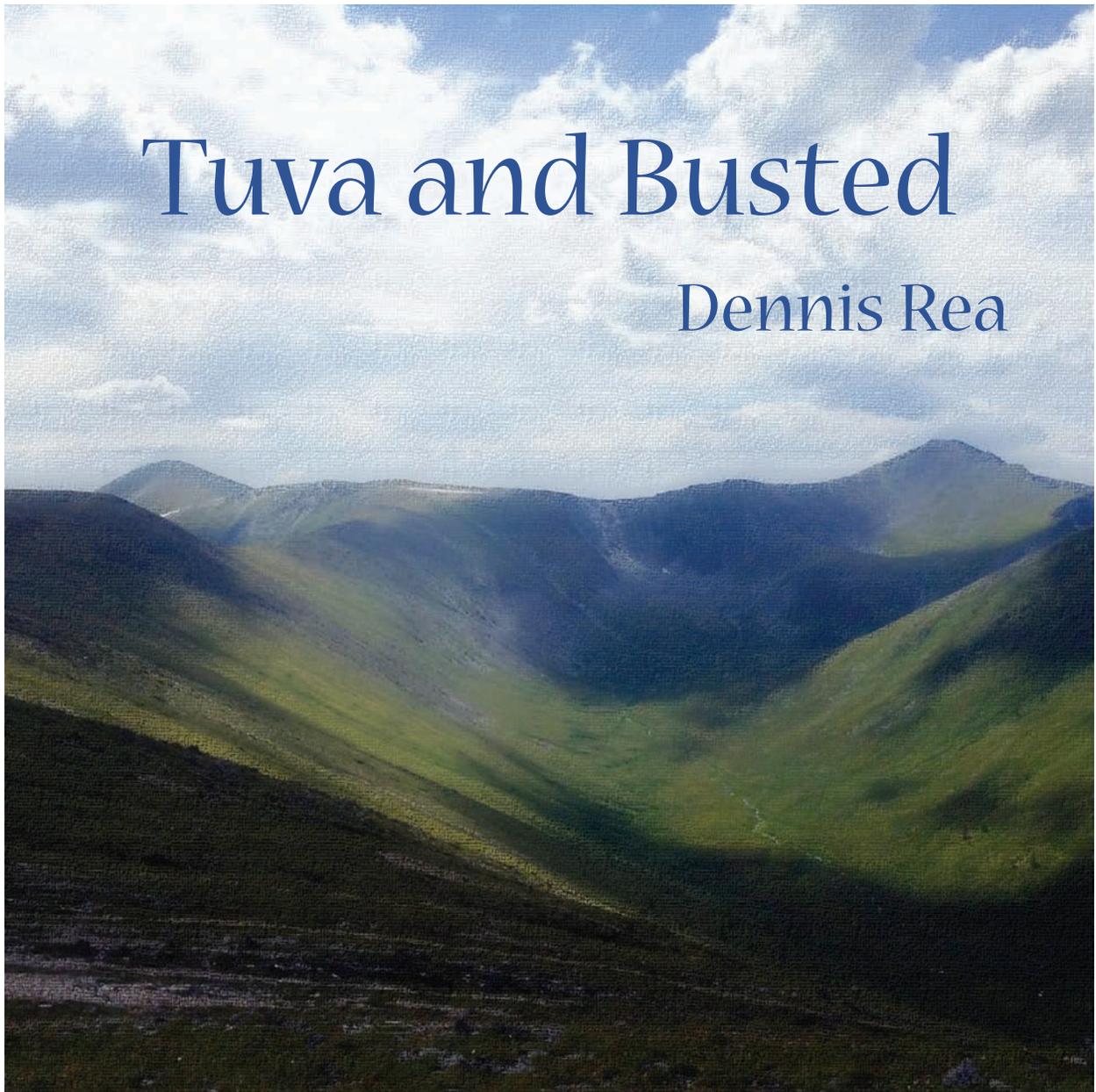


Tuva and Busted

Dennis Rea



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For Iouri, Peter, Leonardo, and Albert

*With loving respect to Ralph Leighton, Galsan Tschinag, and the late
Richard Feynman, Paul Peña, and Jampa Tsering*

CHAPTER 1

THROAT CLEARING

Melody is story, story is journey, journey is melody.

This journey begins on an island in the East China Sea and winds up decades and thousands of miles distant in the heart of Central Asia, the farthest place on earth from an ocean. This melody wells up from deep in the solar plexus, ascends the windpipe, and threads the larynx to enter the world in a prismatic array of musical overtones.

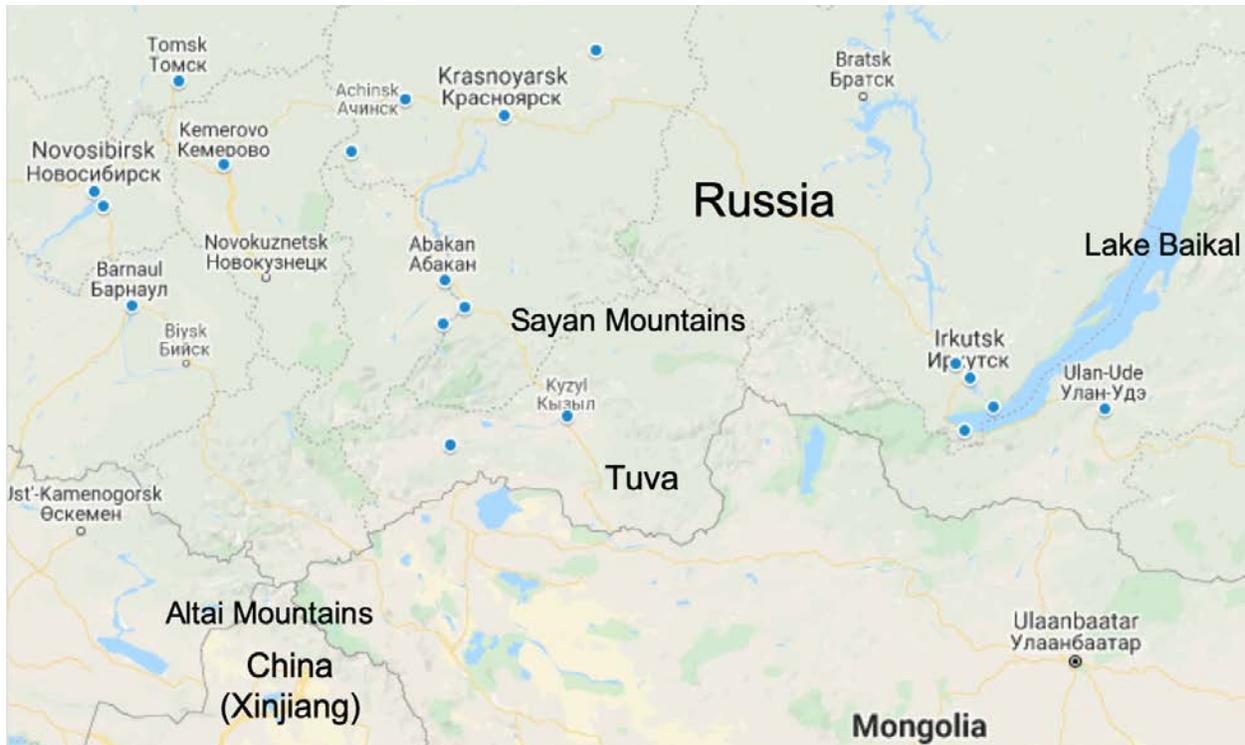
This story commences in the city of Tainan, Taiwan, where I was living in the early 1990s with my wife, Anne Joiner, after a similar stint in China. Both of us were teaching English at “cram schools” on the island at the time, and I was playing music regularly with a series of bands I put together during my three-plus years in this “rogue province” of China, a tale detailed (along with much else) in my previous book [*Live at the Forbidden City: Musical Encounters in China and Taiwan*](#).

Sometime during this period our expatriate friend, the inveterate American traveler and raconteur Peter Shotwell, stopped by our apartment to share some audio cassettes he’d acquired on his latest trip outside the country. Peter excitedly explained that the cassettes documented music from Tuva, an area bordering Mongolia in Russian Central Asia, and guaranteed that we’d heard nothing like it. Like most people, I’d never even heard of Tuva, but from the moment the music started playing, this curious locale would loom large in my mental atlas.

Peter was sure right about the music – it completely floored me, and was indeed unlike anything I’d heard before. The music was fascinating for many reasons, but none more so than the unearthly “throat singing” for which the Tuvans and neighboring cultures are renowned. Also known as overtone singing, this vocal technique, achieved through subtle manipulation of the air passage, makes it possible for a single singer to voice two or more notes simultaneously, a fundamental (base) pitch plus higher-pitched harmonies from the natural harmonic series. A listener’s first reaction is typically disbelief that one person can produce such harmonies using only their voice.

Tuvan throat singing is categorized into a number of styles that essentially correspond to relative pitch, from the preposterously low and raspy *kargyraa* style to the high, whistling *sygyt* technique. Tuvan music also employs a variety of native string, wind, and percussion instruments, notably the sonorous two-stringed *igil* fiddle and the almost electronic-sounding *khomus* jaw harp. Whatever the instrumentation, the Tuvans’ music is deeply rooted in their culture’s foundational animist beliefs and often consciously evokes the sounds of natural phenomena, including the hoofbeats of their beloved horses.

The more the music drew me in, the more I wanted to find out about the people that produced these astounding sounds. I learned that the traditionally nomadic Tuvans embodied a fascinating blend of cultural and geographical traits: They are of Turkic ethnicity and speak a distinct Turkic language, but share many folkways with the nearby Mongolians. They are Tibetan Buddhist in their spiritual beliefs, but with a persistent underlying substratum of local shamanistic practices. Their homeland encompasses lofty alpine mountains, deep coniferous forests, grasslands, and semiarid steppe and is the only place on earth that is home to such disparate wildlife as camels, yaks, and reindeer, along with the greatest concentration of wolves in Asia (more on that later). Its lifeblood is the mighty Yenisey River that traverses Tuva on its 2,000-mile journey to the Arctic Ocean.



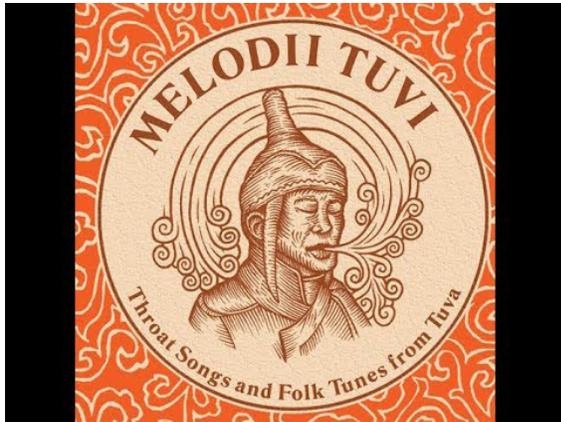
Tuva and MuzEnergy/Terrane tour stops

Reading further, I discovered that the Tuvan people have an unusually complicated history. Their origins remain somewhat opaque; some genetic researchers believe that the early inhabitants of today's Tuva were the most likely ancestors of today's Native Americans, a claim that would seem to be at least superficially supported by similarities in the two groups' respective lifeways. (Intriguingly, the only other world culture that widely practices a form of throat singing are the indigenous peoples of the Arctic.)

Politically, over the centuries the Tuvan homeland variously fell under the dominion of the Scythians, Xiongnu, Uyghurs, Mongols, Oirats, Chinese, and ultimately the Russians. During a brief interregnum occasioned by the political upheaval that gripped Eurasia in the early twentieth century, Tuva finally won independence in 1921 as the Tannu Tuva People's Republic. Independence was fleeting, however, for the short-lived republic was annexed by the Soviet Union, with the Tuvan government's consent, in 1944. The Russian communists ran roughshod over Tuva, imposing iron-fisted rule, suppressing traditional beliefs, and razing Buddhist temples. After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Tuvans briefly considered another bid for independence before accepting membership in the Russian Federation in 1992. Within the federation, Tuva holds the status of a republic, indicating

the presence of a sizable ethnic minority. Theoretically this designation grants the Tuvans an expanded degree of autonomy in ordering their own affairs, but in reality, Russia continues to hold all the cards. Currently, Tuva seems to have a patron in Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose infamous bare-chested portrait atop a steed was snapped on a visit to the landlocked republic, said to be one of the strongman's favorite destinations.

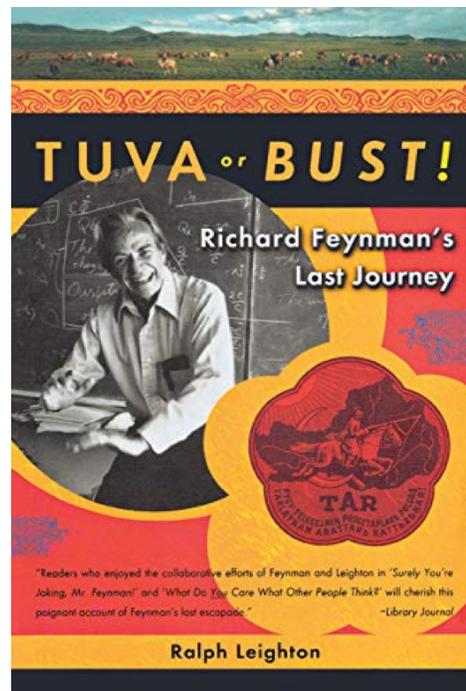
All of this absorbing background information only deepened my interest in the Tuvans and their music. The cassettes that Peter kindly left with us became favorites around our house, and I delighted in introducing the music to others. Over the years I continued to seek out any compilations of Tuvan music that I could find.



Years passed. Anne and I returned to our home base of Seattle in spring 1993, and I embarked on all manner of new musical adventures. Meanwhile, I maintained a keen interest in Tuvan music and noticed a growing awareness of Tuvan throat singing among listeners in general, as an increasing number of CDs appeared in record shops and Tuvan ensembles such as Huun Huur Tu started performing concerts in the U.S.

Further fueling public interest was Ralph Leighton's 1991 book *Tuva or Bust!*, a simultaneously hilarious

and bittersweet chronicle of the celebrated physicist Richard Feynman's quest to visit Tuva in the 1970s and '80s, a time when the remote region was virtually inaccessible due to Cold War restrictions. An avid stamp collector, Feynman had come into possession of some of the exceptionally rare postage stamps issued by the ephemeral Tannu Tuva People's Republic during its short existence, prized by philatelists worldwide, and grew curious about their origins, memorably asking, "Whatever happened to Tannu-Tuva?" He set about learning everything he could about this obscure land of throat-singing equestrians and became hooked, launching a years-long effort to visit the place himself by pulling every string he could, attempting to use as leverage his rarefied stature among the international scientific community. Much of the narrative details his endlessly frustrating *pas de deux* with various Soviet bureaucrats and a few sympathetic Tuvan contacts including Maxim Munzuk, the star of Akira Kurosawa's wonderful film *Dersu Uzala*. After a decade of tantalizing near-misses, Feynman's official invitation to visit Tuva finally came through – just three days after he'd died from cancer. The resulting book, written by his dear friend Leighton, became a modern classic and put Tuva on the map for countless readers. Oh, and more on that book title later.



The Tuva mini-craze culminated in the 1999 documentary *Genghis Blues*, a cinematic account of the blind American blues musician Paul Peña's obsession with Tuvan throat singing. A shortwave radio buff, Peña was surfing the frequencies late one night at home in California when he randomly encountered

the most unusual vocalizing he'd ever heard. He was instantly transfixed, but since the broadcast was in an unknown foreign language, he had no idea where to even begin searching for the source.



Peña eventually traced the music to Tuva, learned everything he could about it from a distance (not easy in those internet-free days), and by trial and error taught himself how to throat-sing. As luck would have it, he had a chance to attend an early U.S. concert by the great ambassador of Tuvan music Kongar-ol Ondar, where he had a chance to demonstrate his throat-singing technique for the master musician. Deeply moved at hearing this blind African-American channeling the music of his distant homeland, Ondar invited Peña to Tuva on the spot.

An opportunity arose in 1995, when Peña traveled to Tuva to take part in a national throat-singing competition in the republic's capital of Kyzyl, where he placed in the contest. By this time Peña's activities had caught the attention of the filmmaking brothers Adrian and Roko Belic, who tagged along and captured the bluesman's performance and interactions with Tuvans, who gave him a warmly appreciative reception. I defy anyone who views the film not to weep at its heart-filling portrait of shared humanity. I know I did – and at the time, I hadn't the slightest inkling that one day I would undergo a life-changing experience in Tuva that rivaled Peña's.

CHAPTER 2

“A TRUE RUSSIAN”: MUZENERGO 2014

A large metallic object comes to rest on the remote, wind-combed uplands of central Asia, its sleek, reflective surface contrasting sharply with undulating grassy steppes once crisscrossed by the steeds of bygone Huns and Khans. Curious locals approach and look on warily as the strange craft's hatch swings open and a succession of outlandish bipeds emerge, bearing weirdly shaped cargo. The creatures make their way to a large platform set in an expansive, sun-drenched meadow, where they separate into small groups and take turns addressing the gathering crowd in a peculiar language marked by piercing whistles, distorted outbursts, and enigmatic melodies.

An invasion of aliens from a distant star system? Not quite – it's the MuzEnergo concert tour of Russia, a traveling sonic circus presenting a bewildering array of adventurous music played by more than 20 highly idiosyncratic instrumentalists from a dozen different countries.

The brainchild of Russian jazz impresario Iouri Lnogradski, MuzEnergo started out as a modestly sized jazz festival in Iouri's adopted city of Dubna, located about an hour north of Moscow. The festival grew into a vital periodic event, and soon Iouri was organizing concerts in other Russian cities for local and foreign musicians alike. From the start, the MuzEnergo events reflected their founder's extremely heterodox musical tastes, embracing not only modern jazz, but also world folkloric traditions, art rock, free improvisation, experimental soundscapes, and unlikely fusions – what Iouri likes to call “honest music,” that is, less concerned with stylistic shibboleths than with imagination, a spirit of inquiry, and authenticity of expression.

Inspired by the success of the Dubna events, Iouri eventually came up with an audacious idea: Why not take MuzEnergo on the road, introducing listeners in



Iouri Lnogradski (Armen Merabov)

far-flung Russian communities to music that would seldom, if ever, reach them otherwise? Thus was born the MuzEnergO Tour, a “musical mystery tour,” as one participant put it, like no other that Russia had ever seen.

The initial MuzEnergO Tour in 2013 – a year before I got involved – was a month-long gambit extending from Moscow across the Europe/Asia divide into western Siberia and on to the lofty grasslands and mountains of distant Tuva. Along the way, a rotating cast of musicians from Russia, Ukraine, Switzerland, France, Spain, Italy, Brazil, and Chile played for upwards of 30,000 listeners at venues ranging from cramped jazz clubs to philharmonic halls to massive outdoor festivals. For many of the players, performing challenging noncommercial music for audiences of this size was almost unheard of in their home countries, where they’d grown used to playing for a few dozen specialist listeners. But far more important than the numbers was the discovery that the audience at most shows sincerely embraced the unfamiliar music, a hugely refreshing dose of validation for players accustomed to being relegated to the “experimental” ghetto back home. Further, the festival fostered a number of new collaborations between the traveling musicians that continue to bear fruit to this day. In the wake of this transformational experience, plans for a second MuzEnergO tour were immediately set in motion.

