

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 composed music for a string quartet predicated on each member being commensurately 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 composed, not so much due to technical challenges, more about the defining emphasis on multi-stylistic integrity. Hence, he recorded all four parts himself via overdubbing, using violins and a [baritone violin](#) (a 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 [chop and shuffle bow](#), he had acquired 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 Quintet](#) as well as his recordings with the new age label [Windham Hill Records](#). Another significant 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, homeland of David's father.

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," and Miles Davis's "So What."

Mark's appearance on the scene was a game changer. Specifically for David, he saw that he might finally have his music performed effectively in the traditional string quartet instrumentation. He approached Mark with this idea, who, fresh from the excitement of the above-mentioned concert and inspired by the vibrancy of the SF bay area New Acoustic music community, 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; thus perfect timing to take on this grand experiment. One of David's improvisation students at the time, violist, [Laurie Moore](#), 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 the jazz arrangements—thus the quartet was born.

The jazz arrangements for the quartet gave lots of space for soloing as well as string band rhythm section style, the drummer-less approach that David and Darol had extensively explored 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 music 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 fueled by immigration, 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 to play with the group, which would prove a common theme for the quartet in the coming years. With Irene the group began to make serious inroads into the national scene, hence 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 released it under their 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 solo cello 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. His idiosyncratic adaptations of chop and shuffle bow techniques combined with his prodigious bass pizzicato technique and stellar instinct for direct and evocative melody resulted in a piece that has taken its rightful place alongside the classics of the cello repertoire.

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 multi-genre skill set required 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, David's 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. After she left, the group went through a two-year period in which they performed with several candidates, including a yearlong stint with violinist [Jeremy Cohen](#), another to switch to play viola 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 skills, 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 a valiant effort was made to popularize the group, including appearing at the Hollywood Bowl alongside artists Shirley Horn and the Manhattan Transfer, and opening 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 presentation and rhythmic drive 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, symbolizing the possibility of a legitimate career track in this area. Evan had indeed grown up listening to the group's recordings and played some TISQ charts in his various school settings.

During the period that followed, 1997-2002, the quartet traveled extensively overseas, 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, who plays on 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 their string quartet colleagues similarly eschewed 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 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 primarily based on playing American styles would make such a move. That said, a case can be made that it was the Europeans who had 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 arguably the premiere violin star of the modern jazz era, Jean Luc Ponty.

Upon Evan's departure in late 2007, Mads switched to violin and [Jeremy Kittel](#), a master of a wide range of alternative genres including jazz, American folk, and Scottish and Irish fiddle music having won multiple US national Scottish fiddle titles, assumed the viola chair in January 2008. With Jeremy they made their third recording with Telarc, "Have You Ever Been...?" featuring the music of Jimi Hendrix and David's "[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; violinist [Mateusz Smoczyński](#), heir to legendary jazz violinist and fellow countryman Zbigniew Siefert, and violist [Benjamin von Gutzeit](#), of German descent, TIQ's second and current authentic 'barking cat', as per his impeccable classical credentials coming from his European classical royalty family and his consummate jazz chops unparalleled on his instrument. This coincided with their working with [Azica Records](#) producer Alan Bise, entering the studio in January 2014 to make the quartet's recording entitled "Confetti Man." The CD was released in October 2014, won 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](#)").

In 2015 Mark Summer, having devoted thirty years of his life to the quartet, decided 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 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.

In January 2017 the quartet recorded their second CD with Azica, "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 recording was released in March 2018 in tandem with their concert program of the same name. With the advent of elite jazz violinist [Gabe Terracciano](#), winner of the 2018 Freshgrass Fiddle Competition the month before coming onboard taking Alex's chair, the quartet launched its fourth 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.

At the start of the 2019-2020 season, Marc Baylin, founder/owner of Baylin Artists Management, made the decision to close his agency, effective at the end of the season. As luck would have it, in February 2020, the renowned jazz trumpeter [Terence Blanchard](#) invited TIQ to record with him for his next project in celebration of Wayne Shorter on Blue Note Records. Terence's agent, Michael Fox, at that time with the International Music Network agency, was previously with Baylin Artists Management. Michael had been extraordinarily successful in getting the quartet booked in his time with BAM. He remained a big fan of TIQ and when Terence decided he wanted a string quartet on the recording, it was Michael who recommended TIQ. The ensuing recording, entitled "[Absence](#)," features TIQ's solo performance of David's piece "[The Second Wave](#)," included at Terence's request upon hearing the quartet play it for him the morning of the second day of recording.

The excitement and hopeful dreams of the future generated by that thrilling experience were immediately dampened by the onslaught of the COVID pandemic shutdown in March 2020. This was followed three months later by Malcolm's decision to leave the quartet to focus exclusively on his film composing career.

With all the turmoil came unforeseen opportunity. The pandemic of course affected a wide swath of the music industry, including booking agencies, and one result was Michael Fox leaving IMN and starting his own agency, with Terence following him. As part of this move, Michael signed TIQ as well, and when it became possible to play concerts again, TIQ began performing with Terence and his band the E-Collective, behind the newly released Absence recording, at major venues and jazz festivals nationally and internationally.

The fall of 2021 saw the arrival of the quartet's newest member, cellist [Naseem Alatrash](#), hailing from Bethlehem Palestine, bringing his prodigious skills in Arabic music styles, unprecedented on the cello. Naseem quickly made his presence felt on the quartet's sound, meshing well with David's utilization of elements of Indian classical music in his compositions.

In 2023 Absence received a Grammy nomination for Best Instrumental Jazz Album, the first nomination in a jazz Grammy category for the quartet. Terence invited TIQ to perform with Terence and the E-Collective on several new projects, including a jazz chamber opera rendition of Terence's Grammy award winning opera, [Fire Shut Up In My Bones](#), arranged for the ensemble by David.

As fortuitous as it has turned out for TIQ to have the opportunity to work extensively with Terence, no less essential to the quartet's resurgence has been their signature project, [Island Prayers](#). David's experience going through the turbulent early days of the pandemic fostered a deep desire to return to and build upon his foundational concept in 1985: a string quartet rooted in the compositional language of the European classical tradition that fully embraces jazz, American roots, and global music performance practices, pairing his original music with extant music masters of said genres similarly drawn to reach beyond the confines of their primary style.

With the help of his booking agent/music muse Michael Fox and new agency, [EFPerformances](#), David put together a multi-composer commission for himself, Terence Blanchard, [Rhiannon Giddens](#), and [Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate](#) to form the core repertoire for a new concert program designed around David's intention. David invoked the symbolism of the name that he and Michael had come up with for the project as inspiration to compose his [three-movement contribution](#). The Island Prayers program premiered in October 2023 at the Meany Center University of Washington, followed by a multitude of performances over the ensuing years, highlights including a NYC concert at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall.

The current '25-'26 season, the quartet's fortieth, proceeds with Island Prayers, multiple programs with Terence Blanchard and the E-Collective, TIQ's "[Shades Of Blue](#)" program nod to the John Coltrane/Miles Davis centennial birth anniversary pairing David's compositional responses to Coltrane's A Love Supreme and Davis's Birth Of The Cool, and the February 2026 release of TIQ's [Island Prayers recording](#), their third on Azica. The quartet continues its phoenix-like rise from the pandemic ashes and forward leaning visionary push on the stylistic parameters of world chamber music; TIQ still bringing it and burning bright.