

In Studio with Tuvan Throat Singers

by David L. Brown



Long-time Doc Man Steven Baigel films Huun-Huur-Tu tweaking the playback. (Photo Tom Heinz)

I recently had the privilege of directing and DPing a multi-cam shoot of a truly remarkable band called Huun-Huur-Tu over four days at Berkeley's Fantasy Studios. Acknowledged as the world's finest throat singers, they hail from Tuva, a Russian republic north of Mongolia.

Many readers may have been introduced - as I was - to this music from the Oscar-nominated doc *Genghis Blues*, by Bay Area filmmakers Roko and Adrian Belic. But even with that exposure, I was astounded by this band's soulful sound, as were the video crew and engineering staff at Fantasy.

Lucia Comnes, a musician friend with whom I traveled to Khakassia, west of Tuva (see article in Jan09 CineSource), introduced me to the band. I was hired by Vladimir Oboronko, the band's Russian road manager/producer, to produce and direct the videotaping of the recording sessions for the band's new CD, *Klassica*, for which all involved held high hopes for a Grammy in February (alas, they lost to *Ilembé*, by Ladysmith Black Mambazo). Huun-Huur-Tu had toured the U.S. and Europe for 14 years and had played with folks like Ry Cooder and Frank Zappa. The band had recorded several albums but none especially well.

With the support of Fantasy Studios director, Jeffrey Wood, and veteran engineer, John Cuniberti (who facilitated the donation of Telefunken mics - considered the world's best), the band would finally achieve the sound their talent deserved. We would be videotaping the sessions (with three cameras) and the performance (with five cameras) at Fantasy's lovely Studio D.

Tuvan throat singing, or *hoomei*, is a distinctive style in which the singers sing multiple tones, or harmonic overtones, by tightening their throats and shaping their mouths. This results in two, three, or sometimes four distinctly tones. The traditional descriptions of the three main styles of *hoomei* reflect a nature-based sound from "wind swirling among rocks" to "the plaintive cries of a mother camel after losing her calf." It is said to have originated with a monk who heard overtones produced by a waterfall in a canyon in western Mongolia but is obviously rooted in the animism and earth-based spirituality of shamanism.

Tuva instruments include the banjo-like *doshpuluur* (an acoustic guitar), a wooden flute, a variety of drums and percussion instruments including real horse hooves, and a variety of stringed instruments that are bowed, particularly the *igil*, strung with horse hair and named for the carved horse on the top of the neck.

After playing the Bay Area for years (the last gig in 2008 was at Great American Music Hall), Huun-Huur-Tu has a sizeable fan base. One of the most fanatic is Dorian Maras, a member of the San Francisco video collective Scary Cow. For the Fantasy sessions, Dorian recruited 16 members of the collective who ultimately contributed three HD camcorders and much skilled labor to the four-day shoot. Art director Kia Resnick designed and built a beautiful set for the concert, based on a Tuvan mountainscape. Resnick had lived in Asia for ten years and collected a variety of Asian fabrics and artifacts which she incorporated artfully. Tuvan culture is a blend of Buddhism and shamanism; we consulted with the band to make sure they would be comfortable with our set dressing and props.

Scheduling the shoot with a mostly volunteer crew from Scary

Cow was challenging. Very few folks were available full-time for four days, although my long-time colleague Steven Baigel was available every day. We had to wrangle Sony HDV cameras (mostly the ZIUs), because there seemed to be no JVC HDV decks in Moscow, where the postproduction would likely happen. In the studio, we would position the cameras for best coverage of the four musicians, then move to two cameras in the control room for band comments, as they listened to playback.

“Because I had never worked with Huun- Huur-Tu,” recalled Cuniberti, “I approached the recording as a documentary rather than a studio production. That is, after setting up for the recordings we tried to interfere with the performances as little as possible. At times when Huun Huur Tu lost their way and couldn’t get a usable take, I would ask David to stop filming and turn off the lights. The musicians could then regroup in order to channel their music without any distractions.”

The interviews were shot against enlarged photos of the band in Tuva, Tuvan landscapes, and traditional Tuvan scenes with prayer-flag trees and yurts. Filmmaker/photographer Tom Heinz, a long-time aficionado, made the enlargements. Another filmmaker friend, Tom Anderson, also a Tuvaphile (having shot a film, Tuva: Shamans and Spirits) helped out, while his wife, Tamia, contributed several of her photos of Tuvan landscapes. We usually shot interviews when the musicians were recording overdubs or taking a break. We interviewed the band’s leader, Sayan Bapa, Cuniberti, the engineer, and the band’s agent - and also covered a lively conversation between Cuniberti and producer Oboronko.



Huun-Huur Tu

an audience camera stage right and a wide angle camera in the center back to shoot the full band. As director/ shooter, I chose to shoot from a seat in the front row center. We anticipated a standing ovation after the last song, and it came thunderously. “I was in heaven to be able to photograph these incredible musicians, up close, for 4 days,” said one of our Tuvaphile cameramen, Tom Heinz, “I had chills up my spine as I danced in the back of the room!”

Huun-Huur Tu and Oboronko left the next day for Boston and New York but it was a delight to spend four days with such distinctive talent and to help capture the band’s act for posterity. “It was an absolute pleasure to host Huun Huur Tu,” noted Fantasy’s Wood. “They are vibrant, inclusive and global. The performance was special enough for us to make studio D available for a live audience concert.”

Watch for Huun-Huur-Tu’s *Klassica* if you hear that CD, you’ll understand why their community of listeners has spread from the Tuvan steppe to lovers of traditional music worldwide. David L. Brown has been producing and directing documentaries since 1971. He won two Emmy Awards for *The Bridge So Far* including Best Documentary. He was nominated for Emmys for *Digital Divide*, *Surfing for Life*, *Of Wind and Waves* and *Amazing*. He teaches Documentary Filmmaking at City College of S.F. and U.C Berkeley Extension. <http://www.DLBfilms.com> (415) 468-7469



David L. Brown films Huun Huur Tu mixing their album.
(Photo: Tom Heinz)

The studio lighting consisted totally of refocused in-house lights. We lit the control room but the engineers objected and we found the available light adequate after boosting the gain. For the concert in the larger Studio D, we refocused the house track lighting, but also brought in additional soft lights, set lights and high riser stands for the back lights. There was a wonderful air of anticipation in the audience of 120 before the show. We had cameras stage right and left,