

## Old Grey Goose International in Mongolia -- May 2014

The Old Grey Goose International (OGGI) tour to Mongolia came about thanks to David Wyche, former Public Affairs Officer (PAO) for the Embassy in Mauritania, where the Goose toured in 2007. David now works in Mongolia as the Economic/Commercial Section Chief and recommended us to Allyson Algeo, the PAO in Ulaanbataar (UB).

Having played music together in different configurations for about forty years, the various members of Old Grey Goose International have been honored to represent the United States through musical and cultural exchanges in a dozen countries over the past fourteen years. The band has shared their traditional old-time country music, dance and stories in Europe, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Africa and Central Asia.

But Mongolia was the first tour for the Goose in six years, and it turned out to be among the best. The Mongolian Goose included veteran members Smokey McKeen, Doug Protsik, and Eric Rolfson and, since John Gawler could not make it, his son-in-law, Bennett Konesni, came along. Bennett traveled the world on a Watson Fellowship studying work songs from different cultures. He even lived in Mongolia for some months studying throat singing (khoomei), as well as songs designed to calm and comfort livestock. Bennett, although a mere gosling at 31, is an accomplished musician, an articulate spokesperson, a seasoned traveler and an all-around great guy. His talent, skills and overall demeanor helped make the trip a grand success, and he stayed on in Mongolia beyond the ten-day tour to further study khoomei and, time permitting, garlic farming. More detail about the OGGI tours, musicians and music may be seen at [www.oldgreygoose.org](http://www.oldgreygoose.org)



## Monday, May 12 - Tuesday, May 13

It is a long poke from Central Maine to Mongolia--about 35 hours door-to-door if one makes all the connections (which we did on the way there but, alas, not on the way back.) Spending the night in Southern Maine was a good idea. Even then, we were up at 3:00 a.m. to get to the airport on time.

Eric decided to put his recently purchased 1974 Ibanez Concord guitar in the protective Calton case and not worry about trying to "talk it on" each leg of the trip. Bennett decided to check the banjo, as well. This paid off just in wear and tear and ease of walking in huge airports--a good decision assuming that the instruments are there when we get to Ulaanbaatar! The instruments we will be playing on this trip include guitar, banjo, mandolin, fiddle, upright bass (to be borrowed or rented on site), ukulele, harmonicas and the moose bones.

The trip to Newark was smooth, in a small but comfortable plane. We spent a few hours there before boarding the Boeing for Beijing, which was quite crowded and a bit claustrophobic. We watched several movies and read a good bit, including sections of the Lonely Planet guide. We were served airline food several times and arrived in Beijing nearly 14 hours later.

For one the world's largest airports it seems quite accessible, clean and organized. We ate some good Korean food and killed six or so hours before checking in for the MIAT flight to Mongolia.

We were able to access the Internet at the airport, but to do so we had to register our passports, and each person was assigned a unique password. This turned out to be a mistake, since at least one of our email addresses was hacked as a result.

Smokey and Eric cleared a strict but efficient security and had a Starbucks coffee for this final leg, while Bennett and Doug joined us following a cribbage game. Again tight quarters--maybe each seat was sixteen inches wide, three across, and the plane was full. But the Mongolian airline (MIAT) was clean and efficient and we arrived in UB at midnight (noon in Maine).



The instruments were there and in good shape, thankfully. Erika Erdenetsetseg, who did much to put this trip together--while in Thailand, no less, and our first

driver, Chinzo, met us and took us to the new Best Western hotel in UB. It was pretty cold out, maybe just above freezing. It seems that UB has similar weather to Maine, but is maybe two or three weeks behind us.

### **Wednesday, May 14**

We woke up to snow this morning having arrived at midnight after the 35-hour trip from Maine. The hotel offered a lovely breakfast of Chinese-style veggies, meats, fish and cheese. There we met Ben who works for USAID. He knew we'd be here and which days we'd be playing for Embassy personnel. He introduced us to Matt Erdman who heard us play in Algeria where his father had been Ambassador.

We went next to the music conservatory to look at an upright basses to borrow. Saw several, and one had a decent sound. We looked next for strings but had to cut our quest short in order to get to our first (of three) gigs that day.

