

## Folk quartet adds Oberlin to the fabric of their American Patchwork (Sept. 13)

by Stephanie Manning



Once you've listened to the American Patchwork Quartet, you might not hear your favorite folk songs the same way. Take the group's September 13 version of "Shenandoah," which began with an introduction that held the Oberlin audience spellbound.

Accompanied only by a drone, Harini ("Rini") Raghavan's voice spun out a searching melody in the South Indian Carnatic style, an improvisation of pure sound and syllable. But before long, she took a breath and seamlessly began the words to "Shenandoah," the rest of the group then picking up the familiar, bittersweet song.

Interactions like that are at the heart of the American Patchwork Quartet — a group that combines different cultural and musical traditions to perform folk music in a distinct and dynamic way. Their Saturday night performance in Finney Chapel marked the group's debut on the Oberlin Artist Recital Series.

Joining Raghavan onstage were guitarist and vocalist Clay Ross, bassist Moto Fukushima, and bassist Charles Penn. Together, the four musicians build a collaborative rapport, free to express their musicality while maintaining a keen awareness of the group's sound.

Ross and Raghavan, the two vocalists, worked particularly closely, intertwining their warm voices in the opening "Beneath the Willow." Issues with Ross' in-ear monitor necessitated a brief pause, but the group was soon back up and running, and Ross took point on vocals for the laid-back "Lazy John."

Both of those songs came off the Grammy-nominated *American Patchwork Quartet* album, as did a good portion of the setlist. Those recordings are beautiful snapshots, but

the performers clearly thrive in a live performance setting, feeling the music in their bodies as they bob their heads and sway to the beat.

In “The Devil’s Nine,” drummer Penn deftly used his hands and elbows on the snares, adding in a shaker for an irresistible groove. Ross had encouraged the audience to cheer when they heard something they liked, and they were happy to oblige — particularly after Raghavan’s rapid-fire vocal acrobatics.

She repeated that impressive display during her original composition, “Mango Showers,” synchronizing her melodic line with Ross’ guitar. Later, a set of jigs once played by Thomas Jefferson — “Rustic Reel” and “Off She Goes” — proved Raghavan’s violin playing to be almost as flexible as her voice.

The breaks between the verses of the groovy “Cuckoo Bird” featured Penn and bassist Fukushima, who provided a steady presence all evening. During the instrumental prelude to “Shady Grove,” Fukushima’s dexterous, soulful solo had more than a few listeners’ heads bobbing.

Audiences also got to hear a sneak peek of some of the tunes the group is workshopping for their next album, like the Kentucky dance tune “Jubilee.” In an exhilarating section, Ross matched the Carnatic style of Raghavan’s singing, both performers holding eye contact to keep their coordination amidst the swirling notes.

The audience’s enthusiasm to cheer — and to clap along during Ola Belle Reed’s “High on a Mountain” — did not go unappreciated by the performers. “You guys really get us,” Ross said, musing that the group should play for these kinds of audiences more often. As if to emphasize his point, the set ended on an upbeat note with the dance tune “I’m So Glad.”

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