The 2014 edition of the MuzEnergO Tour was even more ambitious in scope, taking in more than 40 concerts as far afield as Ulan Ude, southeast of mighty Lake Baikal. I was privileged to take part in the tour for two weeks in July. I’d first come to Iouri’s attention some years earlier when he came across an album by my instrumental art-rock band Moraine, on MoonJune Records. Liking what he heard, Iouri contacted me and invited Moraine to play some concerts in Russia, but the cost of international travel proved prohibitive. A few years later, with the MuzEnergO Tour now established and with Iouri’s crucial intercession, the very fine people in the cultural section of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow bestowed generous travel support on me through the U.S. State Department’s Fulbright-Hays program. (Embassy staff members had heard about Iouri’s groundbreaking efforts and were keen to see the U.S. represented on the tour.) While the funding wasn’t sufficient to fly over the whole band, I readily agreed to participate as a free agent. The one name I recognized on the tour roster was a fellow named Wadim Dicke, a Facebook acquaintance from Tomsk who was partial to my MoonJune albums, so that seemed a promising start. Once in Russia, I quickly found myself in an impromptu “band” together with Wadim on bass and his associate Yuri Turov on guitar; drummer Vasco Trilla, a Portuguese citizen based in Spain; and hurdy-gurdy player Marc Egea from Catalonia.

It must be stressed that nothing as bold as the MuzEnergO Tour had ever before been attempted in Russia. On top of the usual travails and complications that attend to concert tours anywhere, circumstances in Russia posed significant additional challenges, from the sheer distances covered in the world’s largest nation, to rugged conditions encountered in the farther reaches of Siberia, to the massive logistical headache of coordinating the activities of two dozen international musicians who spoke a Babel of languages, plus another dozen crew members. Moreover, Russia’s lingering legacy of suspicion, secrecy, and maze-like bureaucracy made it difficult to anticipate what kind of reception we might receive when our rolling menagerie pulled into an isolated community. Yet while this sometimes led to cancellations and more rigorous conditions than we’d bargained for, the great majority of our tour stops were pleasant experiences overall, and our exotic and sometimes demanding music was surprisingly well received.

By odd coincidence, the Sardinian instrumentalist and vocalist Dario Elia, an acquaintance for whom I'd once set up a show in Seattle, was flying in to join the tour the same day as me and would be my roommate throughout the tour. We met in Moscow, caught a heavy afternoon nap, and then flew on to the Siberian city of Irkutsk on a five-hour overnight flight; to get an idea of just how vast Russia truly is, we'd traversed just six of the country's eleven time zones. The tour bus was still several hours distant in the lakeside community of Baikalsk, where the musicians were preparing for a concert that night at a ski resort perched above fabled Lake Baikal, an immense inland sea that holds a staggering one-fifth of the world's fresh water and is home to the planet's only landlocked seals. (We were fortunate to spot some a few days later.)

Dario and I were met at the chaotic Irkutsk airport by three young rockers that Iouri had engaged to transport us to Baikalsk. The ensuing thrill ride, involving several close calls passing trucks on narrow mountain roadways, was pretty rough on my jet-lagged nerves but proved to be a pretty accurate preview of driving conditions throughout Siberia. On arriving at the resort, a modest guesthouse set in typical Siberian pine and birch woods, I quickly bonded with my new collaborators Wadim and Yuri and ascertained that I shared some mutual friends with a few of the other international musicians, notably the ubiquitous Zelig-like figure Leonardo Pavkovic, head of the label I record for, the fiercely independent New York-based MoonJune Records, and the person truly responsible for setting in motion the chain of events that brought me to Russia.

It all started innocuously enough in 2009, when I made my first direct purchase from MoonJune, who'd issued a rare archival release by Soft Machine, one of my all-time favorite bands. Leonardo was kind enough to personally notify me that the title was on backorder, so I took the opportunity to compliment him on his label, home to exemplary creative artists of many stripes from all over the world, united in their disdain for commercialism and desire to chart their own paths. He became curious and clicked the link to my website, where the first thing that caught his interest was my background playing music in China, documented in my book *Live at the Forbidden City: Musical Encounters in China and Taiwan*. It turned out that Leonardo, a multilingual, globe-spanning traveler for whom the term "peripatetic" hardly does justice, had traveled around China well before I had. I offered to send him a copy of the book and he was quite taken with it, but I resisted foisting off any of my music on him, preferring not to shamelessly solicit his interest but instead let things come naturally. The book piqued his curiosity, and he asked what I was up to musically. It happened that right around that time my primary band Moraine completed its first recording, so I sent the demo his way. He dug the music and asked what plans I had for it; I replied that I was seeking a home for it. "Why don't you put it out on MoonJune?" he asked. I was stunned – and my life changed dramatically from that day forward.

In due time Moraine's debut album was released and Leonardo sent a couple hundred copies to music critics and enthusiasts around the world. One of them was Iouri Lnogradski, and now here I was on the shores of Lake Baikal.

In person, I found Iouri oddly distant, in contrast to our warm correspondence of the past few years, both at this first meeting and right through the tour. He later explained that he'd made an explicit decision not to fraternize with the enlisted men, so to speak, for the length of the journey, to forestall any appearances of favoritism and keep his focus on the challenging tasks at hand. Our rapport has only grown stronger over time, and I consider Iouri a true friend and a key enabler in my musical life.

In addition to those already mentioned, the tour participants at the time of my arrival included two Swiss bands, SchnellerTollerMeier and the Simon Spiess Trio; from Barcelona, drummer Vasco Trilla and hurdy-gurdy player / vocalist Marc Egea, and from Madrid, guitarist Angel Ontalva; the Finnish duo of reed player Jorma Tapio and drummer Janne Tuomi; British guitarist/producer Leo Abrahams and U.S. drummer Chris Vatalaro; French *nyckelharpa* (a Scandinavian stringed instrument) player Aliocha Regnard and flautist Patrick Rudant (billed as “Alysma”); Armenian flautist Valery Tolstov with a Swiss rhythm section of bassist Beat Gisler and drummer Lionel Friedli (“Authentic Light Orchestra”); and from France, the Mad Kluster Trio featuring trumpet player Fred Roudet, drummer Bruno Tocanne, and guitarist / MuzEnergO musical director Alain Blesing – quite the polyglot entourage. Various others had already left the tour by the time I joined several weeks into it. Apart from Chris, a longtime U.S. expat based in London, I was the sole American presence on the tour. Prior to my arrival I’d wondered if my nationality would provoke any hostility from Russians or others – tensions were running high just then because of the Russian invasion of Crimea and other developments – but happily it was a complete non-issue from start to finish, as these things generally are between musicians. I did find it amusing, though, that my official sponsor was the U.S.–Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, as then-President Obama and Russian despot Vladimir Putin were hardly on the best of terms at the time. But as my Embassy contacts emphasized, what better reason could there be for sincere, well-intentioned cultural-exchange efforts like MuzEnergO?

Not a single one of us played anything remotely mainstream or commercially accessible. Every participant, in his way, was a dedicated explorer of the farther reaches of the musical cosmos – even those who explicitly drew on traditional forms – investigating unorthodox sounds and techniques, open improvisation, advanced compositional ideas, and bold fusions of disparate musical streams. Nor were any of us prominent “names,” for an important aspect of Iouri’s vision was to shine a light on lesser-known but equally deserving artists (though economics certainly factored in as well).

My considerable apprehension over performing that very night with first-time collaborators and literally no game plan – given our inability to rehearse in person, we’d opted to freely improvise instead – was dispelled when Iouri summarily canceled the concert after sound check because the shyster promoter of this “Moto Festival” (an actual biker rally) failed to materialize or even return calls. (Not to mention that by show time, just a single audience member had shown up.) The news came as a relief to most of us, as we’d visualized any number of alarming scenarios that might have played out with the combustible combination of drunken bikers and avant-garde musicians.

Freed from the night’s responsibilities, I walked down to the lakeshore with a group from the bus, strolled around the startlingly impoverished village of Baikalsk, and then passed a couple of pleasant hours quaffing beers outside the guesthouse, enjoying the lingering high-latitude light. Just as I was readying to get a solid night’s sleep for the first time in days, members of the Swiss band SchnellerTollerMeier (“Louder, Faster, Harder!” and a pun on their surnames) invited me to accompany them to a bar they’d discovered nearby. I politely declined, pleading exhaustion, but they wouldn’t hear of it, and I soon found myself in a cozy local watering hole with a mixed party of Swiss, Spanish, and Catalan musicians. Normally just a beer drinker, I’d promised myself ahead of the tour that under no circumstances would I let myself get drawn into one of the heavy vodka benders for which Russia is notorious. But my resolve cracked on that very first night, which ended with our staggering, cackling party struggling to carry the most besotted of the lot up three flights of steps to his room at 4 A.M. I gifted myself with an epic hangover for the duration of the following day, which wasn’t helped by the bus lurching and bouncing down long stretches of rough, unpaved Siberian highway, but mercifully I managed to avoid tangoing with the Vodka Spirit for the remainder of the tour.



The bus that was to become so familiar in the coming days was a Euro-style travel coach of German make, proudly emblazoned with “MuzEnergо Tour” in Cyrillic script on the signboard above the windshield. It was comfortable (and, crucially, climate-controlled) inside, ignoring that every spare centimeter was stuffed with instruments, other music gear, and personal effects. Larger items went in the cargo bays below. The bus was impressively piloted for many thousands of often challenging kilometers by our two superhuman drivers, Alexander and Sergey, who spelled each other at intervals and performed miraculous repairs on more than a few occasions. Rounding out the crew were Iouri’s indispensable assistant Daria Nikitskaya (“Dasha”), who provided translation and other support for our uppity assemblage of foreign devils with the patience of Job; sound man Wadim Pechkurov; tour videographer Anton Veselov and photographer Aleksey Akimov; and all-purpose roadie Dimi – a cheerful and easygoing crew to be sure. We seldom overnighed on the bus, except where the protracted Siberian distances made it necessary, but usually stayed in so-called rural “resorts,” shabby guesthouses, and grim former state hotels. To describe our lodgings as funky would be a supreme understatement, with their broken fixtures, malodorous commodes, and hardtack mattresses, but I mean no offense whatsoever and am in fact amazed at Iouri’s ability to conjure up accommodations for a party of 30-plus mostly foreign lodgers in locales far from the beaten tourist track. So far, indeed, that one of my wife Anne’s Russian English students, when told of my itinerary, responded that “the farther east you go in Russia, the more you travel back in time into the Soviet Union.”

Next up, and my first actual gig of the tour, was the Voice of Nomads Festival in Ulan Ude, the hub of Russia’s Buryat Republic, an ethnically Mongolian region bordering Mongolia to the south. An hour or so before reaching Ulan Ude, it became apparent that we were transitioning into a different sort of landscape than the endless taiga forests that cloak much of Siberia’s vastness. Here we were greeted by vistas of expansive, rolling grasslands spreading to the far horizon, punctuated here and there by swatches of forest and roofed with a brilliant cerulean sky – the very definition of horse country. Ulan Ude was the easternmost point reached by this year’s MuzEnergо Tour, a milestone we celebrated with a group photo at a monument marking the city boundary.

Voice of Nomads took place on a large outdoor stage in the gorgeous setting of the Ethnographical Museum of the Trans-Baikalian Peoples. The museum boasted numerous reconstructed traditional buildings ranging from a bark tepee of the forest-dwelling Evenks to a massively timbered church in the style of the Russian Old Believers, trimmed with the filigreed woodwork for which Siberia is famed. Craftspeople and food vendors had set up booths throughout the grounds, and the day’s pleasantly dry

air and golden light made for idyllic surroundings. The only annoyance was a troupe of Hare Krishna zealots who rudely interrupted the music with their mindless chanting.

As usual, our small army's sound check alone took hours – with so many musicians, we typically broke down into seven or eight discrete groups, some of them fixed, others loose transitory collaborations encouraged by Iouri. With each group allotted a 25-minute set, this translated to up to four hours of continuous musical performances. That much music would normally exhaust even the hardest listeners back in our home countries, but almost everywhere we performed, the Russian audiences took it all in stride and remained focused and enthusiastic for the duration – truly a dream gig for those of us who hailed from more attention-challenged societies. Another revelation was the number of women in the audience at all the concerts we played, usually comprising far more than half of the attendees. This was truly a reversal of the normal order for musicians accustomed to playing mostly for men in such stereotypically male-dominated scenes as free jazz and progressive rock, and was wonderfully refreshing. When I mentioned this to an Embassy staff member after the tour, she replied, “More women than men at events is always the case here. . . . Well, if you go to a football game, you will see few women, but at all cultural events, women are a majority.” Intriguing food for speculation to be sure.

For all its isolation, Voice of Nomads was an impressively well-run festival and included a number



Ulan Ude, easternmost point on the 2014 MuzEnergO Tour (Aleksey Akimov)

of relatively well-known acts from Russia, Europe, China, and even Africa. The festival generously gave over an entire day to us (with a Buryat rock band opening), with the MuzEnergо extravaganza stretching out for a full 5-6 hours. It was a big leap of faith for the festival organizers, who had no idea what kind of music to expect from MuzEnergо – Iouri generally thought it best to lump it all under the shorthand of “jazz” – at an event that was decidedly shaded toward world-music fusion tinged with New Age trappings. The audience was a revelation, equal parts “European” Russians and Asiatic Buryats; to my surprise and delight, I saw many of the two mixing freely as friends, a stark contrast to my experiences in China in the late 1980s, when ethnic minorities were generally shunned by the Han majority. Colorful garments in the native Mongolian style were on display, alongside rainbow-dyed hair and hippie garb, a couple of young gals made up as zombies, and a jolly lama in luminous yellow Buddhist robes who persistently bummed cigarettes off the musicians. Once nearly stamped out by the Soviets, Buddhism in the Tibetan lineage had recently made a remarkable comeback in Siberia, particularly here in Buryatia where brilliantly-hued new temples were springing up left and right.



Zombie gals, Voice of Nomads Festival, Ulan-Ude, Buryatia (Aleksy Akimov)

I readied for my first MuzEnergо performance with some trepidation after having witnessed the striking virtuosity of the previous acts. Here in the moment, my cavalier decision to just show up and improvise began to seem overconfident, but I was buoyed by the fact that I had some very accomplished and simpatico collaborators; by this time Yuri, Wadim, and I had recruited the singular Barcelona-based drummer Vasco Trilla. But I hadn't anticipated getting derailed by technical issues. As the sole non-European player present, I was the only one who needed a foreign electrical converter to power my devices. I'd brought the converter and an array of foreign plug adapters but hadn't foreseen the difficulty of actually plugging the thing into the awkwardly recessed outlets that seemed to be the norm in Russia. Consequently, I lost power altogether five times during my inaugural MuzEnergо performance as the plug repeatedly tipped out of the outlet of its own weight. (I soon learned to place the whole contraption upside-down, or wrapped about with tape, for all subsequent gigs.) As if that weren't enough, I'd gotten the settings badly wrong on the unfamiliar borrowed amplifier, with the result that I was playing at about three times the desired volume and could barely hear what my mates were doing. I left the stage much chagrined about this anticlimactic first set, but was comforted by some of the other musicians who told me they'd genuinely enjoyed what we were doing. Nevertheless, a valuable lesson learned.

After the marathon concert wrapped up, our supremely gracious hosts treated us to a sprawling banquet in our honor, with a long central table straining beneath the weight of voluminous dishes of *pelmeni* (Siberian ravioli), steamed dumplings, assorted meats and vegetables, and copious amounts of wine and, of course, vodka. Milling around the table, I recognized the young Buryat rock band who'd preceded us on stage, whom I'd found surprisingly interesting musically, at one point even suggesting

the influence of King Crimson. I complimented them on their set, but all they wanted to talk about was how astounded they were by the MuzEnero players. “You have to understand,” the main guitarist told me, “this sort of thing never happens around here.” He went on to explain that Buryats like him were tired of being typecast as traditional Mongolian throat singers. “We’re connected to the world through the Internet, and listen to bands like King Crimson.” (A-ha! When I responded that I’d played with a couple of members of Crimson, he looked like he’d seen a ghost.) It was at this point that I fully realized the importance and impact of MuzEnero, and understood why Iouri went to such arduous lengths to make the tours happen. As in the opening passage of this section, it seemed to me that the most apt metaphor for MuzEnero was an alien spaceship landing unannounced in a remote and unlikely locale, disgorging outlandish beings bearing strange coded messages in a novel musical language. The festival director essentially acknowledged the same, thanking us profusely for giving the Voice of Nomads audience a fascinating glimpse into hitherto uncharted musical worlds, and remarking on the “seriousness” of the music. After much glad-handing and rounds of toasts, we ended the memorable day and headed back to our hotel – a onetime railroad workers’ “sanitarium” – for a 5 A.M. wake-up call and tomorrow’s all-day bus ride.

Far too early the next morning, we grumpily filed back onto the bus in the pearly pre-dawn light for the return journey to Lake Baikal, where we’d be spending a rare off-day at a modest lakeside resort on the southeastern shore. Having reached its Ultima Thule in Ulan Ude, the bus was now heading back westward for the first time since setting out from Moscow weeks earlier. After hours of jackhammering around in our seats on Russia’s principal cross-country highway, long stretches of which were seemingly under permanent construction – understandable for having been built atop permafrost – we reached the appealing chalet-style resort in the early afternoon. The place sported some odd features, such as a



Keeping the faith, resort on Lake Baikal (DR)

bust of Lenin on a plastic deck table and some moldering wolf, lynx, and brown bear pelts nailed to a fence. It was a welcome respite for our hard-working drivers and crew, who spent a relaxed afternoon swimming in the lake and basking beneath the warm midsummer sun. The rest of us kicked back, traded musical war stories, and enthused about shared musical interests. I was starting to bond with these guys. I’d only been in Russia for four days, yet it already seemed like a month. I’ve often observed how time seems to stretch when one travels, what the Indonesians refer to as “rubber time.”

Still smarting from my group’s disappointing improvisation in Ulan Ude, I reversed course and decided to build a set around some of my compositions, specifically some pieces influenced by traditional Chinese music, since Wadim was a big fan of my East Asia tribute [Views from Chicheng Precipice](#). The “busman’s holiday” gave us a much-needed opportunity to actually learn and practice the material before taking it on stage. From here on these tunes, with some semi-structured linking

passages and a short piece contributed by Wadim, would form the basis of our set. It was at this point that the incredible Catalan hurdy-gurdy player Marc Egea joined our ensemble, enriching our material with sonorous drones and filigreed melodic figures.

The next day we rounded the southern tip of the lake, crossed the broad Angara River that drains Baikal to the northwest, and checked in at our hotel for the next two nights, a once grand, now sadly faded edifice perched on a bluff above the pleasant lakeside resort village of Listvianka. After settling in, the tour party was summoned to the usual disappointing, commissary-style meal in a large, empty dining hall, but I left most of the indifferent fare untouched and slipped away with Dario to investigate the restaurants we'd seen lining the shore below. We hit the jackpot at an agreeable eatery where we spent a couple of pleasant hours sampling several varieties of Lake Baikal's signature dish, a delicious landlocked salmonid species known as *omul*.

A word about the tour food in general: Iouri had promised to provide us with three daily meals and accommodations for the length of our stay in Russia. While he never failed to deliver on his pledge, the expense of feeding three dozen people meant that we typically subsisted on rather humble and monotonous fare, partly a consequence of the local Siberian geography, where a fleetingly short growing season and acidic soil yielded mostly hardy root vegetables such as potatoes, turnips, and carrots. *Pelmeni*, a sort of Siberian meat-filled ravioli, was available at most of our stops, as were the ubiquitous nondescript meatballs that led one member of our party to dub us the "Meatball Warriors." As one of the extremely rare souls who have a pronounced aversion to onions, I quickly discovered to my dismay that the pungent bulbs are a prominent ingredient in virtually every Russian dish, but at least I fared better than the strict vegan Beat Gisler. Fortunately, we were able to periodically restock our personal food stashes at a number of excellent supermarkets en route.

