

Maverick strings: Turtle Island Quartet to interpret Hendrix, Coltrane in Tarpon Springs

By [John Fleming](#), Times Performing Arts Critic
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The Turtle Island Quartet, from left: Mads Tolling on violin, David Balakrishnan, also violin, Mark Summer on cello and Jeremy Kittel on viola.



BY JOHN FLEMING

Times Performing Arts Critic

Mark Summer is looking forward to having some Greek food this weekend in Tarpon Springs. "I spent my honeymoon in Athens, and I love Greek food," said Summer, cellist in the Turtle Island Quartet, which plays Saturday night at the Tarpon Springs Performing Arts Center.

Summer and his colleagues — David Balakrishnan, violin; Mads Tolling, violin; and Jeremy Kittel, viola — are also looking forward to playing selections from their forthcoming album, *Have You Ever Been ...?*, which includes their adaptations of Jimi Hendrix songs for amplified string quartet.

"We've chosen music that really shows Jimi Hendrix as a composer," Summer said last week from his home in Marin County, Calif. "You know, people think of him as a guitar god, and David's whole take (in the violinist's arrangements) is to show how Hendrix was thinking compositionally. Our aim is to make this sound elegant yet ferocious."

In Tarpon, the quartet plans to play *Have You Ever Been (To Electric Ladyland)* and *House Burning Down* from the album, which will be released in August. Hendrix fans are among rock's most discerning. What will they get out of hearing a string quartet play their hero's music?

"I think when you take something that someone did and put it in a new context, and you do it well, you're going to illuminate the original," said Summer. "Jimi Hendrix's music was often one guitar with overdubs and bass and drums. To hear a string quartet bring it off, it's kind of a marvel. Like, how do you do rock 'n' roll without drums? It's kind of ridiculous that we even try it, but because of techniques that we can do, and because we all groove well together, it really comes off."

Turtle Island is not the first string quartet to take on Hendrix. The Kronos Quartet made a splash 25 years ago with its version of *Purple Haze*.

"We didn't think about it that much, because so much time has passed and we knew we were going to treat it differently," Summer said. "We weren't worried about Kronos. We love Kronos. We knew we were going to do it in a whole other way."

Turtle Island has done this sort of thing before with much success. The quartet's last release, *A Love Supreme: The Legacy of John Coltrane* — its interpretations of the great jazz saxophonist's music — won the 2008 Grammy Award for best classical crossover album. The group will also play selections from that album this weekend.

Summer and Balakrishnan are original members of Turtle Island, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this fall. The quartet's *4 + Four* (with the Ying Quartet) won the 2006 Grammy for best classical crossover album.

Summer, 52, started out as a classical cellist ("I tell people I'm in recovery from classical music") who played in the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra for three years. He thinks that background has served him well in his partnership with Balakrishnan, a kind of mad genius of the violin.

"We're a great team because I'm into showcasing the cello and showing you can play any kind of music on string instruments, and David's into showing that you can integrate the compositional elements of classical music and Indian music — his father is from south India — and bluegrass and jazz and rock 'n' roll."

John Fleming can be reached at fleming@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8716

If you go: Turtle Island Quartet

The group plays at 8 p.m. Saturday at Tarpon Springs Performing Arts Center, 324 Pine St. \$18, \$20. The quartet will host a workshop for musicians at 2 p.m. Saturday. \$10. (727) 942-5605