
About the Author

The author studied Russian at Cambridge University while in the Royal Air Force but on joining the British Foreign Service was sent to study Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University and at the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies in Lebanon. He spent much of his career in the Middle East, latterly as Ambassador to Iraq and to Oman. In retirement he retains close links with the Middle East through a number of academic bodies and has written extensively in books and journals on the history and politics of the region and on the Saluki and hunting. E-mail <Sirterenceclark@aol.com>.

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A Thousand Years on the Silk Road: Epic Poetry and Music from the Kyrgyz Republic

Rysbai Isakov, Epic Singer

Akylbek Kasabolotov, Musician

Dr. Helen Faller, Anthropologist

In February-March 2006, with generous support from the Silkroad Foundation, anthropologist Helen Faller toured the United States with two young artists from Kyrgyzstan in a series of university residencies called the Kyrgyz Cultural Performances Project. The artists were Rysbai Isakov, a laureate epic singer, who

performed episodes from the Kyrgyz national epic *Manas*, the longest in the world at over half a million lines, and Akylbek Kasabolotov, a member of Kyrgyzstan's *Tengir Too Ensemble*, who shared his country's unique nomadic musical traditions. The three of them were in residence at eight universities

in six states and performed for over 3000 people. The purpose of the tour was to provide opportunities for Americans to learn about Central Asian performance culture from two talented cultural ambassadors and to provide the artists with experiences that would help them to develop their art in new ways. Video footage of the Kyrgyz Cultural Performances concert at the University of Texas at Austin is on view at www.silkroadfoundation.org and realaudio.cc.utexas.edu:8080/ramgen/cola/centers/creees/images/media/kyrgyz_022206E.rm. Information about the project can be found on

the Central Asian Cultural Exchange website — www.cace.us.

In addition to being a *manaschy* — reciter of the *Manas* epic — Rysbai is the Executive Director of the Manas Miras Foundation, the mission of which is to preserve the *Manas*. Rysbai explained to American audiences that he suffered from terrible migraine headaches as a child and that only after he received a vision and began to recite the *Manas* did they dissipate. In fact, if he doesn't recite regularly, he becomes ill. Akylbek is in his first year of graduate school at Bishkek's Conservatory, where he studies under composer and director of the Tengir Too Ensemble, Nurlanbek Nishanov. Unlike Rysbai, he considers himself an artist who needs to practice in order to perform. In addition to studying and playing professionally, Akylbek teaches music at the university level.

This interview, here somewhat shortened for publication, took place, mostly in Russian, over tea in Helen Fallers's Philadelphia home in early mid-March 2006.

Helen: I wanted to start by asking how long you have each been pursuing your art, although (she nods to Rysbai) you don't consider it art, right? If you could talk a little about the place of the *Manas* in your life, in your childhood, for example, that would be interesting.

Rysbai: I had a grandmother who told me all those folk tales. Epics, legends, and all that. And of course she told me about the *Manas*. I don't know at what age, but in my childhood I was familiar with the *Manas* and when I already had learned how to read, my grandmother gave me a book. And she wanted me to read from it not as it is read silently, but as it is recited. And when I read it, she broke into tears.

H: How old were you at the time?

R: I was six, no, not six. Older. And that's how I grew up. I grew up in the spirit of the *Manas*. And I began to recite at the age of 12.

How I started to recite I've told you, right? Before [I began to recite] I was very ill. I was very, very ill. It's impossible to describe it in words — it wasn't a physical disease. And then I had a vision. After that I began to get better slowly. At the beginning I didn't even understand what it was, it was incomprehensible. But, afterwards, after I started to recite a little, I noticed that my head wasn't aching like it used to.

H: You were already older than 12 at that time?

R: That was when I was around 15 or 16. Only then did I start to notice, but up till then I didn't quite... Only at the age of 12 did I start to understand... not understand but rather to feel it...

H: Did people start inviting you to recite the *Manas* at that age?

R: No. I recited at school on special occasions. I was very shy about reciting the *Manas*. My upbringing made me shy. But, there were occasions.

H: They called upon you.

R: Yes, people who wanted to hear. And when they asked, I began... I closed my eyes and I don't know how I performed. The epic began.... I probably started to recite the *Manas* properly from the age of 20. That's when I started truly to understand the *Manas*. Until then, I was somehow blind.

H: And how did that happen? I'm curious.

R: I became accustomed somehow and began no longer to suffer from shyness when I recited. Step by step...

H: But by the age of 20 you had already lived in Bishkek for four years after graduating from high school. Right?

R: I became a student at the university. In Bishkek I participated in competitions and festivals. We all competed among ourselves. From every department in the university.

H: That was 10 years ago. Didn't studying interfere?

R: No. ... I took ten years off from school and then went back afterwards.

H: When did you start working for the Manas Miras Foundation? At first you worked in television, right?

