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Turtle Island Quartet and Nellie McKay Team Up For a Delightful Evening

By [Jeffrey Rossman](#)

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Sometimes you look at a joint booking for a concert and your initial reaction is "are you serious?" That was what first came to mind when I saw that the [Turtle Island Quartet](#) (TIQ), one of my favorite ensembles, would be sharing the stage with [Nellie McKay](#), whom I [heard at the Carolina Theatre](#) in Durham when she was the opening act for Madeleine Peyroux. With renovations currently taking place at North Carolina State's Talley Student Center, home of the lovely Stewart Theater, this [NCSU Center Stage](#) performance moved to the downtown A.J. Fletcher Theater.

There have been some changes of late to the Turtle Island Quartet; one of them — perplexing to me — is that they officially changed their name from "Turtle Island String Quartet" tossing out "string" despite the fact that there still are sixteen of them — and nothing else — when they play! Perhaps some marketing guy convinced them that "string quartet" scares people away and "quartet" by itself would open up the wallets of the reticent. There are also two relatively new members: violinist Mateusz Smoczynski and violist Benjamin von Gutzeit. Smoczynski is such an astounding virtuoso of all styles, especially jazz, that one of the founders of the group, violinist David Balakrishnan, decided to play second fiddle to

him. The group is rounded off by the other founding member, cellist Mark Summer, whose remarkable special effects on his instrument prompts the description of him playing "cello, bass and drums."

When the TIQ comes out, the members all hook up their bridges so they are amplified, but it is done so tastefully and unobtrusively that you'd hardly know it — except for the sound being a bit more loud and present. That does, however, allow for all of the percussive effects played by cellist Summer.

They started off with a work by jazz composer/arranger Bob Mintzer written for the TIQ, so new that it is currently untitled. The next piece, "Israel" from the Miles Davis classic *Birth of the Cool*, was a tantalizing hint that this would be their new project.

The TIQ left the stage and Nellie McKay quickly strode out to the piano. My admitted trepidation of hearing this quirky singer did not change while she performed her first tune "Zombie." But she slowly changed my mind and by the end of the evening I counted myself as a new fan. For one moment she dipped her toe in NC politics, dedicating her next song, "Long and Lazy River to Your Soul" to Governor McCrory. McKay somehow combines an image of Barbie-doll male fantasies with a persona of innocence all wrapped up in a clear, pristine voice that is comforting and confiding. At times she reminds me of [Blossom Dearie](#), though she is not as breathy.

The TIQ returned, McKay remained, and we heard "Absolute Elsewhere" from her album *Home Sweet Mobile Home*. She made some unfortunate comments about North Carolina and homes on wheels but quickly rebounded with a cover of the standard "I Cover the Waterfront," in a Billie Holiday style. The TIQ sounded just as fresh and creative as the accompanist to McKay; although not explicitly stated, and I would assume that they did the arrangements. McKay next did a great Marlene Dietrich send up in "Black Market."

McKay's lyrics are fun and quirky, and she can deliver knockout punches — with a knowing smile — especially to men. "It's a Pose" is an especially scathing indictment of the "stronger" sex. She can also lightly swing to the classic "Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans" while playing her ukulele, which is more for visual effect and doesn't add much musically. Her piano playing is quite good and she has excellent jazz chops, but she tends to play at the same middle-of-the-road volume.

Another highlight for me was the rarely covered Beatles song "I'm So Tired" from the *White Album*. So, it's nice every now and then to have your mind changed about an artist. I'm a Nellie McKay fan now.

The TIQ displayed their wide variety of influences and styles throughout the evening. They went from playing a stunningly beautiful arrangement of Billy Strayhorn's "A Flower is a Lovesome Thing" to a dead-on accurate transcription of Jimi Hendrix's classic version of Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower." See, kids, no "strings" in this group!

I was completely blown away by the TIQ and McKay when they teamed up for "Caribbean Time," a sultry, tropical gem that hit an infectious rhythmic groove that stayed with you for the rest of the night. When it came time for an encore, they acknowledged the upcoming Halloween without announcing the tune, and the cellist began a series of eerie and frightening dissonant double stops that slowly spread throughout the quartet. Slowly the unadorned melody emerged and McKay sang a lugubrious version of the great love song "I Remember You." Now that's scary stuff!

NCSU Center Stage offerings continue all season. For details, see our calendar.