

April Verch targets children, families with new release

By Terry Fleurie
Staff Writer

Horse Shoe, NC – When the COVID-19 pandemic forced Rankin-native April Verch to first postpone and then cancel her 2020 schedule, the Canadian fiddler, singer, songwriter and step-dancer seized the opportunity to venture into a new style of recording.

She has just released *Top of the Hill*, a 10-track recording of original and found songs geared for children and families on the *Slab Town Records* label.

After beginning her own lockdown on March 13 due to the pandemic and having cancelled the 65 performance dates she had booked through July 31st, as well as the later concerts from August through October, she found she still wanted to write and create music.

“But my heart didn’t feel ready to do it in the same way I usually would,” she explained. “Nothing has been as constant throughout my life as family and music, and both have seen me through the best and worst of times.”

“I felt called to create music that would appeal not only to children, but that might connect generations,” she added.

In her more than 20 years of travel and performing, she has been a magnet for young fans who make a beeline to the stage after a performance to ask questions and she had them in mind as she began thinking about creating an album during her time off the road. They also remind her of herself as a young girl getting started at the competitions when growing up outside Rankin.

She fondly recalls idolizing the older fiddlers and step-dancers at the many competitions she attended when she was young -- people like Rob Dagenais, her first fiddle teachers, Buster and Pauline Brown, her stepdance teachers, Brian Hebert, who produced her first live cassettes and many other older fiddlers. In addition, she learned so much from the other Valley country stars she performed with, saying she learned how to put a show together and saw how they interacted with the audience and the work required behind the scenes.

“I think of them every day and am so proud of what they accomplished,” she stated.

While not a parent herself, Ms. Verch is an aunt, and there are many children who hold a very special place in her life.

“Hearing about them and their parents suddenly facing unexpected homeschooling and long hours in isolation got me thinking about ways I might be able to help.”

She shared the idea with her partner and bandmate, Cody Walters, noting he is very supportive and also very realistic, so she appreciated his feedback and input.

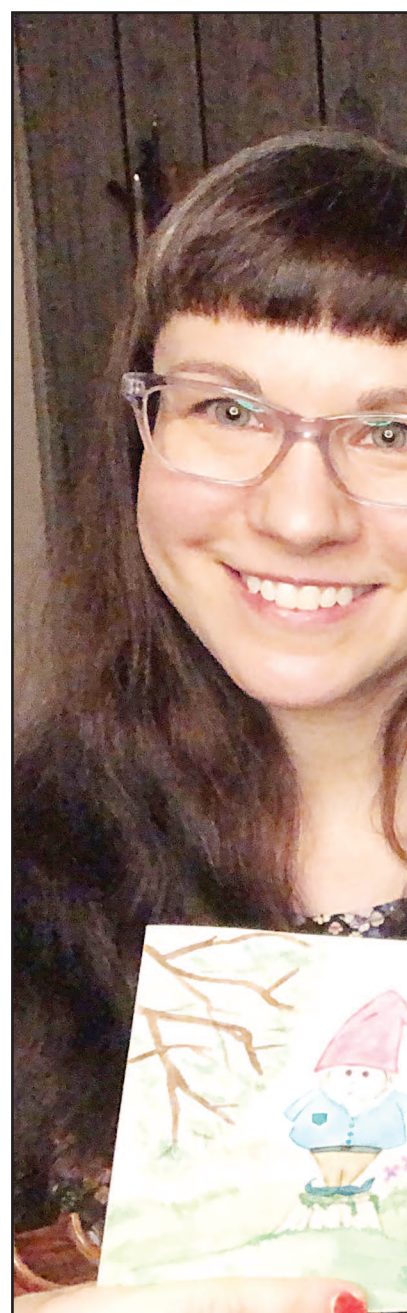
“The more we talked about it, the

more ideas I was getting for songs and how we could approach the project,” she said. “As I got more excited about it, I realized it was the right thing to do and we decided to pursue it.”

The couple purchased some recording equipment and had to learn how to use it, before recording their parts at home, while bandmate Kory Brodsky added parts from his home. The mixing and mastering of the recording was done by Chris Rooser, who they had worked with, at his home in Asheville, N.C.

Project Good For Her
An admitted perfectionist, Ms. Verch said one of the nice things about the forced lockdown is the fact you realize everything doesn’t have to be or can’t be perfect.

“There’s freedom in that,” she stated. “I realized that there would be parts of the project I could still excel in like the quality of the songs I wrote and how we performed them, and some that wouldn’t be achievable because recording at home might not be as stellar as in a studio.”



Rankin-native and Canadian, fiddler, stepdancer, singer and songwriter, April Verch, left, and her partner and bandmate Cody Walters, just released *Top Of The Hill*, a new recording targeting children and their families. Ms. Verch is holding the album cover, which she also created.