Our next gig was one of a pair of shows at sister "Beer Loga" ("Bear Den") jazz clubs in the cities of Angarsk and Irkutsk. Initial impressions of Angarsk from the bus windows were not encouraging – with its belching smokestacks, a maze of petroleum pipelines raised above the ground to avoid the underlying permafrost, and a dismal aura of grit and decay, the city seemed the very embodiment of midcentury Soviet industrial blight. It therefore came as a surprise to find such a capacious, well-appointed jazz club in its midst. (Most U.S. cities would



Marc Egea (Aleksey Akimov)

be envious.) I again looked on amazed as a good-sized crowd of evidently sophisticated listeners took in nearly four hours of uncommonly varied and challenging music; the same was true of our show in Irkutsk the following night. Again, women made up the majority of the audiences.

We left Irkutsk directly after the gig on a long overnight bus journey to the small city of Kansk, where we were scheduled to play a concert at the municipal theater. Pitching and rolling in our seats for half a day on the badly corrugated highway left us feeling rather out of sorts when we tumbled out of the bus that afternoon in seedy Kansk, a regional administrative center in the sprawling Krasnoyarsk

Krai, a district of Russia that's twice the size of Alaska. This burg made Angarsk look like Monte Carlo, with its weedy public square filled with the homeless and destitute, swooping hawks, and a strangely disconsolate-looking bust of Lenin. The night's gig had been hastily arranged by Iouri just a day or two earlier, and the resultant lack of advance advertising had yielded just seven tickets sold. The officials who ran the theater actually tried to talk Iouri into canceling the concert altogether – truthfully, most of us would have preferred that as well, given the circumstances – but a persistent Iouri managed to salvage the booking. In the end, perhaps 30 people showed up in a theater that held hundreds – the one poorly attended gig on my leg of the tour. But one couldn't have asked for a more attentive, patient, and enthusiastic audience. I was especially pleased with my group's closing set, after which a little old *babushka* lady rose to her feet with lusty shouts of "Bravo!" – instantly dissolving all the trials and frustrations of the road. Connecting with people like this across yawning cultural divides is truly what it's all about in the end.



Yuri Turov, Beer Loga, Angarsk (Aleksey Akimov)

Fortified with late-night pizza and beer, we set off around midnight for our next destination, the rural agricultural township of Dzerzhinskoye, where we were to play the inaugural "Iron Felix" Festival. Now we were getting way off the beaten path, as illustrated by our primitive accommodations. We arrived in the middle of the night at a long wooden building that seemed more like a barracks than a guesthouse and were assigned to spartan rooms furnished with military-style plywood beds cushioned with inch-thick mattresses. The rustic guesthouse was served by a pair of outhouses that were like the very gates of Hell, reached via a treacherous, slippery plank walkway; we desperately struggled to hold our breath when making a visit. The single shower was filled calf-deep with murky water by the time 20-some people had bathed. And as was typically – and probably deliberately – the case, the guesthouse was situated in an isolated locale beyond walking distance from any place of interest. Iouri later admitted that his strategy had been to force us to live together in close quarters to promote family-style camaraderie and collaboration, rather than allow us to scatter and form cliques. It was also no doubt a wise decision not to set loose a bunch of foreign nationals in rural Russia, where our presence might have been treated with suspicion.

Speaking of which, everyone seemed to have made a tacit decision not to discuss Russian politics with our hosts and crew to avoid placing them in an uncomfortable position. This required some restraint, since worshipful posters of Putin festooned public spaces everywhere we went, especially in the more conservative rural precincts. I looked on as a couple of the guys laughed at one particularly imperious portrait of Putin in the common area of the Dzerzhinskoye guesthouse, then noticed the Russian caretaker scowling daggers at them, no doubt confirmed in his view of our foreign iniquity.

We awoke the next morning to torrential rain tattooing the guesthouse roof and cascading off the eaves. Even a quick dash to the outhouse turned one into a sponge. The soggy weather system seemed

to have settled in for the long haul, putting us in no mood to play an open-air festival the next day. Our disposition didn't improve when we drove out to inspect the venue in a heavy downpour, the bus threading its way around muddy craters on the dirt road leading to the festival site, a meadow surrounded by woodland. A small covered stage in the center of the field offered no real protection against the hammering rain, and rebellious thoughts began to fester as we huddled beneath a compact grandstand eating cups of kasha porridge ladled out of a wagon. No way were we going to play in



Iron Felix Festival, Dzerzhinskoye (DR)

these conditions – we'd just stay put in the miserable guesthouse and drink beer all day instead.

Presently our gracious hosts brought us to the township's new art museum, a source of great pride for the locals and filled with a surprisingly impressive collection of works by regional artists. It gradually became clear that the people of Dzerzhinskoye had invested high hopes in both the art museum and their new music festival in a bid to attract interest and investment to their neglected district. It was a big deal to them to have accomplished foreign musicians travel so far out of their way to perform at their festival; realizing this quelled our mutinous thoughts.

After a long afternoon and evening cooped up in the sodden guesthouse, we arose in the morning to find the rain mercifully giving way to glorious weather, restoring our spirits and desire to play. We drove back out to the now bucolic meadow, where the second day of the Iron Felix Festival was getting underway. (Some poor rock bands had actually performed for a handful of hardy souls during the previous day's downpour.) The festival, and the township itself, were named after "Iron Felix" Dzerzhinsky, a prominent official in early Soviet times who'd left a decidedly mixed legacy, as both the head of the sinister Cheka security apparatus that preceded the KGB, and as a generous benefactor for orphaned youths. A controversial figure to this day, he seemed to remain popular among the people of this locality.

The MuzErgo musicians filled the sunny afternoon with our usual perplexing blend of instrumental adventurism, perhaps not what the rock-oriented audience was expecting, but well received just the same. Well, mostly – during my group's performance, a young man in the audience persistently cheered and called for more in an exaggerated fashion; I smiled in his direction, glad to have won a fan. But when our set ended, one of the Russian crew members turned to me and said, "Pay no attention to him, he's a fascist asshole" – it turned out that he'd been yelling anti-American insults at me the whole time. Fortunately, this sort of hostility was extremely rare in my experience.

Afterwards we discovered that the bus had suffered a major malfunction that day, and watched in dismay as Sergey and Alexander crawled beneath its undercarriage in a valiant effort to repair a problem with an axle. The rest of us were ferried back to the wretched guesthouse by volunteers, despondent at the prospect of spending another night there, but to our great jubilation the repaired bus arrived a

couple of hours later. Before setting out for our next stop, Krasnoyarsk, we attended a lavish banquet in our honor at the town hall, hosted by district officials who plied us with vodka toasts to international friendship and cooperation. At one point the district chief actually implored us to encourage businesspeople in our home countries to invest in Dzerzhinskoye – as though avant-garde musicians like ourselves had any such lofty connections. Toward the end of the meal I rose and toasted our hosts in gratitude for their truly gracious hospitality, to which the district chief replied, “This man is a true Russian” – !

It was a funny statement, of course, but I couldn’t help feeling a small flush of satisfaction, for by then I’d realized that I’d irretrievably fallen in love with Russia, warts and all.

We arrived in Krasnoyarsk in the wee hours of the morning and toppled wearily into our beds in a downtown hotel. A large city on the banks of the mighty Yenisey River that descends from mysterious Tuva in the Central Asian highlands to the south, Krasnoyarsk was a pleasant municipality of broad, tree-lined streets, handsome buildings, and smartly accoutered shops. The city was strikingly cosmopolitan compared to our other stops in Siberia; I was even able to enjoy an espresso that would have done a Seattle barista proud.

We were all looking forward to that evening’s concert in the grand State Philharmonic Hall, the largest, most opulent venue we played on my leg of the tour. The sold-out concert didn’t disappoint, as each act delivered a strong set to rapturous applause – one excited onlooker told me that it was the “event of the year” in the city. I was very happy with my own group’s set, likely the best of the tour and a tantalizing indication of how the group might have developed had we been able to continue our collaboration, but sadly, Wadim and Yuri now had to leave us to return to their nearby hometown of Tomsk, while the rest of us readied for tomorrow’s flight back to Moscow and the final shows of the tour.

Happily, it wouldn’t be the last I’d see of Yuri, or especially Wadim, who would become a very dear friend and key collaborator. A kind, thoughtful, and very erudite man, Wadim is not only a masterful musician whose tastes mirror mine and whose grasp of theory far exceeds my own, but also a deep student of science, technology, and the natural world. Indeed, we spent as much time jawing about geography and wildlife as we did music.

Before we parted ways, the entire MuzEnergO cast had a chance to perform together in a memorable mass improvisation conducted by Marc Egea as the finale of the Krasnoyarsk concert. Marc artfully sculpted the music with dramatic gestures, teasing out solos and modulating group dynamics as he steered us toward a volcanic climax to vigorous applause.

By the following afternoon, the remaining tour participants were all back in Moscow after morning flights. (Alexander and Sergey would drive the bus the remaining several thousand kilometers back from Krasnoyarsk.) That night we would wrap up MuzEnergO 2014 at one of Moscow’s leading jazz venues, the Alexei Kozlov Jazz Club, where in the absence of Wadim and Yuri I played an exhilarating duo improvisation with the marvelous French drummer Bruno Tocanne. Crawling across impossible city traffic in an airport taxi, I reflected on the marvelous, life-changing events of the previous weeks, bone-weary but extremely grateful for the remarkable opportunity to play music in such improbable places, with such formidable musicians, and to forge what were certain to be lifelong friendships. Most of all, it was the warm reactions of Russian listeners to our alien music that I’ll remember with the

TUVA AND BUSTED BY DENNIS REA

greatest pleasure. Born and raised a child of the Cold War, I'd seen more clearly than ever how music and friendship – simple human contact – make a mockery of all our overheated political posturing.

When offered a chance to return for the next year's tour, I accepted without a moment's hesitation.



Mass conduction, Krasnoyarsk

CHAPTER 3

“NOT THE PATH OF WISDOM”: MUZENERGO 2015

In July 2015, I embarked on my second MuzEnergo Tour of Russia, this time accompanied by my Seattle-based bandmates in Moraine, Alicia and James DeJoie, and again generously sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. Performing as “Russian Moraine” with the formidable rhythm section of Russian bassist Wadim Dicke and Swiss drummer Lionel Friedli (named Swiss Jazz Musician of the Year that same year), for two weeks we performed Moraine repertoire for audiences in locales large and small across a swath of Siberia spanning from Novosibirsk in the west to Krasnoyarsk in the east, logging roughly 2,000 road miles in the process. That might sound like a lot of mileage, but Iouri’s audacious (if not insane) goal that year was to take the tour all the way to Russia’s Pacific coast, a journey about twice the length of the contiguous United States.

I went into this second tour thinking it would be a very tall order to surpass the thrill of the previous edition, but the 2015 outing proved even more transformational because this time we would actually perform in... Tuva! If you had told me back when I was first listening to Tuvan music a quarter-century earlier that I would one day perform there myself, I would have questioned your sanity. And trust me, it gets weirder still.



Tour poster, Tomsk (DR)

The DeJoies and I joined the tour in Novosibirsk, Russia's third-largest metropolis and frankly a rather drab and unwelcoming town. We'd flown for 20-plus hours across more than a dozen time zones; I've still never been more travel-fatigued in my life. Half of the DeJoies' luggage had gone missing (but thankfully not the instruments), and we were scheduled to play our first set ever with Wadim and Lionel that same night, at a student center on the local university campus. Worse yet, there were lots of acts on the bus at the time, and Iouri had decreed that we go on last, playing the tenth of ten 20-minute sets.

WANTED

an international musical act that calls itself

RUSSIAN MORAINES

(meaning unknown, possibly Native American slang)

for serious and systematic assaults on commercial pop music
with live instruments, spoken word and arrangements involved



Gang leader. Calls himself **Dennis Rea** although it's known for sure his official passport nickname given by his parents is *Black*. Plays guitar. Extremely dangerous when it involves advanced English. Was seen at Seattle, USA. Strongly suspected in having dayjob.



Alicia De Joie. The only gang's lady whose role is to charm victims that progrock is of no harm for them. Still, plays violin which proves the level of danger. Was seen at Seattle, USA, secretly buying groceries on the street from dealers.



Known as **James De Joie** but this is supposed attempt to mislead the forces with mixing names with Alicia De Joie. Skilled woodwind player, but has problems in a smoky atmosphere. Openly claims his involvement with "many, many bands".



Lionel Friedli also known as *Leonid Mirkov* in Russian criminal music circles. Uses drums with violent energy and knows no mercy for listeners ears, most probably due to his Swiss origins and professional training at governmental assassin program.



Merchenary for Russian deals, **Wadim Dicke**, plays bass guitar. Covers himself behind the official network hardware or software specialist, job too complicated to cause questions. Speaks Russian, English, supposedly Portuguese. Vegetarian.

Supposed to plan next action at Russian territory of Siberia, July 12-26, 2015, with proven support from US Embassy in Russia and Swiss culture council ProHelvetia. BEWARE.

contact <http://tour.muzenergo.ru> for more info

Iouri's prank poster for Russian Moraine

circumstances. We somehow roused ourselves and sleepwalked through our set, the first time we'd played the Moraine tunes with Lionel and Wadim. I was enormously relieved and impressed that they'd gotten the music down cold with nothing more than recordings and charts to go by.

Russian Moraine hit its stride at the next night's show, in Barnaul, the administrative center of Altai Krai, where we played a spirited and energetic set propelled by Lionel's fantastic drumming. Even the usually impassive Iouri was apparently wowed, and the audience's enthusiasm was palpable. After a

The other tour members gave us an amiable welcome, and in refreshing contrast to the previous year's almost uniformly male lineup, this year's squad included several distinguished female musicians. I enjoyed gladsome reunions with 2014 tour vets Wadim, Lionel, Alain Blesing, and Angel Ontalva, who'd come back for more punishment. Other conspirators on our leg of the tour included vocalists and multi-instrumentalists Andrina Bollinger and Marena Witcher, flautist Claudie Boucau, clarinetist Simon Wyrsh, saxophonist Eric Pailhe, and the dragon-breathed free-jazz trio Cactus Truck. Most of them had already been on the bus for a few weeks.

Long past midnight at the burnt end of a grindingly long evening, the DeJoies and I were actually dead asleep behind the stage just moments before we were to go on – so much for the customary nervousness that attends performing in unfamiliar circumstances.

subsequent show in Berdsk, we doubled back to Novosibirsk for the night. I went to bed feeling elated about the new lineup and eager for more action.

When mustering in the hotel lobby the next morning waiting for the bus to depart – the same familiar, much-loved coach as last year, I'd been pleased to find – a very pale-looking Lionel approached and informed me that he probably wouldn't be able to play that night's gig because he'd injured his hand. He sheepishly explained that he'd been horsing around with some of the other musicians late the previous night and had fallen on his arm in a harmful way. I fought off panic, suggesting that perhaps the injury would heal in time for the evening's concert, but the grim expression on Lionel's face telegraphed its severity. My heart sank; if the trauma was that serious, it seemed likely that he wouldn't be able to play any more shows with us period, which would effectively kill Russian Moraine's tour when we were just getting started. We had seven more shows ahead of us – what a nasty bit of luck.

Lionel's injury would need further evaluation once we reached our next destination, Tomsk, but right now we had to figure out how we were going to salvage tonight's set at a large university performance hall. (Tomsk was once dubbed the "Siberian Athens" due to its many institutes of higher learning.) Of the 20-some musicians on the bus, there were only two other drummers: Nicolas Stocker, a Swiss percussionist who played in Marena Whitcher's Shady Midnight Orchestra



Nicolas Stocker backstage in Tomsk (DR)

(as well as Nik Bärtsch's internationally acclaimed Mobile), and Onno Govaert from Amsterdam-based Cactus Truck. I approached Nicolas first and asked if he'd sub for Lionel on just a few hours' notice, which would require familiarizing himself with several complicated pieces. To my immense relief, he cheerfully agreed. I provided charts and MP3s, and that evening Nicolas executed the tunes on stage as though he'd been playing them for months, a remarkable display of swift adaptation.

Meanwhile, a doctor's examination confirmed the worst: Lionel's injury was indeed serious, and he would fly back to Switzerland that very night. And my relief over recruiting Nicolas proved extremely short-lived when I learned that he, too, would be leaving the tour to return to Switzerland the following day as planned. I salute Nicolas for his grace, poise, and consummate musicianship and have been delighted to see him win increasing renown in the years since for such work as his brilliant duo collaboration with vocalist Areni Agabian, *Bloom*, on the eminent ECM label.

The concert in Tomsk, a city I would grow fond of, was notable for other reasons as well. For one, it was the hometown of Wadim and my 2014 bandmate Yuri Turov, with whom I was happily reunited. It was clearly a big moment for Wadim to appear on a large hometown stage with such a sterling cast of international musicians, and his friends congratulated him effusively afterward. For me, it was yet another comedy of technical errors. We'd been preceded on stage by the titanicly loud Cactus Truck, and only when I struck the first note of our opening number did I realize that their bassist had left the shared amplifier's volume turned up literally to 10. My guitar was so frightfully loud that I immediately hurried back to the amp to turn it down, only to be brought up short because my cable wasn't long enough for me to reach the controls. With the amp howling, I had to awkwardly put the guitar down on the floor in mid-song and try again. We soon recovered, but after the tour ended,

Wadim sent a link to a Tomsk TV program that featured footage of our set, and there I was, erupting in feedback and scuttling back and forth to the amp all over again, my technical blunder preserved on video for posterity.

Other impressions of our stop in Tomsk include the restaurant where we ate after the concert, a pasta joint attached to a popular disco. We were quite taken aback to be searched for weapons on entering the establishment, and for some reason one of the guys was sent back to the bus to change his shoes. What kind of restaurant was this, exactly? The dance floor was filled with threatening-looking musclebound dudes with shaved heads who cast an evil eye on our obviously foreign party as the sound system throbbed savagely. We took refuge in the adjacent restaurant with relief – until those naughty provocateurs Cactus Truck decided to return to the dance floor and dance with *each other* in this infamously homophobic country. I braced for the worst as I waited forever to order a beer while the barman pointedly ignored me. Miraculously, no blows were exchanged, though I was left with the indelible image of a photographic mural running the length of the men's room wall, depicting life-size naked women posing with chainsaws and automatic weapons.

I sensed a slightly darker vibe in general this year than last. Before I'd joined the tour, a Spanish musician had been assaulted while walking around one tour stop, presumably because of his long hair, rarely sighted on a male in Russia. Luckily, some of the crew intervened before any real damage was done, but it was a bit of a wake-up call. I also heard about the belligerent military veteran who'd confronted the Cactus Truck guys in a bar, stormed out in a huff, and was later spotted striding back toward the watering hole with a rifle, but our friends had already left. He'd taken them for Americans (one was, but had been outside the country for years) and was hotly denouncing the U.S. over sanctions and so on. Things boiled over when one of the musicians pointed out to the guy that he was wearing a Ralph Lauren logo t-shirt designed – where else? – in the U.S. of A.

Nationalism was definitely on the rise in Russia, together with a partisan element of “Russian Limbaughs” – and indeed was sweeping the world. Little did I foresee that it would soon come home



Hotel swimming pool outside Abakan, 2015 MuzEnergO Tour (DR)

to roost in my own country, with grave consequences that still throw an ominous shadow as I write this.

