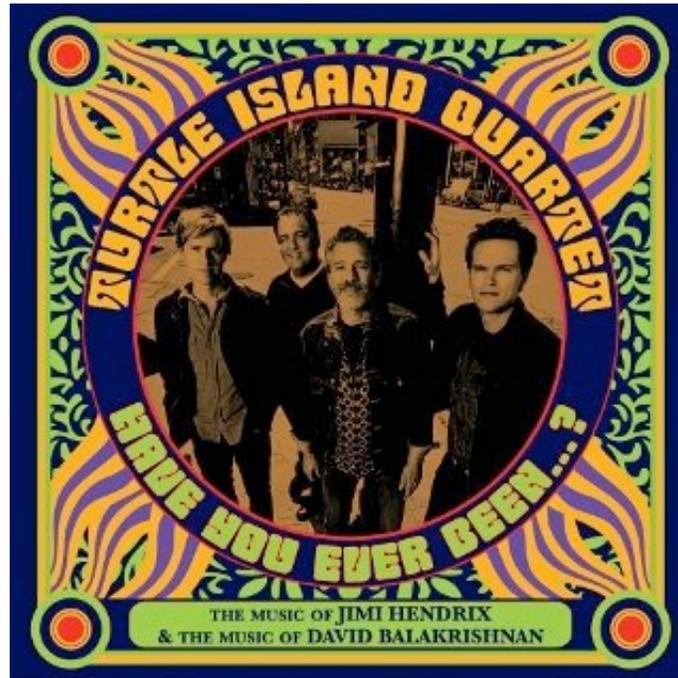


Hendrix, Dylan, and Darwin: The Turtle Island Quartet Releases “Have You Ever Been...?”



Written by Andrea Canter, Contributing Editor

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Have You Ever Been...?

My father would like the latest Turtle Island Quartet release, *Have You Ever Been...? The Music of Jimi Hendrix and David Balakrishnan* (Telarc). A longtime classical and opera buff, I am sure he never has listened to Jimi Hendrix or related music. But on hearing this recording, I believe he would assume he was listening to a 21st century string quartet. Which would be entirely accurate. Not having paid much attention (at the time) to 60s/70s rock music myself, if I had received this CD in a plain brown wrapper, I might have concluded it was one of Bill Frisell’s new string projects... minus Bill. Or more likely, I would have thought the Turtle Island Quartet had written some new music. And in part, that would be accurate, as one of the highlights of this recording is a four-part suite written by TIQ violinist and founder, David Balakrishnan. His cohorts here are founding member/cellist Mark Summer, violinist Mads Tolling, and violist Jeremy Kittel.

The eclectic nature of TIQ, and particularly the global influences of the new recording, are direct manifestations of Balakrishnan’s own multicultural background. “My father is from India, so I grew up hearing that music as a kid.” Already surrounded by the music of India, he also became a fan of Jimi Hendrix, then fusion, bebop and David Grisman, ultimately founding TIQ as “the way that I found to connect the dots.” No dot is omitted from this collection of TIQ arrangements of Hendrix-related covers and Balakrishnan’s own “Tree of Life” suite. And given the TIQ’s penchant for melding modern American music with traditions from other eras and other cultures, *Have You Ever Been...?* seems a natural evolution in their 25-year history as one of today’s the most innovative string ensembles.



A suite of four compositions from Hendrix’s 1968 *Electric Ladyland* opens the recording, starting with the title tune, “Have You Ever Been (to Electric Ladyland).” As throughout the recording, TIQ melds rock concepts to bluegrass harmonies, here as if a country dance, or perhaps a country trance. The quartet drifts into “House Burning Down” with a more defined rhythmic drive reminiscent of Don Cherry’s ‘Mopti.’ “1983... A Merman I Should Turn to Be” has a more gentle flow. On “Voodoo Child (Slight Return),” the quartet’s elastic harmonies and edgy bottom lines indeed suggest some musical (albeit acoustic) voodoo, each string artist taking the lead in chasing the others over sonic barbed wire, into a cauldron of black magic.

Vibraphone master Stefon Harris lends an engaging layer of lyrical atmosphere to the TIQ’s arrangement of Hendrix’s “Gypsy Eyes”



David Balakrishnan©Andrea Canter

(also from *Electric Ladyland*). Strings and vibes move back and forth, as if a meeting of Aaron Copeland and Milt Jackson. This is some of the most intriguing work I’ve heard yet from Harris-- rhythmic, alternately introspective and expansive. Cellist Mark Summer provides a scraping undertow while the higher strings pick up the gypsy’s twirling dance, a swinging counter to the more ethereal vibes.

