



**BEGINNER'S GUIDE...**

Simon Broughton examines the multi-toned singing and unusual instruments of Tuva's most successful band

# HUUN-HUUR-TU

If you've never heard Tuvan throat singing, then you've got a treat in store. It is like entering another musical universe which abides by different rules. Indeed, Tuva, situated between Siberia and Mongolia at the heart of inner Asia, is another world where music is closely connected to the landscape and nature. Ethereal, shimmering melodies hover like a flock of birds over an undulating landscape of growling drones. One voice emits two, or even three separate tones, and a group of voices makes for incredible sonic possibilities. If you have heard throat singing, or more correctly 'overtone singing', then it's more than likely courtesy of Huun-Huur-Tu, Tuva's most successful international band.

The four-piece group formed in 1992, but only adopted the name Huun-Huur-Tu after their debut US tour in 1993. Three Tuvan musicians were invited to California to demonstrate their throat singing skills while on horseback in Pasadena's New Year Rose Parade. A number of East and West Coast gigs were arranged and the tour achieved a sort of legendary notoriety as the Tuvans were invited to jam with Frank Zappa and play with the Kronos Quartet at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch.

Of course, it's the physical process of overtone singing that fascinates people – the way the vocal harmonics are selectively amplified by movements of the lips, tongue and larynx. But the musicians of Huun-Huur-Tu are frustrated by the

way audiences get obsessed by the technicalities rather than enjoying the musicality which is what makes the band stand out. With instrumental playing to match their singing, Huun-Huur-Tu are the leaders in a competitive field.

The name (*xün xürtü* in conventional transliteration) literally means 'sun propeller' and refers to a visual effect of separation of the sun's rays just after sunrise or just before sunset. They see the refraction of light that produces these rays as analogous to the 'refraction' of sound that produces the harmonics in Tuvan overtone singing. It's also fitting that the name refers to an image in the landscape where music and the environment – streams, mountains and animals – are so closely connected.

The original four members of the group were Kaigal-ool Khovalyg, Anatoli Kuular and the brothers Alexander and Sayan Bapa (although Albert Kuvezin was also briefly involved before he went on to start his own group Yat-Kha). Three of them had a spectacular range of throat singing skills and also played the various horse-head fiddles and lutes that bring further textures to the music. Alexander Bapa had an unusual range of percussion, including *tungur* (shamanic drum) and *xapchyk* (sheep's kneebones rattled in a bull's scrotum). Kaigal-ool was born into a family of shepherds who maintained a traditional lifestyle with yurts and a herd of horses. The Tuvans have literally hundreds of songs about horses and the animals are a rich source of rhythmic inspiration and poetic metaphor.

Huun-Huur-Tu recorded four CDs for

## The Tuvans were invited to jam with Frank Zappa and play with the Kronos Quartet at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch

Shanachie in the US: their debut *60 Horses in My Herd* (1993), which thrilled Frank Zappa, *The Orphan's Lament* (1994), *If I'd Been Born an Eagle* (1997), with Russian musicians Sergei Starostin and German Popov, and *Where Young Grass Grows* (1999), which includes more unlikely collaborations with Martyn Bennett on smallpipes and Mary MacMaster on harp. In 1995 Alexander Bapa handed his bull's scrotum to Alexei Saryglar and in 2003 Andrei Mongush replaced Anatoli Kuular who'd had enough of touring and wanted to spend more time in Tuva in touch with traditional musicians.

From the mid-90s, Huun-Huur-Tu became involved in several fusion projects. For the Jaro label in Germany they made two interesting recordings, *Fly, Fly My Sadness* (1996) and *Mountain Tale* (1998), with The Bulgarian Voices Angelite and the Moscow Art Trio. Russian pianist Mikhail Alperin likens it to a family with the Bulgarian women's choir as 'the mother', the Tuvan overtone singers as 'the father' and The Moscow Art Trio, 'with the Russian soul of Sergei Starostin and my own Jewish melancholy' as the children. There were also the inevitable *Spirits from Tuva* (Jaro) remix album and *Malerija* (Greenwave), the band's own experiment with electronics. Ted Levin, who has worked extensively with the band over the years, puts the dilemma eloquently in his book *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: 'How could music linked to the beauty of natural landscapes and the reassuring presence of herd animals, the*



*importance of humility before spirit-masters and respect for the values of family life, be expressed in the hybrid musical idioms and crossover styles that epitomized contemporary world music?* It's an important question. As is the issue of electronics, because the band's natural sound is so full of strange timbres and extraordinary effects, by adding technical gimmicks you can end up with less than the sum of the parts. That's why they are such an impressive live act, when you can see what a group of four guys and a collection of fiddles, skins, knucklebones and scrotums can do.

### BEST ALBUMS

*The Orphan's Lament* (Shanachie 1994)



This was one of our 50 Classic World Music Albums, with the stunning opening 'Prayer' and some of their most popular songs, 'Ödugen Taiga' and 'Eki Attar', which in a remixed version became a number one in Greece after it was used for a Soccer lottery ad.

*Where Young Grass Grows* (Shanachie 1999)



Much more sophisticated production on this album with a stunning opening track, 'Ezir-Kara', with words penned by a great horseman killed in the 1930s purges and full of dramatic vocal and instrumental effects, including the late Martyn Bennett on smallpipes. Also a Jew's harp rap and spectacular overtone singing on horseback on the steppes.

*Best Live (Jaro) or Live 1* (Greenwave)



Two discs have been released from an excellent concert given in Karelia, Russia in 2001. You can really feel that everything is live and for real, but it would have been even better edited down to one CD. On Jaro, in Europe, they are titled *Best Live* (2001) and *More Live* (2003) and on Greenwave, in Russian and the US, *Live 1* and *Live 2* (both released 2001).



*Altai Sayan Tandy-Uula* (Greenwave 2004)

At 43 minutes, this most recent release isn't generous on playing time, but it is their most successful work with

electronics. Programmer Andrei Samsonov adds electronic soundscapes and textures giving a more contemporary feel. The title-track is in praise of the mountain source of the Yenisei river.

### BEST AVOIDED



*Malerija* (Greenwave 2003)

Some classic tracks getting dragged down with electronics and leaden beats.

### LIKE HUUN-HUUR-TU? THEN TRY...



*Tuva, Among the Spirits* (Smithsonian Folkways 1999)

Make a visit to Tuva itself to hear master overtone singers (including Khaigal-ool Khovalyg, Anatoli Kuular and Alexei Saryglar of HHT) singing on hillsides, on horseback, by streams and in a sacred cave. Breathtaking stuff. ■

**Huun-Huur-Tu are on tour in the UK till May 21 (see [On the Road for details](#)) and in Europe during the summer**