



## Turtle Island String Quartet emphasizes the classical in its mixes

By **R.J. DELUKE**, Special to the Albany Times Union  
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The idea of the string quartet performing traditional classical and chamber music has to be pushed aside when one considers the Turtle Island String Quartet. Pushed way aside.

The group was created some 25 years ago with the idea of blurring the lines between musical genres; using traditional classical approaches as a base, but adding jazz improvisation and elements of folk music and other American genres.

Take, for example, its recent recordings. "A Love Supreme: The Legacy Of John Coltrane," (Telarc, 2007) won a Grammy (the group's second) for best classical crossover album. Hardly music one would associate with two violins, cello and viola. In February, the quartet recorded "Have You Ever Been ...," which uses the music of Jimi Hendrix as a jumping off point for musical exploration. It will be released in August on Telarc.

Some of that music, and other examples from Turtle Island's broad musical menu, will be performed when the group comes to The Egg on Sunday night.

David Balakrishnan, its founder, says the group's success over the last quarter-century has created a music scene where the quartet is no longer an anomaly. There are others following in those steps, and stylistic integration is commonplace.

"When I was coming up with the concept, I really thought it was such an important thing that it was going to take over the whole world," said Balakrishnan recently from his California home, where he took time out from post-production work on the new CD. "The way that you can when you're young and on fire. Years later, it didn't turn out that way. It was more like a slow and steady evolution as other minds entered into the fray. So now in 2010, compared to 1985, the idea of crossover and cross-genre stuff is a part of our musical landscape. Those terms start to wash away. In other words, what you would call a mixture of jazz and classical music in 1985 can now be considered classical music, as the categories evolved. And that's healthy."

The Sunday concert is a collaboration between Balakrishnan and his mates -- Mark Summer, Mads Tolling and Jeremy Kittel -- and mandolin master Mike Marshall. Marshall, who has displayed his virtuosity with the David Grisman band among others, is a longtime cohort of Balakrishnan's. He also played on Turtle Island's new recording and the Coltrane tribute.

"He's been a kindred spirit for so long. After all these years, we came up with this idea to do a project with him," Balakrishnan said. "We're going to cover a wide range of material from folk style, a collection of Brazilian choros, a whole bunch of original music of my own that combines Indian music and classical and jazz, bluegrass and fiddle music. ... But you'll hear other elements in there as well."

Some of the Hendrix music will be performed.

"It's more of a reflection of Hendrix, a tribute to Hendrix. But also a Turtle Island record in the sense that it's not just us covering Hendrix. It's us being ourselves with Hendrix as a focal point. One of the pieces we play on that record is 'All Along the Watchtower' by Bob Dylan, but based on the Hendrix version from 'Electric Ladyland' (Reprise, 1968). It's great. I can't wait for people to hear it. ... We'll definitely be playing it with Mike."

Another piece on the album is an arrangement of guitar great John McLaughlin's "To Bop or Not to Be," said Balakrishnan. "I love opening up with it. It's kind of anathematic for us."

For Balakrishnan, it's about all kinds of music, no boundaries.

Turtle Island is still doing concerts with the Coltrane material, but in the fall it adds the Silver Anniversary Tour to its itinerary. The longevity of the group is impressive for any band, let alone a string quartet.

"One thing about Turtle Island. We can deliver on the idea of an American string quartet that can play the American music masterpieces, that aren't classical musicians crossing over to play it, but are coming from inside the music itself, that try to deliver on what the string quartet used to stand for in European music, which is a focal point for the great music of a culture," said Balakrishnan.

"For me, it's been so important to stay connected to the tradition. As an outpost to the classical string quartet tradition and not a departure from it. ... Be seen and accepted as being a continuation of the form, as opposed to going off and being the bad boys of chamber music and breaking the mold. We're not about that. Not interested in that. What we do is not destructive, it's evolutionary."

R.J. DeLuke is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to the Times Union.



Turtle Island String Quartet (Peter Serling)

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Turtle Island String Quartet

with Mike Marshall

When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: The Egg, Empire State Plaza, Albany

Tickets: \$28

Info: 473-1848; <http://theegg.org>