

Preview

Canada's Sultans of String to play at Nighttown on January 31

by Mike Telin



Known as “Canada’s ambassadors of musical diversity”, the [Sultans of String](#) make a return visit to Cleveland on Thursday, January 31 beginning at 8:00 pm at Nighttown. The Sultan’s blend of Spanish Flamenco, Arabic folk, Cuban rhythms, and French Manouche Gypsy-jazz have earned them a 2010 Juno Award nomination as well as being named the *World Group of the Year* at the Canadian Folk Music Awards (2012). The group has also been nominated for the 2013 *World Group of the Year* at the 2013 SiriusXM Canadian Indie Awards, and on February 10, bandleader and violinist Chris McKhool will be awarded the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Medal for his work in building community, and for his contributions to Canada.

We spoke to violinist and bandleader Chris McKhool by telephone and began by asking him what audiences can expect at their Nighttown show.

Chris McKhool: We’ll be playing everything from Flamenco and Salsa to some New York-influenced jazz as well as some Arabic rhythms and Celtic. pretty much running the gamut. But when all of these influences come together they create a sound I consider magical. And, we also have a lot of fun on stage.

I’ll be on violin, Kevin Laliberté’s on guitar and Drew Birston is on bass. Drew is an amazing player who’s as comfortable on huge pop stages as he is in jazz clubs. Kevin has toured around the world with the likes of Jessie Cooke and the Chieftains. He’s the best guitar player I know.

The Sultans do everything from playing in small jazz and folk clubs, to concerts with symphony orchestras. We do it all because our style is varied enough that it can fit in the jazz world, the folk world and the classical world, and that’s really great because it means there’s three times the number of places we can play. It’s a great thing and I feel really lucky to be able to play this style of music and to be able to make a living at it.

MT: The Sultans perform with orchestra quite a bit, and you are finishing a symphony CD as well. On your blog about the project you wrote, "Many of the gems of classical orchestral repertoire can be considered world music!" People often forget this fact.



CMcK: We're trying to bridge the two worlds because we find that classical music goes really love world music. It sounds exciting and kind of exotic to people who have not heard those kinds of rhythms and melodies before. It's always a real treat for us to perform for those types of audiences so we thought the best way to reach a wider audience was through a recording. We're coming to the end of our recording sessions for the symphony show. That was a real treat to perform and record with symphony orchestra, and we've got about a dozen symphony shows for next season.

MT: You come from a musical family, and while you could have chosen one of many musical paths, why is it that you chose to create this hybrid?

CMcK: [Laughing] Probably because I have musical ADD! Or, because I really love telling stories through music. Music for me is all about connecting with people and sharing stories about places we've been and people we've met. And, if it's about telling the story, then it gives us a larger palette of colors to play with.

If we're telling the story of my travels to Lebanon to discover my ancestral roots with my father, then we use Arabic rhythms and motifs. If it's a story about something that happened on the east coast of Canada, we'll use some east coast Celtic fiddling mixed in with gypsy jazz. I really love exploring all of these structures. We live in Toronto, which is really a global village. People there are from all around the globe so we can take in all of those musical influences.

MT: I'm fascinated by the Sultans but, as a writer, I feel as though I'm still looking for the correct words to describe what bands like the Sultans are musically all about. I really don't like the term "cross-over" all that much.

CMcK: We'd all love it if you could think up a new word. It is a problem, although for us, we just make the music we like to make. We do for play with this a little bit. For example if we're pitching to a folk festival then we're a folk act. If we're pitching to a jazz festival then we have jazz influences so we can play it on both sides. But it's true that people are overly concerned about what to call our style of music. Hopefully it's just really great music.

MT: I do think that the world is changing a bit, and more and more, people are coming to expect that a good musician is going to be able to incorporate a number of musical styles.

CMcK: I do think that is true as well. I do a lot of performances in schools with Young Audiences and I was in a school on Tuesday where there were over fifty countries repre-

sented and languages spoken. If you can imagine the musical heritage — all of the folk music of those countries in one place! If we were all able to play together and learn from each other, what could come out of that? It would be amazing.

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