

Becky Buller shines on new compact disc, *Rest My Weary Feet*

by Katryn Conlin

For Inside Bluegrass, October 6, 2000

Do you ever notice how on an album they always put the best songs first and leave the slim pickings for later? To use the metaphor from the wedding at Cana, Becky Buller saves the best wine for last on her new CD, *Rest My Weary Feet*. There's as much or more to savor in the last song, "I Don't Know Why," as in the first, "How I Love You."

There are so many good things to say about *Rest My Weary Feet* that it's hard to know where to start. The vocals—pure and heartfelt, deeply expressive, spot-on intonation, sharp harmonies. The instruments—each one sparkling, top-of-the-line solos, plenty of drive. The songs, almost all Becky's originals—ranging from gospel inspiration, to rural life, to modern love gone astray.

Becky Buller grew up in St. James, Minnesota and many of us remember her as a red-headed kid at the festivals and playing with her family band, Prairie Grass. A few years back, she took off for college, enrolling in the bluegrass and country music program of the East Tennessee State University in Johnson, TN. Under Jack Tottle's direction, this program draws enormously talented students from all across the country and around the world. Most of the faculty are professional musicians. Alumni include Tim Stafford, Adam Steffey, Barry Bales, and a country star named Kenny Chesney, to name a few. Becky has thrived in this rarefied atmosphere and emerged as a first rate singer, songwriter, and fiddle player. Take a look at the program's web site (<http://cass.etsu.edu/bluegrass/index.htm>) and you'll find her featured in several places.

No matter how convincing the musicianship, the songs are at the foundation of every project. At the age of 21, Becky writes with an authority beyond her years, frequently venturing out into the point of view of an imaginary figure from the past, from the Bible, or from a tangled love story. She might be a woman or a man, old or young, disappointed in love or accepting God's will. Where do these songs come from? She says the source is *listening*.

"One of my favorite songwriters, Darrell Scott, once said, 'A good song never comes to those who chase, it comes to those who listen.' I agree with that wholeheartedly," she explains. "Many of my ideas come from just absorbing as much music as I can, from Del McCoury to Simon and Garfunkel. By the same token, I listen to the world and folks around me for inspiration, asking myself how I would react in those same situations."

She adds, "And then there are the songs that are inspired by no more than standing in a mud puddle, in a deluge at the Zimmerman festival, listening to the group Lou Reid, Terry Baucom and Carolina...hence, 'Carolina Rain.'" (I remember that very rainstorm, but I had no idea it was connected to one of the finest songs on Becky Schlegel's debut CD, *This Lonesome Song*, named for still another of Becky Buller's compositions.)

Becky continues, “But there is a part of me in every song I write...sometimes even I have to really dig to find it, but I’m in there!”

Becky’s style spans contemporary love songs (“How I Love You,” “You’re Letting Me Go,” “Why Don’t You Just Say Good-bye?”) that have the modern chord progressions and aggressive beat we’d expect from bands like Lonesome River or Blue Highway. In “Like A Thief,” “The Blind Beggar,” and “The Prodigal Son,” she contemplates Biblical themes with a thoughtful, personalized approach. She proves she can write a hard-driving fiddle instrumental with “Samwise” (and play the heck out of the fiddle, too).

But it’s in “I Don’t Know Why” that these elements come together in a striking way. She describes the kind of painful losses which could leave a woman bitter for life—rejection by a man she loved, the death of an infant son—and comes to terms with the pain: “I don’t know why/ I’ve cried and I’ve cried/ over things that could never be/ From now on I’ll try/ to be satisfied/ with the many blessings that I have received.” Reminiscent of Gillian Welch’s approach, one imagines a woman from a depression-era photograph. The song is fatalistic, sad, and very moving, yet truly describes how time and acceptance do ease suffering.

To support her fine songs, Becky’s voice has developed into a powerful, clear, distinctive instrument, and her fiddle playing is fierce, fast, driving, and intense. Her connections with other talented young adults through the ETSU program have served her music making well; throughout the project the musicianship and arrangements are first rate. Four fellow students from the program participated, including Mo Canada, who is well on his way to being the next best thing in flatpicking guitar .

Becky adds, “I also had some wonderful help from pickers not involved in the program. Darrell Webb (who did most of the mandolin and guitar work) plays mandolin with J.D. Crowe and the New South. Donica Christensen is one of my favorite banjo players. Jeff Webb, formerly of the Country Gentlemen, now with New Tradition, played guitar on one cut. My fellow players in Appalachian Trail did a lot of harmony work with me.”

There is one song that stands apart on this album, and it’s very special to Becky. “My favorite cut has to be ‘Anchored In Love’ on which the whole Buller family sang,” she says. “I am so thrilled that they are a part of this...they’re the reason I got into bluegrass in the first place.” With mandolin, guitar, and four voices, it makes me think of the days of parlor guitars and mandolin orchestras, when this music had its origins in family settings. This song shows us how deeply Becky Buller is rooted in the tradition of acoustic music, and *Rest My Weary Feet* gives us a glimpse of how far she will travel in her calling as a bluegrass musician.