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Sirius Quartet: Seriously Compatible

By Kurt Gottschalk | September 2016

It took more than 30 years for the Sirius Quartet to get it right.

Not that the in-demand string quartet—which has worked with Dianne Reeves, John Escreet and John Zorn, to name a few—has been doing anything wrong. But, according to violist Ron Lawrence, the sole remaining member from the group’s inception as the Soldier String Quartet, it’s only with their new album, *Paths Become Lines* (Autentico Music/Naxos), that they’ve finally documented themselves as the ensemble he wanted all along: specifically, a group of string players who could write original material and perform and improvise on works by such composers as Henry Purcell, Charles Ives and György Ligeti. “It took a long time to find the right people,” Lawrence said.



The right combination of composer-improvisers solidified in 2010, as “an interesting mix ethnically and generationally,” according to cellist Jeremy Harman, the last to join the group. “We’ve found a pretty interesting mix of our own personalities,” he said.

The Soldier String Quartet was founded by the ever-inventive Dave Soldier in 1984. One of the forces behind the Thai Elephant Orchestra, Soldier is by day a neurobiology professor at Columbia University.

That group (which often stretched the definition of “string quartet” in terms of instrumentation) played together for 20 years with a rotating membership that included, at times, violinists Regina Carter and Mark Feldman, bassists Mark Dresser and Jerome Harris and percussionists Jim Black, Kevin Norton and Ben Perowsky. The eventual dissolution of the group influenced Lawrence’s attitude about forming a group and keeping it together.

“I was sitting there, and people were fighting, and the whole situation was blowing up, and I just wanted to keep doing music with Elliott Sharp,” he recalled. “I wanted to keep using extended technique and playing really loud.

“I loved playing with Dave,” he continued. “As a violist, I was playing music uptown. I had some good gigs, but I wanted to do other things as well. I love the idea of getting in up to your elbows.”

Although the group has included some distinguished members in the past—including violinist Jennifer Choi and cellists Mike Block and Dave Eggar—it’s only with Harman and violinists Gregor Huebner and Fung Chern Hwei that Lawrence finally found kindred spirits.

Paths Become Lines is the sixth release under the quartet’s name, but the first to highlight the diverse compositional voices of its members.

The title track, which was composed by Harman, features multiple melody lines over a steady pulse, betraying his punk/metal past. Fung’s three contributions show an appealing tendency toward humor and sentimentality. And Huebner’s richly lyrical String Quartet No. 4, Opus 44, “The Wollheim Quartet” earns the group its stripes as a “serious string quartet.”

“For a long time we didn’t know what to call ourselves,” according to Fung. “It’s not fair to call ourselves ‘classical’ or ‘jazz,’ so we came up with this term.”

In the fall, the foursome will host and curate the Progressive Chamber Music Festival in October at ShapeShifter Lab in Brooklyn, no doubt attracting other likeminded musicians as well as new fans.

Ultimately, the quartet’s goal is to be a recognizable unit—four distinct voices with one cohesive sound.

“There aren’t many people—Stan Getz, Chet Baker, Miles—who from the first sound they play, you know it’s them,” Huebner said. “That’s what we want to do as a quartet.”

“You might not call it ‘jazz’—it’s a personal project for all of us,” Lawrence added. “In Dave Soldier’s group, everybody had a different point of view about where they wanted to go. Dave’s idea of a string quartet was a drummer and two singers and the string players. He’d have like eight people on stage. A lot of very good musicians went through the group. Now we have four unique points of view who are really interested in creating a whole.”