For our first performance, we went to the "American Corner," an Embassy venue we've played before in other countries. They typically have a library, resources, performance center and classroom space for locals who want to improve their English and learn more about the U.S.

The first concert there was for physically disabled kids. Some were in wheelchairs, but it finally dawned upon us that many were mute and some either deaf or close to it, as well. In addition to Erika, our incredibly nice and capable Embassy FSN (Foreign Service National) who translated songs and stories for us, two women also did some translating using sign language during the songs and introductions. Many of the students "clapped" by using the hand sign of raising the fingers in the air and wiggling them.

Towards the end of the program they spontaneously danced to our music. It was very touching after the show because scores wanted to be photographed with our



instruments and us. It was very easy to keep smiling throughout the shoot.

The next show was at the same venue, and this time the audience was 14-year-old or so school children learning English. We didn't need much translating, and they loved the music. They sang along on some work songs that Bennett presented, as well as on some easy choruses. It was lots of fun again, and more photos were taken after the show.

We met some Peace Corps volunteers who told us that the Corps rates languages for difficulty of learning, and Mongolian is one of the more challenging.

We left to find bass strings and were able to buy a low E only. No time to put it on, though, as we needed to get to the UB Jazz Club where we were to play a 45-minute set in preparation for a longer gig the following night.

Shannon Moore from the Embassy was with us, and it was her birthday; also Saruul Khishigsureh, who is taking photographs and video. We had a delicious meal at the club consisting of lunchmeats and cheeses followed by soup and finally a meat platter of pork chops, beef and chicken. We were pretty full by the time the soup was eaten but ate a bit more anyway. We drank some Chinggis Khaan beer

that was quite good and reminded us of the real Budweiser made in Czechoslovakia that we had first tried in Poland.

We got up to do our set without a sound check. After a shaky beginning we achieved good balance and the crowd went wild. The owner joined us on drums and was terrific. They wanted us to stay for another set, and before we knew it we had played for several hours. A young Mongol asked if we would back him up while he sang "Blowing in the Wind" for his girlfriend. We did, and he was great.

We returned to the hotel at midnight, wiped out after three gigs on our first day on the ground, and realized that we had forgotten the banjo. So Bennett headed back with our driver Chinzo and, fortunately, recovered it. Tomorrow, we have a National TV interview in the morning, followed by three more gigs.

## **Thursday, May 15**

It was a beautiful sunrise. After breakfast, Eric decided to change all the bass strings using the expensive, hand-made set he had brought from home. It was a good decision. The worry was that they wouldn't stretch in time to be functional for the morning TV appearance. But the fear was unfounded, and the bass plays like a new instrument. Bennett and Eric, who trade off on the instrument, couldn't be happier.

We arrived at the TV station and met the host and technical people. It was an interesting sort of talk show with a slick host, a Vanna White-type, and a rube-like foil. Young people, about twenty, or so, lined the sides of the studio, clapping on cue. We spent about forty minutes playing three songs and being interviewed. It will air on national television next Sunday, and Bennett tells us that much of the country will see it. Evidently, most of the traditional yurt (ger) dwellers have a solar panel now so that they may watch TV.



From there we headed to a music school where three masterful performers played for us before we took the stage. They offered a good concert and great music, which we recorded. We had a fish, rice and veggie basket for lunch before heading across the river to a small town where we saw a lot of industry and had our first taste of air pollution for which UB is infamous.

The kids at our next school, farther out of town, clearly had very little in terms of arts resources. It was great playing for them, and we got the little ones (which was most of them) singing and doing the hand motions for songs like Comin' Round the Mountain.

We took many photos with students and staff after the event, and the school director gave us an interesting gift: sheep ankle bones with which a game is played. We're not sure of the rules, but each distinctive face of the bone represents horse, camel, sheep or goat.



From the school we headed back to the hotel where we had a little more than an hour to get ready for a return to the Jazz Club. We arrived early and did a sound check, which went very well. We played again with the owner, Ganbat, on drums. The PA System was good and well balanced.

We ate another meal of pressed chicken and beer and played for a couple hours to a very appreciative crowd. Eric was thinking, like the time on stage with the dancers during our first visit to Turkmenistan, that there were few times he had had as much fun.

We headed back to the hotel rooms for laundry, email, and some five hours' sleep before another TV performance at 7:00 a.m.

