

**Cello wails like a saxophone**

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Turtle Island Quartet will perform jazz on strings at... (Photo courtesy of Turtle Island Quartet)

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PITTSFIELD -- The Turtle Island Quartet has turned the potential for string quartet music on its ear -- using the string quartet form to transform familiar songs from the world of jazz and to improvise.

The group formed in 1985 and has released a stream of albums proving that the European Classical string quartet can accommodate the stylistic and improvisational demands of jazz with a bit of rock thrown in.

Its innovative approach has netted it two Grammy Awards, in 2006 and again in 2008, for Best Classical Crossover Album. The second Grammy-winner included a translation of John Coltrane’s landmark album, "A Love Supreme." Turtle Island has been known to adapt work by everyone from Duke Ellington to Robert Johnson, while recording original material as well.

Turtle Island Quartet plays the Colonial Theatre on Friday.

Two of the group’s founding members, cellist Mark Summer and violinist/composer David Balakrishnan, join Danish violinist Mads Tolling, who frequently tours with jazz bandleader Stanley Clarke, and violist Jerey Kittel, a former national champion Scottish fiddle player.

The members’ backgrounds in various musical traditions prove crucial for Turtle Island Quartet in the jazz and rock songs the group interprets and in Balakrishnan’s original material.

To make the approach work, Summer said, he’s had to find new purposes for the cello. In one piece of music, he may find himself alternately anchoring the improvisations of the other members with bass parts; mimicking percussion sounds; and soloing freely, resolving his improvisation into a written part that bridges back into a composed portion.

"Frankly, I’ve created a role for myself that is kind of unparalleled in music," he said. "No one’s ever done this on the cello -- this way of using the cello as a percussion instrument and a bass, and mimicking the role of a saxophone, in a string quartet."

Summer grew up listening to rock music, received classical training on the cello, and served a stint with a symphony orchestra before choosing instead to work out cross-genre experiments in a Winnipeg coffeehouse before meeting Balakrishnan.

The group’s most recent album, "Have you ever been?", presents the Quartet’s radical reworking of material by Jimi Hendrix, augmented by a John McLaughlin song and a new, four-part Balakrishnan suite called "Tree of Life."

The album also includes two songs that Hendrix definitively recorded: "Hey Joe" and "All Along the Watchtower."

Colonial programmer Simon Shaw said that Turtle Island’s musicianship and blend of styles is likely to appeal to a Berkshire audience.

"There are a number of reasons we booked them to perform at the Colonial. First is the quality and variety of their work. I find their vision and drive to move forward chamber music for strings quite inspiring and believe our audience will enjoy their take on some classic Jimi Hendrix. It’s going to be a rocking chamber music evening," he said.

Balakrishnan and Summer joined the Alexandria Symphony (in Alexandria, Virginia) in October to present the world premiere of Balakrishnan’s new piece, "Force of Nature." His work has been known to incorporate elements of European Classical music as well as traditional Indian music, jazz and even bluegrass. Summer said the experience forced him to demonstrate his facility with his instrument in a variety of sometimes-contradictory ways.

"There’s a lot of writing, a lot of very difficult passage work, that is very hostile in some ways," he said, "and then suddenly I’m playing in these huge Latin grooves. I feel like, if anything, I am being pushed to be more and more of a complete cellist, someone who really has to do everything."

He contrasted that with his three-year experience early in his career with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, which he said required a great deal of perfectionism, but a narrower focus.

"I’d given a symphonic career a chance for three years, and I was so miserable and stressed out that I quit my job. They liked me; they wanted to keep me. But I started playing jazz on the cello. It was something I wanted to do but I didn’t know how to go about it at all."

Though the Turtle Island Quartet has proven a stable place from which to work out these musical concepts, Summer said the path is strewn with fresh challenges. His first task, he said, is to keep up his cello chops so as to handle the most difficult written passages, while preserving the impetus to improvise when the time is right.

"As I’ve grown up, I’ve matured into really embracing this idea of what this quartet stands for," he said, "which is celebrating the compositional elegance and excellence of great quartet writing and allowing players to expand the role of these traditional instruments into something beyond what Hayden could have ever imagined."