

Top of Form

**Q&A with Mark Summer, cellist and co-founder of Turtle Island Quartet**

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Friday, March 30, 2012

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*Chattanooga Times Free Press entertainment reporter Casey Phillips spoke with Mark Summer, cellist and co-founder of the alt-classical group Turtle Island Quartet, about what it takes to keep chamber groups relevant, the importance of back beat and introducing people to John Coltrane’s music.*

**CP: Your bio begins with a whopper of a quote from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that watching you is like “when Beethoven was taking Vienna by storm” and “seeing the future of classical music unfold before your eyes and ears.” That's a pretty hefty statement. Do you feel, as a group, like that's what you're doing? Keeping classical music interesting and relevant?**

**MS:** Yeah, I think that's fairly true. I like that. The idea that we're a contemporary string quartet who, instead of playing a narrow version of contemporary classical music, which we also like, we're playing contemporary music that incorporates groove-based music like blues, jazz, rock'n'roll, American fiddle music and influence from India with Dave Balkrishnan background being half-Indian.

**CP: Classical music is often, outside of its core audience, stigmatized as being irrelevant, too high brow or with a steep learning curve. Similar claims are also applied to jazz music. You have a history of combining both genres. How do you combat preconceptions people have about those styles? Do you even see a need to?**

**MS:** There are so many ways to go with that. I do see us as somewhat popularizing the string quartet form and making it more user-friendly in that, since we have such a strong connection to classical music - not because we play classical music, but because we play through a classical form - it starts bringing that idea to people who don't go to classical concerts that classical music and classical forms are accessible, relevant, friendly and enjoyable.

Actually, it's funny to say this because I'm classically trained to the nines, but it's made classical music more relevant to me, personally. That's a joy that, in a subtle way, we're sharing with our audience. I say “subtle” because the only time we play “classical music” is when we are presenting educational activities to young people and play a little bit of Beethoven's Opus 59 No. 3 or something like that. In our programs, we're not playing anything that you can exactly say is classical music, much to the surprise of some of our audiences. It's not always exactly clear what they're going to be getting.

It's still the classical presentation, and in some of our venues where they only have white lights and no color gels, it looks like they're going to hear Beethoven, Mozart and Brahms. In fact, we make jokes about it. Ater we play Jimi Hendrix's version of Bob Dylan's “All Along the Watch Tower,” Dave Balkirshnan will say, “And that, of course, was Mozart's String Quartet No. 54.' ”

To us, honestly, it's to paraphrase the Blues Brothers when they say, “We play both kinds of music - country and western” or when Duke Ellington said there are two kinds of music, good and bad. We just play music that we love and that we think is great. It's not even beyond us to someday play something like a Shostakovich string quartet. We focus on group-based music and the strengths of this group, so we play a lot of jazz and rock'n'roll.

**CP: Because of those preconceptions might have about your group, who do you see as being the quartet's core audience? Is it constantly changing or have you developed a fairly defined one after 27 years?**

**MS:** Well, we're always asking ourselves this. For sure, it's a lot of young string players because many people who are learning string instruments are another career and another mode of expression than simply ending up in an orchestra or strictly playing classical music.

We're doing teaching in conjunction with our concerts, so many times, we're doing workshops with young players and they end up at our concerts. Then, there are just the kind of audience that's somewhat on the older side that's used to coming to concerts and hearing chamber music. I think that's all ages, but sometimes, it's maybe a little bit older than what we're talking about with students.

I think it also depends on how we were marketed and the information got out. For instance, do people understand that this is a fun, toe-tapping, groove-based experience? The programming reflects that and our photos reflect that, and hopefully, the information that has gone out reflects that,

**CP: Have you ever heard from audience members that your music has helped convince them to give jazz or the classical music format a chance?**

**MS:** I'd like to think that we have. The first thought I have is that I remember playing in Weill Hall, the smaller hall connected to Carnegie Hall, and this older concert goer said, “I can't believe I liked it, but I liked it.” I would guess that was someone who was more used to the classical music concert format.

I think there are many people who come who have never heard a string quartet play before, especially young players who we play for. We can tell they're very excited. We're usually getting standing ovations when we're done. With performing arts centers and things like that, I'm fairly certain there are a lot of people who come and hear string quartets and many people who have never heard a string quartet before. I'm sure we're opening up minds.

