

# The Musical Box

## in performance: turtle island quartet with nellie mckay

{ September 24, 2014 @ [12:36 am](#) } · { [in performance](#) }  
{ }



turtle island quartet plus one: mateusz smoczynski, david balakrishnan, nellie mckay, mark summer and benjamin von gutzeit.

“Nothing says ‘Jamaica’ like a string quartet,” remarked a giddy Nellie McKay last night at the Grand Theatre in Frankfort before diving into a reggae uprising called *Carribbean Time*.

Perhaps not. Then again, when the ensemble by your side is the Turtle Island Quartet, a troupe that came across equally last night as a chamber, swing and world music troupe, such stylistic non-sequiturs seemed almost routine. Over the course of two 45 minute sets, these two already multi-directional acts matched wits to create a program full of wildly disparate pop fusion.

For Turtle Island, the instrumentation of a traditional string quartet became an open playing field full of bright jazz expression, as in the show opening *Windspan*, a tune penned by Yellowjackets saxophonist Bob Mintzer. Similarly arresting was the lighter swing of John Carisi’s *Israel*, where cellist Mark Summer plucked his instrument with the solemnity and groove of a double bass. But the quartet’s main attraction was violinist David Balakrishnan’s *Guruvayoor*, where an Eastern-leaning drone sprang to life as a vibrant dance piece that balanced chamber and Celtic accents. All three tunes are featured on TIQ’s upcoming album *Confetti Man*

McKay was the pop scholar – a song stylist capable of bracing original work, as shown by two very different second set affirmations, *Beneath the Underdog* and *Mother of Pearl*. The skies opened after that with McKay channeling the likes of Loretta Lynn (the hapless maternal anthem *One’s on the Way*) and Billie Holiday (through a lullaby-like reading *Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans*).

When the co-billed artists played together the boundaries were blurred even further and the traditions grew more askew. McKay didn’t prove to be a technically dazzling singer, but the strong emotive sway of her vocals and the general cabaret-like demeanor of her delivery were heightened considerably by the quartet’s support, whether it was through the dance hall tipsiness of Kurt Weill’s *Alabama Song*, another beautifully

elegiac nod to Holiday with *I Cover the Waterfront* and the playful Marlene Dietrich vamping during *Black Market*.

But on the show closing cover of *I Remember You*, McKay's vocal and piano work seemed to emerge like a frail spirit from the shadows of the strings before disappearing back into them with a sense of subtle but elegant mystery.

Comments are closed.

## • MUSINGS ON MUSIC FROM CENTRAL KENTUCKY AND BEYOND

POWERED BY  
kentucky.com

LEXGO™

### • meet walter tunis



I am a native Kentuckian and freelance journalist who has been writing about contemporary music for the Lexington Herald-Leader since 1980. I have not a lick of honest musical talent myself, just a pair of appreciative ears for jazz, folk, blues, bluegrass, Americana, soul, Celtic, Cajun, chamber, worldbeat, nearly every form of rock 'n' roll imaginable and, when pressed, the occasional tango and polka.

### • recent posts

- [in performance: turtle island quartet with nellie mckay](#)
- [critic's pick 241: john coltrane, 'offering'](#)
- [return to turtle island](#)
- [in performance: the fixx](#)
- [in performance: the smithereens](#)

### • from the archives

- [September 2014](#)
- [August 2014](#)
- [July 2014](#)
- [June 2014](#)