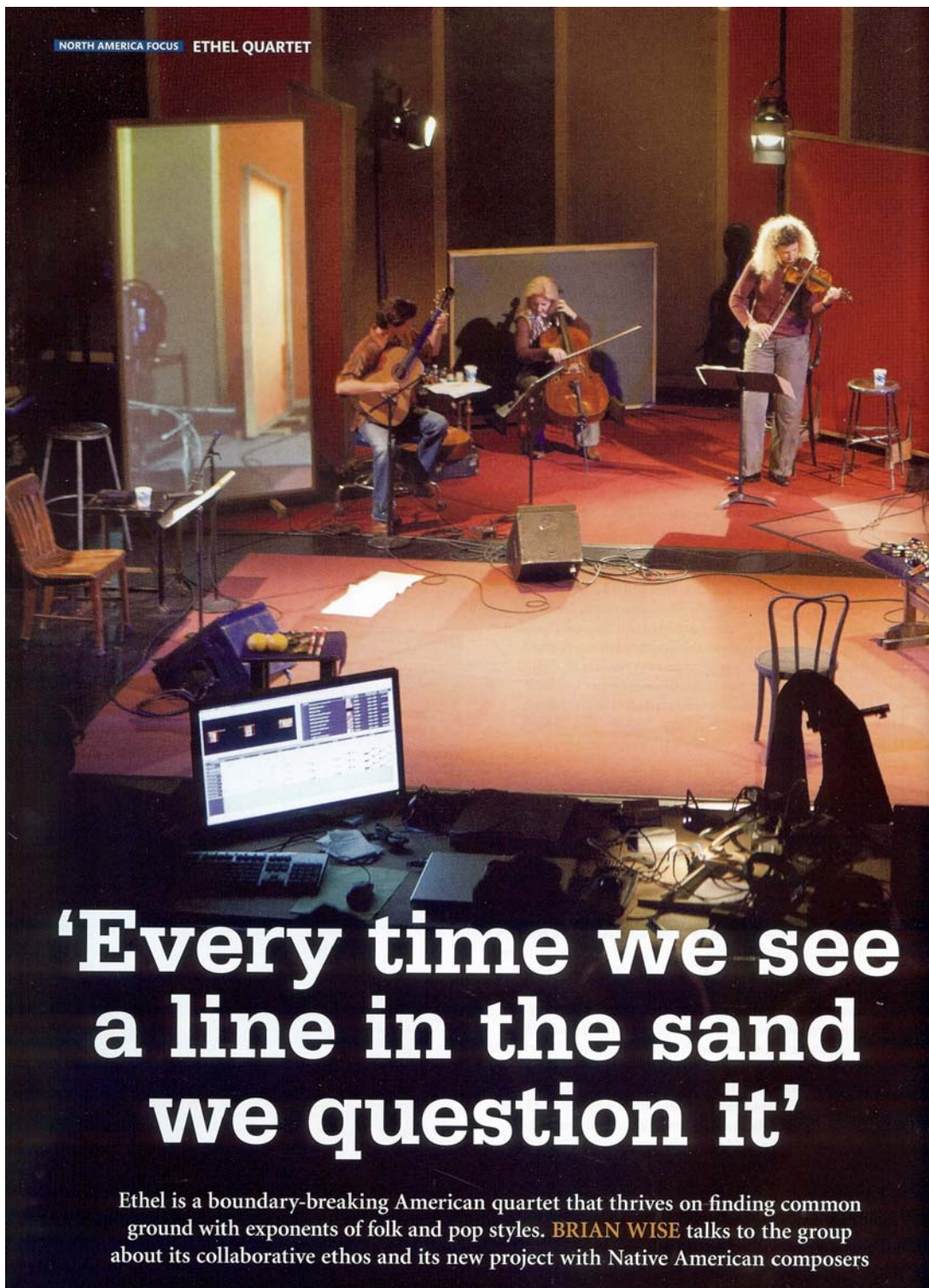


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ESSENTIAL READING FOR THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

