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## CD Review: Paul Asbell: A guitarist for all seasons

By Art Edelstein  
Arts Correspondent

Vermont has many fine musicians, but in the realm of steel string guitar playing, the prize goes to Burlington guitarist and Middlebury College music teacher Paul Asbell. He has gained national recognition over the years, and has performed at various festivals and written guitar-related columns. We know him from his days with the jazz-based band Kilimanjaro and the many other musical ensembles and albums he has appeared on.

What makes Asbell such a fine musician are his broad stylistic abilities. The man can play folk, blues, jazz and pop, all with equal authenticity and technique, either with a pick or his fingers. While not primarily known as a vocalist, his singing is quite good and to my ears he sounds a lot like Dr. John when he does sing.

Thus, the third installment of his series of albums based on the steel string guitar is welcome. On "From Adamant to Atchafalaya," we get to hear Asbell in many forms performing "Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home," "Goodbye Porkpie Hat" and "Naima" by John Coltrane to his own "Bound for Adamant," and "Atchafalaya," in this 13-track album that comes in at 56 minutes.

While Asbell is an astoundingly good soloist, he gets some backing from LeRoi DeBurgher on bass, Mickey Dees on drums, a bit of Jeremiah McLanes' accordion and not enough of harmonica wizard Howard Levy's horn-sounding instrument. The bass and drums are there for subtle rhythm, just enough to flavor the otherwise nearly all acoustic guitar playing.

Asbell, in an interview, categorized this new album as "basically a continuation of the steel-string Americana solo projects I've done over the past decade or so, but I think I've stepped it up a few notches on this one."

Indeed. The extra notches include a variety of instrumentals and songs. Mostly this is a blues and standards album. On the songs like "From Four until Late" from the Robert Johnson songbook, we hear Asbell's very effective blues vocals as later on "I'm a King Bee" by Slim Harpo.

But much of the album is instrumentals and for guitar aficionados this is a pleasure ride into great guitar land. Asbell must own a whole storeroom of instruments and he struts out at least 14 instruments on this CD.

Asked why he used such an arsenal of guitars for this recording, Asbell was clear.

"For me, it comes back to the flavors, and the pictures. Different guitars conjure up different moods, especially when the playing is well matched to what the guitar can do.

"Most of the songs on this album use just one guitar," he said. "But I choose which guitar to use, based on what color I want for that tune. Then, of course, there are a couple of tunes, which have a lot of guitar orchestration. For me, the motivation is the same as it probably is for a composer, who might envision one melody as played by a solo violin and another by a full orchestra.

"I'm not trying to go for anything bombastic in those pieces, though. You know, just like your mother said, 'A place for everything, and everything in its place.' That's what I like to hear!"

While there is a basic theme to the album, Asbell explained the variety of music this way:

"If someone looked at my record and CD collection, they might very well wonder what in the world is the common denominator in all of these music styles? I guess I'd say that I've always been drawn to music that belongs to — and helps define a culture.

"Whether it's southern blues, Appalachian string-band music, New Orleans jazz, Chicago-style electric blues," he continues, "I like music that contains flavors, and paints cinematic pictures that tell me about the people who made it.

"There's a lot of songs that I enjoy playing," he added, "but before I choose a song to record, I like to make sure that it's got those flavors, and paints that all-important picture. I'm hoping that if it paints that picture for me, that it will for someone else. Those are the people who I'm hoping to hit with my CDs."

Asbell said he is "trying to create an audible connection between the trailblazers of American guitar, and the more well-known styles that followed."

Because he is a busy musician touring, playing locally and teaching, this album took two years to complete. However, the CD flows through the American musical heartland fairly consistently. There are twists and turns, side trips up mountains ("You've Got to Walk that Lonesome Valley," "Whiskey Before Breakfast") and a stop right here in Vermont with "Bound For Adamant" (right in Calais and my pick for prettiest melody and guitar sounds on the album). While it's not a straight line, the continent is essentially covered by this music.

We're really lucky to have such a fine, intelligent musician in our midst. His previous acoustic albums "Roots and Branches" and "Steel String Americana" are topnotch as well.

Asbell has a few CD release parties scheduled. He'll play the Savoy Theater in Montpelier this Saturday and, the following Saturday, Nov. 15, at FlynnSpace in Burlington.

Paul Asbell in concert

Paul Asbell CD release concerts:

— Saturday, Nov. 9: Montpelier — Savoy Theatre, 26 Main St.. 7 and 9 p.m., 802-229-0598.

— Saturday, Nov. 16: Burlington — FlynnSpace, 153 Main St., 8 p.m., 863-5966,  
[www.flynntix.org](http://www.flynntix.org).

For information, go online to [www.paulasbell.com](http://www.paulasbell.com).

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