

# ALBUM REVIEW: Turtle Island Quartet's *Confetti Man*

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According to Native American folklore, Sky Woman fell down to the Earth long ago, back when it was entirely covered by water. Realizing that she could not survive in the water, the surrounding sea creatures dug up dirt from the bottom of the ocean in order to create land for her. They placed this dirt on the shell of a giant turtle—and eventually this turtle grew into Turtle Island, the land known today as North America.



This tale is a powerful symbol not only for creation, spirituality, and environmental awareness, but also for coexistence and community. It is a story which celebrates and synthesizes both old and new cultural traditions—a broader theme which the Turtle Island Quartet strives to explore through their music.

The Turtle Island Quartet is a Grammy Award-winning ensemble whose innovative and eclectic sound infuses a classical string quartet aesthetic with contemporary musical influences such as jazz, folk, funk, be-bop, bluegrass, Latin American groove, and Indian classical.

Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, the quartet is comprised of violinists David Balakrishnan and Mateusz Smoczyński, violist Benjamin von Gutzeit, and cellist Mark Summer. Since the group's inception in 1985, they have cultivated a vast and wide-ranging repertoire consisting primarily of original compositions and arrangements by quartet members.

And after 30 years as an ensemble, the group certainly has cause for celebration: they recently released their 15<sup>th</sup> studio album, "[Confetti Man](#)." The 10-track disc is a collection of original compositions, arrangements, and commissioned works.

The two-movement title track, written by Balakrishnan, integrates elements of classical with jazz, bluegrass, folk, and even a touch of Indian musical influences. The dynamic mixture of musical styles from across history (and across the world!) is meant to reflect the computer age, where everything is fast-paced and at our fingertips. Inspired by his wife's painting depicted on the album cover, the piece explores a wide range of vibrant melodic material, as if traveling through a musical museum of different cultures and time periods, often blurring the line between musical traditions past and present, near and far.

The title track is followed up with "Windspan," written for the quartet by the famous saxophonist Bob Mintzer of the Yellowjackets. As one might expect, the piece harnesses a bold, big band sound featuring some seriously saxophone-like string solos brimming with slides, glides, and bona fide jazz grooves.

Another jazzy showpiece is "La Jicotea," which was written for the quartet by renowned clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera—a musician who is celebrated as much for his artistry in Latin jazz as for his achievements in the classical music realm. The piece combines both of these strengths, mixing Latin American grooves in unusual meters with a carefully-crafted polyphonic soundscape featuring imaginative musical textures and timbres.

The sweetest and most charming song on the album, though, is certainly Turtle Island's rendition of the Burt Bacharach and Hal David classic "Send Me No Flowers," featuring the inimitable Nellie McKay on vocals and ukulele. McKay's sugary sweet, '60s-tinged vocals float effortlessly above a darling and delicate string accompaniment.

Another piece with plenty of personality is Balakrishnan's "Alex in A Major," which was inspired by his next-

door neighbor's son. The charming and youthful main theme illustrates the boy's playful and sassy nature, and the piece features both Balakrishnan and Smoczyński as dueling bluegrass fiddlers.

In all, Turtle Island's "Confetti Man" is a charming and charismatic fusion of imaginatively diverse musical styles, a beautiful reminder that musical traditions old and new can still exist in perfect harmony.

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