

NEW RHYTHMS FROM THE MODERN SILK ROAD



Beijing Jazz Unit

This programme of artists from Tel Aviv through Tashkent to Beijing and Hong Kong conveys a sense of the cultural innovations emerging from Asia these days. Just as the old Silk Road constituted not only trade routes but cultural connections that linked vast parts of Eurasia, the “new” Silk Road has re-established many of those same trade and cultural connections after a long hiatus.

For example, young artists, musicians, filmmakers and cultural activists throughout the former Soviet Union have begun to emerge from decades of enforced provincialism to forge a range of fascinating syntheses between the artistic and spiritual

traditions of their own native cultures and the now-universal languages of contemporary art and music coming from the West. From Yakutia and Tuva, from Badakhshan and Uzbekistan, new ensembles are creating shamanist rock music and performance art, maqam-inflected jazz and pop, techno-overtone chanting, and myriad other cross-cultural experiments.

In China there is a similar opening up, while in Israel the ingredients are somewhat different. Many people see Israel as a country of European Jews and Asian Arabs, but in fact the majority of the Jewish population has roots in Arab, Turkic or Persian societies. Their culture for a long time was not encouraged, but this has now changed. Much mainstream popular music in Israel now has a Middle Eastern flair, a trend not necessarily rooted in politics but having potentially significant political implications.

The past decade has seen a rapid world-wide growth of interest in “world music” or “world beat”. This is a term which is being applied to music which is not purely Western, but which has a ready appeal outside the cultural group which originated it. The former term may include classical Indian music or Indonesian gamelan, while the term world beat — it might also be called “modern traditional music” — is generally reserved for more modern hybrids.

Eugene Pao, Hong Kong's first international-level jazz guitarist, marked his growing international prominence recently in a solo album *By the Company You Keep* with John Patitucci, Jack DeJohnette and Michael Brecker. Eugene has played with many jazz greats and in many festivals, and is also noted for his original compositions. His festival lineup includes Ted Lo, a Hong Kong-born piano wizard from New York, and top saxophonist from the Philippines, Tots Tolentino.

Eugene embraces each performance with a completely fresh approach, allowing the musical muse to take him where it will. He has absorbed and mastered a wide range of styles, but has a special passion for jazz

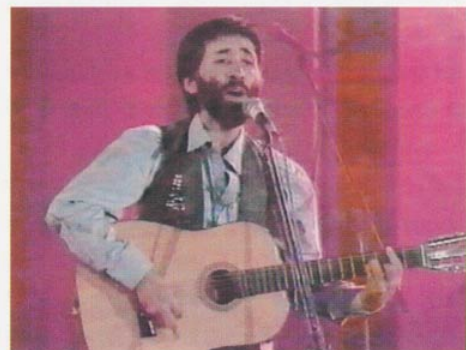


Eugene Pao

improvisation. Now the Silk Road should inspire him and his group to new heights.

Daler Nazar and Shams, though from remote Badakhshan in the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan, is one of the most popular groups in Central Asia and Turkey. Their "Pamir mountain folk rock" is a combination of fast energetic ethnic rock and very "sweet" melodies based on Badakhshani traditional music. Daler himself is lead vocalist, guitarist and author of all the songs. Their touring experience outside of Central Asia is quite recent, the autumn tour last year to Germany being very successful, with ecstatic reaction from the public and good press reviews.

Badakhshani people live in a region bordering on Afghanistan and China. They have a very strong national identity and today the region is very unsettled, making it dangerous for Badakhshani people to live in urban centres like the capital Dushanbe, so all the musicians of Shams now live in Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan.



Daler Nazar

Yulduz Usmanova, "Madonna of Uzbekistan", electrifies with her kinetic performances including dance routines with her backup singers. "Were she English or American, no music magazine in the world could afford not having her on the cover" (*Prinz Stuttgart*), and indeed her recordings now reach world charts and her shows are highlights of international music festivals.

Traditional Uzbek music falls into the modal system called makam, found throughout the Turkic world and closely

related to the Arab maqam, Persian dastgah and Indian raga. Yulduz, trained in this classical style, began singing at weddings and other traditional celebrations, but gradually melded her style more and more with pop music. Perhaps the most popular singer in Uzbekistan, her popularity is now extending all along the Silk Road and beyond.

Ol ensemble has already toured the United States and Europe, appearing in several major folk and world music festivals, and getting rave reviews for music that is “hypnotising... if you wish to know the definition of spiritual, listen to this.” (Yediot Aheronot, Israel)

Dalal is equally well known for his peace activism, being especially engaged in musical cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian musicians. At the Nobel Prize Peace Concert in 1994 he performed in an orchestral arrangement of his composition *A Time for Peace*, conducted by Zubin Mehta, with a choir of Norwegian, Palestinian and Israeli children. The video broadcast throughout Europe showed Yitzhak Rabin and Yassar Arafat side by side, singing along.



