

**BF  
S**

*The*  
British Flute  
Society

# span

June 2005

- Norda Mullen:  
rock flautist
- Richard Davis:  
an orchestral man
- New notes at  
your fingertips

Fall in love with your flute: five full-length features, news and views within ►

# Norda Mullen: rock flautist



## BY KRISTIN BAVER

Kristin E Baver is currently studying for her bachelor's degree in English/ Professional Writing with a minor in Public Relations at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. She began writing stories at the age of eight and learned to play the flute at the age of nine. Today she continues to write and pursues the flute as a hobby.

NORDA MULLEN IS A ROCK FLAUTIST WITH THE MOODY BLUES BAND AND HAS HER OWN DUO, BAHU-RANG. BUT, GROWING UP IN TENNESSEE, HER MUSICAL ROOTS WERE IN THE CLASSICAL TRADITION. KRISTIN BAVER TELLS THE STORY OF THIS SPIRITED WOMAN, WHO COMBINES THE LOOK OF A ROCK STAR WITH THE CRISP, CLEAR SOUND OF A CLASSICAL MUSICIAN.

Music is Norda Mullen's life, her chosen career since she was nine years old and took up the flute. A severe ear infection, a Chicago mugging, and the sometimes caustic music industry could have stood in her way. Instead, Mullen overcame physical predicaments and fear, taking her shot at fame and landing herself a successful career as a studio musician, with a partnership in a fledgling band, and a spot onstage with the Moody Blues' touring ensemble.

Growing up as the youngest of six children, one boy and five girls, Mullen's childhood was taken right out of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. 'My mother is Greek and my father is from Georgia, and that was my parents' story,' she said. 'On my mum's side, my mum was the only one that didn't marry a Greek.' Instead, Helen Kalas (her Greek name was Eleni

Kantilonas), an independent, young violinist, avoided marriage until she met Perry Mullen in 1946, and wed him three years later. Although she seemingly abandoned music for a cosmopolitan southern family, it remained a central part of the Mullen home life, influencing Norda from an early age. As she grew up, music was both practised and played, with the likes of Jethro Tull, Bob Dylan, the Supremes and, ironically, the Moody Blues blaring through the house. Now the only accomplished musician in the family, she credits her success to discipline, a supportive family, and the operation that saved her hearing.

As a toddler in Savannah Tennessee, where she was born, Mullen suffered from severe ear infections on an almost daily basis. At the age of three, doctors removed her tonsils and adenoids, hoping to cure



PHOTOS: CAT CASTRO AND VICTORIA CASTRO

the problem. 'I didn't want to admit to anyone that I couldn't really hear well, but my mum noticed that any time anyone was talking to me, I would pull their chin towards me so that they would be facing me, and then I would just read their lips.' When the operation had no effect, Mullen was tested for allergies, taking four allergy shots a week.

'I learned flute and piano by sheer will,' she said. 'There were points where I couldn't hear the instruments very well, but I kept practising anyway, probably sounding pretty bad.' Eventually, surgery was the only option left. 'The doctor basically went into each ear, punctured the eardrums with tubes, and drained the massive amounts of fluid that had built up over the years. Then, boom! I could hear.'

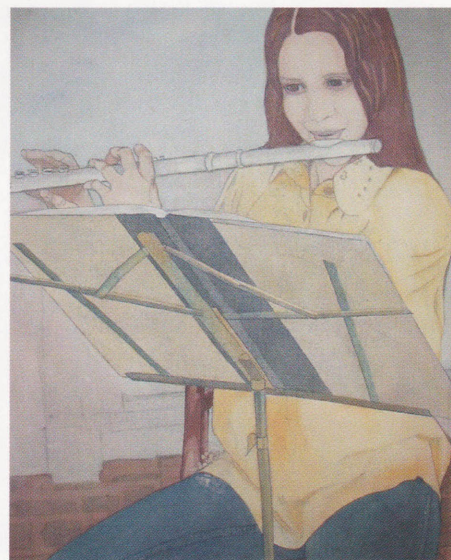
The successful surgery that saved Mullen's hearing fully reintroduced her into a creative, nurturing household where music was a part of daily life. Whether it was a dramatic production taking place in the living room, a show for the grandparents

with the five sisters in old ballet costumes acting out the lyrics from the 'Teaching Little Fingers To Play' piano book, or towel fashion shows by the pool, showcasing an array of turbans, saris and togas, there was always something creative going on.

Every member of the family could play the piano, but Mullen's dedication to the flute was exceptional by comparison. 'She loved the stimulation and the challenge,' her sister, Jeanne Ann Davidson recalled. 'I remember Norda being rather nerdish, always frantically looking for her fruity white band shoes on a Friday night.'

