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## Interview: World Musician Chris McKhool, Founder of Canada's Sultans of String

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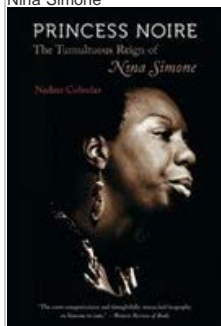
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It's difficult to make good music in any genre. It's more difficult to make music that combines multiple styles from across the globe. And it's even more difficult to do so in a way that looks relaxed and effortless. The Canadian group Sultans of String, whose latest CD is *Move!*, manages to do all three.

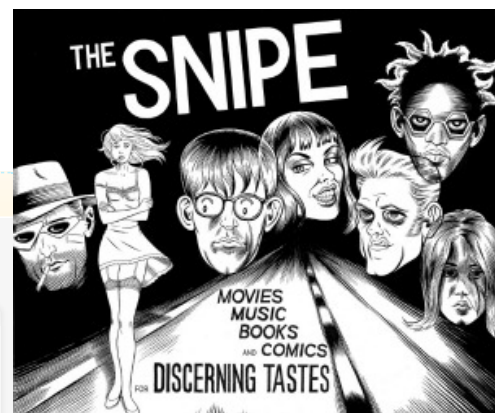
I recently had the opportunity to interview Chris McKhool, violinist and founder of the group. The interview covered a number of topics, including his roots and influences, the challenges of creating world music, and how music fits into his larger life. We began by talking about early influences in his music and a formative visit he took with his father back to Kfarmishki, the Lebanese Christian village where his grandfather grew up. McKhool pays tribute to that visit in the song "Road to Kfarmishki" on *Move!*.

"Once we were in the village, about five minutes in, we found my father's closest living cousin," McKhool recalled. "And then another five minutes after that we found the actual stone house where my grandfather grew up. It was a pretty amazing trip. It helped inspire some of that music. You'll hear a very common Arabic rhythm, a Saidi rhythm, in that song.

"My mother was born in Cairo," he continued. "She lived there until she was 18. And so actually she's more of a classical music buff than a world music buff. But certainly I was exposed to some great music through their record collection."

**I'm curious. The name McKhool sounds Irish. Was it shortened from an Arabic name?**

It was originally pronounced Makhool. My grandfather was a stowaway on a ship in 1903. Everyone at that time came through Montreal. Probably he checked in in Montreal and had a Scottish border guard who said, "What's your name, ?" And he said,



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"Makhool." And the guy probably said, "Ah, McKhool, that's an Irish name." Spelled it kind of funny.

**Interesting. We have similar stories, people coming over to Ellis Island.**

Exactly. Montreal was our Ellis Island at that time.

**So, what kinds of music were you exposed to? Clearly, classical music. What else?**

As I got older I heard some great fiddling music out of Ottawa Valley, where I grew up. It's very famous for that. And by the time I got to be in high school, I learned enough about music so I could teach myself how to play guitar and start writing my own songs; singing those songs within about a month. My older brother and I listened to a lot of prog rock and '60s rock—a lot of Pink Floyd, Neil Young, Led Zeppelin, Peter Gabriel. And my parents had some pretty cool records. That's when I first got exposed to world music. They had some interesting stuff, belly dance vinyl albums and one with Ravi Shankar.

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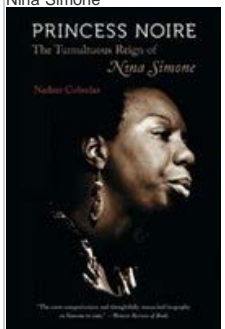
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So I heard some exotic sounds. I think even back then I was interested in exotic music. About 10 years ago I started really falling in love with world music. I think part of it came from traveling. Whenever I travel, I always bring an instrument with me. I put a little violin on my back or a guitar or even a small instrument like a ukulele or harmonica. I find it such a great way to travel because then I always end up meeting other musicians very easily. People are very open when you're traveling with a musical instrument. They'll say, "Come and jam with us." So it's a great way to hang out with people, learn about them and write about their culture.

### Listening to your tone, it sounds like there's a strong Stéphane Grappelli influence.

Definitely. If you have any interest in jazz whatsoever and you're a violin player, you can't escape the Stéphane influence. He was so phenomenal, just unbelievable. I could practice my whole life and I'd never be one percent of the violin player he was in that jazz vein. But, yeah, great tone, amazing music player.

