



# Sounds of America

Gramophone's guide to the classical scene in the US and Canada

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**T**here is nothing predictable about ETHEL, the quartet which bills itself as

"America's favourite string band". The players' omnivorous tastes incorporate classical, rock, blues and jazz – but trying to guess their next move is a fool's errand.

"One of the distinguishing factors of how we make music is by eschewing the guidelines," says Dorothy Lawson, the cellist of ETHEL, which bypasses standard fare for works composed in the last four decades. The ensemble, which often performs with amplification and multimedia, has premiered 47 new works in the past three years. "With anything that seemed like a sacred cow, we would kindly and gently say, 'Maybe it's not for us'. Our goal is not to fit into an orthodoxy. We are very comfortable following the

String Quartet ETHEL has been nurturing its attraction to Native American music, finds  
**Vivien Schweitzer**

whims of our own personal tastes and preferences," she adds.

One of those preferences is a strong attraction to indigenous music, manifested most recently in "Oshtali" – a new recording on the Thunderbird Records label, released in June 2010 and dedicated to music by Native American composers. The disc is the first to showcase works by American Indian students.

"Music is a living art and always changing, fusing, reconnecting and reshaping itself," says Cornelius Dufallo, one of ETHEL's violinists. "The fascinating thing about working with young Native American composers is the blend

of influences. Music is such an important part of everyday life in many Native American cultures."

ETHEL's fascination with this culture dates back to 2005, when the ensemble (formed in 1998) began a multi-year residency at the Native American Composer Apprenticeship Project, part of the Grand Canyon Music Festival, working with young composers on Navajo and Hopi reservations in northern Arizona. This experience intensified the group's frustration with the standard touring life, with its quick visits to endless cities and lack of interaction with local communities.

To address this problem ETHEL created its TruckStop

project, during which the ensemble works with musical communities outside the classical world. Since the initiative was launched in 2007, TruckStops have included a week-long residency with Kaotic Drumline at Dominican University in Chicago and a four-day residency and performances in Albuquerque with Native American flautist Robert Mirabal, now a frequent ETHEL collaborator.

In a separate project from the Grand Canyon festival, Chickasaw Nation composer-in-residence Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate, who was familiar with ETHEL's previous collaborations with Native American musicians, invited the ensemble to work with 11 young composers (aged 13 to 21) who studied with him at the Chickasaw Summer Arts Academy in 2008 and 2009. The Chickasaw



Nation is the only tribe in the United States that sponsors its own fine arts academy. And so "Oshatali" was born.

In a press release, Alan Bise, the producer and owner of Thunderbird Records, says that he decided the Chickasaw students' compositions should be recorded, as they impressed him with "both their complexity and their simplicity. These student compositions are surprisingly sophisticated, and they bring a heritage and point of view to the music unlike anything we are accustomed to hearing". The CD's striking cover art was designed by Mercedes Milligan, a junior high school student who won a competition sponsored by Thunderbird Records and the Chickasaw Nation Division of Arts and Humanities.

Ralph Farris, ETHEL's viola player, explains that the first appealing element of the Chickasaw project was the chance to work with young people. "The fact that they were Native American added an amazing element," he says.

Another plus, adds Dufallo, was the chance to learn about Native music. There is, he points out, a long tradition of composers and musicians from Western traditions exploring the indigenous music around them. Native music, he continues, "is not entertainment. It's ceremony, worship, very spiritual. A lot of the young kids from Native backgrounds have an extremely deep, personal and spiritual connection to music. So they bring old melodies that they've heard their grandparents sing. But they're also kids of today and a lot of them love heavy metal music. So a kid will come along with some beautiful old sacred melody and give it kind of a heavy metal feel with a rocking beat, and we arrange it for string quartet. The result is not particularly heavy metal or string quartet, and it's not ancient American music. It's something completely new. To see that kind of mutation is fascinating and exciting." The

disc includes an eclectic range of compositions, including the Shostakovich-like slashing figures of Joseph Cruise Berry's *Fantasia*, Katelyn Duty's enigmatic and mournful *Here's the burt*, Amanda Shackelford's startling *Yeab...I bit like a girl* and her *River of our times* inspired by Chickasaw culture and language. The disc also features Dylan Bennett's *Holchifo Ki'yo* (which means "un-namable" in Chickasaw), John McAlester's Mahlerian *Concerto for Strings* and Katie Barrick's *The Devil's Advocate*, which reflects her interest in Celtic fiddle music. Aubrey Halford, just 13 years old, offers two works, the poetic *Lullaby* and *Stages*.

