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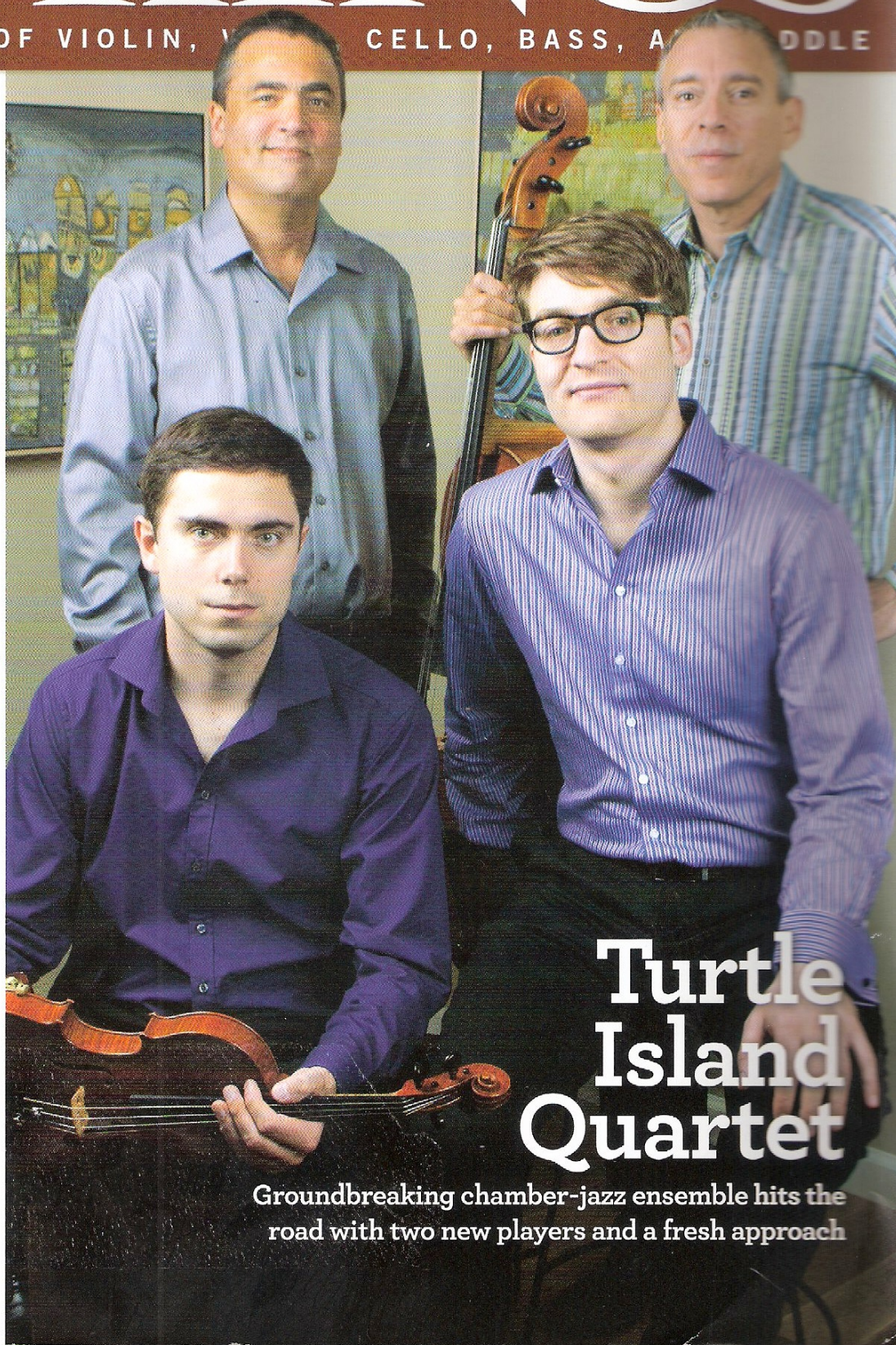
