

THE GREAT MUSIC DEBATE

WHAT DO BEIJING'S MUSIC INSIDERS
WANT FROM THE FANS, THE INDUSTRY
AND THE SCENE?

DESIGN BY SUSU LUO



THE DEBATE

ON RECOGNITION

Hao Fang: Bad music gets much more recognition than good music.

Tian Jianhua: My band became popular because we kept trying. But are the results directly proportionate to the effort you put in? Of course not. Take Cui Jian as an example. His position [in the music industry] and his income are definitely not on the same level.

Ilchi: There's a problem with the media here – they don't use any initiative. They're simply forced to cover this kind of music because there are more and more festivals and more and more people going to them.

Nevin Domer: The situation has gotten much better since 2005. We're getting a lot of recognition from people who are actively involved in the music scene, but there are still a lot of people in China who don't spend money on music or consume live music. The challenge D-22 and Maybe Mars are

looking at now is to reach those people.

Jaime Welton: Everyone at this table is still underground – even the people who you think are doing really well at the big music festivals, you're not going on stage and making 100,000 *kuai*. At the MasterCard Center, we have a huge show once a week; there's 9,000 people, tons of Chinese fans. But that's the mainstream: they only know what they see on TV.

Kou Zhengyu: There's a weird phenomenon: Sometimes a local band can easily attract 1,000 people. But when a very well-known international band plays, like Lamb Of God or Dream Theater, there might only be 600 people.

Jaime Welton: Part of that is that they're singing in English – they're not speaking to most Chinese people.

Kou Zhengyu: Back to the question about recognition – the media doesn't pay enough attention, especially to heavy metal, which has the deepest

roots among all kinds of rock music in China.

Mickey Zhang: Electronic music hasn't even been recognized as much as heavy metal. Most electronic music doesn't have words, so it's even harder for people to accept. Although what we do is non-mainstream, I think it should get more recognition from the mainstream media. But they're not interested.

Li Yongxian: The recognition doesn't really matter. This is what we enjoy doing, after all. I think no matter what kind of music you're doing, as long as you can have fun with it and you have some people who like what you do, it's enough.

Miao Wong: It's the music with *no genre* that is overrepresented.

That was that settled then. With the panelists united in their disdain for music of no genre, we moved the discussion swiftly on ...

ON WHAT THEY'D CHANGE

Jaime Welton: I'd start a music magazine, one with a jazz section, an indie section, a techno section, DJs, metal, experimental ... As far as I can see, music coverage in the magazines looks like 70 percent indie rock. And some of the music editors need to go see more shows.

Shan Wei: Regarding festivals and big events, we want more support from the government. There's a lack of standard regulations for such events – [for example] some were allowed to sell alcohol and some not. And different government departments don't coordinate very well. Sometimes local governments will put money into music festivals, but after the event starts, you find that the police weren't on board. We certainly understand the importance of safety, but communication between musicians and fans is essential, and the police often interrupt or stop that.

Weng Weng: I agree. INTRO was actually a project under the Ministry of Culture. But the relevant government departments – the police, the Health Department, city administrators – came not to help but to look for problems. A person getting burned by a cigarette – that's a big deal [in their eyes]. A person stage-diving – potential safety hazard. We'd like to put more effort into production and presentation, but most of our time, funds



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Founder and managing director, Modern Sky Records; singer and guitarist, Sober



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ZHONG LING 钟灵
PR manager, Pilot Records



