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Verch, Walters perform at Midwest on Friday

By LAUREN BRANT Star-Herald

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Three-year-old April Verch stood on stage and performed a beginner's step dance routine. That started her journey in music.

“My teacher had a recital and, at the end of the year, we all got up at the local arena and performed,” she said.

As a little girl, Verch grew up in the Ottawa Valley region near Ontario, Canada. With an older sister who danced, Verch followed suit. She learned the Ottawa Valley step dance, which has evolved over time.

“It’s a style that is unique to that area,” Verch said.

The Ottawa Valley step dancing style originated in the lumber camps and resembles the Irish dancing style. Over the years, it has taken influences from various cultures to make it what it is today.

“If you can picture Irish dancing and tap dancing and maybe clogging combined, it’s also no longer straight,” she said. “It’s very intricate and is almost like a third instrument.”

She then took up playing the fiddle at the age of six.

“Those traditions are both unique to the valley, but they were a big part of my life because my parents are both fans of that music,” she said. “I grew up going to those kinds of events and I took lessons and started performing really young. I always wanted to make a career of it.”

It wasn't until her early 20s that Verch would begin singing as part of her performance.

Her shows include performances of music from her childhood, traditional music from Scandinavia or old time American and classic country from the 1950s and 1960s.

Through the past year, Verch and her husband Cody Walters have performed various live stream events, but their performance Friday will be their return to the stage.

"It's going to feel so good to have people in the room that are responding because you can kind of read comments when you're streaming, but it's just not the same," she said. "I'm not sure how it's going to feel, but I'm guessing it will be kind of emotional."

During their streamed performances, Verch performed her dance routines on a step board in her living room. She looks forward to getting back on a stage.

"There are certain steps that you just can't do without moving more," she said.

"Then there are steps that you can do them, but you can't do them the way you want because of the space constraint. I'm a lot more free to do whatever comes to mind on a stage."

Walters plays the guitar and banjo. He started playing music in college since his roommates were musicians. There was a bass guitar sitting in the corner that no one played, so he picked it up and learned it.

Years later, Walters would join Verch's band as the bass player before the couple were married in 2018. The pandemic provided him an opportunity to pick up the guitar and incorporate it into their performances. Typically, the third member of the group played the guitar. They will also perform duets as they prepare to return to the Midwest Theater stage.

“My previous experience was a really warm welcome from the audience,” she said. “We’re excited to come back.”

During their first performance at the Midwest Theater, the group performed as a trio, but due to COVID-19, the third member of the group was unable to make it. COVID-19 restrictions also prevent them from playing two 45-minute sets with an intermission in the middle, so she said they will perform one 60- to 70-minute set.

They will return to perform at the Midwest Theater Friday, May 7 at 7:30 p.m.

“I’m very much looking forward to having that artist on stage again on Friday and to be able to have that relationship the audience and artist have,” Midwest Theater executive director Billy Estes said. “The most meaningful thing for me is seeing families coming back to the shows.”

The performance will also be live streamed on the Midwest Theater’s YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/MidwestTheater. Admission is free to the public, but the theater is currently open at 50% capacity. Face coverings are required.

“I think music is more important than ever and it’s true that some people aren’t comfortable coming out, so it’s important for us to still share it with them,” she said. “I realize that music is different for everybody, so I just hope they will get out of it whatever they need if that’s joy, a memory, healing or getting away and forgetting about everything. I hope it’s a positive thing for whatever people need.”

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