

THE
MORNING
CALL

Lehigh Valley Music Awards' top nominees: Talking with James Supra and Scott Marshall



Musicians Scott Marshall (left) and James Supra are pictured on stage at the Musikfest Café at ArtsQuest Center at SteelStacks in Bethlehem on Thursday, February 26, 2015. The pair occasionally perform together and are the top nominees for the 16th annual Lehigh Valley Music Awards. /// (Harry... (Harry Fisher / THE MORNING CALL)

With its 16th awards ceremony at 4 p.m. March 8 at **Musikfest** Café at ArtsQuest Center in Bethlehem, the Lehigh Valley Music Awards has been around long enough to have its own veteran performers. James Supra, who won the awards' first honor as Best Harmonica Player in 1999, is not only still around, but also has the awards' only unbroken winning streak, taking every harmonica award since. This year, the blues band frontman is among the top nominees — he's up for nine awards, including Outstanding All-Around Performer, nominated both by fans and people who work in the music industry. He's won the top industry award two years in a row.

This year's top nominee also is a veteran — country-rock performer Scott Marshall. He has 12 nominations, including facing Supra in both Outstanding All-Around categories. He was the last one to win it before Supra. That gives Marshall 43 nominations in the past four years.

Marshall also will be among five musicians receiving 20-year Veteran Awards at the ceremony at the Musikfest Cafe at the ArtsQuest Center in Bethlehem.

In all, local musicians and others in the music industry will receive awards in 68 categories, from children's music to hard rock.

Here, Supra and Marshall talk about their careers:

James Supra, who last year won seven awards, including Best All Around Performer for second year in a row.

On his recent success:

Supra: “I’d really like to think it’s hard work. [Now working as a full-time musician for four years], I’ve been able to focus on being a full-time musician. So a lot of hard work.

“I wasn’t really feeling well two weeks ago, and I had like three or four gigs in a row. You know, it’s the only job I’ve ever had where I can’t call in sick, you know? When you’re a musician and you’re really passionate about what you do for a living, you feel a little bit more compelled to plow through it even when you’re not feeling well. Funny enough, though, they were three or four of the best gigs I’ve done all year. It’s kind of funny how that works out.

“It really comes down to this: It’s really a lot of luck. I’m very lucky and fortunate to be as successful as I am. I do put a lot of muscle into it – a lot of conviction, but I work hard ... and fortunately for me, I’m able to have a little bit of a name behind me ... I just think that over the years, all the hard work is starting to pay off a little bit.”

Supra on winning the Lehigh Valley Music Awards’ Best Harmonica for 15 years straight:

“I’ve been very fortunate to be the recipient of that harmonica award, going 15 years strong and nominated again. ... I’m very proud of that. [But] I know there are other harmonica players in the Lehigh Valley that I know are equally deserving of that award.

“We’re all winners. There are so many good harmonica players in the Lehigh Valley.” He mentions the three other nominees in the category this year: Mike Mettalia, Ansel Barnum and Brian Brazil.

“They’re so vital. I’d like to see them get recognition for their contribution to the harmonica, especially in the Lehigh Valley.

Marshall: “To be honest, I think the recent spike in popularity and being recognized is first and foremost because of the fans. They’re responsible for it. I mean, we work hard at what we do in all areas of the business, but my fans and my peers – ‘cause some of them are industry nominations, as well.

“I just think they like what they see and what they hear. They appreciate who I am, what I’m about. “And as a songwriter, I’ve always considered it to be an honor to be a part of the local music scene. So to be accepted by the fans and my peers for who I am and what I do and the music I have to offer, I just think it’s resonating with people.

“I’ve always been a bit different, not matter what the genre, really I’m playing at any point in time. But I’ve learned to embrace that. And I think it seems to go a long with the listening audience. ... I’m just giving audiences something different that you might not see in this area.”

On changes in the Lehigh Valley music scene:

Supra: “I’m not a very talented musician when it comes to being musically studied. I made a very unconscious decision, I guess ,to surround myself with musicians that were wayyy better than me. ... I would try to sit in with as many acts as I possibly could, trying to gain experience, especially performing experience.”

At one point, he says, he sat in with five bands in one night.

“There’s a lot of opportunity if you work hard at it. ... so over the years, though all the people I’ve met and collaborated with ... there just seems to be a nice prestige about the Lehigh Valley. It has countless events.

“I don’t see a scene like the Lehigh Valley anywhere else. I really feel like the Lehigh valley music scene is really, really strong as far as camaraderie goes, and the opportunity to perform. I just don’t see that musical collaboration between artists in other areas of the country.

Marshall: Born and raised on top of South Mountain, Marshall broke into the music scene in a band at 17. He later worked as a street performer in center city and played in three bands in between. “It’s hard to believe I’ve been doing it this long. Time just flew. I just kept at it.”

