

Special Feature | Transcultural Music: The Mythic Relay of Tradition, Modernity, and the Future

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Preface

A high-school teacher once told his students that Pink Floyd's The Wall was never merely about revealing what we do not know; it was about how deeply reluctant people are to understand other cultures. Sitting in the audience that day, Andy Bauer felt the words land with particular force. Years later, when he began making his own music, he set out to create something that could carry listeners into different cultures in the most exhilarating and primal way possible. He called this music "transcultural music."

In the recording studio at Maolong Creative Park, Andy Bauer looks largely unchanged from three years ago. His band, Living Mythologies, is deep into the recording of its debut album—nearly ninety percent complete. Tonight's session is focused on a drum track and a guitar track. Drummer Azmat arrives on schedule, two dap drums and an African drum slung over his shoulders. Guitarist Yasen sits near the console, already coaxing notes from his instrument. The band's only female member, Tran Nguyen, is curled on the sofa leafing through Why We Fight: On Ethnic and Religious Conflict. A lilting Tuvan folk song loops quietly in the background as Tran Nguyen and I exchange casual remarks. Recording and conversation continue side by side from eight in the evening until deep into the night.



Living Mythologies sits for an exclusive interview with Billboard China.

My acquaintance with Andy Bauer dates to June 2014, when the Tuvan ensemble Alash made its first tour of China and landed in Beijing. Those sounds—drawn from sky and earth—proved genuinely moving. That same evening Andy Bauer opened the show with a solo set. A Western face producing the vocal textures of Northeast Asia created a startling and exhilarating synchronicity; it was the first time I had ever heard an American perform khoomei. From my limited listening experience, his performance felt natural, almost Tuvan: the Tuvans practice shamanism and animism; their language is considered one of the most ancient Turkic tongues; and their multiphonic throat-singing art carries a particular magic. Andy Bauer's set offered the most direct embodiment of that culture.



Andy Bauer

Seated across from me now, Andy Bauer and Tran Nguyen are both doctoral candidates at Minzu University of China; they have already registered their marriage in Beijing. Tran Nguyen explains that their meeting grew from a shared fascination with Inner Asian cultures. Trained in ethnology, she has completed her doctorate and now works at the Chinese Ethnic Minorities Research Center. Andy Bauer continues his doctoral studies in Asian studies and economics while directing Living Mythologies' cross-cultural project.

When asked why he chose China, Andy answers: "Toward the end of high school I began to feel that the English-language songs I was hearing had become repetitive; those sounds no longer challenged me to do better work. I started listening deliberately to Indian music. Twelve years ago I went to a performance near Chicago and happened upon Yat-Kha. That was the first time I heard Tuvan khoomei, and I became deeply interested in Tuvan music. After studying art anthropology at university, I formed a clear resolve: I had to find a voice that was truly my own." In pursuit of multicultural music, Andy Bauer came to Beijing. He studied six foreign languages and various musical techniques across Japan, Russia, China, and Vietnam, and one by one he encountered the musicians who would become Living Mythologies.



Andy Bauer (left) and Tran Nguyen (right)

Tran Nguyen has lived in Beijing for ten years—two years longer than Andy Bauer. She has joined the band and is currently studying the dan bau systematically, both performance and singing. Her mother is a literature scholar; Vietnam's strong Soviet influence led Tran Nguyen to read extensively in Soviet literature. Among those writers was the Kyrgyz author Chinghiz Aitmatov, a major figure of contemporary Soviet letters. Aitmatov's descriptions of the Tian Shan and Lake Issyk-Kul filled her childhood with a longing for that landscape. After arriving at Minzu University for her master's degree she befriended a Kazakh girl from Ili; the two became close quickly. A series of such coincidences convinced her that she must one day reach the Tian Shan.



