

# YAT-KHA - A HISTORY

The ideology department of the Tuvan Communist Party didn't like it very much when **Albert Kuvezin** picked up the electric guitar and started singing again. As a little boy he was thrown out of the choir and told "never again". It wasn't until the sounds of Deep Purple and Sonic Youth reached his remote homeland of Tuva - that Kuvezin found the musical bridge between his voice, his heritage and the unique culture and environment around him.

Back then, still under Soviet rule, Western rock music was still only available underground. Even if you formed a band, you had to go before a jury of Communist party officials who would decide whether your group was suitable entertainment for impressionable youth. Albert's band failed spectacularly on eleven points – ranging from the dull (They didn't stick to Communist ideology; they had jeans and long-hair; they didn't teach young people good ideas) to the downright surreal (They didn't play enough waltzes; their guitar strings were 'spiky and dis-organised').

Forced underground, literally, and into organising and playing basement shebeens with his own bands – Albert also joined official pop, rock and traditional groups and criss-crossed the Soviet Union performing live. When Perestroika came events still moved slowly in Kyzyl, so Albert moved first to Siberia, then to Moscow, all the time developing more musical contacts and ideas, but never losing his roots, his appreciation of Tuvan music and culture catching up with his first love – Western rock.

Kuvezin's special style of throat-singing (known as "kanzat") had all but died out; vocalists produce a drone as well as its harmonic, which is bent into a melody that soars above the music. These eerie sounds combined with subtle atmospheric percussion evoke the wide-open spaces of the Tuvan steppes and mountains, giving their music an uncanny sense of place.

It's the combination of this impossibly double-bass-deep singing with his progressive punk sensibility that has set the stage for his band Yat-Kha. Tuvan throat-singing reached worldwide consciousness in the early 1990s, largely through the recordings and performances of Huun-Huur-Tu, of which Kuvezin was a founding member. Although Kuvezin had studied classical guitar and double-bass at music college, he felt the rather "folkloric" style of Huun-Huur-Tu, was no longer right for him after finding his homeland in the midst of a perestroika/ glasnost-induced spring-thaw punk rock explosion.

He started Yat-Kha, whose music reflects not only their Tuvan roots but also the recent history of Russia. Yat-Kha still use the exquisite traditional stringed instruments such as the igil and the morinhuur (Mongolian cello), as well as other worldly overtone singing techniques. However, one is more likely to encounter a mosh-pit at one of their many shows than a Tuvan folk-fetishist.

When Albert performed at the 'Voices of Asia' festival in Alma-Aty, Brian Eno recovered swiftly enough from his astonishment at Kuvezin's double-bass vocals to insist that a special prize be made up on the spot to present to him. This was soon followed by an invitation from guitarist Lu Edmonds (guitarist who has played with The Damned, Shriekback and Billy Bragg amongst others)– who was programming the BID Festival in Berlin to play at the event.

Introduced to a European audience Yat-Kha were an immediate hit; since then their career has followed a constant upward trajectory.

Their first release outside of Russia was the album 'Yenesei Punk' (The Yenesei is the 'Great River' in Tuva) in 1995 – recorded live to a two-track tape. It prompted invitations to perform worldwide, and ever since Yat-Kha have been touring regularly all over the world – from Hong Kong to Hitchin, Istanbul to Elche, LA to Lapland (at the annual Reindeer Herders Festival).

Their next release, 'Dalal Beldin' was on The Chieftains' Paddy Moloney's Wicklow label, but the imprint was wound up shortly after the recording of the follow-up, 'Aldyn Dashka' – leading to the set up of their own Yat-Kha Records in 2000.

That year the group, whose constant evolution sees frequent changes in their line-up, joined up for a unique double-bill with Tuvan musical "stepmother" Sainkho for a CMN tour of the UK in November. This followed the July premier at London's Horse Hospital of the restored, full-length 1928 B&W classic movie 'Storm Over Asia', to which Yat-Kha provide a live, improvised soundtrack. The group – interspersing it with their own regular shows – have since then taken the one print of the film around the globe to amazed, but appreciative audiences.

Heading for New York to start a US tour on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, Yat-Kha missed the WTC attacks by 3 hours and after 5 days sleeping on the floor after being diverted to Gander Newfoundland (+ and \$100s in telephone calls, logistical re-arrangements and cancelled shows) the band somehow managed to complete their 5-week US tour of "Storm over Asia", taking in most of the Midwest and East coast.

2002 started well for the band – as Yat-Kha won one of the nine BBC Radio 3 "Awards for World Music" in the category for the Asia/Pacific region – going on to play at the inaugural ceremony at Ocean in Hackney. They followed this with another extensive UK tour last Spring. Yet more dates followed before Yat-Kha prepared for the recording of 'Tuva Rock' with producer Paul Corkett, whose previous credits include Placebo, Nick Cave, The Cure, Cooper Temple Clause, Snuff and Sixteen Horsepower.

Preparations began in Tuva, where Albert selected which traditional songs he would set to modern arrangements and composed seven of the fourteen featured tracks, before moving on to recording in France, and finishing with all vocals added in Bath, England.

'Tuva Rock' is the sound of a band at the height of their not-inconsiderable power. Catch them on their forthcoming UK tour – it could be the last time before – as The Guardian says – it's time to move on to those stadiums.

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