Written by Billy Roberts, “Hey Joe” became a Hendrix staple. Opening with an exquisitely mournful line from Balakrishnan’s baritone violin, the quartet offers haunting harmonies; Summer provides what could easily pass for an upright bass pulse. It’s a very songful track suggesting slow-moving streams in a backcountry where tranquility is but a half note removed from despair.

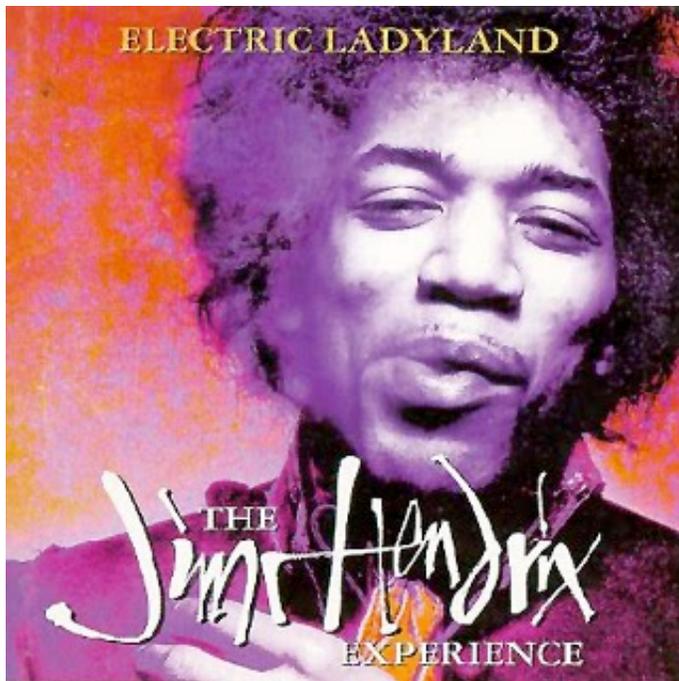
Hendrix’s “Little Wing” is presented as a solo transformation from Mark Summer—transformation of Hendrix’s Fender Stratocaster to Summer’s cello. In the process, Summer conjures a full string section, a full rock band within his instrument, finding percussion, guitar, bass, and human voices within that box.

Placed on the CD between “Have You Ever Been...?” and Balakrishnan’s “Tree of Life” suite, John McLaughlin’s Hendrix-inspired “Bop or Not to Be” offers a transition from classic rock to what might be termed modern world music. The TIQ rendition of “Bop or Not to Be” is neither American bebop nor European classicism, at times suggestive of Middle Eastern folk traditions, at times conjuring a deconstruction of the roots of bluegrass. One minute you are invited to a neighborhood dance, the next moment you find yourself far from home in the company of vaguely familiar relatives.

The 150th anniversary of the publication of *Origin of the Species* and 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birth, as well as his own affinity for Hendrix and world music traditions, inspired David Balakrishnan’s four-part “Tree of Life.” Like evolution itself, the suite covers music from all corners and all eras with surprising cohesion. Tracing the composer’s own evolution,



Mark Summer©Andrea Canter



Electric Ladyland

suggesting Larry Coryell’s recent “Bombay Jazz” as a backwards glance to Dylan and 60s folk-rock.

I would have had a very different view of late 60s and 70s music if the Turtle Island Quartet had been around then to offer translations such as those on *Have You Ever Been...?* And for those who were, and are, Hendrix devotees, perhaps you will have a very different view of modern classical and world music when you hear Hendrix (and Balakrishnan) through these vibrant

“Ashwattha” (the Indian “tree of life”) is a mini-suite of its own: The first segment conjures traditional eastern harmonies, flowing into a “New Delhi bluegrass”/21st century classical sound, then pausing as if for an ancient ritual chant broken by solo violin. Pizzicato cello supports a more symphonic segment, followed by a bridge of sorts that suggests tradition but this time more of an American spiritual that leads to a final, spirited barndance of strings. The gentle “Lucy” refers to the remains of the world’s second-oldest human, infusing a bit of swing and an Afro-Cuban vamp along the way as well as a beautifully executed, classically informed solo cello cadenza. (Would I have noticed the kinship with “All of Me” if not prompted by the liner note? Probably not.) “Monkey Business” sways with an angular humor, as if Monk had written for bluegrass band; strains of “Strangers in the Night” waft through the air. The last part, “Coelacanth” (named after the world’s oldest fish), suggests a dark East European melody with the elegance and power of a Bartok quartet.

Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” (covered by Hendrix on *Electric Ladyland*), closes the recording, with Mike Marshall adding the mandocello. This large, long-necked cousin of the mandolin adds rich texture to the string ensemble, giving the bottom end depth and an acrobatic, earthy folkiness. It’s an upbeat, joyful track melding Americana, Latin and Middle Eastern esthetics, as much

strings.

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