



SAVANE

Ali Farka Touré
World Circuit Records WCDC 075
CD: (Full Price). Length: 58.45 mins.
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

I reviewed an Ali Farka Touré CD in the last issue of Hoop, a gentle album of guitar and kora with fellow musician Toumani Drabaté. This new CD is Touré's very last recording made just before his death earlier this year, and unlike the last CD, features songs and was made with a full band. It's outstanding, launching straight into the first track, with typical repeated blues style guitar riffs, harmonica and traditional instruments from his homeland of Mali, Touré sings and coos, courting us with his husky voice, weaving a trance over all who listen.

What is it with his music? I can play it loud and dance round the kitchen while I prepare food, or I can play it quiet and doze off to it, allowing myself to dream and float upon it's waves. My pre-release white label copy didn't have lyrics, so I don't know exactly what he is singing about, but it did come with a promotional DVD in which Touré talks about his music. In it he says something about 'I'm always talking about the spirits because they are all around me.' And that's what I feel this music is about - spirits; it seems to open a window onto another world.

I adore this album and have played it to death over the last few weeks, what a work of art to have left behind him, a true testament to his genius. On the DVD he says 'there are three people who will be pleased with this album, myself, Nick Gold the record producer and the person who listens to it. How right he was. Buy this album and be the third person too!

Available from High Street Record shops or Amazon
www.worldcircuit.co.uk



ECHU MINGUA

Anga
World Circuit Records WCD 071
CD (Full Price). Length 33.02 mins
Reviewer: Janey Verney

This is another Nick Gold Cuban production which continues the exploration that brought us the stars of the Buena Vista Social Club, and then the award winning album from Orlando 'Cachaito' Lopez, their superb bass player. His playing helps propel much of this album too, and Miguel 'Anga' Diaz played congas & percussion on his album.. this new album is a younger generation's take on the conversation. It gives more space to DJ Dee Nasty as well as tributes to Coltrane and Monk, threads from Africa & Paris as well as the Cuban lineage, including a track featuring both the late great Ruben Gonzalez & his son Rubencito on piano.

In the concise and informative CD booklet, with atmospheric artwork from paintings by Manuel Mendive, the key element is made clear - the spiritual intention behind this project. Echu Mingua is Anga Diaz's saint's name in the Yoruba religion, and the album is constructed as an invocation to the spirits.

The tracks build to a wild celebration, and end with a song to send the spirits back home. This is the fruit of years of music making, and is growing on me each time I listen. It honours & celebrates many influences, starting from the village where he was born, and drawing together Cuban, African & DJ cultures. Its certainly not just another world music mish-mash, it has deep roots and is gentle, experimental and wild in turn. Have fun - join the party!

Available from High Street Record shops or Amazon etc.
www.worldcircuit.co.uk



TUVAN SHAMANIC HEALING

Ai-Churek
Purenature Records
CD: (Full Price). Length: 46.28 mins
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

Ai-Churek (Moon Heart) is a woman shaman from Tuva in Central Asia, we have featured her in Hoop in the past. This CD is a recording of her performing a ceremony for healing and balance, and it is intended to be used ceremonially, the listener is encouraged to smudge, make the room a sacred place and be receptive to the sounds and intent of the ceremony.

Then it begins. Drums, overtone chanting, bells, songs and shrieks. It's not ambient music, but then it's not meant to be. A Tuvan shamanic ceremony performed in a recording studio, but with a rawness none the less. Interesting to hear and although I think maybe it would be better to be there in the flesh, still potentially worth using if you feel the need for it.

Available from www.purenaturemusic.com
www.ai-churek.com



TENGIR-TOO

MOUNTAIN MUSIC OF KYRGYZSTAN
Smithsonian Folkways SFW CD 40520
Music of Central Asia Vol 1
CD and DVD Set CD Length 66mins
DVD introduction and 24 min film with interactive glossary & map
Reviewer: Janey Verney

This is a real feast, it's a collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and the Aga Khan Music Initiative in Central Asia, who are both clearly doing a wonderful job not just in preserving the indigenous music in these distant lands, but promoting them, and most importantly, providing resources for young people to learn their own traditions.

At an academic level there is lots of information here about the instruments, the music and its history, which I wouldn't be without, but the joy here is the actual singing and playing. It both illustrates these living traditions and extends them, creating new ensembles for contemporary situations, and using new technology to write the music down. The music itself comes across as heartfelt and fresh, and this is where the DVD is a rich additional resource. The first section shows the

REVIEWS

Aga Khan Initiative's work teaching children and promoting concerts, and the second follows the members of Tengir-Too. Their lives are very varied but all are totally committed to music as an integral part of life; be it playing a jaws harp on a hillside above a yurt, transferring music into a computer in a high rise flat, teaching, performing, or engaging in necessary spiritual preparations. An inspiration!