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NORTH AMERICA FOCUS ETHEL QUARTET



**‘Every time we see
a line in the sand
we question it’**

Ethel is a boundary-breaking American quartet that thrives on finding common ground with exponents of folk and pop styles. **BRIAN WISE** talks to the group about its collaborative ethos and its new project with Native American composers

ETHEL QUARTET

Ethel with Hawaiian guitarist Jeff Peterson and Native American flute player Robert Mirabal at the Brooklyn Academy of Music



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FOR THE BETTER PART OF THE PAST dozen years, Ethel has been a role model for anyone who believes that a string quartet can also be a band. The group's contemporary repertoire, consisting of several hundred pieces, is known for its edgy and cool veneer as well as the use of amplification and improvisation. The players thumb their noses at classical protocol with their use of choreography, theatrical lighting and improvised segues between compositions. They've recorded on Cantaloupe Music, the genre-bending label of the avant-garde collective Bang on a Can. And the members of Ethel have never strayed far from their downtown New York roots. That is, until recently.

In 2007 the quartet embarked on TruckStop, a series of extended residencies involving local musicians and communities around the US. A week in Chicago saw Ethel performing at Brookfield Zoo with drumming ensemble Kaotic Drumline, after both groups had joined forces to lead schoolchildren in musical storytelling workshops. And in San Antonio, a concert

with accordionist Eva Ybarra capped three days of working with young musicians at the city's Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center.

Rather than TruckStop being a one-off touring event, however, it developed into annual educational visits to the Navajo and Hopi Native American reservations, a new album of works by student composers of the Chickasaw tribe, and touring with Jeff Peterson, a Hawaiian slack-key guitarist. Ethel is increasingly finding common ground between noisy, complex experimentalism and a folk-influenced brand of American populism, thus breaking down once-rigid walls that separated the two.

That includes deeper forays into straightforward pop music. This December, the quartet travels to Europe with 'Ethel Fair', a new programme built on collaborations with singer-songwriters such as New Jersey-born Dayna Kurtz and British synth-pop pioneer and producer Thomas Dolby. Meanwhile, in the US, the group is touring with 'Present Beauty', a programme built around the quartet's own arrangement of the haunting Philip Glass score for the film *The Hours*. ▸

ETHEL ON... WHAT DEFINES AMERICAN MUSIC

DOROTHY LAWSON CELLIST

‘I spent some time studying in Vienna, so at least in my mind, I have some sense of how they like to make sound in that part of Europe. I feel like the American ear is comfortable with a more heightened visceral quality. It can be harsher and more aggressive. We’re willing to really use our instruments passionately. It feels like we’re digging into our instruments and looking for a physical connection that people identify with America. They feel there’s a raw quality and a hopeful quality.’

MARY ROWELL VIOLINIST

‘I think there’s a certain “hee-haw” quality to American playing. There’s a certain cavalier quality maybe. I don’t think that applies to every group. There’s an open-mindedness of influences that’s prevalent in American music, especially in the last ten years or so. I think Ethel embodies a certain aspect of that.’

‘We’ve seen music as a form of connection between people and every time we see a line that people draw in the sand we question it,’ says Dorothy Lawson, the quartet’s cellist. ‘We wonder what would happen if we just reached a little further and let down our guard that much more to work with the people on the other side of that line.’

The desire to live in a kind of genre-less musical world where a string quartet could play beside a vocalist-entertainer from Las Vegas one day and a Native American flute player from New Mexico the next – both on Ethel’s CV – doesn’t always come easily. Ralph Farris, the group’s violist, remembers the obstacles they encountered when appearing with a group of singers who practise the Sacred Harp – a traditional method of singing four-part harmonies – at a Bluegrass festival in Kentucky.

‘Boy, that was really interesting,’ says Farris. ‘The shape-note singers are not performers. They get together to sing old hymns. They consider it like going to church. When we came along and asked about collaborating they became uncomfortable. The idea of getting up on a stage and doing something that was so spiritual and personal did not appeal to them. But what they do is very important – the sound of those hymns leads to so much other music that influences us today.’

