



Arthur



Sultans of String bring world rhythms to Peterborough

SARA OSTROWSKA | SEPTEMBER 30, 2013



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Sultans of String will be coming to Peterborough October 5 and playing at Showplace with the Peterborough Symphony Orchestra.

The band recently released *Symphony!*, which could be described as a “high octane roots-worldbeat-symphonic mash-up.” With spanish flamenca, arabic, folk, jazz, rumba, swing, and cinematic new age sounds, the album is a journey through musical styles and rhythms of the world.

Arthur spoke with bandleader, Chris McKhool, about the band’s new record, their different musical influences, and the folk music community in Canada.

When you and Kevin started as a duo, what was your music like? How did that translate into the group you are today?

When we started off as a duo... actually, Kevin was sent in as a substitute guitar player. When I heard him playing for the first time, I said, “Hey man, that sounds great, what was that?” He said that was “rumba flamenca, the coolest thing around.”

Over the years, we’ve collected other musical friends, and the band has changed. We play with a lot of special guests, and they all bring an interesting blend of rhythms and flavours to the table... we play sometimes with a Palestinian oud player, Bassam Bishara, who brings a whole world of arabic music into the mix... our regular bass player, Drew Birston, studied Jazz at McGill so he’s got the jazz chops down... then we got Rosendo “Chendy” León on percussion who is from Cuba and he just brings a whole world of percussion with him... not just Cuban percussion, but world rhythms from all over middle east and south and central america... So the project has just gotten more and more interesting; everyone brings their strengths into it and we just incorporate it all into one sound.

You have so many musical styles. Is this where you saw your music going?

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Is this what you wanted the band to be?

I wanted to create a band that would keep me as interested as the audience.. it's gotta be fun for me. To have a band that is able to incorporate all these styles from... it keeps it really interesting. I think I would get more weary of a project that was just diving into one style and not thinking outside the box too much. Part of the fun is seeing how far we can stretch it while still being Sultans of String.

The Symphony! record is a great example of that. We hired this amazing arranger, Rebecaa Pellett, who has done arrangements for IMAX and Hollywood films... We just gave her all our music and she created this entire symphonic show that is so deep and rich.

It also helps us find new audiences... maybe some people who like going to the symphony but who have not heard a world music band before. And the opposite is true too, I mean, we're bringing our current fans on a bit of a journey. Some of them may not be familiar with the symphony and it might be the first time they go to see a symphony live... and that's exciting for us.

You've won and been nominated for many awards. Which one stands out the most to you or means the most to the band?

One that stands out for me is the Canadian Folk Music Award. We've been nominated for like seven awards and we've won a couple of them. I love the folk community in Canada. It's a really wonderful community of people and really interesting players and bands. That one means a lot to me.

In terms of trying to reach a broader fan base, the Junos really helped us out when we got our Juno nomination because that's national exposure on a bigger level media-wise and it helped us connect to a lot of fans. It also made a lot of presenters hear about us for the first time. There's so many amazing bands out there that it's sometimes a little hard to be noticed.

The song "Road to Kfarmishki," what's the story behind that? Is it about you?

It is. It's my own personal story. In 2010, I grabbed my elderly father and we ran off to Lebanon to find our ancestral village. We started walking around the village looking for people who look like my dad. [laughs]About 5 minutes later, we found our father's closest living cousin that we never knew before, and he made us a great big feast...We actually found the actual stone house that my grandfather grew up in. It was really a trip of a life time and it was a great way to bond with my dad too.

So, a lot of the songs are about true stories like that.

Another one is about Luna the whale. It's on the new Symphony! record... The chief of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation said that after he passed away he would come back as a killer whale to bring them traditional teachings. Four days after his death, Luna showed up. I won't spoil the ending for you. You're going to have to Wikipedia it.

We just made our first official music video, and we used actual Luna the whale footage in it!

What do you want people to take away from the new album? Why should they listen to it?

If you sit down or lay down and put on a nice set of headphones, we worked really hard at making it the most glorious listening experience. The team we had was really top-notch. We had the recording engineer from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra to record all the symphony musicians, and I just love how he captured all the sound and timbres of all the instruments.

You know, people lead super busy lives and everyone's running around like crazy...but I just wanted to create the kind of listening experience where you can be in a bubble for a few minutes and enjoy something that sounds really out of this world.

You've been really successful in children's music. Why are you in children's music? Do you like performing with your band more, or do you want to keep the two worlds separate?

I really love performing for young audiences because it's a completely different skill-set and has different kinds of awards to it. With Sultans of String I purposefully created a band that could accept a lot of variety and special guests. With children's music is just another extension of that; it's another way to express myself musically.

On top of that, sometimes the worlds seem very separate but sometimes they come together. With Sultans of String, we did the education show with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra for a week at Roy Thompson Hall and they busted in all these school kids... it was such a treat both to play with the TSO but also to be able to share all of the stories and love of world music with young people.

For me, music is about bringing people together, creating community, and helping people see common humanity. Whether I have an adult or youth audience in front of me, in a way it doesn't really matter!

It's a celebration of Canada and Toronto, that we can have all these musical styles interacting and informing one another... we're a very Canadian band in that way.



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