

# THE FIRST USA PERFORMANCE OF TUVAN THROAT SINGERS

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**Figure 1: Sunset silhouettes of the Tuva Ensemble during performance at the Vancouver Folkfestival main stage, Jericho Beach Park. Saturday 18 July 1992. Photo by Bernard Kleikamp.**

## Abstract

Until the 1990s *khöömei* or throat singing from Tuva<sup>2</sup> was virtually unknown outside the then-USSR. Russian researchers like Aksenov and Shchurov had published the results of their fieldwork in Tuva, but their work was hardly known outside the USSR. In the 1980s researchers from outside the USSR like Tran Quang Hai and Ted Levin started paying attention to the subject, but it took until the early 1990s before a Western audience could make its acquaintance with Tuvan throat singers on stage.

I ran the Paradox concert agency from 1978 until 2003, and it so happened that Paradox was the first to bring Tuvan throat singers to Europe and to North America in the early 1990s. The Iron Curtain had just fallen and it became possible to invite musicians from behind the Curtain without assistance from state agencies.

Paradox had ample previous experience with state agencies in visa and work permit procedures, and that expertise proved very useful in dealing directly with musicians and music ensembles and their representatives then.

My essay presents the story of the first concert of Tuvan *khöömei* singers in the USA in 1992 to which I was an eye witness (and also shortly explains the process of throat singing). This is an iconic story, because not only it describes how concert tours were organised in an age before the internet but also it documents the start of a hype. After that first concert in just a few years bands from Tuva were travelling all over the world and many audiences got to experience the phenomenon of throat singing. But in 1992 it was all new.

## Keywords

Tuva, Throat singing, Ensemble music, Concert organisation, Traveling musicians

## EPILOGUE

In August 1991 I was given a tip by Diana Kadota whom I had just met at the Vancouver Folk Festival, suggesting me to contact Marty W. Merkley, the program director of the Chautauqua Institution<sup>3</sup>, as he might be interested in ethnic and traditional music, the kind of music that I represented with my concert agency Paradox. It appeared that he did have an interest. Diana had been

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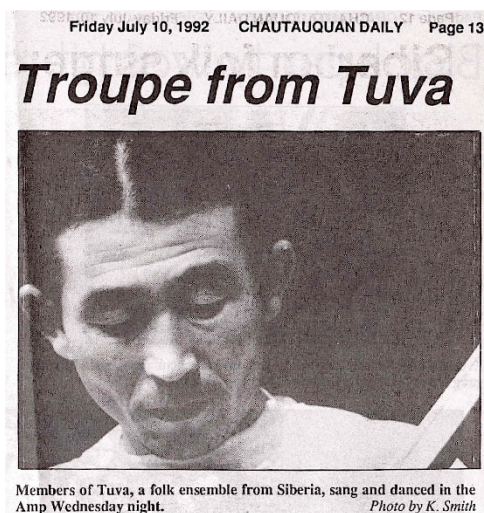
<sup>1</sup> Bernard Kleikamp is an independent ethnomusicologist and scholar, working at Pan Records, Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> Tuva was an autonomous republic in central Siberia in the ex-USSR. Today it is an autonomous republic inside the Russian Federation. It had a brief period of independence, 1921 - 1944.

<sup>3</sup> The Chautauqua Institution is a non-profit education center and summer resort near Jamestown, NY, USA.

performing with her ensemble Uzume Taiko at the Chautauqua Institution that summer. Uzume Taiko had just licensed their CD to Pan Records which I also ran.

The internet, smartphones, apps, and social media didn't exist in those days. Computers barely did. I had just bought my first Apple computer, the Mackintosh Classic, that ran on three-and-a-half inch floppy discs, and that I mainly used as a word processor. Business contacts were kept via letter, telephone, and telefax<sup>4</sup>. I used fax in the Paradox office since the mid-1980s. Before that I used telex and telegrams next to post ("snail mail") and telephone calls.



