



Music Documentary Monday

Beijing Punk

Posted on January 28, 2013 by Sean Caldwell

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Directed by Shaun M. Jefford
USA, 2010

Genre: Punk

In 2008, as Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics, filmmaker Shaun M. Jefford walked the streets of the Chinese capital with a cameraman in tow, hoping to gain some insight into the city's underground punk scene. After failing to engage what he called "the punk

fashion set," Jefford discovered D-22, a venue that serves as Beijing's true punk rock hub. It's at this point in [Beijing Punk](#) that we meet venue owner Michael Pettis and booking agent Nevin Domer, two American expats intent on providing ample sustenance for what they call China's "explosion in new culture." As Pettis explains, "We're pretty certain something big and something important is happening here."

He's right. Jefford's music documentary examines the cultural impact of punk in a truly oppressive environment, and how the sound and lifestyle affect the lives of those who've found meaning in its liberating and rebellious nature. Beijing National Stadium (aka the Bird's Nest), purpose-built for the Olympic spectacle, is a looming presence throughout – an ominous, suggestive symbol of authority intent on aggressively suppressing dissent. In the film's foreground, punk rock's resonance in a changing China is explained through the words and stories of Lei Jun, a skinhead with a fondness for Motorhead and codeine cough syrup who fronts the Oi band Mi San Dao; Demerit, a band whose politically charged lyrics

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prevent them from distributing their new album on the day of the release show; and Hedgehog, an art rock group seemingly best positioned to find international success.

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As the musicians discuss their philosophies, reveal their daily lives, and open their homes to Jefford, Domer provides an overview of the scene itself, both from an industry and a societal standpoint. In addition to booking talent at D-22, he runs Maybe Mars, an independent label that deals specifically with Beijing's underground scene, releasing albums by the area's best known bands. It becomes clear, though, that punk isn't a readily accepted form of expression here, especially under the international spotlight of the Olympics. Late in the film, when Jefford presses Domer about why the authorities won't let the label press and release the Demerit album, he replies, "I'd rather not talk too much about what the lyrics mean on film. The more ambiguous we can be with government officials, the safer it is." Moments like these are what makes Beijing Punk a very compelling look at true outsiders – musicians who, more than perpetuating the legacy of punk, try to find their way through a stifling, authoritarian reality.

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