

“It’s just attitude.”

Lacie Carpenter has a ready answer for people who ask what the difference is between fiddle and violin.

By Tom Geddie

LACIE CARPENTER’S WORLD STRETCHES from bluegrass breakdowns at the Gladewater Opry to chamber orchestra performances in London, Austria, and Germany. At 27 years old, the Texas fiddler already has 23 years of stage experience, beginning with ballet at age four and a stage role when she was “about five.”

Forgive her if the year of that theatrical debut is a little fuzzy.

One thing quickly led to another, and the experiences quickly added up to a so-far career that’s more focused on music today but still includes drama and athletic moves. It adds up to another musician finding a way to piece together a living from the passion.

The Dallas-born, Tyler-raised fiddler, singer-songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist has loved the stage since that early start in ballet that quickly pirouetted into stage roles at Tyler Civic Theater, which in turn led to Broadway-style music when led to experience in half a dozen or so genres.

“I would call my music Americana,” she said, falling back on a genre that’s almost impossible to really define. “It’s based on folk, but has some blues to it. I love blues. I love jazz. And bluegrass, classical, country, and Celtic. A little bit of mariachi, but not so much that I’d call myself a mariachi player. Of course, Texas old-time fiddling and old-time mountain music. I don’t care what genre. I have fun collaborating with artists.”

In 2013, she was named —

for the second year in a row — fiddler of the year at the East Texas Music Awards. Her band, Lacie Carpenter and Southern String Line, also won awards for band of the year, Americana folk act of the year, and vocal group of the year. Back in 2008, she won the “people’s choice” world champion fiddler vote over 500 or so other fiddlers at the annual World Championship Fiddlers Festival in Crockett.

Vertical jump

PART OF THE APPEAL IS HER dramatic stage presence, which includes a five-foot vertical jump that turns into a knee slide across the stage.

“That’s pure adrenaline,” she said. “Usually during something like ‘Orange Blossom Special’ or ‘Devil Went Down to Georgia’ — something that gets the audience going. When they’re going, I go. It just happens.”

Carpenter also was soloist for the Ireland tour of Carthage-based Project String Power and, when she was earning a music education degree at Stephen F. Austin, toured Europe as part of the university’s select chamber ensemble to celebrate Mozart’s 250th birthday. She’s also re-



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corded music for three films and worked as a session musician — fiddle and mandolin — on five country and bluegrass albums. She’s studied with Texas fiddling legend Johnny Gimble along with Buddy Spicher, Randy Elmore, Dale Morris Sr., and others, including being both a student and a certified instructor at workshops hosted by Randy Elmore, Dale Morris, and noted fiddlers Mark Wood of Trans-Siberian Orchestra fame and Mark O’Connor. One of her mentors was Dr. Isidor Saslav, a nationally-respected symphony concertmaster, concert violinist, musicologist and Haydn scholar.

In addition to her long-running gig in the house band at the even longer-running Gladewater Opry, cowboy church services, benefit concerts, and her own band gigs, there’s her day job as orchestra director at two Tyler middle schools and the private lessons she teaches.

Buskirk Scholarship

JUST BEFORE SHE GRADUATED from high school, she auditioned for and won a Buskirk scholarship, named for Paul Buskirk, who was Willie Nelson’s guitar teacher.

“When he died, he gave money to Willie Nelson and di-

rected this money for two violinists who have passion to go into folk music. I was one,” she said.

Carpenter comes from a family of violin players, and tried out for her first orchestra when she was 10. Now she plays two of the electric viper violins — a seven-string model and a five-string model — designed by Wood. The seven-string can sound like a violin, of course, and a viola, cello, and bass. In addition to the violins and the mandolin, she plays guitar and a “ganjo,” which is a six-string banjo that’s played like a guitar.

“Music came to me,” she said. “I didn’t go to it. My mom got me a piano, a baby grand piano, and I just started playing it when I was three or four years old. I distinctly remember playing ‘Memories’ from ‘Cats.’”

Her mother took her to concerts — anything from symphony to rock — “constantly,” she said.

“The one that most inspired me, when I was 8, was Burt Bacharach. I was mesmerized. I wanted to do everything he did and more — how he played piano and sang and wrote all these phenomenal songs. I wanted to play music like that, to perform, and to inspire others the way they inspired me.”

Carpenter has a ready an-

swer for people who ask what the difference is between fiddle and violin.

“It’s just attitude,” she said. “Classical is more refined: sitting up straight, playing music by other people like Bach who have come before us who have a strong opinion about where they lived, why they lived, how they lived. Fiddle music is to make people happy or sad, to really draw out the emotions. Not that classical music can’t. Dvorak, Beethoven, and Bartok sure can really draw out what was going on in their time periods. The fiddle music is all about trying to make people happy, really, like gypsy waltz almost makes you cry but you still want to dance to it. You can improvise, have fun with fiddle music.”

Teaching music works much the same way.

“Theory is important,” she said. “If students don’t know what’s going on, they can’t play the music. They can play notes, but they need to learn how to make beautiful music.”

Perhaps surprisingly coming from someone so grounded in the music, Carpenter said she believes what counts the most in a song is the lyrics.

“The lyrics. Absolutely,” she said. “I love my fiddle tunes, but

when I have a good song I’m going to sing that good song. People like the fiddle tunes. They like to clap their hands. But if they hear a familiar cover song like ‘Have Mercy’ or ‘Only Daddy That’ll Walk the Line’ — I sing ‘only mama that’ll walk the line — everybody sings along and you have them in the palm of your hands.”

Carpenter also does her own songs, telling the audience how and why she wrote the songs “so they can be familiar with the song next time. And, if I get a good reception, I’ll do it next time. If I don’t, I’ll work a little harder on it and maybe do it the next show after.”

If her schedule isn’t busy enough, Carpenter is also getting her master’s degree in music therapy and is recording her first album, due out early this spring with a dozen or more songs including her originals and some traditional such as “Sugar Foot Rag” and “Cluck Old Hen.”

Oh, and then there’s her theater work. Carpenter has been in more than 35 plays and musicals and will be part of an upcoming production of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Nevermore” at Tyler’s Apex Theater.

The many passions of Lacie Carpenter add up to a living. ■

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