

IN CONCERT: Scottish Highs, Fiddle-Wise - Prize-winning Scottish/Celtic fiddler Jamie Laval makes his Santa Barbara debut

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent
September 7, 2012 12:11 PM

IN CONCERT

Jamie Laval

When: 6:30 p.m. Thurs.

Where: SOhO, 1221 State St.

Cost: \$12

information: 962-7776, sohosb.com



Arthur Pearsall photo

Celtic fiddling of a high, prize-worthy order is on tap at SOhO next Thursday, when Jamie Laval makes his Santa Barbara debut in a program of "instrumental Celtic music, history and stories." The now North Carolina-based Mr. Laval's story belongs in the category of the classically-trained musician who, equipped with technical virtuosity and musicality, follows a passion into another stylistic terrain entirely.

The lure and call of Celtic music has defined this violinist-turned-fiddler's musical direction and mind set. The highlights of his chosen path so far include winning the U.S. National Scottish Fiddling Championship in 2002, and a diverse gigging schedule which has found him playing with rocker Dave Mathews and for the Queen of England. At the moment, he is also riding high on acclaim and attention for a strong new album, "Murmurs and Drones," which garnered the "Best World Traditional Album" in this year's Independent Music Awards.

Mr. Laval recently discussed his musical life and mission in progress, on the road towards Santa Barbara, among countless other places.

News-Press: Is the prospect of performing live something you really treasure, both as a musical experience and in terms of helping to educate the audience about your musical tradition?

Jamie Laval: Throughout my performing career I have always found it gratifying to share some of the background story with the audience: "Where do I find my material?" "What

historical events have led to making Celtic music sound so distinctly different?" "Why is ancient Celtic music relevant in today's world?" People consistently tell me after a show that the educational component enhanced their appreciation and enjoyment of the music.

In the past couple of years I've noticed something further-reaching start to happen beyond the immediacy of a particular performance. I've watched new listeners drawn to the beauty of acoustic music and seen young musicians adopt my personalized violin techniques. People thank me for giving them a few moments of solace and meaning in the midst of their crazy world, and I receive emails from people saying that my first album has lived in their car stereo since 2003. Perhaps the difference between being an artist and being a capable practitioner is a matter of what we leave behind after we've gone.

NP: Your latest album, "Murmurs and Drones" has a wonderful journey-like arc to it, in addition to showcasing your fiddling mastery. Was there a particular concept you were pursuing with this album?

JL: I wanted to try something a bit more subtle than the conventional 10 songs of two-and-a-half minutes each with two-second gaps between. Daily life flows seamlessly from one event to the next, so why shouldn't musical ideas? Doesn't music mirror our human experiences? The new album is a story that unfolds.

Imagine a person wandering through the Scottish highlands, encountering village dances along the way, the wisp of a piper's melody somewhere off in a distant glen, a seabird cackling from a misty inlet, a lamenting ballad shared by a traveling peasant. The end of one melody overlaps the start of another. Occasionally two melodies become superimposed, as in a round or canon.

A concept album requires a lot more involvement from the listener. It's also more expensive to record and produce. To my delight, listener reaction to "Murmurs" has been extremely positive, in evidence by the recent award.

NP: You are classically trained. What drew you into the Celtic fiddling world? Was it a natural move for you to on music as a life?

JL: I had been studying classical violin at the Victoria Conservatory for scarcely two years when I caught the Celtic bug at a barn dance in the Canadian Rockies. From then on I eagerly pursued both classical violin and fiddle, ultimately becoming a professional symphony violinist and dashing away from symphony hall after the gig to playin' fiddle jam sessions and contra dances.

As I became more proficient, I found myself drawn irrevocably to Scottish music more than other styles, especially Highland bagpipe music. After several years pursuing two simultaneous careers, I came to feel that my best, most creative work was in traditional Celtic music. The rustic tonality of Celtic music best expresses my own sentiments.

Although I no longer play classical music, much of my technique has been brought forward into my fiddle playing—capabilities which have helped me develop a Celtic style all my own. Classical training has also been invaluable in the area of composition and arranging, giving me the skills and ease for composing in both symphonic and folk idioms.

NP: As you did get more deeply drawn into Scottish/Celtic fiddling, was there an element of musical research and exploring the roots of the music involved?

JL: I am fascinated by how historic events have shaped the evolution of the Celtic style and culture—events such as Ireland's Potato Famine, Scotland's Highland Clearances, the American Revolution, etc. I continually seek out celebrated older musicians to try to understand more about the subtlety and essence of traditional music. In this day and age we are blessed with easy access to seemingly boundless materials such as field recordings, old music books, and scholarly writings. I never stop researching.

NP: You live in the Appalachian region, which has a strong link to Celtic influence, doesn't it? So you sense a musical rootedness, calling that area home?

JL: My present home of Asheville, N.C., is heavily populated by the so-called Scots-Irish, a group of immigrants banished originally from southern Scotland to Ireland, and who eventually settled in the Appalachian Mountains. Over time their music became infused with the rhythmic music of the African slaves, spawning bluegrass and old-time Appalachian styles. It has been gratifying to see people in North Carolina proudly keep alive their Scottish heritage while championing the modern, worldly views of a truly cosmopolitan state.

NP: Your bio includes occasions as varied as playing with Dave Matthews and making a private appearance for Her Majesty the Queen. First of all, how was the audience with the Queen, and does variety make your musical life more interesting and surprising?

JL: Celtic music functions equally well with different combinations of instruments, and transitions beautifully to a multitude of venues, from large outdoor festival stages to lofty concert halls, rock clubs, intimate house parties, recording studios — and yes, Royal functions for the Queen.

The unifying feature is that nearly everyone likes it. Celtic music is certainly ever-expanding as the general public becomes more familiar with it as an artistically-important genre. The challenge for an uninitiated listener today is in discerning between a truly artistic performance which pays homage to the ancient art form and one which has lost the original spirit in an attempt to be flashy.

The music was, after all, not originally created for the purpose of "wow-ing" a crowd, but rather to offer something of delicate beauty. Sometimes it takes learning more about the genre and the top performers before a person can appreciate the depth of Celtic music.

NP: Do you feel good about the way things have progressed so far on your musical path? Is this a strong and healthy time in your creative life?

JL: Every day since I made up my mind to devote myself exclusively to Scottish music, the journey has gathered positive momentum. Obviously, being a full-time performer/educator/composer/band leader/self-manager is challenging, but I am doing exactly what I should be doing. And that feels fantastic.

NP: What's next on the horizon? Any particular projects or ambitions to pursue?

JL: I've had some fantastic experiences composing and performing with symphony orchestras and am eager to continue with similar crossover projects. I also plan to travel to Brittany (France) to study their ancient Celtic music. And a new album is percolating in my mind. So much to create, so little time.