With Lionel and Nicolas' exits, our only hope for continuing the tour was Onno Govaert. I fairly pleaded with the Dutch drummer to join us for the remaining dates, and he literally saved our tour by accepting the mission. I was happily surprised because I'd only seen

him play with the sonic wrecking crew that were Cactus Truck, who specialized in entirely unstructured improvisation at full blast, whereas Moraine's music was fussily composed and arranged. But like Nicolas before him, Onno quickly assimilated the music and imbued it with his own style and personality. I owe him a thousand obeisances for generously rescuing us in our time of need.

In total, nine new musicians passed through the ranks of Moraine on the tour, as we freely

experimented with new lineups and arrangements in the best MuzEnergó spirit, including even the addition of two vocalists for the first time in our instrumental outfit's decade-long tenure. We'd invited Electra Forever (Andrina and Marena from Shady Midnight Orchestra) to do a [cameo](#) with us after overhearing them singing the melody of Jim's tune "Irreducible Complexity" backstage during sound check. It became a habit to reweave the various tour participants into each other's groups, with constantly shifting results, with a net benefit to all involved.

Once again, local audiences were uncommonly receptive to the MuzEnergó menagerie's diversiform, sometimes bracing musical offerings – not least the lovely woman who came on stage and planted a kiss on my surprised cheek as the last tendrils of "The Okanogan Lobe" faded away into the rafters in Achinsk. But audiences were noticeably smaller this year, at least on my short segment of the tour. Had the novelty of the *outré* presentation strategy worn off? Or was it just that most Siberians were understandably spending the late-summer holiday season basking at some lake with the family? No matter the size of the audience, from well-remembered Sharypovo to Sayanogorsk to Shushenskoye, I can't thank the listeners enough for their broad-mindedness and willingness to engage with the unpredictable, in this day and age.

Far and away the strangest and most unlikely experience of the 2015 tour was our visit to Tuva. Readers will recall that my earliest exposure to Tuvan music had been way back in the early 1990s in Taiwan, when the possibility of my visiting the isolated republic, let alone performing there, seemed about as remote as journeying to the Crab Nebula. Yet here I was, en route to the fabled land of throat singers for a concert engagement with my own band.

I always find it more satisfying when transformative life events unfold through serendipity rather than any deliberate striving on my part. In the present case, my improbable ticket to Tuva fell in my lap because I'd signed up for another MuzEnergó Tour of Russia, and it just so happened that the ambitious itinerary included a festival in Tuva. So when it came time to choose the dates of my participation – I could only get away for two weeks – I of course made certain that they included the portion in Tuva.

I was aware that the first tour had stopped in Tuva in 2013, and that Iouri shared my fascination with the culture and landscape. Wadim later suggested that my keen interest in the place had influenced Iouri's decision to go back in 2015. If so, I'm eternally beholden to him for weighing my interests in his planning, but perhaps not so thankful for certain events that followed, though they were surely no fault of Iouri's.

Setting out southward from low-lying Khakassia, the bus labored over the soaring Sayan Mountains in splendid summer weather as it made its way to Tuva, pausing now and then for a snack or a swim in



Prayer flags, Tuva-Khakassia border pass (DR)

one the region's clear-flowing rivers. The landscape here reminded me of my beloved Cascade Range in the Pacific Northwest, or western Canada. At length we dramatically broke out of the trees and crested an alpine pass that marked the divide between Khakassia and the Tuva Republic. In all directions lay soul-swelling vistas of undulating grassy mountains radiating into the distance. This was quintessential equestrian high country, carpeted with what looked from a distance like felted billiard-table cloth. I fancied that I could descry the outlines of the still higher Altai Mountains in the far southwest, long considered the abode of spirits and the site of the legendary metaphysical kingdom of Shambhala – how I yearned to follow the airy emerald ridges in that direction. We stopped here to celebrate the occasion, hiking up a nearby tor crowned with riotously hued prayer flags flapping loudly in the “wind of the world's nest.”

The bus descended the zig-zag road from the pass into the valley of a tributary of the Yenisey, passing the occasional herdsman's summer camp dotted with yurts and livestock, including the odd camel. We broke the journey for a few pleasant hours enjoying a rustic barbecue beside the stream while some of our party braved the cold, swift-running waters. Late in the afternoon we drew near our destination, the small city of Chadan, considered the spiritual heart of the Tuvan homeland. It was here that the Tuvans rebuilt the first of many Buddhist temples that had been destroyed by the Soviets in their anti-religious fervor. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Dalai Lama visited Tuva to restore long-sundered ties between the Tuvans and Tibetans, catalyzing an ongoing revival of Tibetan Buddhist practices that led to the rebuilding of the ruined Ustuu Khuree temple in Chadan. The cultural festival of the same



The past and present Ustuu Khuree temples, Chadan, Tuva (Shirshova Inna)

name where we'd soon play had been founded in 1999 to attract support for the rebuilding effort and fan the Tuvan cultural renaissance. The festival has grown steadily since then and attracts a growing number of attendees and performers from outside Tuva.

As we were pulling into Chadan, Iouri issued a stern warning over the bus intercom: “I'm sure that some of you will be happy to hear that Tuva is a center for cannabis trafficking in Russia, but I caution you not to indulge unless you want to spend the minimum five years in prison.” Whoa! Coming from

Washington state where cannabis is legal, it's startling to be reminded that in the backward thinking of governments like Russia's, such an innocuous "offense" is still treated like a serious crime. Iouri further warned us that alcohol and even cigarettes were forbidden at the religious-themed festival, where we'd effectively be prisoners for the next few days. This didn't go down well with many tour participants who loved to cap off a gig with a gusher of beer each night. The food selection on hand was rather meager as well, unless you were inclined toward exotic offal like the Bourdainesque members of Cactus Truck.

Another condition of each year's Ustuu Khuree is that all nonlocal attendees, including the performers, camp outside for the duration of the event. Iouri had prepared for this by purchasing cheap tents and sleeping bags for everyone in Abakan prior to setting out for Tuva. A small area had been set aside as our campground in the larch forest surrounding the festival site; unfortunately, the camp was downwind of the handful of outhouses that served all present, wafting pestilential vapors our way as the commodes saw increasing use over the course of the event. All of the non-Tuvan visitors, including an assortment of Russian and European hippies and "spiritual" types, looked to have been corralled in this part of the festival grounds. Now and then a masked shaman wandered among the



MuzEnergо campsite, Ustuu Khuree Festival, Chadan, Tuva (DR)

neighboring campsites, shaking a rattle. As darkness fell, we took to our tents and tried to get some sleep while the festival director delivered a stern monologue at high volume through a nearby p.a. system well into the night.

On our way to Chadan, Iouri had casually informed me that he'd nominated me to audition musicians trying out for the big event that weekend. I was stunned – weirdly, my path had now intersected with that of Paul Peña, of *Genghis Blues* legend. But where Peña had taken part in such a competition as a performer, I'd been asked to be a judge – !

Auditioning hopefuls was an Ustuu Khuree tradition, I learned from Alain Blesing, who'd been accorded the same honor in 2013 as the senior player on that MuzEnergy Tour. Iouri had put me forward this year because I had substantial layman's knowledge and keen interest in Tuvan throat singing, and Alain wanted no part of it after what he described as an exhausting experience. It sounded fun to me, and something I might be able to, well, write a book about someday. The festival website states that "The jury consists of specialists and famous musicians." I was neither, but I would give the mission my all out of appreciation and respect.

Just after unfurling myself from my cramped "two-person" tent in the morning – shared with the six-foot-six Wadim – I was introduced to Timur Dulush, a tall, burly Tuvan with a bronzed, wind-blown complexion. The brother of the festival's director, Timur led the Tuvan National Brass Band (yes, there is one) and was a key figure in the republic's music scene. He was outwardly gruff in personality but was an essentially honorable fellow in my limited experience. Timur took me to meet my fellow jurors, all Russians who spoke very little English save one (and why should they?). Most were from Krasnoyarsk, the biggest city in the wider region, located a full day's drive downstream straddling the banks of the broad Yenisey River. The panelists included Luba, a middle-aged educator who led a traditional women's choral ensemble; Yuri, a locally famous "rock star" guitarist, I was told; and Ivan, a talented young drummer who bravely translated for us. Timur installed us in a small pavilion in the center of a broad field where they'd built a small stage for the auditions, giving us notepads so we could jot down our observations.

As the blazing mid-continental sun climbed to its July zenith, the auditions commenced, interrupted by sudden passing rain squalls. I had no idea what to expect, except that there would obviously be a good deal of throat-singing going down. And was there ever – I thought I'd heard a good variety of throat singers on records in my time, but it hadn't prepared me for this. There were master practitioners and audibly raw amateurs; elders and youths; men and women (the latter a recent and welcome departure from tradition); and even a Japanese fellow who'd traveled all this way to put his throat singing to the test a la Paul Peña. There were practitioners of the *kargyraa*, *khoomoi*, and *sygyt* styles; groups of multiple throat singers; and mixed vocal and instrumental ensembles. At first, I felt acutely self-conscious evaluating purveyors of an unfamiliar tradition – who was I to "judge" these people? – but as audition followed audition, it grew easier to distinguish the truly gifted from those still working it out, in terms of projection, steadiness, and ability to effortlessly "surf" the overtone series.

And it wasn't just throat singers auditioning, but a whole gamut of traditional and modern musicians. Acts paraded across the stage playing roughly 10-minute do-or-die sets. Along the way we were treated to a fresh-faced Tuvan boy band from Chadán, a New-Agey world-music fusion ensemble from the Altai Republic, Russian folk musicians, and multiple rock groups. Notable among them were a Siberian metal band that looked like they'd stepped out of the pages of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, with female singers garbed in flowing traditional dresses keening in close harmony while a guitarist with waist-length hair shredded like a permafrost Yngwie Malmsteen. One local band paid moving tribute to the legacy of recently deceased Tuvan rock pioneer Alexander Sarzhat-Ool, who spent 22 years in Soviet prisons for his outspoken activism on his people's behalf. And naturally there were the few wannabes like the cheesy Russian lounge entertainer who was quickly cut off by Timur after she started singing "Fly Me to the Moon" accompanied by a tacky lounge keyboard and obnoxious drum machine.

Earlier in the day, I'd found myself sharing a table in the lunch tent with some friendly Tuvans who'd come to audition with their family band. The adorable and fearless nine-year-old daughter volunteered that she was going to sing the Tina Turner megahit "Simply the Best" – I rolled my eyes inwardly, dismayed at the contagion of overproduced Western pop music even here in the "Land of Eagles." But when the tiny girl trod the audition stage later that afternoon, I couldn't believe what



Siberian metal band auditions, Ustuu Khuree Festival, Tuva (DR)

came out of her mouth – damn, this gal had some pipes! I dubbed her “Tina Tuva” on the spot. When she sang on the festival main stage that weekend, I heard her introduced over the public-address system as “Tina Tuva” – successful meme implantation!

Before the auditions, I’d told Timur and my fellow judges that I would listen carefully to all contenders without prejudice and base my judgments on “musical excellence and imagination.” Everyone nodded without comment. As the afternoon progressed, I filled page after page of my notebook with observations but soon noticed that I was the only one taking notes. Between tryouts, Timur would beckon us to the nearby woods to discuss our findings – and smoke forbidden cigarettes (he was the worst transgressor). I would argue the merits or flaws of this or that performer but got little feedback from the others either way. Eventually we took some straw polls to winnow out the semifinalists from the rest, and a pattern emerged: Many aspirants were being promoted to the big stage for political and sentimental reasons rather than unalloyed musical quality. I could critique their performances as objectively as I liked, but it was soon clear that *of course* the local boy band was going to be rewarded with a main-stage slot; ditto Tina Tuva, the band honoring the Tuvan activist, and the guy who’d come all the way from Japan, whether they were “excellent” or “imaginative” or not (and I liked all of these people). I felt naïve in my idealism, which the others had patiently entertained up to then, and acquiesced to the political exigencies of the situation. It was a revealing lesson in ‘playing to the crowd’ for someone who had a history of curating totally uncompromising, arty music festivals back home.

By late afternoon we’d evaluated twenty or so acts. All the focused listening had worn me out and I was wondering when it would finally end. It was then that we were told to report back tomorrow to judge the next batch of hopefuls. *Next* batch?

We mustered again around noon the next day and slogged our way through another twenty-plus auditions toward narrowing down a list of finalists. We'd evaluated a total of forty-eight acts, way more than I'd bargained for. I was fully played out and figured I was finally off the hook, but before I could wriggle free, Timur bade us assemble at the main stage that night to give our chosen finalists a *second* audition and see how they'd handle the pressure of a bigger setting. *Now* I understood why Alain had begged off on another round of judging, for what had started out as an honor was turning into a bit of a bummer. But slog though it was, I'm forever grateful for one of the most preposterous experiences in my life. I may not have been a teenage werewolf, but I'd somehow become one of very few white guys who've judged a music contest in Tuva. Who'd have imagined such an absurd outcome back when Peter Shotwell dropped by our Tainan apartment with his throat-singing tapes two decades previous?

While packing to leave on our last morning in Chadan, I spotted Timur Dulush striding toward my tent once again. Good grief, I muttered to myself, aren't we done *yet*? But I'd mistaken the purpose of his visit. Instead of putting me back to work, he presented me with the bronzed knee bone of a wolf as a token of gratitude for my contribution to the festival – a highly potent talisman in a culture that holds wolves sacred. He'd clearly appreciated the seriousness with which I'd evaluated the music after all. Timur was a good man; I feel honored to have known him, and was shocked and saddened by the news of his untimely passing just a couple of years later.



The wolf knee-bone amulet (DR)

At last freed from my judging duties, I could concentrate on what I'd come to Tuva to do in the first place: play music. The MuzEnergO gang were chafing to play; unlike me, they'd been largely idle and confined to the festival grounds for the past two days, apart from an excursion to the rebuilt temple, which I was sorry I missed. When the time finally came, we marched back to the bus on the dusty, pitted streets of Chadan to retrieve our instruments. (One of the guys heroically seized the opportunity to slip into a local shop and buy a huge plastic bottle of beer that he smuggled back to our campsite and secretly shared with us later.) We hauled our gear to the stage area and ... waited and waited and waited, for hours and hours and hours. It came out that the sound crew had never finished setting up because they'd preferred watching the wrestling matches taking place in the open-air stadium where the concerts were staged – as in neighboring Mongolia, wrestling was central to Tuvan identity. We sat impatiently on the bleachers behind the stage, shivering in the now-chilly breeze as the crew completed the late setup. The backstage scene was quite the cultural mashup, with performers decked out in resplendent traditional Tuvan and Russian costumes mingling with us MuzEngineers, who hadn't bathed since leaving Abakan days earlier (good thing I brought a bandana).

A few acts preceded us, the highlight being the Tuvan National Brass Band led by my new friend Timur Dulush. More than twenty players strong and clad in brilliant traditional finery, the band hit the stage and unleashed a full-throttle version of Henry Mancini's theme from *Peter Gunn* – not the folkloric fare we'd expected! Their set was tremendously entertaining, even minus the horses the players normally mounted when performing.

It was midnight by the time any of the MuzEnergO players went on, and things were uncomfortably weird from the start. Iouri was already in a state, having been informed by the festival director that our party's total time was being drastically cut back, after we'd dragged the bus an extra 700 miles to get

there. A fey vibe suffused the scene. Those who'd been here two years earlier noted a marked change in atmosphere since the previous visit, when they'd been heartily welcomed by the then-amiable director, who now emitted a hostile aura for no apparent reason. Late each night he'd continued to rant over the campground loudspeakers at full volume, and those among us who could understand what he was saying reported that he'd been hotly denouncing foreign visitors for their spiritual corruption, drugs, alcohol, and so on – though as far as I could observe, there had been almost zero of the latter present and everyone had been on their best behavior.

The first MuzEnergO act's decidedly avant-garde fare, brilliant as it was, met with a frosty reception. Despite the music's inherent sonic kinship with Sun Ra, whose legacy band had met with a rapturous reception at an earlier festival, the Tuvan audience wasn't having any of it this time and started to file out of the stadium. By the time Henosis played their artful but determinedly esoteric set of instrumental music, the trickle had turned into a mass exodus. It was during their set that the scowling festival director was overheard backstage scoffing, "This is not the path of wisdom," a memorable endorsement if ever there was one!

I started to fret that the arena would empty before we played a note, but was surprised to find what looked like a couple of thousand souls remaining on the lawn and in the stands, still easily the largest audience Moraine ever played for. After fussing with some jerry-rigged power connections, we finally commenced our set around 2 A.M. I braced for the worst but felt a wave of relief wash over me when our first number met with modestly warm applause. By the time we'd finished our electric rendition of an ancient Tang Dynasty melody from China, we'd clearly won over the crowd. (Regardless of what



Russian Moraine, Ustuu Khuree Festival, Tuva (video still)

the Tuvans might have thought about their onetime Chinese overlords, they could apparently identify with some shared musical roots.) Viewing [video](#) of our concert afterwards, the surge of audience approval after our final tune, "The Okanogan Lobe," always gives me chills. Perhaps this is what one of our bus mates meant when he told the band before we went home that we'd "saved the tour."

Long after the 2015 festival, Iouri explained how we'd come to be there in the first place. It was only then that I learned that the MuzEnergO Tour itself had its genesis in Tuva. Iouri wrote:

Back in 2004, I was attending that festival with two bands under my production, New A from my native city of Samara and a great Finnish quartet, Kaski, led by Jorma Tapio. Let's say it was the very naive and silly start

of a newbie music manager who grabs onto the idea of participating in a distant festival without having any idea of what the festival and territory are. I was much more interested in widening the geography for my “own” band, and Jorma just happened to be an open-minded person ready for some uncommercial adventure. So, through a series of very funny, sometimes dangerous, and sometimes weird solutions – including 200 kilograms of overweight baggage on the plane, and the promised bus transfer from Tuva being over 24 hours late – we reached the festival and I really fell in love with the territory and its people. Leaving aside the beauty of their nature, I mostly was stunned by the strength of their power and their readiness to work against any normal rules and procedures. I mean that idea to rebuild the temple that is so spiritual for them, their love of art, and their decision to combine the two into something whole to raise funds for the temple, which is really against any sane reason.

When I look back at all this years later, I understand it was a kind of newbie’s love, but I never regretted the moment when my lack of experience and knowledge led me to overestimate the situation. Now I can say these Tuvan guys were doing more or less the same things all of us are doing in culture, with additional flavors of religion and faith and an exotic homeland, but nothing seriously different from what your art rock fest is doing against the mass attitude in Seattle, or mine in Moscow, and so on.

Anyway, I saw a certain working process in which they were weak and I am strong, even in that early stage of my professional career – namely the ability to plan on a long scale, write inquiries and proposals, etc. So for a few years I thought seriously about helping the Tuvans by getting more and more serious musicians and raising foreign funding. Year by year we were closer to the realization, and my own production skills were getting better and better. The idea was always to pick a bunch of musicians who play at my festival near Moscow (which was easy to travel to) and deliver them to Tuva, as they’re already in Russia. But travel calculations led to understanding that neither trains nor flights can do the trick economically, and only the bus could be a solution to consider. And then, hey, why not bring all the equipment and play additional gigs on the way, if we have to travel that far anyway?

