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The Musical Dreams of Rebel Bran

So help be break these heavy thoughts of mine,
Heal my pain, don't give up on me,
Don't let the dragons take me down, down with them,
Sonny boy, play something for me.

Rebel Bran, *Sonny*

A month ago, I got two freshly burned CDs from Sasha Jecmenica, along with the comment: this is the music made by my friend Branislav Vrbaski from *Dina*, a band from Jagodina. He added that Branislav put a great deal of effort (and money) to make his lifelong dream a reality and leave a memorable, recorded imprint of his songs played by his group in the 90s. The songs on this CD, titled *You and I...Twenty Years Later...*, were recorded and published in two versions: in Serbian and English, with the author's artistic name *Rebel Bran*. The CD's exquisite graphic design catches one's attention right away with its Digipak style, the booklet containing the text and the photos mostly presenting the natural scenery of Vancouver and surroundings, signed by the multi-talented author Branislav Vrbaski, alias Rebel Bran.

The CD *You and I ...twenty years later...* offers ten songs and the instrumental version of the title song. Despite the fact that the songs were originally written for the acoustic band, the first listening reveals their well-suited compatibility with electric and electronic instruments. Along with all the vocals, Branislav plays a number of the instruments: the acoustic guitar, the keyboard instruments, the double-bass, the drums, the bongos, the harmonica, the tuba, the oboe, the banjo, the dulcimer... Something like Mike Oldfield in his Tubular Bells. However, the final musical picture gets its pixels from a number of the guest musicians: Kelly Stodola on the drums, Robert Steininger with the guitar, Denis Marcenko on the bass, Laurence Mollerup with his double-bass and Ian Cameron on the violin, along with performers in two separate songs: David Hoerl on the harmonica and Milan Milosevic on the bass clarinet.

The album opens with *Bluesers*, the band Dina's first-prize awarded text at The Acoustics Festival in Sivac, from the vintage year of 1988, presenting the homage to the black masters of the "blue melodies" originating in the Mississippi Delta and Alabama plantations. In this song, Rebel Bran demonstrates his arrangement skills primarily by implementing the complex string sections which, at the end, smoothly transcend into the acoustic guitar introduction to the next song – *Old Story*, my favourite, by the way. The atmosphere surrounding the song is again painted by the string instruments, with the addition of the traditional accordion, which evokes the melancholy and performing passion of an Astor Piazzolla. Although played in adagio, the song has from the beginning an intensive rhythmic drive in its background, which

makes even the least dedicated listeners go with the swing (at least that's how I feel while listening to it). The third song, *Children of the Night*, surely presents the more cheerful portion of the CD, and the following one, *Sonny*, dedicated to the acclaimed harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson, takes us back again to the blues landscapes in the minor key and slow rhythm, in which Rebel Bran feels most at ease. The title song, *You and I*, is probably the most professional piece on this CD, with its melodic foundations complete in the string instruments, primarily so by the virtuoso violin of Ian Cameron. When it comes to the inventive application of the string instruments in rock music, the song *You and I* brings out the associations with my favourite pieces of Paul Weller from the 80s, while he performed with Style Council. After the reggae ballades *Another Night Without You*, and *Goodnight*, dominated by the brass instruments, the song *Beautiful Wodrl* is abundant in the sounds of the nature and offers a pastoral view of the author's immediate environment. The photos of Vancouver and its surroundings from the CD's cover present, in a way, a visual extension to this song (my impression, after all). The acoustic tones of the guitar lead us again to the song *Katarina*, the absolute pearl of the whole album, sung and played with emotions of the famous authors, such as Balasevic: *Into my world she came through the back door, She tiptoed through dark, in silence, she placed both her wings smiling with stars on my palm...* On the first page of the booklet included with the CD, *You and I...Twenty Years Later...*, the author Bransilav Vrbaski wrote a message to his listener: *that in his hands he holds his dreams that are coming true...* We spoke with him about those dreams and a few other things one April night:

- *Umbrella: The title of your CD is You and I...Twenty Years Later...My impression is that it contains in itself an interesting story. What is it?*

Branislav: Well, my musical undertaking started twenty years ago and if everything had been the way it was supposed to be, these songs would have been finished. It was only when I settled down upon my arrival to Canada that I could continue where I once left off. If the music is born with an honest feeling and without imitating others, then it's not essential when the song's been written – it is always authentic.