LI CHI 李赤
Venue owner, MAO Livehouse



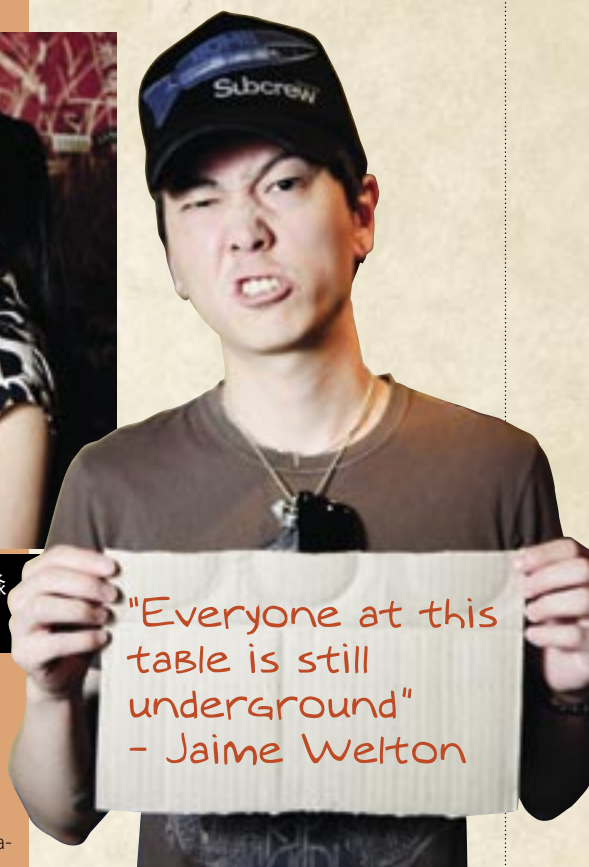
LI YONGXIAN 李永先
Venue co-owner, East Shore Live
Jazz Café



JAIME WELTON
Technical director, MasterCard Center;
producer, guitarist, Black Cat Bone and
Bad Mamasan



MIAO WONG 王淼
Managing director,
Acupuncture Records



and energy are put into security issues.

Liu Huan: At our Shanghai Midi Festival, there were no police at the stage; our volunteers worked as security and they did a great job. When fans wanted to dive, our volunteers helped them dive safely, not just drag them down then beat them up. It's a question of attitude: Are you here to help or to supervise? Unfortunately, it's usually the latter. Many of the rules are ridiculous. A big event can be canceled because of a tiny problem. Fifty percent, perhaps even 70 percent of our energy and time goes towards negotiations with various departments.

Shi Lu: The most important thing to me is to respect each other. Sometimes a festival's sound engineer works against ours. That's disrespectful. And another problem involves the media. Some journalists interview you with no preparation. They might even claim they interviewed us at an event we weren't at. It is slander.

Jaime Welton: Also, how many CDs come out? I've seen a bunch of really good ones that never got reviewed anywhere.

Tian Jianhua: Times have changed, brother – nobody listens to CDs anymore. A DJ from China National Radio said to me that a person is considered patient if they can listen to a song for 30 seconds; it only takes a person 15 seconds to decide if they want to keep listening. The younger generation grew up eating McDonald's. They've never had time to think deeply about anything. As for the problems at music festivals, at a music festival in Nanjing, we were told things like "Don't say this," "Don't say that" and "Don't make the fans excited." What can we do to change that? All I could do was to say to the fans onstage: "Don't get excited."

Kou Zhengyu: Many of the things I do now aren't a musician's responsibility. I've done podcasts, and I spend lots of time posting tour info on the Internet. I don't want to do these things, but before I can make people like our music, I have to let people know about our music. I have no choice.

Zhong Sheng: As a record label, we're doing things PR companies, tech companies and media should do – but not much actually relating to music. But if we don't do these things we might not survive. Things like podcasts. Like Jaime said,

maybe we should start a music magazine. But the media themselves can hardly survive. Music is not so popular in the first place – and what we do is for the minority of the minority.

Hao Fang: I would do something to improve music education – not the kind of practical educa-



tion that Midi School offers, though. The younger generation thinks that they are very *niubi*, that they don't need other people's help to find good music. That's bullshit. China lacks talented people who are capable of focusing on the music scene and writing about it. If we had the funds, I'd be willing to get people from the music industry to go to colleges and start with basic lectures to tell students what good music is, what rock & roll is.

