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## Mixing styles is The Sultans of String's 'secret weapon'

Sean Spillane

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The Sultans of String will perform Thursday night, June 27, at the Spaceland Ballroom in Hamden, as well as on Jesup Green in Westport on Friday night, June 28. Photo: Contributed Photo



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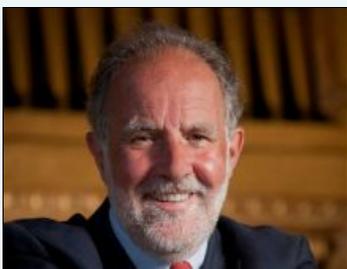
The Sultans of String has made a name for itself in its native Canada, collecting nominations for the Juno Awards -- their version of the Grammys -- and the Canadian Folk Music Awards, winning several CFMAs.

The band blends several styles (folk, flamenco, Gypsy jazz) into its music, which it hopes to bring to a wider audience in the United States.

"We are getting more exposure in the U.S., and we've got some great gigs coming up," violinist **Chris McKhool** said in a recent phone interview from his home in Toronto. "We've got a few (free outdoor shows), which are great places to kind of connect with people who haven't discovered the band before so they can hear some of our music. And we're just getting more word-of-mouth gigs, as well.

"We've got this ex-record company guy in the States, **Dave Wilkes**, who just seems to know everybody. He's been great at connecting us with people we should

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meet and clubs we should visit. It's really a great thing for us."

Traditional Irish music fans may remember the Sultans of String from its visit to Stamford in March, where the band opened for the Chieftains at the [Palace Theater](#).

The Sultans return to the area for shows Thursday night, June 27, at the Spaceland Ballroom in Hamden and Friday night, June 28, on [Jesup Green](#) in Westport. The band also will appear on WTNH's morning news program in a "CT Style" segment on Friday, June 28.

"It was really fun," McKhool said of the evening with [Paddy Moloney](#) and his Chieftains. "There's nothing like being around a band that is that road-tested. There is a real sort of faith in knowing that everything's going to work out when you're on stage with the Chieftains.



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"We all piled onto the stage at the end, and we had no idea what we were going to do. (Moloney) was going around the stage, just nodding at people and they would do their thing and we would go right back into the tune again.

"So when he looked over at us, I thought, 'Maybe I'll play this rumba tune we know,' and we just kind of went into our rumba tune and then back into the Chieftains' song. It was quite a kick."

The gig had an added benefit, as Moloney agreed to perform on the Sultans' next CD, and has already recorded his parts.

"He sounds fantastic on there," McKhool said. "He played both penny whistle and uilleann pipes on a tune called 'Sable Island.' And we've got 10 tracks on this CD that we recorded with a full symphony orchestra here in Toronto. ... It's a really fun project. It was a real trip."

The different genres mixed into the group's sound allows the Sultans to be ideal touring partners for many different kinds of bands, something McKhool said is "almost like a secret weapon that we have.

"Drew (Birston), our bass player, comes from a real jazz background, as well as playing on huge pop stages with Canadian stars like [Chantal Kreviazuk](#). And Kevin (Laliberte) really dug into the rumba, flamenco nylon-string guitar playing.

"And I did some time when I was younger with symphony orchestras when I was a kid and played in a gypsy jazz band and played some Arabic music here and there.

"So we bring all of those influences together and it's kind of a killer combination because we can show up and rip it up at a folk festival or at a jazz club or in a classical music series.

"We can pretty much fit in anywhere, which is really fun for us. I love collaborating. For me, the band is all about exploring new ground and breaking down old barriers. ... That's where the joy comes from for me."

The Sultans of String, which also includes guitarist [Eddie Paton](#) and percussionist [Chendy Leon](#), are working on their next album and McKhool, as always, is on the lookout for new sounds to bring to the mix.

"It's a pretty big world and there are a lot of styles we haven't touched on yet," he said. "I've been jamming with this Pakistani sitar player, and it's just such a beautiful instrument. I've always loved listening to the sitar and ... I'm 100 percent sure he's going to appear on a CD with us sometime in the future."

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Spaceland Ballroom, 295 Treadwell St., Hamden. Thursday, June 27, 7 p.m. \$15. 203-288-6400, [www.theouterspace.net](http://www.theouterspace.net). Jesup Green, 20 Jesup Road, Westport. Friday, June 28, 8 p.m. Free. 203-226-7600, [www.levittpavilion.com](http://www.levittpavilion.com).

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