



Brian Kobayakawa (left), John Showman, Andrew Collins and Brad Keller jazz up the acoustic folk tradition.

music feature

# String-driven thing

The Creaking Tree String Quartet clicks with chamber-grass **By TIM PERLICH**

**CREAKING TREE STRING QUARTET** with **BROTHERS COSMOLINE** and **JUNETILE** at the Rivoli (332 Queen West), Friday (March 7), 9:30 pm. \$9, with CD \$15. 416-596-1908.

WHILE MANY ROOTS MUSICIANS ARE trying to figure out how best to connect with the huge O Brother audience, Toronto's own Creaking Tree String Quartet could have it sussed.

Their intriguing improv chamber-grass concept seems ready-made to appeal to jazz, classical and bluegrass fans looking for a new spin on ancient instrumental forms.

Although, according to mandolinist Andrew Collins — who splits his time between bluegrass jam band Crazy Strings and the more traditionally minded Foggy Hogtown Boys — no elaborate market analysis was involved.

The unique Creaking Tree sound is just a logical consequence of the members' varied backgrounds: upright bassist Brian Kobayakawa studied in the Humber College jazz program with Collins, flash Celtic fiddler John Showman was classically trained, while acoustic guitar picker Brad Keller had been known to dabble in rock 'n' roll after giving up his NHL aspirations.

"The first time the four of us got together in a room was at Brad's place," recalls Collins before a Foggy Hogtown hoedown. "He'd rented some recording equipment and invited us over. We showed each other a couple of our own tunes and just started playing with the tape rolling.

"We used the songs on that recording as the demo we sent to the Canada Council along with our proposal for an album grant. Soon after, we were notified that our application was approved — after playing together once!"

Listening to the Creaking Tree's Don Kerr-produced debut disc, it's clear that the grant money was both well deserved and well spent. The chamber-grass notion might seem like a bad joke on paper, but in practice their fluency in the musical vocabulary of the Celtic, classical, bluegrass and jazz traditions makes the uncommon blend sound completely natural.

It makes you wonder why more artists aren't bucking convention to similarly mix styles. Of course, a number of virtuoso artists are adding their own twists to the traditional repertoire, but unlike the Creaking Tree, relatively few can boast inventive new compositions to match their chops.

There's a precedent for their chamber-grass concept in Edgar Meyer's Uncommon Ritual (Sony) classical crossover project from '97, involving the Modern Mandolin Quartet's Mike Marshall and banjo boss Béla Fleck (the Trees cover Meyer's Sliding Down from that disc), although Collins credits the revolutionary work of the David Grisman Quintet with the real breakthrough.

"That first Grisman Quintet album from '77 was the real jump-off point for the whole new acoustic movement. The way they were bringing jazz influences into bluegrass took the music where it had never been, and after that everyone started looking at traditional music in a different way.

"As much as I love instrumental bluegrass, if that's all you're playing it can all start sounding the same very quickly. But Grisman showed how it was possible to keep things interesting by exploring different forms and sounds. The whole approach of having all the strings working together as one big rhythm section was really attractive, and very influential for us." ©

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Excerpts from Bandwidth on CBC Radio 1

## Disc of the Week

By Matthew Crossier, May 10, 2003

"The Creaking Tree String Quartet debut is one of the best bluegrass albums I've heard in years. ...This is organic music, presented with a wry sense of humour, and featuring some of the best up and coming musicians east of the Mississippi. ...The playing is just superb. These guys are fantastic."

Printed from Exclaim! Magazine

## The Creaking Tree String Quartet

By Brent Hageman, June 02, 2003

Lock your doors and hide your daughters, the four gentlemen of the acoustic apocalypse are comin' a knockin' to romance them with "Sliding Down" or work them into a dancing frenzy with "Waymoot." The Creaking Tree String Quartet have discovered something grand on this self-titled debut — namely the chemistry between them. Adventurous and playful, the quartet is like Zubot and Dawson, only with 21 strings. Acoustic roots music has come too far to remain within the jazz or bluegrass confines and this album is a good example. With their players schooled in both genres, Creaking Tree have fun with both but are never too reserved to leave them completely behind either.