So basically, the steaming desire to reach Tuva with music I love so much was a sort of dedication to these people who accelerated my own growth as a producer, some idea to add my own strong component to their salad. All the mystique of a long adventure, hard planning, and so on were the additional reasons, of course. The complexity, the puzzle to solve. For some faraway distant goal, for the land isolated behind the beautiful mountains. What was wrong was that I over-romanticized the idea, of course. I’d made many pre-judgements, some of which you witnessed – one of the key issues was that nobody on the Tuvan side was eager to lose control on the artistic side of the festival and pass me the right to “bring headliners.” (I somehow was sure that my intentions were so clean and pure that “my” people will be desired guests by definition). So, as usual, when one starts with a naive fascination, cruel life will make a lot of corrections.

The foregoing was related just after Iouri’s return from another journey to Tuva in 2020, this time without a busload of spoiled musicians to endure. The pull of the Land of Eagles remains strong.

I’d accomplished my unlikely mission: Not only had I implausibly visited Tuva, but I’d actually played music there and gained listeners’ respect, and had judged a throat-singing contest in the bargain. The bus rolled out of Chadan the next morning and made a long overnight drive to Krasnoyarsk via the Tuvan capital of Kyzyl and the cheerless Siberian city of Achinsk, where Russian Moraine played its last concert of the tour and we finally managed to take an ice-cold shower – I’d been afraid that they wouldn’t let us stinkers board the plane home. Late that last night we stopped at a gas station in the middle of nowhere and were serenaded with “Shenandoah” by fellow tour member and nationally renowned folkloric musician Maxim “Gudimir” Anukhin, who brought us all to tears. How strangely moving it was hearing this distillation of Americana under brilliant stars in the heart of deepest, darkest Siberia. Back on the bus, our well-lubed companions chanted the theme from our “Okanogan Lobe,” the most touching send-off ever. Weeks spent together on the road in peculiar circumstances

had bonded us for good. Supremely thankful for the experience, the DeJoies and I took flight from Krasnoyarsk at dawn and set out for home, feeling like months had passed.

I fiddled with the bronzed wolf bone in my pocket, wondering if it would ever draw me back to Tannu Tuva.

CHAPTER 4

TUVA AND BUSTED

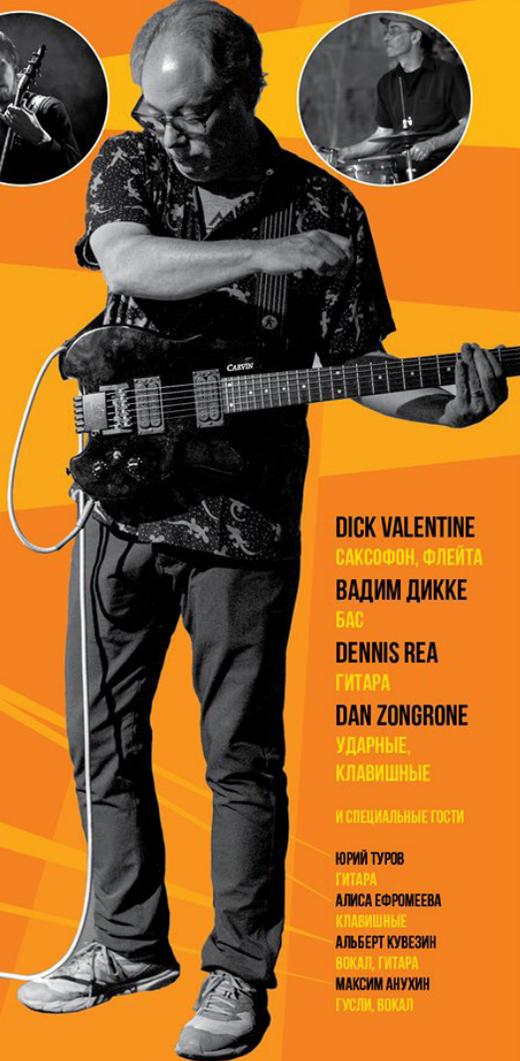
#avantjazz
#progrock
#oriental



РОССИЙСКИЙ ТУР

TERRANE

США / РОССИЯ



06/09 | ТОМСК | КУЛЬТУРНОЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВО FLAT
07/09 | ТОМСК | МУЗЕЙНЫЙ САД
08/09 | КЕМЕРОВО | ДОМ АКТЁРА
11/09 | КЫЗЫЛ | АЛАНТОС
12/09 | АБАКАН | ГЦК ПОБЕДА
13/09 | КРАСНОЯРСК | СТУДИЯ ДОЖДЯ
14/09 | ДУБНА | АРХИТЕАТР MEDIA LOUNGE
15/09 | МОСКВА | КУЛЬТУРНЫЙ ЦЕНТР ДОМ

DICK VALENTINE
САКСОФОН, ФЛЕЙТА
ВАДИМ ДИККЕ
БАС
DENNIS REA
ГИТАРА
DAN ZONGRONE
УДАРНЫЕ,
КЛАВИШНЫЕ

И СПЕЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ГОСТИ

ЮРИЙ ТУРОВ
ГИТАРА
АЛИСА ЕФРОМЕЕВА
КЛАВИШНЫЕ
АЛЬБЕРТ КУВЕЗИН
ВОКАЛ, ГИТАРА
МАКСИМ АНУХИН
ГУСЛИ, ВОКАЛ

организовано
МузЭнерго

A few months after the epic 2015 MuzEnergy Tour wrapped up – the die-hards had ultimately made it all the way from Dubna in far western Russia to the Pacific coast at Vladivostok, a possibly unprecedented bus journey for a traveling music festival (well over 10,000 kilometers / 7,000 miles!) – Iouri got in touch to gauge my interest in a new, typically ambitious Lnogradski proposal: a traveling “opera” (in the loosest terms) based on a work by the Nobel Prize–winning Russian author Ivan Bunin, with the tentative title “Dark Alleys.”

Iouri had selected a half-dozen past MuzEnergy participants as prospective composers for the so-called opera, and suggested that I might want to make a contribution focusing on various ethnic groups within Russia, given my interest in Tuva and other cultures native to the country. When I affirmed my interest, he offered to introduce me to the renowned Tuvan singer Albert Kuvezin as a possible collaborator. According to Iouri, Albert was seeking new challenges at the time and might find it stimulating to get involved. Whatever the eventual outcome, Iouri had a hunch that something interesting might come from my meeting Albert.

I’d heard of Albert and was aware that he led Yat Kha, arguably the first Tuvan rock band and certainly the best known internationally. I later learned that prior to forming Yat Kha, he’d also been a co-founder of the world-famous Huun Huur Tu, who have done more to export Tuvan traditional music to the outside world than any other ensemble, playing countless concerts around the globe.

Albert is famed for his impossibly deep and resonant *basso profundo* voice, a true force of nature that possesses almost mystical vibratory power. Alongside his mastery of traditional techniques including the *kargyraa* form of throat-singing, which sounds like an oceanic growl, Albert is of the generation that tuned in to contemporary global music, especially rock. (Check out his singular versions of classic rock tunes on the Yat Kha album *Re-Covers*.) While best-known for his inimitable voice, he’s also a very accomplished guitarist and songwriter. I thought it wouldn’t be surprising if we could find some common musical ground.

The opera gambit eventually fell by the wayside, but not before Iouri made good on his pledge to hook me up with Albert, who was very courteous and surprisingly open to cooperation. I honestly hadn’t expected that this celebrated figure would be up for working with some little-known weirdo from Seattle, but Albert’s enthusiasm seemed genuine, so Iouri’s recommendation evidently carried some weight. We made vague plans to meet up somewhere in Russia to perform or record together whenever schedules and opportunities aligned.

By this time I’d settled on the scheme for my next major recording project. Some years earlier I’d released my most elaborate album to that point, [*Views from Chicheng Precipice*](#), a collection of personalized takes on East Asian traditional music, from ancient Tang Dynasty court music to the bewitching melodies of the Naxi ethnic group of southwest China. I’d envisioned the recording as a sort of aural companion to my book *Live at the Forbidden City: Musical Encounters in China and Taiwan*, which chronicled my adventures playing music in those places in the 1980s and ’90s, among other hijinks. Blending unconventional arrangements of ancient and modern themes with sonic experimentation and improvisation, *Views* was unorthodox in its choice of instrumentation and treatment of traditional material, yet warmly respectful of its sources – a listening experience I’d hoped would go far beyond most shallow attempts at “East-West fusion.” The record was immensely satisfying to make and met with enthusiastic reviews around the world.

In the years leading up to my Russian forays, my ardor for Chinese music was overtaken by a growing fascination with Central Asia and its music. I’d toyed with the idea of exploring some Central Asian musical themes for Iouri’s short-lived opera, but when that venture collapsed, I decided to record a

sequel to *Views* with similarly expansive interpretations of some of my favorite Central Asian music – specifically that of Tibet, Tuva, the Altai region of Russia, and the Uyghur people of Xinjiang along the Silk Road in today’s northwest China, all places I’d visited at one time or another. In an inspired stroke, my Seattle musician friend Eric Amrine came up with the perfect title for the album: *Giant Steppes*, a moniker that’s not only descriptive of Central Asian landscapes, but also a pun on the classic John Coltrane tune of a similarly adventurous (and sometimes devotional) ilk.

As on *Views*, my basic strategy for *Giant Steppes* was to select tunes I’d collected from those regions over the years and subject them to radical surgery. Sometimes I chose to honor traditional formal constraints, for example, by limiting improvisers to a particular scale, or eschewing the use of Western-style functional harmony. In other cases I threw custom to the winds – harmonizing passages, employing atypical instrumentation, and incorporating noise, free improvisation, and amplification – all while striving to remain faithful to the spirit of my models.

I’d initially planned to take the same approach for the Tuvan piece, so I chose a familiar Tuvan melody from one of the albums in my collection to use as source material. But now that I’d decided to enlist Albert in the project, I wasn’t sure he’d be enthused about regurgitating an old Tuvan chestnut. Meanwhile, I found myself composing an original piece in a quasi-Tuvan style, with characteristic cadences, a brisk middle section that explicitly evoked the rhythm of horse hooves on the rolling steppe, and a quote from the traditional melody. The music was coming together nicely, but one nagging question remained: What exactly was Albert going to sing? I couldn’t exactly ask him to scat-sing nonsensical “ooh, aah” syllables.

I’m not much of a lyricist, and I’d certainly never presume to write anything in the Tuvan language. Despairing of a solution, I decided to search online for Tuvan poetry, if such a thing existed in translation. To my delight, I soon hit the jackpot when I came across works by Galsan Tschinag, an ethnic Tuvan author and political activist who’d grown up across the border in Mongolia and divides his time between there and Germany. Reading about Tschinag, I was surprised to learn that, for all their cultural similarities, the Mongols evidently persecuted their nation’s Tuvan minority and suppressed their language and customs. Tschinag made it his mission to advocate for his people and has since published numerous books and collections of poetry. In one of these volumes, translated from Tuvan to German and thence to English, I came across his poem “My Land,” which stirringly evokes the Tuvans’ relationship with their native landscape – and just happens to map to the rhythm of the melody I’d written.

My Land

*My land
A primal stony mass
Atop the roof
Of planet earth
My people cling to it
Like ancient lichen
Colors and smells
This is the wind of the world’s nest
This is my land*

*The wind rises up
To fly in circles
Now and then
Devastating and corrupting
Valleys and plains
But also heals
Tearing space apart*

– Galsan Tschinag (excerpt, adapted by Dennis Rea)

A funny thing happened on the way to finalizing the piece that would be titled “Wind of the World’s Nest,” a phrase extracted from Tschinag’s poem. While working out the music, I wondered if I could find a way to simulate throat-singing using just my electric guitar and sound effects. It occurred to me that my sophisticated Fractal Audio sound processor included an effect called a “formant” that I’d never used before, a type of filter that can be used to simulate vocal vowel sounds. (Some oldsters might recall guitarist Peter Frampton’s use of a “talk box,” an early version of a formant effect.) I was able to choose the vowel sounds I wanted – for example, “ah,” “ee,” and “aw” – and map them to an expression pedal in such a way that I could travel from one sound to the next by pressing on the pedal with my foot; for instance, “ah-ee-aw” in the downward direction, or “aw-ee-ah” in the upward. I then ran that through a pitch-shifter to drop the pitch down to a throaty “*kargyraa*” octave, and added a dollop of distortion for a grittier texture. The final and crucial touch was the use of a handheld device known as an eBow (electronic bow) to produce continuous sustain for a “singing” sound. The resulting “throat guitar” is uncanny if I do say so, and has fooled a good number of people into thinking they’re hearing an actual throat singer.

Once the piece was complete, I set up a recording session in Seattle and laid down electric and throat guitar, saxophone, flute, and drum tracks with fellow musicians Dick Valentine and Brian Oppel (the latest occupant of the revolving Moraine drum chair) and celebrated sound engineer Steve Fisk, a key collaborator on *Giant Steppes*. The next step, er, step was to have Wadim Dicke send us bass parts he’d recorded in Tomsk and integrate them into the mix. (I’d wanted to involve Wadim in the project because of our shared interest in Tuvan music.) Now I could send the audio file to Albert so he could add his vocal track. I suddenly got cold feet, afraid that he wouldn’t approve of my outsider’s attempt to customize his people’s musical traditions, especially the faux throat-singing on guitar. So it was with immense relief that I read his reply stating that “It really does sound like Tuvan music!” He was very taken with Tschinag’s writing as well.

This raises a problem that perennially dogs musicians like me who have the temerity to interpret the music of other cultures, namely, charges of cultural appropriation. In the musical context, the argument proffered by latter-day culture warriors is essentially that no musician who isn’t born into a particular cultural group has any right to personalize or otherwise tinker with that culture’s music. It’s also strongly implied that musicians who choose to deal with the music of different cultures do so simply to capitalize on a trend for personal gain – something that’s demonstrably not true in my case, since my expenditures on these quixotic projects dwarf any income I might ever earn from them. Of course, the naysayers’ position neatly ignores the empirical truth that in today’s globalized world, no culture is free of influence from other cultures. But while I absolutely believe in preserving irreplaceable cultural customs and applaud those who’ve dedicated their lives to sustaining traditional lifeways, I also believe that actually engaging with other cultures’ practices, when undertaken in a loving and respectful spirit, can help to reinvigorate sometimes moribund traditions, as well as introduce those traditions to those who might never encounter them otherwise. My sincere hope is that *Giant Steppes*, like *Views from Chicheng Precipice* before it, can serve as a bridge between disparate cultures and stimulate listeners to go further and investigate the sources. I might add that none of the many traditional musicians I’ve worked with over the years has ever objected to my “appropriating” their music, but rather felt pride that an outsider would take such a keen interest. The most vociferous objectors to musical fusion typically aren’t musicians themselves.

In a matter of days Albert sent his vocal part, which was so perfect that it made my hair stand on end, both his delivery of the lyrics and the supernal throat-singing he contributed to the song's improvised middle section (entwined with my throat guitar). I felt that it was far and away the best piece I'd ever recorded – and naturally, we now had to figure out a way to perform it together live.

Four years had passed since my last visit to Russia, and I was eager to return for more musical escapades with Albert, Wadim, and other friends I'd made there. Now that I'd completed most of the pieces to be included on *Giant Steppes*, I thought there could be no more fitting reason to go back to Russia than to perform that material closer to its points of origin. I put out some feelers to Iouri, who kindly volunteered to help with bookings, and Wadim, who readily agreed to get involved. I also notified Albert of my intentions, and he affirmed that he was still very much up for collaborating if scheduling worked out. To round out the band, I drafted two simpatico musicians with whom I'd played a successful concert featuring some *Giant Steppes* material in Brooklyn in summer 2018: Dick Valentine, a Seattle saxophonist and flautist with deep knowledge of world music and a questing musical mind; and drummer-vibraphonist-keyboardist Daniel Zongrone, with whom I'd played in my very first band in my hometown of Utica, New York, 40 years earlier, and who was presently living in China. They both signed on to the Russia plan with gusto. The group would be called Dennis Rea and Terrane, the latest in my series of geologically themed band names, and the first time I'd actually stuck my own moniker out front – I'd own this one.

This being 2019, I knew from the outset that my planned endeavor faced steeper challenges than my previous Russian incursions, namely because one Donald Trump had somehow ascended to the U.S. presidency amid a cloud of Russian intrigue. Despite Trump's confounding obeisance to Russian despot Vladimir Putin, the former's administration had nonetheless taken a few mostly cosmetic measures to deflect accusations of, yes, collusion in illegally influencing the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. One consequence of the diplomatic kerfuffle was that most of the Russian staff at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow were dismissed, including the very nice folks in the cultural wing who'd successfully secured the two Fulbright-Hays grants that had covered the entirety of my and Russian Moraine's travel expenses in 2014 and 2015. My one remaining contact at the Embassy regrettably explained that there was no budget for U.S. artists performing in Russia this year, meaning I would have to finance the effort myself. Oh well, it wouldn't be the first time I'd used my own resources to ensure a memorable musical experience.

Months passed. Performance dates fell into place one by one, mostly in cities in eastern Siberia where I'd played before and would be happy to return. Securing a gig in Tuva was our first priority because of Albert but proved a tough nut to crack. Early on, a contact of Iouri's in the Tuvan Cultural Ministry pledged to set up a concert for us in Kyzyl, but she soon went silent on us (shades of Feynman). I was almost ready to give up and resign myself to making a civilian tourist excursion to Tuva without playing when a local rock musician offered us a gig at a restaurant in Kyzyl without pay. We accepted gladly, unaware of how consequential the show would turn out to be.

In early September 2019, Dan, Dick, and I at last flew to Russia for a Terrane mini-tour comprising eight dates in eight cities. As a parting gift, I'd been unexpectedly fired from my day job as an editor at a tech company the previous day, the first time I'd ever been let go in such cold fashion. To justify my dismissal, my ex-manager claimed that I'd had "attitude issues," meaning I actually had another life beyond her shitty short-term contracting world. I'd informed her of my previous commitment six months earlier, but whatever. Someone suggested that I send her a postcard from Tuva saying "Have a nice Pizza Friday."

We spent the first day acclimating at Iouri's residence in the small city of Yakhroma about an hour north of Moscow, the exact location where Russian armed forces had repelled the Nazis' eastward advance in what was likely the pivotal turning point in the European theater in World War II. (Although the Western powers like to claim credit for turning the tide of the conflict, it's more likely that the Battle of Yakhroma was truly the beginning of the end for the Nazis, an event still celebrated in Russia as though it took place yesterday.) Iouri gave us an entertaining tour of the environs, including the massive battle monument, the once-opulent and now eerily abandoned estate of a Romanov nobleman from the Tsarist era, and a surreal onetime summer camp for deaf children that was literally overgrown by poisonous weeds, before dropping us at the airport for the five-hour overnight flight to join Wadim in his Siberian hometown of Tomsk.



Abandoned summer camp for deaf children, Yakhroma

Our arrival in Tomsk marked the first time that the four members of Terrane were actually in the same room together, and we had just half a day to rehearse our ninety-minute set before our first show the next night. It was a deeply sobering rehearsal and an extremely rough gig, compounded by the circumstance that the venue was actively under construction before and even during the gig. We arrived to find heaps of tools and painting supplies covering the stage and a graffiti artist engaged in spray-painting an entire interior wall in a basement space that had almost no ventilation – a literally dizzying



Characteristic "gingerbread" house, Tomsk

experience, though not an adequate excuse for our half-assed performance. It wouldn't be the last time I'd regret my folly in putting together a geographically scattered band that couldn't rehearse together ahead of the tour. I'd naively banked on everyone mastering the material independently using charts and demo recordings, but our first train wreck of a gig put paid to that delusion. At night's end we were valiantly rescued by the brilliant keyboardist Alisa Efromeva and my old comrade, the singular guitarist Yuri Turov, Wadim's bandmates in the wonderfully weird Strangelet Ensemble, who joined us for a pithy free improvisation.

