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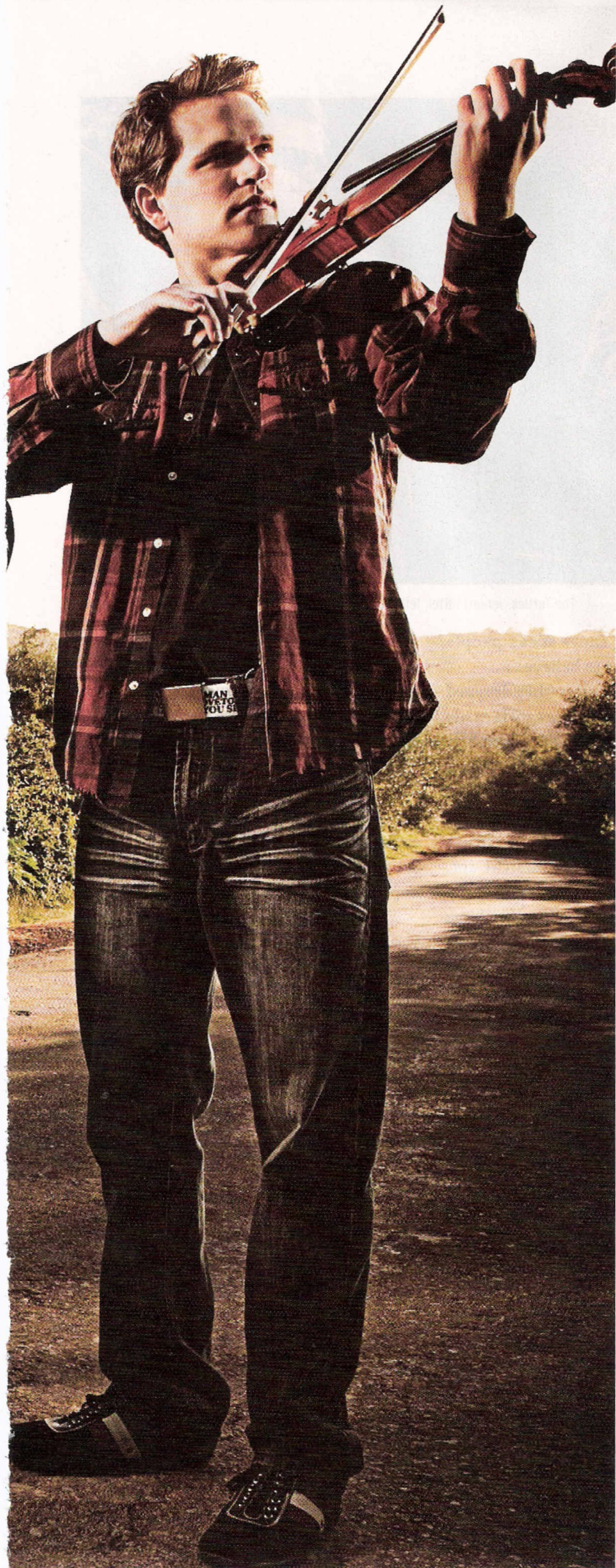
# The evolution of a seminal chamber-jazz group

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# The American Evolution

Turtle Island Quartet celebrates 25 years  
on the cutting edge of chamber jazz

*Text By David Templeton  
Photos by Jay Blakesberg*

**W**rapped in a jaggedly corrugated cocoon of wooden sound baffles, and surrounded by a forest of microphones and mountains of high-tech recording gear, members of the Turtle Island Quartet, bows in hand, are sitting in silent concentration, waiting for their signal to continue. From inside the sound booth at Skywalker Sound, in Marin County, California, the four musicians—violinists David Balakrishnan and Mads Tolling, violist Jeremy Kittel, and cellist Mark Summer—look so distant, so small, clustered together on the vast and yawning soundstage. In the booth, four-time Grammy-winning producer Thom Moore and veteran engineer Robert Friedrich are listening to the playback, chatting softly in musical tech-speak.

It's almost the end of a very long, very important morning, and a sense of stressed-out celebration is in the air. People keep stepping in and out, asking how it's going, eager to catch a whiff of history in the making. Summer's mother has even stopped by to soak up the sensation, as she sits knitting in a chair by the window that overlooks the soundstage.





The Turtles: Jeremy Kittel, left, David Balakrishnan, Mark Summer, and Mads Tolling.