Miao Wong: France has Alliance Française, Germany has the Goethe Institute, the UK has the British Council, Spain has Instituto Cervantes; each supports different types of culture that are non-mainstream in their own countries. But China's Confucius Institute doesn't do anything else ex-

cept teach foreigners the language. We don't have an institute or organization that supports pioneering art and culture. That's the kind of organization I'd establish if I had the power to do so.

Badr Benjelloun: Even the underground scene is divided. There's no consistency in the products on offer, and no helping each other. In other countries, when you put on a show you try to put on one that's not gonna compete with another show's audience.

Tian Jianhua: In a city like Tokyo there's probably 50 shows a night – you just have to let them compete. As I see it, the most important thing is still education. The most money we've made on tour was at Washington University. But when we

wanted to join a show at Peking University, they checked every detail about us – it was very strict. And they only let us play one song.

Li Chi: The problem Badr raised is technically impossible to solve. Other musicians won't tell me what they are planning and I wouldn't tell them either. I'm interested to know how other cities have gotten beyond this problem.

For the crime of raising a problem that was "technically impossible" to solve, we sent Badr to stand in the corner for five minutes and think about what he'd done. Everyone else responded by blaming the media. Ouch. We attempted to introduce a note of optimism by asking our debaters to reflect on the scene now compared to five years ago. Things must be better now, right? Right? Oh dear ...



ON THE CHANGING SCENE

Kou Zhengyu: No one actually pays attention when listening to music nowadays.

Zhong Sheng: I think TV, radio and Internet media have been a bad influence. When they play a song, they cut the intro and interludes and only play the parts with lyrics. And electronic music only gets played during commercials.

Li Yongxian: There have been lots of changes since we opened East Shore five years ago. Now we often have big jazz musicians from the US playing. Young people always want success quickly,

but if it doesn't come quickly, you can only wait. And we actually see results from waiting. An example: UC Berkeley's music school came here looking for students to study jazz, because they were short of students. They enrolled a few from here, and in a few years, those students will come back and teach more students. The scene may be small, but it's getting better.

Weng Weng: Mickey and I first met in 2000 and we started to do techno together. There were more electronic music clubs back then: Vogue, Club Orange, Velvet Room and more. But now,



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Guitarist, Spring & Autumn and Suffocated



WENG WENG 翁喻

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MICKEY ZHANG
DJ, o2culture



ILCHI 伊立奇
Musician, Hanggai



LIU HUAN 刘欢
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HAO FANG 郝舫
Music critic and author; former managing editor of *Rolling Stone China*; TV producer

we've just closed The House, and other clubs like White Rabbit and Lantern are gone too. Sure, we still have INTRO, which is a big festival, but 70-80 percent of people only go there for fun – not the music. We have become more like tools of entertainment.

OK, things are getting pretty bleak when a big strong lad like Weng Weng reckons he's become a "tool of entertainment." We pressed valiantly on, determined to cajole something positive from this. But first, we took a commercial break. Just so we could listen to some electronic music.

ON BEIJING'S UNSUNG HEROES

Shan Wei: Unsung heroes? My wife.

Ilchi: The live music venues.

Liu Huan: Everybody sitting at this table.

Li Chi: I've been going to shows since the early '90s, and we can't overlook the organizers from back then. People like Huang Feng [former marketing manager of Warner China] and Get

how much those bands cost – there's no way that they are making money.

Tian Jianhua: Jon Campbell. The Dr. Bethune of China's rock scene. Absolutely.

Shi Lu: [Theater director] Meng Jinghui is a true unsung hero. He's helped out the bands with promotion and touring, and some of it hasn't worked out, but he still persists. He understands



Lucky Bar's owner, Taoge.

Kou Zhengyu: Yeah, Get Lucky was where we first got started. Taoge ran the bar for over ten years – but now it's gone, no one knows about him anymore.

