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Sultans of String bringing unique voice to Urbana

Sun, 07/21/2013 - 7:00am | Melissa Merli

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URBANA — Sultans of String bandleader/violinist Chris McKhool acknowledges a lot of bands, like the Sultans, mix different styles from around the world.

But the Toronto-based band — a duo from the group performs Wednesday night at The Iron Post — plays their music in one voice.

It's heavily tinged with Cuban and Arabic rhythms, Spanish flamenco, East Coast Celtic, French Manouche gypsy jazz, Americana and "pretty much everything in between," McKhool said.

"We love playing real music, everything that comes to North America through musical immigrants," he said. "Certainly there are other bands that play those styles, but we're a band that kind of plays with all one voice, in one band."

Another thing fun for the Sultans is connecting with their audiences.

"It's kind of a special thing for me to be able to connect with people musically and tell stories through the music even though a lot of our music is instrumental," McKhool said.

"For me, music is a great way for people to connect with one another and to connect with what's important. I hope that comes through. Maybe that's part of why people have been drawn to it as they have."

Indeed, the band has attracted fans and critics alike. One for Maverick Music magazine in the United Kingdom wrote:

"Energetic and exciting music from a band with talent to burn ... the very epitome of world music: no boundaries, no rules ... the sort of band and music that would rip up any festival in the country!"

And in the past several years, the Sultans of String have done just that, at festivals and on stages. In the process, they have received a slew of awards and nominations, among them the Juno, Canada's equivalent of the Grammy, and Canadian Folk Music awards.

They also are a 2013 SiriusXM Canadian Indie Award nominee for World Group of the Year and winner of the 2008 International Songwriting Contest, which drew 15,000 entries.

The Chieftains recently invited the Sultans to open for them on their spring tour in Connecticut. Paddy Moloney, leader and founding member of The Chieftains, also plays on the Sultans' upcoming world-classical CD, "Symphony!," to be released Sept. 8 on the Sony label.

Generally a quintet, the Sultans of String do shows in formations ranging from duo to quintet, and perform as well with symphony orchestras.

On the current tour in support of their latest album, "Move," McKhool plays his six-stringed violin made by a luthier in Ithaca, N.Y., and Kevin Laliberte plays guitar.



Photo by: Provided

A duo from the Sultans of String will play Wednesday evening at the Iron Post in Urbana.



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"He's really a master guitar player; he's really one of the best," McKhool said. "He can play all these styles convincingly."

As a duo, they bring with them "a lot of tricks and toys," among them a foot-stomper pedal to help keep the beat and a looper pedal Laliberte uses.

"We can build up some layers," McKhool said. "He's the best looper guy I know. It has a tendency to get out of hand, but I think Kevin is a master at it."

The Sultans of String — all of its members live in Toronto but none is from there — began jamming and performing together around 2005. They released their first recording, "Luna," in 2007.

"That's when we really launched the band with that name," McKhool said.

As with most bands, all of the Sultans are free agents and play with other groups as well, McKhool said.

"When we come together as Sultans of String, something magical happens," he said. "We all bring our strengths to the project and throw in our love to the arrangements. All of it's pretty fun to play."

A well-known and award-winning musician in Canada, McKhool started playing violin when he was 7 or 8 years old. (His paternal Makhoul grandparents immigrated to Canada from Lebanon, and his Egyptian-born mother is a piano and theory teacher.)

McKhool, now 44, first learned violin "by ear" before taking classical lessons.

"That was a really amazing foundation for me. I played in youth orchestras, which was so much fun," he said. "In high school, I kind of got a little bored of the classical violin and started plugging it in and making crazy sounds, with pedals. The only guy I knew back then that plugged in his violin was Jean-Luc Ponty."

After that, McKhool took up guitar and started "doing the singer-songwriter thing." He also writes for the Sultans; 90 percent of what the band performs are originals.

Among the covers they do are those of Neil Young's "Heart of Gold" and the Who's "Pinball Wizard."

McKhool considers covers "touchstones" for the audiences.

"It gives them some frame of reference to understand what we're doing," he said. "We keep playing with things until we find things that work."

Opening Wednesday night for McKhool and Laliberte will be the local band Bones, Jugs N Harmony, which is scheduled to go on at 7 p.m. The xylophone-driven ragtime jug band will be celebrating the July 15 release of their first EP, "Episode One." It's a collection of live studio cuts.

Tickets will be \$10 at the door. The show is a fundraiser for the Champaign-Urbana Folk and Roots Festival, which will present its fifth annual festival Nov. 1-2 in downtown Urbana. For more information, visit <http://www.folkandroots.org>.

If you go

What: The Champaign-Urbana Folk & Roots Festival presents Chris McKhool and Kevin Laliberte of the Sultans of String, a Toronto-based world music group, with opening act Bones, Jugs N Harmony, a local xylophone-driven ragtime jug band.

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday

Where: The Iron Post, 120 S. Race St., U

Tickets: \$10 at the door

Online: <http://www.sultansofstring.com/>; <http://www.folkandroots.org>

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