



Zdrasti Lilly Drumeva

RICK TOWNEND catches up with his friend and musical co-conspirator, Bulgaria's bluegrass ambassador, Lilly Drumeva

I met Lilly Drumeva when she came to live in London for a few years in the 1990s. She linked up with Rosie Davis and I to form a trio, **Lilly and Rosie**, which toured in the UK and continental Europe.

Her band **Lilly of the West** had won awards at the pan-European festival in the Netherlands, so her distinctive singing was already well known, but this was the first time I got to know her as a friend and co-musician. At the time Lilly impressed me with her talent for harmony, as well as with her instrumental abilities – which she doesn't always put to the fore. Lilly is also a dedicated worker at the liaison and publicity aspect of being a successful musical artiste. I've always admired her albums, and was very pleased to hear the latest (*Lovin' You*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue). I thought I'd ask her a bit about making the album, and about her career in music to date.

RT: Zdrasti Lilly ('Hi Lilly' in Bulgarian), it's nice to talk with you again. May I ask you about the new CD? Where did you record it, and how did you choose the songs?

LD: *Lovin' You* is a mixture of bluegrass, country, swing and Bulgarian folk music. That's where my influences lie. All the songs are currently in my set list. The album was recorded in two countries, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. For the bluegrass repertoire (tracks 1–9) I went to Prague and recorded with one of my favourite European bands, **Monogram**. Among these nine tracks are also two duets with Monogram's singer/guitarist Jakub Racek. In Sofia I recorded with my home band Lilly of the West (tracks 10–15). We focused on two Bulgarian folk songs and some country and swing.

RT: What are we going to hear at your shows? Can you tell us a bit more about the songs featured on the album

LD: My concerts start with Molly & Tenbrooks by **Bill Monroe**, then continue with **Tim O'Brien**'s Nelly Kane, followed by another Bill Monroe classic Can't You Hear Me Callin'. Then we slow down with a waltz like Cry, Cry Darlin' by **Jimmy C. Newman**, followed by some swing numbers such as Pennies From Heaven and Lovin' You. I sing a bluesy number, such as I'm A Pilgrim, to feature the musicians on the solos. When I play abroad I always include some Bulgarian folk songs. At the moment I favour Mechkin Kamen and Goro Le Goro Zelena. They have beautiful melodies and interesting rhythms such as 7/8 and 11/16. My concerts normally finish with the Tennessee Waltz, a classic written by **Red Stewart** and **Pee Wee King** in 1947, which the state of Tennessee adopted as its anthem.

RT: The album is called *Lovin' You*. Why did you pick that as the title track?

LD: *Lovin' You* is one of the featured songs on the album. It was written by John Sebastian of **The Lovin' Spoonful**. We do it as a swing number and it is always a crowd-pleaser. The album is

dedicated to my partner Sean O'Reilly, who supports me in everything I do. You know how important it is, especially as a musician, to have a loving and supportive partner on your side. So *Lovin' You* is about Sean.

RT: You have always put a lot of effort into the quality of your recordings; both of the music and the technical side, but this album seemed to me to be even better than the previous ones. Did it take longer to record, or is that down to experience?

LD: Yes, it is the experience, of course, and the help of Jakub Racek (of Monogram) as co-producer. Also the excellent musicians on the album; Jakub himself, Jarda and Zdenek Jahoda, Pavel Liscar, Jasen Vasilev, Bodie Bozduganova, Misho Shishkov and Ivan Penchev. But mostly, it is the effort of one man, whom I respect and admire for his musical brilliance and professionalism. His name is Stamen Yannev, and he did the mixing and mastering on all my albums. Stamen works as a sound engineer; he composes music for Bulgarian pop singers and TV documentaries, and he plays piano in a top 40 band every night. A very busy guy, but he always finds time for me, and he loves bluegrass and acoustic music. For this album I spent more time with Stamen working on the post-production than on the previous ones. We worked weekends and evenings, and listened a lot at home. And of course we are both more experienced now, it being my eighth release.

RT: I'm particularly impressed with your duet work with Jakub - it seems to be a very natural pairing of voices - how did that develop?