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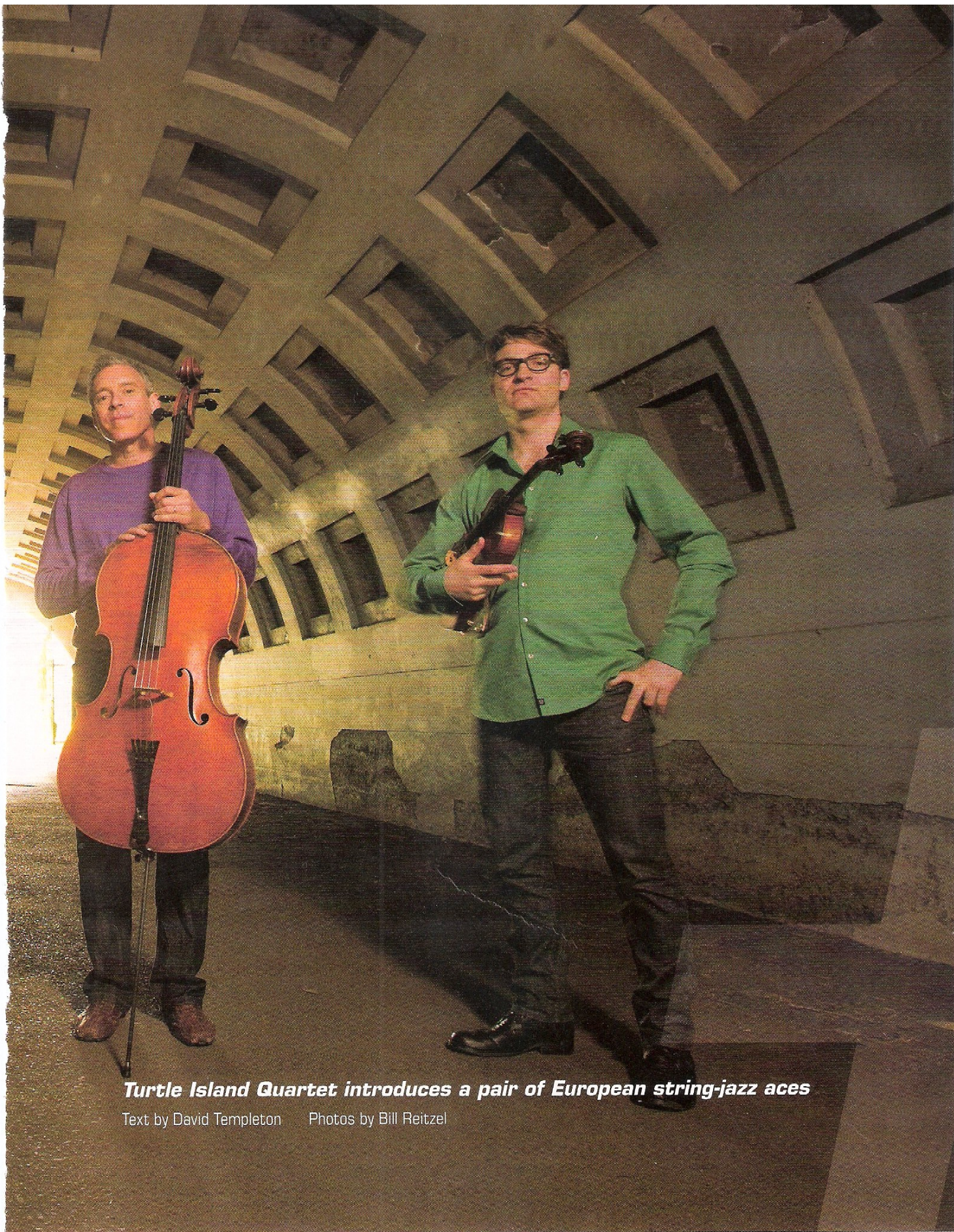
Turtle Island Quartet

