

Fiddler on the road

Jamie Laval right at home with touring life of Celtic musician

by Brian McCoy, Entertainment Editor
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Jamie Laval spent much of his youth preparing to become a professional musician. For Laval, that meant more than merely mastering his instrument, the violin. Those years also taught him much about the itinerant life musicians lead, as his family ping-ponged from Princeton, N.J., to Pasadena, CA, to Duluth, MN, to Victoria, BC, to a number of Washington state locales. "All my life my Dad moved us all over the country just about every year or two," Laval said.

But just as Laval's wanderings have given way to something more permanent – Seattle has been his base for seven years – his music has similarly evolved. Schooled in classical and adept at jazz, the fiddler found a home in Celtic music with a sound that married the music's deepest traditions to a fresh, contemporary outlook.

"It wasn't one certain moment," Laval said of the decision. "I think I tried all these different musics only to be able to reject all of them. I would keep defaulting back to always playing Celtic because it's my voice. I feel like it's most consistent with my own personal expression."

Central Valley and Mother Lode audiences can hear that voice Saturday as Laval performs in Sutter Creek. He'll share the stage with longtime collaborator guitarist Hans York. The men were drawn together by both an appreciation for traditional Celtic music – Laval won the 2002 U.S. National Scottish Fiddle Championship – and the desire to expand upon it.

"I found him simply by putting an ad in the newspaper," Laval recalled. "I was fairly specific about what I was looking for – I didn't want any strummy-strummy, which is just what most Irish guitar players do. I said, 'We're going to come up with something more modern'."

That was fine with York, who plays in the nontraditional DADGAD tuning. "It enables him to kind of create this drone effect where he moves chords around while the basic key is droning underneath," Laval said. "There's just a background of sonic space from that drone, and on top of it he's putting in all these colorful harmonies."

And on top of that comes Laval's violin. As evident on his solo debut, "Shades of Green" (2002), Laval's playing embraces styles from waltzes to reels while never being anything less than evocative. The result is a sound both bracingly original and warmly familiar.

"My calling in life is to kind of present to the modern world how astonishing this very old music really is," he said. "When you really dig deep into the melody, you can find something in there. If you just play it the traditional sense the way people do in the jam sessions in the pub ... it may not be super obvious to the rest of the world." Plenty of people have come to see Laval expecting that public experience only to be surprised. "The live show has energy up the yin yang," he said.

Already proficient on clarinet, Laval picked up the violin at 16. He had grown up with music – "my mother played mandolin and accordion and my father was a French hornist" – and found in it the opportunity to escape his family's nomadic lifestyle. Laval finished high school a year early and went off to study at British Columbia's Victoria Conservatory of Music.

There, along with his classical studies, he was exposed to Celtic music, in particular the Cape Breton tradition. He dabbled in jazz for a time and went on to study at the New England Conservatory in Boston before fully embracing Celtic.

His success in that field has brought opportunities in others. Laval's studio credits include soundtracks to the films "Wild America" and "Finding Home," as well as the television series "Everwood." His fiddle was featured prominently on the Dave Matthews solo project "Some Devil." "It's an interesting scene," Laval said of being a session player. "It's kind of fascinating that in that world, when you're doing an extremely good job, the audience never knows anything about the music. They're not thinking about the music, they're just having an elevated emotional experience."

There is something appealing, too, for the usually solo Laval to be immersed in a mass of musicians. The fiddler noted that he played two dates in the Northwest last month with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra. "It was tremendous fun, because it was with some of the best rockers in the business," he said. "We were just playing for each other and having a ball. I absolutely loved that show."

There's little chance, however, that Laval will abandon his solo career. He noted that 2005 should bring sessions for a second album and, oh, yes, a change in address. "I'm actually looking at moving to Portland in a couple of months," he said.