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Around the World in 10 Tracks with the Sultans of String

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Toronto's **Sultans of String** have given you a way to travel the world without a single plane ticket, passport or need to change currency. Their recent release, *Subcontinental Drift*, is a global affair where you'll tour France, Ireland, Cuba and India with various stops in between on one high-energy, uplifting trip through song. With all the points on the map you'll touch, perhaps the album should have been named *Multi-continental Hop*, because your ears will be doing a lot of globe-trekking. The Sultans seem right at home being far from home, finding eclectic ways with each album to musically stamp their passports with an ever widening array of sound.

The band, led by Ottawa native Chris McKhool on six-stringed violin, formed eight years ago and quickly started racking up accolades for their unique blend of styles that often create an interesting culture collide. Be it with a blend of Arabic and South Asian grooves or a musical fusion of Celtic jigs and reels alongside the rhythm of a flamenco guitar, you don't quite know where the band is going to take you next.

The group, made up of McKhool, Kevin Laliberté on flamenco guitar, Eddie Paton on, yes, another flamenco guitar, Drew Birston on bass and Chendy Leon on percussion, are joined on the new album by world renowned sitar master **Anwar Khurshid**. It's an East meets West affair of ragas, reels and rumbas with a lot of rhythm.

"There is something magical about joining the world music rhythms we play, but with pop sensibilities and forms and lengths, and blending that with the music of the East," says McKhool of the album's 10 tracks, four of which feature

Khurshid.

Fused into the songs on *Subcontinental Drift* are uplifting messages of hope and freedom. It may just have you boarding the next flight to somewhere, anywhere, simply wanting to find yourself alive in the world. You may also want to clear away some furniture before your departure because these sultans will make you dance out the door.

However, if you don't see yourself catching that flight this weekend you can take the trip with the band a little closer to home when they bring the world to you for a show at the [National Arts Centre's Fourth Stage](#) on April 14.

Contest! Interested in taking the Sultans' sound home with you and seeing it in person? Comment on this article with one reason for why you'd like to see this group play, and your name will enter a draw for a Sultans of String box set and two tickets for the upcoming NAC show! We will draw the names on the morning of April 13th, you can find full contest rules [here](#).



Ottawa Life chatted with McKhool about his Ottawa roots, the worldly sounds of the band and their collaboration with Khurshid.

Ottawa Life: You grew up in a Lebanese-Egyptian household. How did that shape your music to come?

McKhool: Growing up, I listened to a few Arabic music albums from my family's record collection. My mom was also a piano teacher and we had a steady stream of neighbourhood children coming to the house for lessons. So I was exposed to music all of the time. About 10-15 years ago I wanted to explore more of my roots and went to an Arabic music retreat in Massachusetts and started learning more about how to play some of the Arabic motifs. I continued to dive more into this music and integrate it into the sound of our band.

Can you tell me about your time in Ottawa and your time as a musician here?

I was raised in Ottawa and it was an amazing city to grow up in. Being a musician, I spent a lot of time at Rasputin's Café listening to fantastic folk singer-songwriters who performed there like Rebecca Campbell, Lynn Miles, Alex Sinclair, and Ian Tamblyn. It was a great spot where you could get up there as part of their Open Stage as well. Just down the next block was the Ottawa Folklore Centre which was a fabulous place to check out musical instruments and take lessons. I took vocal lessons when I was in high school from Lynn Miles. There was so much going on in the city then and even more so now. It's quite the hub with a lot of great venues, bands and players.

How did the collaboration with Anwar Khurshid come about for this album?

We met at an event that featured different bands representing different parts of Toronto. Kevin and I were there playing music representing eastern European parts of the city and Anwar was there representing Little India. I heard him play and fell in love with the sound right away. We got together soon after to play and discovered there was a very special musical connection. When Anwar arrived here in Canada 20 years ago from Pakistan, he started exploring different kinds of things

that he could do with the sitar and meeting us was great because we both love playing world music. For Anwar it was an interesting process, connecting with our pop music sensibilities—which we have just by virtue of being born in North America and being used to songs being three and a half minutes long. Typically a song that he would play would maybe last half an hour on the sitar and he’s still just warming up. It was a good and fun learning curve for him.

