

# 46/47

Spring / Summer 2004

A Murley-Salas  
Publication

# Higher & Higher

The Moody Blues Magazine™

*Pictured:*

*The Moody Blues circa  
1969-70*

## Norda Mullen

*Gigging with the Moodies toot sweet*

## The Other Side of Red Rocks

*Backstage gets even better*

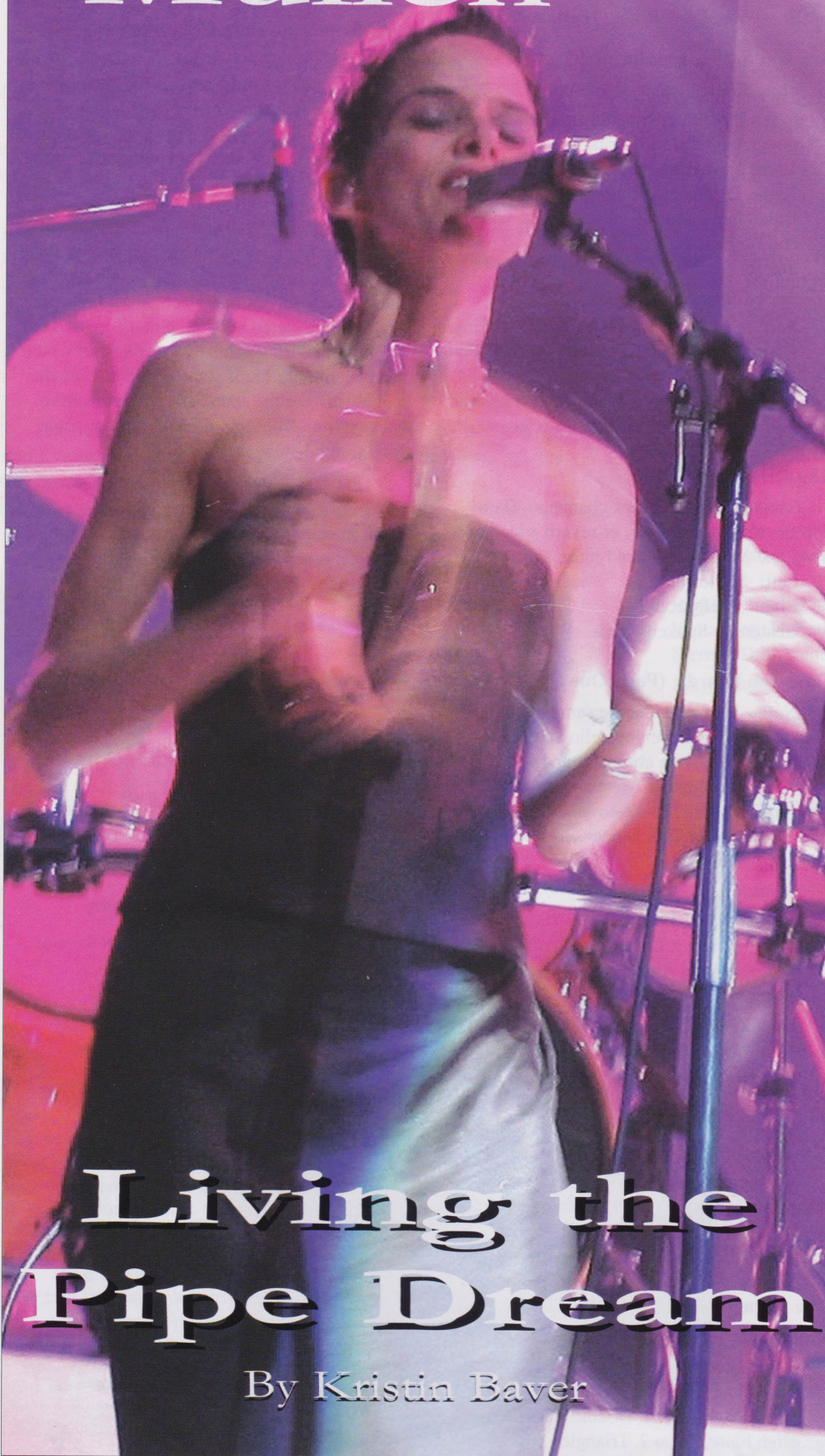
## Time Traveller

*Celebrating — live! — the  
music of the Moody Blues*

**In this Special Issue:  
A 32-Page Look Back at...**

The Moody Blues  
On The Threshold of a Dream

# Norda Mullen



## Living the Pipe Dream

By Kristin Baver

*Since Ray Thomas' retirement from the Moody Blues in 2002, concert goers have been wowed by multi-instrumentalist / backup vocalist Norda Mullen. Kristin Baver provides the scoop on Ms. Mullen in this exclusive article she penned for H&H.*

Norda Mullen looks out of place sitting in Pumpernick's Delicatessen, a typical, easily overlooked little restaurant located on a side-street in Philadelphia. She's spreading cream cheese on a toasted bagel, much like the other patrons trying to catch a midday breakfast, but her hair is short and spiked, one section right in front standing above the rest, which sets her apart from the other noticeably conservative customers on their way to or from work. In fact, she doesn't have to work today; it's her day off. And, unlike the other hungry customers at Pumpernick's this morning, on any day that she will be working, she'll be doing so in front of 15,000 strangers who will judge her based on appearance, intonation and overall stage presence.

