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Sultans of String bring their flavour back home



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York alumnus Chris McKhool and Anwar Khurshid chit-chat with Excalibur

Sultans, sitars, and strings, oh my!

September 25 marked the release of Canadian band Sultans of String's new album *Subcontinental Drift*. As a collaboration with sitarist Anwar Khurshid, whose songs were featured in Hollywood soundtracks such as *Life of Pie* and *The Love Guru*, this fusion pot of South Asian and Western music marks the band's fifth album.

A unique sound, Sultans of String is hard to categorize into one box. Their past four albums have explored a wide mixture of genres, described by founder and violinist Chris McKhool as a mix between rumba, salamanca, Gypsy jazz, Arabic rhythms, East Coast, Celtic, and Cuban rhythms.

Subcontinental Drift, however, shifts the sound of Sultans of String to include a South Asian flavour. "I love the other albums for their diversity, but I also have really learned to enjoy this project for focusing in a little bit tighter on a sound, a place, a vibe, and a feel," says McKhool regarding their new direction.

The collaboration started between McKhool and Khurshid, as the two met at a corporate Christmas event. They kept in touch for years before Khurshid invited McKhool to play with him for the Canada Pakistan Business Council in 2008. This is where McKhool says that listening to the sitar really cemented the idea of the new collaboration.

"I was always drawn to that music, but when I got to play with Khurshid, it unleashed a whole other style of music in me that I've always dreamed of playing but didn't have a vehicle to do so," he says.

The recipe for this fusion jazz band is simple. Starting as a duo in 2004, Sultans of String was born of the unique sound of McKhool, a York alumnus, on six-string violin paired with Kevin Laliberté on flamenco guitar. Add bassist Drew Birston, guitarist Eddie Paton, and percussionist Chendy Leon to complete the quintet. Top with a myriad of special guests and worldwide collaborators, and the world fusion band's unique and diverse sound becomes more than the sum of its parts. Winners of numerous awards, including those recognizing world music, folk music, and songwriting, Sultans of String have honours to show for their work. In 2015, they were nominated for the Instrumental Album of the Year award, their second Juno nomination.

The exact fusion of the band, particularly of Sultans of String may be odd to a pop audience. One song may begin as an exotic and hypnotic sitar, only to flow moments later into a guitar solo. The track listing includes 10 singles, including a Bob Dylan cover that is followed by a song titled "Snake Charmer." The movement is seamless and continuously refreshing, and keeps a harmonious balance between energetic, get-up-and-dance songs and reflective, transcendent instrumentals.

The *Subcontinental Drift* CD release concert takes place in Toronto on October 30 at Trinity-St. Paul's Centre. The Sultans of String and Khurshid will bring their new material to their home base. Reflecting the wild flavours of Toronto's multiculturalism, their tunes are a tasty treat for all ears.