‘One of the funny little twists for them was contemplating dealing with applause,’ adds Lawson. ‘It was not acceptable



The quartet’s New York heritage is at the heart of its identity

to them. They saw it as self-aggrandisement. When we proposed that it was just a way of saying thank you, they were completely in tune with it and felt fine with performing.’

THE MEMBERS OF ETHEL DEVELOPED the idea for TruckStop after having grown weary of touring, with its endless shuttling between airports, hotels and concert venues. Since the 2007–8 season, when Ethel visited Chicago, Las Vegas, New York and seven other TruckStop cities in eleven months, the quartet has shown a particular interest in Native American culture. The group is ensemble-in-residence with the Grand Canyon Music Festival’s Native American Composers Apprentice Project, making annual visits to Native American high schools in Arizona and Utah. Students are coached to write pieces for the quartet, and the workshop process allows them to learn about the instruments and their capabilities.

Similarly, earlier this year Ethel visited the Chickasaw Summer Arts Academy in Ada, Oklahoma, working directly with eleven composers aged 13 to 21 on music for a new album, *Oshkali*. The students had received coaching from Chickasaw Nation

NEW YORK PHOTO DENNIS KLEMAN; TOWN HALL PHOTO STEVE SHERMAN



Ethel in action at the Town Hall in New York in 2006



Playing for students at the Native American Composers Apprenticeship Project

explains Ethel violinist Mary Rowell. 'So I started to go online and educate myself about the different styles.'

Rowell contacted Peterson after listening to audio samples on his website. The five musicians eventually gathered in a studio on the northernmost island of Kauai where they rehearsed for a week and recorded together. They not only participated in a *hula luau*, a vibrant party with traditional island dancing, but also worked with a chorus of Hawaiian children at a missionary school where the native language is still spoken.

'That's what our interest in doing this work is about,' says Rowell. 'It's not just "we play our song and they play their song," but actually learning about the style and incorporating it. It's getting immersed in the culture and making friends and understanding.'

composer-in-residence Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate, and they participated in every aspect of the album production process, including recording sessions at Oklahoma City University. Among the album's standout tracks is Amanda Shackleford's *Yeah... I Hit Like a Girl*, a piece about practising martial arts. 'It starts with a karate exclamation,' says Farris. 'They marked it *saltando pianissimo*. I couldn't believe that. I had never made that sound on my fiddle and they showed me how to do that. When I finally actually did it, she was really excited.'

Education is increasingly central to the quartet's touring these days, even when it's by happenstance, as when the group spent a week learning to play Hawaiian music with Peterson, the slack-key guitarist. 'I had long had this notion of working with Hawaiian musicians in a way that wouldn't sound like muzak,'

TO SUPPORT THE QUARTET'S OUTREACH, commissions and recordings, the group formed Ethel's Foundation for the Arts, a non-profit organisation with a budget of half a million dollars. The quartet's long roster of donors underscores the appeal of educational projects, explains Bill Bragin, the director of public programming at Lincoln Center. 'There is money for residencies and outreach programmes now,' he says. 'The state of arts funding has pushed people into a direction where there's support for this. And where the funding is, there's support to bring contemporary music to underserved markets. It has enormous value for the field.'

Bragin was an early champion of Ethel's work when he was the director of Joe's Pub, the upscale club in New York's ▶

'It's not just "we play our song and they play their song", but actually learning about the style and incorporating it'

MARY ROWELL

East Village known for its eclectic programming. He commends the group for its ability to make contemporary music more accessible without pandering. 'What makes them interesting is that they have extremely broad taste, they have a broad range and they're inventive in how they define themselves,' he says. 'They're always interested in different collaborators, different modes of collaboration, and how they present themselves. And they cross boundaries.'

