

ABIGAIL WASHBURN
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Although she's been singing all her life, Washburn never had her heart set on a musical career. So when she found herself on stage in a smoke filled Beijing club playing her banjo and singing old-time Appalachian mountain music in Chinese to a packed house, she was as surprised as anyone.

In 1996 she joined a summer program in China. "During my first week at Fudan University in Shanghai, I found out I was absorbing the language quickly, which was a surprise." Washburn recalled, "It had a profound effect on me. I discovered a Chinese culture that was so deep and ancient; it changed my perspective on America."

Once back in the States, she developed a new desire to explore her own culture and traditional roots. Washburn began to explore American culture, a journey that led her to Doc Watson playing "Shady Grove" on the banjo. As soon as she heard this something clicked.

She bought a banjo and carried it around without touching it for years. "I was living in Vermont working as a lobbyist when my good friends, the Cleary Brothers Band, lost their banjo player after setting up a tour of Alaska. I got a crash course in banjo and joined the tour." Washburn sang lead, harmony, and played the banjo, and discovered a love for live performance.

After the tour, Washburn took a road trip to Nashville. Along the way she stopped at a bluegrass conference (IBMA) in Louisville, KY where she met young American roots musicians making a career at playing music.

Within weeks, Abby settled in Nashville and began writing songs and learning more about the tradition of old-time banjo.

Unwilling to give up her passion for the Chinese culture and her desire to continue studying the language, Abby took a day job which involved translating Chinese business documents where she met Jing Li Jurca. Jing Li helped Washburn with her first attempt at writing a Chinese song. They began co-writing from there.

In the fall of 2004 Abby merged her love of China with her career in American roots music by arranging a small group of good friends and bluegrass pros for a mini-tour of China. In 2005 she returned with Bela Fleck on banjo, Casey Driessen on fiddle and Ben Sollee on cello; a group now known of as The Sparrow Quartet. They toured club (www.ygtwo.com), theatres and universities in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Chongqing and Guangzhou. In 2006 The Sparrow Quartet returned to tour China and this time Tibet (sponsored by the US State Department), becoming the first US band to officially tour the country.

“At this point, I’m caught between two cultures, but I like being a bridge. I want to keep going to China and living a creative existence. I want to learn more about Chinese folk traditions, so I can integrate them into my music and continue to be a part of the development of a more universal language.”