

## **Fiddler and step dancer April Verch tells Chris Jones of a childhood in Canada's Ottawa Valley, and the influence of Scots and Irish settlers on her music.**

When April Verch performs at the Ulster-American Folk Park's Bluegrass Festival this weekend, she won't just be showcasing her own music, she will be representing generations' worth of tradition.

The fiddler and step dancer was born into a musical family in the Ottawa Valley, Canada, where she became immersed in the energetic styles of the area.

“My parents were really big fans of that music, even before my sister and I came along,” she says. “They went to a square dance every Saturday night, country and bluegrass music jamborees and all that sort of thing. It was very much a part of my upbringing.”

Now in her mid-30s, Verch had racked up a long list of competition wins and released three full-length albums before she was out of her teens. In fact she started step-dancing (which she describes as similar to Irish hardshoe, tap and clogging) aged just three, and playing the fiddle at six. The music, clearly, is in her blood.

“I'm really proud to carry forth the music that I was raised with,” she says. “Where I come from is a big part of who I am and the music is an expression (of that), and it has to be sincere. Because I know that's when it works and that's when people absolutely love our show — when it's coming from the heart and you're just being yourself.”

These days, April and her band tour full-time, playing around 270 shows a year all over the world, from Ottawa to China and many places in between. She says she is looking forward to her first visit to Ireland, given the debt that her style of fiddle music owes to Scottish and Irish settlers, as well as the French and others. “It's a really articulate, subtle style, and it has a really strong, driving rhythm,” she says. “It's meant to make you feel like dancing, and it's really happy.

“I'm interested to see how our music goes over, and to see how much of themselves they recognise in our music”

Four years ago, April connected with a global audience when she was selected to perform at the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Vancouver as part of a sequence celebrating the many different folk traditions across Canada.

“It was really wonderful,” she says. “It's a little surreal, you almost feel like you're watching yourself go through all that. The stadium itself was really exciting, with the energy and excitement in the building.”

The significance of the occasion was not lost on April, given that she had been chosen as an ambassador for the musical styles she was raised with. “It was emotional,” she says. “The Canadian fiddle community is quite small, and I thought of all the people that have passed away — the pioneers of the music we play — and what it would mean for them that we were doing this”

Verch has also performed for 100,000 people on Canada Day, but although her audience in Omagh this weekend will be much smaller, it matters little to her. The point is that she is bringing the sounds of the Ottawa Valley to a new audience, and that seems to be enough.

“It's always a thrill to play to lots of people and have that kind of reach, but I remember moments that were just as special for 200 people. When the moment's right, it's just great.”

**April Verch will be performing over this weekend at the Bluegrass Festival, at the Ulster-American Folk Park. For details, visit [www.nmni.com](http://www.nmni.com)**