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Crossing boundaries between jazz, rock, classical and a whole palette of international styles, Ethel's music is as enlightening as it is unique. Steve J. Sherman

ETHEL: A PREMIUM BRAND

String quartet plays the field of musical styles – 'There's an openness and willingness to explore'

By Andrew Gilbert

Don't let the name fool you. Ethel might sound like a moniker befitting an old-fashioned gal, but this relentlessly inventive string quartet is setting the standard for new music engagement.

Since coming together in 1998, Ethel has commissioned compositions by a glittering array of artists, from jazz avatars clarinetist Don Byron, saxophonist John Zorn and pianist Vijay Iyer to singer-songwriter Amy Kohn, sonic explorer Raz Mesinai (aka Badawi) and Bang on a Can All-Star multi-instrumentalist Mark Stewart.

By insouciantly ignoring boundaries between jazz, rock, classical and a far-flung palette of international styles, Ethel moves gracefully from chamber music settings to nontraditional venues, like tonight's shows at UC San Diego's Porter's Pub as part of the ArtPower! Tentacle Sessions.

"Sometimes new music can be very ivory tower," said violinist Cornelius Dufallo, who joined the ensemble in 2005. "To get on stage and

DETAILS

Ethel

When: Tonight, 8 and 10
Where: The Stage at Porter's Pub, UCSD campus
Tickets: \$12
Phone: (858) 534-8497
Online: artpower.ucsd.edu

play newly commissioned pieces for string quartet, but have the audience so excited that they're on their feet and screaming is very unusual. And it happens with this group."

In addition to Dufallo, Ethel features violist Ralph Farris, cellist Dorothy Lawson and violinist Mary Rowell. The quartet was already well-established when Dufallo replaced founding fiddler Todd Reynolds. Like the group's other members, he's a highly regarded composer in his own right, and he came to Ethel after distinguishing himself as a founder of the Flux string quartet. He also directs the acclaimed creative music ensemble Ne(x)works.

In many ways Dufallo extended Ethel's already deep connections to the worlds of rock (Thomas Dolby, Queensryche and Sondre Lerche)

and cutting-edge jazz (Oliver Lake, Marty Ehrlich, Butch Morris and Ornette Coleman, with whom he collaborated extensively in 2002). He was attracted to Ethel by the group's similarly fearless sensibility.

"I had been playing in Flux, a string quintet with a drummer, and I was really into that fusion idea," Dufallo said. "I have a really eclectic and diverse range of musical interests, and it's hard to find other string players who are OK with that. In Ethel, there's an openness and willingness to explore."

For tonight's performance, Ethel's program includes original works by the quartet and a cross-section of commissions, such as John King's blues-drenched "Shuffle," Randall Woolf's invigorating, electronica-inflected "Try to Believe," Brazilian pianist and film composer Marcelo Zarvos' "Light" and Don Byron's "Four Thoughts on Marvin Gaye."

"Bryon's piece has no improvisation," Dufallo said. "It's all written out, but it has this nonclassical music energy. One thing I love about his music is his intricate percussion. We're missing percus-

sion, but you still get a sense of the rhythmic vitality."

One thing that sets Ethel apart from a group like Kronos Quartet, the venerable new music maverick ensemble that paved the way for younger upstarts, is that in addition to commissions, Ethel generates a good deal of its own material in-house. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, the demands of mastering the European classical literature left little time for performers to concentrate on composing. The players in Ethel reject that compartmentalization.

"There was this specialization that happened," Dufallo said. "Composers and performers became more and more expert and separated from each other. I'm not saying one thing is better than another. So much great music was composed by people who didn't perform. But there is something to be said for musicians having a well-rounded approach to what they do. It's only Western classical music that involves a separation of composers, improvisers and performers."

Andrew Gilbert is a Bay Area writer.