Available from High Street Record shops or Amazon
www.viakaboul.com/artist_page.php?artist_id=6
www.akdn.org/Music/Kyrgyz%20bkl_t_final.pdf



AFRO-MANDINKA SOUL

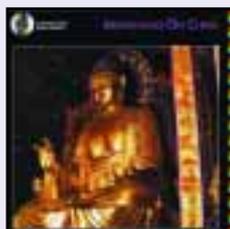
Seckou Keita Quartet
Arc Music EUVD 2028
CD: (Full Price). Length: 56.46 mins.
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

Seckou Keita is a UK based, Senegalese Kora player playing traditional based music with his band, the other members of the quartet, who are an Egyptian violinist, an Italian double bassist, and a Gambian percussionist. They are joined by vocalists and a *riti* (one string Senegalese fiddle) player. The music is delicate and has, despite the other non Senegalese musicians, a very traditional feeling, as Seckou is very much the leader of the quartet.

Seckou has been a member of Baka Beyond, and appeared on a couple of their albums. We featured Baka Beyond's musical collaborative work with the Baka people of Africa in Sacred Hoop a few years ago.

The album is laid-back and restful, and the kora playing and other instruments are a delight to let wash over you. I am always a bit wary of world music fusion albums, there seemed to have been a lot of dreadful 'sitar and saxophone' and 'didgeridoo and dulcimer' albums released when the world discovered 'world music' a few years ago. Happily we seemed to have mostly moved beyond those, and the fact that a double bass and a violin are on this album seems decent matter a fig as the music sounds authentic from start to finish - this album is real, not the result of some bright spark saying 'hey, I've had a great idea for a CD...' A delicious mesmeric album, and I bet they are wonderful to experience live.

Available from High Street Record shops or Amazon etc.
www.arcmusic.co.uk
www.seckoukeita.com



MEDITATIONS ON CHINA

Various Artists
Cooking Vinyl Music Gumbo CD 033
CD: (Budget Price). Length: 65.10 mins.
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

It may have escaped your notice, but China is a big place, with a long history and has music too. Now, I have to say I am not very knowledgeable about Chinese music, my musical knowledge gets about as far East as Tuva and then stops, so this seemed a great CD to start an exploration with. There are no notes on the cover other than the track titles, so there's not much help there, but it sounds Chinese - or at least what I

imagine Chinese to sound like. And that maybe is the problem, I can't help feeling it's a bit cleaned up, a bit packaged, a bit like 'Abba Sing Britain Greatest Folk Songs of Death and Disaster' (Cheerful Sounds Music 1976). I can't help thinking the real stuff is rawer than this, but then I don't know much about Chinese music so maybe it isn't. It's a nice enough album, and it makes a change from the music I normally play, but even though it is played on authentic instruments it's a bit hollywood, all sweet and no sour.

Available from High Street Record shops or Amazon etc.
www.cookingvinyl.com



IN PURSUIT OF THE SIBERIAN SHAMAN

A film by Anya Bernstein
Length: 73 mins.
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

This is an extraordinary film, an up-close and personal documentary about a Buryat shaman called Valentin Khagdaev who lives on the sacred Olkhan Island in lake Baikal. The film starts with footage taken in 1928 of a shaman performing in the time just before Soviet persecution all but destroyed Siberian shamanic culture and then moves to modern day footage of Lake Baikal with the sound of two phonecalls, one telling Anya to 'forget the film idea as there are no real shamans left', the other saying 'forget the film idea because the shamans are real and the magic dangerous'.

And that's the theme of the film, shaman or showman? Anya follows Valentin as he works in his small holding, as he entertains the many tourists who come to lake Baikal wanting to see a 'real shaman' at work, and who are treated to story telling in a ger and a bit of a shaman dance and chanting session near to the famous 'shaman's rock'... They got Valentin the showman. And then, interspersed with those sections, is Valentin the shaman, working with the local people, helping them honour the spirits, and make offerings (early on in the film we see him performing a blessing ceremony for the crew of a fishing trawler on the lake) as he travels around to large oboo type Ongons (spirit houses - shrines) keeping the traditions alive.

At one point he has to perform a ceremony at a sacred rock by the lakeside where campers have pitched their gear and has to ask them to remove all their possessions while he does it. This clash of the sacred ways and the tourists is ever present, and to rub it in even more Valentin shows us his collection of press cuttings, all the magazines that have done articles on him, making me, as a magazine editor, shudder with the crass-ness of it all.

Anya's film style is simple and to the point, one girl, one camera, shadowing the shaman; and this direct uncluttered approach makes the film even more poignant. I deeply enjoyed watching the film of the ceremonies and hearing Valentin talking about them. So, shaman or showman - yes!

Sadly, to the best of my knowledge, this film is not available to buy, but can be seen at special screenings.

