



Lilly Drumeva

Loving You

Producers: Jakub Racek (tracks 1–9);
Stamen Yannev and Lilly Drumeva (tracks
10–15)

This is outstanding: singing of the highest order, all the musicians taking part on top form and almost half the songs from the repertoire of Bill Monroe. In the first nine tracks the Bulgarian singer Lilly Drumeva sings and plays with top Czech bluegrass outfit Monogram, and the remainder with her own homegrown (Bulgaria, that is) band, Lilly Of The West.

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Taking on the might of the US in the bluegrass, country and jazz arenas is a difficult task, as America would seem to have the cultural advantage, but the folks on this recording are so steeped in the conventions and feel of American musical idioms that you won't detect the difference.

Bill Monroe, Townes van Zandt, Gillian Welch, Tim O'Brian, Jimmy C Newman, Jimmie Rodgers and John Sebastian, are among the song credits. Lilly has written Turn Away, in which she outdoes the British at whinging about the English weather.

Tasty moments include Lilly's singing with Monogram's Jakub Racek on If I Needed You and Racek's seemingly effortless but dynamic flat-pick guitar breaks. Mandolin backup and breaks from Zdenek Jahoda are superb throughout, as are the banjo playing of Jarda Jahoda – which remains smooth and lucid whilst retaining drive – and bass playing of Pavel Lzicar, who knows exactly where the beat is.

The Lilly Of The West session features Lilly in her element, singing two Bulgarian folk songs. As an English bluegrass it's strange to admit that it is those two songs that thrill me most on this recording. There's more great duet singing – this time from Lilly and guest Tsvetan Vlaykov on Mechkin Kamen and the most heartfelt and stunning singing from Lilly on Goro Le Goro Zelena. This song has an astoundingly beautiful melody with a chorus that rises from the verse like an eagle soaring from a high mountain ledge to even greater height.

The transition from the Monogram tracks to the Lilly Of The West tracks is marked by a change from strong bluegrass to a mix of country, western swing and jazz. Again, great guitar playing – this time from Yasen Vasilev, who could hold his own in any top jazz band; Ivan Penchev, whose fiddle playing gave me goose bumps – especially on the eerie intro to Tennessee Waltz, which, together with Michail Shishkov's pedal steel, creates the most off-the-wall delicious start to a song I've heard in an age. The sleeve gives no indication of who is playing mandolin on the title track but, whoever it is, the back up, fills and break are inspired.

TOM TRAVIS

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