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Central Asian throat singers bring their ancient art to region

RUFFIN PREVOST Gazette Wyoming Bureau

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Huun-Huur-Tu, a traditional Tuvan musical quartet, performed Tuesday in Meeteetse, Wyo. The unique vocal group, which includes, clockwise from upper-left, Sayan Bapa, Radik Tolouche, Alexei Saryglar and Kaigal-ool k
RUFFIN PREVOST/Gazette Staff

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MEETEETSE, Wyo. - A quartet of singing horsemen might seem like a predictable band to perform in a town that has seen more than a century of ranching, riding and roping.

But no one could have predicted the huge crowd Tuesday night in the school gymnasium, or the rousing standing ovation for four men who played traditional central-Asian songs dating to 13th-century warlord Genghis Khan.

Performing in period formal wear on traditional instruments, Huun-Huur-Tu have played more than 1,000 shows in Europe and America, said Vladimir Oboronko, the group's manager.

But their trip to Meeteetse this week was like a homecoming of sorts, said Sayan Bapa, a co-founder of the band who plays the doshpuluur, a guitarlike instrument covered in snakeskin.

"We came from the plane in Cody and looked around and thought it was autumn in Tuva," Bapa said, referring to his homeland, an autonomous Russian republic of 305,000 in southern Siberia, bordering Mongolia.

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"It was the same kind of landscape: lots of grass, not many trees, mountains in the distance with snow. We felt like we were back home. This is a good, huge territory, with a lot of grass and not many people," Bapa said.

The similarities of place, and the Tuvans' reputation as master horsemen who traverse the steppes tending cattle and sheep, made for some obvious cultural parallels with Meeteetse, said Steve Schrepferman.

Chairman of the Park County Arts Council, Schrepferman first saw Huun-Huur-Tu at a booking conference and decided they would be an interesting group to bring to Meeteetse.

More than 280 people from Cody, Powell and Meeteetse attended the concert. Schrepferman said he was thrilled with the turnout, which has never topped more than about 100 for such events.

Band members gave a workshop Monday on the art of throat singing, also called overtone singing, a rare and difficult vocal technique that is a hallmark of their musical style.

Throat singers can produce two, and sometimes three, distinct tones at one time. They sing a lower, growling tone, called the fundamental, mirroring it with a higher harmonic tone.

Imagine the low drone of a bagpipe accompanied by a flute.

Sun propeller

Huun-Huur-Tu is Tuvan for "sun propeller," the kind of refracted light seen shining through clouds at sunrise or sunset, and a visual representation of the throat-singing technique.

Performers must exercise precise and intense control of their throats, and band members often closed their eyes and appeared to grimace as if in pain during Tuesday's performance.

"The tension is strong from your chest, up into your mouth, and your tongue, lips and head," Bapa said after the show Tuesday, dressed in blue jeans and smoking a cigarette in the cool night air outside the Meeteetse school.

"But it doesn't hurt," he said. "It looks difficult, but for us it's not so hard."

"If you grew up riding a horse with your grandpa holding you against his chest while he did it, then it might not be so hard," said Elijah Cobb, a Cody photographer who attended the workshop.

Cobb said none of the 15 students who tried could pick up the technique, but he praised Robert Rumbolz for coming close.

It turns out Rumbolz, an ethnomusicologist who teaches at Northwest College in Powell, had an unfair advantage.

He had met Huun-Huur-Tu member Alexei Saryglar a decade ago, while Rumbolz was in graduate school.

"I was feeling pretty sure about my abilities," said Rumbolz, who has worked occasionally to pick up the technique since meeting Saryglar.

"Then I went into the workshop and they told me, 'No, you don't have it,' " he said with a laugh.

Like a barn dance

Meeteetse ranchers Rich Herman and Mervin Larsen said they enjoyed the group's performance.

"It's amazing how many different instruments they all can play. And they sure have awfully good lungs," Herman said.

Larsen said he noticed that the scrolls at the ends of the necks on the band's stringed instruments all sported carved horse heads.

Herman said the group's music was exotic but also had familiar elements.

"One song they played sounded like an old-time Saturday night barn dance," he said, referring to "Chiraa-Xoor," Tuvan for "Yellow Trotter."

The song features Saryglar on percussion mimicking the clattering hooves of a cantering horse, and Radik Tolouche bowing his Tuvan fiddle to mimic a spirited neigh.

Some of the band's songs are about love, or evoke the sounds of birds in the forest. Many are filled with a sense of plaintive and soulful longing that recalls difficult days of solitude in wide-open spaces.

Music of the horse

The horse is a common theme in the music of Huun-Huur-Tu. So it was an unexpected treat for the band members Tuesday when a group of local cowboys took them on a trail ride in the hills around Meeteetse.

One cowboy said the musicians were adept riders, who first asked politely if they could "exercise" their horses before taking off at a mad gallop.

It was the first time on a horse for Oboronko, the manager, but all part of the job.

"I did not expect this, but it was good," he said. "They enjoyed it very much."

Bapa said all the band members have ridden since an early age, and that Tuvans typically learn riding from grandparents, who expect the grandchildren to help with herding livestock.

Some of the band members have formal musical training in other genres, including jazz, and their songs include moments that swing with layered syncopation.

"It's syncopated, yes, but like a horse galloping," Bapa said. "Swing gets around the world, you know. It didn't just come from Africa."

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