

TURTLE ISLAND STRING QUARTET HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

While there are many things to point to as far as origins and preludes for the Turtle Island concept, the primary precursor is David's work in his masters degree program from 1981-1984. He wrote music for a string quartet predicated on each member being equally and powerfully grounded in classical technique and jazz improvisation. He also wrote a thesis called "Transcending Style" in which he pointed out that there did not currently exist a string quartet that could adequately perform the music he had written, not so much because of the technical challenges, but because of the primary emphasis on multi stylistic integrity. Hence, he recorded all four parts himself overdubbing them one by one, using three violins and a baritone violin (a regular violin with strings tuned an octave low), thereby establishing the compositional and architectural template upon which the TISQ approach would be based.

Many of the American fiddle derived rhythmic techniques he used in this music, such as shuffle bow and chop, he had learned through his close association with the hugely influential crossover genius of the violin, Darol Anger. Darol at that time had already achieved deserved notoriety for his work with the David Grisman Quartet as well as his recordings with the new age label Windham Hill Records. Another big influence was David's composition teacher Allaudin Mathieu, who gave him tools to excavate the underlying connective principles of a wide range of musical styles and cultures, including the music of India, where David's father was from.

Cellist Mark Summer came to the SF bay area in the summer of 1985, happily leaving behind his position in the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra to check out the exciting new string music that he had heard was happening there. David, Darol and violinist Matt Glaser had made a recording called "Jazz Violin Celebration," were playing some concerts in the bay area at the time, and invited Mark to sit in with them. One of the things they did together was perform as a quartet, playing a Bach chorale going into a version of "All Of Me," as well as Miles Davis' "So What." In those pieces Mark demonstrated an uncanny ability to play swinging bass lines on the cello, a skill he was to develop beyond anyone's imagination in the years that followed with the TISQ.

This experience convinced David that he could finally form a group that could perform his music. At the time one of his improvisation students was a violist, Laurie Moore, who was excited about the music David had written and wanted to try playing it. So David enlisted her and Mark, and together with Darol they assembled in the fall of 1985, in order to perform David's piece—thus, the quartet was born.

David had also come up with some jazz arrangements for the quartet that gave lots of space for soloing and string band rhythm section style, something that he and Darol had done a lot of in their previous work together in various settings (most notably a band called Saheeb, with mandolinist Mike Marshall and pianist Barbara Higbie). It was these arrangements that first captured the imagination of the public.

At the time jazz violinists were rare, jazz cellists even more so. Regarding the theoretical existence of jazz violinists, as clarinetist Paquito D’Rivera likes to say, that is akin to a barking cat. The Kronos Quartet by that time had already made their seminal recordings of the music of Thelonius Monk and Bill Evans, beautiful examples of a classical string quartet expanding the possibilities for the form. The stage was set for a string quartet made up of maverick string jazzers to go rogue and take things to the next level!

It quickly became clear that the quartet was striking a deep chord in the musical community due to its completely unique core identity coming from an authentic American music perspective. The group set upon a determined search for a name that would signal these fundamental defining characteristics, during which they performed under the title “The Quartet With No Name.” Finally Darol came across a Pulitzer prize winning book by poet/ecologist Gary Snyder called “Turtle Island,” its title taken from native American creation mythology, in which the author pointed out that American culture was really an immigrant culture, coming from all points of the globe. This fit the group perfectly, since jazz, the most important art form to emanate from America, was at its roots an integration of musical elements brought in from Europe and Africa, later absorbing a healthy influx from Latin America and Asia, making it the first significant world music style.

Another early consequence of success was the realization that there would be membership changes. In 1986, the group started to attract possibilities for touring, which was not workable for Laurie. She was replaced by Irene Sazer, a violinist willing to switch to viola in order to play with the group, which would prove to be a common theme for the quartet in the coming years.

In 1987 they recorded their first LP, eponymously titled, the ‘A’ side being David’s arrangements of “Stolen Moments” by Oliver Nelson, “Milestones” by Miles Davis, “A Night In Tunisia” by Dizzy Gillespie and Darol’s arrangement of Bud Powell’s “Tempus Fugit.” The ‘B’ side contained David’s aforementioned four-movement piece “Balapadam.” They also recorded some free improvisations to be included as bonus tracks for the newly arrived CD format. It was released by Windham Hill Records under their brand new sub label, Windham Hill Jazz.