We buried the hangover of last night's bum gig by taking a Tomsk walkabout before our evening concert on the outdoor jazz stage at the annual city festival. Guided by Wadim and Yuri, we savored the city's celebrated timber architecture, whose ornamental "gingerbread" fretwork far surpassed mine at the previous night's gig. We climbed the Voskresenskaya knoll that marks Tomsk's birthplace, with its tall wooden tower and hilarious "Monument to her Lover," a statue of a man dangling outside his paramour's upper-floor

window in his attempt to escape being caught in flagrante delicto by her returning husband. The weather was perfect for a stroll on the promenade alongside the broad river Tom as it coursed its way northward to its rendezvous with the majestic Ob, beyond which lay Yuri's hometown of Kargasok, the farthest town accessible by land in this region, except in winter when the rivers froze over. Across the Tom in the distance lay the Great Vasyugan Mire, the most extensive wetlands in the Northern Hemisphere and a veritable Hades of mosquitoes in season.

The city tour had a salutary effect and to my considerable relief, that night we played a much-improved set for an engaged crowd of hundreds while children with cardboard-cutout instruments frolicked on the grass in front of the bandstand. It was the 415th anniversary of the city's founding, and organizers bestowed commemorative t-shirts and memorabilia on us with a graciousness that's sadly lacking at most such events where I come from. I hope I'll visit Tomsk again.

In the morning Terrane set out by bus for the city of Kemerovo, a half-day's drive southeast up the river Tom, traversing cultivated rural country dotted with classic Siberian cottages, with their trademark brightly painted window shutters. That night's show was a genial affair at a small, elegant theater before a musically knowledgeable and warmly receptive audience. Afterward we chatted with our convivial host Elena Veselovskaya and fellow enthusiast Ksenia Sova, who proudly extolled their city's embrace of adventurous music, seconded by Wadim, who'd played in Kemerovo often with fond memories. Around dawn we boarded a bus to the regional metropolis Novosibirsk to take a direct flight to Tuva.

Unlike the MuzEnergo tours, on which Iouri provided transport, meals, lodging, and certain equipment items, this time we were on our own apart from his crucial aid in booking shows, hotels, and a few flights covering longer distances. Instead of the homey comforts of the familiar Bus, we would now cover several legs of the tour on public conveyances, burdened with bulky luggage and gear. We'd considered renting a vehicle for the tour, but Wadim didn't drive and I wanted no part of it based on past observations of Siberian highway, uh, etiquette. Dan cheerfully volunteered, arguing that surely it couldn't be that bad for someone who'd once been a Manhattan delivery driver, but Wadim put a stop to that, and Dan later voiced great relief at not having to contend with the driving conditions.

About hauling musical equipment: Anyone who thinks the performing musician's life is a nonstop party should try hoisting my Fender Twin amp up a couple of flights of stairs sometime. For most players, the roadie is a mythical beast known only to those who ply more commercially lucrative paths (like my nephew who plays in the prominent metal band Queensrÿche, who's seldom had to lug his own equipment since his teens). What's worse is knowing that most of us will never even earn enough money playing music to equal the cost of the gear we're schlepping around.

For a budget tour like Terrane's, the fun starts at the airport, where security agents routinely inspect one's gear with a malevolent glee that seems almost personal (especially in the U.S.). If one makes it past the first checkpoint, travelers with awkwardly shaped objects like guitars face the nail-biting prospect of finding space for their instrument in the cabin. In friendlier times, flight attendants often went out of their way to accommodate those with musical instruments, but those days are gone. That's why I've learned to always travel with a short "headless" guitar that fits in a standard overhead compartment – that is, if one's fellow passengers haven't already jammed it full of baby carriers and whatnot, prompting a desperate search for space in some distant compartment. So far, I've been extremely fortunate (knock, knock) in never having to surrender my instrument for stowage in the main baggage hold, where its fabric case would invite certain destruction. (The last time I baggage-checked a guitar with an "ATA-compliant" hard case, its finish was chipped; the last time I flew somewhere with Jim DeJoie, his baritone sax got crumpled.)

If the tour involves multiple flights, the whole miserable process repeats for each one – and then there’s Customs to deal with on the other end. Since I’ve undertaken most of my international tours without official dispensation, I’ve often spent hours trying to come up with some plausible rationale for why I’m arriving in a foreign country ostensibly as a tourist but laden with highly visible, professional-grade music gear. “Oh, this? I thought I’d bring 40 pounds of specialized equipment with me so I could practice my scales.” But interestingly, the only countries where I’ve ever been hassled about gear at the border are Britain and the dear old USA, where my compatriots are likely to gleefully tear apart my luggage – again.

One rare exception to the rule came when the DeJoies and I transited through Paris on our way to join the 2015 MuzEnergo Tour. Of course they made us run our instruments through the x-ray machines, even though our final destination was Russia. One of the Customs inspectors asked Jim what was in his huge baritone saxophone case, and when told, brightened and asked what the band’s name was. “Moraine,” we told him, wondering if we’d just landed ourselves on some list. “I’ll check it out,” he said, and sent us off with a smile. We laughed and forgot about it – until a couple of days later, when we got a message from the guy through our website. “Hello!” he wrote. “I listened to your music. Some of it I like! Some of it I don’t. You should have vocals!”

Mercifully, most long-distance buses have underside luggage compartments, but woe unto the musician who’s forced to try and wedge their gear into a stingy overhead rack. It’s not unusual to have to hold a 30-pound case in your lap for a couple hundred kilometers until your feet fall asleep. Subways like Moscow’s are the most fun of all, with the constant press of bodies, occasional lack of escalators, and narrow turnstiles you have to lift your cases over.

On the street, variations in sidewalk design are audibly revealed by the distinctive percussive tattoo of wheeled cases rolling over patterns in the pavement, disturbing the slumbering locals as you sharply rat-a-tat your way down lonesome streets at 2 A.M. after a gig (clack-clack-CLACK! clack-clack-CLACK!...).

A few days before we were to fly to Kyzyl, Albert got in touch to tell me that a singer he knew – Sailyk Ommun, his former bandmate in Yat Kha – was hoping to get involved in our concert. If we were up for including her – and we most enthusiastically were (Wadim, already a big fan of Sailyk’s, was ecstatic about her participation) – Albert suggested that we choose a jazz standard for her to sing, since she had a growing interest in jazz. Honestly, I wasn’t terribly keen on playing a jazz standard because it didn’t really suit Terrane’s character as a mildly subversive cross-cultural venture. Considering alternatives that might be a better fit for the band while still being jazz, I hit on what I felt was the perfect solution: Sun Ra.

Although the great musical cosmonaut never visited Tuva during his lifetime, his big band, the mighty Arkestra under the direction of longtime stalwart Marshall Allen, had actually performed at Ustuu Khuree, the same festival where Russian Moraine had played in 2015. Strange as it seems given the cultural distance, Tuvan audiences rapturously received the Arkestra’s music, which characteristically veered wildly from the harmonious to the cacophonous. Being a huge Sun Ra fan myself, I happily chose a couple of his vocal numbers, “Love in Outer Space” and “Rocket Number Nine”; both had accommodating open structures that we all could pick up easily, and few words for Sailyk to learn. She and Albert both heartily endorsed the selections.

Terrane boarded a compact plane for the roughly two-hour flight from industrial Novosibirsk to Kyzyl with great anticipation, vaulting the Western Sayan Mountains and landing in the Tuvan capital in late afternoon in bright sunshine. Stepping out onto the tarmac, Dick and I felt a twinge of guilt

over how easy it had been for us to drop out of the sky into Tuva, when dear old Richard Feynman had never managed to get there after years of determined effort. We were met at the airport by the ebullient Vladimir Simchit, a guitarist friend of Albert's and organizer of the Tuva Rock Club, a fledgling association devoted to creating more opportunities for aspiring local rock musicians, and the sponsor of Terrane's show. The concert was to take place at a sizable riverside restaurant and was reportedly already sold out. Performances by foreign bands were apparently still a novelty in remote Kyzyl, and Albert's appearances had become less frequent since he'd moved to Abakan in neighboring Khakassia some years earlier.

Vladimir kindly deposited us at our hotel, a brand-new five-story building close to the central riverfront that was easily the most modern and comfortable place we stayed on the tour. Its notably cosmopolitan bistro – with a menu spanning sushi, pelmeni, and pizza – gave evidence that once-inaccessible Tuva had inevitably found itself on the worldwide tourist map. One striking feature of our otherwise mellow lodging was a bold painting on the stairway portraying a bare-chested Tuvan warrior bowing an *igil* while singing a victory song on a battlefield, with a stygian raven hungrily looking on. I realized with a start that the war spoils at his feet were Nazi helmets and dog tags, not what I'd expect to see here on the Mongolian border. On a later visit to the Tuvan National Museum, I learned that the Tuvans had proudly contributed to the Allied war effort in World War II, serving with distinction alongside Soviet forces in Ukraine.



Painting of victorious Tuvan warrior on battlefield (note Nazi helmets and dog tags) (DR)

After a nap we met up with Albert and Sailyk for the first time, at a cramped practice space in the city center for a seat-of-the-pants rehearsal. In person, Albert proved to be a big-hearted guy and most gracious host who spoke eloquent English; I'd only communicated with him by email and text previously and had no idea how cosmopolitan he was, but shouldn't have been surprised seeing how many times



Musical meeting in Kyzyl, Tuva. back (L-R): Wadim Dicke, Vladimir Simchit, Alexey Salchak, Dennis Rea; middle: Albert Kuvezin, Sailyk Ommun, Sholban Mongush, Dick Valentine; front: Daniel Zongrone (obscured) (Daniel Zongrone)

he'd crisscrossed the planet with Yat Kha, and how deeply he'd studied rock music. Sailyk was similarly fluent, with an infectious buoyant mien. She was just emerging from a lengthy hiatus from musical activity while raising her two children and was eager to pursue new prospects. Now came the moment of truth: Would this collaborative scheme, hatched so confidently halfway around the world with no direct contact, actually jell here in the moment?

I got my answer as soon as we launched into "Wind of the World's Nest." I'd asked Albert if he wanted to go over the structure first for a reminder

before giving it a go, but he felt it wasn't necessary, so on a count of four we dove in – and he aced it perfectly on the first try. Only then did I realize that he really liked the song, both the music and the lyrics, and had clearly put in the work to internalize the music like a true professional. A circuit connected; things were going to work out just fine.

We ran through a couple of powerful tunes by Albert, "The Philosopher" and "The Way My Poetry Should Go," both from the Yat Kha album *Poets and Lighthouses* and originally recorded, interestingly enough, on an island off the west coast of Scotland (which I adore). Moving on to the Sun Ra tunes, Sailyk likewise wowed us by nailing them right out of the gate, with a just-right feel. The cherry on top was the last-minute addition of the raucous Yat Kha rocker "Katarchy," a vehicle for Sailyk's stratospheric vocals with roots in local folklore. Was this going to be fun! We also learned that, in a happy coincidence, Sailyk would be flying to Moscow from Abakan the day after our concert in the latter city, so she'd be able to join us for our shows in both cities.

We'd built in a free day before the gig so we could soak in the scenery and vibe of Tuva. Albert had arranged for me to hire his good friend Artur to drive us to various area points of interest. On a beautiful early fall day, they swung by our hotel in Artur's van and took us first to the famed promenade along the Yenisey riverbank. Here, where the two upper branches of the Yenisey meet to form one of the world's greatest watercourses, flowing from the mountains of Mongolia to the distant Arctic Ocean, a marvelous monument festooned with fanciful creatures marks the purported "center of Asia."

Technically speaking, the true center of the continent lies several hundred kilometers away, but hey, it's close enough for the Tuvans.

From the city we drove roughly a hundred kilometers westward and downstream alongside the Yenisey, our destination the holy mountain Khairakan with its distinctive serrated profile. Rising from the surrounding dun-colored steppe lands like the prow of an enormous white ship, the mountain had transfixed me four years earlier when the MuzEnergO bus had passed nearby on its way from Chadan to Kyzyl. I couldn't believe my luck in actually having a chance to visit the place – perhaps abetted by my love for Seattle's homegrown Holy Mountain brewery?

The day's peregrinations included a leisurely visit to the riverbank by way of some sketchy backcountry tracks, and a stop at a resort complex of artfully embroidered traditional yurt dwellings. Albert and Artur were informative guides, sketching out historical, geographical, and natural details such as native vegetation used for various medicinal and ceremonial purposes. It came out that Albert loved the use of the word "lichen" in "Wind of the World's Nest" (as did I), rather unusual in a song lyric, because it had significance in local lore. He also informed us that with his rapidly silvering hair, he'd become a bullseye for divebombing ravens who love all things shiny. We wound down our outing with a traditional Tuvan meal in a large yurt back in Kyzyl, a quite tasty repast of lamb, noodles, and other dishes, though I squeamishly demurred when offered a plate of steaming sheep innards. (The omnivorous Dick happily gobbled them up and proclaimed them excellent.)



Confluence of the two upper branches of the Yenisey River, with Kyzyl at lower right (DR)



Terrane at the Yenisey River, looking north: (L-R) Dick Valentine, Wadim Dicke, Dennis Rea, Daniel Zongrone, Albert Kuvezin (Artur)

Sadly, our concert in Kyzyl coincided with the funeral of a dear friend of Albert and his associates, a lawyer and political activist who'd suddenly passed away without warning just a few days earlier. Our friends were visibly shocked and grieving, so we offered to forgo the gig if it would be more appropriate, but they felt that the best way to honor their late friend's spirit was to go ahead with the concert as a celebration of his life.

We showed up at the venue amid a bustle of activity and got busy with setup and sound check. After a while Albert, Vladimir, and their companions arrived directly from their friend's memorial service, already and understandably pretty well lubricated. A reporter from Tuva TV interviewed me on camera about my interest in Tuvan music; I spoke about my past experience playing Ustuu Khuree with MuzErgo and how it had whetted my appetite for a return visit. The audience started to arrive, a mixture of ethnic Tuvans and Russians, some dressed as if for a high-culture event. The venue soon filled to capacity – not bad for a completely unknown band of geezers.

After some speeches honoring our hosts' late friend, and an opening set by a local Russian jazz trio (backed by a cheap drum machine, oddly enough), we took the stage as a quartet for our first set, consisting chiefly of my eccentric adaptations of traditional and popular music from Xinjiang (not far away in northwestern China), Tibet, and Georgia, plus a few tunes from Moraine's songbook. At the start of our set I announced that we were dedicating our performance to the memory of our hosts' departed friend. Despite excessive crowd noise and a balky borrowed amplifier, the set seemed to go down well with the crowd, who I'd been told had very little previous exposure to jazz – not that I considered what we were playing capital-J jazz, but that's how we were being presented, and it was certainly an important element of our music.

After a short interval we were back for a second set, this time joined by Albert, who was now deep in his cups and raring to go. We kicked off with "Wind of the World's Nest," Albert intoning Galsan Tschinag's vivid lyrics in his uncanny guttural growl, seemingly a couple of octaves below the range of mere *sapiens*. The tune got a great response. Truth be told, I'd been nervous about exposing a Tuvan audience to my "throat guitar" antics, afraid that locals might think I was bastardizing their venerable ancient tradition with clever gimcrackery, but people evidently thought it was pretty neat. Next up were Albert's two Yat Kha numbers, which drew shouts of recognition from the crowd and not a few singalongs. An animated Albert was hopping up and down on stage, throwing his arm around Dick's shoulders as the latter dug deep into his alto sax. Sweat was flying and people were dancing, not a common occurrence at one of my gigs.

Now it was Sailyk's turn in the spotlight – and how she shone! The willowy singer tore into the Sun Ra tunes with gusto in an astonishing display of vocal prowess. On "Love in Outer Space," she sounded like she'd been a jazz singer all her life, her mercurial voice curling like smoke rings around the melody with finely shaded sensitivity. The band achieved liftoff with Ra's "Rocket Number



Center of Asia monument, Kyzyl

Nine,” Sailyk’s voice arcing across the sonic firmament like a shooting star in tandem with my off-world guitar-synth outbursts, Dick’s coruscating sax forays, and Dan’s neo-tribal drumming. We upped the ante further on the closing “Katarchy,” with its greasy wah-wah-fried riffs, scorching solos, and Sailyk soaring one moment like a cosmic sunbird, the next plunging down into a bottomless *kargyraa* well, jubilant at being back in her element. Though a bit rough around the edges, the show went down as one of my most exhilarating ever. I could hardly believe that we’d actually pulled it off.

Before the night was over, our joy was somewhat attenuated by the scene we witnessed outside the venue while readying to leave. Outsiders tend to have a romanticized view of Tuva and Central Asian steppe cultures in general, imagining a harmonious pastoral society still rooted in ancient lifeways, with doughty horsemen forever galloping across grassy, windswept landscapes. But as some travel guides warn, Tuva also has its share of contemporary ills. White travelers are advised not to wander about after dark in Kyzyl to avoid being mistaken for Russians, for whom the locals have little love.

While the threat of violence has reportedly lessened in recent times, we did get a glimpse of Kyzyl’s shady underside when a group of heavily inebriated youths descended on the venue after the show let out, prompting the proprietors to bar their gate. Sholban Mongush, an *igil* virtuoso who plays with Yat Kha, was present at the time. With a sigh, he turned to me and said, “I’m sorry, my country... sometimes it seems like Colombia, with all the crime and drugs.” Indeed, I heard from several sources that Tuva remained a sort of “Wild West” frontier area in Russia, its rugged, porous border with Mongolia a sieve for the trafficking of contraband including methamphetamine and other hard drugs. As always, the lowest rungs of society pay the heaviest price.

We awoke energized by the previous night’s blowout and eager to set out for the day’s destination, the city of Abakan on the far side of the Western Sayan mountains in Russia’s Republic of Khakassia. Artur and Albert would pick us up at 9:30 A.M. before grabbing Sailyk on the way out of town. After a bite of breakfast at the pleasant hotel café beforehand, I exited into the lobby—and right into the hands of three waiting policemen.

Two of the officers were ethnically Tuvan; the other, evidently of higher rank, was Russian. “Excuse me,” the Russian officer said in English in a no-nonsense tone. “We need to see your passport.” My stomach flopped. I didn’t need to ask what the problem was, for I knew full well that we’d violated the conditions of our tourist visas by playing a public concert, a calculated risk I’d knowingly taken at the outset. The worst-case scenario was now at hand. Ironically, two days earlier I’d congratulated Dick, a huge fan of Ralph Leighton’s classic quasi-travel book *Tuva or Bust*, on having made it to Tuva safely “without busting.” Now here we were, in a fine fix: Tuva *and* busted.

I gathered the others, who were none too pleased with the unwelcome turn of events; they’d been dubious about doing a concert tour on tourist visas from the start, notwithstanding my breezy reassurances. Hearts pounding, we grabbed our jackets and papers from our rooms. To their credit, the friendly hotel staff protested to the police that, as far as the hotel was concerned, our papers were in good order, but their pleas were ignored. The cops quickly scanned our passports and told us to accompany them to the police station for questioning. The four of us – including the saintly Wadim, on whom we depended as always for translation – folded ourselves into the rear seat of a police vehicle in heavy rain and were driven to a station that dealt specifically with immigration matters.