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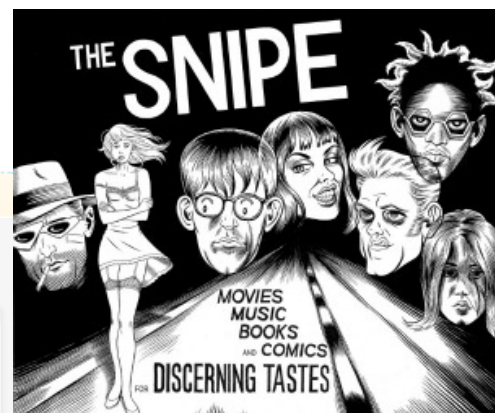


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### Are there other players in particular that resonate with you?

When I started to explore different kinds of electronic sounds with the violin, Hugh Marsh was a player that I really appreciated a lot. And Oliver Schroer is another Toronto violin player. He passed away a couple of years ago. He had a pretty big influence on me. I walked into a bar and I heard him playing, wailing away with wah-wah pedals and stuff. And I thought, wow, you can do that with a violin. Maybe the world of violin isn't as limited as I thought. So all of us in the band are a little bit pedal-crazy. We all have a lot of fun playing with those.

### Can you talk about the other members in the band and what they bring?

Absolutely. Drew Birston is our bass player. He brings a lot of the jazz sensibility as well as a big pop stage sensibility to our act. He's played with, you know, 100 different jazz bands and also has gone on tour with pop superstars like Chantal Kreviazuk—I don't know if you know her in the States. Chantal, she's pretty huge here in Canada—and Melanie Doane. He also does some recording with Jesse Cook.

### You've played with him too, right?

Yes. I did one tour with him a couple of summers ago. It was really fun. I've also guested with Pavlo and Club Django and Amanda Martinez, all kinds of world music and jazz bands. And I was playing quite a bit of gypsy jazz music, that kind of Django Rheinart/Stéphane Grappelli stuff with a band called Club Django at about the same time that I was founding Sultan of Strings. So I bring some of that gypsy jazz flavor in. Also I bring some of those Arabic sounds. And I think one of the things that I bring to the project is that I really love telling stories. Telling stories about Canada, about the world, finding commonalities between people around the world.

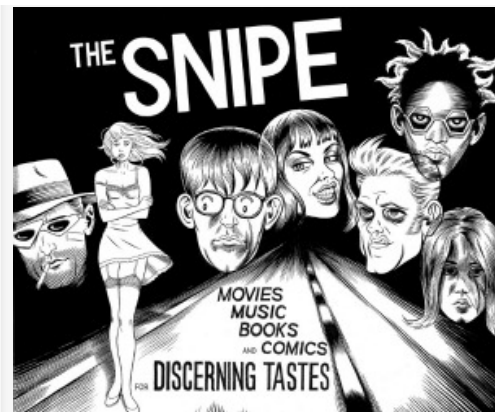
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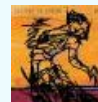
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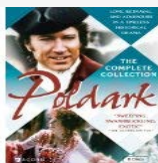
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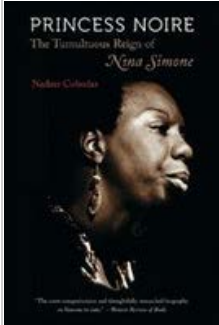


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We've got Kevin Laliberté on guitar. He performed around the world for five years with Jesse Cook and with the Chinese superstar, Dadawa. He's performed on stage with the Chieftains. He's really an amazing player. And he really brings a very strong rumba/flamenco foundation to the band. A bunch of our songs are in that vein. We've got Eddie Paton on guitar, who's also toured with some pretty famous rumba/flamenco players like Robert Michaels. And then on percussion, we have Rosendo Chendy Leon, a fabulous percussionist from Cuba. He's performed with everyone from Alex Cuba to Parachute Club to dozens and dozens of Cuban bands back home. He really pushes us in our band to try harder and explore rhythms in a really deep way. He's really an amazing player and the best cajon player I've ever heard in my life.

**In my own playing, I try to draw from different influences. And there are some areas where I won't tread—**

Yeah.