## Friday, May 16

Three program days and eleven performances under our belt, so far.

We left early for another TV appearance, this time at a private station and live. The people were warm, funny and accommodating. As always, Smokey's moose bones were a big hit. We were interviewed and then played one song. They are always interested in our impressions of the people and country as well as the instruments, old-time and country music, the dancing, and the history of traditional music in the U.S.



We took a short walk for a coffee following the performance and interview before driving to the International School of Ulaanbaatar. Both the headmaster and principal knew Eric's friend and international school recruiter John Magagna. The

school was beautiful and on the hillside above it was the image of Chinggis Khaan made from stones. We played in the gym for an extremely well behaved audience of all ages. The PA system was a challenge, but we worked through it. When we asked for volunteers to do a dance, about 250 - 300 lined up, and we knew we were in trouble. Amazingly, we pulled it off and everyone had a good time. Doug called the Gallopede and progressed from the first couple down the middle to the first three, then five, and finally the top ten couples down the middle! This was, possibly, a new world's record. The international school kids were fantastic.



We went from the school to a Sri Lankan restaurant and had a delicious meal, including chicken curry and chai.

Our next performance was at a school for the blind, and it was incredibly moving. Probably fifty children, many of whom were totally blind, enthusiastically awaited our performance. We played for 45 minutes or so, and then three of them performed for us. The first was a boy of six, completely blind, who sang a moving



song about his mother. His facial expressions were so intense that it was hard for us to hold it together. He was a great performer, standing alone in his little suit, holding a microphone. A young lady who performed an equally moving song about her dog followed him. Finally, another young lady recited a long poem about persevering under trying circumstances. It touched upon a favorite Mongolian theme--the sky. Three of the big themes are the blue sky, motherhood and horses. We try to do as many horse songs and galloping-sounding songs that we can when performing. We stayed for photos and exchanged certificates of appreciation. We all were touched by the experience.

We headed back to the hotel, and some of us were finally able to nap for two hours. Waking up was a challenge whenever any of us took a catnap. After a coffee and shower, we were ready to go again and met in the lobby for transport to the Mongolian Association for State Alumni--(MASA) a collection of Mongolian students who have studied in the U.S. -- many sponsored by the U.S. government. MASA was collaborating for this event with British alumni.

The PA system was in place, but there were no microphone stands. Once we rounded some up, the performance went fine. A highlight was hearing a local, very humble musician, Batorgil (aka Mark) play. He had been a star a

dozen or so years ago before going into politics and business. When queried about his musical style, he called himself a Mongolian-Irish troubadour. He was great, and everyone in the crowd knew his original songs and sang along. We joined him on stage for a couple final numbers before moving into dance mode and calling and teaching a number of dances--line, circle, waltz, and polka.

Erika was concerned that we get back to the hotel early and that we hadn't eaten, so she ordered pizza that we ate on the 25th floor. It is a beautiful lounge with a view and stage. We met the owner, Sam, who is American of Egyptian lineage and is a "fixer" for Americans in the very best sense of the word. We have arranged to play there the night we return from Selenge province, where we are headed tomorrow--about an eight hour trip, with stops, due north on the Russian border.

### **Saturday, May 17**

The plan is to have lunch with a herder family in Javkhlant Soum. The local TV station performance en route has been canceled, so we are in no hurry.

About an hour into the ride we turned off the main road and drove into the hills. One of the two drivers, named Dacha, has a friend, and we stopped at his ger (yurt). It was veterinary day for the herd of sheep, and the family and friends were rounding them up when we arrived. They also have cattle, but they were across the valley grazing. They have some goats, as well, but apparently no camels.

They had 75 to a hundred sheep that were eventually corralled into a shed. It had a sod roof and was chinked with manure. We also saw their horses and eventually rode one. They were beautiful, happy animals; if a little thin after a long winter. We were invited into the ger, were careful not to step on the threshold, and moved into it counterclockwise, as custom dictates. The women sat in the back, but were quickly invited to the front rows. We had read that one need not asked to be invited into a ger, but simply holler the Mongolian phrase for "Hold the dog"



before entering. No dogs were present, however.

