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Jazz Etc. / Paul de Barros

Carla Kihlstedt's fiddling is mighty fine

I'd heard, and liked, Bay Area violinist/vocalist Carla Kihlstedt a couple of times before — notably at last fall's Earshot Festival with the Tin Hat Trio and at the Vancouver International Jazz Festival, where she did a terrific workshop and played free-improv with pianist Paul Plimley. But I was totally unprepared for the dazzling beauty and quirky excellence of her debut album as a leader, "2 Foot Yard" (Tzadik).

Imagine Laurie Anderson with for-real violin chops; a voice that soars from



[enlarge](#)

Violinist/vocalist Carla Kihlstedt plays with her trio, 2 Foot Yard, on a triple bill, "The Family Van Tour," Thursday at the Sunset Tavern.

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singer/songwriter pathos to grunge-rock wail; and gently off-kilter art songs that recall Charles Ives.

Then again, you don't have to imagine it, because you can hear Kihlstedt with her trio (also called 2 Foot Yard) on a dynamite triple bill, "The Family Van Tour," Thursday at the Sunset Tavern, in Ballard (\$8; 206-784-4880).

Kihlstedt's trio plays a set and also backs up Bay Area singer/songwriters Lisa Fay ("El Fay"), lately of the group Seven Year Bitch, and Carla Bozulich, known for her work with the Geraldine Fibbers and collaborations with Willie Nelson, Beck, Lydia Lunch and others. Guitarist Nels Cline (married to Bozulich) also will be on hand.

Speaking on her cellphone Tuesday from a balcony at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, Kihlstedt explained how the "van" got rolling. "When the record came out," she said, "I didn't want to stick the group on a bill with a random act in every city, so I decided I would book a whole tour. Lisa Fay is a friend who has been writing beautiful songs. Then we decided we should have a headliner, so we asked Carla."

Raised in Lancaster, Pa., Kihlstedt studied violin at the Peabody and Oberlin conservatories but has been dodging a classical career ever since. In the centerfold of her album insert, there's a reproduction of a note, written in a child's hand, that pretty much sums it up: "Dear Mom and Dad," she writes. "I am very sorry for upsetting you last night. The Mozart was very very long and got me bored."

"I was all my teachers' worst nightmare," recalled the 31-year-old fiddler. "My heroes were Laurie Anderson and the Kronos String Quartet. When I won a contest by playing the Beethoven violin concerto, I wrote my own cadenzas."

2 Foot Yard, with Marika Hughes (cello) and Shahzad Ismaily (percussion, guitar), came together in the studio. The name, says Kihlstedt, is meant to suggest both a "teeny solo playground," as well as a sense of intentional "mismeasurement."

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That said, there is an organic quality to Kihlstedt's songs arising from her conviction that, at its heart, music is about breath. At her Vancouver workshop, violin tucked under her chin, she sang wordlessly as she bowed.

"If you're not breathing when you're playing, you stop speaking in sentences," she explained. "If you're aware of your voice, it keeps the process visceral."

In the same vein, Kihlstedt's post-modern genre-splicing — she's a regular on New York's "downtown" scene, where jazz, rock, world, classical and avant-garde music shoot hoops together, as equals — isn't what makes her music appealing. It's her sense of melody, texture, drama and dynamics — not to mention a great sense of humor.

Check out Carla.