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The world in one band

BY MIKE DEVLIN, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JANUARY 26, 2009

STORY

PHOTOS (1)



Sultans of String violinist Chris McKhool fills the gaps in the band's concert schedule with dates at elementary schools, which he hopes inspires a new generation of musicians.

Photograph by: (Maple Music), (Maple Music)

VICTORIA - From Gypsy jazz and rumba flamenco to blues and classical, Toronto's Sultans of String leave no musical genre untouched.

"If there's a style of music out there we play it," said the group's de facto leader, violinist Chris McKhool.

There's no simple way to describe such a sound, which is why the back cover of the band's latest CD, *Luna*, comes bearing the tip, "File under: Atomic world-jazz flamenco."

That's the band in a complicated nutshell. And yet, it barely begins to describe Sultans of String, a trio that combines the talents of McKhool, guitarist Kevin Laliberte and bassist Drew Birston with an entire world of influences.

Sultans of String expands its membership on the road, which further confuses those keeping track of the band's musical direction. Members of the group (and its extended family) have spent time in the studio and on tour with Jesse Cook, Pavlo, Robert Michaels, Chantal Kreviazuk, Melanie Doane, Loreena McKennitt and Oliver Schroer.

"We all come from different backgrounds and bring different things to the band," McKhool said from the road, which will consume the band until the end of February. "There's a lot of cross-pollination between all the different styles, bringing different elements to it. We can draw from a great pool of experience."

That has parlayed into a landslide of critical attention for the group, including a nomination at the Canadian Folk Music Awards in 2007. Despite their small measure of success, countrywide tours come only when the schedules of its members coalesce - which isn't often.

McKhool toured this summer as part of Jesse Cook's band, including dates at some major folk festivals. When he's not on the road with either Cook or the Sultans of String, the remainder of his musical schedule encompasses solo gigs and his budding career as a children's entertainer, which follows an eco-friendly bent.

McKhool, an avid cyclist and environmentalist, attempted to set a Guinness World Record last year by shepherding the world's largest bicycle bell ensemble.

The pace of his endeavours dictates that McKhool must be reachable any time, anywhere. Hence, the creation of 1-800-MCKHOOL, a one-stop shop to meet the demand; it doubles as the phone at his Toronto home. "If we were playing in stadiums I might not be advertising the 1-800-MCKHOOL," he said.

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