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Sultans of String have arrived World beat wizards play Festival Place

BY ROGER LEVESQUE, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM FEBRUARY 9, 2012

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The Toronto-based world beat group, Sultans of String, plays Festival Place on Friday.

EDMONTON - Over the past few months, Toronto's world beat wizards **Sultans Of String** have played numerous concert halls and clubs, notable folk fests, New York's venerable jazz club Birdland, and taken the stage with symphony orchestras. Versatility was always part of the plan.

"I wanted something that could appeal to different audiences from the beginning," explains founder and violin player Chris McKhool. "It's tough to make a living in music so I thought it would be good to have touchstones to all these different communities. It's a really exciting time. I'm so happy the way things are coming together."

As he underlines, the Sultans have at least a few different strengths.

"We've got the storytelling appeal that works great in folk houses and festivals and that's really where my heart is. But we've also got a couple of super-heavy jazz players in the band. Even though we use basic song formats, there's a lot of free rein to solo. And then with a symphony

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show, a lot of our music is very filmic and story-bound. For a guy who grew up playing in youth orchestras, it's a dream come true."

McKhool was speaking on his cellphone in British Columbia, on an eight-hour drive that brings the touring quartet version of the band to Festival Place on Friday. Their third western Canadian tour is hot on the heels of a memorable date for 2,000 folks at Celtic Connections last month, part of their first U.K. tour (with live broadcasts on BBC and Irish National Radio), and their first U.S. tour before that.

All this follows the Sultans's recent, third and most varied independent release, *Move*, which takes off from McKhool's own Middle Eastern musical roots in Lebanon to include a strong Latin element, Gypsy jazz and more.

Ultimately, the disc reflects a fusion of efforts, a stronger collective feel between McKhool on four- and six-string violins and his original collaborator, guitarist Kevin Laliberte, second guitarist Eddie Paton (absent from the tour), bassist Drew Birston and percussionist "Chendy" Leon.

On record and onstage, the band continues to evolve. The Sultans don't seek out long road trips but the highway does offer a daily opportunity for valuable debriefing from the show the night before.

While *Move*'s opening *Andalucia* touches on flamenco and its ties to ancient Arabic and Jewish music, other tunes tap Cuban and Brazilian rhythms and an east-coast Celtic flavour. Another track, *Montreal*, is one of two numbers featuring trumpeter Kevin Turcotte in a salute to that city's jazz fest. There's even an oddly exotic rumba cover of Neil Young's *Heart Of Gold* sung by Dala (Amanda Walther, Sheila Carabine).

"They nailed it," says McKhool of the vocal duo, adding that the proliferation of Latin rhythms on the new album is "just the way it happened" once they hit the studio. Ken Whiteley, Ernie Tollar and singer Amanda Martinez (Birston's wife) also guest.

It's been more than a decade since Ottawa-raised McKhool met Laliberte and began working as a duo. Bassist Drew Birston made it a trio before they released the debut *Sultans Of String* CD *Luna* in 2007. The first quintet recording of the group, *Yalla Yalla* (2009), got them their first Juno nomination.

"Thanks in part to the touring that we're doing, we're always finding our voice, finding what makes us unique. When we were first on tour about three years ago we were such a new band, but on this tour I feel like we've really arrived."

The Sultans Of String play Sherwood Park's Festival Place 7:30 p.m. Friday. Tickets are \$18 (box office 780-449-3378 or festivalplace.ab.ca).

Festival Place is busy again Saturday with a visit from that Newfoundland Celtic-rock institution Rawlins Cross. It will be the band's first indoor concert show here since they released *Head-Heart-Hands* in 2010.

Roots Roundup

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If there's any chill left to the season the Winter Roots & Blues Roundup is set to bring some musical heat. The third annual weekend fest created by Peter North and Folkways Alive! happens Feb. 23 to 26 and it's looking to be the best year yet with a hip mix of performers, interview-workshops and film screenings.

You'll be able to hear roots music veteran Peter Case, Seattle singer and harmonica master Mark DuFresne, a tribute to the Women of Folkways with Cindy Church, and shows with Sean Pinchin, Jim McLennan, Roy Forbes, Dave Clarke and others.

The music documentary series features several new flicks like the BBC's award-winning The Godmother of Rock & Roll: Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

Six venues include the Royal Alberta Museum Theatre, the Milner Library Theatre, Art Gallery of Alberta Theatre and Blue Chair Cafe. Some screenings are free while other events are grouped together with tickets ranging from \$5 to \$25. For details go to www.fwalive.ualberta.ca/home.

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