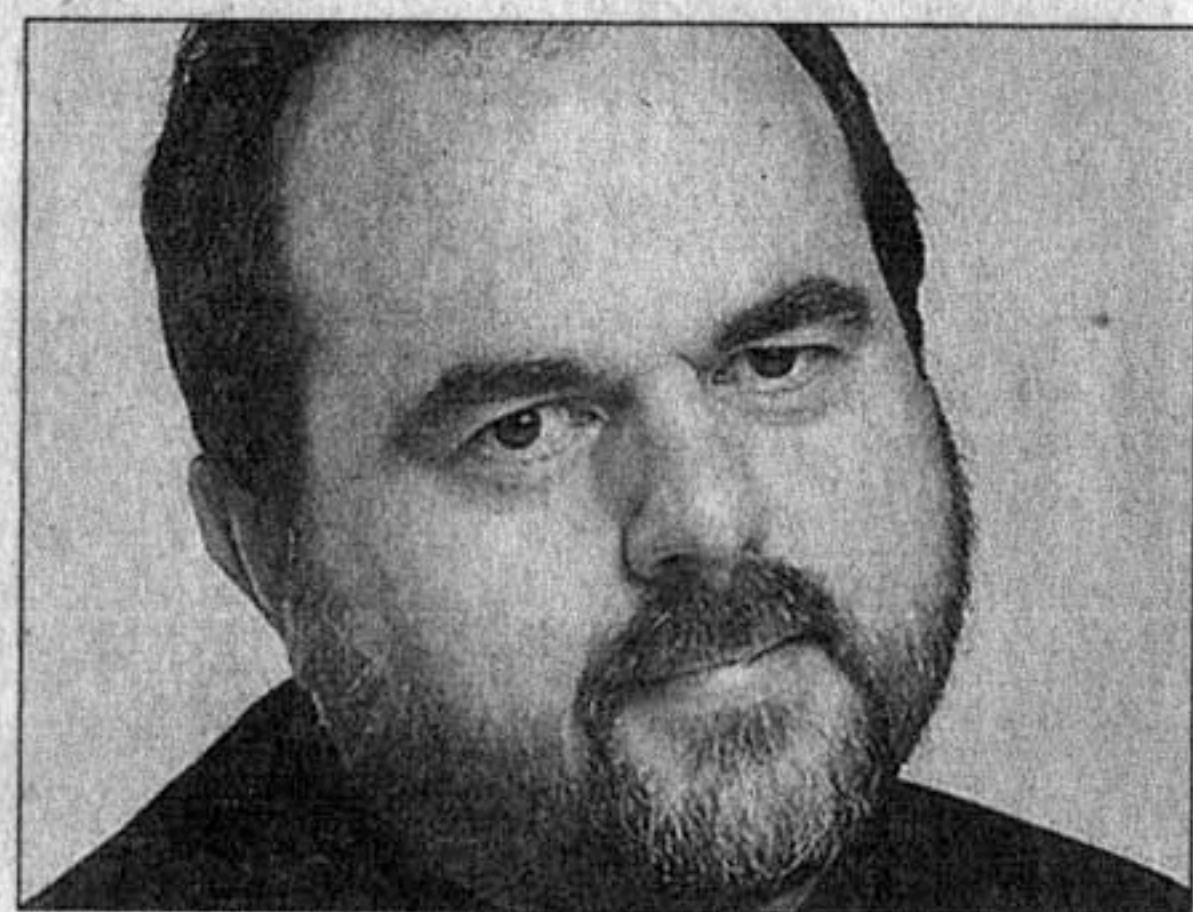


Rosined up and ready to String along audiences

Roger Levesque



Chris Mckhool recalls that as a child learning to play violin, "I never liked playing music off the page."

Growing up in Ottawa, he found that improvisation offered an exciting opportunity, and hearing jazz for the first time was "a revelation."

He absorbed eight years of lessons anyway. Now based in Toronto, Mckhool plays a violin with two extra strings that touches on the viola and cello range and he's an excellent composer-arranger. But his instinct for musical spontaneity hasn't left him. When he gets onstage with his exotic, multi-faceted unit Sultans of String, it can involve gripping suspense for both the audience and the musicians.

"We have a smaller, more intimate sound than our studio recordings," he notes, "but live shows really allow us to interact. There tends to be a lot more improvising and that's part of the thrill. It's like we're all on this ride together, just hoping we can get to the finish line at the same time."

That should make for good fun when the band makes its local debut at the Blue Chair Cafe tonight

Thrill of improvising makes Sultans a thrill to experience



The multi-faceted Sultans of String will play the Blue Chair Cafe tonight.

SUPPLIED

as part of a cross-country trip to promote their superb second album *Yalla Yalla!*, which has received three nominations for the Canadian Folk Music Awards.

The title is an Arabic expression for "come on, let's go!" reflecting Mckhool's roots, Lebanese on one side, Egyptian on the other. Add a curiosity for disparate musical traditions, which pushed him to take trips to Cuba, India and Europe with violin in hand, and left him an unofficial ethnomusicologist. As a professional musician, he has worked with Jesse Cook, Pavlo and many others.

The concept of Sultans of String began germinating about eight years ago when Mckhool befriended guitarist Kevin Laliberte. After performing as a duo, they began acquiring collaborators. Bassist Drew Birston made it a trio by the time they released Sultans of String's debut CD *Luna* back in 2007.

Since then, rhythm guitarist Ed-die Paton and Cuban percussionist Rosendo Leon have made SOS a quartet, but *Yalla Yalla!* features more than a dozen players with a mess of strings, a small horn section and occasional vocals (Paton's

absence on the current tour makes it a quartet). The range of influences is amazing, from their original tunes to unexpected covers of Erik Satie and The Who.

"What makes the band so fun are the different layers of experience of all the members," adds Mckhool.

Sultans of String play Blue Chair Cafe (9624 76th Ave.) tonight at 8. Tickets are \$20. Call for reservations (780-989-2861).

Juan Martin

When it comes to flamenco, you can't get any more authentic than

Juan Martin, the award-winning virtuoso guitarist who returns to Festival Place tonight.

Martin is a native son of Malaga, in Spain's southern Andalusia region, where the Moors of North Africa invaded Europe some 500 years ago.

It was the Moorish rhythms, mixed with Gypsy strains and Spanish influences, which gave birth to flamenco. Today it makes for a highly percussive, technically sophisticated, high-drama sound, a song form and a dance style which all draw liberally on improvisation and the interaction between those elements.

"You have to understand that part of this music came out of the ghetto," explains Martin. "But flamenco has also continued to change over the years, so now it is a music that can reflect every mood."

Martin's current tour is an intimate affair compared to the company he heads up at home, but the show still represents all three flamenco aspects with the addition of dancer Salvador Moreno "El Tigre" (the tiger) and singer-guitarist Manuel Jimenez. Interaction remains the key, or as Martin says: "It's full of passion. That's the most important part."

For further background, go to www.flamencovision.com.

Juan Martin and his flamenco trio play Sherwood Park's Festival Place tonight at 7:30. Tickets are \$26-\$32, available from the box office (780-449-3378) or from Ticketmaster (780-451-8000).