One of the things we do is, if we're playing Jimi Hendrix or John Coltrane's magnum opus's like “A Love Supreme” or “Electric Ladyland,” we always ask the audience how many of them are familiar with those works. I can't say that the majority of people are raising their hands, which means we're presenting this music to many people for the first time in the context of a string quartet concert. We are certainly looking to turning them on to checking to the original records and to checking out our recordings and to appreciate the similarities and the differences in the way that our group has been able to open up people's minds and ears to these genres they might not normally be exposed to.

**CP: Being the first person to expose someone to such seminal works seems like it would greatly increase the pressure you feel as interpreters. Does that add to the responsibility you feel to honor the music?**

**MS:** Yeah. We love this music so we take it very seriously anyway and have a reverence for it. Yeah, we do feel a responsibility to take it seriously. It would be easy to descend into shtick in some ways with this stuff having a string quartet doing all these rhythmic techniques. We're fairly careful to be enormously respectful to the source material we're working with.

I have that experience of listening to "A Love Supreme" for the first time on vinyl and was extremely moved by it. When David proposed doing that piece, I thought, "That's a great idea. How the heck are we going to do it?” He had to put a lot of thought into it. That first movement was tremendously composed to make it work. The other movements were more open with improvised solos, but with the first solo, in order to get across what John Coltrane was doing harmonically and laying different keys over a ground base, there was a tremendous amount of composition involved. That takes a lot of time and a lot of care and love for the source material.

**CP: Turtle Island Quartet is now 27 years old. Looking back on the years since you helped found it, are you surprised by where the band is now? Has its evolution taken different paths than you would have expected?**

**MS:** I don't know if it surprises me. We keep flirting with mainstream success. There was a time when we played at the Hollywood Bowl with Shirley Horn and the Manhattan Transfer and opened up for Ray Charles at the Universal Amphitheatre. We talked a lot about opening up for the Grateful Dead.

In some ways, what surprises me, personally, is the fact that I've done this for so long. David's dream was of having a string quartet where everyone was classically trained but was equally versed in the art of improvisation. When he proposed it to me, I had to stop for a minute and think about it, because as much as I wanted to be doing this, string quartets are kind of difficult, difficult to the level of four people interacting and getting along and making decisions and challenging to keep together, financially.

One of my surprises that I have come to appreciate is that this is my life's work with David. We've become very strong allies with each other. As we've gone through membership changes that will happen, more and more, it's the old guard with two founding members and two younger players. That's working out very well because Matt and Jeremy bring a lot of fresh energy and very interesting viewpoints to what we do. Jeremy is a fine fiddler, as well as being our viola player, and Matt is an incredible fusion violinist.

With every personnel change we've ever had, the sound of the band has changed, and yet we have this continuity with David and myself to be very clear what we're doing. That never wavers but gets stronger with each passing year.

**CP: Your chamber compositions have been praised for being bold and innovative. What is your process for crafting music that manages to avoid the pitfalls of classical music conventions?**

**MS:** Honestly, David does the lion's share of the composing. We call him the composer-in-residence. He would answer that in a probably more useful way.

I've done composing and arranging, and it's ironic because even though I'm the most classically trained of anyone I the group, I tend to approach the cello as an alternative to the guitar or the bass or the drums; that's what makes my stuff kind of come alive. When it comes to composing, I find that I'm thinking in a pop model. I avoid those pitfalls by thinking that way.

The fact that we're operating as a self-contained rhythm section blows convention out of the water because whatever David is writing, for the most part, he's incorporating sections involving improvisation. Once we're improvising, I'm improvising bass lines over chord changes and someone is doing their solos. There are occasions when David will write out solos just because he wants to control the harmonies a lot, but that's not the norm.

Also, when they're written out, they're being played in this jazz style that is very backbeat-oriented, so it sounds nothing like most classical music you'll ever hear. When people try and be jazzy or do rock coming from a classical idiom, they usually fail, to some extent, because it doesn't ring as authentic because the person who is composing is still coming from a classical model.

It's hard to explain why it works. I know our techniques help make this work. I have the ability to play the cello like a bass. I've listened to tons and tons of jazz and pop music, so I have a feeling for it, as does everyone in the group. There's a big difference to being asked to do a rhythmic technique coming from a classical tradition where you're often asked in avant garde music and all sorts of kinds of classical music that is contemporary to create percussive sounds on your instrument, but they don't usually involve the back beat, and they don't usually involve creating a groove like we do.

I'm reminded that there's a cello section in either the Munich Symphony or the Vienna Philharmonic where the cello section plays a section of a piece that involves a lot of knocking on the instrument, but it just doesn't end up having the feeling of rock'n'roll or jazz or blues. All of these vernacular styles rely on a back beat.That's a big, big difference between what we do and what contemporary classical music involves. You just don't hear something that grooves that way very often.

