

mation. The context: a conference of music educators, Ezrin was keynote speaker and “McKhool and the boys” were “keynote band.” (Every conference should have one.)

“It was early morning, we were playing in front of about 800 sleepy-eyed teachers,” recalls McKhool, leader of Sultans of String. “We woke ’em up good!”

So good that after the band played, Ezrin put aside his pre-planned speech and talked about how what he’d just heard and seen—800 teachers clapping, singing, smiling—was how music should work, that McKhool and Sultans of String band mates had gone right to the heart of live music—engaging the audience.

Ironical, since the band began by not “waking ’em up,” instead by being more or less ignored. Here’s the story. About a decade ago, McKhool, a six-string violinist, met jazz and flamenco guitarist Kevin Laliberté. The two began a regular gig at a defunct bar in the burbs of Toronto called Umno Mundo. (Spanish speakers: McKhool figures Umno was a typo.)

With three hours to fill and not enough songs to fill them, the pair began to “spontaneously compose songs.” It was the kind of lounge where no one was paying much attention to the musicians playing so the gig became a kind of workshop, and the music they created became the basis for Sultans of String.

“A lot of the music is based in rumba flamenco rhythms,” says McKhool, trying

to define the sound. “But there are many different influences.”

Most noticeable is jazz, Django Reinhardt style, but their latest recording, *Yalla Yalla!* also has elements of Middle Eastern styles, North American folk, and Cuban rhythms. The last is down to the brilliance of Cuban-Canadian percussionist Chendy Leon, who worked closely with the band in the development of the songs. But ultimately what unifies the sound is fleet-fingered interplay of strings: two guitars (Laliberté plus rhythm guitarist Eddie Paton) with McKhool’s fiddle.

There’s a polish to the music, but a playfulness, too, some of which is down to McKhool’s alter ego as a children’s performer, touring across Canada for the past decade with appearances on TV shows including *Mr. Dressup*, YTV’s *Treehouse*, and TVOntario’s *Crawlspac*. With his Juno-nominated FiddleFire kids music project (including many of the same performers who play with Sultans), McKhool has developed a relationship to live performance that differs slightly from those who play only for adult audiences.

“Kids are a very immediate audience. You find out what works and what doesn’t very quickly. And there’s the random factor: every show is a different experience, depending on how the kids react,” he says, with a chuckle. “Playing in front of kids has taught me to put together a show rather than a string of songs.”

The approach is evident on *Yalla Yalla!* too. It has a quality almost of storytelling, not an easy feat with an all-instrumental album. But it’s a story with fairly diverse chapters, beginning with the title track with its rumba flamenco rhythms, Brazilian samba feel, plus oud and trumpet section, and ending with *Le Bisou* (The Kiss), a gentle, swinging jazz-meets-rumba piece titled while driving along the Trans-Canada Highway and thinking of loved ones back at home.

Perhaps part of what gives *Yalla Yalla!* the quality of a story or journey is that sense of place—covering Canada from downtown Toronto, with *Stomping At the Rex*, a tribute to the longstanding Rex jazz club, to *Sable Island*, a song inspired by the wild-horse island some 180 kilometres off the coast of Nova Scotia. Or through compositions like *Auyuittuq Sunrise*, a

response to a trip McKhool and his wife took to Baffin Island. (“It was astoundingly beautiful, we were in a fjord, the last remaining glacier—rocks start falling as the glacier retreats and you have this sense that the landscape is evolving as it is retreating.”)

Then there are hints of a “hyphenated-Canadian” sense of place, although McKhool, Ottawa-born and raised, says he feels very firmly “Canadian-Canadian.” Even so, his own deeper cultural roots trickle into *Yalla Yalla!* as well as the Sultans’ previous recording, *Luna*.

On the new recording, it’s most obvious in the track *Gardens of Lebanon*. McKhool, a third-generation Lebanese (and Egyptian) Canadian, grew up in the city where, according to Stats Can, Lebanese people “account for a larger share of the population than that of any other census metropolitan area across the country.” Arabic folk music was part of his world, along with the western classical music his mother, a piano teacher, played at home.

It also explains the name McKhool, which you might have assumed was a clever stage name, part of his kids’ music personal. But McKhool was once Makhoul, two generations ago. (McKhool figures when his paternal grandparents went through immigration in Montreal some official heard the name and figured it was some obscure Scottish clan.)

McKhool jokingly calls himself “reluctant band leader,” saying the others have kids so the job fell to him. But he’s quick to credit guitarist Laliberté for his considerable contributions, from a bebop influence to that foundation rhythm of rumba.

A player of multiple styles, Laliberté fell in love with the music of Spain in the mid-1990s, and is well known for his work with Jesse Cook and Amanda Martinez as well as Sultans of String.

Musical connections aside, there’s also a shared sense of humour between McKhool and Laliberté. On *Yalla Yalla!* you can hear Pete Townsend’s *Pinball Wizard*, rumba style, and a hybridized treatment of one of French composer Eric Satie’s beautiful but famously somber *Gymnopédies*; their version is called *Gymnorumba*. Let’s just say that it’ll “wake ’em up good.”

For more information visit: mckhool.wordpress.com

The Rhythm Method

Chris McKhool and The Sultans of String conjure up an ingenious concoction of global rhythms on their polished and playful new disc, *Yalla Yalla!*. Li Robbins pays Mr. McKhool a visit.

“Chris McKhool [of Sultans of String] and the boys were fantastic! They can play my Bar Mitzvah.” —Bob Ezrin, producer

You may be wondering where and why Ezrin (co-producer of Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, not to mention a sizeable chunk of Alice Cooper’s discography) happened to make this procla-

