

## “Techung’s Band Offers a Sweet Evening Full of Promise”

by Keila Diehl

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Techung has a new sound. Recognized around the world as one of the finest traditional Tibetan singers and musicians, Techung (known more formally as Tashi Dhondup Sharzur) has for years also collaborated with musicians from other cultural and musical backgrounds. One of his most enduring partnerships—with percussionist Michel Tyabji—has been so fruitful and inspirational that Techung has built a new band around it and is now taking his talent, and his fans, in new directions.

The band, which performs under Techung’s name, released a CD titled “Lam La Che” (“On the Road”) in 2012 and is now on the road on a Kickstarter-funded tour with stops in L.A., Berkeley, Minneapolis, Chicago, and Rockport, MA. The band members call themselves “stewards of culture” who are celebrating the “ancient and venerable culture of Tibet” and transmitting it “through music to the global community.” With their themes of courage, devotion to the Dalai Lama, remembering 1959 (the year the Dalai Lama fled from Tibet), gratitude to India for giving shelter to Tibetan refugees, and the power of the dollar, the songs on the band’s set list fit closely with Techung’s life-long concerns with documenting his people’s struggles and educating others about Tibet’s plight.

On a recent Saturday night in Berkeley, Techung and his band treated an audience of about 70 people (mostly friends and family) to two hours of music drawn from the “Lam La Che” CD and from Techung’s earlier CDs of original songs. The Hillside Club resonated with Techung’s soaring voice and melodies on the *dranyen* (lute), *lingbu* (flute), *pivang* (horsehair fiddle), and guitar, Tyabi’s playful rhythms, and plenty of funky bass lines laid down by Puerto Rican Kito Rodriguez. The newcomer to the band, guitarist and fellow Tibetan Rinzing Wangyal.

Despite the talent of his companions on stage, Techung’s voice is the heart of the band’s sound. The group’s job is to support and celebrate it, as they did beautifully for the love song “Tsomo.” The few songs that didn’t provide opportunities for his powerful high-range notes to shine were nice, but not particularly memorable. Since most of the songs’ lyrics are in Tibetan, Injis and other non-Tibetans depend on Techung’s voice—and his explanations between songs—to convey the emotions and themes of the songs. (Although it was a thoughtful gesture, I found the out-of-sync translated lyrics rolling by on a screen to the side of the stage less useful than distracting—especially to the poor guitarist put in charge of dealing with the laptop between and even during songs.)

The band is held together by the musical connection and evident brotherly love between Techung and Tyabji. Having listened to Techung’s music for more than 20 years now, I felt Tyabji’s influence (which means India’s and Africa’s influence) in nearly every song, such as the delightful moment when “Nyingtop”—Techung’s well-known “personal anthem”—slid into an unexpected Caribbean groove. Tyabji is a happy presence on stage and is in constant visual contact with each member of the band, playfully energizing them in the background, while Techung attends to the audience.

Which raises the question: who is the audience for Techung's band? This "For Peace in Tibet" tour is clearly organized with Tibetan (and Tibet-loving) audiences in mind: the cities on the schedule all have (or are near) large exile communities and the songs are in Tibetan and mostly address issues of concern to those living in the diaspora. But, few people from the burgeoning Bay Area Tibetan community were in attendance at the Hillside Club. Why not? Evidently, the band's advance public relations work was poor, but I know from experience that the Tibetan grapevine is quicker than any email blast. And, sure, the Sakya Trinzin was in town. But, Tibetans love Techung—he is one of the heroes of cultural preservation, an ambassador for Tibet throughout the world. Still, most didn't come. They're busy Bay Area people with night shifts and birthday parties.

Techung has always performed *as a Tibetan*. Whether playing in a small community hall or in Carnegie Hall, he has been billed as a Tibetan folk musician. He tells me that this new band hopes to cross over into the world music scene and reach a broader audience, without selling out to the Casio keyboard-generated pop sounds churned out by teen idols (including Tibetan ones). Yet, the band is still marketing itself primarily to "the Tibetan community." A little image consulting may be needed for this young enterprise, perhaps starting with a name for the band that honors the many traditions in the mix and allows Techung (and his community and the Tibetan Cause) to be just one of the inspiring forces behind their music. Techung will, of course, continue to develop and share traditional and modern Tibetan music, but it would be a shame if he didn't gift himself (and us) with some elbow room to perform simply *as a musician*, without the ethnic identifier.

All that said, the Berkeley concert was a Tibetan evening. Despite all of the innovation and exploration at play in the set list and the global influences churning in the air, the sweetest part of the evening was unplanned and utterly traditional. At the end of the performance, an audience member walked up to stage and offered *khatag* (blessing scarves) to Techung and Tsering Wangmo (the artistic director of Chaksampa Tibetan opera company who had performed with Techung earlier in the evening) to thank them for their dedication to preserving and sharing Tibetan culture. We learned that Acha Ugyen Dolma, owner of Tibet Styles on Haight Street in San Francisco, had known the two artists since they were children at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in Dharamsala in the 1970s. She expressed her pride in Techung and Tsering and, with eyes closed and hands in prayer, chanted the Guru Rinpoche puja. *Om Ah Hung Benza Guru Padme Siddhi Hung*. Techung and Tsering were clearly deeply moved as their old friend and supporter blessed us all and appealed to Padmasambhava to remove the sufferings of the people of the world. Ugyen Dolma's offering perfectly bookended an evening that had begun with Techung and Nyima Gyalpo, his musical partner for decades, playing a gentle traditional *Nangma* on the *dranyen* and *gyumang* (dulcimer).

The band's current tour closes on May 26 with a performance at the Shalin Liu Performance Center in the seaport village of Rockport, MA. Before then, however, they will experience the big time, when they "open" for His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama—someone who has completely mastered the art of being both a Tibetan and a citizen of the world—at the 10,000-seat Lakefront Arena in New Orleans this Saturday. I wish them well!

Dr. Keila Diehl is an anthropologist and editor. She was a post-doctoral fellow and lecturer at her alma mater, Stanford University. Dr. Diehl has conducted research in India, Nepal and Tibet and is the author

of *Echoes from Dharamsala: Music in the Life of a Tibetan Refugee Community* (UC Press, 2002), an ethnography based on her doctoral work at the University of Texas-Austin.