**CP: Speaking of that familiarity you have with jazz, watching Turtle Island's performance of “Model Trane,” you spend much of the time playing a role similar to that of a bassist. You seem totally at home doing that. Is that something you came to the group already versed in or was it something that has become more comfortable to you through your participation in the quartet?**

**MS:** If you listen to the early recordings of the group, I probably still sound comfortable, which is funny because I only did it for about a year before the quartet was formed. I was in a symphony for three years, and I quit my job because I was so unhappy and started improvising with a guitar player. I hadn't done much on the cello, just a little bit; I played a Stephane Grappelli transcription.

Basically, I hadn't done this style of playing, and he said, “Well, let's go playing.” I said, “Where?” and he said there was this club called The Blue Note in Winnipeg. [Laughs.] We went that very night, and I found that I could do it. I also found that I could sing while I was playing bass lines. I didn't know I could do that until I tried it. The walking is something that, after listening to a lot of jazz, I had a feeling for it; I never practiced it. Now, I've done it for so many years that it's second nature.

It is the thing that really gives the group and gives jazz and popular music that sound, that and the percussive techniques that the violins and the viola do, that chop thing. As soon as you take those away, you're starting to sound more classical.

We take the best of both worlds. If you listen to the newest recording, “Have You Ever Been,” and you listen to “Tree of Life,” there's a lot of composing that David did that doesn't involve the chops and the bass lines. On “Coelacanth,” for instance, he doesn't use me that way at all. The idea is to preserve those textures so they don't get overused. On a piece like “Model Trane,” if we did every piece like that, eventually, everything would start to blur together and sound the same. We're trying not to do that. Even in that piece, you'll notice there are arranged parts where the cello plays arco [bowed] and the backgrounds are all arranged and written out in a certain way that will make all that work.

Much in the same way, you have to arrange a group very carefully to play Mozart string quartets with the cello on top. There's a [Palais] Rasumofsky quartet where the cello all the sudden gets to play the melody, and you have to very carefully handle the other voices to make it work. David is really good at that.

**CP: Given your popularity. Why do you think more groups aren't taking this approach or reaching out to other styles?**

**MS:** You can answer both ways. There are a lot of things happening right now that directly are a result of what we've done and what other groups have done. I think of “Goat Rodeo Sessions.” It's not the Turtle Island Quartet, but you have Yo-Yo Ma, this thoroughly classical player, surrounded by these great bluegrass players - Edgar Meyer. Stuart Duncan and Chris Thile, who does just about everything you can do on the mandolin.

There are other ensembles and other string quartets that do what we do, but I think what we do is very difficult. It's hard to get people to swing on string instruments. Even people who are in “jazz string quartets,” when you look at what they're doing, they're not big improvisers. That's one of the things that makes Turtle Island unique.

Also, we have a major composer in the group with David and everyone as pretty high level composers and arranger as well. It's just a requirement to be in Turtle Island. We always find that out when we go through membership changes. It's all well and good to say we have these really great players, but they have very special talents that go beyond playing well on their instruments.

Jeremy is a Scottish fiddle champion and Matt has played with Stanley Clark, so that's pretty impressive.

**CP: You have a number of dates coming up in April and May. What do you expect to be playing during these upcoming shows? Do you usually bother with set lists?**

**MS:** It depends on the program. When Turtle Island started out, we just sort of presented Turtle Island String Quartet and did whatever we wanted. That was fun because we could incorporate new repertoire into the set right away. In the last few years, we've started doing programs with titles, which is also fun, but it locks us in a little bit more.

At the Chattanooga concert, I know we're playing the music of Jimi Hendrix, and we play some of David's music, which is from the same recording. We throw in some John Coltrane music, just because we love it and it's in the repertoire because we're still playing the Coltrane show sometimes. We like that variety in what we do.

We'll be playing a piece by Paquito D'rivera, a piece he sent us after we met that David arranged and, as we like to say, “Turtle-ized it” a bit. We've been playing “Model Trane” and a four-movement suite called “Have You Ever Been [to Electric Ladyland]?” featuring four tunes from that record that Jimi Hendrix recorded. We've also been playing “All Along the Watchtower” and a couple of movements from “Tree of Life,” David's four-movement suite from the same new album we did. We've also been playing “Hey Joe,” a tune by Billy Roberts that Jimi Hendrix made famous.

I've been doing a solo version of “Little Wing.” It's my reward for playing bass lines for so long. [Laughs.] I get a little feature.