

Our gift to the world

By TINA PEPLINSKIE
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Despite spending an average of 250 days a year on the road, champion fiddler April Verch loves to make it home and attend the Pembroke Old Time Fiddling and Stepdancing Championships every chance she gets. With a break in her busy touring schedule, she flew home for an appointment in Ottawa this week so her mother Muriel expects she will try to squeeze in a trip to Fiddle Park this weekend. Although her talents have taken her around the world, April has never forgotten her Ottawa Valley roots.



As she tours around Canada and the United States, she often meets people who have attended the Pembroke championships and fiddle park, or who've wanted to attend the festivities, making her appreciate the event's great reputation and far reach.

Some would say April was born to entertain. Before learning to dance or picking up a fiddle for the first time, she loved the stage. As a bubbly two-year-old she was standing in front of the stage imitating the dancers during the final Saturday night jamboree of the Pembroke championships when contest house pianist Carol Kennedy noticed and brought her up on stage, she recalls.

"I have a picture of it," she wrote in an e-mail. "Me dancing away to all of those great fiddlers I learned to look up to."

Her older sister Tawnya also influenced April, as she was already taking lessons and competing at the local competition, so April wanted to follow in her footsteps.

As a three-year-old she began dance lessons and competing, and the fiddle lessons began after her parents Muriel and Ralph Verch bought her a fiddle for her sixth birthday. By the age of 10 she was winning fiddle contests and touring Canada, and she soon realized playing fiddle and dancing was what she wanted to do for a living. By the time she graduated from high school, she had already released solo albums.

Over the years, April competed at home as often as she could, but she's lost track of how many times she won. She has also lent her talents to the judging panel.

She also had success on the road. April is the first woman to ever win both the Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Championships and the Shelburne Canadian Open Fiddling Championships, her mother noted.

Growing up surrounded by the Ottawa Valley music, April always felt honoured to have the biggest and best fiddling and stepdancing competition in her own back yard. "It was the last big contest of the summer before school started and the last chance to see my music friends from the contest scene," she wrote.

"I performed and competed full-time, but it was special to have that opportunity at home where my family and friends could attend, fiddle park included."

The current tour takes April back on the road beginning Sept. 9 when she returns to Minnesota for three shows before stops in Indiana, Illinois, California, Tennessee and North Carolina take her and her bandmates Clay Ross on guitar and Cody Walters on upright-electric bass and banjo to the end of the month. The trio blends Canadian, folk, jazz, American old-time, Latin American and bluegrass music together into a repertoire infused with soulful energy.

They expect to be touring full-time for the foreseeable future, with major events booked into next year. In 2011 they are slated for their debut tour in China. Next June the April Verch Band will also be cruising passage to Alaska on a Celtic Music Cruise.

To date April has released seven recordings including Verchusosity, 2001 Rounder Records which release earned a JUNO nomination for Roots/ Traditional Album. Her most recent release, Steal The Blue, was coproduced by Stephen Mouglin of the Sam Bush Band and Jon Weisberger. It is both a compelling collection of vocal and instrumental selections and the best portrait of April yet.

