

# Life in LAMORINDA

## Turtle Island – Not Your Usual String Quartet

By Lou Fancher



Turtle Island Quartet rehearses during a recording session for "Have You Ever Been...?"

Photo Barbara Summer

When David Balakrishnan brings his violin and the Turtle Island Quartet to Saint Mary's College on September 29, Jimi Hendrix will tag along.

The Grammy-winning string quartet, known for its genre-defying mastery of everything from classical to bluegrass, swing to hip-hop, latin american music to jazz, and now, rock, easily defies description. Sometimes referred to as an "American string quartet," Turtle Island is more like an "Everything string quartet."

The ensemble's latest release, *Have You Ever Been...?*, opens an alternate universe for music lovers: one where highly-trained classical

artists, steeped in the improvisational traditions of jazz, embrace the genius of Hendrix.

Balakrishnan, in a wide-ranging interview, talks about his fellow quartet members, Turtle Island's history, his own compositions, winning awards, and the undisputed king of electric guitar, Hendrix.

Listening to Hendrix as a teenager in the 1970's inspired Balakrishnan to pick up a guitar himself. "Playing guitar taught me how to play the blues," he says. "When I went back to the violin, I found you can play more percussive sounds on it too. It made me widen the performance practice of my instrument."

Approximately forty years later, a Woodstock video of Hendrix's brilliant 1969 performance triggered a long-buried yearning in Balakrishnan's soul. "There's always pressure to repeat yourself when you've been successful," he says, about the period of time following the release of *A Love Supreme*, which won the group its second Grammy in 2008. "But I didn't want to do that. So I listened to (Hendrix's) *Electric Ladyland* without talking to anybody about it. I kept it under my hat – didn't even tell the band – because I knew everyone would jump on the commercial idea of it."

At the same time, Balakr-

ishnan was developing his *Tree of Life*, a one-hour collaborative work involving scientists and artists and based on Darwin's evolutionary theories. "I realized Hendrix and *Tree of Life* were my story. The connection lies in me, not in a marketing plan. It's a fortuitous combination: the two ideas grew up with each other." And with that, a CD was born. "You could say I've been writing the same piece all my life," Balakrishnan says, turning the conversation to process. "I limit myself to sounds through which I can draw lines of continuity."

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