



Entertainment

## Turtle Island strung out gloriously on Coltrane

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By Joe Barron  
Staff Writer

Musical purists bristle with indignation at the word “crossover” — and with some justification. When classical musicians tackle jazz, pop or folk music, the results rarely live up to the originals, and the project can carry the acrid whiff of slumming or commercial opportunism. The release in 1991 of a CD of Cole Porter tunes by a well-known classical baritone sent some of us running back to Frank Sinatra’s Capitol recordings with the Nelson Riddle Orchestra, which still count, after 50 years, as one of the great pleasures in life.

But there is crossover, and there is crossover. The Turtle Island Quartet, which appears in Sellersville April 1, doesn’t just visit the vernacular for a brief vacation here and there. It has spent 25 years translating the techniques of string quartet playing to the language of popular music, particularly jazz.

“When people come to our concert, it’s a toe-tapping experience,” cellist Mark Summer said in a telephone interview Saturday. “It’s a fun, groove-based evening of music.”

Summer is one of two charter members still active with the quartet. The other, violinist David Balakrishnan, founded Turtle Island in 1985 as a performance outlet for his own compositions and arrangements. Summer, a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music and, at the time, something of a purist himself, recalls his skepticism when Balakrishnan asked him to sign on.

“I really looked at him like he was crazy,” Summer said.

In time, the arrangements outnumbered the originals, although Turtle Island’s latest CD, “Have You Ever Been ...,” includes both. From the start, however, Balakrishnan placed an emphasis on improvisation. For the centerpiece of Thursday’s program, a 20-minute abridgement of Coltrane’s epic suite “A Love Supreme,” he wrote out much of the first movement but gave the quartet more and more freedom as the piece goes on.

“To play Coltrane through a string instrument, you gotta have listened to his music for many, many hours,” Summer said. “There’s a lot that goes into it. Then you can take your bow so that it sounds like John Coltrane. It’s always something that you’re reaching for. It’s never something that you actually arrive at. To get that happening on a cello is not easy.”

Summers plays his cello like an upright bass through much of the suite, using plenty of pizzicato. He has also attached a pedal and electric hookup to his instrument, and over the years, he has learned to switch between electric and acoustic effects with “lightning speed,” in his phrase.

“It takes a fast foot,” he said.

Other techniques, such as knocking on the sound box and “chopping” with the bow, allow him to imitate a snare drum and a high hat, important components of a standard jazz rhythm section.

Given the speed of the pedaling, spur-of-the-moment composition and unusual ways of expanding the repertoire of sound, seeing becomes as important as hearing to the appreciation of Turtle Island, and part of group’s mission is to draw young listeners away from their computers and MP3 players and back into the concert hall.

“There should be a lot more live music in our country,” Summer said. “It’s great theater. Watching us interact with each other is pretty darned interesting.”

The theatrics are nothing new, of course, and in some ways, Turtle Island is reproducing the feeling of a European chamber concert. In his many tours abroad, Summer has been struck by the difference between American and continental audiences. In the States, chamber music is like spinach — people come and sit and listen quietly because, he said, they think the music is supposed to be good for them.

In Europe, by contrast, chamber music concerts are family outings, almost like a sporting event, he said.

“For me, where it gets exciting is mixing things up — rock and jazz and fiddle music,” he said. “It’s the stylistic integration that’s really what’s exciting to us — not to play jazz with classical, but to figure out how to make Coltrane come through the violin.”



Turtle Island String Quartet

will perform

at Sellersville Theater 1894,

Main Street & Temple Avenue,

Sellersville, PA 18960,

Thursday, April 8, 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$25.

Info: 215-257-5808

or [www.st94.com](http://www.st94.com).