

## **The rise of the great Canadian string bands**

*Why here? Musicians say audiences are more willing to enjoy a form that can encompass everything from free jazz to tango*

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The Creaking Tree String Quartet doesn't look like a typical jazz combo. There are no drums, for one thing, nor is there a piano. No trumpet or saxophone, either. And despite the name, it doesn't really look like a string quartet, either, as the sole violin is backed by mandolin, guitar and double bass, not violin, viola and cello, as in classical music.

The Creaking Tree String Quartet is a string band, a type of combo so archaic that it was dubbed "old-time" as far back as 1923. Although string bands were once incredibly common - the music they played would eventually form the basis of what is now known as country music - the format was mostly ignored in jazz, apart from the popularity enjoyed by Django Reinhardt and the Quintette du Hot Club de France in the 1930s.

Somehow, though, the string-band format has become quite hot in Canada. The Toronto-based Creaking Trees landed two trophies at last Saturday's Canadian Folk Music Awards ceremony at Gatineau, Que., where its third album, *The Soundtrack*, was recognized in the "pushing the boundaries" category.

Along with a host of Reinhardt-inspired groups such as Toronto's Club Django, a growing number of jazz groups are eschewing the usual brass and piano, and letting violin and acoustic guitar take the lead. In addition to the bluegrass-tinged sound of the Creaking Trees, there is the Sultans of String (also from Toronto), whose debut album, *Luna*, incorporates Gypsy melodies, rumba rhythms and sometimes even Middle Eastern percussion. There's also Halifax's Gypsophilia, a sextet whose first album, *Minor Hope*, bounces from hot swing to free jazz and back again.

Why string bands, though? And why in Canada?

Some of that no doubt has to do with the fact that, in this country, violin isn't just a classical instrument. "Violin certainly rules the East Coast of Canada," says Sultans of String violinist Chris McKhool. "It's the electric guitar of the East Coast. But there's a super-rich tradition of fiddling all through Canada."

Of course, there's quite a tradition of fiddling in American bluegrass and country music, which is why Creaking Tree violinist John Showman avers,

"I don't know that it's a particularly Canadian thing. In the States, you have a lot of what would have been bluegrass or old-time bands that are going in that direction. Some of the bands that pop into mind are the Mammals, the Infamous Stringdusters and the Biscuit Burners.

"But they do stick to a narrower sound frame," he adds. "Maybe it is a more Canadian thing to jump out and explore a lot."

It's certainly true that while the Creaking Tree String Quartet's music started with a firm grounding in bluegrass, the four wasted little time in finding other areas to explore. "The other three guys in the band - Brian [Kobayakawa], Andrew [Collins] and Brad [Keller] - had all gone to jazz schools and were all pretty decent jazz players," says Showman.

"But once we started to get to know each other, it was like, there's so much music that we all like, from crazy free-form improv, to really dark heavy metal, to really cool modern classical stuff. So why don't we try to communicate the rest of this stuff and play whatever the heck we want?"

Feeling free to explore such possibilities isn't simply a matter of having tastes in common; it also helps if the players can afford to take the time to try out new ideas and unexpected connections. And that's where Canadian musicians have an advantage over their American colleagues.

"I think we have more artistic freedom because we've got more financial freedom," says McKhool. "Musicians in the States have to worry about all sorts of things we don't have to worry about. Take the health-care system. When I started out in music as a professional musician, I was living in Montreal and was making about \$400 a month. My rent was \$150, and after buying food and a little bit of electronic gear, I could get through each month.

"And the freedom that grants you, of not having to worry about getting thrown out of your flat, means you can do crazier things, to please your artistic soul, instead of trying to make a buck."

It also helps that the Canadian music scene, particularly on the festival circuit, is very inclusive. "We've played jazz festivals, folk festivals, bluegrass festivals and just plain music festivals," says Keller of Creaking Tree's six years on the circuit. "We even got hired at the Stratford [Summer Music] classical festival one year, to play on the barge."

But as Gypsophilia guitarist Nick Wilkinson sees it, the biggest advantage bands like his have are Canadian audiences. Like the other groups, Gypsophilia started almost by accident, as Wilkinson and other Reinhart-inspired musicians looked for opportunities to play together. And, as with

Creaking Tree and the Sultans, Gypsophilia's stylistic footprint grew broader as its members decided to explore other influences, such as funk, tango and klezmer music.

"One thing that's been really cool is that as we've moved into more different song structures and more modern harmonies, the audience has always been right there with us," he says.

"I think part of it is that we keep that swing pulse going, underneath whatever we're doing, even if it's fairly out there. It almost feels like we could do anything onstage, and as long as we keep that energy, people would like it. It's really exciting."