Tran Nguyen

Later she developed an interest in the throat-singing of the Altai Republic. She discovered that Altai kai (a throat-singing technique of the region) functions not only musically but also socially, through its use in ritual and religious contexts. Musical analysis, however, is not her strongest suit; her research remains primarily ethnological. At the same time Andy Bauer was studying Tuvan throat-singing. The Altai Republic lies just

west of the Tuva Republic; both sit in southern Siberia. Shared interest, different scholarly approaches. Their meeting carries a sense of quiet inevitability.

Tran Nguyen also appeared in a personal documentary On the Road with You.

Before leaving the studio, Andy Bauer mentions that the band's newest member, Payzula, will soon arrive in Beijing. A week later I meet the long-awaited Berklee prodigy at Andy Bauer's home. Payzula has returned primarily to record for Jiangsu Television's Golden Melody Recovery. "I brought a group of musician friends from the United States. We're serving as the house band for four episodes—about a month's work." China's live-music market is flourishing, and Payzula sees real opportunity: "The atmosphere here is excellent and very international now. There used to be no music festivals; these days there seems to be one every week."

In 2009 Payzula received a full scholarship to Berklee College of Music, becoming the first Uyghur musician to study there. After graduation he remained in Boston, continuing his career and forming a funk band called Background Orcs. Speaking of his musical formation, he is candid. The young man from Ürümqi received what he now calls "false musical education": "I began on saxophone, switched to clarinet, and eventually entered the Xinjiang Arts Institute on clarinet, simply because clarinet players could find jobs in symphony orchestras while saxophonists could not."



Bassist Payzula

University consisted of "memorizing scores and textbooks to obtain a diploma." Payzula regards that system as one that "produced no real creativity." "Only after I reached the United States did I realize the problem was not me but the teaching. There I first acquired a sense of 'share,' and I learned to praise others sincerely. Americans are generous with praise, even when someone is not especially outstanding. My own teacher was a five-time Grammy winner. I knew exactly where I stood, yet he never withheld appreciation. In America I discovered I could participate in many kinds of music. The idea that 'I only like this style' or 'I only do that

style' is far too narrow. Everything is connected. The notes and rhythms may differ, but the underlying impulse and expression are the same. Any music that is sincere can move people. If it is felt and conveyed, it is good music."

His self-education is even more remarkable. He was struck instantly by a performance of Askar Grey Wolf; he thought, "Wow, that's incredible," and began playing bass. Two years later, at only fifteen, he joined Askar Grey Wolf as bassist. "Askar was an aggressive rock band with a touch of ethnic flavor—ninety percent rock. In that era of Black Panther, Tang Dynasty, Cui Jian, and Revolver, Askar represented Xinjiang rock. The music had real poetic atmosphere. Askar is fluent in both Uyghur and Chinese, yet his Chinese-language songs are never simple covers; he sings them with his own Chinese character. He belongs to the first generation of modern Uyghur musicians—someone like Cui Jian within his community. Yet he has already transcended ethnicity and become a figure of multicultural significance."



Tuvan musician Radik Tyulyush

Living Mythologies was founded in 2015 as a cross-cultural music project initiated by the American Andy Bauer. The band brings together Tuvan Radik Tyulyush (Huun-Huur-Tu), Aksu Uzbek Azmat Hekim (Askar Grey Wolf, Han Hong), Kashgar Uyghur Yasen Altan (Jam), Ürümqi Uyghur Payzula, Vietnamese Tran Nguyen, and American Andy Bauer. More than thirty instruments, six throat-singing techniques, eight languages. What the band values is not mere fusion but the rich sonorities that emerge after deep engagement with different cultures.



Guitarist Yasen Altan

In October of last year Living Mythologies was invited by Guizhou Miao musician Diegui to perform at the Yelang Valley · Leishi Sound Site. The karst caves and the Siyan River that embrace the ancient Yelang fortress create a unique acoustic field; such a "primitive" sound festival proved exhilarating. Building on that experiment, the band undertook a short tour at year's end. The tour revealed certain difficulties: too many musical elements, too many languages, transitions that felt cumbersome. Tuvan throat-singer Radik Tyulyush tried learning some Uyghur, yet having him improvise sung passages in Uyghur proved impractical. Moreover, as research-oriented music, Andy Bauer hopes to unfold narrative plots that speak to the human condition. How does one develop narrative skill, express ideas onstage without becoming verbose, and guide an audience toward the song's theme? Beyond visual supplements, Andy Bauer continues to study how to fully realize the transcultural atmosphere they emphasize.

