

# Daily Press



## Nellie McKay and Turtle Island Quartet unpacked surprises at American Theatre: A review



Nellie McKay and the Turtle Island Quartet found common ground in Hampton. (Courtesy of Bucklesweet Media)

By Sam McDonald

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The wisdom of linking oddball songwriter [Nellie McKay](#) with the jazzy string quartet Turtle Island wasn't immediately clear but, at [The American Theatre](#) on Friday, the pairing was often magical.

While there was a glitch or two along the way, McKay and this California-based crew of open-minded string players found common ground. What's more, Turtle Island's lust for precision and glitzy improvising was tempered by McKay's wacky sense of humor and unusual showmanship. The contrast -- while mildly jarring -- made the concert a joy.

After the celebrated [Turtle Island Quartet](#) kicked off the show with a pair of lovely, scene-setting instrumentals, the string players left the stage and McKay sat down at the piano and sang a gentle, relaxed version of "Sentimental Journey."

Her rich, expressive voice allows McKay to naturally slide into retro mode. While McKay's best known for her inventive, occasionally scalding original tunes, she has explored this territory before. In 2009, she released an album of songs paying tribute to Doris Day. McKay, 31, knows how to take something tones and styles and inject them with her own off-kilter energy. In Hampton, she followed up "Sentimental Journey" with her own "Toto Dies," a Latin-tinged number that includes the lines: *Yeah, I'll have my coffee black, Hey look we're bombing Iraq, I guess that's the only way, Oh, did I tell you we got Fifi spayed?*

McKay delivers both sweet and sour -- usually with a smile and a wink.

Continuing the tag-team approach, she left the stage and the Turtles played a version of "Israel," a jazz tune included on the classic Miles Davis album "Birth of the Cool." Next, McKay joined the Turtles and sang her own tune "Absolute Elsewhere" while also playing marimbas.

Introducing it, she said the idea of the song came from a bad dream. "I'd like to dedicate it to my arch nemesis, Harry Connick Jr.," she said, cracking up the audience.

During the show's second set, she picked up a ukulele and a fake Southern drawl to sing Loretta Lynn's "One's On the Way," (dedicated to Planned Parenthood) and sang her own tongue-in-cheek "Mother of Pearl," which begins with the line, "Feminists don't have a sense of humor."

Turtle Island responded with their take on Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower."

The transitions weren't always natural and McKay's microphone headset gave her some problems, but overall, the concert was so good, I wished I'd bootlegged it.

Touching on jazz, classical, torch songs, country, rock and reggae -- even Asian and Cajun music -- McKay and Turtle Island filled a Friday night with music that was both off the wall and sharply focused.

This kind of gonzo alchemy comes our way once in a blue moon, which made it all the sweeter.