When Mullen was 14, her parents sent her to Interlochen, a competitive music camp in Michigan, where she practised for eight hours a day under Alexander Murray, a flautist with the London Symphony Orchestra. By her senior year of high school, Mullen's parents had purchased a Haynes flute for \$1,500, and a Powell flute for \$2,400, both fashioned entirely from silver.

'The Powell was ordered when I was 12



*A painting of Norda by her mother, when she was around 12 years old.*

years old and I got it when I was 18,' said Mullen. 'This was in the 1970s, when they made them by hand. I sold the Haynes when I moved to LA because I needed money, you know, to live. I was teaching and doing studio work in Chicago and so I sold it to one of my favourite little students. I regret selling it, but I did.'

### **Classical training**

In 1978, Mullen was accepted into the classical flute programme at Northwestern University. 'I wanted to go to Northwestern because of the teacher, Walfrid Kujala. He has recently retired, but he was the piccoloist for the Chicago Symphony for many years. Gosh, maybe 40 years. They only let in four flute players a year, which I had no idea. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have even auditioned.'

Mullen's modesty is only outweighed by her sincerity, the small town southern charm that shows through a rugged LA exterior. While her features are soft, and her face youthful (especially when she covers her mouth to laugh, squeezing her eyes shut like an excited child), she still looks as if she could win in a bar fight. Mullen is an avid enthusiast of yoga, which helps regulate her breathing, and a third degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do, a registration that makes her a lethal weapon in Korea.

'I've been doing Tae Kwon Do for 16 years because I got mugged. I was living in Chicago, I had already graduated from college and then I got mugged one night in an alleyway. It was awful! I felt this hand on my back and then he pushed me face down and cut my purse strap with a knife.' The normally jovial features sag as she recalls laying face down in the snow after the attack. 'I had my Powell flute in my hand. He had no idea what it was and that it was very expensive, so he just took my purse with \$13 in it and ran the other way.' After the incident, Mullen scrambled to find a male roommate and a new apartment, to avoid the alley.

That roommate was Jo Pusateri, who,





20 years later, has become a close friend and long-lasting musical partner. Their relationship flourished quickly, when the pair got engaged just ten days after meeting, but never culminated in nuptials. Instead, Mullen joined Pusateri's band Cause for Passion, which was eventually renamed Evil Twin. When Evil Twin dissolved, Mullen and Pusateri developed their own duo, Bahu-rang.

'Norda has great rhythm and can play anything,' Pusateri said of his long-time collaborative partner. The LA-based band has been touring for the past ten years, playing the club circuit around LA and gaining a fan following on the west coast. Pusateri's catchy beats blend with Mullen's hauntingly beautiful wind instrumentation to give Bahu-rang its individuality, a musical gift that seems like a curse when it comes to getting a big-name label: 'It's hard to get a record deal no matter who you are or what you play, but it's especially hard when you're a little different from the rest.' And Bahu-rang is different, with Pusateri on drums, percussion and keyboards and Mullen lending her flute playing, along with

bass, recorder, panpipes and acoustic fretless bass.

Bahu-rang has one independent release, 1998's *Just Try to Walk*, but is currently hard at work on a new album. As a flautist, Mullen takes on several California-based session playing jobs when she's not busy performing. The side-jobs started with California jingle-houses who were looking for a flautist to play on TV commercial soundtracks. That industry has since dried up, with keyboard instrumentation replacing live musicians for the 60-second spots.

With the help of Randy Newman, a famous LA composer and the man she calls 'the Santa Claus' of her career, Mullen began working on movie soundtracks in 1999, on Disney's *Toy Story 2*. Since then, Mullen has been called to play on numerous movie soundtracks, including *Jurassic Park III*, *Seabiscuit*, *Monsters Inc.*, and the last two instalments of the *Matrix* Trilogy. 'It's great; you go to a movie and you hear yourself playing the solo. You can always hear yourself, because you remember playing it. It rings a bell.'

But Mullen's latest performing gig is winning her attention from a new crowd – progressive rock fans. 'The first thing I figured out by ear on the flute was *Nights in White Satin*. I was so proud of myself! My sister was having a party in the other room and I wasn't allowed in the room, you know, because all the teenagers were in there. I was in the next room and they kept playing this Moody Blues' album *Days of Future Passed*, and this flute solo kept coming up, so I sat there on my mother's bed and just figured out that solo.'