But today, 43-year-old Mullen is dressed in a comfortable black sweater, brown dress slacks and a pair of gleaming, leather, high-heeled boots. With minimal makeup, the fine lines around her eyes that have appeared over time are just barely visible, offset mostly by her youthful mannerisms and cheerful laughter, both complimented by her five-foot, seven-inch frame and small bones. She is quickly excited by the mere mention of her favorite things in life: her flute, her latest performing gig and her cats.

"I got 'em from a little pet adoption place in Santa Monica," she recalls. Her expression brightens with an air of excitement usually reserved for one's children, but Mullen is unmarried and without human offspring. With a slight southern drawl, indicative of her upbringing in Starkville, Mississippi, she continues to dote upon her beloved felines. "Simon and Ruby are so cute! They're weird, though. I hear they're digging at the closet, tearing up the carpet." She pauses with a maternal sigh and a boisterous but

understanding laugh, imagining the state of her carpet. "They don't like the touring thing. When I bring out my suitcases they get very upset."

While her kittens are understandably sensitive when their mother leaves them alone to tour with the Moody Blues for a month, they are supportive of her habit. "When I practice, they just sit right at the bottom of the music stand and roll around. I mean, they've heard it their whole life. They probably think that's what everybody does."

### The Early Years

Music is Mullen's life, her chosen career since she was nine and started to play the flute. Growing up 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. On my mom's side, my mom 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. Growing up, music was both practiced 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 the problem. "I didn't want to admit to anyone that I couldn't really hear well, but my mom noticed that anytime 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. There were points where I couldn't hear the instruments very well, but I kept practicing anyway, probably sounding pretty bad." Eventually, surgery was the



Graeme Edge and Norda Mullen at the close of a recent Moodies gig.

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 recalls. "I remember Norda being rather nerdish, always frantically looking for her fruity white band shoes on a Friday night."

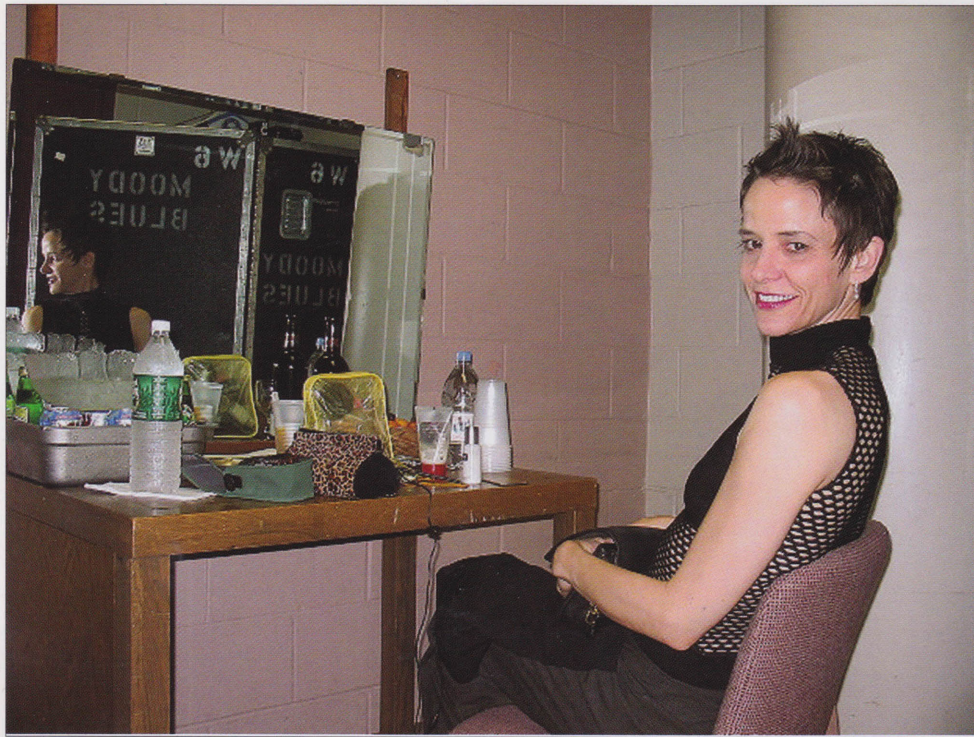
When Mullen was 14, her parents sent her to Interlochen, a competitive music camp in Michigan, where she practiced for three hours a day under Alexander Murray, a flautist with the London Symphony Orchestra. By her senior year of high school, Mullen's parents had purchased a Haynes flute for \$1,500,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

for \$2,400, both fashioned entirely from silver. "The Powell was ordered when I was 12 years old and I got it when I was 18. This was in the '70s, when they made them by hand. I sold the Haynes when I moved to L.A. because I needed money to live. I was teaching and doing studio work in Chicago, and so I sold it to one of my favorite little students. I regret selling it, but I did."