In 1988, A Night In Tunisia garnered David a Grammy nomination in the instrumental arrangement category, the first big success for the group as well as for David as a composer/arranger. The group also began to tour more extensively in that year, and went on to make their next recording, “Metropolis,” which featured among other things, Mark’s classic solo cello crossover composition, “Julie O.”

A graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music, Mark’s initial inspiration for “Julie O” grew out of his love for the Bach Cello Suites, which can be heard in the way he uses broken chords and rolling arpeggios. But that is just the point of entry. His idiosyncratic adaptations of the shuffle bow and chop techniques brought in from Darol, combined with his prodigious bass pizzicato technique and stellar instinct for direct and evocative melody garnered from a lifelong passion for the music of the Beatles resulted in a piece

that has taken its rightful place next to the classics of the cello repertoire, widely performed throughout the world by cellists of all stripes and ages and ability levels.

“Julie O” resoundingly underscores the unique position Mark created for himself in the context of the group, the only chair never to be replaced. Described by People Magazine as appearing like a “Blissed out rock drummer,” Mark is consistently the player most often singled out for special praise and acknowledgment by audience members at shows, and deservedly so.

In 1989, Irene left the quartet to pursue a solo career, yet another common recurring theme in the quartet’s history. The group was coming to realize that the skill set required to be in the quartet also predisposed members to want to do their own thing, which meant people were going to come and go. The good news was that for a group almost entirely fueled by the members of the group for repertoire as well as the abundant space for improvisation, the advent of new members translated into refreshing new inspiration and ideas. At the same time, the original premise put forth by David was powerful enough to encapsulate this influx.

Katrina Wreede, a classically trained violist who had studied jazz with David, assumed the viola chair from Irene and played in the group from 1989 to 1992, a period that included four more Windham Hill recordings. After she left, the group went through a two year period in which they performed with several candidates for the viola seat, including a six month stint with violinist Jeremy Cohen, another to switch to play viola in order to work with the group, who also played on two tracks of the “Spider Dreams” recording.

In the fall of 1992, violist Danny Seidenberg joined the group. He was the group’s first authentic ‘barking cat,’ in that he was a Juilliard trained violist with a commensurate level of jazz chops, along with brilliant compositional talent and a hilarious taste for the irreverent. He was to stay in the group for eleven years, and contributed some of the most well loved Turtle Island charts, such as Tower Of Power’s “Who Do You Think You Are,” as well as witty adaptations of classical standards, suitably renamed, such as “Bach’s Lunch,” and “Thin Ice,” a reworking of the Winter concerto from Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons.”

A few months later, family responsibilities prompted David to resign in the spring of 1993. Another Juilliard graduate with an off the page background, Tracy Silverman, took his seat. The group also changed management, to ICM, with whom they made a valiant effort to popularize the group, including opening up for Ray Charles at the Hollywood Bowl. Eventually their efforts in this direction along with conflicting individual agendas started to pull the band apart. Nonetheless this period was important in the group’s development, both for the innovations that grew from their passionate drive towards commerciality as well as the ensuing recommitment to the principles upon which the group had been founded. In February 1997, Tracy left and David returned. Two months later, capping off a whirlwind of changes, Darol left to pursue his solo career, and was replaced by 24 year old Evan Price.

Evan came to the group by way of recommendation by Matt Glaser, now chairman of the string department of the Berklee School Of Music, the first college to award a degree in string jazz performance. Evan had also previously undertaken studies at Cleveland Institute Of Music, Mark's alma mater. He was the first of the new generation of string players with accredited academic training in alternative string styles to join the group. TISQ had been a big influence in the development of programs such as the one at Berklee because it symbolized the possibility of a legitimate career track in this area. Evan had indeed grown up listening to the group's recordings and had played some TISQ charts in his various school settings.

During the period that followed, 1997-2002, the scene in America was not very strong for the group, prompting them to travel overseas quite a bit, especially in Germany, where they had great success. They moved on from Windham Hill to Koch International, with whom they made two recordings, the second featuring Paquito D'Rivera, including their cover of "You've Changed," which garnered David his second Grammy nomination in the instrumental arrangement category. They also left ICM to work with Baylin Artists Management, who encouraged them to take a more thematic approach to their concert presentations as well as undertake more collaborative projects. Most successful in this regard was the program they put together with the Ying Quartet.

When David was at the 2003 Grammy Awards for his nomination, he happened to sit next to Telarc producer Thomas Moore, who had just won a Grammy for classical producer of the year. Thom encouraged David to contact the owner of Telarc, Bob Woods, saying to simply look up his number in the phone book and give him a call. David proposed the project with the Yings, Telarc accepted, Thom produced the recording and the group went on to win their first Grammy, in the 2006 classical crossover category, for their recording "4+Four." Their following recording, "A Love Supreme, The Legacy Of John Coltrane," won them their second Grammy in 2008, also in the classical crossover category.

