



BEGINNER'S GUIDE...

Simon Broughton examines the multi-toned singing and unusual instruments of Tuva's most successful band

# HUUN-HUUR-TU

If you've never heard Tuvan throat singing, then you've got a treat in store. It is like entering another musical universe which abides by different rules. Indeed, Tuva, situated between Siberia and Mongolia at the heart of inner Asia, is another world where music is closely connected to the landscape and nature. Ethereal, shimmering melodies hover like a flock of birds over an undulating landscape of growling drones. One voice emits two, or even three separate tones, and a group of voices makes for incredible sonic possibilities. If you have heard throat singing, or more correctly 'overtone singing', then it's more than likely courtesy of Huun-Huur-Tu, Tuva's most successful international band.

The four-piece group formed in 1992, but only adopted the name Huun-Huur-Tu after their debut US tour in 1993. Three Tuvan musicians were invited to California to demonstrate their throat singing skills while on horseback in Pasadena's New Year Rose Parade. A number of East and West Coast gigs were arranged and the tour achieved a sort of legendary notoriety as the Tuvans were invited to jam with Frank Zappa and play with the Kronos Quartet at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch.

Of course, it's the physical process of overtone singing that fascinates people – the way the vocal harmonics are selectively amplified by movements of the lips, tongue and larynx. But the musicians of Huun-Huur-Tu are frustrated by the

way audiences get obsessed by the technicalities rather than enjoying the musicality which is what makes the band stand out. With instrumental playing to match their singing, Huun-Huur-Tu are the leaders in a competitive field.

The name (*xūn xūrtū* in conventional transliteration) literally means 'sun propeller' and refers to a visual effect of separation of the sun's rays just after sunrise or just before sunset. They see the refraction of light that produces these rays as analogous to the 'refraction' of sound that produces the harmonics in Tuvan overtone singing. It's also fitting that the name refers to an image in the landscape where music and the environment – streams, mountains and animals – are so closely connected.