To find out more about the film and to see dates and venues of showings visit www.cinetrance.com





SPRIT OF SIBERIA

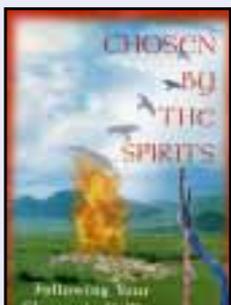
Traditional Native Life,
Clothing and Footwear
Jill Oakes and Rick Riewe
Smithsonian Institution Press
HB £39 224 pages
ISBN 1 56098 801 0.
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

If you have a foot fetish, this is a book for you. Boots, lots of boots. tall boots, short, plain - it looks like the native peoples of Siberia are really into boots. This is a book about the clothes and material culture of the tribes of Siberia, often hard to find in books, so it is pleasing to find this sumptuous volume. Putting the glut of footwear aside, the book is a great sourcebook for artists and craftspeople, with its many coloured photos. It also includes some nice pieces of shamanic costume and photos of shamans as well. Not only does the book have a feast of photos, it also includes quite a few diagrams of some of the craft techniques too, including a form of decoration using reindeer hair which is a little like Native American porcupine quill work, and I can't wait to have a go at that myself.

So why all the podophilia? The answer to that lies in the sacred connection between the walker on the land and the spirit of the land itself. As the book points out, footwear is sacred because it is the basic foundation of life, life's main support, and a connection between the sacred and the ordinary. Across Siberia clothes and spirituality are intimately connected, culminating of course in the ritual costumes of the shamans themselves.

It is an extraordinary book in many ways, offering a glimpse into a whole other way of relating to our clothes. Looking through its pages I'm left wondering if the next pair of jeans I buy will help connect me to the land and tradition, and the spirits and ancestors. Will their off-the-pegness enrich my soul at all, because I bet wearing some of the things in this book would, especially if they had been made by my loved ones.

Available from High Street Bookshops or from Amazon etc.



CHOSEN BY THE SPIRITS

Sarangerei
Destiny Books PB £12.69 300 pages
ISBN 0 89281 861 1
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

I've been reading a lot of books about Mongolian, Buryat, Altai and Tuvan shamanism lately, and they have all been written from the outside-in, by people who looked at the culture, such as anthropologists, and tried to make sense of it. This is a book written from the inside-out, by someone who wanted to tell the world about her traditions and who's traditions already make sense to them because they lived them.

Saraa, who sadly died earlier this year, was born in America but from a Mongolian family, and she went back to her roots and homelands, and learnt her shamanic tradition and it's these traditions she shares in this extraordinary book.

Now first of all, bear in mind tradition says that the spirits choose who are to be shamans, and no matter how much you want to be one, if you are not born that shape you can't be

that shape. Having established that, this book tells you how to practice Shamanism, or Mongolian shamanism in considerable detail and with a simple, direct approach that is 'lean of speech' but none the less gives great details (the sign of a good writer... not much padding!).

The book covers what shamanism is, the tools used in the Mongolian traditions, the nature of illness, the parts of the soul, ceremonies you can do, how to journey, how to make offerings to the spirits, setting up altars, the nature of the spirits, the Mongolian cosmological map and cycle of the ceremonial year, and a great deal more besides. It does, on the surface, appear to give you everything you need to know to practice the tradition should you put your mind to it. Saraa seems to have wanted to really let people know about the heart of her traditions and her passion for them shines out.

Will it make you a shaman? I would have to answer 'No!', and I think there is a potential danger that people might latch on to these ways and say 'I can do it, I'm a shaman!'. On the other hand, I think that if you have a teacher and are already working shamanically and wish to learn about how to use some of these Mongolian ways in your own practice then the book is perfect; it certainly gave me a great deal of food for thought.

But then at the end of the day, as the title of the book says, shamans are born not made, if the spirits don't want to play ball with you - there won't be a ball game. This is certainly a book that should be on the bookshelf of everyone who is interested in shamanism and the spirits, and I don't think I have ever read a book like it before.

Available from High Street Bookshops or from Amazon etc.



PLANT SPIRIT SHAMANISM

Ross Heaven and Howard G. Charing
Destiny Books PB £12.69
244 pages
ISBN 10 59477 118 9
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

Ross and Howard are of course well known to readers of Hoop, so many of you will know what to expect. And you won't be disappointed, as this is an excellent book about the sacred plant traditions of South America the island of Haiti. I expected it to be full of accounts of using Ayahuasca, but was delighted to find it was thankfully far more than that, in fact it does not focus that much on awareness altering plants at all, as it looks at the whole way that plants are used as 'teachers', from herbal and fragrant baths to love magic.

Both authors know their subjects well, and they put down the information with considerable clarity and with a lightness of touch. The book is broken down into sections that look at specific cultural ways that plants are used, which plants and why, as well as more general sections such as an outline of the concepts of soul damage and loss, and the nature of shamanic illness and how it can be treated. The use of songs to the plant spirits is also included. There is a colour section in the book of photos of some of the shamans and ceremonies. All in all, a very useful book for anyone who is a sacred plant lover.

Available from High Street Bookshops or from Amazon etc.