**Figure 1: Sergey Ondar, member of the Tuva Ensemble. Chautauquan Daily, 10 July 1992. Newspaper clipping. (Photograph by courtesy of K. Smith).**

I had started to work with the Tuva Ensemble in Netherlands in March 1991 through their management Tuvavostok in Kyzyl, Tuva. The Tuvan musicians were sensational on stage with a program of traditional music, of which *khöömei* (throat singing, also called overtone singing), was a major part. Overtones are created when a singer simultaneously generates a fundamental (also called drone, or bourdon) and a natural overtone through a special vocal technique. The melody is conveyed by overtones in a low or a high register, that can sound as bird's whistling or low grumbling, with the drone as the fundamental. Many styles of overtone singing exist in Tuva. It is said that overtones are imitations of sounds in nature, like the wind in high mountains or the water in fast-flowing rivers. Audiences in Netherlands were flabbergasted at experiencing the musicians' otherworldly sounds, and I was confident that people in other territories would also be baffled. I decided to try and organise concerts for the Tuva Ensemble in North America in the summer of 1992. The Chautauqua Institution was one of the potential venues in that concert tour, and that concert-to-be of the Tuva Ensemble was the very first concert of *khöömei* (throat singing) in the USA.

The first letter to the Chautauqua Institution was sent on 20 August 1991, and a total of 55 faxes and an estimated 10 more letters by mail were sent back and forth relating to the Chautauqua 8 July 1992 concert, the last one dating from 26 August 1992.

In their 1992 summer tour the Tuvan musicians were scheduled to travel via Moscow (to arrange for visas for Netherlands, Canada, and USA), followed by a two-week stopover in Netherlands for concerts and other activities. But somehow the musicians were not able to get or were denied Canada and USA visas<sup>5</sup>. Both embassies agreed to send the eventual visa permission to their respective embassies in Netherlands, as they couldn't process the paperwork in Moscow in time. But the musicians did get their Netherlands visas and the ensemble arrived at Amsterdam airport on 21 June

<sup>4</sup> Telefax or simply fax is/was a means to send text and images via telephone line from scanner to printer and vice versa.

<sup>5</sup> Probably they or their management made the visa applications too late.

1992 for four concerts<sup>6</sup>, embassy visits, editing work for their second CD, and some touristic sightseeing in the following two weeks. I expected there was plenty of time to pick up the USA and Canada visas in that period and I had scheduled embassy visits accordingly. On 24 June I sent the Paradox' roadmanager with the ensemble to the USA embassy in Amsterdam to pick up the USA visas. Visa permission had not arrived from Moscow yet, and the ensemble was advised to pick up the visas



Figures 2 and 3: Stas Danmaa and Ivan Saryglar. Chautauquan Daily, 10 July 1992. Newspaper clipping / Stas Danmaa in shaman costume. Chautauquan Daily, 10 July 1992. Newspaper clipping (Photographs by courtesy of K. Smith).

in Toronto, their port of entry in North America. The staff of the Amsterdam USA embassy promised to process the paperwork timely and have the visa permission sent to the USA consulate in Toronto.

A few days later, on 2 July, I took the Tuvan musicians to the Canadian embassy in The Hague. That went smooth. We were given what felt like a special audience with the visa officer. He wanted to know what the Tuvan musicians were going to do in Canada. I had already handed in all relevant paperwork including a full itinerary with dates of performances. But apparently the officer wanted to hear it from them personally. Now that was a problem, because only one of the musicians spoke a bit of English. Then the visa officer asked if they could give a sample of their music. Two or three of them started singing overtones. The visa officer seemed quite pleased and immediately after the impromptu two-minute concert the Tuvan musicians were given their double entry Canadian visas.

Eventually we took flight CP91 from Amsterdam to Toronto on 7 July, where we arrived at 4:35 pm. The luggage of the Tuvan musicians had not arrived with our flight and arrived only two days later. My own luggage had arrived though. I picked up the rental van at Thrifty's airport office and we checked in for one night at a downtown Toronto hotel. We planned to have an early breakfast and report at the USA consulate at 9 am sharp to pick up the USA visas. The distance from Toronto to Chautauqua was 280 km, an estimated 3 hours drive with a possible delay at the border crossing. If possible I wanted to be on the road before noon, so as not having to drive in a nervous rush.

