

BEIJING PUNK: a conversation with the director

by *Alexandra Loulias*



AiB contributor Alexandra Loulias goes behind the scenes with the director of [Beijing Punk](#), a new documentary directed by Shaun Jefford, which will be screened during Bushwick Open Studios 2013 on June 1st at \ ONE MORE SONG //. For more information, please go to onemoresong.eventbrite.com or facebook.com/onemoresongbk.

I met Shaun Jefford in the afternoon near Washington Square Park. He had just arrived after what he termed “a fairly serious evening’s debauchery” and was scheduled to walk into the Tribeca Film Fellows dinner after our sit down. I later found out this is where he was going to a young filmmaker selected by the festival to be mentored into the industry. “Let’s get a drink. Take me somewhere dark and calm,” he suggested as a venue for our interview. He did not look well. I lead him down the street, through a gold revolving door. I turned to see Jefford still stuck inside, wide-eyed and cursing. One more go round and he made it through the door, seemingly spent by the effort. We ended up in a unmemorable place with hundreds of wine bottles and rows of very strange extended high top desks without chairs, which looked all too convenient for quick conversation. The hostess let us know that someone who was someone we very obviously should have known would be seated at the far end of the bar, so we should sit towards the left. Ignoring the fanfare of

grapes, we ordered two whiskey and cokes.

Loulias: Why did you go to Beijing?

Jefford: I went to China on another project. I actually fell into it. I originally was planning to raise money for a bigger film. It was a comedy about weightlifting. It's a feature that I wrote called "Get Huge."

L: Was it about weightlifters in China?

J: No. It was weightlifters in Midwest America. It's these two brothers who are completely hopeless. One of them is really fat and one of them is really thin and they both decide to get huge. Well actually the fat one decides to get huge so he's going to, you know, get ripped. So he gets involved in this weight program which was big in the eighties and he attaches to this weightlifting guru called "Max Rabies".

L: "Max Rabies"?

J: "Max Rabies". Anyway, the point of all this is that it's a comedy and we almost got it up but it didn't happen. So in the process of meeting all the money people for that film I also met the guys from Public Enemy...and I met...public enemies guys whose names escape me...but one of those crazy characters was going to produce a record in China and we started talking about it backstage in Las Vegas. It was a big music festival that they were playing at and we had this backstage access. He asked me to film Public Enemy as they went on stage. I said sure and ran on with them and stood there and filmed while they played their set. They were about to go on and he told me he was going to China to produce an album. At that point, I thought, wait a minute...there are punks in China, that's the coolest thing I've ever heard about and I want to be a part of that. That's what it was

L: What year was that?

J: That was in...well, years are a little slippery for me right now so I'd have to consult my voluminous notes and get back to you.

L: Sometime before?

J: I'm pretty sure it happened before, yes. And everything after today..well, that's after. Date system is.. before and after. Like my counting system which goes; One, two, many.

L: I guess I could say the same thing.

J: So maybe *many* years before now? More than two? So he went to China and his name was Brian Hardgroove...Ok, the file just arrived, the download is happening now! Brian Hardgroove...You have to say in this interview that I had a hangover verging on a *medical emergency*.

L: Done.

J: So anyway, Brian Hardgroove is an interesting character. He's a musician. The album was for Demerit which is this hardcore punk band in Beijing. So I went to China, met those guys, fell in love with what they were doing. The concept of what they were doing which is anarchy in a police state. I've always been very interested in control systems and thought control. The concept of controlling someones inputs. You know, once you control someone's inputs, like they do in China, then you can control how they think. As a bad thing I mean. You shouldn't ever control someones inputs. That's actually what appealed to me. The concept of these guys standing up and rebelling in a state where that kind of thing matters. These guys who grew up

bathed in state propaganda. In China you have a state that has claws. Thought control is alive and well in Beijing. It sends its love. So that's what drew me to it.

L: When did your interest become a plan to film the documentary?