R: After I got my university degree, I worked in television programming. But before that we established a society among ourselves of creative young people. I worked there as the executive director. We developed oral folk projects in the form of contemporary performance. We submitted a proposal to the television company and started working there. We collaborated there with writers from the House of Poets. At that time I received an invitation from Baitkochernezov (Sponsor of the Manas Miras Foundation) which I accepted, and we started the Foundation.

H (turning to Akylbek): I would like to learn more about how you came to work in music.

Akylbek: Well, my father's younger brother is a musician. He plays the *komuz* (Kyrgyz lute). Even now he works at the Karakul Music School. And he was the one who showed me the musical path in the road [of life]. He had me start as a student at the music school in 1996. And there I learned how to play the *balalaika*, the Russian 'lute.'

H: And for the *komuz* there are no written notes. Is that how they taught the instrument?

A: No.

H: They taught students to play by using musical notation.

A (nods): And around then they opened a department of mountain region instruments. At the time, there was no such thing.

H: But I thought your father's brother was a *komuz* player?

A: Yes he is. But he was the only *komuz* player, and he took me under his wing. So that's how I ended up learning how to play the *balalaika*. But, I also have a grandmother who plays the

komuz. After I finished music school, I wanted to study at the Conservatory in the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek.

H: And that was five years ago?

A: Yes. In 1996 I entered the Karakul Music School and I graduated in 2000. And in the same year I immediately began at the Conservatory. At that time the Conservatory offered only traditional singing and the *komuz*. But in 2000 they opened a department of national music that included wind instruments and the *kylkiyak* (Kyrgyz cello).

H: It was Nurlanbek. [Nurlanbek Nishanov is a Kyrgyz composer and director of Tengir Too, who has worked with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture for some five years. Akylbek is his protégé.]

A: Both Nurlanbek and Chytyrbaev opened the new department. So after entering the Conservatory, I gave it a lot of thought and decided that I wanted to play my own national instruments. And I immediately started playing wind instruments. I gave up the balalaika and began from nothing. Nurlanbek started me out from nothing. And when I graduated from the Conservatory, he immediately gave me work in Tengir Too.

H: But, before joining Tengir Too, you also played in a group, right?

A: Yes, yes. I played when I was in music school in an ensemble called Aidigil. I played a little *sybyzgy* (Kyrgyz flute), but only the *sybyzgy*. But, in Karakul there weren't really any musicians of professional stature. And then Nurlan *aga* [an honorific meaning older brother or uncle] invited me to work with Tengir Too. I worked with Tengir Too for two or three months, but then they closed due to lack of finances. And then in 2003 we started to work again.

H: That was because of the Aga Khan Foundation? You started getting money from them or...

A: Yes. And in addition to that we got support from the Kyrgyz State

Technical University. So we started to work there, and we're there now.

H: I have a question. You both had to move to Bishkek in order to seriously pursue your callings?

A: Yes.

R: I didn't know that I was going to become a *manaschy*. I just decided to go to university.

A: I wanted to continue studying music.

H: Hm. I ask because it's not an absolute contradiction but it seems somewhat strange that you as rural people who have very deep folk roots in your blood, in order to develop those roots to reach a higher level had to move to Bishkek, which is a much less Kyrgyz place. In the sense that Russians live there, Russian speakers. In Bishkek, things aren't really so much culturally Kyrgyz as they are post-Soviet, right?

A: If I had stayed in Karakul, I wouldn't have learned to play national wind instruments. There aren't any professionals like Nurlanbek there. And I want to say that Nurlanbek *aga* is the only Kyrgyz folk musician who works at a professional level. Now he has begun to revive all our musical traditions and has started to make instruments. And he composes works to be played on folk instruments. For that reason I had to leave home to study. Because there weren't any professionals, any teachers.

R: For me, as I said, the situation was different. I never dreamed of becoming a *manaschy*. I simply thought about getting into university. Just like everyone else. I got in and suddenly that was what happened. I've already said that I started truly to understand the *Manas* when I was studying in Bishkek.

H: It's interesting to me that in order to continue to do your work, you have to be in the city.

R: Well, we aren't always there. We very often leave the city for the villages to tour and perform.

H: I would like to know from you why you decided to participate in this project, to take part in a residence across what seems like almost all of America?

R: For me it was an honor. And not everyone is given such an opportunity, right? To travel to America.

H: Akylbek, why did you decide to participate in this project?

A: We have a saying in Kyrgyz that states, if they invite you, it is necessary to go. And the second reason is that I wanted to show my culture to Americans. It's as Rysbai *aga* said, for us it is an honor. Athletes and cultural activists have a special role. It is our obligation...

R: To bring to light the splendor of the people, the people's culture.

H: And what did you want to get out of this experience?

R: We wanted to perform as we should, so that our people wouldn't be ashamed of us after our performance. We hoped for that.

H: Akylbek, did you want something different or the same thing?

