

For Sultans of String, world is their oyster

JIM CATALANO, Correspondent 7:23 p.m. EDT March 29, 2016

Eclectic group to play at Hangar Theatre on Thursday night



(Photo: Provided)

For nearly a decade, Toronto's Sultans of String have been bringing their eclectic, high-energy brand of world music to fans across North America.

Led by founders Chris McKhool (violin) and Kevin Laliberté (guitar), the Sultans draw from all sorts of influences — Celtic, pop, Middle Eastern, jazz, South Asian and more — to create a distinctive sound that they'll showcase when they perform Thursday night at the Hangar Theatre in Ithaca.

McKhool and Laliberté handle the bulk of songwriting and arranging for the band, which has released five albums.

"Often we have an idea of a story we want to tell through music. So we'll start with that concept and try some melodic or rhythmic ideas to tell that story the best we can," McKhool said in phone interview earlier this week. "Other times it starts where we're playing fun musical riffs, and just seeing where the music takes us rhythmically and harmonically. Sometimes the frame we put around it comes after the fact, instead of starting with it."



For their latest release, "Subcontinental Drift," the group brought in sitarist Anwar Khurshid at the beginning of the process.

"It was the first album where we actually wrote a whole body of music with a special guest," McKhool said. "We've worked with guests before — it's a great way of adding energy and ideas to the band — but Kevin and I have done most of the songwriting. For this project, we thought it would be cool to bring in Anwar and do the creation as well as recording with him to give it a real flavor and put it in the different place with a different sense of space and time.

"It definitely has a collusion of styles, which we like to do, but stylistically it was much more uniform than our other albums, which are really all over the map," McKhool added with a big laugh.

"This is the most unified album in terms of creating a world for ourselves. It was such a fun process for us. Growing up here in North America and listening to all the classic folk and rock and pop growing up, we have the standard song structures already lodged in our heads. Even when we write instrumental songs, we still tend to think of things in that way. But Anwar has a completely different approach — he'll be playing for five minutes and still be just warming up. So we tried to take these 30-minute jams and condense them into three or four-minute pop songs, which was a super-fun challenge."



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The recorded versions of the songs are mere launching points for their live renditions. “We know how the songs are going to start and how they’ll end, but a lot of the middle bits are improvised,” McKhool said. “Which keeps it fresh for us, and for our audience. They can tell that we’re concentrating and having fun and playing off each other.”

The Sultans of String also are drawn from their Canadian heritage for inspiration.

“The philosophy behind our country is not the melting pot — which is the American model — but the mosaic,” McKhool said. “When you look at a stained-glass window, all the pieces are different colors but it makes a more beautiful whole. People here keep their musical traditions alive really well, and that really enriches our musical scene here in Toronto. It’s great to interact with other musicians — we learn from them and grow from them when we bring them in as special guests. It’s not just that our music is influencing them; their music is influencing us. It’s like having more colors in your paint box.”



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For the Ithaca performance, the Sultans of String will perform as a quartet, with McKhool and Laliberté joined by bassist Drew Birston (Chantal Kreviazuk) and percussionist Chendy Leon (Parachute Club, Alex Cuba). McKhool is also trying to get local favorite Eric Aceto, whose electric violins he plays, to make a guest appearance.

“He’s one of the best violin-makers on the planet and also a great jazz violin player, so we hope to have him sit in for a song or two,” McKhool said.



If You Go

•**Who:** Sultans of String

•**When:** 8 p.m. Thursday

•**Where:** Hangar Theatre, 801 Taughannock Blvd., Ithaca

•**Tickets:** \$18-\$22. Purchase at Hangar Theatre box office in Center Ithaca from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday, online at www.hangartheatre.org or by calling 273-ARTS.



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