



Bluegrass Thrives, Far From Home

By RUTH ELLEN GRUBER
Published: April 9, 2009

PRAGUE — A recent concert in Prague demonstrated the far-flung reach of an infectious musical genre that spells “Americana” from the first ringing twang of a finger-picked string.

It was a concert of bluegrass music — but the event was a far cry from the high lonesome hills of Appalachia.

Lilly of the West, a bluegrass band from Bulgaria, was joined by Czech musicians for a performance hosted by the Bulgarian Culture Institute at its premises in the heart of the capital.

“The music is very sincere, it’s about the lyrics, about the songs; every song tells a story,” said Lilly Drumeva, the singer who founded the band more than a dozen years ago. She had first heard bluegrass in Vienna, she said, when she studied there in the early 1990s.

Famed for its close harmony singing and lightning-fast fingerwork on the banjo, mandolin and fiddle, bluegrass music has an international following among a passionate niche of devotees.

In Europe, dozens of bluegrass concerts, festivals, workshops and jam sessions take place throughout the year. Homegrown bands take center stage, but American musicians also often tour. And local bluegrass associations, Web sites, blogs and publications promote the music and chronicle events. Scotland, the Czech Republic, Norway and other locations have even had bluegrass programs in public schools.

The scene is small but intensely active, said Dennis Schut, a Dutch musician who has been involved in bluegrass since the 1970s.

“I see it as a sort of religion or something,” he said. “You get addicted to bluegrass. The first time you hear it, you’re hooked.”

Mr. Schut’s 26-year-old son, Ralph, is a case in point. He moved to the Czech Republic — home to the liveliest bluegrass scene in Europe — for the music and now plays in a number of bands, including Roll’s Boys and G-runs ‘n Roses.

Bluegrass in Czech lands grew out of a long, widespread acoustic music tradition. In 1964, concerts in Prague and Brno by Pete Seeger galvanized fans, who made their own five-string banjos based on photographs of Seeger performing.

Today, devotees claim that there are more bluegrass bands per capita in the Czech Republic than in any other country in the world.


By now, the music practically forms a local idiom — so much so that it was the country’s premier bluegrass band, Druha Trava, that was chosen to perform at Prague Castle before U.S. President Barack Obama’s speech there last Sunday.

Hard-core bluegrass fans, said Dennis Schut, do “everything they can to get people to play

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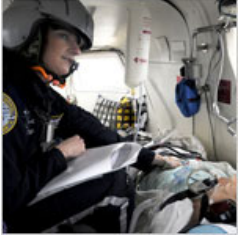


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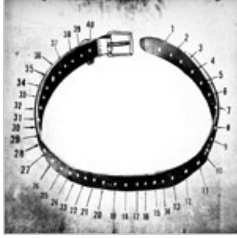


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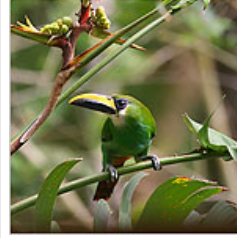
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