Tian Jianhua: All the fans who pay to go to shows are unsung heroes – they're the ones who supported us to continue working on music.

Jaime Welton: I think the heroes are the people who are putting on shows and losing money every time, and who have been doing it for a long time. Like the Painkiller stuff that I go to. I know

very well what bands really want to do and what they are able to do.

Shen Lihui: The ones who did a lot when the environment was much tougher, like Lü Bo, the founder of Scream Records. People may forget about those things as time passes.

Miao Wong: People who continue fighting in the music industry after all these years. It hasn't been easy.

All this goodwill was refreshing. But the unsung heroes remained unsung. We felt the impulse to sing for them. Or at least give them some kind of recognition. Awards?





ON THE VALUE OF AWARDS

Li Chi: I think awards are really necessary. We have had a small annual awards at MAO for the past three years – anyone who wins feels happy about the recognition.

Liu Huan: We surely need them, otherwise Midi wouldn't be doing its awards. Awards help to establish standards and attract more attention from the fans. We need to make the stars stars.

Ilchi: Awards should focus more on new bands.

Shi Lu: I think it would be OK if you separate it out by genres.

Jaime Welton: For judging, there are basically three things. First, the audience, who should be divided by genre; second, you should have a panel of experts; third, the club owners. You'll need contributions from each of these three tiers to make it really fair.

Badr Benjelloun: That would work, but you would end up with the problem that the same

bands win all the time and new bands don't get any recognition.

Liu Huan: But as time goes by, the new bands will become old bands and they should focus on winning in other award competitions.

Mickey Zhang: I don't think we need awards in the DJ field yet. There may be hundreds of bands in Beijing, but the good DJs can be counted on one person's fingers.

Shen Lihui: I don't think it matters who decides the winners. It would be OK if it were only three people from your magazine making the decision. What's important is to do it in your own style.

Ilchi: Bands like Omnipotent Youth Society and Hedgehog were already pretty good a few years ago, and now they've worked their way out and attracted a much bigger audience. I don't agree with giving these kinds of awards out based on who's already successful, following the lead of the market.

Liu Huan: The Midi awards is very focused on rock. But I'd be very supportive of an event including

more genres. That would be good for the rock scene, too.

Right, so they like awards. This gave us a brainwave. Many on our panel say the media is part of the problem. We wanted to be part of the solution ... What if we did a Beijinger Music Awards?

SO ... A BEIJINGER MUSIC AWARDS?

Badr Benjelloun: There's many segments of the music industry that are not represented. However, *the Beijinger* is facing a foreign audience. Would that benefit the industry? Probably.

Nevin Domer: Having an English-language awards does help with capturing a more international audience. When I worked with Chinese bands touring overseas, a lot of the English media (both inside and outside China) were very important to getting those bands abroad. I do take Chinese media reports and translate them, but foreigners can relate a lot more easily to English-language media. Although I will also say that from D-22's perspective, the young Chinese audience is much more important.

Jaime Welton: The point is now that you guys should make *the Beijinger* in Chinese.

Nevin Domer: We send the Chinese bands abroad to make money that they can't make in China. But the bigger reason is that as they gain recognition abroad they can then become bigger and more popular in China. Up until now, it's really taken recognition from abroad before Chinese media will take a band seriously.

Miao Wong: To the electronic music scene in Beijing, this group of people who reads *the Beijinger* is actually very important. Even though we get a larger Chinese audience now, the results of an English-language awards event would still be very important to us. People say any press is good press. With social media now, we can use and reuse any kind of coverage to keep promoting ourselves.

Shen Lihui: It's common for our bands to tour abroad these days, so we really need a good archive of English articles. A magazine based in Beijing has the obvious advantage of being able to discover something deeper about local musicians. ■



"The younger generation thinks that they are very niubi" - Hao Fang



TIAN JIANHUA 田健华
Bass player, Reflector



SHI LU 石璐
Drummer, Hedgehog



BADR BENJELLOUN
Music blogger