Dacha greeted our host by kissing him on both cheeks, and then the ceremonial snuffbox was passed around for each of us to place on both sides of our noses. Cheese curd was prepared, and a delicious dish that looked like applesauce, but was actually fried curd with sugar, was served. We also had homemade yogurt and



tea made with milk, water and salt and a few flecks of black tea. It was called suutei tsai. This was served with delicious beignets. For the main course, the woman of the house prepared a fire in the wood stove and put a wok-like pot into the stove lid. She added homemade noodles and dried beef, called bortz, that is preserved either in the top of the ger or in a separate ger and then re-hydrated into the soup. The broth was tasty, as well--the salt coming from the dehydrated beef. It only took twenty minutes to cook.

The ger was beautiful and was in its winter location next to the barns/sheds. In the summer, they move it about a hundred yards down the hill for better, cooler air. This is a process that only takes a few hours with a little help from family and friends. The radius was, perhaps, ten feet, and decorative and functional furniture lined the walls, including a Sharp TV. They had electricity from a battery hanging outside, and apparently many of the gers are equipped with solar panels to charge



them.

After eating and seeing the horses, we played a couple songs for our hosts while still inside. They seemed to appreciate it and said that when guests come to one's home they bring warmth.

After lunch, we took turns taking a short ride on their horse. The saddle was made of wood, with padding held together with large brass brads. The stirrups were



welded together and very solid. The horse's hair was stylishly punk in the front and a flat top along the mane. Riding a horse on the Mongolian plain on a crisp, beautiful day was amazing.

After saying goodbye to our hosts with a final song outdoors (Happy Trails, led by Doug on the ukulele) we hit the road again and proceeded north.

The countryside looked a lot like Montana or Wyoming. It was mostly bare from grazing, but we saw occasional woodlots of white birch and, perhaps, poplar. Beautiful vistas of rolling hills and cool air also graced the landscape. There were lots of sky and some remnants of snow. No fences were seen along the roads, allowing livestock to wander onto them. Occasionally we would see a horseman rounding up sheep. There were constant, severe potholes, along the paved road to Selenge, some of which required driving into the ditch or fields for hundreds of yards at a time.

A couple hours further down the road we had set a rendezvous with the cultural officials from Selenge who had arranged another ger visit and meal for us.

We entered the threshold, and the men went to the left and the women to the right. The snuff bottle was circulated for the traditional sniff. The ceremonial tea was passed around and then the bortz was served. The traditional passing of the vodka followed this. Following the host's example we dipped our ring finger in the vodka and flicked it to the left and right to bless nature. The tradition comes from the old days when one would dip their silver ring into the vodka before drinking it to ensure that it was not poisoned.

This ger was on the plains instead of the hills and was in a gorgeous location with flocks of sheep all around, a corral for horses, and lovely views in all directions.

They had arranged for two traditional dancers and a singer. The dancers represented two different geographic areas, and their dances were representative of the work the nomads do, including braiding horse or camel hair into rope. The fast movements of the dance had to do with different stages of the every-day work of



the Mongol herdsman.

A two-stringed instrument called the morin khuur accompanied the dancers. One of the women from the Selenge cultural affairs group also had studied classical harp in university and played a beautiful instrument related to the harp. They all were great--not professional musicians, but amateurs like us.

Next the bowl of airkh was passed around. It was refilled following each person's drink, whether they had taken a large or small sip. The liquid was clear and tasted like a combination of fermented milk and wine. They showed us how it was made, but we are still a bit unclear about it. Boiled yoghurt and condensed, distilled liquid were involved. It definitely packed a punch.

We were asked to play, then, and we brought the instruments into the ger to play three songs. They were very well received. At the end, Bennett played the banjo



along with the morin khuur player. It was great and, when Bennett did some throat singing, the result was delightfully predictable.

We went outside to look at the animals, and Doug and Saruul rode a horse. Doug and Smokey also had an opportunity to lasso horses in the corral using leather, home-made rope.

We left with thanks and gave maple syrup as gifts.

We finally arrived at Sukhbaatar on the Russian / Siberian border and checked into the Selenge Hotel. We had a meal at the Wandering Nomad restaurant and hit the hay.

