

Showcase



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The Sultans of String — guitarist Eddie Paton, bassist Drew Birston, Chris McKhool, violinist, guitarist Kevin Laliberte and percussionist Alberto Suarez — bring their globetrotting sound to the Sanderson Centre on Saturday.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Ambassadors of musical diversity

By ELIZABETH YATES
EXPOSITOR STAFF
Brantford

NOW PLAYING

◆ **Who:** the Sultans of String
◆ **When:** Saturday, 8 p.m.
◆ **Where:** Sanderson Centre. ◆
Tickets: \$32; call the box office at 519-758-8090. Check out: www.sultansofstring.co

Chris McKhool remembers when he couldn't even lift an instrument — let alone wield a mesmerizing six-string violin and lead an acclaimed world-music ensemble.

Now 39, the frontman for the Sultans of String was a 20-ish graduate of McGill University when struck by fibromyalgia, a disease characterized by chronic pain, weakness and sensitivity to touch. For a year, the disease rendered the singer-songwriter unable to perform or do much of anything.

"It was a really long process of getting the music back," McKhool says in a telephone interview from home in Toronto, a few days before the Sultans of String perform at the Sanderson Centre. Lifestyle changes — more exercise, healthier eating — helped him recover. He's now free of symptoms.

In a way, he muses, the devastating illness was a boon: losing the ability to play made him realize that music was the most important thing in life.

"It really helps define me as a person. It's my way of communicating to the world."

It seems that the world likes what he's got to say.

Since forming four years ago, the Sultans have won or been nominated for a slew of awards, ranging from being named best variety act by festivals and events Ontario this year to an Indie Award as favourite world group.

"It's really great to be recognized. We make the music because we love it. So to be recognized for our songwriting and performing is just a wonderful bonus."

Released earlier this year, their debut disc, *Luna*, showcases the group's mission to celebrate Canada's cultural diversity. Its songs range from a Maritime mashup called *Kitchen Party* to the poignant title track, inspired by the tale of the famed B.C. killer whale believed to be the reincarnation of a First Nations chief.

Mainly co-written by McKhool and rumba flamenco guitarist Kevin Laliberte, the melodies also reflect a country whose musical melting pot is accented by Latin, Middle Eastern, Gypsy-jazz and folk rhythms.

"We like to joke that we have musical ADD (attention deficit disorder)," says McKhool. "We don't play any one style for too long. We like to take the audience on an armchair tour around the world."

"We love to get people clapping along — and sometimes, dancing in the aisles."

Saturday's show will feature McKhool and Laliberte as well as bassist Drew Birston, guitarist Eddie Paton and percussionist Alberto Suarez. They're eager to play their first show in Brantford, one of a string of dates in Ontario. Soon after, the group kicks off their first cross-Canada tour.

It's an exciting time for the Sultans, who came together in 2004. McKhool was playing jazz clubs in Toronto when his regular guitarist couldn't make a gig and sent Laliberte instead.

Hearing him warm up by playing rumba flamenco rhythms "was the coolest thing ever," says McKhool, who kept on hiring Laliberte after that night. Eventually, the two began writing their own tunes, which are now showcased on *Luna*. "This music comes from our hearts and our souls."

It's born of edge-of-our-seats improvisation.

"It was really fun to get it all down on a CD."

While the group brings together a range of musical influences, McKhool's own style is steeped in the Middle East: his father's family came to Canada from Lebanon, while his mom — a piano teacher — is from Egypt. The pair met in Ottawa, where McKhool was born and raised.

NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE

Growing up, he was exposed to a variety of genres by music loving parents, who took him regularly to the National Arts Centre orchestra. At one concert, they told him to pick out an instrument to learn. As the boy was just 7, the double bass and cello were deemed too large; violin was a default choice.

He trained classically on the instrument, but lost interest in high-school, switching to guitar and writing and singing his own songs in local folk clubs. It was just a beloved pastime for McKhool, who moved to Montreal to study psychology at McGill. Then fibromyalgia struck, bringing its revelation of just how central music was to his existence. "It was really up to me to figure out how to play again."

While recovering, he worked part-time at a preschool and began performing for the kids. That led to gigs around town — and then, a move to Toronto, seeking a wider choice of venues.

After that move, about 12 years ago, he regained enough strength to be able to play violin — more physically demanding than the guitar — once again. Now, he sports a unique electro-acoustic instrument with two more strings than the traditional models. Made by a luthier in Ithaca, N.Y., "it's just gorgeous. I loved that extended range."

Toronto's multicultural hotspot proved the perfect pace to jam with other world-minded musicians, says McKhool, who has performed with artists such as Pavlo and Jesse Cook.

Comparisons between the Sultans of String and fellow Canadian Cook — a bestselling rumba flamenco guitarist who's also known for global collaborations — may be inevitable.

And that's fine, says McKhool. "Fans of Jesse Cook will love our music," he says. "But we're also quite different. We do try to bring in many different styles ... and we're telling Canadian stories."

"What I love about this band is that it's quite diverse."