J: I went there originally to check it out, look around. I had the interest of some people in Australia and in America and went back 4 or 5 months later with a little crew. I was electrified and felt I must do this, I really love what these guys are doing. I wanted to support it anyway I can. That was my main mission. The nature of documentary making, unless you happen to be a super genius, is exploratory and it develops, for me anyway. I wander into these situations and because I think everything is hilarious and I find the funny in things, that's how I'm looking at stuff...I have things I am passionate about and I want change but I'm not a crusader. Mainly, I'm interested in things that make me laugh. Punks in China...I thought that was hilarious. And then I met them and then got into their cores and I went, right, I love these guys. I will feel like a fraud if I don't do something to support these people. I contacted Nevin Domer, he was the booking manager at D-22, the main club in the scene. Nevin was just kind of doing his thing and I was this foreigner who'd come over and was a little bit annoying. I'm not a punk person. I'm in a suit tday, I'm as far as you can get. But I love the concept of rebellion. Fighting a police state, control system. Intelligently, not irresponsibly. I don't like the idea of anarchy because that doesn't solve anything, but I do like the idea of people who think differently, are born differently and can't think the same as everybody else. That's what I identify with, that's what I'm sure yourself and most artists will identify with.

L: Yeah. You see the problem but you're not focusing on the problem as the thing to fight. The thing to fight for is the solution.

J: Absolutely. To not get lost in the fight for fights sake. Remember what you are doing. I feel like you can always fight. It takes a lot more to actually prevail.

L: Did anything change within you from the beginning of filming to the end?

J: Yeah it did. I grew up in conservative circumstances in Australia with a pretty narrow world view. I had so stridently believed the things I believed just like...that's the way it is. Then I learned about the world and realized...that's not the way it is. I was an idiot. I went to China with a few preconceived ideas. I don't pretend to understand everything I saw but there was an energy there that I connected with. The youth are energized for change. They want to get out and have their life. There is a world out there and they want a part of it. We're a little jaded over here...We've seen it all, done it all. In China it felt somehow more truthful, like they are going through some adolescent process that the west is over. It felt pure. I wanted to channel that.

Jefford (to bartender): Can we get a little cheese and bread plate?

Bartender: Is there anything you don't like or can't have?

J: I like everything. You like everything right?

L: Yeah I love cheese. Cheese is good.

J: We like cheese. Just a wheel of cheese, please. This is the cheese wheel, you have to eat your way out. You're not allowed out of the restaurant until you eat the cheese wheel.

L: That's disgusting

J: Well, the next day would be interesting.

L: Tell me something weird that happened while filming.

J: The last night in Beijing I went out drinking with Justin Padro, the bartender from D-22. The same Justin that I was out drinking with last night - the man responsible for this unspeakable hang over. Justin is a certified lunatic, he's got the paperwork. State approved. Anyway, Justin...a great bartender, a very good musician, great drummer. He was brought to Beijing by Michael Pettis to be a drummer in the punk scene.

The cheese and bread plate arrived. The plate was all white and far too big. The cheese was in the shape of little squares, placed around the plate like numbers on a clock.

Jefford (acknowledging the cheese plate): Very artfully arranged. It's curated...So Justin and I went drinking last night. He's an award-winning drinker.

L: A certified lunatic and an award-winning drinker. I love him.

J: You will love him. He is an absolutely memorable character. See, I closed the bar with Justin last night. That's why I am so uncoordinated today.

L: So basically, it's all Justin's fault. Maybe that's what we will call the interview.

J: Yeah. Justin got me in a headlock and forced booze down my throat. You know, last time he was at a screening for Beijing Punk he got into a fist fight while doing the Q+A. He's wonderful. It is pretty special when you find a character like that...and they're for real.

L: So, it was your last night...

J: Right, we were out drinking. It was my last night. I was with Justin and I realized at a certain point that there was no way to end this. This would never end. Justin had to be dealt with, I mean he is an Olympic grade drinker.

L: What time was it when you realized this?

J: About 5AM.

L: What time was your flight?

J: About 9AM. But, I had to go back to the hotel room and download all this footage I had. And I had to pack. So I just realized there was no way to end it except...to make a scene. So I called Justin over and I said, "Justin, this has been an amazing experience. Forgive me for doing this but I have to do it". I pulled the fire extinguisher off the wall and started spraying it around the club. My last vision of Justin in China is a quizzical look as he disappeared in this cloud of white. And then there were these little men who had some pretty serious kung fu going on came and dragged me out of the club. They threw me down these stairs. Which actually wasn't that bad because I was quite medicated. When I stood up I was doubled over laughing. All these angry men are outside shouting at me. When you think about it, that's a really shitty, irresponsible thing to do. But it seemed so hilarious at the time.

