



## Step sister: Violinist Verch puts Ottawa Valley traditions on stage



PATRICK LANGSTON

It's definitely not hip.

Gilchrist, a track on April Verch's 10th album *The Newpart*, has no fiddle — Verch's *métier*; no singing — another Verch specialty; but it does have step-dancing, the other element of her performing trifecta. In fact, it's simply a recording of Verch step-dancing. Solo. No accompaniment. And while that's not hip, it is hypnotic, evocative and just plain fun. And it is totally Ottawa Valley.

The tune is a tribute to the granddaddy of Valley step, the late Donnie Gilchrist. It's also a tribute to the tradition of step-dancing itself. "People in the Valley worked so hard, all those people who came and settled there, and it was the thing they did to relax," says the 37-year-old Verch, a native of Rankin, near Pembroke, who began step-dancing when she was three.

"It feels good, it's a joyous thing"

she says of the rapid-fire style which is also surprisingly nuanced. "It's like playing an instrument. It's expressing something I can't always do with words."

Not that *The Newpart* is all about step-dancing, even if another tune, John Hartford's *Bring Your Clothes Back Home*, does feature Verch doing the seemingly impossible: stepping, singing and fiddling simultaneously.

However, the album — abound-

ing with fine fiddle work (Verch was the first woman to win both the Canadian Open Old Time Fiddle Championship and the Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Competition) and with Cody Walters and Hayes Griffin on clawhammer banjo, mandolin and more — does focus on material from before the 1950s plus a few originals.

She says that focus comes from being raised in a rural area where

she learned respect for traditional arts and for the way life used to be.

Nobody would accuse Verch, whose music can be as inventive as the latest hand-held device and whose spiky hair and pert posture on the new album's cover are hardly old-school, of being sepia-toned.

But she does believe that not everything contemporary is necessarily better than what's gone before.

"I feel like sometimes people think they have to reinvent what's already done, and that's not necessarily positive. I think a healthy mix of both is where it's at."

That big nod to precedent can be a double-edged sword as Verch discovered a decade or so ago.

A determined musician who'd released her first album at the age of

13, she was urged by her teachers and producers as her career progressed not to become just "an Ottawa Valley fiddler." So she started including the odd jazzy number or Celtic tune from the Maritimes in her repertoire.

That opened doors to different venues and festivals. But it also backfired when she found herself thinking she had to please every musical constituency and fearful that if she alienated any one of them the number of gigs would decline.

"It took me a long time to realize that I wasn't going to please everybody, that I didn't have to cover all the bases. If there's no Ottawa Valley fiddle tune on a record, that's OK."

In fact, aside from the Verch and Verch-Walters originals, none of the

tracks on the new album is from the Valley. But the album's title is, and for good reason.

"The new part" is what her family still calls the addition to their home which was once a one-room schoolhouse. The addition was built the year Verch was born. It's where her father Ralph and his country band practised, where a wood stove blazes in the winter, and where Verch composed and practised her latest album before heading to the studio.

She says she remembers as a child "sitting in the corner (in the new part) with my first fiddle and trying to pick out a few notes while my dad's band practised. It was my goto spot where I could really focus; it just became my place. And baptisms and weddings and funerals —

anything strongly tied to our family, that's where we would gather."

Speaking of the addition in words that could as easily be applied to her new album, Verch adds, "Stuff of importance was in the new part."

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