

TURTLE ISLAND STRING QUARTET HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

While there are many things to point to as far as origins and preludes for the Turtle Island concept, the primary combinative elements—i.e., pertaining directly to the 200 year old tradition of the string quartet and embracing the American music ethos—can be postulated as most clearly recognizable in David Balakrishnan’s work in his masters degree program from 1981-1984. He wrote music for a string quartet predicated on each member being commensurately and powerfully grounded in classical technique and jazz improvisation. He also wrote a thesis called “Transcending Style” in which he pointed out that there did not currently exist a string quartet that could adequately perform the music he had written, not so much because of the technical challenges, but because of the primary emphasis on multi stylistic integrity. Hence, he recorded all four parts himself overdubbing them one by one, using three violins and a baritone violin (a regular violin with strings tuned an octave low), thereby establishing a compositional and architectural template upon which, along with his subsequent jazz arrangements for the group, the TISQ approach would be primarily based.

Many of the American fiddle derived rhythmic techniques he used in this music, such as shuffle bow and chop, he had learned through his close association with the hugely influential crossover virtuoso of the violin, Darol Anger. Darol at that time had already achieved deserved notoriety for his work with the David Grisman Quartet as well as his recordings with the new age label Windham Hill Records. Another big influence was David’s composition teacher W.A. Mathieu, who gave him tools to excavate the underlying connective principles of a wide range of musical styles and cultures, including the music of India, where David’s father was from.

Cellist Mark Summer came to the SF bay area in the summer of 1985, to check out the exciting new string music that he had heard was happening there. David, Darol and violinist Matt Glaser, having made a recording called “Jazz Violin Celebration,” were playing some concerts in the bay area at the time and invited Mark to sit in with them. One of the things they did together was perform as a quartet, playing a Bach chorale going into a version of “All Of Me,” as well as Miles Davis’ “So What.”

For David and Darol, having long shared dreams of forming a string quartet that fit their approach, Mark’s appearance on the scene was a game changer. Specifically for David, he saw that he might finally be able to have his music performed effectively in the traditional string quartet instrumentation. They approached Mark with this idea, who, fresh from the excitement of the above-mentioned concert, subsequently made the bold decision to leave Winnipeg Canada, where he had been a member of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra before quitting to pursue other projects such as his own group the West End String Band (appeared at the prestigious Winnipeg Folk Festival), thus perfect timing to take on this grand experiment. One of David’s improvisation students at the time was a violist, Laurie Moore, who was also inspired by the music David had written and wanted to try playing it. Together the four of them assembled in the fall of 1985, to

perform David's piece and play through some jazz arrangements—thus, the quartet was born.

The jazz arrangements for the quartet gave lots of space for soloing and string band rhythm section style, something that David and Darol had done a lot of in their previous work together in various settings (most notably a band called Saheeb, with mandolinist Mike Marshall and pianist Barbara Higbie). It was these arrangements that first captured the imagination of the public.

At the time jazz violinists were rare, jazz cellists even more so. Regarding the theoretical existence of jazz violists, as clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera likes to say, that is akin to a barking cat. The Kronos Quartet by that time had already made their seminal recordings of the music of Thelonius Monk and Bill Evans, beautiful examples of a classical string quartet expanding the possibilities for the form. The stage was set for a string quartet made up of maverick string jazzers to go rogue and take things to the next level!

It quickly became clear that the quartet was striking a deep chord in the musical community due to its completely unique core identity coming from an authentic American music perspective. The group set upon a determined search for a name that would signal these fundamental defining characteristics, during which they performed under the title "The Quartet With No Name." Finally Darol came across a Pulitzer prize winning book by poet/ecologist Gary Snyder called "Turtle Island," its title taken from native American creation mythology, in which the author pointed out that American culture was really an immigrant culture, coming from all points of the globe. This fit the group perfectly, since jazz, the most important art form to emanate from America, was at its roots an integration of musical elements brought in from Europe and Africa, later absorbing a healthy influx from Latin America and Asia, making it the first significant world music style.