Once inside, we were taken to an austere waiting room that – I kid you not – actually had a sinister,

constantly flickering fluorescent ceiling light. “They’re trying to break us down,” we joked nervously. Minutes later we were taken to an office and seated before a weary-looking Tuvan policewoman. Via Wadim, she confronted us with the knowledge that we’d played a concert the previous night without having the required work visas, pulling out her phone to show us a gotcha! photo of the concert poster outside the venue – a ridiculously large banner with a near life-sized photo of me playing guitar, with the caption “USA” – and pointing out that tickets were sold. The price was a mere 200 rubles – about US\$3 – and we’d never even discussed money with our hosts, let alone received any, but strictly speaking, it was still a technical violation.



Double Dennis, Kyzyl (Daniel Zongrone)

I knew this, of course, and truthfully explained that we didn’t accept payment for our concerts, instead donating any proceeds to the local musicians and promoters (in this case, the Tuva Rock Club) and the tour organizer for their considerable expenses. Hey, it was the least we could do to avoid trouble, while living off ATMs. I contended that this was all about friendly cultural exchange, which was true. I also pointed out that we’d spent exponentially more money on travel expenses than we’d ever pull in from our gigs anyway, but the policewoman insisted that rules were rules regardless. We Americans would have to face a penalty, perhaps a severe fine or, even worse, a ban on ever returning to Russia.

We learned with relief that we weren’t required to be present at our hearing the following week because the police already knew we were scheduled to leave the country in six days. Instead, we could sign a waiver, designate an in-

terpreter (the much put-upon Wadim), and be informed of the outcome and penalty soon after our return to the States. We meekly acquiesced, figuring we had no grounds to contest the charges in any case.

Just then Albert and Vladimir showed up at the police station, loaded for bear. I’d been mortified thinking they were probably angry with me for drawing them into this legal shitstorm, but instead, they apologized for their countrymen’s behavior and began heatedly arguing on our behalf, threatening to enlist a lawyer friend. Since we’d already admitted to our transgression, we worried that our friends’ defense would only make things worse, but they eventually calmed down. At one point when the Russian cop wasn’t within earshot – he’d been periodically looking in on us to make sure that the Tuvan policewoman was following protocol – the latter told our friends in a lowered voice that she understood that our offense wasn’t a big deal but that she was bound to obey her superiors. Overall,



Guilty as charged in Tuva
(note passports on desk)

while the policewoman wore an unsmiling demeanor and did everything by the book, my sense was that she was not unsympathetic to our plight, and understood that we were being truthful about the amount of money we were actually losing for the sake of well-meaning cultural exchange.

It now remained to formally write up the charges, a process that took a good three hours because repeated power outages necessitated filling out all the lengthy forms longhand (three handwritten copies, one for each of us Americans). By now we'd accepted that we would regrettably have to cancel the remaining half of our tour because we'd blown our cover and the penalty for a second violation would presumably be much steeper. The cops were well aware that we had additional concerts scheduled in other cities, for they'd done their homework and shown us Iouri's ubiquitous social-media event listings on their phones, with dates and venue details. All they had to do was email or phone the police in Abakan or Krasnoyarsk to lay a snare for us in those cities. We felt terrible about pulling out on the local promoters and those who'd bought advance tickets, but saw no choice but to abide by the law.

Now comes the really weird part. After the initial rush of paranoia subsided, my friends and I started wondering how it had come about that we were busted in the first place. Had the police seen the posters advertising a "U.S.-Russia" band and decided to track us down because we were foreigners? Or maybe specifically because we were Americans, at an especially fraught time in U.S.-Russia relations? Was somebody incensed that we'd dedicated our set to the late political activist? Had I been seen spouting off on Tuva TV about MuzEnergó? For that matter, how did they know what kind of visas we had in the first place, or where we were staying? But when I apologized to Albert for embroiling him in an irksome situation, he said he believed it was for none of these reasons and had nothing to do with us specifically; instead, he thought it was a targeted attack on him and his friends by a rival who'd informed the cops just to fuck with them. And he had a pretty good idea who that person was.

Strangely, I thought I knew who it might be, too, and I barely knew anyone in Tuva. Wadim also had his suspicions, as did our tour manager Iouri back in the Moscow region, who'd organized the MuzEnergó Tour that brought me to Tuva in the first place. The odd thing is that all four of us were thinking of the same person.

Readers will recall that back in 2015 I'd performed – and judged auditions – at the annual Ustuu Khuree Festival in Chadán, about 200 kilometers west of Kyzyl. I won't reveal names here so as not to stir the hornet's nest, but two Tuvan brothers had key roles in the festival, one as the overall organizer, the other as a talent curator. It was the latter brother who'd involved me in judging the auditions, and who'd gifted me with the bronzed knee bone of a wolf that I'd joked would draw me back to Tuva – and which I'd indeed carried back with me on this second visit.

I'd been told that when the MuzEnergó Tour first took part in Ustuu Khuree prior to my involvement, relations with the organization had been cordial and the MuzEnergó players had been warmly

welcomed. But those who'd returned in 2015 noticed that management had cooled toward the MuzEnergo enterprise this time around. The director radiated an antagonistic vibe, and not only toward us; throughout our stay, he bellowed over a public-address system late into the night about the despicable habits of foreigners. Readers may recall that one evening back then, as the take-no-prisoners Dutch free-jazz outfit Cactus Truck caterwauled on stage, Wadim heard this fellow remark with contempt, "This is not the path of wisdom." I got on fine with his brother, but for some unknown reason this guy gave me the creeps.

On arriving in Kyzyl this time with Terrane, I mentioned to Albert that I'd been involved in judging the Ustuu Khuree auditions with the late brother. Albert told me that the other brother – the festival organizer – was based in Kyzyl, where he headed a cultural organization that had kindly loaned the Tuva Rock Club its p.a. system for use at the Terrane show. For this reason, he'd been placed on the guest list for the show; I thought it ironic that Mr. Path of Wisdom might actually attend Terrane's no-doubt unwise performance. It turned out that he didn't actually show up for the gig, but if Albert's surmise is correct, the fellow had other machinations in store.

I'd had no personal interactions with him at Ustuu Khuree and had actually done the festival a service by volunteering for the audition committee. Moreover, Moraine had received the warmest audience reception of any of the MuzEnergo acts, so I couldn't imagine what might have provoked him to put the cops on our tail. Were we tainted by our MuzEnergo connection? Was it that we were Americans? Or simply the fact that we played "spiritually corrupt" rock and jazz music, not to mention cheekily adapting Tuvan melodies? Albert thought the attack was due to none of the above and wasn't aimed specifically at us, but was an attempt to embarrass and harass him and his friends. So had we become unwitting pawns in a turf war between Tuvan traditionalists and rebel rockers? Or was Albert's late politically active friend somehow mixed up in it? We had, after all, dedicated our performance to his memory. Iouri agreed with Albert that it likely had nothing to do with us personally, though he did allow that things had been tense when we were at Ustuu Khuree in 2015. He also pointed out that it wasn't at all uncommon for foreigners to be hassled in the border regions. I suppose we'll never really know for certain.

On a coincidental side note, Arrington de Dionyso, a friend of mine and Dick's from the Pacific Northwest, just happened to have been in Tuva two weeks before us. A throat-singer and multi-instrumentalist, Arrington had hung out with Sailyk and other Tuvan musicians we knew and had just headlined a small music festival, but with zero police interference. He was no doubt traveling on a tourist visa himself. Go figure...

The police finally released us from custody around one in the afternoon and said we'd be informed of the outcome of our hearing shortly after our return to the U.S. in roughly a week's time. (An overtaxed Wadim would once again have to shoulder the burden of translating.) Albert and Artur were waiting outside in the van and urged us to make haste because it normally took six or seven hours to drive to Abakan across the Sayan Mountains and we were in danger of missing our sound check. Sound check?! Incredulous, I asked if they really thought we should risk falling into the same trap just hours after being busted in Tuva. Albert breezily assured us that he didn't think we'd have any such difficulties in Abakan because our recent incident was most likely "a local thing." Hmmm.

We swung by our hotel and grabbed our belongings, then crossed the Yenisey to collect Sailyk from her home on the far bank. No sooner did we arrive at her residence than a problem developed with

the van's rear door, which now refused to shut securely (the vehicle was filled to bursting with luggage and gear) and needed to be jerry-rigged with rope. Coming on the heels of our earlier police detainment, this second untoward mishap spooked Sailyk, who clearly believed that some sort of hex had been placed on us. She rushed back inside her home and emerged with a bundle of sage like those used by Native Americans and New Agers in cleansing ceremonies. She lit the sage and passed it over each of our bodies in turn to see if the smoke would reveal whether any of us was the "sinner" responsible for bringing down voodoo upon our heads. I gulped, desperately hoping that none of us Terraneans would be fingered as the culprit, but happily the smoke showed no such indication. I found it fascinating that Sailyk, who in every other regard was a globally aware modern citizen, had such deeply rooted shamanistic beliefs, but then if I lived in a place like Tuva, I probably would, too. And I confess that it did occur to me that my wolf bone might have been some sort of "monkey's paw" rather than the good-luck charm I'd thought it was. (It's still right here on the table beside me, though.)

Our anxiety ebbed as we embarked on one of the most scenic drives in all Siberia, with sweeping panoramas of the Sayan Mountains that roughly delineate the frontier between Russia and Mongolia. The morning's heavy rain had ceased, and rifts in the cloud cover revealed the first snowfall of the season at higher elevations. Vistas became ever more expansive as the road climbed, a patchwork quilt of rolling autumnal meadows, contrasting belts of coniferous forest, and glimpses of distant peaks. Some spots reminded me of Mazama in the Methow Valley of Washington state, where my wife Anne and I have a beloved "microcabin."

About an hour out from Kyzyl we passed the turnoff to the Valley of the Kings, celebrated for its impressively large *kurgan* tumuli – mounded earthen crypts that once held the remains of ancient Scythians who roamed the region. The Scythians, a cultural force to be reckoned with across Eurasia in the first millennium B.C.E., are famed for their remarkably intricate gold jewelry and other striking objects. Dick and I had viewed some splendid specimens on a guided tour of the Tuvan National Museum back in Kyzyl, kindly given by the museum director herself. Sailyk related how she'd once provided some appropriately atmospheric singing for an international crew filming a documentary on the vanished Scythians.

The drive brought a tense moment when we approached a police checkpoint on Tuva's frontier with neighboring Khakassia, and a big sigh of relief from the Tuvans when it became clear that we wouldn't be stopped – we'd had plenty enough police action for one day, thank you! I remembered undergoing a police inspection at the same location when the MuzEnerg bus had passed this way in 2015; Iouri explained at the time that these internal border checks, unusual in Russia, were occasioned by the steady flow of cannabis and other contraband from Tuva into the rest of Russia.

We drove on, at times passing rural residents selling mushrooms and berries at the roadside, Sailyk quietly practicing her throat-singing to pass the time. At length we crested a high pass amid a surprise early-season blizzard, near a cluster of ski resorts. The clouds parted just in time to afford a glimpse of the fantastically sculpted spires of the Ergaki Mountains, a climactic subrange of the Western Sayan that's situated within the protected Ergaki Nature Park.

The van descended into Abakan at twilight, minutes before we were scheduled to take the stage. I'd played in Abakan in 2015 with Russian Moraine and had pleasant memories of the Khakassian capital, but all my paranoia over possibly being busted again now returned in full force. We arrived at the night's venue in a rattled state, expecting cops to spring out of the shadows at any moment. It seemed like a no-brainer that the police in Tuva would have messaged their Abakan counterparts to waylay us. I felt vaguely ill as we distractedly sound-checked while the audience waited patiently in the lobby. How

could we be so reckless? Would the police pounce on us during the concert, or afterward? Would they deport us outright, or even jail us this time? The day's stress showed in our performance, which improved once Albert and Sailyk joined us on stage, and was warmly received by the audience in any case. (In fact, the [video](#) captured by an audience member is our proudest souvenir of the whole tour.) We broke down our gear and exited the building consumed with apprehension and ... nothing happened.

Relieved but not relaxed, we had a bite after the show with local friends, including Albert's bright and affable teenaged son, then checked into our hotel close to midnight. Wadim had optimistically calculated that if the police really were on our tail, they'd be unlikely to pull off a hotel sting as they had in Kyzyl. They didn't know where we were staying, and since we were checking in so late, the staff's mandatory reporting of foreign guests to the local authorities wouldn't reach them until after we'd left early the next morning. Wadim thought we had nothing to fear, but I couldn't shake my agitation, imagining that an unusually friendly man in the hotel lobby was an informant. At any rate, following a too-short night's sleep, we left our lodgings just after dawn and boarded a bus for the seven-hour ride to Krasnoyarsk without incident.

The Krasnoyarsk gig – where we were again graced with Albert's participation, Sailyk having flown from Abakan to Moscow for her holiday – was the most widely publicized and best-attended date of the tour. Sponsored by a local radio station and staged in its modern performance and production facility, the Terrane gig was in fact the kickoff event for the Krasnoyarsk Jazz Festival. Posters with my mug on them were all over town, and I was again interviewed on camera by a local TV station. We were sitting ducks for a police raid, but what were we to do? Hundreds of tickets had already been sold at a fairly steep price.

We played what was likely our strongest concert of the tour to a warmly enthusiastic reception. Clearly, Albert was the lodestone that drew people to the gig, and was well-known to many in the audience, who were no doubt curious to see him in an unpredictable context. A highlight of the evening was an extended improvisation in a vaguely “Tibetan” mode as part of a suite of Tibetan pop songs I'd arranged for *Giant Steppes* under the title “The Fellowship of Tsering” (a nod to their Tibetan composer, Jamba Tsering). The tunes had been personal favorites ever since Anne had found them on a cheap handwritten cassette on a visit to Lhasa in 1989. We involved Albert in the improvisation to wonderful effect, as he vocalized eerily amid the instrumental sounds and sampled recordings of Tibetan *dungchen* (long horns), spinning prayer wheels, and flapping, windblown prayer flags. He said he felt comfortable interpreting Tibetan material because of the deep, longstanding ties between the Tuvan and Tibetan peoples, chiefly their shared devotion to Tibetan Buddhism (recall the Dalai Lama's consecration of the rebuilt Ustuu Khuree temple), though Albert himself seemed secular in his beliefs.



Terrane at the Krasnoyarsk Jazz festival

Curiously, the organizers had arranged for an informal tea ceremony to take place just before the concert, hosted by a Russian man garbed in Asian silk who explained that he'd apprenticed in the art in China and Taiwan. After a few sips of what was indeed very fine tea, it dawned on me that the ceremony was a response to my artist bio, which went on at some length about my doings in those countries. I was touched by the gesture, little as it had to do with present matters, but the film montage of Asian landscapes projected behind us throughout the concert was a bit much – I rather doubt that Tibetans would have felt very sanguine about all the footage of landscapes in the heart of China, which had no bearing on the music we were playing. But hey, Asians are Asians, right?

Even though the Tuvan policewoman had confronted us with the Krasnoyarsk concert poster on her phone, just as in Abakan, we encountered no inquiring police at either the venue or the hotel. Instead we sat up late into the night quaffing cocktails made with wonderful orange “sea buckthorn” berries while discussing the state of the world with our new friend Albert, who would return to Abakan in the morning, while the rest of us would board a six-hour flight to Moscow to complete Terrane's up-and-down concert tour.

Iouri collected a now permanently jet-lagged Terrane from Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport – or rather, Sheremetyevo Alexander S. Pushkin International Airport, as it had recently been officially renamed in honor of the beloved writer by decree of Vladimir Putin, creating quite a mouthful. We made our way to the pleasant small city of Dubna about an hour north of Moscow on the Volga River, until recently Iouri's longtime home and the place where he launched his now legendary MuzEnergO project, first as a local festival of adventurous music, and later as the cross-country bus tour that had changed my own and many other musicians' lives.

Iouri had booked us rooms at a 1950s-era hotel associated with the city's centerpiece, the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research; indeed, the young planned city was essentially built around the institute. The still-active facility was the leading center of nuclear research for a consortium of mostly Soviet bloc nations during its Cold War heyday. Its sprawling grounds boasted some of the most opulent houses I've ever seen in Russia, once home to such eminent scientific minds as the Italian physicist Bruno Pontecorvo, immortalized as a bronze statue in a riverside park. Atomic motifs were ubiquitous in the



Artwork at venue in Dubna, the “Atomic City” (DR)

leafy city whose motto is “Science Bringing Nations Together.” (Um, how’s that working out for you?) Our walking tour of the city, entertainingly narrated by Iouri, was the highlight of our short stay in Dubna. That night we played a lackluster show for a small crowd at a local hookah bar amid billows of tobacco smoke, surely not helped by the nasty cold I’d picked up in Tuva (which would end up lasting nearly a month). As in Abakan and Krasnoyarsk, the cops were no-shows.

On the morrow we made the short train journey to Moscow for the final episode of the Terrane tour, at DOM, the city’s shrine for experimental music. The band reunited with Sailyk for the gig, and myself with a dear friend from the 2015 MuzEnergo Tour, the spellbinding singer and *güslü* (an ancient Russian zither) player Maxim “Gudimir” Anukhin. A legend of Russian folkloric music, Maxim



Reunion of grizzled MuzEnergo Tour survivors, DOM, Moscow 2019. L-R: Maxim “Gudimir” Anukhin, George “Gosha” Zholud, Iouri Lnogradski, DR

had kindly traveled all the way from his home in St. Petersburg to see me and join Terrane for a rendition of the Americana chestnut “Shenandoah,” a song he’d loved since touring the U.S. with the famed Moscow Circus (and which this American had to learn for the occasion). I loved Maxim’s stories of being mobbed by Russian-American auto-graph seekers after circus shows in places like Kansas City. Also present was our beloved sound man George

“Gosha” Zholud from the 2015 MuzEnergo Tour. The band played with as much passion as we had anywhere on the tour, and Sailyk once again cracked the sky with her lightning voice. Again, there was no cop sting. – though one local fellow did come up and tell me he’d been a fan of mine since I’d played with LAND in the 1990s.

Our tour now at an end, we wrapped things up with a day of sightseeing in Moscow – I instantly loved the city, now that I finally had time to see it– ending with an evening visit to a jazz club with Sailyk to take in some commendable local music. Early the next morning we made our way to the airport to fly home, Dick and I back to Seattle, Dan to his ancestral Italy where he’d recently purchased a house. (Wadim had flown home to Tomsk hours after the DOM gig.)

I tried to look calm as I handed the Customs officer my passport on the way to the gate, fully expecting to be detained for a red-flag visa violation, compounded by repeat offenses no doubt registered by the central government. The officer asked the purpose of my visit. I responded with the rehearsed line “Visiting friends, sightseeing, playing a little music.” (I did after all have a guitar slung over my shoulder.) “Was it a good time?” he inquired. “Oh yes, excellent,” I replied. He gave a faint approximation of a smile – rare enough in these circumstances – stamped my passport, and sent me on my way. It took me a good ten minutes to stop trembling. No gulag for me (yet), it seemed.

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As promised, the Tuvan police notified us of our hearing's outcome two days after our return to the States. The anticlimactic verdict: a fine for an amount equivalent to US\$30 apiece, and zero restrictions on future entry. It was an almost laughably light wrist-slap, and proof that Albert and his friends were right that the incident, though a federal violation, had been nothing more than a local dust-up with us as sort-of innocent bystanders. The cops in Kyzyl clearly hadn't cared in the slightest whether we played more gigs in Russia. Still, it was a seriously worrisome situation while it lasted and taught me a valuable lesson about cavalierly ignoring legal niceties. Once again, I raise a cup of *kumis* to my splendid comrades in Terrane for risking the consequences of my audacious musical incursion, and for investing so much of their energy and resources in the tour.