I keep telling people that listening to *Subcontinental Drift* is like taking a musical trip around the world. I liken it to, say, watching a film like *Baraka* in regards to how much culture is on there. How do you go about melding so many different styles into your music?

Everyone comes to the band with such a rich background. A lot of the success actually comes from trial and error. When we’re writing songs, often about different subjects and themes, or about the places we’ve been, we’ll try and frame a song and see which style suits the song the best. Drew Birston, our bass player, comes from both the pop world and Kevin Laliberte, our guitarist, spent 5 years travelling around the globe performing with Jesse Cook, perfecting his Rumba Flamenca rhythm. Rosendo ‘Chendy’ Leon, our percussionist originally from Cuba, brings a whole slew of world instruments to the group. I spent a few years performing with a jazz band called Club Django, as well as being influenced by east coast Celtic fiddling and Arabic music from my ancestral homeland of Lebanon. Of course Anwar brings the sounds of India and Pakistan to the mix. When we’re writing songs, we throw all our influences into a musical blender and hit purée.

In a way we are trying to emulate a model for world peace because we have many musical worlds coming together. Sometimes they understand each other and sometimes they don’t. That’s part of the artistic process, too, and yet there’s enough common ground to create something new and something exciting that hopefully hasn’t been said before. That’s kind of the Canadian ideal of multiculturalism, the sense of the mosaic. You look up at a stained glass window of a church and you see all those beautiful colours and they all come together to make one beautiful image. That’s what we’re trying to do on a daily basis in our lives and with our music.

Do you feel you are all constantly on the look out for new styles to bring to your sound?

Definitely! One of the best things about this band is its openness to learning from others, and every time we record or perform with a special guest, it brings a lot to the music we’re creating. Right now we have a few new musical projects on the go, including working with a group of Turkish Roma violin players for an upcoming record. We’re also working on a Christmas record featuring many special guest vocalists who are adding their sound to what we do. This is a bit of a departure for us because most of the time we play instrumental music so it brings a whole other side of our music to the fore.

The cover of Dylan’s “Blowing in the Wind” is fantastic with a unique spin. How did you go about choosing it and what was the process in the studio to make such an iconic song your own?

We chose that song because we were really moved by the fact that both Anwar and the band love that song so much. Anwar had already been singing that in Pakistan. It struck me that here’s a song that’s over a half century old and it stands the test of time, distance and culture. It has a universal resonance and speaks very much to the band’s and Anwar’s truth on a personal level, especially in light of world politics today. In the studio, we very purposefully recorded it very differently from the original in a way that incorporated a blending of cultures and genres. I don’t see much point in rendering a song similar to the original so we took the opportunity to put a really fun banghra spin on the track.

Can you tell me a bit about the story behind the track “Journey to Freedom”?

Because this is global music and music that comes to Canada from around the world, there is a theme of travel in the songs on this album. Both Chendy and Anwar are immigrants to Canada and very grateful to have found a home here. Anwar’s brother had come to Canada before Anwar did and when he returned to Pakistan to visit, Anwar so appreciated the man his brother had become through living in an open society. In Pakistan, there are certain religious factions that would not want to have any music playing at all. In the village where Anwar lived, he was not allowed to play his sitar in public. The sitar was not only an instrument he loved but he felt like it was his actual voice. It’s kind of an interesting thing, like what if you find out the one thing that you know to be true is something that you’re being denied? It’s not dissimilar from Chendy’s story, drawn to Canada as a place where he can be free, to speak his voice and to live his truth and not worry about being thrown in jail for having an opinion contrary to the government. With both these band members, we’ve created a space where they can be themselves musically, personally, and living in as diverse a city as Toronto allows them the freedom to be who they are. When you hear Anwar play the sitar, you realize that’s really who he *is*. To deny the expression – political, musical – of a human being is really to quash their soul.