LD: I met Monogram in 1998 at the Dobrofest in Trnava (in Slovakia). We jammed later in the pub and I remember that Jakub and I sang Blue & Lonesome together. It was great fun and worked well. Monogram are one of my favourite bluegrass bands in Europe. Since we met, it was always my dream to record with them; I like their style – solid, powerful bluegrass, but with a lot of finesse and warmth. Some bluegrass bands are just machines; they play fast, with an abundance of licks, but only a little feeling. Monogram play bluegrass with style. And the duets with Jakub - I always wanted to sing with a suitable male vocalist; unfortunately in Bulgaria there are none at the moment. I thought that when we recorded some duets it would contribute to the international bluegrass aspect - musicians from two different countries singing together and making it work! We also shot a video to Townes Van Zandt's If I Needed You that can be seen on YouTube.

RT: I hadn't heard you yodel before I heard *When The Cactus Is In Bloom*. Did that take a while to get a feeling for?

LD: Not really. I've lived for 10 years in Austria and Germany and I'm very familiar with the yodelling. The yodel singing came to America with the first settlers from the Alpine countries. They became cowboys and started to use it to lead the cattle. I decided to try to yodel myself on *When The Cactus Is In Bloom*, a song recorded by **Jimmie Rodgers** in 1928. It always gets applause; I even got applauded when I sang it in Switzerland, at the Willisau bluegrass festival, so I think I do OK with the yodels.

RT: Can you tell us some details about yourself, and how you got involved in bluegrass music?

LD: I grew up in Bulgaria, but lived in many other European countries: France, Germany, Austria, Slovakia and the UK. I picked up different languages and studied many cultures. With a degree in economics, I had worked for several years in finance and tourism, until one day I discovered music. My passion for bluegrass, country and folk came 15 years ago, when I first heard **Emmylou Harris's Live At The Ryman** CD. I embraced it and began to study it thoroughly, learning to play guitar and sing. I formed a band and named it Lilly of the West. Bluegrass and country music became my life, my passion. I love it so much that I feel it is my mission to promote it everywhere I go, especially in the Balkans, a place where bluegrass and country music hardly exists. I promote it through my concerts and the programs I host on Bulgarian National Radio and TV.

RT: Nowadays most people in the UK know where Bulgaria is: bounded by the Black Sea on the East and the Danube on the north, Serbia on the west and - rather artificially - northern Greece on the south. Much like the Celtic nations there are beautiful mountains, and the national folk music is held in much greater regard than in England. You've often included Bulgarian or Macedonian songs and tunes in your albums: that's partly what got me fascinated by Balkan music. Has that been a way you've helped to make a link in your own country to get people to listen to bluegrass music?

LD: No, not really. I was raised with Bulgarian folk music because I am from the Balkans. You hear it everywhere, on radio, TV, on the streets. I sang as a child in a choir and we had some Bulgarian folk songs in the repertoire. Later, after I had established a bluegrass career, I decided to study Bulgarian music a bit more. I made contact with the renowned Filip Kutev folk ensemble and started taking singing and dancing lessons. My band colleagues learned the traditional Bulgarian instruments such as the tambura, tapan and gudulka. We incorporated unusual Bulgarian rhythms into the bluegrass tunes. We also played Bulgarian folk songs with the bluegrass instruments. It can be very interesting. On every album I include at least one Bulgarian song, because this is who I am, where I come from. Often I play concerts at Bulgarian embassies around the world. Bulgarians who live far from home want to hear these songs; there are tears sometimes.

RT: When I visited Bulgaria you introduced me to the members of the first Lilly of the West line-up - Rosen, Tsetso and Rayko. How difficult was it at first finding other bluegrass musicians in and around Sofia? And can you tell me more about the current band? How did you get to meet them?

