

Weekly Webb: Exploring musical tangents

Jaci Webb Apr 26, 2013 0



A member of the Billings Symphony and bluegrass group Ted Ness and the Rusty Nail, violinist Geoffrey Paul Taylor follows up a program of improvisational music he played last year with a similar concert Thursday at the Billings Depot.

JAMES WOODCOCK/Gazette Staff

Geoffrey Paul Taylor bounces his bow across his violin strings, caught up in a moment that may never happen again.

He's inventing music influenced by what he had for breakfast, his need for more coffee, and who's standing in the room with him. That's the way his May 2 concert at the Billings Depot will be: Taylor reaching for sounds that no one has heard.

When you listen, you can pick out his classical influences and the happy frenzy of his fiddle music with Ted Ness and the Rusty Nails. To stretch his boundaries, Taylor changed the tuning on his violin from the usual GDA and E to ADAD. But beyond the tuning is Taylor's all-encompassing quest to perform living music.

Taylor was born in Billings and started studying violin at the age of 8 with Diane Fossen, who is still part of the Billings Symphony Orchestra, an organization that Taylor is now a member of. Taylor is a small, cheerful man with dreadlocks down to the middle of his back. He always looks

like he's in on some inside joke that can't quite be explained. Music makes him happy these days. It better because it's become his whole life.

Taylor's family moved to Tyler, Texas, when he was 8 and he grew up in what he calls the "buckle of the Bible belt." After graduating from the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley with a performance degree in violin, Taylor moved back to Billings a year and a half ago where his aunt, Joanie Swords, runs Harper & Madison.

"I figured I'd get a job there, but she was full. So I took the job with the symphony and started teaching private lessons and working in an after-school program at the Salvation Army. Sometimes you have to build your wings on the way down the cliff, you know," Taylor said.

Taylor is like the pied piper of music, influencing students not much younger than he is as a private instructor and a substitute music teacher at Billings high schools.

Taylor met the rest of Ted Ness and the Rusty Nails at Ernie November soon after arriving in Billings.

"I was burnt out, ready for something new," Taylor said.

The bluegrass project has been so much fun, Taylor said, that they are hoping to organize a tour after they all relocate to Missoula later this year.

But meanwhile, there was just something Taylor had to get out. He calls it exploring all the possibilities of sound and tone without a framework or more simply, "going off on musical tangents."

"It's similar to jazz," Taylor said. "I'm not really going in with a concrete melodic idea. I have a key in mind and explore a taste or a smile within that key. The more you associate, the more you can explore."

It's important to note that Taylor has performed this type of concert before. He played a similar program in 2012 and had so much fun doing that show, he's working on another round.

“I’m not really taking it lightly,” Taylor said. “I’m practicing my (expletive) off.”

All kinds of music inspires Taylor, but folk, gypsy fiddlers and Norwegian fiddle have the strongest influence on his sound. He first got interested in improvisation when he worked with the “coolest thing” in Greeley, a group called Cobra.

“There are no notes, you just follow the rules,” Taylor said. “We don’t live in a world where everyone wants to listen to ‘Pomp and Circumstance.’ That’s not music of our time, that’s not music that is relevant, spontaneous or living music.”