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ENTERTAINMENT MUSIC

Sultans blend East and West

Tegan Sonley, For Northumberland Today
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The Sultans of String feature violinist Chris McKhool, bassist Drew Birston and guitarist Kevin Laliberte. (Scott Wishart, Postmedia Network)

When a band blends flamenco, Cuban rhythms, East Coast fiddling, Arabic flavours and more, its music is bound to be a journey.

For the Toronto-area-based Sultans of String, that journey started 10 years ago when violinist Chris McKhool met guitarist Kevin Laliberte after he'd come off the road from touring with Jesse Cook for five years.

"When I heard him play, I knew right away that he was a fantastic player and I needed to play with him," McKhool said recently.

After deciding to perform together, their first challenge was a show at a club in North York. Having three hours to fill with only a few dozen songs meant improvisation was needed. Those improvised songs later appeared on the duo's first few albums.

Since then, the duo has become a quintet including flamenco guitarist Eddie Paton, bassist Drew Birston and percussionist Chendy Leon and has welcomed many special guests including David Woodhead and Alberto Suarez.

The Sultans of String play Aeolian Hall Saturday with special guest Anwar Khurshid, a sitarist known for his work on the soundtracks to *Life Of Pi* and *Love Guru* soundtracks.

Khurshid, from Pakistan, has been in Canada for 25 years. He has been writing music with McKhool and Laliberte for about a year and a half.

"There is this musical connection between us, but what I noticed the first time I came here and I played with you guys, was this wonderful humanity and generosity . . . such a nice welcome that you had for me. It was really soul-enhancing," Khurshid said.

Blending the genres poses a challenge, McKhool said.

"It was kind of a really fun challenge to be able to take songs with an Eastern vibe that would last maybe 60 minutes, and try and distil them down to the best four minutes we could write. It's conflict, but it's conflict based on trying to blend together two really wonderful musical forms and hopefully creating a new form that has the best of both worlds."

Their newest album, *Subcontinental Drift*, took about a year to put together with six months of writing and six months of recording.

"Every time we do a new project like this, it reinvigorates us as artists," McKhool said. "We get to explore different ways of playing and learning about music."

Their success has included two Juno Awards including one last year for their *Symphony* album.

The Sultans of String are working on a Christmas album set to come next year.

"It's going to be a Christmas album with a bunch of really fabulous vocal special guests," McKhool said. "I'm not allowed to name them yet."

— with files from James Reaney, *The London Free Press*

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IF YOU GO

What: London concert by Sultans of String with Anwar Khurshid.

When: Saturday, 8 p.m.

Where: Aeolian Hall, 795 Dundas St. (at Rectory)

Details: \$23 advance, \$26 at door; seniors (55-and-up), \$20; students, \$10. Visit aeolianhall.ca or call 519-672-7950.