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Sultans of String bring the world to Lethbridge

Tuesday, 07 February 2012 11:53 | Richard Amery



If you want to take a trip around the world, check out the Sultans of String, Feb. 11 at the Lethbridge Folk Club Wolf's Den.

The popular Toronto based string band, blend a cornucopia of international influences, including elements of jazz, gypsy jazz, Cuban rhythm, Arabic folk and any other kind of world music you can name.

Though the year has just begun, the band has already been on two week tours of the United Kingdom as well as two weeks in the United States.

Their Lethbridge debut will be a part of a two week Canadian tour. "Anytime you add a rhumba rhythm and flamenco guitar to a song, it just sounds better," enthused Sultans of String violinist Chris McKhool.

Each of the band members brings a variety of influences to the table though all of the members are firmly rooted in jazz music. McKhool brings the Celtic-folk to the tables

"I bring gypsy jazz and Celtic folk, but when you throw everyone else's musical influences into the blender and press purée, then out comes Sultans of String," he said, raving about his talented bandmates.

They met through the Toronto jazz scene. McKhool was impressed by hearing guitarist Kevin Laliberté playing rhumba and flamenco music.

"I asked him what he was playing and we decided to form a band, I met the other members in a similar way. And one day we got a three hour gig, but we didn't know that many songs, so we just jammed and all of our influences came out," he said.

The band has recorded three CDs of expressive instrumental music including their 2010 Juno Award winning "Yalla Yalla," and their most recent CD "Move," which was released in September 2011.

While they are a mostly original instrumental band, they also play a couple choice covers. "Yalla Yalla" has a unique exotic version of the Who's "Pinball Wizard."

"That's the type of thing that came about from playing clubs where the longer people are there the more they imbibe and they shout things out. So we wanted to play a song and see how far we could go with it. If you add Arabic vocalizing and an oud, is it still the same song," asked McKhool who said a lot of it comes from having a very talented band who enjoys jazz style improvisation.

"We're lucky we get to play a lot of different venues from jazz clubs, to world music festivals to folk clubs," he said. The band will be busy this year with tours, gigs at jazz clubs and summer festivals. However McKhool also plays performances for young people as well.

Plans are in the works for Sultans of String to record with a well known symphony, though he won't say which one.

"We're still in the beginning of negotiations," he said, though McKhool has performed with the Windsor Symphony. The band likes to be able to tell a story, even with their instrumentals.

"We love storytelling. A lot of the fun is in the set up, especially in a folk club, where you can tell the story of the song, and that allows people to hear these little things in the songs," he said.



THE SULTANS OF STRING. PHOTO SUBMITTED



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DEPARTMENTS



Their latest CD has a solid cover of Neil Young's "Heart of Gold."
"I'm a guitar player as well. So that comes from my years of playing folk music," he said.
The latest CD was also the most rehearsed than had ever been before entering the studio.

"We spent a lot of time writing the songs. We didn't want to do a lot of slicing and dicing in the studio," he said.
The songs come from all over the world.

"Road to Kfarmishki" was inspired by an indigenous elder he met during his search for his grandfather's village in Lebanon, while others, like "Nacimiento" are more personal as it is about the birth of his new daughter.

"It starts by creating a feeling of space and mystery to begin with, then it explodes and it calms down by the end," he summarized.

They are looking forward to playing Lethbridge for the first time, particularly the Wolf's Den.

"We're going to be playing music off the first three albums. It's pretty exciting. We'll be playing many styles of world music and we will be telling a lot of stories," he said.

The show begins at 8 p.m. with opening act

Prashant John of the band Tandave. Tickets are \$20 for Lethbridge Folk Club members, \$25 for non folk club members.

— By Richard Amery, L.A. Beat Editor

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