## **Sunday, May 18**

After breakfast at the hotel, we took a van ride to the local museum in Altan Bulag that was a testament to the revolution of 1921-23 during which the Mongols gained their independence from China. Apparently, the Chinese reign was not beneficial to Mongolia, as they had kept them in a state of feudalism. The Russians were

anxious to help the Mongolians (and gain strategic dominance in the area, no doubt) and were invited in to help shed the Chinese yoke. Many young, educated, Mongols are pleased with and complimentary about the Russian reign and influence. They say that before the Russians, Mongols were simply nomads and herders, and that the Russians introduced education and agriculture.

The museum was divided into several parts, one of which was a tribute to Chinggis Khaan and another to the 300 soldiers who fought under General Sukbaatar, winning against a superior force of 10,000 Japanese and Chinese. We saw a large mural depicting the battle held nearby and some of the weapons used, which in addition to modern rifles included what looked like a homemade flintlock.

Some children outside the museum were playing what looked like Red Rover ("Red Rover, Red Rover, send Billy right over.")

From there we headed to "School # 1" for a concert. As before, the school children performed songs and danced for us, including a young disabled child who belted



out a song. The disabled seem fully integrated and accepted in Mongol society.

One cute little boy ran around with his hands to his head imitating a rabbit when we played Rabbit in the Log.

The school on this Russian border town was clean, and the kids looked happy. They had several English teachers and had learned some of the words to Comin' Round the Mountain, which we had sent ahead.

From the school we headed to lunch at the Wandering Nomad where Eric made the mistake of ordering steak. It was a lot like shoe leather, and he determined to stick with chicken from then on.

We had about half an hour to change and get to the venue for the evening

performance where we were to meet the soundman and the singers and dancers with whom we were to collaborate. The venue was the classic Russian theatre; similar to many we have seen in our travels. To get to the green room, for example, we had to carry the instruments upstairs, go down a hall, and then go back downstairs. The front doors required zig-zagging, and the stairs were uniformly uneven by several inches. Smokey and Eric decided that if we'd learned one thing in our travels to former Soviet Union countries, it is that before you go up a Russian staircase you should visually check it out, because if not you will inevitably trip.

The collaboration was tricky because the dancers and singers, who were fabulous, talented individuals, were being micro-managed by the classic, probably Russian-trained, all-knowing manager we have seen in several Central Asian country. After the performers worked out two songs and a reasonable way to share the stage, she nixed it all. Nevertheless, we had a good time playing with them. One player had the classic two-string Mongolian bass with a horse head at the top of the neck, tuned in fifths, as opposed to ours, which is tuned in fourths. The other musician played the morin khuur, the two-stringed, cello-sized instrument. The strings, as well as the bow, are made off horsehair, the only instrument in the world like that.

We played a set, and then the dancers performed, and finally the musicians took the state. All were great. We then came on stage and played one song with them, and Bennett did some throat singing to the crowd's delight.

The audience was fabulous during our entire performance, stomping, hollering and clapping along. Towards the end of our set, the lights in the auditorium went out, and we played the next few songs in the dark. It was great fun, and people pulled out their cell phones and waved them around so that the impression from the stage was a sea of fireflies. It was reminiscent of the time in Benin that the lights went out during our performance in the birthplace of voodoo. On that occasion, the PAO ran out and purchased some candles that were set on stage for our entire concert.

We posed for photos with the musicians and many audience members after the show, and then headed back to the Nomad for dinner. Bennett disappeared for awhile and came back with Doug's fiddle having learned the song Pretty Saro, which he dedicated to our videographer Saruul, whose name means bright and intelligent--also moon (sar) and mountain (uul).

## **Monday, May 19**

Our first stop on the way back to UB was at the Mother Tree, a large pine that was a place of refuge and sanctuary for women with children during the War for Independence in the early 20's. It has since become a holy place, steeped in tradition and superstition. It is said by the locals that you walk around the tree three times, and then kneel before it in reverence to make your wishes known. It is customary to leave a tribute of bills, bread and, perhaps milk, since the whole area smelled of it. We walked thrice around the tree, burning incense, and left a tribute of bread crumbs before kneeling in front on a small platform made for the purpose. It is said that you must come back three consecutive years, and while it is usually mobbed with people, Shannon said that this was the first time she'd been there when we were the only ones present.

