

## **Interview in Rock 'n' Reel September/ October 07**

Dolly Mixtures and Turkish Delight - Singer, guitarist and songwriter Paula Darwish leads the Country and Eastern band and also presents Middle Eastern music at the Club Cous Cous nights in Manchester. Norman Darwen finds out more.

Let's ask the obvious question first: Country and Eastern must surely cause some confusion. Paula laughs: "My big influences as a child were country music and Middle Eastern music, but as an adult I've got more into Turkish and Kurdish stuff. 'Country and Eastern' comes from what I grew up with - my dad's Arabic, he used to be really into Dolly Parton and the Arabic singers, so it is literally what it says."

### **Do people turn up expecting an Arabic Dolly Parton?**

"Well, on the CD there is our version of Dolly Parton. We have been billed, wrongly, as a country and western band. That doesn't happen as much nowadays but we had a few kiss-of-death write-ups. I don't think we get many people who come expecting to line-dance; they'll think, 'My God! What's this?'"

Paula was born in Pontefract, West Yorkshire and grew up listening "mainly to stuff that my mum and dad would listen to - I was a bit of an insular child, so I never really listened to pop music. I do now, but didn't then. I'd just listen to stuff at home, which was old reel-to-reels that my dad used to have from Jordan, and Dolly Parton, Tammy Wynette, Glen Campbell, those glossy country singers...cheesy country, really."

### **How did she begin making her own music?**

"I've virtually always played in bands since I was twelve. I started off with classical music, playing flute and piano; when I was about eighteen, I started playing keyboards in a band. I played keyboards in a band called TV Babies around London and the south east for quite a few years, which was basically not my stuff but this guy was a really good friend of mine. He was really into The Clash. Our connection was politics rather than music. Then I got into folk stuff □ Bob Dylan, Irish music, and I taught myself guitar because I wanted to play on my own and didn't really think piano went with that. So I started playing and that just developed, kind of singer-songwriter-style songs, probably a bit weird at that time. Then I got fed-up with the gigs and that coincided with when I really got into Turkish and Kurdish stuff. So I just played in Turkish and Kurdish community centres. I just stopped playing anything English for two or three years."

### **Why Turkish and Kurdish music?**

"I went to Turkey for six months and I grew really interested in it. I thought it would be similar to Middle Eastern music; some is, but the stuff from the folk tradition, I'd never heard that, and I just heard it there in cafés. I absolutely loved it. I brought a few cassettes home and listened to them. I didn't really do anything about it for quite a long time but then I decided to go to college to do Arabic. At the last minute I saw they had Turkish □ one of those bizarre life-changing things. I went for the interview and was accepted. Part of it was studying in Istanbul - I absolutely loved it, I was completely taken by it."

### **Paula's first recording was made to try to get gigs in Turkey.**

"I did a demo CD, all in Turkish, with all-Turkish instruments. That was the first Country and Eastern thing, some tracks were blues-styled and country-styled, but all Turkish songs and all Turkish lyrics. So I took that with me. It wasn't really good enough to open any doors - possibly it would have if I'd had longer but I was a bit naïve; I just went and didn't have enough money to hang around. It is completely naïve to think that in a couple of months something will happen. When I came back to

England, I didn't want to go back to London, so here I am in Manchester.

"I thought, 'There's so much live music going on, and it's as good a place as any!' There's loads of Turkish, Kurdish, Syrian musicians in London, so being naïve I thought I'd just get some people in Manchester who can play this Turkish stuff. I went to an open mic night first of all, and met musicians through that. It carried on for two years with different people, hiring session musicians and people who heard what I was doing. The belly dance thing is quite big round here, so that also helped me meet other musicians."

### **And finally the present incarnation of the Country & Eastern Band came together:**

"Ric Gibbs was my first and permanent drummer; he's been the only one. He's played a lot of Middle Eastern music; he plays hand drums, kit, everything, so he's absolutely perfect. When I've said I do this, most musicians have been really interested. I realised quickly that I wasn't going to find anyone who knows any Turkish folk songs, but then last year I got Serpil Kiliq, a Kurdish woman saz [a lute-like instrument] player who lives in Manchester - very lucky! It's such a different tradition of playing - and the way I play it, you can't just jam, like you do with a guitar, it's so different. No one else that I've ever played with in Manchester has been anywhere near where I'm going with it. At the moment I'm just really, really happy with the band."

### **When we met, Paula was busy recording.**

"Album-wise, there's only been one before this album we're doing now. That was Autumn Sessions, which we recorded like a live session. There was the first 'Country And Eastern' CD, the one with Turkish songs and western-styled things - quite obviously that way. The second was when I came to Manchester, the first one that I recorded here, and that was the other way round □ all songs in English with Turkish instruments and Turkish touches - not necessarily Turkish but Eastern style. I did that to get a band and give people an idea of what I wanted. Most of the people who played on it were friends from London. Then we did a demo, a Country and Eastern Band demo. That was more like what I do now □ the first that was a complete fusion of everything, Turkish and English mixed up. That was five tracks □ an EP really, and the first one that I sold. After that we did the Autumn Sessions album. This one now, it's been a long time coming. I think it shows, where it has developed and it's just more □ Country and Eastern! It's more of a band recording rather than just Paula Darwish and it's more a fusion of styles."

### **I ask Paula how she writes her songs:**

"The English songs just start off with a tune or a chorus, or a line or something, and then I go from there. I decide what kind of song it's going to be, a Western verse-chorus-middle-eight-type song or a Turkish folky, trancey, just-repeat-everything kind of song. The Turkish and Kurdish stuff is different because it's all based on traditional songs. It's mostly the rhythm that's the pull: 'Oh, that's really rocky, I can do something with that'. I just play it on the guitar and then do it with the band. They have a big influence now. It's developing more; we all are arranging, particularly since I got the latest bass player, Colin Pender - he's got a connection with the belly-dancing style and Middle Eastern music. What I like to do now is to play stuff to the band before I get too structured about it, because once it's done, I'll probably be really fixed. Once I've got an idea, I think, 'Oh, I wanted it to sound like this'. But I try and be a bit more brave about it and present it to the band when it's not really ready and the lyrics might be a bit ropey - but we'll just try it. Then I take it back and think about what they have done and try and incorporate it into the song."

The Country and Eastern band attract a mixed audience of world music fans, foreign students, fans of Middle Eastern music and Turkish and Kurdish people, though their fame is beginning to spread. To close, she tells me her aim: "To break down those barriers about songs in other languages which just shouldn't be there, really. Other countries have such knowledge of different musics. In Britain we're so insular. If it's good, it's good!"

**Norman Darwen - Rock n Reel 2007**