

Sultans of String to return to Nighttown: a three-way call with the violinist and guitarist

by Jarrett Hoffman



Someday, somewhere, a genre will be coined that sums up the sound of the Sultans of String. The Toronto-based group frequently blends Spanish Flamenco, Arabic folk music, Cuban rhythms, and jazz. In the meantime, as bandleader and violinist Chris McKhool told us in a 2013 [interview](#), “We just make the music we like to make.”

Three-time Juno Award nominees, the Sultans’ lineup ranges from two to five members, sometimes topped off with guest artists. But at their core is the pairing of violin and guitar — McKhool and Kevin Laliberté, founders of the ensemble. They’ll bring the duo form of Sultans of String to Nighttown on Wednesday, May 30 at 7:00 pm. The [concert](#) celebrates the group’s tenth anniversary, and will raise funds for displaced families in Syria and Lebanon through the Outreach Foundation.

McKhool picked up the phone in Burlington, Ontario for our recent conversation, then worked some modern magic — a three-way call — to bring in Laliberté from his kitchen in Toronto. They began by looking back on the beginning of their collaboration.

Kevin Laliberté: I’m slightly foggy when it comes to memory, but I think we started playing together a little bit in 2002, just dabbling here and there. Eventually it came together, largely thanks to Chris’s initiative. We did some different gigs around town as a duo, and Chris very wisely brought out his digital recorder and recorded a bunch of stuff that we were making up on the fly. He said, “Hey, we could turn these into actual songs,”

so that's what we did. But the official story is that we've been playing together for ten years. Our 10-year vinyl retrospective came out last year.

Chris McKhool: One final note about the genesis of the band is that it was 2007 when we released our first CD called *Luna*, and we needed a band name. We had been going around calling ourselves Laliberté and McKhool, which sounds a bit more like a law firm. So we made a list of about 100 different band names — it's a lot harder to name a band than you'd think — and that's when we came up with the moniker Sultans of String.

But Kevin came in as a substitute for another guitar player I had booked on a jazz gig in Toronto, and I heard him playing that Rumba Flamenca style that he does so well. He had been on the road with Jesse Cook for five years, traveling around the globe and really nailing that rumba rhythm, and when I heard it, I really fell in love with it. I was like, wow, what is that? He said, "That's Rumba Flamenca, the best thing around."

Rumba was hitting its stride, or maybe had already hit its stride, but it was a new rhythm to me. So we started writing a lot of songs in that vein, then incorporating other styles that we play. I'd been playing gypsy jazz in a Django Reinhardt / Stéphane Grappelli cover band called Club Django Toronto, and I'd also been digging into the Arabic rhythms of my heritage.

And then Kevin brought in his rumba playing and his heavy jazz playing that we get to sneak in here and there. That's part of the reason why we love playing Nighttown — it's a great venue, but also jazz lovers go there and get what we do too. We know how the songs begin and end, but there's a lot of jazz listening and improvisation in the middle.

Jarrett Hoffman: How did you originally become fluent in those different styles?

CMcK: Kevin?

KL: (laughs) "Are you still there?" Yes I'm still here, listening intently. And actually that's the key right there, listening intently. We're of a like mind. We keep our ears open and are constantly getting excited by music from different places, and new and old things that are happening in music. I mean, music is so huge. There are different ways of expressing things through sound in every place in the world, so there's almost an infinite amount of music that can be discovered.

I don't think it was a conscious process — let's do some research and genetically engineer some sort of musical hybrid. I think it's been more natural, following our interests. We have access to music from everywhere nowadays with the click of a mouse,

so it's really easy to discover new things. Then we try to blend that with something else and hopefully come up with something that's interesting and sounds like music.

CMcK: (laughs) "Sounds like music."

KL: A reasonable facsimile of music.

JH: How has your relationship developed from the beginning?

CMcK: Kevin and I have some really similar musical loves. We both listen to rock and prog rock, and we both enjoy different kinds of world music — anything that's good, really. But there's a lot that's so different about us, and I think that's partly what makes this a really magical match.

If we're working on something and you look over at Kevin, it looks like he's concentrating. He's got a really analytical mind, and he's looking at the whole chord chart of the song in his head and figuring out how he's going to get from one chord to another.

And I like stories (laughs). I come from a folk world where I like telling stories through music. And both of those parts are so important. Sometimes I don't know what I'm playing, but I know I like it, so I say to Kevin, "What is this, how do we get there?" And he can figure that out. Maybe I'm more of the driver — let's do a song about this — but I really rely on him for his mathematical musicality and his brains. It really works well together, instead of both of us being dreamers, playing flaky music, and never really hitting the ground, or both of us getting really bogged down in something so that it never connects with an audience. It seems to be a good match.

And I'll probably hear about that on the next car ride to a gig. Kevin, feel free to completely disown everything I said if you don't think it's true.

KL: (laughs) No, sounds good — what he said.

JH: Anything else you'd like to add about the concert at Nighttown?

KL: For people who haven't seen us perform, one of the things that I think audiences appreciate is that we have fun. We're not taking ourselves too seriously — we're definitely taking the music seriously — but we're out there to have a good time, and audiences seem to connect with that. So if you're on the fence, just come out — you'll have a great time.

Another thing that people comment on when we perform as a duo is that we create a lot of different sounds for two people. It's not the same landscape from song to song — it can change quite dramatically, and people seem to enjoy that. So it's always interesting, always fun — how about that?

CMcK: We're also going to be raising donations for the Outreach Foundation, which has ground operations in Syria and Lebanon. It's for displaced children and their families that are still living in Syria — not refugees, but displaced within the country. We're playing music and including styles and rhythms from around the globe, so we thought this would be a very small way of giving back. We did this previously, and we were really happy with how much money we were able to raise just by passing around a hat.

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