

Paul Liberatore: Turtle Island Quartet marks its 25th year with Hendrix tribute

[Paul Liberatore](#)

Posted: 02/25/2010 10:24:12 PM PST



The Turtle Island Quartet: Mads Tolling, David Balakrishnan, Mark Summer and Jeremy Kittel. (Photo by Peter Serling)

When I heard that the Turtle Island Quartet was celebrating its 25th anniversary by recording an album of Jimi Hendrix and Hendrix-inspired songs, I thought it was a cool idea - if they could pull it off.

So I went to hear them play four Hendrix tunes from the 1968 album "Electric Ladyland" the other night at a house concert in Novato. And they pulled it off all right - in spades.

It shouldn't have been a surprise. These guys have been redefining the public perception of the string quartet since cellist Mark Summer and violinist David Balakrishnan formed the group in 1985.

They've been the first string ensemble to successfully integrate jazz improvisation and rhythm into the classical aesthetic, reimagining folk, bluegrass, swing, be-bop, funk, R&B, New Age, rock, even hip-hop.

 **Audio:** Turtle Island Quartet - 'Round Midnight

"They have changed the way we think of the string quartet in America today," Mike Marshall, a great string player in his own right, told an audience of family and friends who had gathered in the living room of Summer's comfortable home this past Saturday evening. "They bring groove to the string quartet."

The Turtles, as they are sometimes affectionately known, won a Grammy Award for best classical crossover album for their last CD, 2007's "A Love Supreme: The Legacy of John Coltrane."

In 2006, they won in the same crossover category for "4+Four," an album with the Ying Quartet that features Summer's much-covered "Julie-O," a composition that incorporates the percussive techniques (including slapping the cello rhythmically with his hands) that has earned him a reputation as a trailblazer on his instrument.

When Balakrishnan introduced him the other night, he called him "our cellist and drummer."

After living in Oakland for 17 years, the trim 51-year-old bought a house in a horsey neighborhood in Novato with his wife, Barbara, art director for Acoustic Guitar magazine in San Anselmo, and moved in four months ago.

"I always wondered, 'How in the world does a musician buy a house in Marin?'" he told me before the concert. "Now I know how you do it."

Yeah, you pay your dues for a quarter century, win a couple of Grammys and perform, record and tour with extraordinary colleagues like Marshall, who brought a superstar aura to the proceedings the other night, joining the ensemble on mandocello, playing big chunky chords in a rollicking rendition of "All Along the Watch Tower," a tune slated for the new record.

The informal evening was a chance to rehearse in front of an appreciative live audience before going into Skywalker Sound in Nicasio this week to record the new album, "Have You Ever Been," the title taken from the late guitarist's song that begins: "Have you ever been to Electric Ladyland?"

In addition to Marshall, Stefon Harris, a new generation vibraphonist the Los Angeles Times called "one of the most important young artists in jazz," was also at Skywalker this week to guest on the Hendrix classic "Gypsy Eyes."

On the new album, set to be released in August on the Telarc label, Summer will have his own showcase - a solo rendition of "Little Wing," which Hendrix wrote in 1967 and is ranked number 357 on Rolling Stone magazine's "500 Greatest Songs of All Time."

He confesses to being somewhat intimidated, covering such an iconic guitar piece, but he brought his own house down, so to speak, when he played it for the folks in his living room using the show-stopping percussive style he's developed in Turtle Island.

"There are lots of different ways to create rhythm, and that's what this group has spent a lot of time figuring out: How do you create rhythm on a violin, a viola and a cello?" he said. "Because of the cello's size and similarity to a bass, you can do a lot of neat things with it. You can hit the fingerboard and get a woodblock sound. You can pluck it like a bass or strum it like a guitar."

From the beginning, he said, "It just seemed to demand that I make a lot of noise if we were going to play anything approaching rock music."

The original Turtle Island included the celebrated violinist Darol Anger and many fine players have passed through over the decades. In the current lineup, Summer and Balakrishnan are joined by violinists Mads Tolling and Jeremy Kittel, both in their 20s.

"What's exciting for us is that the two founding members are in our 50s, and then we've got two guys who are admittedly young enough to be our sons," Summer said with a grin. "They represent the next generation. They've learned a lot from us, and we get their energy and vitality."

Turtle Island doesn't often play in Marin. But on March 27, the quartet will be at the Dance Palace in Point Reyes Station.

At this stage in his career, Summer is doing pretty much what he set out to do after he quit the Winnipeg Symphony and drove across the continent to the Bay Area in a Ford Fiesta without air conditioning to join the ensemble that would become Turtle Island, the name taken from the Pulitzer Prize-winning poem by Gary Snyder.

"I wanted to rock out and play Chick Corea," he told me, saying the music he's making now is "the logical outcome of someone who grew up listening to the Beatles, wanted to be a rock player and a singer-songwriter and also spent a lot of time learning the Bach Cello Suites. I'm pretty happy with what I've done."

IF YOU GO

- What: Turtle Island Quartet
- When: 8 p.m. March 27
- Where: Dance Palace, Fifth and B streets, Point Reyes Station
- Tickets: \$28 to \$30
- Information: 663-1075, www.dancepalace.org

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