

J.J. Lavallee: Métis Fiddler

JJ Lavallee was born and raised in the small town of St. Ambrose, Manitoba. Part of a large Métis family that includes many accomplished musicians. JJ started singing at the age of six and by the age of nine had picked up his first guitar. When JJ turned sixteen, he found himself playing regularly with his Uncle Dave Lavallee. This talented family includes such groups as “The Lavallee Tradition” and the “Darren Lavallee Band”. At the age of 16, his Uncles took JJ under their wing and introduced him to the music industry, playing Métis festivals, family gatherings, and a variety of concerts. After branching off from his family, JJ has become an accomplished musician in his own right, releasing 3 CDs, capturing nominations and winning an APCMA award for best fiddle album in 2006, and opening up for country music stars like Charlie Major, Johnny Reid, Marty Stewart, Jesse Ferrell, and Shane Yellowbird.



JJ was a winner at the 2010 Aboriginal Peoples Choice Music Awards for Best Fiddle CD – *A Fiddle Bit of This & A Fiddle Bit of That*

Road of redemption leads to Batoche

Lavallee says music 'saved my life'

Jeremy Warren, The StarPhoenix

Published: Monday, July 23, 2012

Musician J.J. Lavallee waited three years to perform at Back to Batoche Days, the annual summer celebration of Métis culture in Saskatchewan.

Organizers asked Lavallee to wait until 2012 to play so he could share his life story of recovery and redemption with young people at Batoche during the four-day event, which this year had a theme focusing on Métis youth. For Lavallee, the timing was right.

"I'm on my way out of being a youth and on the way to mentorship," the 32-year-old Lavallee said at Batoche on Saturday, adding that his appearance is about more than just music.

A little over three years ago, Lavallee struggled with an addiction to drugs and alcohol. With the help of his band, he decided to get sober after spending much of his younger years partying and trying to find confidence through drinking.

"Culture and music have transformed and saved my life," said Lavallee, who is from St. Ambroise, Man., but now resides in Winnipeg. "I almost lost my life. But I came out of it clean and sober. I want to show the youth that they don't have to follow that path. Don't reinvent the wheel. It's been done before."

At 17, Lavallee, now an accomplished fiddle and guitar player, started performing at house concerts where the booze freely flowed. He found that alcohol gave him the confidence that he lacked growing up surrounded by abuse.

"Nobody told me I didn't need to be drunk or need to be high," he said. "But I didn't know anything else. Nobody ever told me there was another way."

His friends and bandmates helped steer him away from the hard partying life and toward traditional Métis music. "They helped immerse me in the music and here I am three years later," Lavallee said. "It was the music and culture that brought me back to life."

Around 5,000 people were expected to pass through the Back to Batoche event, now in its 42nd year, organizers said. The celebration of Métis culture regularly includes traditional fiddle music and jigging performances and competitions, bannock baking demonstrations, tours of the Batoche National Historic Site, arts and food vendors and pavilions of Métis organizations from across Canada.

Lavallee is the type of performer Back to Batoche needs, especially as more young people are coming to the annual celebration, event manager Claire Belanger said.

"When you have someone like J.J. Lavallee or John Arcand teaching young people, that is sharing knowledge," Belanger said. "That is what the primary role of Batoche will become over the years, to be a place for people to come together and have this knowledge shared."



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