The Turtles (as they are sometimes known) are recording a brand-new piece by Balakrishnan, a four-movement string quartet titled “Tree of Life.” It will be featured on the ensemble’s much-anticipated 25th anniversary album, *Have You Ever Been . . . ?* (Telarc), along with several reinterpretations of compositions by Jimi Hendrix (the CD title is derived from the title track of the late rock icon’s *Electric Ladyland* album).

“Okay guys,” murmurs Moore, speaking into his microphone. “That last one was just about perfect. But we’d like you to do it again, starting from the same place.”

“When you’re ready.”

After a moment, out on the sound stage, the Turtles begin to play, a tight, controlled burst of cataclysmic jazz, with pinches of surging Middle Eastern phrases and a bit of everything else. After 25 years, that sound has become instantly recognizable. Though there are other jazz string quartets in the world, there is still nothing quite like the Turtle Island Quartet.

A quarter of a century ago, when Turtle Island was first conceived by Balakrishnan and Summer—along with original members Darol Anger and Laurie Moore—the notion of a string quartet playing jazz compositions was still revolutionary, and more than a little heretical in the chamber-music world. Conceived by Balakrishnan as a way to shake up conventional thoughts about string music and jazz, the original Turtle Island String

Quartet was one of those ideas people needed to see and hear to believe.

The Turtle Island Quartet (they dropped the word “string” several years ago) is easily one of the best-known chamber ensembles in the world. They’ve won a pair of Grammy Awards (for *4 + Four* in 2006, and for *A Love Supreme: The Legacy of John Coltrane* in 2008) and the foursome tours as hard as Bruce Springsteen or any other musical act. Though there have been several personnel changes over the years—paralleling huge shifts in the worlds of music distribution and sound production—there is one thing that hasn’t changed: the Turtles are still doing what they started out doing.

They are pushing forward the boundaries of musical evolution.

“Twenty-five years!” Balakrishnan says, as he and Summer lead the way from the gorgeous, vine-covered building that is Skywalker Sound, and out across the impossibly bucolic Skywalker Ranch. It’s lunchtime, and folks from all over George Lucas’ legendary film-and-sound tech complex are making their way to the casual four-star restaurant that passes as a cafeteria here. The “young guys,” as Kittel and Tolling appear to be known, are eating back at the studio, catching up on a few of their many side projects. “In these past 25 years,” Balakrishnan is saying, “there’s been a lot of water under the bridge, a lot of good times, and sure, a lot of changes. But there is a clear evolution of what we are, though I admit it wasn’t always clear as it was happening.”

“Oh, I think you *always* have an idea of where we are and where we’re going,” adds Summer, the only member to have been with the quartet the entire 25 years (Balakrishnan left the quartet for a few years in the 1990s). “Not that I don’t give myself some credit for what Turtle Island has become,” Summer jokes, “but the credit for conceptualizing a string quartet in which all of the members are fully versed in classical music and jazz improvisation—that was David’s genius.”

“It’s pretty hard to have ideas that no one else has had, but that’s what David did.”

Seated at a table in the sunny cafeteria, sipping iced tea, Balakrishnan observes that the idea of Turtle Island wasn’t half as hard to conceive as explaining that idea to prospective members. “It’s always totally complicated,” he shrugs. “In the beginning, when I’d try to explain it, people just wouldn’t get it. But I’d written a whole body of work, and I’d recorded it all myself, playing all the parts—of course the cello parts were horribly undeveloped—but at one point, I decided to just play those pieces for people. I’d say, ‘Maybe if I can’t *explain* what I’m thinking, you can hear what I’m thinking,’ and they’d go, ‘Oh, wow. I get it!’ and then they’d get excited about it.”

In the early days, Summer and Balakrishnan suggest, there were plenty of musicians who assumed that playing jazz meant less rigor and structure than playing classical music. Summer admits he was one of those and was actually rather uncomfortable, at the start of Turtle Island, since he’d



been so anxious to leave the classical tradition. But with the brand-new Turtle Island, parts of that tradition were suddenly calling him back in an uncomfortable way.

"I thought I'd escaped the misery and perfectionism of classical music," he says. "Everybody comes up after concerts and says, 'You all look like you're having such a great time up there,' and we are. But it is also hard. I didn't escape anything. I'm still dealing with the same problems of intonation and all that. And then we add new, different problems—problems of rhythm, of playing with four people who all have different concepts of rhythm. You have all these... 'issues!'"

