

MUSIC:

Mads Tolling: Violin came first; then he applied it to jazz

Mads Tolling saw the light when he heard a popular Danish jazz guitarist play



Publicity photo

Mads Tolling prefers “more fusiony” jazz.

By [Kristen Peterson](#)

Fri, Mar 6, 2009 (2 a.m.)

Mads Tolling, violinist with the Turtle Island Quartet, never pictured himself in a string quartet.

Being a jazz violinist wasn't exactly on his radar either.

But you never really know what's going to happen.

One day, you're 6 years old, starting violin; the next thing you know you're 10 years old and busking Swedish folk songs on the streets of Denmark with your sister. You hear Miles Davis and your world changes. By 16, you're playing jazz violin. Four years later you're boarding a plane to Boston to study jazz at the Berklee

School of Music — at least that's how it happened for Tolling.

"It took me a little bit of time for me to realize that this isn't an impossible thing to do," says Tolling, who will perform with the Mads Tolling Quartet tonight in Las Vegas. "I didn't know anybody who played Miles Davis on violin, but I certainly knew trumpet players. Then my dad took me to see Kristian Jorgensen, a Danish jazz violinist, when I was 17."

The 28-year-old Danish-born jazz violinist has won two Grammy Awards with the Turtle Island Quartet and tours with jazz bass player Stanley Clarke.

He also composes music, and his preference for a "more fusiony type of jazz" led to his forming the Mads Tolling Quartet in 2007. He describes it as a cross between Bela Fleck and the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

The group's CD "Speed of Light" features Tolling's textured compositions, Miles Davis' "Blue in Green," Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog" and Clarke's tribute to John Coltrane, "Song to John."

The quartet includes Mike Abraham on guitar, George Ban-Weiss on acoustic and electric bass and Eric Garland on drums. They met in the San Francisco Bay area, where Tolling lives.

"It's really hard to find people who play well together in jazz," he says. "It just kind of clicked from the get-go. The jazz violin is a whole different animal than a sax or trumpet. It's a thinner sound so you have to find someone who can play sensitively and has great dynamics."

Tolling studied under violinist Matt Glaser at Berklee and with saxophonist Joe Lovano and pianist Joanne Brackeen. Tolling has performed with clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera, guitarist Al Di Meola and drummer Lenny White. His gig with Clarke came on the recommendation of jazz violinist Jean-Luc Ponty.

The Turtle Island Quartet, a jazz string quartet based in San Francisco, asked Tolling if he played viola. Although he never played the viola, he said yes and joined the group in 2003.

"You just don't find a lot of viola players out there who are jazz violists," Tolling said.

He was the group's viola player for four years before becoming one of its violinists. He's also written arrangements and compositions for the group.

"It's intriguing to me that you can reshape a song, but keep its integrity and energy," Tolling says of arranging music for violin. "I always think of songs that lend themselves to violin. Sixteenth-note licks, I get completely lost."