Stepanida Borisova

Stepanida Borisova has world acclaim as a singer and actress, but her collaboration with Siberian shaman rock band **Cholbon** is less well known, unless you have been to Tabyk, the annual Yakut rock festival. Coming from remote villages far from Yakutsk and featuring the shaman Nikofor, this group has a wild, psychedelic sound — like a meeting of a conventional rock sound with the unusual rhythms and melody lines of ancient traditional pagan chants. Unlike many pseudo-ethnic rock bands, they are real authentic thing, deeply rooted in the Siberian mythology and completely serious about it.

Sakha Yakutia, a republic within the Russian Federation, extends from about 200 miles north of Manchuria to the Arctic Ocean; the Yakuts are a Turkic people with their own shaman religious practices. Stepanida Borisova has a very special “trembling” manner of singing (kalykhan) and her songs are closely connected with those of a shamanic ritual in which the central performer is simultaneously an actor and singer, hypnotist and healer, magician and priest.



Yulduz Usmanova

Al-Ol brings to life the world music potential of the rich Jewish-Arabic musical heritage. The atmosphere, time and rhythms are Middle Eastern, but the sources extend from the Balkans to Central Asia and beyond. The music skills of leader Yair Dalal, of Iraqi Jewish origin, vary from classical Arab and classical European music to jazz and blues. In its first year his new Al-



Yair Dalal

The earliest types of world beat to gain wide acceptance came from Africa and South America. Now attention is turning to Asia, and Inner Asia in particular seems to be leading the way in this. Some of this music from distant regions in the former Soviet Union is beginning to show up at clubs, concert halls and small festivals in Europe — particularly in Germany and the Baltics, Moscow and St. Petersburg — and it gives strong promises of becoming the next big thing in world beat. It's not yet well enough known for anyone to have named it, but events such as the one at this festival will perhaps help define what the movement is about: young Asian musicians searching simultaneously for their own cultural roots and for a sense of connection to the mainstream musical world.

Not all places represented in this programme are normally considered to be on the Silk Road. But in any case there are varying opinions of where this trade and cultural route actually began and ended.

Was it Naples or Damascus (barely 100 miles from modern Tel Aviv); was it Beijing or Hangzhou? Yet events like the great migrations of the Inner Asian Turkic peoples underline that it is all a matter of some conjecture who was in contact with whom, and when such contacts took place. The Yakuts, for example, are thought to have originally lived around Lake Baikal, where they would have been in contact with the Buddhist Buryats, who were closely connected to the Mongols. It is this old and abiding interpenetration of cultural influences among the people of Inner Asia — still ongoing after so many centuries — that makes this New Silk Road theme so significant as an organizing principle.

From East to West, the variety here is quite astounding.

Beijing Jazz Unit, highlight of the 2nd Beijing International Jazz Festival, previews their featured appearance at the 3rd Festival. Led by Italian trombonist Luca

Bonvini, the Beijing Jazz Unit features the top Beijing artists. The skepticism extended to rock music has contributed to the development of an active jazz scene today in Beijing, and these musicians are helping to give it a distinctive style.

More than standard Western jazz melodies the group plays new music, incorporating Chinese idiom when appropriate. For example, Bonvini, whose classical training includes the classical Chinese quxin, has opened one set with *Spiritual*, a John Coltrane riff played on the quxin. Says he, "It worked amazingly well. Sometimes the Chinese scholars really got the blues."

Yat-Kha's album *Yenisei Punk* reached #2 in World Music Charts Europe and the group won the Grand Jury Prize of Radio France "Rock and Pop in the East" 1996. Even soft ears go for this hard rock created from exotic instruments plus a unique *khoomoi* (throat singing: one person sings two notes at the same time), with bass notes that must be heard to be believed.

Leader Albert Kuvezin has one of the world's lowest voices; Alexey Saya chimes in with a variety of the unique *khoomoi* that wowed audiences at the 15th Festival of Asian Arts; Yevgeny Tkachev complements with energetic and powerful drums. The unusual combination of traditional instruments (*igil*, *morin-khuur*, *yat-kha*) with electric guitars and drums plus a recently introduced bass guitar has the group now in constant demand in Europe. They call their music *kargyraa* hard rock, *kargyraa* being an onomatopoeic word (roll the r's) for the vocal sounds they make.



Yat-Kha