## CONCERT DAY 8 JULY

After breakfast we went to the USA consulate for the visas. We were asked to wait in an antechamber, it was not expected to take long. But we were kept waiting and waiting. Around noon I went out to get lunch for the musicians and to make a phonecall to the Chautauqua Institution, to inform them that we would arrive later, as the visas had not been processed. It got later and later. The musicians seemed quite relaxed and I got more and more nervous. Finally, at around 3 pm, an official sauntered

<sup>6</sup> Among those concerts were the renowned festivals of Oerol on the island of Terschelling (22 June) and Documenta in Kassel, Germany (25 June).

by and asked what we were doing there. I explained the urgency of the matter. He seemed genuinely surprised. "I am supposed to be handling this and nobody told me you were here. I'll see what I can do." Twenty minutes later we received the USA visas, and ten minutes after that we were driving, after another phonecall to the Chautauqua organisation that we had received the visas and were on our way. We had four hours left for the trip, including the border crossing. That crossing went smooth, and I managed to take only one wrong exit before we arrived at the venue at 7:30 pm.



**Figure 4: Breakfast in Jamestown Holiday Inn. From left to right: Stas Danmaa, Gennadi Tumat, Anatolii Kuular, Ivan Saryglar (with hat), Sergey Ondar. Photograph by the author, 9 July 1992.**

The performance was to start at 8pm and would take place in the Amphitheater, "The Amp", a hall with a capacity of 4000. In my memory a crowd of around 2500 spectators showed up. The evening was to be presented by Ted Levin, professor of music at Dartmouth College in Hanover NH, who would give an introduction on Tuva and the music of Tuva. Levin had produced a CD on the Smithsonian Folkways label in 1990 with recordings from his 1987 and 1988 fieldwork trips in Tuva<sup>7</sup>, so he could be considered an expert. It marked the first time that we met.

The Tuva Ensemble, under the leadership of iconic *khöömei* singer Gennadi Tumat<sup>8</sup>, with Stas Danmaa, Anatolii Kuular, Sergey Ondar, and Ivan Saryglar as further members, needed almost no time to change costumes, as their luggage with the costumes in it was still in limbo between Amsterdam and Toronto. Instead they performed in promotional T-shirts with an image of Tuva on the front<sup>9</sup>, and were wearing the colourful conical fur-rimmed Tuvan hats that they had always on their heads anyway. Stas Danmaa, who would do a five-minute shaman impersonation in the program, for some reason had brought his shaman costume in his hand luggage, so he was ok for that.

The program was 75 minutes long with a break halfway. and consisted of seven songs, eight overtone songs, three instrumentals, and a shaman healing session. Seven of the pieces had been released on Pan Records' first Tuva CD<sup>10</sup>, and another twelve would be released later that year on Pan Records' second Tuva CD<sup>11</sup>.

The evening was a huge success. The Chautauquan Daily, which already had published lengthy previews in their issues of Spring (covering the period 27 June to 30 August) and of 8 July (see appendices 1 and 2), after the concert published a few photographs of the concert in their 10 July

<sup>7</sup> Tuva. Voices from the Center of Asia. Smithsonian Folkways SF 40017. Washington DC, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Gennadi Tuma founded his own ensemble Ay Kherel (Moonlight) in 1994. I continued to work with Gennadi until his death in 1996. In the year 2000 Pan Records posthumously published Gennadi's solo-CD "My Homeland Övür". Pan Records no. 2090, Leiden, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> I had 200 promotional T-shirts made for the tour with the aim of selling these at performances. I had given the musicians two each..

<sup>10</sup> Tuva. Voices from the Land of the Eagles. Pan Records no. 2005. Leiden, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Tuva. Echoes from the Spirit World. Pan Records no. 2013. Leiden, 1992.

issue but unfortunately neglected to write a full review (photos 1—Sergey Ondar, 2—Stas Danmaa and Ivan Saryglar, and 3—Stas Danmaa in shaman costume).