Joe's Pub served as a proving ground for Ethel through much of the last decade, but the group's roots go back even further, to 1997, when Todd Reynolds, a violinist who worked with the Bang on a Can All-Stars, contacted Rowell, who played violin in the Sirius Quartet and in nearly every other group that needed an avant-garde, do-anything violinist. Also enlisted was Lawson, a Canadian with a more traditional classical background, and Farris, a studio musician with contacts in the worlds of rock and Broadway. (Reynolds left in 2005, turning his attention to composing and a growing solo career. His replacement, Cornelius Dufallo, had previously been a member of the Flux Quartet.)

After a few trial efforts, the members of Ethel made their debut in July 1999 at Context Studios in lower Manhattan under the moniker Hazardous Materials, a name shelved two years later in the wake of terrorist attacks and an anthrax outbreak. Renamed Ethel, after a scene in the film *Shakespeare in Love*, the group started building its career in alternative venues like the Galapagos Art Space and the Cutting Room. Soon the players moved uptown to the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and Columbia University's Miller Theatre. Bang on a Can was an early sponsor of the group and put out their eponymous first CD.

THE DESIRE TO ADD A TWANGY accent to chamber music has tripped up string players before. Think of the mixed reactions to *Appalachian Journey* and *Appalachia Waltz*, Yo-Yo Ma's collaborations with fiddler Mark O'Connor and bassist Edgar Meyer: a few critics accused Ma of slumming with 'hillbilly music'. Dvořák encountered suspicion from purists with his 'American' Quartet, a work composed

after spending a summer in a small town in northeastern Iowa. Even the Kronos Quartet, Ethel's close ancestor, was accused by some critics of butchering Mexican and Latin American tunes for its 2002 album *Nuevo*.

Lawson disputes the notion that Ethel's New York pedigree makes its efforts less valid. 'I don't think Ethel could have generated anywhere else but in New York City,' she says. 'It's a very potent environment – a place where different streams of thought and sound are mixing. It's also a huge economy and market, which is what really sustained us for many years.'

All the members of Ethel are composers and arrangers, with the skills to write string arrangements that don't merely serve as background texture. 'It's difficult to incorporate strings,' says Rowell. 'It tends to sound like muzak or string sessions for rock singers. Actually using the string quartet as a band and being integral to music – and not just the sweetener or an obligato part – that's what's interesting to me.' She adds, 'Ethel is not going out and pretending to be experts. We're trying to integrate the style into our musical language. So we're not trying to become authentic Bluegrass players.'

AS ETHEL ENTERS MIDDLE AGE it shows signs of softening its rough edges. The group has increasingly found that its version of Glass's score for *The Hours* has garnered the strongest interest from US presenters. It's not particularly edgy but rather a polished, elegant score with smooth, subtle motifs and engaging harmonic changes.

Several premieres are on the way this season too, including a new work by Bang on a Can co-founder Julia Wolfe. The group also hopes to expand TruckStop to include two artists with Middle Eastern heritage: the San Francisco-based saxophonist and composer Hafez Modirzadeh, and Kinan Azmeh, a Syrian clarinet player in New York. 'Both of these artists use very different scale systems and tunings,' notes Rowell. 'Working with them would become a very involved process of learning this scale system. In a way it's much more involved technically than stuff we've done previously.' Is there a political message to be found in these plans? 'Not at all, she says. 'We really try to stay apolitical. It's simply about meeting musicians with whom we can build a relationship.' ■



ETHEL ON DISC

Oshkali

THUNDERBIRD RECORDS ACD 71258
Released this summer, Ethel's latest album comprises 16 short string works by Chickasaw student composers

Light

CANTALOUPE MUSIC CA21037
Influences on this 2006 disc range from Finnish folk and Brazilian dance rhythms to blues and Marvin Gaye

Ethel

CANTALOUPE MUSIC CA21017
Eponymous debut from 2003 featuring music by John King, Phil Kline, Evan Ziporyn and founder member Todd Reynolds

Ethel performs at the Tromp Festival in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, on 13 November with former Police drummer Stewart Copeland and New York-based Brazilian band Forro in the Dark. Also in November, the quartet's 'Present Beauty' tour takes it to Paramus in New Jersey, and to Stormlake and Grinnell in Iowa. Ethel's new CD 'Oshtali' is out now on Thunderbird Records