*Printed from Umbrella Music*

**The Creaking Tree String Quartet  
(Independent/Festival - 2003)**

*By Sean Flinn, April 2003*

If not for the Canada Council, which funded the recording of this record through its Specialized Music grant program, this self-titled debut by the Creaking Tree String Quartet may not have happened. And that would've been a damn shame.

It's a beautiful album full of virtuosity and emotion, a lovely balance for a moment when the only activity is listening.

Some Torontonians may know the quartet as the Tuesday night regulars at Cadillac Lounge. For the rest of us in Canada, we can only hope a tour happens soon.

The group is made up of a violinist, guitarist, acoustic bassist and mandolin player. Despite only playing together for a little over two years, this group sounds like they're the product of generations playing together.

The varying moods here are wonderful, from quiet contemplation to foot-stomping tunes fit for a jamboree. Even without vocals, you don't feel like you're missing anything, like you can't connect. The connection made is quite strong in fact.

Recorded at Don Kerr's (Ron Sexsmith, Rheostatics) venerable Gas Station studio on Toronto Island, it's easy to conclude that cottage-like feel of the island (tucked as it is in the shadow of Canada's biggest city) seeped into the recording.

Currently Canada seems to be sitting under a wave of folk and folk-pop artists, but one wonders how many will be around in a few years' time. The Creaking Tree String Quartet is not one that raises questions. They're here to stay.

*Printed from The Ottawa Citizen*

**The Creaking Tree String Quartet (Independent)**

*By Patrick Langston, May 1 2003*

Mixing and matching bluegrass with jazz, Celtic and classical music is nothing new. It's what put Nickel Creek, Bela Fleck and countless other newgrass acts on the map while helping keep bluegrass vibrant. The challenge now is to put an individual stamp on the permutations and combinations. Toronto's Creaking Tree String Quartet does just that on their debut CD. Tight and lively textures, tasty solos, and a healthy dose of musical humour, not to mention those arresting mid-stream rhythmic changeups, make this collection of mostly original instrumental tunes noteworthy. And while the boys put their mandolin, guitar, fiddle and standup bass through chameleon-like musical paces, good taste and restrained arrangements prevail. Creaking Tree String Quartet plays Rasputin's May 3 and The Bayou May 4.

*Printed from Ottawa Xpress*

**Strung and Quartered**

*By Fateema Sayani, May 1, 2003*

The four members of Toronto's The Creaking Tree String Quartet do what they can to balance the interests of the four members – John Showman on fiddle, Andrew Collins on mandolin, Brian Kobayakawa on bass and Brad Keller on guitar – and yet, despite being accountable to everyone's ideal, they manage a tight sound that's anything but staid.

Its acoustic music with an *O Brother* feel, jumping from roots to chamber music and mixing them too, with a free-form jazz philosophy behind it.

That's thanks to Kobayakawa, who studied jazz at Humber College. Do the math with Showman's classic background and Collins' and Keller's dabbling in roots/country/Celtic outfits, and then their self-titled debut makes some sense – but just for a bit.

"We took some time with it," Kobayakawa says of their demo, about a year in the making and helped by \$10Gs from a Canada Council grant. "We just wanted to keep people on their toes. There are a lot of different moods and textures on the album, we wanted every song to start fresh and to make you step back to wonder if it's the same band playing as the song before."

*Printed from Acoustic Guitar Magazine*

### **The Creaking Tree String Quartet**

By Celine Keating, January 2004 issue

There's nothing the least bit creaky about the string combo of Andrew Collins (mandolin), Brad Keller (guitar), Brian Kobayakawa (bass), and John Showman (fiddle), whose sparkling debut CD is as tight and polished as it is improvisational and exuberant.

The music crackles with imaginative and sometimes manic instrumental interplay. Such original compositions as "Underpass," "Phthalo Blues," "Stream," and "Waymoot" blend genres in Mark O'Connor/Edgar Meyer fashion and reflect the musicians' jazz, bluegrass, classical, and Celtic backgrounds.

The spooky nine-minute "Motian" showcases the quartet's many talents, unleashing interweaving melody lines and tapping a treasure chest of effects.

*Printed from Bluegrass Now Magazine*

### **The Creaking Tree String Quartet**

By JF, January 2004 issue

The Creaking Tree String Quartet is four very talented young men from Canada, Brian Kobayakawa on bass, John Showman, fiddle, Andrew Collins, mandolin and, Brad Keller, guitar. Each is an accomplished musician in his own right.