Over the years I'd made about ten trips to various countries outside the U.S. to play music in public. With just one exception – an official Chinese government invitation in 1991 – I'd flown beneath the radar on tourist rather than work visas every time without incident. Now my luck had finally run out.

Readers might justifiably wonder why I didn't just knuckle under and apply for a work visa in the first place. The simple answer is that at my lowly position on the ladder of musical economics, far more money goes into these international tours than is ever brought in. For musicians like me who work in specialized stylistic niches for a relatively microscopic audience – invariably at a loss, once one factors in the cost of equipment, rehearsal-space rental, travel expenses, and thousands of dollars of outlay for recording and manufacturing albums – it's no mere platitude to say that our musical outreach is truly a labor of love. Hence the necessity of a day job, which I made my peace with long ago; without that income stream, I wouldn't have been able to pull off the wacky adventures you just read about. I suppose I could have just sat at home and waited for all-expenses-paid opportunities to flow my way. And waited, and waited. My point is that prevalent assumptions about the income of your average musician are almost always divorced from reality.

Other considerations include the high cost of obtaining a work visa and, depending on the destination country, the extremely high bar one must meet to be granted one. Not long before the Terrane tour, I'd been asked to provide a professional reference on behalf of the legendary British band Soft Machine, who'd initiated the tortuous process of applying for a U.S. work visa for an upcoming tour. The procedure throws up serious obstacles that weed out a majority of applicants, deserving and otherwise. For one thing, the application requires approval from the American Federation of Musicians union, who tend to take a protectionist stance toward foreign musicians working in their territory. The State Department also requires multiple references from music-industry professionals attesting that the applicant is of a stature befitting admission into the country, as I'd been asked to provide for Soft Machine. If even such a historically important band as Soft Machine has to thread its way through these bureaucratic mazes – and fork over application-processing fees amounting to thousands of dollars per band member – imagine the odds for players at my obscure level. And in today's world of trade wars and hysterical xenophobia, it gets harder and harder to clear the hurdles. (In the event, Soft Machine did get their visas, at a cost of probably US\$10,000.)

Ironically, for this most recent trip to Russia, we Terraneans could have applied for so-called “humanitarian” visas – essentially work visas, but for cultural purposes – since a Russian associate of Iouri's had already agreed to issue an accredited invitation. Yet here again we found ourselves bedeviled by Trump. Despite his shady involvement in all manner of Russia-related chicanery, in a transparently cover-your-ass move, his State Department had punitively closed the Consulate of the Russian Federation in Seattle about a year earlier. The practical result for each of the many thousands of Russian citizens living on the U.S. West Coast is that they now have to travel as far as Washington D.C. or Texas

for even the most minor consular services. For foreign nationals, a humanitarian visa requires an in-person interview with a Russian consular official. Dick and I could have flown to D.C. for an interview with embassy officials there (and Dan to Beijing), and our chance of success was probably good, but after airfare and hotel expenses, it would have cost each of us roughly a grand, many multiples of our most optimistic expectation of gig income in Russia. In the face of such hassle and expense, I decided to take my chances on a tourist visa because I wasn't going to be making any money anyway. We know how that worked out.

Of course, the brush with diplomatic danger was all worth it in the end. Had we applied for the humanitarian visas but been denied, we might have called off the trip altogether, and I might never have had a chance to perform with Albert and Sailyk in Tuva and close the circle that began so serendipitously with Peter Shotwell's cassettes all those years ago.

My deepest gratitude and a hearty *kargyraa* cheer and wolf howl go to Peter, Leonardo, Iouri, Albert, Sailyk, Wadim, Yuri, Vasco, Marc, Alicia, Jim, Lionel, Nicolas, Onno, Maxim, Gosha, Dan, Dick, Timur, and everyone else who had a part in this most fortuitous and life-affirming adventure. A part of me resides in Siberia forevermore.

“This is the wind of the world's nest – this is my land.”

September 2020

GIANT STEPPES BACKGROUND NOTES

1. Live at Gaochang

Uyghur traditional; arranged by Dennis Rea

Don Berman (drums, percussion) • Stuart Dempster (didgeridoo) • Greg Campbell (electric French horn) • Greg Kelley (trumpet) • Dick Valentine (alto and soprano saxophones) • Dennis Rea (electric, resonator, and 'Mellotron' guitars)

Sources: "Yaru," "Morning," and "Ejem," from the 1980s collection *Uyghur Music of Xinjiang*.

In late summer 1989, Anne and I traveled from the city of Chengdu in western China's Sichuan Province, where we'd been teaching English to graduate researchers, to Xinjiang in China's far northwest. The shock waves were still reverberating from the Tiananmen massacre just two months earlier, and the simultaneous bloodbath we'd witnessed in Chengdu. School had been suspended indefinitely, and China was refreshingly free of skittish foreign travelers, so it seemed like a good time to get out and explore the country.

Historically known as East Turkestan, Xinjiang is a purportedly "autonomous" region inhabited largely by Turkic-speaking Muslim peoples including Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kirghiz. Its arid topography funneled the fabled Silk Road trade route that historically linked China to the outer world. After side trips to a Tibetan lamasery in Qinghai Province and the Dunhuang caves with their ancient frescoes, we stepped off a train in the desert oasis of Turfan and passed a few pleasant days in the trellis-shaded courtyard of the local guesthouse with newfound French-Canadian friends Pierre and Danielle Daigneault and their gifted son Yann. Together we visited nearby cultural sites such as the vast ruined city of Gaochang, where Pierre, having learned that I was a musician, quipped, "You need to put out an album someday, Dennis Rea Live at Gaochang." We had a good laugh over that, picturing me playing alone to no one through a stack of speakers amid the baking, crumbling masonry.



The ruined city of Gaochang in Xinjiang
(East Turkestan) (DR)

From Turfan, Anne and I traveled on to the drab provincial capital of Urumqi. The highlight of our stay was a visit to the Xinjiang Museum, which housed a rich collection of cultural treasures. In the museum gift shop, I purchased a handsomely packaged boxed set of four audio cassettes titled *Music of Xinjiang*. On listening to the tapes back in Chengdu, I was floored by the vigor, virtuosity, and



sensuality on display in the collection's two instrumental volumes, sometimes evoking a sort of Taklamakan Desert flamenco. I grew so obsessed with the piece "Spring" that I adapted it to electric guitar and insisted on playing it as a solo feature when I joined the Chinese pop star Zhang Xing for a few arena dates in Chengdu and Chongqing on his comeback tour in 1990, to the puzzlement of his mainstream audience.

The music never left my head. When many years later I first conceived what was to become *Giant Steppes*, the first

piece I recorded was this suite of three rearranged pieces for Uyghur stringed instruments, first heard on that same gilt-figured box of cassettes: "Yaru," "Morning," and "Ejem."

The key to approximating the shallow-bodied instruments heard on the original tapes – some with as few as two strings, one providing an underlying drone – was my choice of a Dobro-style resonator guitar that sounds somewhat like a banjo. Tuning the instrument to just two notes – alternating D and A strings – transformed the guitar into a reasonable facsimile of the Uyghur instruments. On this track, acoustic guitar passages based on the Uyghur melodies (electric on "Spring") form the backbone of the arrangements and are fleshed out by the marvelous contributions of my collaborators, with a dash of desert wind and sand for a garnish. Of course, there could be no more fitting title than Pierre's "Live at Gaochang."

As I wrote in *Live at the Forbidden City*,

Xinjiang is Chinese in name and governance only, a land of mosques, melons, and mutton kebabs where the ruled far outnumber the rulers. Thousands of kilometers removed from the Han cultural heartland, the region's Chinese populace is a motley assortment of frontier soldiers, political exiles, miners, oilmen, and hardy entrepreneurs, few of whom live in this arid landscape by choice. Relations are tense between the Muslim majority and the growing numbers of unwelcome Chinese settlers, viewed with some justification as the vanguard of a Beijing-orchestrated social engineering plot. Incidences of ethnic violence are increasingly common, and in recent years a Uyghur separatist movement has gathered momentum, inspired in part by the newly won independence of their cousins across the border in the former Soviet republics.

I penned that back in 2006, when few nonspecialists had even heard of the Uyghurs. Today in 2020, the Uyghur people are often in even the mainstream news, but for all the wrong reasons. The systematic erasure of Uyghur culture dramatically escalated under the rule of China's monstrous President-for-life Xi Jinping, whose regime has carried out deliberate, wholesale culturicide in the region, to the world's horror (and Donald Trump's explicit approval). It's estimated that Xi's forces have detained hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs in what are accurately described as concentration camps, on the flimsy pretense of "retraining," echoing the brutal reeducation camps of the Cultural Revolution. Religious and other cultural practices have been outlawed. Uyghur males have been forced to

shave their beards and recant their faith. Families have been separated, forced abortions and sterilizations alleged, and facial-recognition technology has been deployed, with ominous implications for us all. For more of the harrowing details, see [Persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang](#) on Wikipedia, and please help spread awareness of the Chinese regime's inhumane repression of not only Uyghurs, but also Tibetans and other distinct cultures rooted within China's borders. (Note: I certainly don't excuse my own country's demolition of its native peoples, either.) I offer this piece as a small token of my abiding respect for a culture whose music deeply influenced my own musical thinking.

2. Altai By and By

Russian traditional; arranged by Juliana Svetlitchnaia / Dennis Rea

Juliana & PAVA (vocals and hurdy-gurdy) • Dennis Rea (electric guitar)

Sources: "I Was Angry" and "My Dear Bridesmaids," two Russian songs from Altai Krai in the heart of Russian Central Asia, as arranged by the Seattle-based Russian folkloric vocal ensemble Juliana and PAVA (www.ethnorussia.com/pava.htm).

The farthest distance I've ever traveled westward from my birthplace is the southern margin of the Junggar Basin in northwest China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous (ha!) Region, in 1989 (see above). Back then, when reading about what lay beyond the basin to the north, I felt a strong attraction to the Altai Mountains that form the border of China, Russia, Mongolia, and (nearly) Kazakhstan, a remote region shrouded in mystery and spiritual significance that's long been rumored to be the location of the mystical realm of Shambhala. While I never did make it there, I got pretty darn close coming from the other direction when Moraine played a concert in the Russian city of Barnaul in summer 2015, leaving me just 700 miles shy of having circled the globe.

Barnaul is the hub of Altai Krai, one of two regions of Russia to bear the name: the Krai ("territory") and the adjacent Altai Republic. The latter is extremely mountainous and home to a relatively large population of ethnic minorities (Tuvans, Kazakhs, even Germans). The former is a land of rolling steppes at the mountains' feet, inhabited largely by the descendants of European Russian settlers. It's in this area where the two songs on which "Altai By and By" are based originated.

Like so many other serendipitous connections in my life, the partnership that led to this piece of music came about through the MuzErgo Tour, albeit indirectly. Among my musical involvements, I co-produce the Seaprog festival, an annual showcase for adventurous progressive and psychedelic rock music in Seattle. While standing outside the venue one day, I was approached by a festival attendee who inquired about the t-shirt I was wearing, which bore the logo of the "Iron Felix Festival" I'd recently played in the rural enclave of Dzerzhinskoye in Russia (see main text above). As a Russian himself, Nikolay was very surprised to hear that I'd played in such an out-of-the-way locale. As we conversed, it came out that he was a musician himself who played hurdy-gurdy with the Seattle-based women's choral group Juliana & PAVA, who specialized in Russian folkloric songs. Nikolay told me the group would be keen to work with me if I were interested. I figured he was just being polite.

The next time I ran into Nikolay, he repeated the invitation, saying the group was looking to branch out from a strictly traditional repertoire. When I listened to the lovely CDs he gave me, my wheels started turning, especially when I noticed that the ensemble interpreted a few songs from Altai Krai, which meant they were wholly appropriate for a record of Central Asian music. I was very taken with

a couple of songs in particular, the plaintive “My Dear Bridesmaids” and the lament “I Was Angry,” and set about coming up with personalized arrangements. The group very kindly agreed to join me in the studio.

PAVA was formed by Russian-born Juliana Svetlitchnaia, Nikolay’s partner and a powerful singer with many impressive accomplishments in Russia, Scandinavia, and her adopted U.S. She’d assembled a group with four other Russian expatriate singers, with Nikolay typically providing accompaniment on hurdy-gurdy. PAVA performs frequently at cultural events throughout the Pacific Northwest, even with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. I couldn’t believe my good fortune in stumbling into this exciting alliance, right when I was working on my *Giant Steppes* opus.



Juliana & PAVA, Jack Straw Cultural Center, Seattle (DR)

With nonpareil sound engineer Doug Haire at the helm, the group recorded both songs, the plan being that I would add my guitar parts after the fact as the music took shape. In addition to the traditional material, I asked each of the ladies to sing each note of a particular scale in isolation so that I could assemble a ‘palette’ of material to work with later, comprising a wide spectrum of pitches and timbre. The players quickly got into the spirit of the moment and also contributed some beautiful (and goofy) improvisations. Doug and I later created mysterious harmonies by combining the single sung notes of the various singers into chords, then stitched the suite together into a narrative continuum over which I later layered my guitar parts and solos. Thus was created “Altai By and By,” a pun on the Washington state motto, “Alki (By and By),” bestowed by some of Seattle’s earliest white settlers when they put ashore at Alki Point.

I’m extremely thankful for Juliana and PAVA’s generosity, warmth, and spirit of openness to new musical approaches. Do yourself a favor and check them out at www.ethnorussia.com/pava.htm.

3. Wind of the World's Nest

Dennis Rea / Tuvan traditional; lyrics by Galsan Tschinag

Albert Kuvezin (voice) • Dick Valentine (alto saxophone, flute) • Wadim Dicke (electric fretted and fretless basses) • Brian Opiel (drums) • Dennis Rea (electric guitar, 'throat guitar')

Source: Contains a fragment of the Tuvan traditional song "Baezhin" but otherwise is original music in a Tuvan vein by Dennis Rea.

See the main text for a detailed description of the origins and making of this tune.

4. The Fellowship of Tsering

Jampa Tsering, arranged by Dennis Rea

Steve Fisk (keyboards, sounds, rhythms, creative processing) • Greg Powers (*dungchen* horn) • Albert Kuvezin (vocal) • Wadim Dicke (electric bass) • Daniel Zongrone (drums, percussion) • Dick Valentine (flute) • Dennis Rea (electric and organ guitars, kalimba) • Tibetan prayer flag and prayer wheel field recordings courtesy of Avosound.

Sources: two songs (titles unknown) by the beloved Tibetan singer-songwriter Jampa Tsering (1960s–1997), from a handwritten cassette purchased in Lhasa by my wife Anne Joiner in 1989.

In January 1989, just before I joined her in Chengdu, Sichuan, for a year of teaching English (and a wholly unexpected career as a Chinese "rock star"), Anne took advantage of a rare opportunity to visit Tibet. The region had only recently reopened to foreigners after sporadic unrest, and she was able to make the trip as a faculty member of our employer, Chengdu University of Science and Technology. Everywhere she went in Lhasa, she heard a strangely appealing Tibetan pop song that soon became a persistent earworm. One day she happened on a street vendor who sold tapes, and walked away with a cassette labeled with handwritten Tibetan characters and the words "Chamba Tseren." One side was the song she'd been looking for, the B side a similarly fetching number.

We both grew to love the songs, featuring an oddly effeminate male singer (and sometimes a woman as well) accompanied by a cheap period keyboard, needle-thin electric guitar, and muffled drums playing to a quasi-reggae beat. The music had an endearing cheesiness owing to tape wobble and crude duplication, but the melodies never failed to charm.

I never made it to Tibet proper myself, but I did visit Tibetan cultural areas in western Sichuan and Qinghai Province that had been part of Tibet before the Chinese annexed them.

Years later when considering material for *Giant Steppes*, the Tibetan tunes naturally were at the top of my list. Over time I developed elaborate, almost baroque arrangements featuring (of course) cheesy organ sounds, synth bass, surf guitar, and a minimalist drum track – probably the most "techno" piece I've ever made. The final version also included an improvised "Tibetan" soundscape that Terrane and Albert Kuvezin recorded at the Krasnoyarsk Jazz Festival in 2019, field recordings of spinning prayer wheels and flapping prayer flags, and Greg Powers playing a Tibetan *dungchen* (long horn). My main

collaborator on the suite was celebrated recording engineer and experimental musician Steve Fisk, who's produced lots of records you've heard that he wouldn't want me to mention. The experience of working with Steve on this material was fulfilling in so many ways; I'm indebted to him for his enthusiasm, commitment, and consistently great ideas.

At the start I'd planned on recording the vocal tracks, too, but I hit a wall because I had no idea what the fellow was singing. I enlisted my friend and sometime musical collaborator, the extraordinary singer Caterina De Re, to try to divine the lyrics' meaning, since she had many Tibetan contacts. But though she sent the songs to Tibetans in the States, Europe, and the homeland, nobody was able to offer more than a vague, fragmentary translation, so I decided to make an instrumental version instead.

More problematic was that I didn't even know the artist's name so I could properly credit him. I was resigned to putting it out with a lame explanation to that effect, but at the last minute decided to give it one last try. I did yet another internet search on "Chamba Tseren" plus some likely keywords, and this time started getting some results for a singer named "Jampa Tsering" who'd been active during the same time period. I watched some videos featuring Tsering's songs – and here, thirty years later, was the voice from the cassette!

The discovery was bittersweet, as I learned that he'd died tragically in an auto accident in 1997. But I also learned that he'd been a much-beloved musical hero among Tibetans during his lifetime, and that he'd evidently been the bridge between Tibetan folk music and modern electric pop-rock, picked up during his student days in China. How fitting to include his music in this collection – here's to his memory and his spirit, riding a steed of wind among the airy precipices of his homeland!

Recorded 2016–19 in Seattle, Tacoma, Abakan, Krasnoyarsk, and Tomsk

Tracks 1 and 2 recorded at Jack Straw Cultural Center, Seattle

Recorded and mixed by Doug Haire.

Made possible through a generous grant from JSCC's Artist Support Program.

<http://www.jackstraw.org/>

Track 3 recorded at:

Sound House, Seattle; engineer: Steve Fisk; assistant engineers: Chris Merten, Mitch Midkiff, Jack Endino

Arundel Gardens, Tacoma; recording and mix engineer: Steve Fisk

Wadim Dicke home studio, Tomsk, Russia

Albert Kuvezin home studio, Abakan, Russia

Track 4 recorded at:

Arundel Gardens, Tacoma; recorded and mixed by Steve Fisk

Silver Rain Concert Studio, Krasnoyarsk, Russia (live at Krasnoyarsk Jazz Festival 13.09.19)

Jack Straw Cultural Center, Seattle; engineer: Doug Haire

Mastered by Steve Turnidge at UltraViolet Studios, Seattle.

Produced by Dennis Rea.

Executive Producer: Leonardo Pavkovic

Cover design: Leonardo Pavkovic and Sasha Popovic; cover photo by Dennis Rea

LINKS

Audio



Giant Steppes (MoonJune Records)

Video

[MuzEnergó Tour at Ustuu Khuree Festival](#), Tuva 2015 (features Russian Moraine)

[Russian Moraine with Electra Forever](#), 2015 MuzEnergó Tour

[Dennis Rea & Terrane with Sailyk Ommun](#), Abakan, Khakassia 2019

[Dennis Rea & Terrane with Albert Kuvezin: Jampa Tsering improvisation](#), Krasnoyarsk Jazz Festival 2019

