





Liz Davis Maxfield

INTERVIEWED BY MERIDITH JACKMAN

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When did you first begin to play cello?

When I was four years old, my mom bought me my first cello and I started taking lessons. That stint lasted all of two months. At the time I was much more interested in headstands than music, so it was probably more of a liability than anything else.

However, even though I only played for a few weeks, it did have a lasting effect on me—over the next few years I still considered myself a musician and a cellist. When I was about nine years old, I started lessons again, and I had a little more patience and interest. (Although I still did headstands.)

Why music? Why Celtic?

Around the time that I started playing the cello again, my family started a band called FiddleSticks. (My mom, Kira Pratt Davis, played the Irish harp; my dad, Mark Davis, plays the bodhran [an Irish drum]; my sister Becca Davis Stevenson plays the flute and sings; and my sister Kate Davis Henderson plays the fiddle.)

With performances as motivation, I gradually learned to play bass lines, then harmony parts, melodic lines, and rhythmic grooves. Because I took classical cello lessons consistently while I performed folk music regularly, I feel like I grew up equally comfortable in both traditions.

When I enrolled as a cello performance major at BYU, I really began to think about my future career as a cellist, and I came to the decision that while I will always love to *play* classical music, I would much rather *perform* folk music. With that in mind, I applied to Berklee College of Music in Boston.

Tell us about attending Berklee.

Berklee began as a jazz school, but over the years it has branched out to include most styles of popular music. Most recently, Berklee has begun to embrace folk music, primarily bluegrass and Celtic. It was really wonderful to be a part of something so fresh and innovative there.

Many of my professors there are gigging musicians who have made names for themselves in the performance world, and many of my peers brought a lot of depth and experience that contributed quite a lot to my education.

What were the highlights of your experience there as a Celtic cellist?

While I was at Berklee I had great opportunities to collaborate with my peers and professors in concerts, classrooms, and recording studios. I worked with a huge range of musicians—Dropkick Murphys to Eugene Friesen to Phil Ramone.

I formed a band called Folk Arts Quartet (FAQ) to explore Celtic/classical crossover in a hybrid genre we call ChamberGrass. With this group, I performed around Boston and toured in New York. It was so satisfying to create something and see it take off. I learned so much through that process.

Tell us about your newest album.

During my last semester I recorded two albums. *Big Fiddle*, my first solo album, was a really rewarding project. Once again, it was a great opportunity to see an idea come to life. I arranged traditional tunes and original compositions to demonstrate the cello's versatility as the “big fiddle” in folk music. I collaborated with a great group of people and performed the album for my senior recital.

I also recorded an album with FAQ during my last semester. This self-titled album highlights the “folky” side of the string quartet and features compositions and arrangements from each member of the band. Through the recording process, I felt like we were able to really solidify our sound and explore ChamberGrass in new ways.

How was creating your own band different from participating in the family band?

With the Folk Arts Quartet, I worked with three fellow Berklee students. Our musical backgrounds, as well as our approach to Celtic, varied greatly, and we tried to take advantage of the musical diversity in our group. In FiddleSticks, I knew so much about my bandmates that I could predict most of their reactions—musically or not. As a member of FAQ I learned a lot about finding ways to combine vastly different ideas together to suit the taste, skills, and personality of each member. I felt that this process was very rewarding and musically successful.

How have you seen the gospel affect you as an artist?

The gospel has an immense impact on the way I view my career as an artist. Through spiritual experiences, I have found inspiration and comfort relating to my artistic endeavours.

Sometimes it's easy to get caught up in the *practical* implications of my membership in the Church. I don't like to play shows on Sunday, I don't drink, and I don't swear. I'm married and I'd like to have kids someday. Yes, these are the most obvious effects—or at least the ones that people comment on most often. It's kind of a shame, though. I wish that the *spiritual* implications took precedence. In the long run, I'd rather have people equate Mormonism with the plan of salvation than with scheduling conflicts and party-poopers. That being said, the

fact that I live my religion has led to conversations about spirituality with several of my colleagues.

How has your additional technical training influenced you as an artist?

Because of my classical training, I feel at home with the cello. Because of my non-classical training, I feel at home with music. I particularly loved studying music theory at Berklee. It was taught from a jazz and popular music perspective, and the ideas I learned there have really helped me as a composer, arranger, and performer.

What are your plans now after completing your bachelor's degree?

Shortly before I graduated from Berklee, I was awarded a Fulbright grant to study Irish music at the University of Limerick in Ireland. Under this grant, I will write and publish a method book on Irish music for the cello, and I'll receive a master's in Irish traditional music performance from the University of Limerick.

After the completion of my studies I plan to continue composing, performing, recording, and teaching, as I aim to expand the folk cello world.

What do you look forward to most with your move to Ireland?

I've just started classes at the University of Limerick, and I am so excited for this opportunity. I really look forward to immersing myself in this style of music and exploring new ways to use the cello. Because the cello hasn't been used in Irish traditional music, I look forward to collaborating with high caliber musicians and exposing more people to the cello's potential in folk music.

How do you see your music help build the kingdom?

Although I am not pursuing a career in Mormon art, I hope to help build the kingdom by exposing more people to the goodness of the gospel. By living my religion I can be an example of stability and integrity. By being upfront about what I believe and how it affects my life, I hope I can inspire others to consider spirituality as a source of happiness. ■



