive recording of the group at their experimental best, recorded in 2001. The band (banjo, bass, drums and winds) mixes jazz, bluegrass, classical, funk, gospel and Middle Eastern into one with instrumentation the likes of which you've probably never heard. The diverse, musically rich experience is augmented with Andy Narell on steel drums, Paul McCandless on Oboe and other wind instruments, the amazing Paul Hanson on bassoon (sometimes played through a wah-wah!), Tuvan throat singer Kogar-ol Ondar and Sandip Burman on tabla. Songs to check out:
- Bassist Victor Wooten's jaw-dropping solo version of Amazing Grace, in which he keeps the bass line steady on one end of the instrument, while also simultaneously playing the melody;
- Aaron Copeland's classical Hoedown turned into an upbeat jazz tune with a Middle Eastern twang. Listen for the hot call-and-response-meeting of the tabla and banjo when Fleck duels Burman.
- Futureman takes a solo turn on Ovombo Summit, which has to be seen and heard to be believed. (More on the DVD in a minute.) One half of the rhythm section of the Flecktones, Futureman plays his homemade Drumitar (electronic drums on a guitar body) with one hand, while the other hand goes at it on a traditional drum set.
- Earth Jam, a time-signature-busting up tempo jazz tune that usually has the audience screaming when they see Jeff Coffin playing two saxophones simultaneously. The DVD also includes a documentary on the band, interviews and extra songs that aren't on the CD.

The studio masterpiece: Little

But Fleck says, "We're not feeling it yet. Considering how bad the business is supposed to be, we're not doing that bad. Our fan base is loyal."

Consumers also can afford his shows.

Fleck's average ticket price this summer is $35, but tickets are often available for less. In Deer Valley, they were just $18. An upcoming show at Paramount's Kings Island theme park in Ohio is $27.50, and roller coasters and other rides are included with the ticket purchase.

Superstars use touring as a way to make a chunk of cash fast. Madonna grossed $44.9 million for 21 shows, according to Pollstar, playing to more than 250,000 people. Average ticket price: $174.17, says Pollstar. The reunited Simon and Garfunkel sold $12.2 million in tickets for 14 shows and played to 871,428 people.

But the Flecktones don't have a string of top 10 hits. They've never had a hit single, a gold album or substantial radio airplay — the usual tools needed to sell concert tickets.

Yet they'll perform to nearly 500,000 people this year in about 120 shows, grossing $8.5 million to $9.5 million for the tour. Bongiovanni says it's a rare act that can pull in audiences for so many shows. Of the top 100 touring acts last year, most average 50 shows or fewer. Only six did more than 100 shows.

Fleck has tapped into the jam-band phenomenon pioneered by the Grateful Dead in the 1960s and further established by groups such as Phish, the String Cheese Incident and Dave Matthews Band.

Like the Flecktones, jam bands specialize in long shows, varied set lists and a rapport with fans that allows them to tape shows freely — and encourages them to trade songs online.


Flecktones fan Hope Lin, 41, who has seen the band perform four times this year, says taping "not only promotes the fan base, but the active purchasing of albums in the long run. Most people that hear tunes from traded live shows want to hear the studio or live album version as well."

A good business plan

Fleck plays the banjo — usually associated with country and bluegrass music — in a jazz setting, with backing from bass, sax and electronic drums.

The Flecktones often jam with musicians who sit in with offbeat instruments such as the bassoon, tabla, oboe and ukulele. Fleck also often plays classical music in shows and has recorded two classical albums.

"The strength of our business is having a diverse audience," Fleck says. "It turned out to be a good business plan. We'll play some blues and maybe that won't win over 100% of blues fans, but 15% will like us and come back. Same goes for other styles. Pretty soon you have an audience that's significant."

Earlier this year, the Grand Rapids Ballet Company choreographed several numbers to Fleck compositions and performed on stage with the band.
Worlds. The studio masterpiece. This eclectic 2003 3-CD collection harks back to the 1960s era of elaborate multi-album productions that had to be played many times (and heard in headphones) to catch all the nuances. Worlds features even more guest musicians than usual, from a wider array of musical avenues: Celtic, Middle Eastern, Hawaiian, jazz, blues, hip-hop, bluegrass and rock and roll. Several songs have the Flecktones joined by such unusual instruments as ukulele, theremin and unilean pipes. The catchy Next and Scratchin' are played by the band often in concert and also featured on the Ten from Little Worlds compilation, which Sony put out for those too cheap to spring for the triple set.