Photo courtesy: April Verch

“I just embraced the overall picture of the project and what it could achieve, rather than focusing on what it couldn’t,” she added. “There is something really beautiful in creating something without getting caught up in the perfection of it, and that’s a good lesson to learn.”

She said now, more than ever, it’s more important to find healing and joy when and where people can.

“And I have to admit, this recording surprised me in providing just that for me,” she admitted. “I’m hoping the same might be true for people who hear it.”

The album, which features Ms. Verch on fiddle, foot percussion, and vocals, also showcases banjo and vocals from Mr. Walters, and bandmate Mr. Brodsky on guitar and mandolin. Ms. Verch is assisted by nephew, Calvin Domann, of Ankeny, Iowa, cousin Liliana MacLean of Gloucester, niece Chelsea Painchaud of Rankin who sang and were involved in the videos and artwork for the album.

“We did a music video for ‘*I Want To Help*’ which features relatives,

friends and students that we asked to contribute,” she noted. “It’s on YouTube if anyone wants to check it out.”

For the artwork in the liner notes of the album, she put out a public call via social media to friends and fans inviting people of all ages across Canada and the U.S. to contribute works based on the topics of the songs.

“It was really exciting to have people from all over Canada and the U.S. sending paintings and drawings and we included as many as we could in the booklet,” she remarked. “It was also another way to keep that connection to homemade rather than perfect and I think it feels extra special because of it.”

Seven of the 10 songs are originals, while the remaining three are favourites from her time growing up with her parents, Ralph and Muriel Verch, and sister Tawnya (Painchaud) at their home in Rankin. The three found pieces are an old Shaker hymn called “*Simple Gifts*”, the catchy “*Little Robin Red Breast*”, and a cute song, which they added

a verse to entitled, “*Good Morning, Merry Sunshine*”.

Her favourite piece is the title track, *Top of the Hill*, and the illustration on the cover is a water-colour impression of what the song depicted for her.

“I have no experience in water colours but I didn’t let that stop me,” she said. “I knew it would keep everything in the spirit of creating and expressing without being caught up in the details.”

She had so much fun doing it she did other paintings for the inside liner.

All 10 tracks include vocals and the lyrics are included in the liner notes so people can sing along. Selections from “*Top of the Hill*” will likely show up in her future shows when touring opens back up. Digital downloads are available at april-verch.com. The download includes the album and a digital booklet with liner notes and song lyrics that can be printed out at home. The tracks include: 1. *Favourite Season*; 2. *Top of the Hill*; 3. *Little Robin Red Breast*; 4. *It’s Okay to Cry When*

You’re Sad; 5. *Good Morning Merry Sunshine*; 6. *My Neighbour*; 7. *I Want to Help*; 8. *A Little Dance*; 9. *Simple Gifts*; 10. *Ten Little Fiddlers*.

Good Feedback
While the release was only out a week as of last Friday, she has had people writing and commenting they are enjoying it.

“I especially love hearing grandparents say they’ve shared it with their grandchildren,” she noted. “That makes it extra special.”

The release is exclusively in digital format, which has worked out okay, she said.

“People who buy the album receive a link to a folder they download and it has the music files in a few different formats to suit their preference, and the liner notes and artwork are there too,” she explained. “It’s the first time I’ve ever done a digital-only release, but it made the most sense right now.”

Unsure if she would do another project like this again, she has certainly enjoyed it and is hopeful it brought joy to others as well.

Staying Busy
Despite not being on the road, she has been doing some live-streamed concerts from home, some more like her actual concerts, others that are more casual where they answer questions and comments. She admits she still has not got used to playing to a screen, rather than an audience.

“It’s just not the same as reading an audience, but we appreciate that we’re lucky to have this option to connect with people,” she remarked. “There are so many live-streamed events though, and it’s getting harder and harder to catch people’s attention.”

“At the same time, with everything going on, music has great power and we still want to share it anyway that we can,” she added. “I’ve been able to start teaching online fiddle and step-dance lessons which have been great and I can do with regularity, which I could never do while we were touring.”

She doesn’t have any students from the Valley right now, but she would welcome the chance to connect with someone here.

During the last couple of years, she has split her time between her parent’s home in Rankin and their home in Horse Shoe, but since COVID hit in mid-March, they have not gone anywhere.

“We’re trying to do our part to keep everybody safe,” she said. “We can’t cross the border easily, but we also don’t feel safe travelling, even to see Cody’s family in Kansas.”

“I’m very homesick for my family and the Valley,” she admitted. “But we stay in touch the best we can and I keep in mind that that’s a small problem to have compared to so many in the world right now, and I count my blessings instead. There are so many.”



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