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WSJ.com

MUSIC | SEPTEMBER 4, 2010

## String Quartet Does Hendrix

*Turtle Island's new album is a tribute to his genius*

By JIM FUSILLI

*Nicasio, Calif.*

As a teenager, David Balakrishnan saw Jimi Hendrix perform live. "I could feel the momentum of his genius shining through," the violinist, composer and founder of Turtle Island Quartet said earlier this year at Skywalker Ranch here. "I went home and listened to 'Electric Ladyland' for three days straight." Since then, Mr. Balakrishnan has sought to incorporate Hendrix's works into his repertoire.

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Telarc

From left: Quartet members Mads Tolling, Mark Summer, David Balakrishnan and Jeremy Kittel.

He's found a way. His string quartet's new album, "Have You Ever Been. . ." (Telarc), is a tribute to Hendrix as the group's four musicians—Mark Summer on cello, Mads Tolling on violin and Jeremy Kittel on viola, in addition to Mr. Balakrishnan—reimagine eight songs associated with the guitarist, who died 40 years ago this month. The album, out last week, also includes Mr. Balakrishnan's four-part "Tree of Life" suite, written in tribute to Charles Darwin, and a reading of guitarist John McLaughlin's "To Bop or Not to Be." By juxtaposing Hendrix's works with those compositions, Mr. Balakrishnan is portraying the guitar legend as a kindred spirit to a modern-jazz giant and declaring Hendrix an evolutionary figure in the history of music

for electric guitar.

With Hendrix, Mr. Balakrishnan said, "it's not just about 'Purple Haze' and 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' He's a true American genius, not only as a guitar player but as a composer." During his lifetime, Hendrix released three studio albums in the U.S. that contained 35 original compositions. (The versions of the three albums issued in the U.K. included a few more.) Other compositions have emerged since his death.

There's no brief way to describe the Turtle Island Quartet, which was formed in 1985 as the Turtle Island String Quartet. Classical music remains a part of their repertoire, though not more so than jazz: They've reimagined compositions by Dave Brubeck, Chick Corea, Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, among others, and in 2007 released "A Love Supreme: The Legacy of John Coltrane." On the new disc,

vibraphonist Stefon Harris guests on Hendrix's "Gypsy Eyes."

The quartet first tackled Hendrix and "Gypsy Eyes" in 1994 on their "Who Do We Think We Are" album, but Hendrix's influence has been with them since their first recording. On the group's eponymous debut album, Mr. Balakrishnan opened his "Balopadem" suite with the same dominant chord that Hendrix used in his compositions to add tension and color to his blues—it's featured in "Purple Haze," for example. Musicians today refer to it as the "Hendrix chord."

### Tune In

Listen to clips of songs from "Have You Ever Been. . ."

[House Burning Down](#)

[Little Wing](#)

[Have You Ever Been \(to Electric Ladyland\)?](#)

"I've been accused of overusing the sharp ninth," Mr. Balakrishnan said. The quartet was on a lunch break from a session in which they were working on "House Burning Down," the second piece in the new disc's opening "Electric Ladyland" suite. The discussion quickly turned to how the essence of Hendrix's music could be captured.

Most rock musicians who want to honor Hendrix try to emulate the speed of his playing, his tonality, and his use of overtones and studio effects. But they stumble when they fail to acknowledge the breadth of his harmonic language or depth of musical knowledge. David Hidalgo of Los Lobos recently asked Hendrix bassist Billy Cox where Hendrix found the tricky figure he played in "Freedom." "Beethoven," Mr. Cox replied.

Hendrix presents a different sort of challenge for classically trained musicians. "I like the looseness of his music," said Mr. Summer. "But are we supposed to rush and drag?"

The quartet gets to the heart of Hendrix's writing and playing on "Have You Ever Been. . ." On "Little Wing," Mr. Summer, in a solo performance that's part transcription and part interpretation, not only quotes Hendrix, who overdubbed several guitars on the original track, but also references the original bass and percussion parts. The quartet's version of "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)" includes the waka-chucka sound Hendrix used to kick off the performance, and the violins play the arpeggios the guitarist tossed in while he sang the melody. Their "House Burning Down" begins as dramatically as the original—Mr. Balakrishnan gives it a bit of gypsy flair—and then swings more so than the original; Hendrix's flashy ending to the song, full of feedback and studio trickery, is transformed as well.

"With Hendrix, it's a feeling and rhythm," Mr. Balakrishnan said. "He was not a nice player. He was an in-your-face player." The quartet captures that assertiveness.

As with their earlier Coltrane project, the members of the Turtle Island Quartet faced the possibility of subordinating their individual personalities here in favor of the artist to whom they were paying tribute. "It has to reflect Hendrix," Mr. Balakrishnan said. "But it has to be about us, too."

As the sessions progressed, Mr. Summer saw the quartet achieve both ambitions.

"I'm not amazed we're doing it," the cellist said. "I'm amazed it's working."

—Mr. Fusilli is the Journal's rock and pop music critic. Email him at [jfusilli@wsj.com](mailto:jfusilli@wsj.com) or follow him on Twitter: [@wsjrock](https://twitter.com/wsjrock).

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