The classical album: Perpetual Motion. Bach and Beethoven on the banjo? Yes, it can be done — and very nicely too. Fleck plays compositions by the masters (also including Debussy, Chopin and Tchaikovsky) in single-note picking style, not the strumming often associated with the instrument. He also is accompanied on some tunes by marimba, violin, cello and guitar. — Jefferson Graham

After an evening show, the Flecktones' touring bus leaves around 11 p.m. or midnight and travels 500 miles to the next city, usually arriving around 10 in the morning. Tour manager Richard Battaglia books nine hotel rooms — "everything from Days Inn to Marriotts," says Battaglia — where band members shower, go online or rest up.

The band arrives at the new venue in the afternoon for a one-hour sound check. They eat dinner there and perform, usually a three-hour set.

Transportation costs have risen 25% to 30% in the past year. At four miles per gallon for the bus, it costs more than $600 to fill up the 300-gallon tank, but "it hasn't slowed us down," says Battaglia. "We're feeling the higher prices, but flying wouldn't be any better. If we had to fly to every show, we'd be exhausted."

The economics of recording

These are tough times to be a working musician. CD sales have fallen 18% in the past three years, mostly because of piracy and the popularity of CD burners. Many record chains, including Tower Records and the Wherehouse, have shuttered stores. Corporate domination of radio stations has tightened playlists, making it harder for artists to get their music heard.

Sony Music and BMG, two of the largest labels, are merging, which will leave the industry controlled by just four giant concerns: Sony/BMG, Universal, EMI and Warner Bros.

Even in flush times, the economics of the recording industry make it hard for most acts to make money from CDs.

Fleck says most of his CDs cost $100,000 to $200,000 to produce. The budget — fronted by the label — has to be recouped from CD sales before Fleck and the band see royalties.

Getting royalties from albums can take years. Fleck says that even though his first album with Warner Bros. Records sold well, "We didn't see money from that deal until eight records down the line."

Fleck manager David Bendett says the band switched to Sony because the label offered a big advance — he won't reveal the number — and a unique arrangement: three albums on Sony's Columbia jazz label and two on Sony Classical.

Fleck's Grammy-award-winning recording of banjo classical music, Perpetual Motion, sold 94,000 copies, unheard of for a classical album, where many symphonic recordings sell 40,000 to 60,000 copies.
"If you can sell 100,000 records for an art project, then you're doing really well," says Fleck, who was named after classical composer Béla Bartók. He credits the sales to the exposure from the touring.

*Perpetual Motion* is profitable, because of the economics of his Sony deal. It was the first record on his classical contract.

The latest, *Music for Two*, a classical project with bassist Edgar Meyer released in the spring, has sold 17,000 copies, and moves "around 1,000 copies a week," says Sony Classical President Peter Gelb. "The touring really helps."

Beyond the 120 shows with the Flecktones this year, Fleck also did 23 duo dates with Meyer.

The most successful Flecktones albums tend to sell about 100,000 copies, although two CDs (*Live Art* and *Flight of the Cosmic Hippo*) both sold more than 300,000 copies.

Fleck says the band is at its best in the studio and that even with the topsided money that touring provides, CDs are a necessity.

"The press won't talk to you unless you have a new record," he says. "It's part of the process. You just can't look at it (record making) as a big moneymaker."

Leave that to touring, where fans certainly are free about parting with cash for tickets.

Hardy Jones says he's seen the Flecktones more than 130 times — three times this year. "Their music just speaks to me," says the Kansas City, Mo., kitchen remodeler.

"No one plays stuff like they do," says Brady Gambels, 19, of Salt Lake City, seeing his second Flecktones show, in Deer Valley. He was part of the crowd standing by the stage to have a CD cover signed by Fleck; the band always mingle with fans after the encores.

But Flecktones fans will have to find other concerts to attend in 2005. The group plans to take a hiatus from the road next year, their first in 15 years.

Fleck, who is single, says he's doing it to give band members more time with their families and to spend time working on a new solo classical album: an exploration of the banjo in African music, where the instrument was created.

"If I could do nothing but stay at home and be with my family next year, I would," says Wooten, whose wife is expecting a fourth child later this year. "The way it is in jazz bands, you don't sell enough records to support a family, so you have to do live shows, and a lot of them. So I'll be out there with side projects."

---

**RELATED ADVERTISING LINKS**

- **Banjo Starter Package**
  - With Tuner, Bag, Strap, Book, Dvd, Finger picks, Extra Strings 0$ Ship
  - thebanjohut.com

- **Quality low price Banjos**
  - Large selection of quality banjos at everyday low prices
  - folkofthewood.com

- **Huber Banjos & Tone Rings**
  - Fine 5 string banjos, tone rings, and accessories from Huber.
  - www.huberbanjos.com

- **Banjos for sale**
  - Old-time & Resonator banjos Discount prices starting at $149
  - www.bryansmusic.com