Groundbreaking chamber-jazz ensemble hits the road with two new players and a fresh approach

Upping the Game



David Balakrishnan, left, Mateusz Smoczynski, Mark Summer, and Benjamin von Gutzeit.



Turtle Island Quartet introduces a pair of European string-jazz aces

Text by David Templeton Photos by Bill Reitzel

T“You handle the phone call,” violinist David Balakrishnan of the Turtle Island Quartet says, “and I’ll show the new guys how the coffee maker works!”

It’s break time, and Balakrishnan is calling out playfully to cellist Mark Summer, who is headed upstairs to handle important telephonic business regarding the Turtles’ upcoming international tour. On this rainy morning in Albany, California, not far from Berkeley, the celebrated jazz quartet has been rehearsing with its two new members, violinist Mateusz Smoczyński, of Poland, and violist Benjamin von Gutzeit, of Germany. Crammed together inside Balakrishnan’s tightly compact living room, the two veteran members of the Grammy-winning ensemble are gently guiding “the new guys” through their second official day as Turtles.

At the moment, that means teaching their colleagues how to use the gadgets in Balakrishnan’s kitchen. Smoczyński and von Gutzeit seem up to the challenge. Recruited to replace outgoing members Jeremy Kittel and Mads Tolling—who’ve left to make room for their rocketing solo careers—Smoczyński and von Gutzeit bring with them an impressive sense of confidence and a technical fearlessness that have won over Balakrishnan and Summer. After nearly 28 years, and 13 different players, the trailblazing chamber-jazz ensemble Turtle Island Quartet has seen the ways a personnel change can alter the flavor of an ensemble, the whole quartet shifting slightly with each new member’s particular skill set or musical interests. This morning, Balakrishnan and Summer are excited to be playing with their new recruits and that excitement has worked its way into the music.

“Wow!” says Summer, immediately following their first run-through of jazz great Paquito D’Rivera’s ‘Wapango’ (from the Turtle’s 2002 album *Danzon*). It’s a piece that includes moments of hand-drumming on the players’ instruments. “That’s the fastest we’ve ever played that!”

“That was really exciting!” Balakrishnan says with a nod. “But maybe it was a little too fast. I’m afraid we’re going to kill our new violist!”

Von Gutzeit, studying the sheet music on the stand in front of him, flips the page and back again, as if trying to imagine playing the piece any slower. “I liked it like that,” he shrugs.

‘A big part of what Turtle Island is about is taking a large stylistic framework, and finding new ways to integrate various styles together, so that they speak a common language.’

—David Balakrishnan

Pointing to Smoczyński, Balakrishnan grins: “Hey! Nice percussion, dude. I love how you just picked up on that the very first time! Nice!”

Smoczyński nods. “You too,” he says. Then, after a brief, dramatic struggle to remain serious, Smoczyński surrenders to the enormous grin suddenly spreading across his face. “I’m still getting used to this a little,” he admits.

S Smoczyński graduated from the Frederic Chopin Academy of Music in Warsaw. Debuting as a jazz violinist in 1999, he has worked with several high-profile Polish musicians, including Urszula Dudziak, Krzesimir Debski and Tomasz Stanko. Early on, while still a young student, a cousin had turned him on to jazz, notably Dixieland jazz. Eventually, he discovered the music of free-jazz saxophonist John Coltrane and began saving up his lunch money to buy Coltrane CDs, of which he now owns more than 70.

In 2006, with the Mateusz Smoczyński Quintet, he recorded *Inspirations*, a critically acclaimed recording inspired by Coltrane and Polish jazz violinist Zbigniew Seifert. After going on to win numerous awards as a solo violinist, Smoczyński formed two jazz ensembles: the New Trio, in 2009, together with his organist brother Jan and the Russian drummer Alexander Zinger, and the Atom String Quartet, quickly earning acclaim as Poland’s first jazz string quartet.

When it became clear that TIQ would be looking for a new violinist, a mutual friend told Summer about Smoczyński.

“He’s a really nice guy,” Summer recalls the friend saying of Smoczyński, “and he’s a great player—but he lives in Poland.”

“Poland,” Summer replied. “Wow, that’s really far.”

Still, Summer began corresponding with Smoczyński. In January, an audition was held in New York City. By then, von Gutzeit also was being considered for the quartet

(more on that in a moment), so it was a chance to hear what all four sounded like together.

“We had such a great time,” Summer recalls. “As we played, David and I just kept thinking, ‘Yeah. Yeah! Yeah! This could really work!’” But after the audition, Smoczyński confessed that he wasn’t quite ready to give up his career in Poland and relocate to America.

“That was kind of devastating,” Balakrishnan says. “Because we could see how good this guy was, and he just seemed like a good fit for us. We’d taken a picture of the four of us, and later, when I saw the photo, I just kept thinking, ‘We even look like we belong together!’”

