

WINNING SPINS

by Bill Meredith

IN PERFORMING THE MUSIC OF JIMI

Hendrix, rock's most electrifying guitarist, the all-acoustic Turtle Island Quartet exhibits both creativity and bravery on its latest CD, *Have You Ever Been...?* (Telarc).

Violinists David Balakrishnan and Mads Tolling, cellist Mark Summer and violist Jeremy Kittel are among a generation of open-minded classical musicians who not only listen to other forms of music, but play them, as well. Balakrishnan, the group's founder, explains in the liner notes that his father, who was born in India, exposed him to traditional Indian music while he was growing up. He added Hendrix to his playlist, then fusion, classical music, bebop and bluegrass. The quartet, he says, is "the way that I found to connect the dots."

Glimpses of all those styles appear intermittently on *Have You Ever Been...?* Hendrix was revered more for his futuristic playing than for his compositional prowess, but the quartet's interpretations of his material could certainly change that. No listener is likely to have experienced the dreamy opener, "Have You Ever Been (To Electric Ladyland)," veering into chamber-music territory.

That short introduction segues into a bluegrass-tinged romp through "House Burning Down," on which Balakrishnan actually plays the same scales as Hendrix and mimics his phrasing, as well. Again with no break in between, the four musicians downshift into the melodic "1983... A Merman I Should Turn to Be." Summer's pizzicato technique shines here—his finger-played lines sound exactly like an acoustic upright bass—as the violins and viola create an enticing, intertwining web.

Turtle Island's reading of "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)" shifts between reverent unison runs and ominous additions that, in some ways, make their version even heavier than the original. But then something strange happens as Tolling, whose frequent work with bassist Stanley Clarke's band makes him the most fusion-centric of the group's members, leads them through his arrangement of John McLaughlin's "To Bop or Not to Be."

McLaughlin was certainly influenced by Hendrix, but the addition of his composition is a setup for Balakrishnan's subsequent



"Tree of Life" suite. Dedicated to Charles Darwin and honoring last year's 150th anniversary of *On the Origin of Species*, the four-piece movement ("Ashwattha," "Lucy," "Monkey Business" and "Coelacanth") doesn't sound out of place—unless, of course, you're wondering where the Hendrix melodies are. While Balakrishnan certainly deserves credit for an evolutionary musical collage including Indian classical, Afro-Cuban, Eastern European folk and American jazz standards, it seems forced in this setting.

That's because four more Hendrix numbers conclude the disc. Vibraphonist Stefon Harris adds his customary flair to the dramatic Middle Eastern feel of "Gypsy Eyes," and Mike Marshall plays a hybrid, eight-stringed mandocello on the closing "All Along the Watchtower," the Bob Dylan composition that Hendrix transformed into one of his biggest hits.

Kittel's arrangement of Billy Roberts' "Hey Joe" features banner viola work by the quartet's newest member. This tune and "Little Wing" are the only Hendrix selections that weren't culled from the 1968 *Electric Ladyland* album. Summer's solo arrangement of the latter, on which he transposes all of the electric guitar -isms—hammer-ons and pull-offs, bends and double-stops—to cello is simply stunning.

No less an authority than former Police guitarist Andy Summers—who's covered

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Hendrix, and recorded stellar tribute CDs to both Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus—gives an accurate testimonial on the quartet's behalf. In the liner notes, he praises their "imagination, sincerity and arranging prowess in reigniting the Hendrix fire."

Since the Turtle Island Quartet helped invent the classical crossover subgenre, this comes as no surprise. The group's last two CDs (one all-original, the other a salute to John Coltrane) have, in fact, won "Best Classical Crossover Album" Grammys.

And while Turtle Island hasn't entirely taken us to Electric Ladyland—they left out more than half of the original double album's 16 songs, including the gems "Crosstown Traffic" and "Burning of the Midnight Lamp"—Have You Ever Been...? makes a fittingly daring addition to the quartet's oeuvre.

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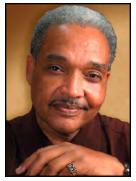
JAZZ RIFFS Join Stu Grant of WXEL's Jazz Impressions for pre-show jazz talks at 7pm

Turtle Island Quartet performs at 8PM on Dec. 8 with pianist Cyrus Chestnut and mandolinist Mike Marshall at the Society of the Four Arts' Gubelmann Auditorium in Palm Beach. Call 561-655-7226 or visit Fourarts.org.



