

# The Province

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VANCOUVER



These Sultans can go from imitating the sound of a lonely orca to reinventing 'Pinball Wizard.'

## Players without borders

**DIVERSITY:** In McKhool's world, music transcends time and space

### In concert

#### The Sultans of String

**Where:** The Jazz Cellar, 3611 W. Broadway St.

**When:** Tonight at 8:30

**Tickets:** \$10, call 604-738-1959

BY JOHN P. MCLAUGHLIN  
MUSIC REPORTER

So how often, I had to ask Toronto's Chris McKhool, co-founder of the eclectic Sultans of String group, do people assume you're some Dire Straits tribute band? Not very, it turns out. In fact, the most common problem he has with the name is media people ever resorting to "swing," not "string." Force of habit.

And, however, innovative Mark Knopfler and his original Dire Straits may have been in their day, six-string violinist McKhool and mates, guitarist Eddie Paton and Drew Birston on bass, actually incorporate much broader, more diverse ideas into their music from imitating the sound of a lonely

venting "Pinball Wizard."

They are players without borders, rejecting out of hand any notion that flamenco doesn't work with gypsy jazz with, why not, some funk bass rumbling down below. It's world music that transcends place and time with a heavy dose of playfulness added in which, considering these guys are also kids' entertainers, makes for a kooky sort of experience.

It all came together when McKhool — his name is actually the Lebanese Makhoul — with Birsten and another guitarist, Kevin Laliberte, were booked to play a little lounge jazz gig which mostly means making melodic background noise, aural wallpaper.

"Yes, we all met at these various jazz jobbing gigs where people aren't necessarily listening," says McKhool. "It actually offered us a lot of freedom to explore different things and compose on the spot, it was pretty fun and freeing in that way. And I always had a little hand-held recorder going during our gigs and we came up with a lot of material that way that ended up on *Luna*."

album that has garnered some exceptional reviews. The title track is where McKhool makes eerily like the wandering orca trying to get back to the pod. Elsewhere the music is decorated with oud, mandolin, flute, percussion, guitar, fiddle — name it, it's in there.

Much of it is a result of McKhool's great love of travel and immersion in faraway cultures and, especially, music. Whether it's Indonesia, India, South America, Europe, the U.S. or the rest of Canada, he's always taken the time to rosin the bow and swap a few licks.

"It's a really fun way to travel when you bring a musical instrument with you," says McKhool, "because you can always learn so much from other people. If you have an instrument on your back everyone wants to be your friend, even if you don't speak the language. It's always, 'Come and play, come and play.' There's definitely a unifying power in music that's different from other kinds of art forms. It's a really great way to communicate and it reaches beyond the intellectual level right into peoples' hearts."

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