

Hard work got Mads Tolling to Turtle Island

Jesse Hamlin, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Mads Tolling cheerfully admits it: He lied.

"But it was a white lie," says the brilliant young Danish violinist, who'd never picked up a viola until David Balakrishnan of Turtle Island Quartet called him in 2003 to ask if he wanted to audition for the group and if he'd ever played viola. Tolling said yes to both, got an instrument and "practiced my ass off for 10 days," he says with a laugh.

That's all the time he had to prepare for his audition in Puebla, Mexico. After a second date in Bremen, Germany, the other musicians were sufficiently impressed to offer him a permanent chair in the Bay Area string quartet. "If playing the violin is like driving, playing the viola is like driving through snow," says Tolling, who now plays violin in Turtle Island, an improvising ensemble fluent in the language of Brahms and bop, Indian ragas and American folk and rock. He's won two Grammys with the quartet, including the 2008 Classical Crossover prize for "A Love Supreme - the Legacy of John Coltrane."

Tolling is also featured in electric bassist Stanley Clarke's rocking fusion band, and leads his own grooving quartet with guitarist Mike Abraham, bassist George Ban-Weiss and drummer Eric Garland, which plays Yoshi's in Oakland on Monday. They'll do some of the songs from Tolling's latest CD - including some Americana informed by Bill Frisell and Pat Metheny - Cannonball Adderley's "Work Song," Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog" and a sublime solo meditation on the Miles Davis-Bill Evans classic "Blue in Green" that moves from Bach-like cadenzas to dancing country fiddling.

"Growing up in Europe, I knew nothing about fiddle music," says Tolling, 28, sitting on the deck of his hilltop Albany apartment, which has an expansive view of the Berkeley hills. A gracious guy with classic Scandinavian good looks, he studied classical music from an early age and made money playing Danish and Swedish folk songs on the street with his violin-playing sister. "It wasn't until I was 20, when I moved to Boston to study jazz at Berklee (College of Music), that I started hearing all these fiddlers. I was like, 'What's that?' " says Tolling, who studied for a spell at Copenhagen's marvelously named Rhythmic Conservatory, home to jazz and pop.

Fiddle skills

A gifted improviser and arranger with a keen sense of harmony and a beautiful tone, Tolling picked up a lot of fiddle techniques - the shuffle bow and the percussion trick called the chop - working with Turtle Island. "I love combining fiddle techniques with jazz, because you can create amazing grooves and amazing-sounding things for violin that you can't create on any other instrument," says Tolling, who

flipped for jazz at 14 when his father played him a cassette of Davis doing "Autumn Leaves." The intimacy of it got to him. "You can cry when you listen to that. Jazz was all I wanted to listen to."

He dug into Miles and Coltrane and then the jazz violinists - Stephane Grappelli, Stuff Smith and his fellow Dane Svend Asmussen. Tolling gigged around Copenhagen and landed a part in a Danish TV miniseries set in the 1940s, playing Danish jazz violinist Finn Ziegler. He could've made a career for himself in Denmark, but wanted to push himself and study at Berklee with people like saxophonist Joe Lovano and pianist JoAnne Brackeen. Tolling was also tutored there by violinist Matt Glaser, who recommended him to Turtle Island. Clarke hired him at the suggestion of the wired-up French violinist Jean-Luc Ponty.

Tolling also works locally with the English jazz-and-rock pianist Terry Disley, who raves about him. "Most classically trained violinists that attempt to play jazz sound like they were influenced heavily by Stephane Grappelli," Disley says. "Mads, however, sounds like he comes out of Charlie Parker and Coltrane as well as being influenced by rock. A very contemporary sound. He's one of a new breed of improvisers and one hell of a musician."

When he's not making music, Tolling likes to hike the hills of Marin. A decade ago, he climbed Mount Kilimanjaro with his family. His mother and sister couldn't make it beyond 14,000 feet, but he and his father reached the volcano's summit. "I'd never climbed a mountain before," Tolling says. "Denmark's highest point is 400 feet. It was very humbling."

Keeping fresh

He prefers scaling musical heights. "I want to come out with music that turns people's heads," says Tolling, who deftly integrates solos and group improvisation into his written arrangements, shifting stylistic gears as he goes. "I always try to come up with different colors and schemes so as a listener, you never feel, 'Oh, I've heard that, they're going to repeat that.' I try to create a groove and interest and sound melodic at the same time. It's a challenge, but that's what I love to do."

Mads Tolling: The violinist performs with his quartet at 8 p.m. Mon. at Yoshi's, 510 Embarcadero W., Oakland. \$12. (510) 238-9200. www.yoshis.com.

To hear samples of Mads Tolling's music, go to www.madstolling.com.

E-mail Jesse Hamlin at jhamlin@sfchronicle.com.

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