



A String Quartet Named Ethel

Musically omnivorous group plays with itself and its audience

By Mel Minter

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Calling ETHEL a string quartet is like calling Jimi Hendrix a blues guitarist. It's perfectly accurate and almost completely misleading.

The New York-based group has the earmarks of a proper classical quartet: two violinists, Cornelius Dufallo and Mary Rowell; a violist, Ralph Farris; and a cellist, Dorothy Lawson. They've all got the requisite advanced degrees from Juilliard, and they can all play the bejesus out of their instruments.

But this string quartet, which focuses on extraordinarily beautiful and exciting new music (including its own compositions), has collaborated with Yo-Yo Ma, Ornette Coleman, Lenny Kravitz and Thomas Dolby. Its TruckStop project takes it to communities across the country, where it settles in for extended periods to share ideas with local musicians—as it did in February with Hawaiian nose flutists and slack-key guitarists, and as it's doing now with New Mexico flutist Robert Mirabal. It pulls from any musical genre that suits its purpose—blues, jazz, classical, funk, you-name-it—and it's not afraid to use recording technology to extend its sonic capabilities (for example, playing with its prerecorded and possibly manipulated self in concert). It also sometimes makes animal noises.

So expect anything when Ethel, with guest Mirabal, appears Friday at the Simms Center in Chamber Music Albuquerque's Chamber Music X concert.

The Spice of Life

The quartet began playing without a name, hired by composers to perform new music, but when one event required a name and quick, they chose "Hazardous Materials."

“Ethel” is the result of internal backlash against that ill-suited choice.

“We didn’t want to have to look nasty,” says Lawson. “We wanted to have fun with what we were doing.”

Ethel does that by playing a wide variety of music and pretty much ignoring what’s expected of a classical string quartet.

“What we do is an outgrowth of the fact that we lived in New York ... ” she says. “Part of the condition of life here is that you’re asked to do a really distractingly wide variety of things. ... A lot of what we’re doing now is very much an embodiment of that. We’re basking in the variety. We’re embracing it.”

Ethel’s latest, breathtaking CD, *Light*, burns with variety with music from Brazilian composer Marcelo Zarvos; jazzers Lennie Tristano and Don Byron; San Francisco composer/performance artist Pamela Z; exuberant American composer Mary Ellen Childs; Finnish folk, classical and pop composer Timo Alakotila; as well as originals from Dufallo, Lawson and Rowell and an original arrangement from Farris. The Albuquerque concert will include material from the CD, new pieces developed with Mirabal and other music, including “Fred” by David Ross Gunn, who believes this Ethel needs its own Fred.

Making a Connection

Dufallo contends that Ethel is more a band than a string quartet, and Lawson agrees, though she feels the distinction “betrays prejudices on all sides.”

“We operate much more as a creative body [versus the prototypical string quartet],” she says. “We’re improvisers, we’re composers in our own ways, we collaborate with other artists. ... We are involved in making compositional and adaptive decisions in our performances, as well as performing strictly what someone else has written down.

“We’re engaged in a relationship with the people that listen ...” Lawson adds. “We want our music to be useful, we want our music to be relevant to other people. ... We’ve really cultivated a responsiveness to our audience.”

That responsiveness gets to the heart of the Ethel experience. “We feel that music in general is a very powerful form of communication,” she says. “It’s a medium you can use to come into a closer sense of connection with people, probably far more immediately and far more completely than you can with language.”

Given the environmental, political and societal pressures on the planet today, Ethel sees music as a critical tool for communication.

Given the beauty and intensity of these musicians’ playing, it’s clear that music is also a critical tool for joy.