JOHNNY RAWLS ACE'S, BRADENTON/DEC. 3 BRADFORDVILLE BLUES, TALLAHASSEE/DEC. 4 HURRICANE GRILLE, MARATHON/DEC. 10-11 Armed with a silky, soulful croon and a quiver full of

Armed with a silky, soulful croon and a quiver full of searing guitar licks, Johnny Rawls is a true soulbluesman. His grandfather was a renowned blues guitarist around Hattiesburg, Miss., and by the time he was in his teens, Rawls was playing behind soul greats such as Z.Z. Hill, Johnny Taylor and Joe Tex. He went on to lead the band of the mighty O.V. Wright, as well. The dues Rawls paid on the Chitlin Circuit can be heard in every note he sings or wrings from his guitar, and are amply displayed on his consistently fine recordings. His 2006 CD Heart & Soul was



nominated for a Blues Music Award for Best Soul Blues Album. and his latest release, 2009's Ace of Spades, actually took that honor at this summer's awards ceremony. And it's easy to hear why: Rawls sounds like he's lived every lyric. He also continues to tour like a demon, which brings him to Florida for several shows this month. BW



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JUSTIN TOWNES EARLE COMMON GROUNDS, GAINESVILLE/DEC. 7 CROWBAR, YBOR CITY/DEC. 9 THE SOCIAL, ORLANDO/DEC. 10

MOJO KITCHEN, JACKSONVILLE/DEC. 11

Justin Townes Earle has a lot to live up to. His dad is roots renegade Steve Earle and his middle name honors one of Texas' finest singer-songwriters, Townes Van Zandt. Despite all that freight, or perhaps because of it, the Nashville-raised Earle developed a style all his own, a hybrid of old-school country, country blues and folk. A deft songwriter and picker, Earle, 28, doesn't disappoint. Recent recordings—2008's The Good Life, 2009's Midnight at the Movies and this year's Harlem River Blues—reveal a penchant for stark imagery and



damaged characters. Earle won Best New and Emerging Artist honors at last year's Americana Awards, appeared with his dad on the HBO series Treme, and his song "Mama's Eyes" was ranked No. 19 on Esquire's list of 50 Songs Every Man Should Be Listening To. Earle shares the bill on this Florida tour with singer-songwriter Caitlin Rose. BW





JOHNNIE MARSHALL BAND SOUTHERN PINES BLUES & BBQ, FOREST CAPITAL STATE PARK, PERRY/DEC. 10-11 BRADFORDVILLE BLUES, TALLAHASSEE/DEC. 31

As a young man living in Whigham, Ga., Johnnie Marshall frequented a Tallahassee juke joint called Dave's C.C. Club. Here, the burgeoning guitarist developed his chops and took inspiration from touring blues vets who would invite him on-stage. One of those performers was Johnny Rawls, who was so knocked out by Marshall that he brought him to Chicago to record his 1998 JSP debut album *Live for Today*. While Dave's C.C. closed in 2001–Bradfordville Blues carries on in its place—Marshall continues to honor the juke's influence on his life and



career with his funky. danceable blues grooves. But he can just as easily grind out a slowburner that showcases his fiery black Strat, as evidenced on his fine 2001 recording 98 Cents in the Bank. Catch Marshall at the Southern Pines Blues and BBQ Fest (southernpinesblues.com) or ring in the New Year with him at Bradfordville Blues.

GRADY CHAMPION SKIPPER'S SMOKEHOUSE, TAMPA/DEC. 11

South Florida blues fans may remember Grady Champion from his short stint in the area about a decade ago. With his huge charisma, husky growl and autobiographical tunes, the singer and harmonica player seemed primed for the national spotlight. And he's certainly lived up to his promise. Soon after winning the 2010 International Blues Challenge, the 41-year-old bluesman was presented with the key to the city of his native Canton, Miss., and his home state decreed Feb. 25 as Grady Champion Day. And Champion's latest recording, Back in Mississippi, Live at the 930 Blues Cafe, made it to the Grammys first round of nominations for Traditional Blues



Album of the Year. While he's strongly rooted in the blues. Champion doesn't shy away from contemporary soul, R&B and funk, and his razorsharp four-piece lays it all down with precision and sizzle. Along with the Wesley Chapel-based Lamkin and Automatic Heat, Champion will perform at the Suncoast Blues Society's holiday party. BW







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ROCKIN' JAKE

PARADISE GRILLE, PENSACOLA BEACH/DEC. 30 WOODS NUDIST RV PARK, LAND O' LAKES/DEC. 31 How dangerous is harmonica man Rockin' Jake

Jacobs? Consider that New Orleans music bible Off Beat Magazine named him best harmonica player five times. Or better yet, pick up his live 2004 recording 5 p.m. Breakfast, which was recorded on New Year's Eve at the Green Parrot in Key West. Jake blows revved up reads of classics such as Slim Harpo's "Shake Your Hips" and Sonny Boy Williamson's "One Way Out," and the Big Easy influence drips from his takes on Clifton Chenier's "Hot Tamale Baby" and Bobby Bland's "Turn on Your Love Light." The Sunshine State remains a favorite destination for the St. Louis-



based harmonica virtuoso, whose mom lives in South Florida. The Rockin' Band will once again celebrate New Year's Eve at the Woods Nudist RV Park, You don't have to get naked to join the clothing-optional party (visit thewoods rv.com for info). The band will stay in state through January. See Rockinjake.com for a full schedule. BW

MANHATTAN TRANSFER VAN WEZEL PAC, SARASOTA/DEC. 3

Even fans of the Manhattan Transfer may not realize that the New York City vocal group formed the same year as Woodstock. The quartet has since become the most popular and gifted jazz vocal group since Lambert, Hendricks & Ross in the early 1960s, even with only one remaining original member in Tim Hauser. But the current quartet of Hauser, Janis Siegel, Alan Paul and Cheryl Bentyne has been in place since 1979, when their cover of Weather Report's hit "Birdland" (from the album Extensions) earned the group two Grammys. With lyrics by Jon Hendricks, the track also established the Manhattan Transfer in concert, where it continues to shine.



