

The Taj Mahal Quartet

2019

“When I began, soul was something people had. It wasn’t a style of music,” Taj Mahal says.

No matter where we come from, we are all part of the same circle. We all want to dance, to get out of our heads and tap into ourselves. When delivered by the Taj Mahal Quartet, the blues can take us there.

For more than 40 years, Taj Mahal and bandmates Bill Rich and Kester Smith have taken blues on a joyride through reggae, funk, jazz, cajun, and more, leaving a trail of swinging hips and raised palms in their wake. In 2019, guitarist and lap steel virtuoso Bobby Ingano joined the group, and the trio became the Taj Mahal Quartet. The four match musical virtuosity with downhome grit unlike anyone else: a blend of sophistication and humble familiarity that is equally at home on a shotgun-shack porch or a Carnegie Hall stage.

Taj is a towering musical figure -- a legend who transcended the blues not by leaving them behind, but by revealing their magnificent scope to the world. “The blues is bigger than most people think,” the three-time Grammy winner says. “You could hear Mozart play the blues. It might be more like a lament. It might be more melancholy. But I’m going to tell you: the blues is in there.” Quantifying Taj’s significance is impossible, but people try anyway. A 2017 Grammy win for *TajMo*, his collaboration with Keb’ Mo’, brought his Grammy tally to three wins and 14 nominations, and underscored his undiminished relevance more than 50 years after his solo debut. Blues Hall of Fame membership, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Americana Music Association, and other honors punctuate his résumé. He appreciates the accolades, but his motivation lies elsewhere.

“I was raised really conscious of my African roots, so I was trying to find out, just what is this? Where is it that what we do here connects to what we left there?” Taj says. “Like it or not, the music and the movement of my people to the West completely shaped the modern music that we have. I’m not trying to start crowing about it, but popular music is shaped on the backs and shoulders and foundation of what came out of Africa.”

Bill Rich is an internationally renowned bassist whose musical journey began in earnest when he was still very much a child. He gigged before he could drive, performing with local groups including the Seven Wonders -- which featured his siblings -- in his native Omaha, Nebraska. The future Nebraska Musicians Hall of Fame member hit the road with the Whispers right after earning his high school diploma. A pivotal run with the Buddy Miles Express followed, which yielded two acclaimed albums and numerous national tours. Then, Bill connected with another musical giant: Jimi Hendrix, with whom he’d ultimately deliver career-shaping performances. Jimi produced “69 Freedom Special,” funk-infused instrumental masterpiece that Bill wrote for the Buddy Miles

album, *Electric Church*. The song would eventually be recorded again for a power-packed tribute album to Les Paul -- and was the only track featuring Les himself.

In 1972, Bill began playing bass with Taj, and the two forged a lifelong bond. Over the years, Bill has also worked with Paul Butterfield, Geoff Muldaur, John McLaughlin, Seals & Crofts, Jackie Lomax, James Van Buren, Alvaro Torres, and many more. In 2010, he released his first solo album, *Bill Rich the Fee-Vah*.

Revered percussionist Kester Smith was born a world away from Taj Mahal and Bill Rich in Granada. As a child, he left Spain for Trinidad in the West Indies, almost 4,000 miles away. There, he launched his musical career on drums, congas, and timbales with beloved Trinidadian outfit Andre Tanker and the Flamingos. Ready for new challenges, Kester moved to New York City, where he found work with an eclectic roster of bands and artists including Exuma, the influential project of Bahamian musician Macfarlane Gregory Anthony Mackey that combined elements of calypso, African music, folk, and other sounds. Like Bill, Kester has worked with Geoff Mulduar, and has also worked with Peter Rowan, Pinetop Perkins, Morgan Freeman, and others. A brilliant composer and intuitive performer, Kester also served as musical director for *Mulebone* on Broadway and played on scores and soundtracks for multiple films.

With his silver steel guitar glistening on his lap, Bobby Ingano is always smiling. Born in Lana'i City on a Hawaiian pineapple plantation in 1952, Bobby traces his roots to Shanghai, China, and Cebu in the Philippines, from which his grandparents emigrated. Over the last several decades, Bobby has enriched and expanded the proud tradition of Hawaiian steel guitar, on his own beloved recordings, as a member of Taj's New Hula Blues Band, and on three Grammy-winning albums by other Hawaiian artists. Tours throughout Hawaii, Japan, and Korea line his résumé, but the summer of 2019 marks his first long string of dates stateside.

After different projects and individual explorations, the Taj Mahal Quartet keeps come back to one another. For Taj, the reason is simple. "That's what musicians did when I was growing up," he says. "They all played with one another. We don't have to go through all this rigmarole to get it done -- to get the music out there."

And according to Taj, the collaboration extends far beyond the Taj Mahal Quartet themselves. "Music is like theater to a lot of people -- they're watching it," he says. "Well, you can watch it, but you're supposed to participate. The audience is just as much a part of the music as the musicians are." Taj pauses, then adds with a warm laugh, "I do like it when they dance."