**If I'm doing something with blues, I won't sing about a mojo hand. I won't do a country song about growing up on the farm, because**

**that's not part of my culture.**

Yeah. Totally know what you're talking about.

**I do a little bit of fingerpicking guitar. I've been reluctant to get into flamenco because it seems so tied into the particular culture. It seems really daunting. Do you wrestle with those kinds of issues?**

That's a really good question and could be a very big question. One thing I'll say to start off is that when we play—I mean, the rumba/flamenco is music of the Roma people and, you know, we're not Roma. There was a pain in the expression and the hard lives of the Roma. We certainly have a lot of respect for the Roma people and their music. We'll be the first ones to say that this is not Flamenco Puro. This is not going back to the source. It's not going back to the well. Everyone, at some point in their life, should be seeing the true flamenco music. And it's the same with Arabic music. I grew up in Canada. People have spent their lifetime learning these Arabic modal scales. What we do is not pure—none of it is. Even the East Coast fiddling from Canada, the country that

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I'm from. The real fiddlers in the East Coast can do stuff that's pretty amazing.

What we do is bring together a lot of these influences into our play. And I think that the music we make is really our own. We're very conscious of not trying to put on something that we're not really about. I'm so grateful that in this world you can see anything on YouTube and hear anyone on iTunes. It's wonderful that all the blending and mixing occurs because it's really interesting. But I also have a lot of respect for those who go super deep into their own traditions and maintain those traditions. We don't want to lose those just like we don't want to lose languages. So, to sum it up, our songs are really more based around pop forms of verse and chorus, the shorter forms. The one rule we follow is that we like to have fun. So a part of the fun for us... If we take a gypsy jazz rhythm and put a fiddle tune we make up, and [then] some funky bass line and some Cuban percussion and mix it all together and push musical purée and see what comes out... That's where the fun lies for us.

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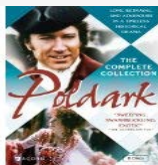
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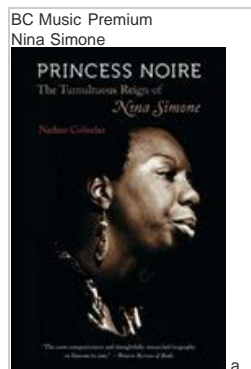
**That (sense of fun) seems to come across. I saw some of your YouTube performances and you guys do seem to have a good time playing off of each other.**

Yeah. It's a lot of fun. I love playing with those guys. We're all in the same headspace. We've all played in very restrictive bands. Sometimes the bigger the band, the more they want you to avoid *that* note in the next show, you know. It's very restrictive. So this is the project where we all get to be ourselves.

**Are there areas that you would like to get into that you haven't had a chance to yet?**

Absolutely. There's a sitar player that lives just outside of Toronto that I really want to get together with. I think that that sound would be beautiful with us. Also we just played with a Swedish nyckelharpa player. We were down in New York City playing at The Living Room and she sat in with her nyckelharpa. Do you know that instrument?

**No. I don't.**



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It's about 500 years old and it looks like a violin, but it's on your lap. And you blow it, but you blow it a funny way. It's got four strings, but then it's got like a ton of resonate strings, sympathetic vibration strings. I think you can hear some nyckelharpa in *The Lord of the Rings* music. It sounds like Middle Earth. So it'd be fun to team up with her again and make some music. There's always so many players out there, so many amazing string players that it'd be fun to team up with. I mean, my dream would be to do stuff with players like Yo Yo Ma or Béla Fleck, and see what players like that would bring to our music.

**Does the name Sultans of String come from the pop song (Dire Straits' "Sultans of Swing")?**

It's a silly pun on "Sultans of Swing," but I guess we were looking for a name that kind of evoked a sense of play as well as saying, "We're really good at something." Sultan means king or expert. And then you got the string, the feeling that we're string players trying to create a string supergroup with these amazing players from around the world.

**I don't know whether this was intentional or not, but that song is actually one of the more**

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poignant pop songs ever written. The idea of these older musicians playing a form that's forgotten, that the younger generation doesn't appreciate. They don't care. They just keep playing their music.

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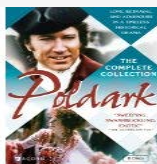
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"A sinister cabal of superior writers."