L: And you were desperate.

J: Yeah. It HAD TO END. So I'm outside, I get in a cab and I think I am hilarious. I did it for a particular reason, it worked out, and I didn't die. Now I'm in the cab and I'm about to go to my hotel. I wind down the window and I shout at these really angry little men who were quite twitchy and shouting at me in Chinese, I say, shaking my arm, "You'll hear from my lawyers!" Someone once said that to me and I thought it was the

most ridiculous thing anyone has ever said so I'm going to say it. I wind up the window and I say to the driver, "DRIVE!" and he was growling back at me. He had seen what had happened. It was clear there was no way he was going to drive. Eventually I jump out the other side of the car and now they are laughing at me. I ran across a highway and then jumped in another cab and was on my way.

L: Sounds like an excellent way to end your trip. I can't believe you managed to set off a fire extinguisher, jump in a cab, download the footage, and make it to your flight in 4 hours. That's superhero status.

J: It is superhero status. And I also had a bottle of Baiju... Chinese moonshine... which I had in my luggage. When I went through customs, they were like, "No, you're not taking that out, forget it." I told them I had just bought it yesterday. They didn't care. So I figured, all right, I'll just drink it. I couldn't drink it, I drank about a quarter of it.

L: You drank it at the airport?

J: Yeah. In the security line. That was a mistake, just for reference. Don't drink a quarter bottle of Baiju after you've been awake for two days. You're not really saying fuck you to anybody but your brain.

L: Any final words on the film?

J: What's been interesting is the positive response to the film. Everybody seems to have good things to say about it. Many positive reviews and this never seems to end. Even though I am in NY for the Tribeca Film Festival and the film *Alias Ruby Blade*, which I am a producer on, everyone still wants to talk with me about *Beijing Punk* which is now a few years ago for me. It's gratifying but not what I expected. I just thought there would be some people who liked it and some people who hated it but 99% of the reviews and the feed has been very positive. People are behind it.

L: Is there anything that you wish could've been included after you had finished editing it?

J: I wish we could've delved deeper into the political realm of China but it just was not possible. I had intended to do that but as we got into it we realized that if we spoke badly about the government, it would not have been good for the subjects in the movie. I am a filmmaker, and not a journalist. I have no aspirations to journalism, so I didn't feel like I had to state those truths. There are some things that I know could've been in the movie and would've made it more scandalous and interesting but it also might've sent some of our friends to jail. I wanted an interesting movie without these people, so many of those scandalous details had to stay on the cutting room floor.

L: I feel with anarchy and bringing down the system it makes me think of a saying I heard once – A clever crow will always paint its feather black.

J: Right, exactly, there is a time and place for rebellion.

L: So what's next?

J: I was a cameraman on the new documentary "Upaj: Improvise" by Antara Bhardwaj. That was pretty exciting. Upaj is a movie about Indian Kathak dancing and the journey of an Indian dance Guru, the incredible Pandit Chitresh Das. I also was co-editor and a producer on the film and I am really happy to say it is screening in the film market at Cannes this year. It was an incredible journey. We drove across India and filmed in all of these wonderful little towns and strange rural venues. India is amazing. Relatively untold story... I mean no one has really gone into Kathak dance before. I really was not interested in Kathak dance

to begin with but as I went to India and met these people, I got involved in their passions and once again I fell in love with the subject. Chitresh, the Guru, is trying to maintain the purity of an ancient art form and that's increasingly hard to do in modern times when kids are less and less interested. He's found a way and it is compelling.

Upaj: Improvise. Look for it.

Also the thing I am filming in LA right now is quite entertaining too. We have been chronicling the life of an entrepreneur in the sex toy industry. The working title is King of Kink. I think that one is going to be pretty good too. OK let's get out of here. I've got to get to this dinner. There is mentoring to do.



4 notes

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