Unfortunately, during the Russian purge when 27,000 monks were murdered, they also cut the original tree down. Thus, we worshiped at the stump and at the entire area around it, which was decorated in blue silk. There is a second tree, fifty yards away that also is holy and, albeit dead, is at least still majestically standing.



We arrived in UB in the mid-afternoon and decided to rest for a couple hours and catch up on laundry rather than find lunch.

Our late afternoon gig was at the Embassy residence where 90% of the staff resides. It was billed "Goose on the Green," but because it was a bit chilly, they decided to hold it inside. Ambassador Campbell was there with her newly adopted Chinese daughter, also the Public Affairs Officer, Allyson Algeo, with whom we had corresponded but not yet met due to a Congressional visit with representatives from Massachusetts and Ohio. The Congressmen were on their way to the Ukraine following their mission to Mongolia.

We played some tunes and songs, and then Doug gave a polka lesson and called some dances. The audience was largely families, and the kids joined in. We sang

songs from around the U.S., and all had a good time.

From there, our new driver "Baggy" negotiated ridiculous traffic to get us back to the hotel where Sam had arranged a party on the 25th floor. He provided food and beverage and regaled us with amazing stories for an hour or so before we played. He has been in the hotel business for 44 years and has literally seen it all. His day had been interesting as there was a heated conflict between the Emir from Kuwait and a belligerent head of Mongolian secret police as to who would get the Presidential suite on a particular day. Sam was caught in the middle, but took it all in stride, and diplomatically told the latter to take a hike since the Kuwaitis had their reservation first and are investing billions of dollars in the country.

The crowd was sparse, but diverse, with Americans, Mongols, Kuwaitis, and Japanese among others. They enjoyed the music, and two Japanese asked if they could use the guitar to sing and record a song for their friends.

We were back to our rooms before midnight and have arranged an impromptu breakfast at a restaurant owned by the "Irish / Mongolian troubadour," Mark, with whom we performed a few days ago.

## **Tuesday, May 20**

We began our day by having an amazing breakfast with Mark. What a thoughtful, bright and insightful man! We learned about Mongolian politics, the ebb and flow of post-Soviet Union democracy in this country, the challenges caused by the massive mining of minerals, and the resulting construction boom. We got into philosophy about what builds community and how professional silos are diluting culture and community in Mongolia by filtering the free-flow of information. It was a thoroughly enjoyable hour, and we ate like kings at his family restaurant.

From there we went to a rehearsal with Bayartsengel, a young Mongolian who specialized in yodeling in the American Cowboy style. He learned on You Tube and was absolutely flawless. We put a tune together for tomorrow's show, "She Taught Me to Yodel," and it will be a big hit. We told him about our friend Yodeling Slim Clark, and said that Slim used to play this tune.

After that session, we met the band Altai with whom we will collaborate on stage tomorrow. The manager, Ganpurev (pronounced "Ghana") Dagvan, used to play



with the band Boerte. They are tremendous musicians, and we practiced three songs to play at tomorrow's Philharmonic concert. Of all the groups with which we have played internationally, this one was, perhaps, the most exciting. We loved their musicianship, energy and arrangements. We worked up three songs and will practice again tomorrow before the performance. They played the harp-like instrument which may be yatug-a and is tuned by moving, multiple bridges; the morin khuur, which is bowed and has two strings made of dried deer or sheep sinew; and some percussion instruments including a drum and sheep anklebones on a string. They were incredibly talented musicians led by "Ghana" who also is a throat singer and majored in upright bass at university.

Following practice, we left for the Arts and Cultural University where we played for college students studying music. Before we played, a dance troupe performed in beautiful costumes. The dancers in Mongolia are very expressive, talented and seem to stick to traditional forms. The audience was appreciative, and we enjoyed the time we spent with them.



Following the performance we headed back to the hotel, and Smokey and Eric found a small Korean restaurant. We ordered the Bibimbap, and to our culinary surprise it came with 12 side dishes! We finished the night with a drink on the 25th floor of the hotel, looking for Sam, who was not there.

