

April Verch

To listen to April Verch is to be immersed in tradition. To watch her perform is to be transported. While best known for her deep expertise in the distinctive Ottawa Valley fiddle and step dancing styles, there is far more to April's story. Be it regional Canadian roots, American old-time, 50's Country, Scandinavian folk music, or something original that sounds as though it's been around for a century—the one common thread is her love and reverence for the music and traditions that have been passed down to her.

Born in the heart of the Ottawa Valley in northeastern Ontario, Verch was trained from birth in the specific rhythms and melodies of the region, giving her music a sense of intuition and ease that could only come from a lifetime of experience. Growing up bouncing between weekend festivals and listening to her Dad's country band play for dances, she assumed that this is just what life is. "I thought that everyone played the fiddle and step danced," says Verch. And that worked just fine for her. She loved it all—the energy, the music, and the stories that were woven into these age-old community traditions.

Verch's musical education began young—she took her first step dancing class at just three years old and her first fiddle lesson at six. Beginning with performances as the "token cute kid" at fairs, festivals and TV shows alongside her dance teachers, Ottawa Valley natives Buster and Pauline Brown, she went on to study at Berklee College of Music with legends like Matt Glaser and Darol Anger. These educational opportunities would equip her with the breadth and depth of musical knowledge that defines her artistic voice to this day. But more than that, her decades of performance experience—including her historic wins at the Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Championship and Canadian Open Old-Time Fiddlers' Contest at the ages of 18 and 19 respectively—would give her a singular bond with the music, providing her with the intuition to "dance the tune" and improvise with incredible fluency in both fiddling and step dancing.

Buoyed by her competition success, she struck out on her own to make it as a full-time professional musician. Verch got her first taste of career musicianship touring with established acts like Canadian country music legend Tommy Hunter and Celtic pop band Mad Pudding as a backing fiddler. But her dream was always to form her own band, representing the Ottawa Valley and the sounds of home. In 2000, she first began touring under her own name, the April Verch Band. Initially formed as a pickup band centered around her own fiddle and dance stylings, the band would grow and blossom into an established trio of world-class musicians, spanning several musical traditions and backgrounds, yet all united in their mission to share the music they love. Together the April Verch Band has traveled to four continents, performed in fourteen countries, and played everywhere from tiny pubs and dusty festival workshops all the way to legendary stages such as the Kennedy Center and the Ryman Auditorium.

After gaining some experience as a bandleader in her own right, Verch would tour with Canadian fiddle supergroup Bowfire—working as a side member to the finely-tuned machine of a major show production. Verch also toured as special guest with acclaimed Irish tenor, John McDermott.

Her virtuosity and reverence for tradition would eventually lead Verch to one of the true highlights of her career: participating in the Opening Ceremonies for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver. “It was so touching to be part of representing the Canadian fiddle tradition to the world. I thought about all the fiddlers who came before us... and about what they would say if they knew that the producers of the Olympics had chosen to include that segment.” It blew her away. She felt that she owed it to them—all the legends that she had met and all the ones who had influenced her music and career—to do it right. “I was more nervous about *that* than about the fact that there were so many people who were going to be watching.”

It was this incredible experience that would give her the courage to take on new challenges. Though she had been nervous in her earlier career about picking up multiple projects—afraid that they might interfere with each other—she had now come to realize that, in fact, music begets music. So, in addition to her work leading the April Verch Band, she would begin a new project in partnership with American old-time legend Joe Newberry in 2016. Together, Newberry & Verch have played everything from the International Bluegrass Music Association’s Wide Open Bluegrass Festival in Raleigh, North Carolina to the Celtic Connections Festival in Glasgow, Scotland. The success and fulfillment of that project led to even more collaborations, including one with Estonian quartet Curly Strings titled *The Heritage Projekt* in 2018, and now a duo with her husband and longtime collaborator Cody Walters in 2020.

Regardless of the configuration, Verch’s diverse repertoire and unbridled passion come to life on stage with a presence that is versatile, robust, and masterfully executed. Audiences remark at her sincerity in sharing stories between tunes. Her delicate voice, energetic footwork, sand paper foot percussion and stunning playing (sometimes combined all at once!) are jaw-dropping. Her ability to preserve the authentic folk traditions of the past and reintroduce them into the musical landscape of the present is a testament to her expert musicianship and widespread appeal.

Passing along the music is, in itself, central to the traditions that Verch has built a life and career within, so it will come as no surprise that teaching has been at the heart of Verch’s work from the very beginning. Not only has she released a book of original fiddle tunes, a Canadian fiddle method book for Mel Bay Publications, and a self-produced instructional step dance DVD—she also weaves teaching into her tour schedule whenever possible. Teaching camps, master classes, and workshops along the road gives her yet another way to preserve, honor, and connect with the traditions she holds dear.

Even now, after more than two decades leading her own band and with 14 albums in her name (two of which were nominated for JUNO Awards, among other honors), there is nothing that fulfills Verch or gives her more joy than playing and sharing her music with the world. “It’s like the reward for everything else,” she says. Verch never forgets the roots of her music, that connection to the people out there in the audience or on the dance floor, to the community sparked by a good song. “It’s about joining together to celebrate everyday life, through music. We’re all in this together.” And so she presses onward: diving deep into musical tradition, bringing people together and forging connections, and sharing her insight and genuine love for the music she plays so well.