“I’m thankful. The Lehigh Valley music scene all these years has kind of embraced me and I’ve always been able to go out and find work and maintain a fan base among all the other talented musical artists that are all over the Lehigh Valley.”

“For me it’s been a lifelong blessing because the local music scene has been very good to me. I consider myself extremely blessed. ... All the artists and musicians that I’ve shared the scene with an business associates just the same. Some say, ‘Aw, you’re lucky.’ But I feel God blessed.”

“I’m trying to be a light in a world of ever-increasing darkness, it seems. It’s working for my listening audience.”

On taking a new direction in his music:

Supra’s James Supra Blues Band changed lineups more than a year ago: “Unfortunately you have to roll with the punches that come to you. In 2012-13, The James Supra Blues band was riding really high. We had an excellent lineup and released an album that did really well in England. “In the very beginning of 2014, he had to make a serious lineup change. I had lost my bass player to a national touring act ... We went with a different lineup and the 2014 year was really an experimental period for me.

“We definitely changed a lot. We’re a little bit more hard rock-oriented. But we still really dig playing the blues. We’ve opened up our minds a little bit to do more different stuff that my band hadn’t done in the past.

“The band has never been more communicative. We really have a close musical collaboration. ... It’s come full circle, and we’re really ready to take it even higher.”

Marshall has a new disc, “These Wheels” out (It’s nominated for the Lehigh Valley Music Award for Best Album): He says he started recording it in 2011. “That year, my mother’s health started declining, [and] my wife’s health was very poor at the time as well. What started out as an inspirational album in that – we’ve got to stay focused on the roads that lie ahead and having fun and pressing on toward our goals -- it kind of took a spin because my mother passed and we were fresh in the middle of recording.

“And it seemed the writing took on a different feel, though the message was still the same. ... at the end of it, I realized, ‘this album really tells the story of what’s on my heart and in my life the last three years. Hardship after hardship, and then when we finally got it done, it all made sense. And I really looked at it as a blessing. ... when I read through the lyrics, I thought, ‘people will really get this. It’s universal language – even though it was at the cost of my hardship and my heavy heart, this is something special.

“Keep your wheels rolling in the right direction, no matter what road you’re on or where you’re at in life, trying to remain positive. Try to be a light in a world of darkness; try to be everything everybody needs us to be.”

Marshall plays as both Marshall’s Highway and Scott Marshall and Hillbilly Souls: “It started with Marshall’s Highway – a horsepower band; a heavier side of me. ... a hybrid rock/country collision. ... Because of the guys, we’re able to go in any direction that I want to, really. And we’re able to do it authentically. ... It’s kind of like The Rolling Stones going country at times.”

“Hillbilly Souls started when I was being offered acoustic gigs. ... duos or singer-songwriters. I don’t like compromising my sound. I was really missing some of these other instruments I was hearing in my head, and I reached out to banjo player and upright bass player.”

“I figured, you know what, I’m going to try this.” More folk/Americana. Do bluegrass renditions of Rolling Stones songs.

On sharing the stage:

Supra: “One of the thing that really is the biggest part of my heart in this area is the collaboration. As a full-time working musician, you sort of have to reach out there and work as much as possible. And that means filling up those Wednesdays and those Thursdays and those Sundays, when your own band isn’t performing.

“And Scott Marshall and I, we’ve been acquaintances for several years but the last two years, we’ve really come together as friends. We both look up to one another. I have a tremendous amount of respect for him as a person and an artist.

“But it just seemed natural when we got on stage together. ... We played so well together, and the audience really received us very well. And we became very good friends in the interim. ... I think we

both realized the fans really dug us on stage together. We both have a lot of energy; we both have a lot of commitment to what we do. We're really passionate about the music we play. And that really worked well."

Marshall: "I first saw him play at the Lehigh Valley Music Awards, and then I saw him two or three years later open for **Buddy Guy** at Penn's Peak. ... sure enough, three years ago, he came out to a show and he blew some harmonica with us, and we just got along, we just hit it off. And a couple of months later, he gave me a call" and asked whether Scott would be interested in getting together and doing a show or two?

"We'll just fill our calendars up. And we've done it several times now and it's a whole other blast. This whole other entity that people love."

LEHIGH VALLEY MUSIC AWARDS 16, 4 p.m. Sunday March 8, Musikfest Cafe, ArtsQuest Center at SteelStacks, 101 Founders Way, Bethlehem. Tickets: \$20 general admission, Info: www.artsquest.org, www.lehighvalleymusicawards.com

<http://www.mcall.com/entertainment/lehigh-valley-music/mc-lehigh-valley-music-awards-top-nominees-talking-with-james-supra-and-scott-marshall-20150307-column.html#page=1>