

The Samaritans Of Song

With two Canadian Folk Music Awards and several prestigious nominations under their belts (yes, the one they call JUNO is among them), it's not surprising that Sultans of String are feeling pretty successful these days.

The Sultans, who describe their sound as Latin, Gypsy-jazz, Middle Eastern, and folk rhythms, are busy wowing audiences with their worldly exotic blend of guitars, bass, violin, and various types of percussion. Still, bandleader/violinist Chris McKhool and his counterparts (guitarists Kevin Laliberté and Eddie Paton, bassists Drew Birston and David Woodhead, Cuban percussionists Chendy Leon and Alberto Suarez, and oudist Bassam Bishara) always find the time in their manic musical schedules to give to music education, a cause they deem worthy perhaps because their own educational experiences have been so profound.

McKhool began studying the violin via the Suzuki technique at the age of seven and went on to take private lessons for several years. When he reached high school, he taught himself to play guitar and started writing his own songs, an experience he recalls as liberating. "After completing a BA in psychology at McGill University, I started seeking out teachers that could help me with the particular elements of music education I was looking for," explains McKhool. "I went to York University for a year, met great teachers like pianist Frank Falco, and took jazz workshops with Howard Rees. Saxophonist Phil Dwyer was very influential. He stressed the idea of putting down the books and really listening, and trying to play music as sentences and complete thoughts, rather than a string of riffs or motifs."

McKhool maintains that music is a "life-saver" and doesn't know how he would have made it through the ever-trying adolescent years without it. Armed with his education and passion, McKhool defied his parents' urging to have a back-up plan and built a musical career that has seen him perform with such artists as Emm Gryner, Jesse Cook, and of course, his Sultans of String.

The rest of the Sultans have had equally impactful experiences with music education. Leon learned within the aural tradition in Cuba. He currently teaches World Percussion and Drums at Humber College, and has played with diverse artists from Jesse Cook to Alex Cuba to Sultans of String.

Birston studied jazz at McGill, and more recently took a course entitled "Life as a practical musician." Laliberté studied privately under legendary bebop pianist Barry Harris, and Howard Rees. Patton studied classical guitar on full scholarship at the University of Western Ontario, which gave him a solid foundation in theory and performance, and later developed his electric and acoustic guitar styles playing in a variety of rock, funk, and Latin jazz acts.

With such diverse backgrounds in music education, it's no wonder that the Sultans of String are so enthusiastic on the subject. They've taken that enthusiasm to another level by bringing their show to middle schools and high schools all across Canada and the U.S.



"We see that the shows can help inspire the students and teachers by showing them what is possible on their instruments," McKhool divulges, adding that the Sultans take pride in exposing their younger audiences to everything from rumba flamenca to Arabic rhythms from Lebanon and Egypt. "I was exposed early on to many world music styles, and we try to pass along some of that wonder and inspiration."

Since students are sometimes assigned an instrument with which they may not be enamoured, one of the messages of the Sultans' school shows is that everything one learns on any instrument can be transferred to another. "So if you are playing the clarinet, you are lucky, because later on you will be able to pick up the saxophone, or the flute, or penny whistle, and be miles ahead", explains McKhool. "In fact", he continues, "if you want to make a living as a musician, it really helps to be able to double, or triple instruments."

The school shows are not the only way the Sultans give back to music education. McKhool works with ArtsCan Circle, a charitable organization that connects artists with at-risk Indigenous youth in northern communities to increase self-esteem through a cooperative exploration of the arts. "I have been on the board of ArtsCan for a few years, and have gone on trips where we lead songwriting, ukulele, and harmonica workshops in the schools and the communities. It is wonderful to see young people learn to create," he explains.

Last but not least, the Sultans of String work closely with EyeGO To The Arts, a program which promotes affordable concert tickets for students. "We are dedicated to youth outreach, and we saw the discounted EyeGO admission as a fantastic way to reach out to young people and help them see all the possibilities in playing and performing," says

McKhool, and for the band's recent CD release at Trinity St. Paul's Centre in Toronto, anyone with a high school ID was admitted free of charge.

The Sultans of String are an eclectic group of musicians who are devoted to sharing the musical experience with others, particularly young people. They see the importance of music education and strive to push the cause in any way they can. As McKhool puts it: "I feel that anyone with drive and passion for music should pursue their dreams."

That's certainly what the Sultans of String have done, so it's only fitting that they encourage others to do the same.