"Issues," Balakrishnan concurs. "Issues like, how do you make a quartet work well together, when all four of you have different ideas?"

Suddenly, Balakrishnan and Summer grow silent. For a few seconds, they look at each other across the table. Then they both burst into laughter.

"Well," Balakrishnan begins, "what has occurred over time is that new players will blossom into their roles, and that what they bring with them becomes a big part of the group. That's not always been easy for me to recognize, because I have very specific ideas. With Mark, let's face it—the cello is not part of something I understand. So Mark really had an opening to establish how the cello would be featured in this quartet, and he found a way to bring in the rhythm section—on the cello—in a way that I could never have foreseen.

"I think that Turtle Island is part of what brought that out in him. I think Turtle Island is the catalyst that triggered that. And, as a composer, Turtle Island has had the same effect on me. The group has created a place where musicians can come, grow, and really find their voice."

"With the young guys, it's the same situation," Summer suggests.

**T**hough these two 50-something, longtime collaborators seem entirely relaxed and easygoing this afternoon, they are the first to confess that today is an especially high-pressure day. The long-awaited recording of Balakrishnan's "Tree of Life" suite represents, for the Turtles, a major step in their own musical evolution. Fittingly enough, evolution is

exactly what "Tree of Life" is about—Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

The piece grew out of a commission from the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and the Creative Campus, which works to encourage the crossing of genres and disciplines within the university system, where a tendency to compartmentalize often stifles creativity. The idea behind the Creative Campus is to introduce artists and scientists, in an effort to break through traditional academic and scientific boundaries. Balakrishnan was given a grant to create a collaborative, cross-disciplinary art piece based on Darwin's game-changing theory. Inspired by the idea of evolution, Balakrishnan set out to write music that would stretch his own abilities as far as possible, stylistically. Presented last year at the Lied Center in Kansas, the finished piece included the efforts of dancers, actors, poets, filmmakers—and the Turtle Island Quartet.

**"Turtle Island is, we hope,  
a model of how string music  
will continue to evolve."**

**—David Balakrishnan**

What the Turtles are recording at Skywalker is a four-movement distillation of the original hour-long work. The movements are titled "Aswatha," an Indian word meaning, appropriately, "Tree of Life"; "Lucy," named for the famous three-million-year-old human fossil discovered in 1974; "Monkey Business," named for... monkeys; and "Coelacanth," named for the oldest living species of fish.

"I'm really proud of what David has done with this piece, as a composer," Summer says. "It utilizes his talents to the fullest, and then it totally demands the best of the rest of us. It totally *kicks our butts*. These movements are hard, but they're so intriguing, and beautiful, and just so very well written."

Employing folk, jazz, African rhythms, Indian, and Latin American musical elements, the piece is a perfect example of Turtle Island's cross-genre ambitions. If Balakrishnan has accomplished what he set out to accomplish—and this morning's

recording session indicates that he has come awfully close—"Tree of Life" tells its story by weaving together all of those musical styles in a way that somehow transcends all of its elements. What Turtle Island is attempting with this project is to define a new compositional musical language.

"And it's a language that, so far, only this group can speak," Balakrishnan adds. "So yeah, I'd say that 'Tree of Life' represents a high point, a point of maturity for me and for this group, a group that has spent 25 years developing this way of working.

"Turtle Island is, we hope, a model of how string music will continue to evolve. If groups like us didn't exist, you would still be looking at string quartets playing only Beethoven and Mozart and all that, or only playing modern classical music, which is great, too. But what about this way of making music that came out of America? Jazz and folk and all this great stuff?

"I would say that's our place in musical history—we are at the edge of American musical evolution."

**A** messenger approaches the table to let the two Turtles know that lunch is over. Time for just one more question. They've been talking a bit about the past. So what about the future of the Turtle Island Quartet? What can the world expect from the next 25 years?

Balakrishnan sighs, a long, contented—and slightly weary—sigh.

"The future? Well, we will continue to look for the kind of projects that allow us to do what we do," he says. "But as much as we have been thinking about the past, with this anniversary upon us, and as much as we do look to the future, we are really just very much in the moment. That's what makes the music work. We are jazz players. We are improvisers. We live in the moment, and the music happens in that moment.

"Truth is," he laughs, "we don't know a darn thing about what's going to happen next!"

"I do, I know what's going to happen next," says Summer, pushing back his chair and standing up, as the afternoon light illuminates the table, making it appear to glow. "What's going to happen next," he says, smiling, "is we are going to go back and play our butts off."