LD: Lilly of the West was formed in Sofia in 1996 by me and Rayko Pepelanov (guitar, mandolin), Rosen Hristov (banjo, dobro) and Tsvetan Vlaykov (bass). That was shortly after I returned from my studies in Vienna. I met them one by one and together we decided to play bluegrass. We all knew about the music, but we were beginners on the instruments. Our first appearance was in the Czech Republic at the Velke Nemce festival where we met many bands and the board of the EBMA. In the following years we toured successfully throughout Europe and showcased at the IBMA conference in Louisville, Kentucky. With Rayko, Rosen and Tsetso I released three albums, *Lilly Of The West*, *Sail On The Wild, Wild Wind* (recorded in The Netherlands) and *Dear & Kind*. Then I left Bulgaria and lived for couple of years in the UK. Fortunately I found you, Rick, and together with Rosie Davis, we started our Carter Family project. To me, it was a whole new world of music that I always wanted to explore, the simple songs, the beautiful harmonies and the challenge of playing guitar in the style of Maybelle Carter. Then I returned to Bulgaria and started to look

for new musicians. It was very difficult. I found a promising bass player - Bodie (Svoboda Bozduganova). She is a classically trained upright bass student but didn't know much about bluegrass. It took some time until she could play without looking at the sheets. Then I found an excellent guitar player - Jasen (Jasen Vasilev). I saw him in a club, playing Latino music. I noticed that his right hand is very light and fast, so I invited him home to show him some Alison Krauss videos. He immediately played along. Jasen and Bodie became the core of my band. We had some fiddle players joining and leaving in the last couple of years. They all came from classical music and had no ear for improvising. It was hard work, so in the end I decided to learn to play fiddle myself. Actually you, Rick, inspired me when you came to Bulgaria and played with us in JJ Murphy's Irish bar. You left your spare fiddle in my apartment and I picked it up, slowly.

Then I met a very talented all-round musician - Misho (Michail Shishkov), who started to play dobro with us. He also plays piano, pedal steel, upright bass, mandolin, guitar and harmonica. So, the current line up features me on vocal, guitar and fiddle, Yassen Vasilev on guitar, Svoboda on bass, Michail Shishkov (Misho) on dobro, pedal steel, piano and harmonica. Yes, it is very difficult, almost impossible, to find bluegrass musicians in Bulgaria. You have to teach them one by one, and then they become good, make sure they are busy enough so they won't leave the band. That's why I worked so often with musicians from other countries: Monogram, **Druha Trava** and **Petr Brandej's Band** (Czech Republic), **29 Strings** (Slovakia), **Acousticure** (Hungary) and **Jesse Brock, Marshall Wilborn and Mike Munford** (USA).

RT: Song-writing has become a mainstay of your song-list. The new album features Turn Away, which fits in perfectly with the other songs. Many of these are traditional or classic bluegrass, or from other songwriters like Gillian Welch, who have, like yourself, managed to write 'from within the tradition'. I know your work has made you a really natural speaker in many languages, but do you find you have to translate 'emotionally' from an original idea that you had, or do you actually now 'think' in English/American when you write a bluegrass song?

LD: Yes, I do think in English when I write a song that is going to be in my repertoire. I wrote Turn Away in England: it was always meant to be a fast bluegrass song. My other songs are ballads - mostly dark and sad. I wish I had more time for writing, but I have too much technical and organisational work at the moment.

RT: You have done a lot of liaison between the countries of Europe. I remember that it was through your contact in Norway - Dagfinn Pedersen - that Lilly & Rosie got to tour over there. And I know that for many years now you've played concerts all over the continent. There are some great musicians and bands spread over Europe and through the efforts of people like yourself in the EBMA and EWOPA they are feeling a lot less lonely. In Bulgaria you've arranged some great concerts - very high profile at the NDK (National Palace of Culture) etc. - you appear on radio and TV, and you're also a music programme presenter. How do you see the road ahead for the European bluegrass scene?

LD: Yes, I am very active in the bluegrass scene, and not only as musician. I was on the board of EBMA for couple of years. I am a member of IBMA and recently I also joined the BBMA. I have many friends in the UK and enjoy reading the magazine, which is done very professionally.

I present bluegrass and country music on Bulgarian national radio and TV. I organise at least two big concerts per year, with at least 300 people attending each - it is a lot of work. I work closely with

the US embassy in Sofia. They brought Laurie Lewis and Tim O'Brien over. My band usually opens for the American acts or we accompany solo musicians on tour in Bulgaria.

I see a bright future for the European bluegrass scene. The Bluegrass Summits that took place in Bühl (in Germany) are a great example for intelligent, cultural people working together. Where there is a will, there is a way.

RT: Thanks very much for talking to us, Lilly. Good luck with the new album.



