

The Long Beach string master hails from a family of classically trained musicians – a violin-playing grandmother (also his first teacher), his violinist father and cellist uncle. “I started playing violin at three and four years old,” says Sudakow. “I had a lot of background in classical and music theory as a youngster and that provided an excellent foundation that has helped me, I think, with what I am doing today.”

James received ample encouragement and personal instruction in those formative years, judging by how he’s flourished as a contemporary musician. The writing was on the wall early on: As Sudakow studied and developed his classical chops, his heart started drifting in an entirely different direction. “As a kid, I obviously was practicing the classical thing and hadn’t really found my own sound or style of music yet,” he explains. “But when I hit my teens this is where the real gap started to exist between practicing a couple hours a day classically and then listening to hard rock, alternative and progressive stuff like Yes, Pink Floyd, Nine Inch Nails and King Crimson. I wanted to play music like that because that’s what I got excited about.”

Around this time a close friend suggested he find a way to adapt his violin with a pickup so he could plug into an amp and join an ensemble setting. He took his buddy’s advice and was immediately hooked on the new, electric sound.

Sudakow bought a Marshall amplifier and began experimenting with volume, tone, power chords and, basically, attempting to mimic electric guitar sounds. “It was trial and error, mostly,” he says. “I was influenced by a lot of electric violinists like Jerry Goodman from Mahavishnu Orchestra. He did some amazing things with them. But actually, it was John McLaughlin and what he did on guitar that really got my attention. So I bought some effects pedals to try and simulate what I was hearing on guitar. But after screwing around with effects and trying to sound like a guitar, a light went on. I realized I have a bow and I play a fretless instrument, so I can use these effects in a different way. I found I had even more flexibility than what a guitarist would have.

“The cool thing I found using delay pedals and other things is that I can get different sounds by the way I use the bow. If I pizzicato it or get real staccato with it, the delay sounds different. By doing that I just opened up a whole new set of delay sounds with just that one effect. That’s when I realized I could expand the range of sounds with just single or double effects.”

Sudakow’s gear these days consists of his main axe, a Zeta five-string violin, and a custom Mark Wood six-string model. His amplifier of choice is a Marshall triple-lead half stack, with final sound embellishments supplied by a Line Six delay. James likes the flexibility of his amplifier setup and — particularly in the recording studio — his raw, organic sound really comes through.

“I used to do a lot of studio work and producers would always want me to plug directly into the board for recording,” he says. “But I never was satisfied with what came out because that sound was never big- or fat-enough sounding for me. Many electric violin players go direct and I think they are missing out on a lot of distinct tonal qualities you get from a big amp like a Marshall. I need that big, fat sound, especially when trying to play power chords or rhythm parts.”

In recent years Sudakow split time between session work and his own projects, serving as a member of the instrumental rock band Human Life Index and contributor to the group Under-Radio. Recently, he has devoted most of his energy to live performance with his own trio and promotion of debut solo disc, *Green*.

“*Green* was clearly my first real foray into writing my own music and composing things the way I wanted to,” says James. “I’ve always been a fan of the concept album. Pink Floyd and Radiohead were real masters of that stuff. I always wanted to do something like that because my goal with this album was to

have each song represent a discrete color, as far as style and tonality. What I also tried to do was have the listener be able to listen from start to finish for 45 minutes and have the songs interwoven into each other. The intent was to have the entire album become like one 45-minute song, going through changes with an ebb and flow to the music.”

The independently released *Green* was produced and engineered by Under-Radio guitarist and friend Eric Zimmerman, and features the tight virtuosic trio of Sudakow, veteran session ace Matt Bissonette on bass, and drummer David Gaziel. It’s the culmination of Sudakow’s prog-rock vision — stripped down and visceral, with elements of industrial electronica, ambient space and Hendrix-like urgency added to the mix.

Sudakow is quick to credit his many musical heroes and mentors, and seems very humble in his quest for a uniquely identifiable sound. But, at the same time, how often does one witness a violinist fronting a rock trio with the unbridled abandon normally reserved for heavy metal shredders? James and the live rhythm section of drummer Gaziel and bassist Andy Zacharias are reopening an experimental musical gateway forged in the ‘70s. They know that, circa 2008, it’s an approach with which the under-40 crowd is largely unfamiliar.

“What we’re doing was obviously bigger in the ‘70s when the whole fusion and progressive rock movement was [more mainstream],” says Sudakow. “What is interesting now is that there are people who just don’t get it. That is, in terms of the songs being ‘too long’ and not conforming to some formula-based cookie-cutter format. That being said, there is a wide group of people that, when we’re done playing a show, will be open to our music and find it interesting, even if they are not familiar with what we do or the style. It’s this organic process of trying to help people discover music that they hadn’t listened to before or haven’t been around in a while.”

Sudakow and company have focused on club dates and special prog-oriented events like the Cal Prog Music Festival, where the trio performs in October. They also have pursued promotional opportunities via college and independent radio, as well as marketing and music licensing for media outlets like MTV, which have featured music from the *Green* album in specialty programming.

Currently, Sudakow is immersed in composing and recording material for the successor to *Green*. The new disc will continue along a similar path — advancing the marriage of energized, edgy progressive rock with electronic sounds and textures.

“I’ve always liked industrial/electronic music like Nine Inch Nails, as I mentioned before,” says Sudakow. “I just like the element of some of the electronic programming because it’s got this dark and edgy side to it. And my sound, with all the distortion and effects, I think fits really well there. So I wanted to incorporate some of that into what I do.”

Sudakow performs regularly in Los Angeles and San Francisco, both as a headliner and opening act for the likes of Apex Theory, Kings X and Steve Vai. He also was nominated for indie rock artist of 2007 at the South Bay Music Awards in Southern California.

James enjoys taking the violin into uncharted waters, gaining new friends and fans along the way.

“It’s cool to find that there are people who are interested in hearing a violin in a very different way, and that it can fit into this alternative and progressive rock kind of vibe,” he says. “It has been a fun ride so far and hopefully it’ll keep moving forward.” Ω