Another early consequence of success was the realization that there would be membership changes. In 1986, the group started to attract possibilities for touring, which was not workable for Laurie. She was replaced by Irene Sazer, a talented young improvising violinist willing to switch to viola in order to play with the group, which would prove to be a common theme for the quartet in the coming years. With Irene the group began to make serious inroads into the national scene, thus she is widely regarded as being a founding member, and rightly so.

In 1987 (the tail end of the good old 'vinyl' days!) they recorded their eponymously titled debut LP, the 'A' side being David's arrangements of "Stolen Moments" by Oliver Nelson, "Milestones" by Miles Davis, "A Night In Tunisia" by Dizzy Gillespie and Darol's arrangement of Bud Powell's "Tempus Fugit." The 'B' side contained David's aforementioned four-movement piece "Balapadam." They also recorded some free improvisations to be included as bonus tracks for the newly arrived CD format. Windham Hill Records, with whom Darol had an agreement that provided for him to record his own projects separate from the super-group Montreux, released it under their brand new sub label, Windham Hill Jazz.

In 1988, “A Night In Tunisia” garnered David a Grammy nomination in the instrumental arrangement category, the first big success for the group as well as for David as a composer/arranger. The group also began to tour more extensively in that year, and went on to make their next recording, “Metropolis,” which featured among other things, Mark’s classic solo cello crossover composition, “Julie O.”

A graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music, Mark’s initial inspiration for “Julie O” grew out of his love for the Bach Cello Suites, which can be heard in the way he uses broken chords and rolling arpeggios. But that is just the point of entry. His idiosyncratic adaptations of the shuffle bow and chop techniques brought in from Darol, combined with his prodigious bass pizzicato technique and stellar instinct for direct and evocative melody garnered from a lifelong passion for the music of the Beatles resulted in a piece that has taken its rightful place next to the classics of the cello repertoire, widely performed throughout the world by cellists of all stripes and ages and ability levels.

In 1989, Irene left the quartet to pursue a solo career, yet another common recurring theme in the quartet’s history. The group was coming to realize that the skill set required to be in the quartet also predisposed members to want to do their own thing, which meant people were going to come and go. The good news was that for a group almost entirely fueled by the members of the group for repertoire as well as the abundant space for improvisation, the advent of new members translated into refreshing new inspiration and ideas. At the same time, the original premise was powerful enough to encapsulate this influx.

Katrina Wreede, a classically trained violist who had studied jazz with David, assumed the viola chair from Irene and played in the group from 1989 to 1992, a period that included four more Windham Hill recordings. After she left, the group went through a two year period in which they performed with several candidates for the viola seat, including a year long stint with violinist Jeremy Cohen, another to switch to play viola in order to work with the group, who also played on two tracks of the “Spider Dreams” recording.

In the fall of 1992, violist Danny Seidenberg joined the group. He was the group’s first authentic ‘barking cat,’ in that he was a Juilliard trained violist with a commensurate level of jazz chops, along with brilliant compositional talent and a hilarious taste for the irreverent. He was to stay in the group for eleven years, and contributed some of the most well loved Turtle Island charts, such as Tower Of Power’s “Who Do You Think You Are,” as well as witty adaptations of classical standards, suitably renamed, such as “Bach’s Lunch,” and “Thin Ice,” a reworking of the Winter concerto from Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons.”

