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Music & Concerts



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Award-winning Sultans of String perform at Largo Cultural

By LEE CLARK ZUMPE

Article published on Monday, April 18, 2016

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LARGO – Two-time Juno nominees and SiriusXM Award winners Sultans of String will make a much-anticipated return to Florida this month on a whirlwind tour that includes a performance on Friday, April 29, 8 p.m., at Largo Cultural Center, 105 Central Park Drive, Largo.

Sultans of String are touring in support of their new CD, "Subcontinental Drift."

Known for spotlighting treasured special guests from around the world, including The Chieftains' Paddy Moloney on their last CD, Sultans of String are particularly excited about this east-meets-west offering.

Tickets range from \$19.50 to \$34.50. Visit [LargoArts.com](#) or call 727-587-6793.

Since forming 10 years ago, Sultans of String have been on an impressive trajectory with an astonishing number of awards and accolades in tow, including two Canadian Folk Music Awards, a Queen's Diamond Jubilee

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The Sultans of String perform April 29 at Largo Cultural Center.

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Medal and first place in the International Songwriting Competition out of 15,000 entries.

Six-string violinist Chris McKhool who was raised in a Lebanese-Egyptian household just bursting with music and diversity leads the band. Growing up, McKhool was fed a steady diet of delicious musicality alongside Middle Eastern cuisine and violin lessons. At the core of the band's sound is his bold and fiery fiddle, melded seamlessly with founding guitarist Kevin Laliberté's rumba rhythm. Together their musical synergy created Sultans of String's signature sound – the intimate and playful relationship between violin and guitar. Added to this rich foundation for this tour is in-the-pocket bass master Drew Birston and jaw-dropping Cuban percussionist Chendy Leon.

"Subcontinental Drift," the band's new album, is more than a genre-hopping passport – it is a musical promise that embraces differences while finding common ground across culture, land, and time.

"In a way we are trying to emulate a model for world peace, by showing how we can work together to create something great," McKhool said in an interview. "We have many musical worlds coming together, and sometimes they understand each other and sometimes they don't. And that's part of the artistic process too. Even more so when we're combining these seemingly disparate music styles."

McKhool said that there's still enough common ground to create something new and something exciting that hopefully hasn't been said before.

"That's kind of the ideal of multiculturalism, that we are stronger when we work together," he said. "Like a mosaic, you look up at a stained glass window of a church, and you see all those beautiful colors and they all come together to make one beautiful image. And that's what we're trying to do, sort of on a daily basis in our lives and with our music."

The album also represents the journeys from one homeland to another that ultimately results in this coming together of different peoples, cultures, and music. For example, Rosendo 'Chendy' Leon, the band's percussionist, is originally from Cuba, and brings a whole world of percussion instruments to the group.

"I spent a few years performing with a Gypsy-jazz band called Club Django, as well as being influenced by east coast Celtic fiddling and Arabic music from my ancestral homeland of Lebanon," McKhool said. "Our special guest on the album, Anwar Khurshid, brings the sounds of India and Pakistan to the mix. When we're writing songs, we bring together all our influences to create our sound."

Bridging cultural gaps comes naturally for the members of Sultans of String. The band performed live on stage with The Chieftains in the States on their 50th anniversary tour.

"We opened for them and towards the end of the show, Paddy Moloney called us back to the stage to play with them along with other special guests," McKhool said. "It was a bit terrifying because they were playing a traditional tune and then they would stop and nod to one of the guests to play for a minute, and go back to the traditional tune, next guest and so on. It had to work with an instant segue."

When it was their tune, the band ended up playing a Rumba Flamenca melody and rhythm.

"You wouldn't think it would work but it did," McKhool said. "Playing with

	
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such an established and gifted group like The Chieftains made the back and forth seamless, and they seemed to like what we did.”

Moloney then joined Sultans of String as special guest on their “Symphony” CD.

“Very special,” McKhool said. “We hope to continue to hone our craft and be as musically agile as they are. They are also truly giving of their art and always show a spirit of camaraderie, a quality we really value as band and personally, and one we always hope to share and build on.”

The Sultans of String has faced some challenges as an indie band in the era of digital music.

According to McKhool, the traditional music industry model where a band tours in order to sell the recording is out the window.

“Now, it’s almost like a CD is a calling card that is needed to be able to tour,” he explained. “There are very few brick and mortar retail stores to sell CDs and there has been a dramatic shift to selling music through streaming and downloading music.”

McKhool said that one medium to another is not in and of itself a problem but the issue of regulating and proper compensation for the creators is key, and there has been a lot of lost revenue for artists in the digital age.

“In this era where music is so accessible through streaming and downloads, it feels like there is a lot music out there, but at the same time, the music feels more disposable than ever,” McKhool said. “So, many indie artists now emphasize touring where CDs can be bought directly from the artist offstage.”

For McKhool and other members of the band, that model also provides a really nice connection with the audience. It can help build an indie artist’s base.

“When we autograph our CDs, it becomes a really personal thing,” McKhool said. “The one experience that cannot be downloaded or streamed or duplicated is the live performance. That’s why we love to perform live – and we get to connect in a deeper way with our audience.”

These ambassadors of musical diversity have a reputation for thrilling their audiences with their global sound-tapestry of East Coast Celtic, Arabic folk, Cuban rhythms and gypsy-jazz, celebrating musical fusion and human creativity with warmth and virtuosity. Fiery violin dances with kinetic guitar, while rhythmic bass and percussion lay down unstoppable grooves. Throughout, acoustic strings meet electronic wizardry to create layers and depth of sound.

In addition to the April 29 show at Largo Cultural Center, the band’s Florida tour will include stops at Sandhill Stage in Gainesville on April 28, South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center in Cutler Bay on April 30 and Café Moka in Tavernier on May 1.

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