A: The same thing. For the public to understand and listen to us. We are very pleased. It has been good. Our dream has been realized.

H: How do you feel you're being received by American audiences. How do you feel when you perform?

A: I feel comfortable, somehow.

R: Yes, and it's not only our music that they understand. If a person has music in his or her soul, then it is possible to understand without language. But, the astonishing thing is that they understand the *Manas* as well. You saw that yourself in Texas. The audience told us what was happening in the epic. They asked the question about the woman speaking [the students heard Rysbai vocalizing Kanykei's distress and wanted to know more]. That shows that they understood the words. And one woman said that she began to cry

when I was reciting. Moments like that make it clear to us that American audiences comprehend us with their souls.

H: Did you have any other additional goals for your trip to America?

R: We didn't come here only to acquaint America with our culture. At the same time we wanted to learn, to see how Americans live with our own eyes. What life is really like for Americans. To hear about it is one thing, but to see it with your own eyes is another. We didn't even know that Americans would be so hospitable...but of course their traditions are completely different. And that was a surprise for us. I personally thought that Americans wouldn't invite us to their houses as guests.

H: And what else surprised you?

R: Wyoming was surprising. The heavenly nature in Wyoming, the beautiful mountains, and of course the antelope. How the sheep roam free.

H (addressing Akylbek): And did anything surprise you other than that?

A: Well, seeing the cities and the civilization itself, yes. And the cars, by comparison with ours... There are differences... The people here are good and very open.

H: You didn't expect that?

A: No. I didn't expect that. No matter where you go, people are ready to answer your questions. And the cities, the cities are very beautiful.

H: What haven't you liked in America? I have asked you several times. It probably seems like a strange question to you, since you haven't answered.

R: Aha, what haven't we liked? That of course is a matter for each person. That's personal... Well, I notice that very few people are a healthy weight.

H: Yes, Americans eat too much.

R: I think it's not just a matter of overeating. I eat a great deal too and I don't put on weight.

H: Yes, but you walk 11 km every day [to and from work in Bishkek].

R: There you go. If you're going to eat a lot, you need to be active. But, that's my personal opinion. There's a lot more, of course. If you compare Texas with Wyoming and New York, it's magnificent. We saw Texas first, and then Wyoming. In those places everything was clean. Like glass, right? But when we arrived in New York, it was unexpected. New York was dirty. It turns out that a big city means big trash. (Laughs)

H: Akylbek, you didn't answer the question about what you found surprising in America.

A: Well, what has been surprising is to see such big cities, how they're built, and also I'm surprised by how much work is involved...and how well the buildings are looked after. Inside everything is in order. So, all that human labor, that surprises me. How everything is kept up. And another thing — the relationship between man and nature is very close. In my opinion, that's very good.

H: What do you mean exactly?

A: Yesterday we learned [while guests at the house of some Philadelphia Kyrgyz] that sheep aren't slaughtered the same way we do it in Kyrgyzstan. Here they use a special razor. The attitude of people to nature here is respectful, not only towards animals but towards all nature. Also, it was good to meet local musicians, who played different kinds of music. I played with them. They taught me music and I taught them music. It was very interesting.

R: I would like to collaborate creatively with Americans again.

H: Although you haven't yet seen all of America, you've spent some time here and I wonder if your opinion of it has changed.

R: Yes. Yes, now we've seen it with our own eyes, right? Of course our knowledge isn't complete. Everywhere we go, we are treated as guests. We live in hotels. In short, everything is done for us —

every detail is looked after. With this experience we can't say that we really know America, but we do have some understanding of the place now. And our impressions are completely different from what we have been told about America.

H: Interesting.

R: In Kyrgyz we say: it's better to see something once than to hear about it a thousand times. I wanted to make one more point. Here it seems easier for people to realize their dreams. I would like to establish a creative connection, a scholarly and creative connection, with Americans with the goal of preserving the *Manas* epic. To create that connection and realize it... In the *Manas* there are sacred things — not for any particular nations or tribes. But things that should be sacred for all people. Like the Bible, like the Koran! Like Buddhism and Krishnaism and so on. The *Manas* is also a part of those worlds. One shouldn't divide them. And it's not right to love only one and deny the others, the way that religious fanatics do. For example, one fanatic loves only the Bible and denies all other religions. Another loves only Islam and denies another religion. If a person truly believes in the sacredness of his religion, then he ought to value other sacred things.

H: Certainly. Akylbek?

A: Well, for me this experience has given the inspiration when I go back to Kyrgyzstan to practice and play music even more. To make even more instruments. To learn how to play new instruments. And eventually to compose a piece of music. That's what I feel inspired to do.

H: And the piece of music will be for Kyrgyz folk instruments or for...

A: For folk instruments.

H: Good. Thank you for taking the time to do this interview. *As bolsyn.*

R and A: *As bolsyn.*