

L.A. TIMES Review

Huun-Huur-Tu, "60 Horses in My Herd: Old Songs and Tunes of Tuva" *Shanachie*

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You've never heard anything like this folk music from Tuva, a Siberian region at the edge of Outer Mongolia. At times the four members of Huun-Huur-Tu conjure a beauty so strange that it might have emanated from the banks of Martian canals.

The defining characteristic of this music is a technique known as *khoomei*, which, translated from Tuvan, means "throat-singing." Tuvan singers have found a way to turn their throats into oscillation chambers in which two notes can sound simultaneously. Led by an amazing musician named Kaigol-ool Khovalyg, Huun-Huur-Tu builds its songs from a guttural, quavering foundation, above which the singers can simultaneously hoist whistling high tones that sound almost metaphysical. When the Tuvans start that whistling, it's as if human breath had merged with a mountain wind.

A newcomer to this music will be enchanted, but not adrift. There are strong parallels between those guttural lows and the rumbling growls of the great blues singer Howlin' Wolf. Some of the melodies and rhythms resemble Native American chanting--a similarity not lost on Ry Cooder, who wove performances by Huun-Huur-Tu (the group name means "shafts of light") into his music for the film "Geronimo."

As if the throat-singing was not attraction enough, Huun-Huur-Tu's singers are superb when employing less exotic techniques in the reedy-chesty passages that often state a song's primary theme before the throat-singing unfolds to add development and variation. The singers also are accomplished instrumentalists, using a rustic violin called the *igil* to hypnotic effect and coloring ensemble pieces with conch-shell flute and a rattle made from a bull's testicle.

The songs are in Tuvan, but the album notes offer succinct translations. Ultimately, as strange as their elements are, these songs have the universal accessibility and timeless feel of good folk music. The delivery is simple and direct, and the sentiments and stories spring from the everyday life of people who have to work hard, endure oppressive rulers and travel far from home. The Tuvans also have an obvious love of a good tune--so much, that they've found a way to sing their tunes two notes at a time.

(Huun-Huur-Tu begins a U.S. tour with a performance Jan. 6 at Mandeville Auditorium at UC San Diego.)

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