- *When were the songs from the CD written and how long did you prepare the CD?*

I started working on the arrangements for the songs three years ago. I worked on building my home recording studio and the songs at the same time, and so they were finished together. When I completed the demo recordings, I gathered the musicians to play those ideas of mine.

- *The songs are mostly the ballades in the slow rhythm – you call them 'dreams'. Do these songs suit you more as a performer and a composer, are more in line with you, or is it just a particular mood best expressed in the minor mode?*

It's always the 'mood', since the music stems from personal emotions. I personally more enjoy the smooth rhythm, relaxing music and I try making it out.

- *One song is dedicated to the famous blues player, Sonny Boy Williamson. Who are your model musicians, i.e. the musicians that influenced the evolution of your style?*

That song was composed during a previous period when I was exploring the blues. I was inspired then by Sonny Boy and the great blues performers, but I feel open to diverse musical styles. If I am to sample out any great musicians, that would be Leonard Cohen, then Sade, Vaya con Dios...

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- *Tell us something about your musical beginnings, your band Dina from Jagodina?*

We started playing in 1988 as a duo – my friend Mirko Jakovljevic and me. The band's name is a short version of the name of our city. In our first year alone we won the first prize for the text in the song *Bluesers*, which opens the CD. Shortly after that, the band grew by a few more members and we started playing live at the radio stations: *Radio Jagodina*, *Studio B* – where we composed the theme for the series *The Yellow Taxi*, then on *Radio 202* in their *Night Programming*, *Radio Novi Sad*, then *Radio Penguin*...We were active right until I left for Canada.

- *You published both Serbian and English versions of the song texts on the CD. Does that mean you plan to distribute the CD on both markets: world and Serbian, and how has that played so far?*

I've only just started with the CD distribution. I've signed the contract for the world promotion with the New York based marketing agency Ariel Publicity. When it comes to the Serbian market, I still don't have any concrete ideas. We might organize the come-back tour of the band Dina, since these songs are from that period.

- *Some very good local musicians play on the CD. Was it difficult to bring them together to record your songs?*

I first met the wife of my co-producer Kelly Stodola, who has been in the music business for a long time and knows a lot of people on the music stage in Vancouver. He found the musicians and the recording studio.

- *In one of the songs, your guest is Milan Milosevic, the clarinettist, about whom we wrote in our previous number. How did he adapt to your arrangements as the classical music player?*

When we met here during one of his performances, I mentioned I would like him to play for one of my songs for which I hadn't had the bass line yet, and since he plays the clarinet, that came out in a perfect way. He did a tremendous job with that theme on his clarinet, so we were both pleased at the end.

- *In the comment for the CD, you wrote that "you were born and started speaking once again in Vancouver.." Teofil Pancic recently wrote something like that about himself: born in Skopje, died in Zagreb, lives in Belgrade...Is it possible to be born twice at different places?*

I truly believe I was born again here. When you change the country and when you start all over again, that's as if you were born again.

- *Do you have any plans for a live promotion of the CD: concerts, tour..?*

The promotion organized by my agency will be four months long and we'll probably cover a live performance sometime in September. I'd like the Vogue Theatre, but we'll see...

- *How can our readers buy your CD *You and I ...twenty years later*...?*

It sells at the Internet sites: www.itunes, www.cdbaby.com www.cduniverse.com www.amazon.com and many other places,

and off course, through my web site www.rebelbran.com or directly at 604-588-0508.