Their musical styles, collectively and individually, are wonderfully reminiscent of Strength in Numbers. Their music is very eclectic, very creative with all four impressively adept at composing, arranging, and performing a variety of styles: jazz, blues, newgrass, even a taste of classical. Their musical structures and chord progressions, propelled by their flawless solo and harmony instrumental work, are stunning. Running the gamut from hot and driving to tender, their compositions are always inspired. Band members composed 12 of the 13 pieces here, with one paying sweet homage to, Edgar Meyer's haunting "Sliding Down."

Creaking Tree grabs your attention right away with John's very jazzy "Underpass." Andrew's "s.y.t.e.," with its intricate mandolin and fiddle counterpoint and harmonies and a hot guitar lead, has a real feel of Copeland's classical Americana in parts. That one is followed up with some modern jazz, Brian's "Phthalo Blues." "Zig Zag" does just that, moving intricately in wonderful high and low harmonies and featuring Brian's nice bowed bass work.

From the standpoint of recording quality, this is an excellent recording as well, each note is clear and crisp, the mix and engineering measure up to the high caliber of music presented here. By the looks of these guys in the CD photo, they're still fairly young...with a great musical future ahead of them. Many thanks go out to the Music Section of the Canada Council for the Arts for making it possible for these young musicians to bring their music to us.

*Printed from Dirty Linen*

### **The Creaking Tree String Quartet**

By LDP, December 2003 issue

The Creaking Tree String Quartet is a Canadian-based group of the new-grass persuasion, quite clearly Grisman-Anger-Marshall disciples. There's even an Edgar Meyer cover ("Sliding Down") among the originals. Some of the more interesting tracks include "Spare Parts" and "Green in the Face" the latter of which has an Eastern European feel to it. "Waymoot" is about as bluegrass as the quartet gets. This disc is fairly auspicious for a debut effort. It will be interesting to hear where the group goes.

*Printed from CityGigs.com*

## **The Creaking Tree String Quartet**

**By N. Wilson**

Toronto  
March 7, 2003

Thinking that a 9:45 p.m. arrival would be sufficient to catch the entire show was clearly naïve thinking. With two great bands in their own right opening for them, the Creaking Tree CD release party was bulging success.

I could feel the energy as the Rivoli security guard escorted me in only to be stopped at the door. Band members from the Creaking Tree and Brothers Cosmoline attentively watched for family and friends to secure their entry to the show. "They're family and he's my Dad, he'll be bringing a guest and they are coming from out of town," said Creaking Tree's violinist, Showman.

The easy-going nature of the Creaking Tree's members was apparent as they happily engaged in introductions and chatted freely in the crowd through the soulful and rocking honky tonk sounds of Brothers Cosmoline, all the while bringing forth chairs for presumed family members. Having been witness to this congeniality prior made it easier to connect with them during their less than stunning stage presence. But uneasy banter between sets and instrumental tunings did not translate into a bad performance. In fact, they provided an awe-inspiring demonstration of an upbeat mélange of instrumental energy.

While they are defined as progressive bluegrass in media releases, this hardly encompasses the eclectic mix the music encompasses. Strong comparisons to the David Grisman Quartet sound of "dawg" music, a blend of fast jazz, swing, Latin, and gypsy, all grounded in a bluegrass base, can be made. Similar to the wide open attitude of "dawg" music that is clearly exposed in the band's choice instrumentals are occasional infused with bars of Celtic, classical, folk, and rumblings of Flamenco and Middle Eastern styled riffs.

The crowd took a while to warm up to the sound, missing out on the poetic justice the band brought to Edgar Meyer's tune "Sliding Down". If only those chattering by the bar could actually bear witness to the crazy transitions and pace of the band members precision playing. It didn't take long before the seemingly uninterested in the crowd became pulled in by the band's bluegrass leanings. As Andrew Collin's nimble fingering ripped through Grismanesque mando playing, succinctly followed by the typical echoing of other instruments the appreciative hollers could be heard from the back. The Bill Munroe cover received raves from those initially uninterested and the band was able to continue to secure audience attention with a funky acoustic number called "Underpass" that highlighted the bass player's talent.