These works and the others on the disc reveal an impressive level of talent from the young composers, most of whom had formal training of some sort in classical music before studying at the Chickasaw Summer Arts Academy. According to cellist Lawson, "They were comfortable with the instruments and language and incorporated sophisticated

ideas and stylistic contrasts in their scores."

The young Native composers "revere music," she continued, noting a "very substantial difference between teens from our culture and the Native cultures. Often teens in our culture are very shut down and don't want to talk about themselves; they're worried about sticking out. The Native kids have a deeply, beautifully developed language for what they're feeling that they can express verbally or through their music. I sometimes feel that when we're playing their music it's like encountering the Venus rising fully born from the waves."

The students were initially intimidated by a professional quartet playing their works, but relaxed and became immensely grateful. It was "a very touching experience," says Dufallo.


ETHEL approached the work of these budding composers with the same level of seriousness and focus as they would with any established name, which sometimes disconcerted the youngsters, surprised that a

professional string quartet would take their ideas so seriously. ETHEL, whose members also compose, did, though, offer advice about matters such as notation, articulation and markings. At the recording sessions, which took place at the Wanda L Bass Music Center at Oklahoma City University, family and friends crowded in to show support.

Right from the start, it was important for ETHEL to break down any cultural barriers or fears of elitism. As Lawson explains, "People were waiting to see if we will bring in a load of condescension and pre-judgment. But we have had the opportunity to walk in with completely open hearts and say, 'We have beautiful equipment but we don't want to tell you what to do with it'."

"Many of these cultures do not regard the music that we make as part of their tradition," adds Lawson. "We need to demonstrate that we have a more whole purpose. To simply arrive and try and capture a few colours and leave is appropriationist, merely looking for exoticism. We have tried to demonstrate that we understand that a world is involved and that we respect it and can be messengers for some of the beauty of that world."

The Chickasaw Nation has invited ETHEL to perform at its inaugural Chickasaw Chamber Music Festival in June 2011. ETHEL's performances this autumn include events featuring musicians from TruckStop projects, including Mirabal, who will perform with ETHEL on its "Music of the Sun" programme, inspired by aspects of Native American sun mythology.

The ETHEL musicians have little interest in becoming ethnomusicologists. Yet their goal is ambitious – to connect through music with the people of other cultures, to learn in the process and grow as artists.  *ETHEL performs in Eindhoven on December 8 and at the Chickasaw Nation in Oklahoma on June 3-4, 2011. For more information, visit [www.ethelcentral.com](http://www.ethelcentral.com)*

UNEXPECTED SOUNDS - ETHEL ON DISC

**ETHEL**

Cantaloupe © CA21017  
Blues and minimalism co-exist on the group's debut recording from 2003, which was rated Billboard Magazine's Best Album in that same year.

**Light**

Cantaloupe © CA21037  
From hillbilly, hoedown music to a sultry tango to a disembodied woman's voice quoting public television (in the appropriately weirdly titled *Ethel dreams of temporal disturbances*), here are 12 short pieces by nine composers – and there's never a dull moment.

**John the Revelator:**

**A Mass for Six Voices**

Cantaloupe © CA21047  
The mass for six voices and string quartet by New York composer Phil Kline was released in 2008, and features ETHEL alongside the Lionheart

vocal ensemble. The work is a setting of the traditional Latin mass – it's being toured by ETHEL and Lionheart throughout the US in 2011.

**Dedicated to You: Kurt Elling Sings the Music of Coltrane and Hartman**

Concord Jazz © CJA31314-02  
Recorded live at the Lincoln Center, ETHEL joins jazz vocalist Kurt Elling along with sax player Ernie Watts and the Laurence Hobgood Trio to salute and reinterpret one of the greatest jazz albums of all time.

**Oshatali**

Thunderbird © 71258  
On this first ever recording of American Indian student works, ETHEL embrace 16 works written by 11 young composers ranging in age from 13 to 21. The students themselves actively participated in every aspect of the album production process.