A few months later, family responsibilities prompted David to resign in the spring of 1993. Another Juilliard graduate with an off the page background, Tracy Silverman, took his seat. The group also changed management, to ICM (now Opus Three), with whom they made a valiant effort to popularize the group, including appearing at the Hollywood

Bowl alongside artists Shirley Horn and the Manhattan Transfer, and opening up for Ray Charles at the Universal Amphitheatre. Eventually their efforts in this direction along with conflicting individual agendas started to pull the band apart. Nonetheless this period was important in the group's development, both for the innovations in the area of rhythmic drive and explosiveness that grew from their passionate push towards the pop side of the ledger, as well as the ensuing recommitment to the more classically identified principles upon which the group had been founded. In February 1997, Tracy left and David returned. Two months later, capping off a whirlwind of changes, Darol left to pursue his solo career, and was replaced by 24-year-old Evan Price.

Evan came to the group by way of recommendation by Matt Glaser, now chairman of the string department of the Berklee School Of Music, the first college to award a degree in string jazz performance. Evan had also previously undertaken studies at Cleveland Institute Of Music, Mark's alma mater. He was the first of the new generation of string players with accredited academic training in alternative string styles to join the group. TISQ had been a big influence in the development of programs such as the one at Berklee because it symbolized the possibility of a legitimate career track in this area. Evan had indeed grown up listening to the group's recordings and had played some TISQ charts in his various school settings.

During the period that followed, 1997-2002, the scene in America was not very strong for the group, prompting them to travel overseas quite a bit, especially in Germany, where they had great success. They moved on from Windham Hill to Koch International, with whom they made two recordings, the second featuring Paquito D'Rivera, including their cover of "You've Changed," which garnered David his second Grammy nomination in the instrumental arrangement category. They also left ICM to work with Baylin Artists Management, who encouraged them to take a more thematic approach to their concert presentations as well as undertake more collaborative projects. Most successful in this regard was the program they put together with the Ying Quartet.

When David was at the 2003 Grammy Awards for his nomination, he happened to sit next to Telarc producer Thomas Moore, who had just won a Grammy for classical producer of the year. Thom encouraged David to contact the owner of Telarc, Bob Woods. David proposed the project with the Yings, Telarc accepted, Thom produced the recording and the group went on to win their first Grammy, in the 2006 classical crossover category, for their recording "4+Four." Their following recording, "A Love Supreme, The Legacy Of John Coltrane," won them their second Grammy in 2008, also in the classical crossover category.

At the time of this last recording the group decided to drop the word 'String' from their name, in keeping with groups such as the Emerson, Guarneri, and Kronos quartets; in fact pretty much all of their string quartet colleagues similarly eschew the word. Another factor was the group's ongoing imperative to search out ways to sidestep the unfortunate associations for American audiences with string quartets being stuffy and boring, without sacrificing artistic integrity. Currently, the quartet finds itself comfortable with both versions of their name, also in keeping with their string quartet contemporaries.

The shift to Telarc coincided with Danny Seidenberg's leaving the group in 2003. Next to take up the viola chair was Mads Tolling, a 24 year old jazz violinist from Denmark, also a graduate of Berklee College Of Music, again recommended by Matt Glaser, and the first European to join the group. It was somewhat ironic that a group so much based on playing American styles would make such a move. But as serious jazz violin aficionados well know, it was the Europeans that first made the biggest impact on string jazz, starting with the patron saint of jazz violin, Stephane Grappelli, his contemporaries such as Mads' countryman Danish violinist Svend Asmussen, and continuing with the biggest violin star of the modern jazz era, Jean Luc Ponty. Mads was similarly grounded in modern jazz styles, especially those so warmly embraced by the European culture, exemplified by musicians such as Keith Jarrett, Jan Garbarek, Nils Henning Orsted Peterson, Wayne Shorter, and other legendary jazz musicians associated with the famous European label ECM.

