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Stringing together a Sherwood show

Sultans of Swing inspired by real life events

By Meaghan Baxter News Staff
Posted 19 hours ago

Sultans of String, who have been dubbed the string super group of Canada, are about to make their first stop at Festival Place on Friday, Feb. 10 to present audiences with a whirlwind of multicultural flare.

The show is part of the Realtor Cafe Series and begins at 7:30 p.m. The Sultans of String aim to take their crowds on a musical adventure through Middle Eastern folk, Spanish Flamenco, French Manouche, Gypsy jazz and Cuban beats. The quartet uses a blend of electric and acoustic instruments to create even more depth to its already multifaceted sound.

"One thing, and people say it all the time and it sounds corny, but it's actually true, is that music is the international language," said Chris Mckhool, the group's violin player, who has also made a name for himself as a successful children's musician.

When he travels, Mckhool brings an instrument along for the ride and said it has opened up possibilities for him to experience cultures in new ways. For him, music also acts as a way to meet people and communicate.

"It's such a great way to travel, with an instrument," he said.

The groups' latest album, Yalla Yalla, which means "Come on, let's go" in Arabic, has taken the Sultans of String on a sold-out Canadian tour, including national features on CTV's Canada AM and CBC's Canada Live. They were also praised with three 2009 Canadian Folk Music Awards nominations, where they won Instrumental Group of the Year.

Music has always been part of Mckhool's life, and he started playing violin as a child, after his mother, who was a piano player and music teacher, took him to see an orchestra and told him to choose an instrument. He recalled he had initially pointed out the double bass and cello, but his mother encouraged him to think smaller.

His mother is from Egypt and his father is Lebanese, so Mckhool grew up with musical influences from western classical to sounds of the Middle East. His parents deeply rooted values of respect, tolerance and acceptance for all cultures. These teachings have been worked into his music as well.

"I think a lot of what I do is rooted in social justice issues, and that's part of what makes music interesting for me," he said, adding that when he started his career, he wrote protest songs and songs about the environment for his younger audiences. "It's nice to just play tunes, but where's the meaning in it? If it doesn't have a deeper meaning, I'm not really interested in it, and our songs reflect that."



The Sultans of String

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Mckhool said, in addition to multicultural influences, the group's music stems from real-life stories.

A particular example he recalled is the song "Josie," which was inspired by an indigenous elder of the same name. McKhool met her at a camp that sends children to northern communities in Canada to learn songwriting and establish the ability to tell their own stories.

Every day, Mckhool ate lunch with Josie and she recounted tales of taking children into the woods to teach them how to fish, hunt and trap.

"On the last day, someone told me that she was completely blind," Mckhool said. "I was totally blown away. She put out her hand and shook mine the first day I met her, and I realized just the great strength of this woman."

The Sultans of String are currently working to fund their fourth album, which will be a collaborative effort with a full symphony orchestra. To help raise \$30,000 for the budgeted \$60,000 project, Mckhool set up a Kapipal page. Fans and music lovers alike can donate an amount of their choice to the project. A variety of rewards are up for grabs, depending on the donated amount. These rewards range from CDs to iPods to being credited as executive producer in the album liner. For more information, or to make a donation, visit www.kapipal.com/sultansofstring.

Tickets for the show are \$18 and available on the Festival Place website at www.festivalplace.ab.ca or through the box office by calling 780-449-3378.

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