**Figure 5: Niagara Falls (Canadian side). From left to right: Gennadi Tumat, Anatolii Kuular, Ivan Saryglar. Photograph by the author, 9 July 1992.**

## AFTERMATH & CONCLUSIONS<sup>12</sup>

After a hearty breakfast in our hotel, The Holiday Inn in Jamestown NY (photo 4), we drove back to Toronto airport to catch flight CP929 at 2:45pm to Winnipeg. Halfway, after we had crossed the border, we made a short stop at the Niagara Falls, where I heard the Tuvans sing *khöömei* with the Falls (photo 5). They seemed quite stimulated by the sounds of the cascading water. At the airport we picked up the lost luggage that had arrived in the meantime. This trip would further bring the Tuva Ensemble to the folk festivals of Winnipeg, and Vancouver before they would return home to Tuva via Moscow. The Tuvans were to be invited back the next summer to both festivals because of their great success. This was quite an unusual feat as these festivals would not normally invite the same act in two consecutive years.



**Figure 6: Edmonton Folk Festival. Top, from left to right Kaigal-ool Khovalyg, Sayan Bappa, Anatolii Kuular, Kongar-ool Ondar. Bottom, from left to right: Radomir Mongush, Sayan Bappa. Photo by Bernard Kleikamp, 7 August 1993.**

<sup>12</sup> The information in this essay, unless otherwise attributed, comes from the private archive of the author in Leiden, Netherlands.

Friends of Tuva, an organisation of Tuva aficionados with its own newsletter<sup>13</sup>, run by Ralph Leighton, jumped in to organise future concerts of Tuvan musicians in the USA. Ralph Leighton lived in the San Francisco area and came to meet the Tuvan musicians at the 1992 Vancouver Folk Festival, whom he befriended and subsequently invited to the next Rose Parade in Pasadena on 1 January 1993, after which followed a six-week tour in the USA with Anatolii Kuular, Kaigal-ool Khovaly, and Kongar-ool Ondar<sup>14</sup>. Leighton continued to promote and work with Kongar-ool Ondar for many years to come<sup>15</sup>. The 1993 USA & Canada summer tour brought the Tuva Ensemble in a completely different line-up, that later was to become known under the name of Huun Huur Tu, to the festivals of Winnipeg, Edmonton (photo 6), and Vancouver in Canada again, and in the USA to the Ann Arbor folk festival and to the World Financial Center in New York. The Ann Arbor festival was organised by the Concerted Efforts agency, and they continued to work with Huun Huur Tu in the USA for several years. A demand was quickly growing for Tuvan throat singing on the world stages and to fill up that demand many more bands and soloists emerged from Tuva to conquer the world, like Chirgilchin, Shu De, Ay Kherel, Tyva Kyzy, Yat Kha, Sainkho Namchylak and the already previously mentioned Huun Huur Tu and the Tuva Ensemble.

Ron Gaskin, Toronto-based manager of experimental folk band Rare Air, in the mid-1990s labeled me as "The man who brought Tuva to the world". Of course I'm not the only such person, but I'm happy to have been given that epithet anyway. But indeed, my Paradox concert agency was the first to bring Tuvan throat singing musicians to the USA.

And the rest is history.

25 years later the Tuvan Ministry of Culture and the Center of Tuvan Traditional Culture in retrospect recognized the importance of Pan Records and the Paradox concert agency in the global dissemination of Tuvan overtone singing and invited me to write the story of my involvement with music from Tuva in the 1990s. This is part of that story.

## APPENDICES

The illustration on the first page are sunset silhouettes of the Tuva Ensemble during performance at the Vancouver Folkfestival main stage, Jericho Beach Park. Saturday 18 July 1992. Photographs by the author.

Appendix 1. The Chautauquan. Summer Program 1992 June - August. Clippings.

Appendix 2. Chautauquan Daily. 8 July 1992. Clippings.



## Appendices 1 and 2.

<sup>13</sup> The Friends of Tuva newsletter was published from 1991 to 1999. Their 20th and final issue dates from 9 January 1999.

<sup>14</sup> The Friends of Tuva Newsletter, Fifth issue, Fall 1992, for info on the 1993 Rose Parade and the full itinerary of the concert tour.

<sup>15</sup> Resulting in at least three CD productions, that drew wide attention and got high sales figures.