



Almaty, Kazakhstan

Eva Adorisio reports on the Almaty artists taking inspiration from Kazakhstan's ancient arts

Rows of aged instruments hang from the wall. I stand in front of one; wooden, half-egg shaped, with a thin, long guitar-like neck and strings – it's the *dombra*. Thought to date back as far as 4,000 BC, this national instrument of Kazakhstan epitomises ancient Kazakh culture that was almost lost during communist rule. Here, in the Museum of Folk Music in Almaty, these emblems of Kazakhstan are being preserved and protected behind glass cabinets. However, Kazakh musicians are taking it a step further by reviving and reinventing these ancient arts to form a modern identity.

Layla Tazhibayeva is a professional *kobyz* player based in Almaty. Created in the 9th century, the *kobyz* – which legend says can banish evil spirits with its sound – features a curved wooden body and horsehair strings, as well as a bow. Layla came to the *kobyz* through an unusual source, as she confides: “When I first saw Vanessa Mae in the early 2000s, I was deeply impressed by how the electric violin could open up new sonic possibilities. It inspired me to imagine the same for the *kobyz*.” After she started performing with a live band (guitar, drums, keyboards), she realised that she needed to amplify her instrument, just like Mae. “No matter how good the microphones were, the *kobyz* would get drowned out, and I had to play with much more force, which affected the sound quality.” So, she worked with a luthier to create the first-ever electric *kobyz*.

At a recent performance at Jodhpur RIFF in India, she performed solo, changing between acoustic and electric *kobyz*, and playing a set

of mainly traditional Kazakh compositions. It's a very different repertoire from when she performs with her band Layla-Qobyz in Almaty and stretches out the possibilities of her amplified instrument: “I keep the Kazakh melodies, but I arrange them with Celtic-inspired harmonies, since Celtic progressions are often used in rock music and sound very natural to the ear.” She also confesses to playing a few hits: “I also perform covers from Aerosmith and Queen to Michael Jackson, they bring joy both to the audience and to myself.”

Asked what the scene is like for traditional music in Kazakhstan, she replies: “There are many musicians in Kazakhstan who combine traditional instruments with modern genres. Ulytau feature the *dombra* and bring a rock energy to Kazakh music. Another great example is The Magic of Nomads.”

Formed in 2005, The Magic of Nomads have been integral in introducing Kazakh music to international audiences. The seven-piece ensemble from Almaty released their debut album, *Bulbul Zaman* (recorded at Abbey Road, London), in 2008 and have since performed all over the world, combining their use of traditional instruments – *dombra*, *kobyz* and *shankobyz* (a metal reed instrument that produces a hypnotic sound) – with throat singing and elements of contemporary jazz.

Kazakh traditions have made their way into other scenes in the city. Alternative hip-hop singer/producer dudeontheguitar started his career playing guitar in Almaty's subways and streets, but now performs at important Kazakh festivals such as Spirit of Tengri. His

multilingual style takes some inspiration from *aitysh*, a UNESCO-protected tradition that dates back thousands of years and consists of two contestants taking turns to perform improvised rhymes in front of an audience – a sort of ancient rap battle. I spoke to Alina, who represents dudeontheguitar. She tells me: “We can say that rap and hip-hop itself are quite natural for our culture, since oral traditions (like *aitysh*) are at the core of it, but we can't say that he is directly working with *aitysh*, which is a traditional genre that exists on its own”.

dudeontheguitar's music is encouraging people to embrace the Kazakh language as he suggested to local Kazakh media, *The Village*, in 2023, “many people say my songs inspired them to learn Kazakh. For me, that's a wow.” His sound varies from the melodic R&B grooves of ‘Obal oilar-ai’ to the dreamy indie-folk of ‘üi küii’, a collaboration with Almaty group Steppe Sons, who perform using only traditional instruments. dudeontheguitar's breakthrough track was 2020's ‘Boiy Bulgan’, a simple folk song based on a poem by Kazakh philosopher Abai Qūnabaiūly. Its accompanying YouTube video has been viewed close to four million times. During his chat with *The Village*, he said: “I want Kazakh music to be heard not only in Kazakhstan. And I think I can contribute to that.”

Known for its nomadic culture, Kazakhstan is experiencing a musical renaissance. Concentrated in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city and former capital, musicians are embracing their ancestral roots in the pursuit of a modern Kazakh identity. ♦

