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Journey to the East: Canadian band merges styles from around the globe

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By Bill Chaisson | 0 comments

You can't really be blamed for thinking of the British band Dire Straits when you hear the name "Sultans of String." In fact, the Toronto ensemble did consciously pun on the title of the '70s hit, but they actually live up to the name by incorporating Turkish and other Middle Eastern music into their eclectic sound. The band will return to Ithaca on March 31 to play an 8 p.m. show at the Hangar Theatre. On their previous swing through they lit up the Carriage House loft.

Bandleader, violinist, and guitarist Chris McKhool (Makhoul) comes by his fascination with Middle Eastern music via genealogy. He is of Lebanese extraction on his father's side, while his mother is an Egyptian-born piano and music theory teacher. The Sultans of String was born when McKhool met Kevin Laliberté, a guitarist steeped in flamenco, Manouche, bossa nova, and jazz styles. The two began playing together and then added Cuban percussionist Chendy Leon and bassist Drew Birston to form the core of the band.

Immediately after they met in the mid-2000s, McKhool and Laliberté broke in their musical partnership by jamming and mining their respective traditions, but by early 2006 they had developed into the Sultans of String, eventually becoming the band's principal songwriters.

"We started writing up stuff that we care about," said McKhool. "We share the stories in concert. Some of them are about meeting amazing animals in remote parts of Canada. We tell stories to consciously put a frame around the music. I think that if we ask for the audience's attention, then we ought to give something back. I think they want to take something home with them."

The quintet version of the Sultans of Swing. A quartet version will be visiting Ithaca.



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McKhool began studying classical violin at age 7. By the time he was in high school, he had learned enough theory to teach himself to play the guitar. Now 41, McKhool came of age in the Ottawa Valley during the late '80s and

early '90s, playing guitar and using the violin as an accompanying instrument in bands from genres as diverse as folk—the Ottawa Valley has a respected fiddle tradition—world, jazz, and ... thrash metal.

He doesn't see his evolution from a classical player into an explorer of multiple vernacular styles as much of a leap. "I always found it hard to fit myself in a box," McKhool said. "When I hear people say that something is supposed to sound a certain way ... well, that's just not how I roll."

McKhool laughs when he remembers a transformative experience he had as a teenager. "I was just starting to make my own music, and I discovered Jean-Luc Ponty's [1976 jazz-rock album] *Imaginary Voyage*," he recalled, "and that made me realize that you could do anything you wanted with the violin. Early on I bought a pickup—God, it was a really awful one—and a chorus and a delay pedal, and I started making music in my room."

He moved to Toronto and for a while continued to play in all kinds of bands. "Then I studied jazz for a year at York University," the violinist said. "One of my professors told me I didn't need to take all these classes. He said, 'Play along with records and learn to play every solo. Then you'll be able to play jazz.'"

In addition to the traditional four-string instrument, McKhool also plays five- and six-string violins. He will be playing the five-string when they visit Ithaca. "I have a violin made by Eric Aceto [of Ithaca Stringed Instruments]," said McKhool, who added that as soon as he booked the upcoming Ithaca show, he called Aceto and insisted that he join the Sultans onstage for at least one song.

Which instrument he plays is determined in part by what configuration of Sultans of String is going to appear. While often playing as a quintet—bringing in a second guitarist—in the immediate Toronto area, they will appear as a quartet in Ithaca. McKhool and Laliberté also play as a duo and add a bass player to make a trio.

"When we play as a duo," said McKhool, "I'll play the six-string violin like a ukelele and use a pedal to make it sound like a bass and to create moody drones. People are surprised to hear sounds so low from a violin." McKhool also employs looping, as well as echo and delay pedals. While playing with just Laliberté is enjoyable, McKhool admits it can be a bit nerve-racking. "We explore textures with the help of the reverb pedal and loops," he said, "but, you know, everything is audible, when it's just the two of us."

• • •

The Sultans of String sound, it would seem, is an amalgam of activist concerns, technological wizardry, and ethnomusicological scholarship. The modus operandi over succeeding albums has been to bring in guests and explore new musical territory suggested by the guests' traditions. On *Subcontinental Drift*, their latest CD, they collaborate with sitar player Anwar Khurshid (who scored the film *Life of Pi*). The preceding CD, *Symphony*, saw them working with the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra. Additional guitarist Kevin Whiteley made 2012's *Move* a feast of Iberian rhythms.

Symphony came about because the band set themselves to a project of translating their arrangements in order to play with symphony orchestras. McKhool called *Subcontinental Drift* a "dive into South Asian sound."

"There's no master plan [for the Sultans of String sound]," said McKhool. "We live in a global world, and we're like kids in a sandbox. Partly it's a product of the atmosphere in Toronto. People from all over the world make Canada their home and bring their music with them. There's lots of fusion."

McKhool makes connections when he is on the road too. He met some Turkish Roma while he was in Istanbul and did some recordings of Christmas music. "They did an Arabic arrangement of 'Greensleeves,'" he said with some awe in his voice. "It was so incredible that I thought, 'We should make an album of this.' So, maybe we'll go to Turkey and workshop with them."

"Festivals are great for running into people," he said, "and meeting those musicians that you've never seen play live before. We all love to play the workshop stage at festivals. You never know what is going to happen."

• • •

Since the release of *Subcontinental Drift*, the Sultans of String have been visiting the U.S. every two months or so to promote it and make new friends. This album has been given a "proper release" in the U.S. through the Creative Entertainment Network in New York City, which gives them automatic distribution via RED, a division of Sony Music, not only in the U.S., but around the world.

Because many of them have families with young children, they now only go out for four or five nights before returning home. The exchange rate, McKhool said, is rough right now, with the Canadians paying \$1.40 to get a U.S. dollar. "So Canadians have a tough time spending money in the States right now," he said, "but it's a great time for us to make money in the States and go home." He also urged Americans to visit Canada now, as the U.S. dollar goes a long way.

While the other members of the Sultans of String each play in five or six other bands, it is McKhool's primary focus. He is the band's manager, booking agent, and marketing staff. "Running a world music band is like flying a helicopter," said McKhool. "You spend eight hours on the ground doing maintenance just to take a one-hour flight. And I get to be the mechanic."

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He does find time to carry on a parallel career as a performer for children under the name Fiddlefire. "I love performing for children," he said. "I've got a social activist/environmentalist streak, and I work at getting kids motivated to protect the planet, plant trees, and celebrate multiculturalism."

"Kids are a super audience to perform for," he continued. "They are engaged, and they sing along." There is also a practical aspect to his side project, McKhool said: "In the same town I can perform a matinee as Fiddlefire and then with Sultans of Swing at night."

"We're of the vintage of owning CDs," said McKhool of himself and his bandmates. "I'm used to flipping through the credits to see who played on what. It bugs me that when people download music they don't get any of that information." They will have CDs for sale at their Hangar show.

"People know," he said, "that that \$20 is putting gas in [the band's] tank that night." •



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