After about a month, he changed his mind and sent Summer and Balakrishnan a succinct e-mail from Warsaw.

“To join your group would be my greatest pleasure,” it said.

“For me, it was a very big decision,” Smoczyński says. “I was not so sure I wanted to leave Poland, but it was my chance to play with the greatest jazz string quartet in the world, so I finally decided, OK, I must try it. Also, many other musicians, many friends, and the members of my quartet—who were all inspired by Turtle Island Quartet—told me I was crazy not to do it. ‘For us, it is not good for you to leave,’ they told me. ‘But it is the best thing for you, and we are happy for you.’ So, I finally decided it was what I had to do.”

As for von Gutzeit, his introduction to the Turtles was like something from a movie. Originally from Salzburg, Austria, von Gutzeit was raised in a musical family, starting on the viola at age four. Throughout the 1990s, he won awards for his playing. In his teens, he switched briefly to the electric bass guitar, and in 2004 moved to the Netherlands to study jazz at the Conservatory of Amsterdam. In 2010, now fully hooked on jazz string music, von Gutzeit won a scholarship from the

Manhattan School of Music, where he earned his masters degree this past May.

It was while studying in New York that he first encountered the Turtle Island Quartet.

"We were playing in New York, a gig at the Apple Store," Balakrishnan says. "We knew we were playing a gig the next morning at the *Wall Street Journal* offices. They were doing a little CNN thing where they were filming little arts and news pieces in their office."

Summer continues the story: "I needed an amplifier for the *Wall Street Journal* gig, because they weren't able to supply one. So, we were at the Apple Store, and I look up, and there's Bennie—this fine young man. And he had this big amplifier strapped to his back! I saw that it was a Trace Elliot, which is a really good amp, so I said, 'Excuse me, are you a musician? And he said, 'Yes, I play the viola!'

"I didn't even know they were playing at the Apple Store," von Gutzeit says. "But, of course, I knew them very well, and was a big fan."

Eager to help, von Gutzeit agreed to meet the Turtles at their gig the next morning, with his amp. He even found a moment to play a few jazz licks on his viola before the gig.

"Actually," von Gutzeit laughs, "eight years ago, before Mads first joined the Turtle Island Quartet as violist, my jazz teacher in Austria told me that the Turtle Island Quartet was looking for a violist. He said,

'Maybe you should audition,' but I thought, 'Oh no! I had only just started.' I thought I wouldn't have any chance."

The violist never dreamed that that chance would come through an accidental meeting... in a computer store.

"He'd really come through for us, and that was pretty neat," Summer says. "And he was obviously a really talented player. So we started talking, and eventually we auditioned him—and here he is."

"There are very, very few violists who play jazz," Balakrishnan notes, explaining that the majority of TIQ violists have been violinists who made the jump to viola because that's where the quartet had an opening. "Bennie has been a violist from the age of four—a committed violist with a complete understanding of the nature of the instrument, and also a monster jazz player. Now, just after these two rehearsals, Mark and I can already feel the difference, we can feel it, it's like we're a whole different animal. It gives us someone to play to in a very different way."

For Balakrishnan and Summer, the introduction of, not one, but two young European players has upped the gamesmanship of the entire quartet. "A big part of what Turtle Island is about," Balakrishnan explains, "is taking a large stylistic framework and finding new ways

to integrate various styles together, so that they speak a common language. Each new player who comes into the group has his own unique individual integration, and as we go through these phases of membership, people coming and going, each new person leads us in surprising new directions."

For the "new guys," that opportunity for growth is what joining the Turtles is all about.

"One of the reasons I came to the states in the first place," von Gutzeit says, "was to learn jazz in America. It's logical—jazz isn't a European thing, it's an American thing. Joining Turtle Island is great, because I've been a fan of these guys for ten years. They developed this thing over so many years, and it's great to be able to step into that. It's not like some band that is still trying to work everything out, and figure out what it wants to be. It's all there. I just have to bring my personality to what David and Mark are already doing."

For Smoczynski, the move to the Turtles is more than just geographic relocation, and more than a mere career opportunity.

"I'm excited about it all," he says, "moving to California, starting a new life, in a new place, with a whole new set of goals for myself. I can almost not believe it. I never thought I would ever have this opportunity, to play with the band that has inspired me so much."