Upon Evan's departure in late 2007, Mads switched to violin and 24-year-old violinist Jeremy Kittel joined, assuming the viola chair in January 2008. Jeremy had previously auditioned for the group in 2003. 19 years old at the time, he was already a master of a wide range of alternative styles, including jazz improvisation, American folk, and Scottish and Irish fiddle styles as well, having won multiple US national Scottish fiddle titles. He was then working on his masters in jazz studies at the Manhattan School Of Music, and since Mads was ready to join, the group felt it best to give Jeremy more time to develop. Which he did in spades, and so when Evan left, Jeremy was the group's first choice to join the group. With Jeremy they made their third recording with Telarc, "Have You Ever Been...?" featuring the music of the legendary icon of rock guitar, Jimi Hendrix and David's work, "Tree Of Life," released in late summer of 2010. They also made a recording with mandolinist Mike Marshall, released in 2014, that was nominated for a Grammy in the Classical Compendium category.

In the summer of 2012, both Jeremy and Mads left the group, to be replaced by two European musicians; Polish jazz violin phenom Mateusz Smoczyński, heir to legendary jazz violinist and fellow countryman Zbigniew Siefert, and violist Benjamin von Gutzeit, of German descent, who upon completing a masters degree in jazz studies from the Manhattan School of Music, was immediately 'drafted' by the quartet. This coincided with their working with Azica Records producer Alan Bise, entering the studio in January 2014 to make the quartet's next recording entitled "Confetti Man." Selections include original music written for Turtle Island by Paquito D'Rivera and Bob Mintzer (big band leader and saxophonist with the Yellowjackets), the two movement work by David that gives the CD its title, a virtuosic cello solo piece by Mark Summer as well as a bevy of new jazz arrangements, and nicely augmented with a cameo appearance by vocalist Nellie McKay, with whom the quartet has been collaborating for the '13-'14 and '14-'15 seasons. The CD was released in October 2014 to critical acclaim, including an award for best American Chamber Music recording given by the National Federation of Music Clubs, and a 2015 Grammy nomination for David in the Instrumental Composition category (for his piece "Confetti Man").

The membership challenge that followed was a formidable one indeed. Similar to the previous change it was a double-switch, this time around included Mark's momentous decision in 2015 that the time had come for him to focus exclusively on his solo career. Mateusz as well wanted to return to the brilliant music scene he had created for himself in Poland, most notably with "Atom," his own award winning string quartet, specifically modeled upon the TIQ approach. Cellist Malcolm Parson, who had previously served several years as a member of the Grammy winning "Carolina Chocolate Drops," and Alex Hargreaves, one the bright shining stars of the current crop of young lions of the jazz violin scene in America, took their seats in January 2016. Thus began yet another big leap into uncharted waters for the quartet, in steadfast adherence to its penchant for taking the turns as dictated by the archetypal road less traveled.

The changeover prompted the following quote from David: "Every group, particularly one that has been together for 30 years, reaches transition points along their journey. We are so happy for Mark as he moves into this new phase in his career, and honor the wonderful years of camaraderie and stirring performances he has given us. Mateusz as well has contributed mightily to the story line in his recent tenure. At the same time, one of our group's core strengths is discovering new and exciting talent, allowing us to grow, evolve and keep the quartet alive and vibrant. Both Malcolm and Alex are uniquely gifted in their ability to transition effortlessly between classical music, jazz, and contemporary styles, and to meld them together into a personal unique sound, a perfect fit for TIQ. We are thrilled to unleash their formidable talents and know our audiences will love this latest evolution of our ensemble."

In January 2017 the quartet recorded their latest CD, "Bird's Eye View," inspired by the music of Charlie Parker, and featuring David's newest work, "Aeroelasticity: Harmonies Of Impermanence," written in fulfillment of the prestigious Chamber Music America Classical Commission grant he was awarded in 2015. The CD was released in March 2018 in tandem with their concert program of the same name.

With the advent of violinist Gabe Terracciano, who came onboard in fall of 2018 taking Alex's chair, the quartet launched its latest concert program with jazz piano legend Cyrus Chestnut, entitled "Carry Me Home," infused with the global reach of gospel and sacred music ranging from the Appalachian Mountains to the spiritually defined musical landscape of J.S. Bach. The journey continues!