### On to Northwestern University

In 1978 Mullen was accepted into the classical flute program at Northwestern University. "I wanted to go to Northwestern because of the teacher, Walfrid Kujala. He just 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 L.A. exterior. While her features are soft, her face youthful, she still looks like she could win in a bar fight. Mullen is an avid yoga enthusiast, which helps regulate her breathing, and possesses 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 'cause I got mugged. I was living in Chicago, I had already graduated from



**Above:** Norda backstage. **Below:** Portrait of the musician as a youth.

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 in the snow after the attack. The deli setting has fallen away, and Mullen is once again in the alley, miming her jacket pulled tightly around her. “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.”

#### **Musical Partner and Session Success**

After the mugging Mullen scrambled to find a male roommate and a new apartment to avoid the alley. That roommate was Jo Pusateri, who, twenty years later, has become a close friend and long-lasting musical partner. Their relationship flourished quickly, when the pair got engaged just 10 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 longtime collaborative partner. The Los Angeles-based band has been touring for the past 10 years, playing the club circuit in

and around L.A. and gaining a fan following on the west coast. The east coast, however, isn’t cognizant of Bahu-rang, although the band has recently had a few songs placed in two films, *Hour Glass* and *Tell You*, success on television with two songs on *Dawson’s Creek*, and even a Budweiser radio spot. Pusateri’s catchy beats blend with Mullen’s hauntingly beautiful wind instrumentation to give Bahu-rang their 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, as well as bass, recorder, pan pipes, 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 looking for a flautist to play on T.V. 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 L.A. 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 installments of the *Matrix Trilogy*. “It’s great; you’ll go to a movie and you’ll hear yourself playing the solo. You can always hear yourself, because you remember playing it. It kinda rings a bell.”

#### **Meeting Justin**

But Mullen’s latest performing gig is winning her the most personal credit of her career. “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, cause 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.”



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 flutist 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.'" Coming from someone else the story sounds a bit egotistical, but, as she tells it across a small table at the back of Pumpnick's Deli, Mullen is comedic and sincere. For every bit of dialogue, she evokes a new tone to her voice, sometimes using a mock British accent to tell Justin's part, 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 offense, but I figured it out when I was 12 years old.'"

### Moodies Gig

Mullen's career with Hayward could have stopped there, after she played just 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 earlier this year 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. Although Thomas left abruptly after a tour had been announced, the group was lucky to already have Mullen's name on hand. 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. "I'm not replacing him, but, you know, I'm standing in his spot and doing his thing. I think it was kinda odd for everyone, at first, to have a woman standing there, but all I can do is be myself."

Mullen could not be more disparate

from the jolly, gray-haired Thomas, a man whose upper lip was always obscured with a bristly mustache. 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

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the back, Mullen is easily distinguished onstage from the other band members. Her purposely erratic hair and exotic stage ensemble give her the air of a rock star. Unlike previous female background vocalists that have toured with the Moody Blues, Barlow and Mullen add their own flair to the role, dancing however the music seems to hit them, and both add background instrumentation, with Barlow on keyboards. 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 envelopes them.

Moody Blues touring percussionist, Gordon Marshall, complimented Mullen, when he said, "Norda is one of the finest musicians I've ever met. She is a true virtuoso of her instrument. To say she is an asset to the band is an understatement. Obviously Ray is a difficult individual to replace, being so talented and unique. But everyone in the band considers Norda to have risen to the challenge." Davidson, Mullen's sister, remarked, "I thought it was the most amazing thing to see my baby sister looking so fabulous onstage. Then I thought, but, who are those old guys up there with Norda?" The jest is in pure fun, as the Moody Blues are regarded as classic rock and roll legends. While their Top-40 status is waning, the rabid fans continue to steadily increase in number.

Marching in with their vintage "Moody Blues" T-shirts, and standing in line to buy more, the fans are extremely supportive of Mullen as the alternate flautist. Cheryl Walborn, a Moody Blues fan for the past 38 years explained, "People miss Ray, and I think they are startled to see a woman where he used to stand, but she's wonderful." Lee Althouse, a fan since the *On the Threshold of a Dream* LP, remarked on the dynamic of the group. "A new flautist won't change things too much," he said. "I noticed the vocals were a little lacking because Ray is missing, but Norda is a very good flautist, probably better than Thomas as far as breath control."

Another fan for the past 40 years, Richard Wagner said, "She fits them! And she sounds just as good as the other one."

With the troupe of fans behind her, Mullen shows no signs of leaving her newfound spot, touring three times a year with the Moody Blues. "I'll stay on as long as they'll have me! I love it! I mean I love performing! My number one favorite thing to do is to perform. I wanted to do another type of music besides classical because I wanted to be one of four or five people onstage, not one of a hundred. I'm sort of a show off, I guess, but in an orchestra you don't get to show your individual self as much; it kind of gets lost in the mix."

Mullen puts on her heavy woolen jacket, ready to succumb to Philadelphia's frigid November air. She'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?'"

*Kristin lives in Kutztown, PA. This is her first article for Higher & Higher.*

