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NEWS LOCAL

Sultans of String's Chris McKhool still sometimes wonders how in the world he got into world music; Sultans grace Sault Sault Saturday



By Jeffrey Ougler, Sault Star
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Sultans of String mine a host of musical genres, from Celtic reels, flamenco and Gypsy-jazz, to Arabic, Cuban, and South Asian rhythms.

SAULT STE. MARIE - Should a tongue slip — even one fuelled by a pint or two — prompt a mispronunciation of his band's name, Chris McKhool promises to keep his cool.

Sultans of String does, he concedes, sound very much like the name of what some would say is Dire Straits's signature song.

"We still get it wrong all the time," laughs McKhool. "People, after a couple of beers or whatever ... No one gets the name right."

The band's music, however, speaks for itself. Racking up two Juno nods, a pair of Canadian Folk Music Awards and a host of other industry kudos, Sultans of String has carved out a niche in world music, affording the Toronto-based indie act a world stage with which to share its "poly-rhythms and revved-up riffs."

The Sultans of String "pun" — as McKhool calls it — was no accident. The Ottawa native, 47, wasn't always into tackling Arabic violin techniques, albeit he did study classical violin as a child, his mother was a classically trained pianist and the family's record album collection contained a curious mix, including offerings from famed sitarist Ravi Shankar.

"I remember listening to that Ravi record over and over, trying to figure out how that music worked," McKhool told The Sault Star in a recent interview from Toronto.

But like most music-mad kids in the 1970s and '80s — especially those with older siblings equally enchanted by rock riffs — McKhool was a disciple of progressive rock, that curious, mostly British genre, that produced such notables as Yes, Genesis, Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Pink Floyd and Electric Light Orchestra.

When it came to actual playing, though, picking out more folk-oriented tunes via guitar was the case, aping works of Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell and Neil Young.

World music was not then on the radar.

"It's a complete fluke," McKhool said. "I think it's safe to say that 30 years ago, I would have had no idea that I'd be doing this. I had no idea I'd be taking this world music route."

Well, he did, albeit his professional salad days as a musician saw him touring as a folk act. McKhool did eventually shift gears, veering toward more eclectic fare, bringing the violin out of mothballs.

It was in the mid-2000s when McKhool first heard the group's founding guitarist Kevin Laliberté's signature rumba rhythm, the pair concluded the relationship between violin and guitar could make magic.

Indeed.

The duo has blossomed, with others, including bassist Drew Birston, guitarist Eddie Paton and Cuban percussionist Chendy Leon, joining the fold. Special guests have included the Chieftains's Paddy Moloney, folk-pop duo Dala and sitarist Anwar Khurshid.

Toiling in world music — everything from Celtic reels, flamenco and Gypsy-jazz, to Arabic, Cuban, and South Asian rhythms — has hardly been work, McKhool maintains. In fact, it's been a passport to the far reaches of the planet, affording performing opportunities once unimaginable for an indie outfit.

Chalk some of it up to the wonderful world of technology. The Internet has made the world a smaller place, which McKhool says, has been a boon to Sultans of String.

"Now, as an artist, you can build a global audience in a very small, niche market," he added.

"Folk music and world music, they're tiny, almost imperceptible slivers of the music industry. But, there's lots and lots of people who love to listen to that music."

A testament to that being a cyberspace chock-full of such music, not just performances, but instruction, as well.

"Now, if I want to learn about Arabic violin shows, I just go to my computer and (search for) Arabic violin shows on YouTube and there you go ... I'm in Turkey learning from the greats," McKhool said. "It's kind of a ridiculous time to be alive."

Buoyed by five albums — the most recent being 2013's *Symphony!* and *Subcontinental Drift*, released last fall — Sultans of String has criss-crossed North America for the past so many years, playing such storied venues as New York's legendary jazz club Birdland. The group has also taken its brand to Europe, appearing at the renowned Celtic Connections Festival in the U.K. The band has sold out Toronto's Koerner Hall and has performed with Toronto, Vancouver, Edmonton, Stratford, Ontario and Niagara symphony orchestras. Sault Symphony Orchestra joins such ranks Saturday evening, when Sultans of String play Mill Square.

The Sultans have also performed live on BBC TV, Irish National Radio, the internationally syndicated shows *WoodSongs* and *World Cafe*, and on SiriusXM, in Washington.

Given his handle, McKhool must have sought out distant family members when Sultans of String played across the pond.

Not.

McKhool was Makhoul when a Lebanese stowaway arrived in Canada in 1902.

McKhool figures, jokingly, the porter who dealt with his grandfather was of old Scottish stock, and decided the Mc prefix and some letter juggling would fit fine.

"Aha ... a good Scottish name," McKhool laughed.

Generations later, in the digital age when many entertainers bank on social media to help get the word out, this rather peculiar surname is paying dividends.

"I think we're the only McKhools on the planet with that spelling," the musician said. "It's great, in the age of the Internet, you want to have a unique identifier in your name, especially if you're a performer."

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If you go

Who: Sultans of String, with Sault Symphony Orchestra;

When: Saturday, 8 p.m.;

Where: Mill Square (@ the Machine Shop), Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

Tickets: \$35. \$15 for students.

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