### Wednesday, May 21

We had our first morning off today, and it was welcome. We walked to the State Department Store to do some shopping and then got a ride to a gigantic open-air market known as the Black Market. We went all through the small alleyways and saw everything from wooden saddles to a 1918 U.S. bayonet. Smokey and Eric purchased fur hats and leather belts. Smokey also picked up some additional sheep



ankle bones and some jaws harps. By noon, we'd had enough and rode with Baggy back to the hotel where we

had a couple more free hours before our rehearsal at the Philharmonic across the street.

We practiced first with our yodeler who had us going about as fast as we can play. Next Altai arrived, and we went over our three numbers. The collaboration is very impressive with good dynamics and shared verses and solos. It also is tremendous fun to be playing with such talented musicians. And since none of us speaks the others' language, when Erica is not around, we simply let the music speak for us.

The "Cowboy Dancers," a group of Mongolian alumni we had seen perform earlier also rehearsed their five minute routine to the tune of Cotton Eyed Joe. They were authentically dressed and cleverly choreographed.

By 6:00 PM, the 250 or so seats were pretty full. We greeted Ambassador Campbell and went on shortly after 6:30. We played a set, in the middle of which our yodeler was featured. He will be representing Mongolia in a yodeling contest, soon, held in Switzerland. Not used to playing with a live band, he had a couple false starts, but finally we played the song and the crowd loved it.

Following our set, the dancers performed and did a great job. We came back out, sang Amazing Grace in the shape note style and then invited Altai to the stage. They performed two songs on their own, and then we joined them for three more. The crowd loved the collaboration and wanted an encore--except that we hadn't prepared one and had to end it there. All told, it was a great variety show and a huge success from a collaboration perspective.

Following the show, we took photos with the bands and headed across the street for the after party on the 25th floor. We thanked and toasted our friends from the Embassy and were joined by Altai. Sam was holding court and wanted to hear some songs he remembered from his time in Nova Scotia. We played "Farewell to Nova Scotia" and "I'll See You in the Bye." A Mongolian performer sang "O Sol Mio," and the throat singers wanted to hear, and sang along with "Old Lang Syne"!

The party went pretty late, but we didn't have very far to go before grabbing a few hours sleep and catching a ride to the airport. Bennett arranged to stay at the hotel for free for ten more days in exchange for playing music nightly. Thus, we left the Ibanez with him. We said warm goodbyes to our new musician friends, and it was a great way to end a tremendous tour.



**Post Script: Thursday, May 22 through the wee hours of Saturday, May 24**

The tour had been so flawlessly planned and executed that it took us by surprise when the first glitch hit at the airport: Due to high winds in Beijing, our China Air morning flight had to return to the airport and never made it to UB. This meant an eight-hour delay getting to Beijing and, of course, that we would miss our connecting flight to Newark on United.

China Air was good to us, however, and provided a hotel for the day back in UB. Doug and Eric had been fighting sore throats and coughs for the past couple days, and the air pollution became increasingly difficult to manage.

Nevertheless, we ate a couple meals in UB before boarding the bus back to the airport that evening. There was some confusion as to whether the flight that night had been cancelled. As a result, we had been re-booked for the same morning

flight the following day. We chose, however, to get to Beijing that night just in case there were weather issues again.

The flight did depart, and we arrived in Beijing after midnight. Unfortunately, we had to reclaim our checked luggage and schlep it on an overcrowded bus to an airport hotel, arriving at 2:00 am. The air in Beijing was phenomenally bad, and breathing both indoors and out was difficult.

The following morning, we headed back to airport, learning en route that it wasn't clear whether Eric's reservation for either flight had been updated. Fortunately, it all worked out, and we arrived back in Maine to clear, crisp, welcome air after a 53-hour travel marathon. All in all, missing the flight had cost us about 27 hours, but we were grateful to have made our connections--especially given that it was the beginning of Memorial Day weekend.

Twenty-plus gigs and a multitude of experiences later, we are again honored and grateful for the new friends made, the education received, and the opportunity to show another part of the world a side of Americans and America of which they may not have been aware. We offer a sincere thanks to all who helped make this and our previous trips possible.

Gratefully,

The Goose

P.S. See below for further news!



EVERY NIGHT  
TIME VARIOUS

LAST NIGHT MAY 31<sup>ST</sup> .2014

@ PREMIER LOUNGE  
25<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR



Smoky, Doug, Eric went home but Bennett stayed.  
**HE LOVES MONGOLIA**