

# Mr. McKhool is swingin' with the Sultans



LYNN SAXBERG

Most of Chris McKhool's fans are under 10 years old. The effervescent Ottawa-born musician is known to the school-age set as an engaging entertainer who plays a lively guitar, mean fiddle and loves to sing about land, sea and air. His ecologically minded songs have reached more than a million children across the country in the last decade.

But after three CDs for kids and a zillion kilometres on the road, McKhool has discovered a new musical passion, a flamenco-rumba hybrid with a sexy rhythm. Now the sweet sound of his five-string electric violin is at the centre of Sultans of String, a musical collective formed to play world-flavoured gypsy jazz.

The fare is quite a bit more sophisticated than McKool's material for children, but so far the band has managed to avoid falling into the boring-adult trap. On their new independent CD, *Luna*, their playful spirit shines through; it sounds like the band and special guests are having a great time. CBC Radio has been playing the disc, and it's been nominated for a Canadian Folk Music Award, to be handed out Dec. 1 at a ceremony in Ottawa.



STEVE GERECKE, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

**The Sultans of String artists, left to right, Chris McKhool, Drew Birston and guest artist Mark Sepic, who is filling in for Kevin Laliberte. The musicians will perform a concert at Centrepointe Theatre Saturday to launch the group's new CD.**

On stage, the Sultans are terrific players who bring a real enthusiasm to the music. Their infectious energy has made them a hit on the festival circuit, and you can see it Saturday in a CD-release concert at Centrepointe Theatre (or get a sample online in the video we shot with them last week).

While the Sultans' core lineup consists of McKhool with guitarist Kevin Laliberte and bassist Drew Birston, there's a supportive community of Toronto-based musicians to draw

from. The Centrepointe concert will feature guest singer Amanda Martinez, percussionist Jeff Wilson and flute-and saxophone player Ernie Tollar.

McKhool developed an interest in jazz after moving to Toronto to pursue a career in children's music. He formed a quartet and met Laliberte when the guitarist was called in as a substitute. McKhool was blown away by Laliberte's warmup routine.

"I was like, 'That rhythm sounds amazing, what is that?'" McKhool re-

calls, "and he said, 'flamenco, that's what it's all about.'"

Musically, the pair clicked and learned a few flamenco-style pieces, which landed them an extended "musical wallpaper" gig at a Toronto club. "You're supposed to be there and playing but you're not supposed to be so loud that they can't talk to each other," McKhool says to describe the wallpaper role.

"It was great," he added with a laugh. "We'd play our half dozen songs that we knew and we'd make up music the rest of the time. We'd start chunking out rumba-flamenco chords and I'd start making up melodies."

They ended the engagement a few months later with a nice batch of original compositions that would eventually become the basis of *Luna*. Bed tracks were recorded at Ken Whiteley's Toronto studio before McKhool began inviting guest players on flute, percussion, oud, mandolin and any other instrument that popped into his head, including vocals. "You gotta know when to stop," he says, smiling as if it was a challenge for him.

McKhool is quick with a smile and friendly words, but there's a serious streak beneath the breezy demeanour, a strength of character that comes from facing a challenge far greater than figuring out where to fit an oud into a song.

During his last year of university at McGill, McKhool developed fibromyalgia, a chronic muscle disorder. Physical activity caused pain — it got so bad he couldn't tie a shoe or sit

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on the bus for any length of time. "I couldn't make myself a meal, never mind play an instrument," he said. "I couldn't pick up an instrument for at least a year."

Doctors warned him he probably wouldn't be able to handle the demands of a career in music so McKhool started working as a classroom assistant in a pre-school, which ultimately led him back to music.

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