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Female vocal quartet Tuuletar will bring its unique fusion of Finnish folk music and hip-hop beatboxing to WOMADelaide

WORDS **PATRICK MCDONALD**
PHOTOGRAPH **KATARIINI SALMI**

When it comes to niche musical genres, Finnish “vocal folk hop” group Tuuletar probably has the market cornered.

The female quartet, which will make its Australian debut at WOMADelaide, blends a cappella harmonies with lyrics and melodies rooted in Finland’s folk tradition and vocal beatbox rhythms which owe more to contemporary hip-hop than their classical training.

Even more unusually – given the small and close-knit nature of Finland’s music community – the four women hadn’t met or performed together until they were living and studying abroad nine years ago.

“It’s a bit funny – although we are native Finns, all of us, we actually met in Den-

mark,” says classically trained singer turned beatboxer Venla Ilona Blom, who formed Tuuletar with Sini Koskelainen, Johanna Kyykoski and Piia Sailynoja.

“We were all music students in Finland but we studied at different academies. In some strange way, we all ended up going for exchange studies to Denmark at the same music academy – we didn’t know each other before.

“That was a bit weird, because there’s not that many people living in Finland and for music students and musicians it’s a fairly small community.”

None of them could initially believe the coincidence that they were four Finnish vocalists who had never met before, let alone all studying during the same year at the same Danish academy.

“We became really good friends at first, then maybe after half a year – again a little bit by accident – we started to sing together,” Blom recalls.

“When we started to sing together, we noticed that there was something very special about our sound, because we have very different voices and we have very different backgrounds.”

Blom brought her burgeoning interest in Finnish folk tradition to the table.

“I had been working a lot with folk musicians in Finland, researching it already and studying it a little bit,” she says.

“The others didn’t have that connection with it, but we all shared this really strong urge to dig into it.

“Also, I had strong classical singing background, so that was another strong influ-



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ence that I brought.”

The other three women had even more diverse musical backgrounds and interests.

“Johanna, she is our pop star,” Blom laughs. “She has this very beautiful voice that is suited especially to Finnish pop music, which she has been singing all her life. So she brought this more mainstream sound, even though she can do a lot of different things with her voice.

“Piia has this very lyrical, high, a bit Enya-

like sound, and she was also very much into singer-songwriters like Tori Amos ... especially on our first album (2016’s *Tules Maas Vedes Taivaal*) she wrote most of the lyrics.

“Sini is our super-experimentalist – she was already doing a lot of weird, crazy things with her voice. She had been working with jazz musicians quite a lot, and loved free improvisation and all these performance art things.”

When they combined their natural singing styles and wide-ranging influences, Blom says “there was something really

unique and special” and “we needed to explore this more”.

“I immediately signed us up for the academy’s spring festival ... we didn’t have any songs yet, but we already had one gig coming up.

“Then we started composing our own songs right away. It was a rich variety of different things already in the beginning, but then during the last eight years we’ve been developing and researching so much as a group, so we have all expanded our limits into real extremes.”

Blom in particular discovered and developed a new talent as the group’s primary beatboxer, using her voice to create hip-hop style percussion sounds.

“In the very first few concerts that we had, we were also playing percussion instruments. That was really fun, but none of us was a trained percussionist and we felt it was a bit limiting having these drums there between us and the audience,” she says.

“When it’s not your main instrument, it can make it a bit stiff and you focus too

Piia Sailynoja, Venla Ilona Blom, Johanna Kyykoski and Sini Koskelainen are Tuuletar

much on the playing when you just want to focus on the interpretation and the energy and your voice.

“There was just one day in the rehearsal room when we started to jam and play around with our voices, and we started to find different percussive sounds and ways to use our voice as a percussion instrument.

“Then it started to emerge: What about beatboxing? We started to watch some YouTube videos together.”

They were soon influenced by former UK vocal quintet The Boxettes, especially its world champion beatboxer Belle “Bellatrix” Ehresmann.

“When she started this super-strong dubstep beat, we were all literally falling from our chairs going: ‘That’s what we need in our music. That’s what’s going to make it really explode’.

“Because we already had these rich harmonies, we had strong stories, we had this energy and this unique sound, but we still were missing something ... that moment was just really priceless.”

All four singers began practising beatbox sounds, but it became evident that one member needed to take charge of the rhythm.

“It’s a technique that requires a lot of practice and a lot of stamina,” Blom says.

“I was already so hooked on it that I eventually made it my major in my masters studies. So I think I am the first person in Finland who has an MA in music with beatboxing as her main instrument,” she laughs.

Tuuletar has also used hand, feet and body percussion on some numbers, which evolved into a sort of rhythmic choreography that complements the performers’ natural interaction on stage. On its latest album *Rajatila/Borderline*, the group also reintroduced some of its original percussion instruments, allowing Blom to use her vocals in other harmonies.

“Even though I love, love, love beatboxing and it’s part of my identity, I am still also a singer,” she says.

After a brief dalliance with using an external choreographer, Tuuletar has also decided to let its own bodies do the talking.



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“We have very different voices, but also different personalities and everyone has a very unique way of using their body on stage and moving. We want to emphasise that everyone gets to be themselves.”

A 2018 appearance at WOMAD in the UK led to the invitation to do this year’s Adelaide and New Zealand events.

Tuuletar is named after a Finnish wind goddess or spirit, which embodies the group’s elemental approach to making music. It also draws inspiration from Karelian joik music, which is designed to evoke its subjects through sound.

“The strongest thing that we have adapted are the lyrics and metre and the rhythm of the lyrics. Especially on the first album, we have used a lot of this rune singing tradition as an influence,” Blom says.

“Finnish folklore has very strong elements from nature – we are trying to create this landscape with each note that we sing. For us, it is also a visual thing, that we see this landscape and then we sing the landscape.”

**Tuuletar performs at WOMADelaide,
Botanic Park, March 6-9. Book at
womadelaide.com.au**

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