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**Turtle Island takes string quartet into uncharted territory**

### BY FERNANDO GONZALEZ

**SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD**

The string quartet is a Western music institution. Compact but with broad sonic and expressive range, it has inspired some of the greatest works in the European classical canon.

But there’s a world of music beyond the boundaries of that tradition — and jazz, blues, Afro-Cuban, rock and bluegrass all have their own exacting demands, both technical and emotional.

The challenge, says David Balakrishnan violinist and founder of the Turtle Island Quartet, is to experiment while maintaining the discipline of a classical string quartet.

“At one point you step back and decide: ‘I’m not going to play Mozart even though that’s what I’m supposed to do. I’m going to take a chance and take a wider look,’ ” he says.

The Turtle Island Quartet — violinists Balakrishnan and Mads Tolling, violist Jeremy Kittel and cellist Mark Summer — will perform *A Love Supreme, The Music of John Coltrane* at the South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center on Saturday.

The quartet’s recording of Coltrane’s music won a Grammy in 2007.

“Part of the mission of the group is to find a way to pay homage to the jazz canon with great respect but at the same time showing how the traditions of jazz and classical music can work together in the string quartet tradition,” Balakrishnan says.

“String quartets are known for playing great, huge works of the canon in the European tradition, so *A Love Supreme* is a jazz version of that, one of the great treasures. Combining the string quartet tradition with a piece like *A Love Supreme* is not easy to pull off. But it has become a perennial for us. Who would’ve thought it?”

Then again, the story of the Turtle Island Quartet seems built on improbable turns. Balakrishnan organized the group in 1985 to play a piece he had composed.

“I had spent years in a master’s program, experimenting with overdubbing myself, trying to write string quartet music with this idea of a string quartet that didn’t exist,” he recalls.

The original group included Summer (who stunned Balakrishnan by playing Coltrane’s *Moment’s Notice*on his cello), violinist Darol Anger (a member of the David Grisman Quintet) and violist Irene Sazer.

“And noticing that we had these jazz musicians, we thought, ‘Why not to come up with some jazz arrangements?’ ” Balakrishnan says. “So we arranged *A Night in Tunisia*, *Milestones* and *Stolen Moments*, and until that first concert I didn’t realize how strongly the jazz arrangements would appeal to people.

“I was so wrapped on my own music to realize that people had to catch up to the idea of a string quartet that can swing. After all, like Paquito D’Rivera said, a swinging string quartet is like a barking cat — you just don’t expect it.”

Originally called The Turtle Island String Quartet, the group quickly became “a laboratory of ideas that continued to evolve.”

It’s been through many personnel changes. Cellist Summer stayed through, but even Balakrishnan left for awhile (1993-1997). And in 2006 the group dropped “string” from its name, “in part because we were on a label that felt that having ‘string quartet’ as part of our name made some people uncomfortable,” Balakrishnan says. “It’s some of the baggage of a string quartet. You live with it, and you die with it.”

Musically, Turtle Island has, if anything, taken on even bolder challenges. While continuing to draw freely from many sources, the quartet explored film music ( *A Shock to the System*, 1990) and swing ( *On the Town*, 1991), gave a nod to Latin music ( *Danzón*, 2002) and celebrated one of the monuments of post-bop ( *A Love Supreme: The Music of John Coltrane*, 2007).

And then, in 2010, it veered off yet again, this time into rock with *Have You Ever Been…?,* which focuses on the music of Jimi Hendrix and a new suite by Balakrishnan.

“What has made it consistent is that throughout we have kept a high level of composition,” he says.

“It never falls into a gimmicky thing where you just play tunes and improvise and show off our individual chops. I’m very proud of [having found] a way to incorporate the jazz tradition without losing the identity of the string quartet.”

 

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**IF YOU GO**

**What:** Turtle Island Quartet – ‘A Love Supreme, The Music of John Coltrane’

**When:** 8 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center, 10950 SW 211th St., Cutler Bay

**Tickets:** $30 at 786-573-5300 or www.smdcac.org

Read more here: http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/04/18/2753979/turtle-island-takes-string-quartet.html#storylink=cpy