

# Turtle Island Quartet integrates jazz & classical music



Tom Mayhall Rastrelli, Statesman Journal 11:30 a.m. PDT March 25, 2015



(Photo: Bill Reitzel / Special to the Statesman Journal)

When David Balakrishnan was 13, he saw a picture that changed his life. The photo showed Jerry Goodman of the jazz-rock band The Flock playing violin. Goodman's hair dangled down his back past his waistline.

It was the '60s. Balakrishnan had been playing classical violin for four years. Goodman was playing music from India on a violin. The Beatles soon followed integrating Indian elements into their rock. Balakrishnan's father, a mathematician at University of California Los Angeles, was Indian. Young Balakrishnan was inspired.

"I thought, 'I want to do that,'" Balakrishnan said. "I realized the violin was perfect for playing those blues riffs."

He started on a musical path that would lead to the founding of the Turtle Island Quartet, two Grammy wins and a 2015 nomination. Since its inception in 1985, the quartet — Balakrishnan and Mateusz Smoczynski (violins), Benjamin von Gutzeit (viola) and Mark Summer (cello) — has been creating trends in chamber music.

This Friday, Jan. 16, Mid-Valley music lovers will enjoy the fruition of Balakrishnan's childhood inspiration when the Edgar H. Smith Fine Arts Series welcomes the Turtle Island Quartet to Western Oregon University. The quartet will perform a new program titled "Birth of the Cool."

The title is a nod to jazz legend Miles Davis and his 1957 album of the same name. This seminal recording is considered a tipping point in the development of cool jazz. The Turtle Island Quartet's program will celebrate luminaries including Davis, Dave Brubeck, John Carisi and others, who ushered in the era of cool jazz.

Davis' work is a natural fit for the Turtle Island Quartet's musicians. They have been playing both classical and jazz music since their childhoods. Today, they fuse the classical quartet esthetic with contemporary American musical styles. They won the 2006 and 2008 Grammy Awards for Best Classical Crossover Album, but Balakrishnan said crossover is not the best word to describe their work.

"It's not a break from the past. The whole point of Turtle Island is not to make any breaks, but to come from the tradition of the string quartet and expand it from within," Balakrishnan said. "I love to write music that integrates jazz, classical, bluegrass and Indian." He refers to these four traditions as "the four food groups" of his compositions.

The integration of classical and jazz traditions isn't a stretch. Balakrishnan said jazz has the vocabulary of European classical and the phrasing and rhythmic quality of African music traditions.

"I like to think of jazz as the first form of world music. You have this amazing synthesis of styles from all over the world," Balakrishnan said. "The main difference is the element of improvisation."

This is an essential element of jazz. In the era of Mozart and Bach, Balakrishnan said musicians improvised. Over time as composers established more control over their music which became increasingly difficult to play, string players' ability to improvise atrophied until it became a lost art. The Turtle Island Quartet has reclaimed classical improvisation, which Balakrishnan calls "composing on the spot."

The quartet will premiere Balakrishnan's new composition "Rebirth of the Holy Fool." The piece is a play on Davis' "Birth of the Cool" and integrates Balakrishnan's "four food groups" with cool jazz. The program will also draw from the quartet's latest album, Confetti Man, released in October 2014 from Azica.

Next month, Balakrishnan will attend the Grammy Awards. The quartet is nominated in the Best Classical Compendium category for their collaboration with mandolinist Mike Marshall.

"As you get older and you play and dedicate your life to this craft, one of the things you know is that these things like Grammy nominations are very hard to attain," Balakrishnan said. "It's humbling. I got my first nomination back in 1988 for our first record. That came so out of the blue for me. I had no idea. That woke me up to the fact that now we're on a bigger stage."

For more information about the quartet, the nomination and their recordings, go to [mikemarshall.net](http://mikemarshall.net) (<http://mikemarshall.net/>) and [turtleislandquartet.com](http://turtleislandquartet.com) (<http://turtleislandquartet.com/>).

**If you go**

**What:** Turtle Island Quartet in "Birth of the Cool"

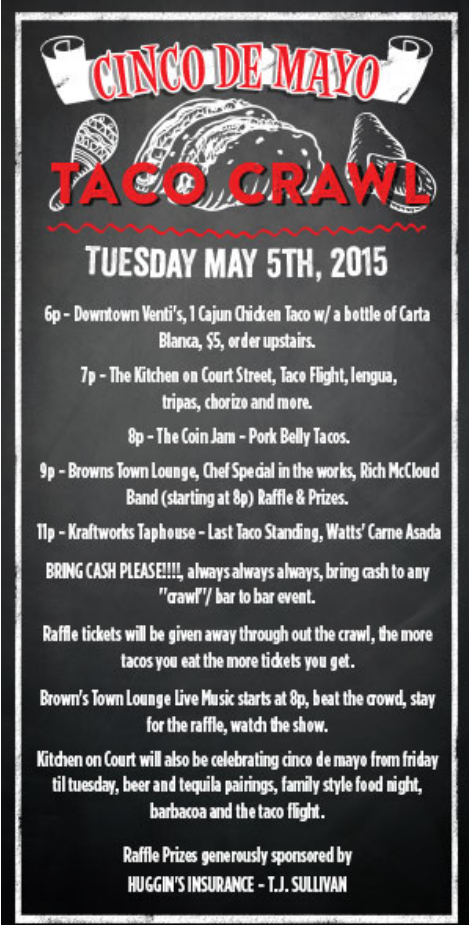
**Where:** Western Oregon University, Rice Auditorium, 345 N Monmouth Ave., Monmouth

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 16

**Tickets:** \$25 adults and \$11 students

**Information:** (503) 838-8333 or [wou.edu/president/advancement/smith/](http://wou.edu/president/advancement/smith/) (<http://www.wou.edu/president/advancement/smith/>)

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**CINCO DE MAYO**  
**TACO CRAWL**  
**TUESDAY MAY 5TH, 2015**

6p - Downtown Venti's, 1 Cajun Chicken Taco w/ a bottle of Carta Blanca, \$5, order upstairs.

7p - The Kitchen on Court Street, Taco Flight, lengua, tripas, chorizo and more.

8p - The Coin Jam - Pork Belly Tacos.

9p - Browns Town Lounge, Chef Special in the works, Rich McCloud Band (starting at 8p) Raffle & Prizes.

11p - Kraftworks Taphouse - Last Taco Standing, Walts' Carne Asada

**BRING CASH PLEASE!!!!**, always always always, bring cash to any "crawl"/ bar to bar event.

Raffle tickets will be given away through out the crawl, the more tacos you eat the more tickets you get.

Brown's Town Lounge Live Music starts at 8p, beat the crowd, stay for the raffle, watch the show.

Kitchen on Court will also be celebrating cinco de mayo from friday til tuesday, beer and tequila pairings, family style food night, barbacoa and the taco flight.

Raffle Prizes generously sponsored by  
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