Their self-titled CD is unwavering in its musical execution. Recorded at The Gas Station by Don Kerr, who could do no less than offer the honest compliment, "It was a great, they are all virtuosos." Indeed, Creaking Tree's performance displayed obvious talent. It is not surprising they received a chunk of money on their application to Arts Council for this recording. The CD, like their show, is a truly shared expression with three tracks written by each member, spotlighting each instrument with tight changes and subtle nuances throughout the pieces. The sweet sounds of the violin at the beginning of "Six Sense", along with Keller's guitar in the middle is a great example of this. Bassist Kobayakawa, admitted that because of the band's desire for perfection in their sound, he feared that they worked Don too hard. Again, a notable likeness to the work of David Grisman, with his attention to sound detail, Creaking Tree are well on their way to moving towards the potential for similar success.

# Live Music

Worldbeat GEOFF CHAPMAN



Toronto musicians John Showman, Andrew Collins, Brian Kobayakawa and Brad Keller are The Creaking Tree String Quartet.

## Crossover that's anything but creaky

### Creaking String Quartet has energy to burn

Young group launches debut CD tomorrow night

You might have come across John Showman, Andrew Collins, Brian Kobayakawa and Brad Keller during your peripatetic surveys of the busy local bluegrass and roots scenes that includes groups like Pagan Mary, Crazy Strings, Skraeling, Nobody You Know and the Foggy Hogtown Boys.

You may even have attended Creaking Tuesdays at the Cadillac Lounge on Queen St. W.

Now these four players plan a musical upgrade as The Creaking Tree String Quartet, which releases its excellent self-titled debut CD tomorrow night at The Rivoli — and what they play doesn't sound at all like a forest Redwood feeling its age.

Says leader Showman, the

group's lively fiddler: "Our music is unique. It lives in the cracks between idioms. Our original, acoustic instrumentals fall between chamber music and bluegrass, too jazzy for folk and too rambunctious for classical music."

That's a pretty good summary of the music to be heard on the disc (handled by Festival Distribution), which also highlights Collins' mandolin, Keller's guitar and Kobayakawa's bass.

You can add references to free jazz, Maritime music, folk, country and rock to their style, which cheerily embraces strong melodies, clean sounds and a big helping of zest.

Try the high-stepping "Zig Zag," the breezy "Waymoot," the spooky "Motian," the moody "Phthalo Blues," the classical crossover "The Real Rapsca-lion" and a sleek take on Edgar Meyer's "Sliding Down."

You get the picture.

Showman, educated in Indiana and Ottawa before starting his pro career in Montreal, recording four albums and touring North America before mov-

ing to Toronto in 2001, says the band's name came from a tune written by stringmeister Darryl Anger.

"The name is part of the appeal and legitimizes the music we play, which has so many elements in it perhaps it's best just to call it new acoustic music or instrumental roots music.

"We're trying to get away from playing in just clubs and bars. We're after a different market, with gigs that are more high-profile, and we're trying to zone in on our sound."

Showman, who studied classical music before planning to get a degree in business (and German), says that, at the suggestion of a girlfriend, he began busking in Montreal, making \$30 an hour.

"I'd spent too much time listening to classical music but busking got rid of my hangups. Besides, I was getting rusty and busking meant I had freedom and could work on technique. I learned to play three or four different styles, including straight-ahead rhythm fiddle and harmonizing with voices.

"Now I'm trying to find the notes that make everything sound like an orchestra," says the player who has as much regard as guitarists Duane Allman and Mark Knopfler as he does for Kenny Baker and Vassar Clemens.

"People react pretty well to us, university 'green/granola' types, for example — as well as our friends.

"There's always a lot of people, mainly 20 to 35, from all walks of life in our audiences, but we're trying to target everybody, anyone who's open-minded about music.

"Too much of today's music is recycled, the average person knows that, but we're hoping to hit the right chord with them."

### Just the facts

**Who:** The Creaking Tree Quartet, with Junetile and The Brothers Cosmoline

**When:** Friday @ 10:30 p.m.

**Where:** The Rivoli, 334 Queen St. W.

**Admission:** \$9 (\$15 with CD) @416-596-1908