"This music can be summed up simply as vibe + live. I call it vive music. It is vivid and contemporary, and it possesses its own independent system."

"We each have different stories to tell, so everyone in the band sings and expresses; all of us participate in the storytelling. We have done so much academic research; now we make music. The intention is to create something like oral literature—placing as much as possible of the places we have visited and the influences we have absorbed into the work. I keep thinking about the concept of 'modern.' What does 'modern' look like for Uyghurs? An Indian's 'modern' is certainly different from an American's. What is ours? When different cultures collide around the human condition, something else may emerge. To refine and deepen the storytelling we cannot simply pile instruments together. We try to work with subjects we already understand, things we know, hold opinions about, and can judge."

When I ask Payzula why he joined Living Mythologies, he replies: "This band has no individual coloring. Andy Bauer has no American-centric mindset, and none of the others carry the ethnic superiority that 'Xinjiang people are naturally good at singing and dancing.' He invited me not because I play bass well or because the

band needed a bassist. We simply do something together that we like. The strength of this ensemble lies in its meaning. People return to their original state—no longer defined by skin color, region, or instrument. Everything is one; we are all together." Payzula's more inclusive and open musical and world view aligns with the globalization of our time. "I represent only myself. I do not represent a group, and my geography does not define me."



Living Mythologies

Andy Bauer and Payzula have known each other for eight years. "Many people only realize after several years that they can form a band together. I have done fieldwork in many Uyghur places and studied the language, customs, and instrumental techniques. Local people possess an innate musical acuity. These things cannot be learned in a short time. I thought that if we made music together, the learning could continue." Andy Bauer's Uyghur is still imperfect, yet when he speaks it one senses his genuine affection for Xinjiang.

Work on Living Mythologies' debut album began three years ago, though preparations stretch back five. Andy Bauer estimates the project will require seven or eight years in total. How does one reasonably incorporate several languages while maintaining thematic coherence and visual atmosphere, and still allow free linguistic movement? If such a technique can be found, Andy Bauer hopes it will become a distinctive signature of the band. Another difficulty is funding. "Everyone in the band has to contribute money. I believe that is necessary. If you are unwilling to put your own money in, the result may not truly represent you." Over three years the band has recorded roughly twenty songs; some will never be released, others may appear on a later album. "The purpose of recording is not solely for release; it is also for reference. Taking finished work out and discussing it with everyone is essential. Some pieces listeners can enjoy—those we release. Some are still immature—those we refine further."



Drummer Azmat Hekim

The twenty songs already recorded depart from a profound interculturalism; their melodies are carried primarily by five vowels. Combined with the playing of dap, Tuvan drums, tanbur, dutar, ghijek, and igil, they form Living Mythologies' dense, atmospheric vive music.

"My field community is a place of thirty thousand Tajik people. Many of my Vietnamese compatriots do not understand what I do, what I research, or who my subjects are. If, through the channel of music, the instruments, lyrics, and voices of these remote ethnic groups can be presented vividly and directly—if people can know that such a place exists in the world, so beautiful even though distant, yet still full of things worth learning—then I will be content. I want them to understand the work I do, and I hope it can encourage young Vietnamese to travel farther and explore other cultures." From her perspective as an ethnologist, Tran Nguyen gives Living Mythologies its deeper meaning.

I believe "ethnicity" exists. Language and flavor, for example—the things a people express sometimes possess absolute uniqueness. Yet if one steps outside the frameworks of nation or ethnicity, might the forms of musical presentation become more complete? Let us look forward together to Living Mythologies' new album.