

on the road



The Real Life

A ceremony in a distant land recalls a more distant home.

By David Balakrishnan

ONE OF MY FAVORITE aspects of the touring musician's life is that I am often graced with glimpses of the real lives of people in faraway places. One such glimpse came during the Turtle Island Quartet's recent trip to Italy, where after arriving in Rome, we quickly departed for Bari, a small seaport on the other side of "the boot."

As it happened, the day we arrived was the holy day of the city's patron saint. Being a deeply Catholic constituency, it seemed as though the entire population of Bari had gathered to parade a life-size statue of the saint through the city streets, replete with

numerous marching bands, entertainers of all sorts, and us gawking Turtles the only foreigners in sight! After we made inquiries as to who was being worshipped, we were told it was Saint Nicholas — yes, the same — who, evidently, when not in America delivering presents on Christmas Eve is busy blessing and protecting the denizens of a small city on the southeast coast of Italy.

We followed the crowd as it slowly worked its way down the main street, turned a corner and arrived at a huge open square, where a large stage was encircled by a choir and a bishop standing at a dais with an old microphone, feedback squealing away. The bishop launched into a mass of sorts as the statue made its way to the front, where it was met with a pedestal waiting for its arrival and installation. There were bright neon lights hanging on scaffolding surrounding the square and stage with the ocean harbor for a backdrop, where all sorts of crafts were milling around in full regalia.

I stood and watched the full service, and though I understood not a word, I was mesmerized nonetheless. The scene was so real — nothing posed or staged, no tourist hustle. I could imagine that this had been an essentially unchanged part of these peoples' lives for centuries.

In Alampallam, my father's ancestral village in South India, they have a similar yearly event they call Rathotsvalam, where they parade around their patron saint (Sri Varadharajaperumal) in a gigantic chariot kept under lock and key until the big day. Unfortunately, I have never witnessed it, having not yet managed to land a gig at the family digs — maybe it's true what they say about not being able to draw a crowd in one's hometown. But hope springs eternal, as I imagine it would be quite the spiritual — if not religious — experience. ■

David Balakrishnan is a violinist with the Turtle Island Quartet.