

Style

Tuvan throat-singers have American ‘son-in-law’ as emcee at Folklife Festival

By Ivan Gutterman

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MOSCOW — He’s not bragging when Sean Quirk calls himself something of a national hero in Tuva. How else to describe a pony-tailed, bespectacled native of Dayton, Ohio, who moves to a remote region of horseback-riding nomads nearly 2,300 miles east of Moscow and masters the local art of throat-singing?

No need to take his word for it, Washington. You can check him out at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which resumed Wednesday and will continue through Sunday on the Mall. Quirk will emcee for a group of Tuvan musicians called the [Alash Ensemble](#), which is performing every day of the festival.

About 90 percent of the Tuvan population (some 300,000 people living along the Mongolian border in a region the size of Wisconsin) knows him, he said: An American stands out in Tuva, where most people are descended from Mongols and Turkic tribes and many still spend part of the year following their grazing animals and living in yurts.

“My unofficial title is the National Son-in-Law”, said Quirk, as he awaited his wife outside Tuva’s office in Moscow, as she set out to fly home while he prepared for his trip to the festival in Washington.

Tuva — its capital is the vowel-challenged Kyzyl — has a devoted base of fans in the United States who find [throat-singing](#) — or “Khoomei” in the native language — mesmerizing.

Throat-singing is an ancient, complex art with a lone performer often having to vocalize three notes simultaneously, producing a background in the lower octaves as well as a melody. The music has elements of animism — the belief, which is still alive in Tuva, that animals and plants have a spiritual essence. Tuva has seen a revival of Central Asia’s Tengrist shamanism since the fall of the Soviet Union.

This year’s Smithsonian theme is Endangered Languages and Cultural Heritage, and Tuvans have been better able to protect theirs than some of the indigenous peoples in neighboring regions of Russia.

Quirk’s fascination with Tuva began in 2000, when he first heard Tuvan throat singing by the band Huun-Huur-Tu as he was finishing his studies as a music major at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn.

“I became totally fascinated by their music and decided to teach myself how to do it. I got pretty good at it,” he said, “and I realized in 2002, that if I wanted to truly learn throat-singing, I needed to go to Tuva.”

At the suggestion of a friend who had been to the region and heard native throat-singers, Quirk applied for a Fulbright scholarship. The year-long process, for which he taught himself Russian from cassette tapes and eventually performed throat-singing for a Fulbright commission in New York, resulted in a grant with enough money to live in the Tuvan capital of Kyzyl at the geographic heart of Asia, for a year.

“I came to Tuva . . . and realized instantly that Russian was useless, because even though everyone in Tuva speaks Russian, they all speak Tuvan among themselves,” he said. “It’s the only ethnic republic in Russia where the native population still speaks the indigenous language as a majority.”

Toward the end of that year, with the Fulbright money at an end, he fell in love with his future wife, who had no desire to leave her country. Quirk knew he had to find a way to return. He worked in the United States for five months as a bike messenger, saving the money he needed to go back to Tuva.

There, he was accepted as the first foreign member of the Tuvan National Orchestra in 2005, where he still sings in the bass range and plays the doshpuluur, a Tuvan lute. His relationship with the Alash ensemble started a year later, when he was invited to be their interpreter on a Library of Congress sponsored program called “Open World”.

Alash was made up of a group of students from the local arts college who had some experience touring in countries such as Norway and Switzerland. With Quirk’s help they have begun touring more often.

“What we’ve been doing now for the last 7 years,” Quirk said, “is once, twice or three times a year we’ll go on tours, mostly in the United States. We’ve done a little bit in Europe and some in Asia, presenting Tuvan music. They play and I emcee, you know being the guy who’s kind of the cultural link, and so every couple of songs I provide some information about the context of the song.”

Their latest big gig was this past spring at Carnegie Hall; they’ve also played with banjo player Bela Fleck and the Flecktones.

Quirk’s devotion to spreading Tuvan culture has made him the first Westerner to receive the “Distinguished Artist of the Tuvan Republic” award. “Roots are definitely going down,” he said — he and his wife have four children and they are building a house in Tuva.

“I plan on having my grave being in Tuva,” he said.

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