Multiple Grammys followed throughout the '80s, and the group's 1985 album Vocalese earned a staggering 12 nominations. latest CD, 2009's The Chick Corea Songbook, provided no less of a challenge than those of the past. With 31 years of chemistry, the quartet's harmonies soar on modern Corea standards like "Spain" and "500 Miles High." BM





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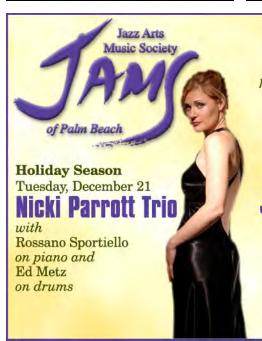
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PONCHO SANCHEZ & TIEMPO LIBRE ADRIENNE ARSHT CENTER, MIAMI/DEC. 3

The past, present and future of Latin jazz combine in this "Jazz Roots: Descargal" jam session, which pairs veteran Mexican-American conga master Poncho Sanchez with rising young Cuban timba group Tiempo Libre. The Texas-born, 59-year-old Sanchez worked with influential Latin jazz vibraphonist Cal Tjader from 1975 until Tjader's death in 1982, and has led his own band ever since. A multiple Grammy winner, Sanchez was influenced by late Cuban conguero Mongo Santamaria, bebop titan Charlie Parker, and practically everything in between (as evidenced by his latest CD, Psychedelic Blues). Miami-based Tiempo Libre's timba sound mixes high-energy Latin jazz with Cuban



son rhythms, and has earned the sevenpiece group three Grammy tions. All members were trained at La ENA, Cuba's premier conservatory, their latest projects the Bach and Afro-Cuban fusion CD Bach in Havana and the interactive, biographical stage production Miami Libre showcase those deep roots. BM

BOBBY RAMIREZ & PAN CON BISTEC WITH MEL DANCY

CALEB CENTER, MIAMI/DEC. 5

The term "Renaissance man" is overused in describing multifaceted artists, but in Bobby Ramirez's case, it fits. The Miami resident is a bandleader, saxophonist, flutist, vocalist, composer, arranger and producer—and those are just his musical talents. Ramirez is also a dancer and painter, publisher of the online Latin JazzClub Magazine and founder of a nonprofit venture to establish the future Miami Jazz Museum. The native of Santa Clara, Cuba, deserves recognition for his ability to lead a band through every authentic Cuban musical style, including cha cha, son, montuno, charanga, rumba and bolero. His Pan Con Bistec

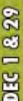


ensemble features the Miami-based Uruguayan violin star Federico Britos, and South Florida jazz fixture and guest vocalist Mel Dancy will add to the Sunshine Jazz Organization presentation. A multicultural group (its name translates to "steak sandwich"), Pan Con Bistec will also venture into Brazilian and Afro-Cuban jazz, swing and bebop. BM





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DENNIS NODAY BIG BAND SPANISH RIVER PERFORMING ARTS CENTER, BOCA RATON/DEC. 21

Dennis Noday's recording credits include a handful of albums with the big bands of Stan Kenton and Maynard Ferguson. And the veteran trumpeter has never forgotten his musical roots. On his self-titled orchestra's recent release, A Tribute to Stan Kenton, Noday and his 18-piece band torch standards from "Stompin' at the Savoy" to "Sophisticated Lady" á la Kenton's great big bands. The classically trained musician has also played in the orchestras of celebrated Broadway musicals and on the TV soundtracks to Gunsmoke and Hawaii Five-O, among others. His trumpet and flugelhorn playing has graced the Chicago



Metropolitan Jazz Orchestra and earned him a guest soloist spot at the IAJE Conference when it was held there. Some more recent testimony: "Some of the best big-band sounds I've heard in years," saxophonist and arranger Lee Harris gushed on his website after sitting in on a rehearsal in October. "Dennis Noday's new band is smokin' hot." BM

NICKI PARROTT TRIO HARRIET HIMMEL THEATER, WEST PALM BEACH/DEC. 21

Like many bass players, Nicki Parrott took up the instrument out of necessity, since her sister needed a bassist for her band in their native Australia. The fledgling musician ascended to the New South Wales Conservatory of Music in Sydney to study jazz, and took lessons with visiting double-bass dignitaries like Ray Brown and John Clayton. Those, and the lessons with Rufus Reid after moving to New York City in 1994, have obviously paid off. Parrott leads her self-titled trio as both bassist and lead singer, and displays a breathy vocal delivery on ballads and swing numbers, which gets saucier as the tempos increase. In a



YouTube video of Cole Porter's "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home she locks in instrumentally with drummer Ed Metz Jr. while covly crooning the tune's Italian pianist Rossano Sportiello, also increasing in name recognition, uses subtlety to enhance the standard before delivering one of his signature solos.



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