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CULTURE

How A Mongolian Heavy Metal Band Got Millions Of YouTube Views

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KATYA CENGEL

The HU - Wolf Totem



YouTube

A band from Mongolia that blends the screaming guitars of heavy metal and traditional Mongolian guttural singing has picked up 7 million views for its two videos.

Leather jackets, skull rings and bandannas alongside intricately carved Mongolian

horsehead fiddles are just some of the images in the first two music videos the Mongolian band The Hu released on YouTube this fall. Excited listeners from around the globe have posted comments like: "This makes me want to ride a horse and shoot people with a bow" and "This sounds like ancient mongol rock of 1000 b.c. Really badass!" (sic)

The HU - Yuve Yuve Yu



YouTube

And yet what The Hu is doing, while new, comes out of a tradition that began several decades ago when Mongolia transitioned from a satellite of the Soviet Union to a democracy.

As the Soviet Union crumbled and Western influence flooded in during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mongolian musicians chose to preserve Mongolian culture while also adapting new influences, explains University of Chicago ethnomusicology doctoral student Thalea Stokes.

It is something they continue to do today, says Stokes, who spoke via Skype from Inner Mongolia where she is studying Mongolian hip-hop. That hip-hop scene has a similar

background. Although hip-hop is a relatively new import, Mongolians have rapidly adapted it, mixing "fierce ethnic pride and adventurous dancing" with social and political critique, according to Stokes' research.

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"Mongolians are not just taking elements from Western music and just copying and pasting," says Stokes. Instead, they're using some of these elements and making their own authentic music.

"So it's not rock music performed by Mongolians. It's Mongolian rock music," she says.



GOATS AND SODA

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Mongolian rock combines traditional Mongolian instruments, like a horsehead fiddle (*morin khuur*), Jew's harp (*tumur khuur*) and Mongolian guitar (*tovshuur*) with the pounding bass and drums of rock.

It also involves singing in a guttural way known as throat singing while throwing heads

back and forth reminiscent of the headbanging of '80s heavy metal bands like Metallica. Those who study Mongolian music believe one reason The Hu has proved so popular with outsiders is this combining of modern and historical and Eastern and Western elements.

The Hu call their style "hunnu rock" — from the Mongolian root word for human being: "hu." The band spent seven years putting together its first album, which it expects to release this spring. They plan to call it *Gereg*, the name for a diplomatic passport used during the time of Genghis Khan. For the album, the idea was to find, study and incorporate as much of Mongolia's musical culture as they could into a rock style, says the band's 52-year-old producer and songwriter, B. Dashdondog, who goes by "Dashka."

Mongolian musical culture is tied up with their pastoral way of life. The two-stringed horsehead fiddle is shaped to resemble a horse and includes the carving of a horse head and strings and bow made of horsehair. It produces a sound similar to a violin and can be used to imitate the sound of a herd of horses. In throat singing, associated with pastoral herders in Central Asia, the singer produces a low constant sort of drone at the same time as a series of higher tones.

"We wanted to come up with our own thing that we can offer to this big music family. Make something new," says Dashka, who spoke through a translator via Skype.

It is not just their instruments that incorporate traditional elements. In the band's first song, "Yuve Yuve Yu" (What's going on?), they mention Genghis Khan and how he was fated to bring nations together. The video begins with images of people inside playing video games, watching television and looking at their phones. A door is opened and the band's four members step into different natural settings: cliffs, desert, forest and lake. The message they hope to convey through their lyrics and imagery is that people need to pay attention to nature and their history and culture, explains lead singer TS. Galbadrakh, known as "Gala," 29.

It is a familiar message to Kip Hutchins, a doctoral student in cultural anthropology at

the University of Wisconsin. Lines about neglecting their ancestors — like "taking our great Mongol ancestors names in vain" — are almost exactly what was sung in the late 1980s during the transition to democracy, says Hutchins. It was then that rock became popular as a form of political protest. Soon after, Mongolians started to form folk rock and folk jazz ensembles. Band members tended to be trained in conservatories on traditional instruments.

The four members of The Hu all learned to play traditional Mongolian instruments at the Mongolian State conservatory. The oldest in the group, G. Nyamjantsan, who goes by "Jaya," 35, still teaches at the conservatory. N. Temuulen aka "Temka," 28, who plays the Mongolian guitar, says their international popularity was something they expected — but not in the millions.

"When we do this, we try to spiritually express this beautiful thing about Mongolian music. We think we will talk to everyone's soul through our music," says Temka through a translator. "But we didn't expect this fast, people just popping up everywhere."

They aren't quite sure how it happened. Hutchins has an idea. He believes part of the appeal of bands like The Hu is the way he believes the story of Mongolia has been written in the West. Nomadism and horse culture has been romanticized, and the emphasis on freedom and heroes tends to appeal to the stereotypical male heavy metal fan.

"There is a kind of exoticism to Mongolia," says Hutchins. Mongolia "is at once a community and a culture that is part of Asia and Europe at the same time."

The Hu is not the only Mongolian band that has attracted recent international attention. There is the folk rock band Altan Urag, whose music was featured in the 2007 film *Mongol* and in the Netflix show *Marco Polo*, and the Inner Mongolian Hanggai Band.

Ethnomusicologist Charlotte D'Evelyn sees The Hu as trying to bring back traditions

while also modernizing. For her, it is as if the band is saying, "We're still modern and we're living in the modern world. But we're using this music to revive some kind of nationalistic cultural identity."

Hutchins puts it another way.

"The Hu is obviously interested in teaching a global community about Mongolian culture as much as they're interested in creating something Mongol."

Katya Cengel is the author of *Exiled: From the Killing Fields of Cambodia to California and Back*. She reported from Mongolia in 2017 on a fellowship from the International Reporting Project (IRP). You can find her on Twitter @kcengel.

Correction

Jan. 5, 2019

An earlier version of this story misspelled B. Dashdondog's name as B. Dashdong.

rock music mongolia

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