

INDIE SCENE



Jean-Philippe Studios

LYDIA SALNIKOVA

The former Bering Strait vocalist does it all to keep the music playing



BORN AND RAISED IN OBNINSK, Russia, Lydia Salnikova grew up idolizing American music. The classically trained pianist wasn't alone, and joined five other like-minded local musicians to form Bering Strait. It was an unusual grouping—a band of Russian teens obsessed with American bluegrass and country, in a city 60 miles outside Moscow. But over the next half-dozen years and a bunch of trips to Nashville, they caught the attention of Music Row executives who signed them to a record deal.

They relocated to the U.S. in the late 1990s and eventually released two albums. A Grammy nomination followed, and their saga became the subject of a *60 Minutes* segment and a film, *The Ballad of Bering Strait*. Yet by 2006 success eluded them, and the band broke up. "Major labels' job is to make money with your music," says Salnikova. "And we were musicians from Russia who had a whole other dimension to us, a Russianness. Quite frankly, they just didn't know what to do with us."

Salnikova, 33, embarked on a solo career and landed session work for artists as diverse as Kenny Rogers and actor Christopher Lee. In 2010, she released her debut album, *Hallway*, on her own Collyde

Records label. Two years later she moved to Knoxville, Tenn., and recently released her new album *Valentine Circle*. "My solo sound is different from Bering Strait's on many levels," Salnikova says. "Rather than five instrumentalists in the mix, it's just me and my piano and whatever comes out when I sit and write. You're hearing a one-woman orchestra. When you're on a major label, that helps define what you can and can't do. But when you're stirring your own juices and trying different sounds and samples, you never know what's going to come out. It's exciting and scary at the same time."

Both *Hallway* and *Valentine Circle* found Salnikova taking charge of the albums' production, engineering and mixing. "At times it was a challenge," she says. "The technical part is obviously something I had to learn as I went along. But in this day and age, an independent artist can do it themselves if they have the time and the knack for it." Salnikova's DIY decision was motivated by practical concerns. "I didn't want just any producer," she says. "I might have found somebody who made me sound better, but not anyone I could afford. So I had to take everything at my disposal, punch forward and

hope the momentum created will attract the right elements."

One of those elements was funding via the Kickstarter website. "As an independent artist, my number one task—other than creating the music—is reaching my fan base," she continues. "I reached out on Kickstarter and asked for support to help me press my albums. That way I could invest the time to come up with the best music I could. I'll pursue anything that helps me continue to make music and keep getting better, whatever avenue or shape that might take. It's a never-ending educational process. But when there was a choice of making music or not making music, it wasn't a question for me. I took it upon myself, and I hope listeners like the result."

Listeners have been thrilled with the results, including some far away—one of Salnikova's songs has been played during a NASA space mission. Closer to home, her own ambitions remain well grounded. "I don't see my role as a worldwide star," she says. "I'm not trying to make music for everybody. I just put one foot in front of the other and continue to work on my craft. If the music is there and it touches people, what more can I ask for?"

—Lee Zimmerman