At the time of this last recording the group decided to drop the word 'String' from their name, in keeping with groups such as the Emerson, Guarneri, and Kronos quartets; in fact pretty much all of their string quartet colleagues similarly eschew the word. Another factor was the group's ongoing imperative to search out ways to sidestep the unfortunate associations for American audiences with string quartets being stuffy and boring without sacrificing artistic integrity.

The shift to Telarc coincided with Danny Seidenberg's leaving the group in 2003. Next to take up the viola chair was Mads Tolling, a 24 year old jazz violinist from Denmark, also a graduate of Berklee College Of Music and again recommended by Matt Glaser. It was somewhat ironic that a group so much based on playing American styles would bring on a string player from Europe. But as serious jazz violin aficionados well know, it was the Europeans that first made the biggest impact on string jazz, starting with the patron saint of jazz violin, Stephane Grappelli, his contemporaries such as Mads' countryman Danish violinist Svend Asmussen, and continuing with the biggest violin star of the modern jazz

era, Jean Luc Ponty. Mads was similarly grounded in modern jazz styles, especially those so warmly embraced by the European culture, exemplified by musicians such as Keith Jarrett, Jan Garbarek, Nils Henning Orsted Peterson, Wayne Shorter, and other legendary jazz musicians associated with the famous European label ECM.

Upon Evan's departure in late 2007, Mads switched to violin and 24 year old violinist Jeremy Kittel joined, assuming the viola chair in January 2008. Jeremy had previously auditioned for the group in 2003, including playing a concert with the group, and had made a big impression. 19 years old at the time, he was already a master of a wide range of alternative styles, including jazz improvisation, American folk, and Scottish and Irish fiddle styles as well, having won multiple US national Scottish fiddle titles. He was then working on his masters in jazz studies at the Manhattan School Of Music, and since Mads was ready to go, the group felt it best to give Jeremy more time to develop. Which he did in spades, and so when Evan left, Jeremy was the group's first choice to join the group. Luckily the group was able to lure Jeremy away from New York where he was making quite a name for himself as a solo violinist. With Jeremy they made their third recording with Telarc, "Have You Ever Been...?" featuring the music of the legendary icon of rock guitar, Jimi Hendrix, released in late summer of 2010. The recording also features David's most recent multi movement composition, "Tree Of Life."

"Tree Of Life" is the latest and perhaps most mature example of David's sticking to his compositional guns, so to speak, throughout the history of the group. While the journey has not been simple nor easy, his determination to hold to the integrity of his original vision, buttressed by Mark's unswerving support and incredibly powerful musical response, has played a central role in the group having survived the danger of an early departure due to being discounted as a cutesy trick or gimmick as a consequence of its notoriety for playing jazz standards and imitating the sound of a jazz ensemble.

In fact, the group prides itself as being the string quartet best suited to presenting the music of the great geniuses of jazz and its many tributaries such as blues, rock, R&B, etc., and has always felt thrilled and honored by the chance to re-voice this music through the lens of the string quartet. Ironically, this is in keeping with the traditional string quartet form itself, having long been essentially a cover band format, in that the vast bulk of the material performed comes from another era, written by composers long dead. Nonetheless the group has strived mightily to live up to its vast potential for significantly contributing to the expansion and redefinition of the parameters of classical music, which demands an ongoing fearless willingness to reach out beyond the overlay of its cover band persona.

For David, the string quartet form is hallowed ground, of course largely due to the phenomenal strength of the classical performance tradition, but perhaps even more so to the compositional tradition, representative of the finest music ever conceived of by the great European classical master composers, from the inventor of the form Haydn onwards well into the twentieth century. From the very beginning David foresaw that if a group such as Turtle Island could keep both sides of this equation at a high enough level, it could conceivably come to be seen as the most important string quartet of modern times.

While the group's amazing scope exceeds any one person's vision, in essence, the defining characteristics of the group as he envisioned it are easily recognizable in the current version three decades later. Many people ask how the group has changed over the years. Often Mark's answer, reflective of long years spent wrestling with how to breathe fire into the sometimes distant and opaque conceptualizations of his longtime partner, is that the group has come full circle back to David's original vision. But for David, there was never a question of the group coming back, because as he saw it, it never left in the first place. And it never will.