## Interview: World Musician Chris McKhool, Founder of Canada's Sultans of String - Page 5



Author: Phillip Barnett — Published: Feb 06, 2012 at 8:06 am

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Yeah, that didn't really occur into the forum. At least I'm honest about it.

**You do children's performances under the name FiddleFire! About what percentage do you do of which?**

The Sultans of String have really taken off and that's eaten up most of the schedule, but I really do love performing for young audiences. Just this morning we were playing as Sultans of String for grades five to eight. It was great for them because they get to see string players playing. We play over a dozen different styles in the show. And it's a treat for them to see instruments played in funny ways. For me, that's the point of the show, to open up their eyes and see all the possibilities so that they don't get stuck into a narrow view of what they can or should be doing on an instrument. And for kids who aren't playing any instrument at all, I hope that it inspires them to pick something up. Even like a one-dollar penny whistle so you can get going and play amazing music and you don't even need to have fancy music lessons. Just teach yourself how to play some simple folk instruments. That's a big part of the message of what I'm trying to get across.

**I noticed you were doing some things that I wouldn't necessarily associate with kids' performances. You were getting the kids into "Salt Peanuts" and having them scat sing.**

Yeah. It's a lot of fun.

**You emphasize an environmental message in those performances.**

I've got four different shows now for young people. And the environmental show is actually what got me into performing for young people in the first place. I'm an environmental activist as well. We created the world's largest bicycle bell orchestra at Yonge-Dundas Square, which is kind of our Times Square here in Toronto. Music is such a powerful tool to bring people together and get messages across that you want to share. So there we had a few messages going on. One was to support bicycling; the song that we sang to was called "Walk and Roll." We had over 800 bicycles bells ringing at the same time. Also the idea of making music with everyday objects is fun for us. Just encouraging kids to pick up instruments, pick up whatever they can, and make some music with it. We hit it on a couple of different levels there.

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Looking at the liner notes of *Move!*, it seems that you are trying to convey a message even with Sultans of String. Some people would play and wouldn't necessarily think about the greater message. You seem to have something larger that you're trying to convey. Is that correct?

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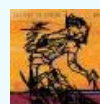
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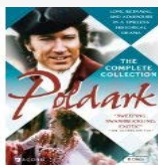
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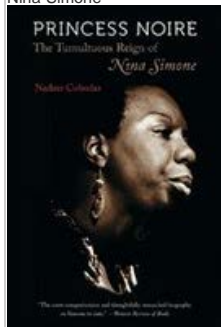
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Yeah. I see music as fun and if I'm not having fun doing it, I'm not interested. But at the same time at a certain point I feel like I need to look back at my life and think about what I've done. Am I just going out going and just playing for the sake of playing or is there something larger I can do with music? And I've always been about connecting people to their environment or connecting people to each other. You know, we only have one planet here and I'm pretty concerned about it. So I think that does end up seeping into pretty much everything I do. At the end of the day I have to look at myself in the mirror and think, have I done all I can to try and make the world a better place?

**Can you describe the collaborative process that you use in Sultans of String? How do you interact with the different band members in creating the songs, especially when you have so many different influences?**

Most of it comes from Kevin and me. We do a lot of the songwriting together, often just him and me acoustically. Sometimes we get an idea, we hear something that really peaks your interest, and I say to him, "Remember when we heard that woman playing that instrument and

she was beating that cool kind of rhythm? What it'd be like if we put this other kind of melody to it?" Or sometimes it comes from songs like "Stable Island" or "Luna." It comes from things that touch us either when we're out in the world or we hear it in the news; or a song about Josie, from a very personal experience, meeting this woman, Josie, in Northern Canada.

And we'll think, how can we get that thought, idea or emotion into music? So we'll play with sounds and timbres and see what we come up with. Then we bring all the songs to the rest of the guys and arrange it so that they become part of the music as well. Then on stage, everything changes over time the more shows we do. Recently, we've started collaborating with symphony orchestras. We've done a few of our orchestra shows now where we've played our music with 60 musicians behind us. It's really fantastic. We're fundraising; you'll see a link on the left-hand side on [sultansofstring.com](http://sultansofstring.com), the link to our page where we're fundraising to record with the symphony orchestra. And so that's a project that we're moving forward with right now, which is a lot of fun.

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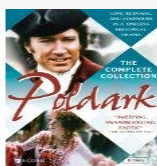
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