### *Star struck*

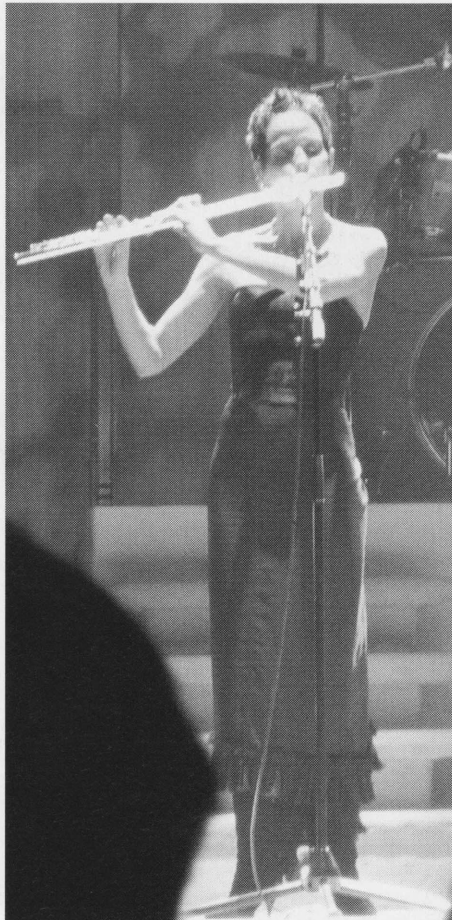
Thirty years later, irony would come calling in the form of the Creative Artists Agency. Mullen looks a little star struck when she remembers the first time she was called to tour with Justin Hayward in 1996. 'I did this Bugs Bunny on Broadway Warner Brothers show, and Justin went to that conductor and said, "I need a flautist who can play really well but kinda looks the part of a rock flute player." And the conductor said, "I've got the name for ya!" And Justin said, "Well, give me 20 names." But the conductor told him, "You only need this one name."'

Mullen is comic and sincere. For every bit of dialogue she evokes a new tone in her voice, sometimes using a mock British accent for Justin's lines, and culminating in a peal of laughter. 'So Creative Artists Agency called and then he called himself, and I remember Justin saying, "You know, there's some flats and sharps in *Nights in White Satin*.' Mullen chuckles again, cupping her mouth with one hand. 'And I said, "No offence, but I figured it out when I was 12 years old."'

Mullen's career with Hayward could have stopped there, after she played just

*Norda Mullen has modesty, charm and sincerity as well as talent – and a tough LA exterior when necessary!*





## NORDA MULLEN

**Born:** April 26, 1960, Savannah, Tennessee.

**Raised:** Starkville, Mississippi.

**Early Influences:** Helen Kalas (her mother), who played Greek mandolin and violin; her grandmother, an Italian ragtime pianist; Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson; French flautist Jean-Pierre Rampal; Irish flautist James Galway.

**Education:** Northwestern University, with a major in Classical Flute Performance; taught by Walfrid Kujala, the piccoloist for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for 40 years (recently retired). Spent four summers at Interlocken in Michigan, a competitive music camp where she practised for eight hours a day for two months and was taught by Alexander Murray, a member of the London Symphony Orchestra.

**Instruments:** Flute, ethnic flutes (panpipes, shakuhachi flute, recorder, ('anything you can blow, really,' says Mullen), guitar, electric bass and piano.

**Recent projects:** Working on a second album with LA-based Bahu-rang and a funky flute CD of her own; recording an album of Christmas music with five other flute players from LA calling themselves Resonance (to be released later this year); touring with the Moody Blues.

*Norda Mullen performing with the Moody Blues in November 2003.*

three songs at a few southern California show stops on his solo tour. Instead, Bernie Barlow, another member of the Moody Blues' touring ensemble, called in 2003 to ask Mullen to join the tour. 'Gee, twist my arm!' Mullen remarked sarcastically. Since the call, Mullen has been a fixture in the front row of the Moody Blues touring show, a spot that was once held by original member Ray Thomas.

In concert, she is an exquisite addition to the band, covering the flute parts with the true mark of a professional, and adding guitar and vocals to several other songs in the set. Mullen could not be more disparate from the jolly, gray-haired Thomas, a man whose upper lip was always obscured with a bristly moustache. In a strapless, black corset top that accentuates her toned upper body muscles, black stiletto boots, and a matching black skirt, complete with ruffles around the hem that form a tail-like bustle in the back, Mullen is easily distinguished onstage from the other band members. Her spiky hair and exotic stage ensemble give her the air of a rock star.

Still, Mullen's classical roots show through the moment she puts her flute to her lips. 'When I'm playing the flute, I automatically go into that prickly, arched back, planting-the-feet type thing that one is so trained to do when playing classical music.' The serious pose works onstage, though, setting the audience up for the crisp, clear sound that envelops them.

After all her successes, Mullen's still laughing about her good luck, spanning her entire lifetime, from her supportive upbringing, to the discipline that earned her a spot at Northwestern University, her chance meeting with musical counterpart Jo Pusateri, and finally, the phone call that put her on-tour with the Moody Blues. Her eyes widen as she speaks about the band. Onstage, Mullen is all professionalism and even breathing, but offstage she's a fan, wide-eyed and giggling, just as much as any other. 'I mean, they're legends, they're people I've heard of my whole life. Every night I look at them and think, "How did I get here?"' ■

