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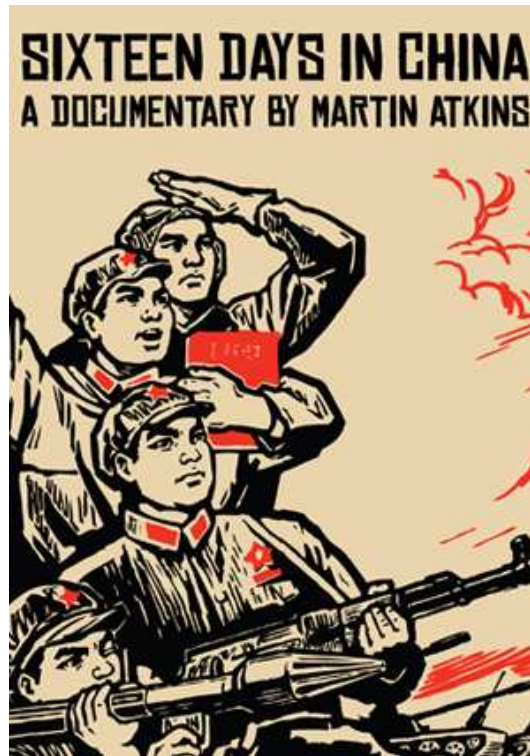
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[Beijing Rocks: Public Image Limited's Martin Atkins in China](#)



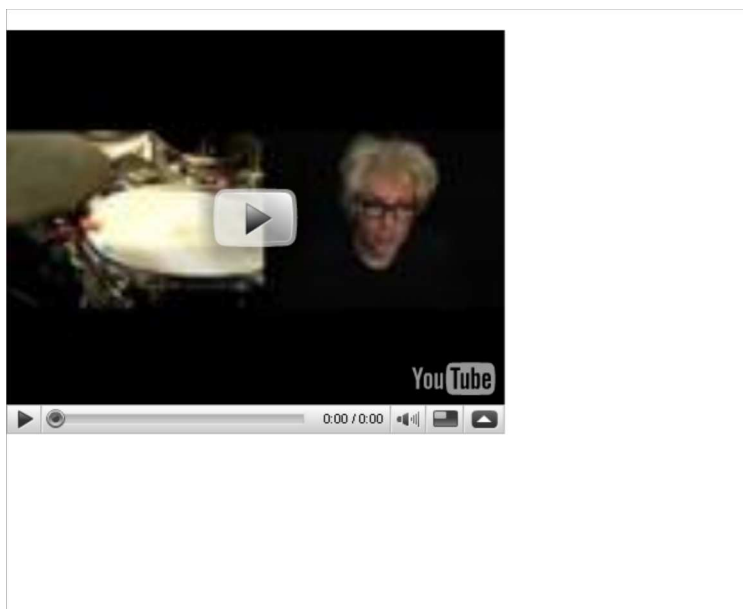
by Chris Estey

Not to get all “[Weird At My School](#)” (that’s DJ El Toro’s job here on the KEXP Blog), but my favorite album that seemed to freak everybody out when I was growing up was Public Image Limited’s *Flowers of Romance*. This was a spare, traumatic burst of language and noise from John Lydon’s follow up “business” (band, project, whatever) with post-punk definers guitarist Keith Levene, bassist Jah Wobble, and drummer Martin Atkins. PiL was falling apart due to brilliance and no doubt a huge level of inimical dysfunction, but this sophomore release for the collective featured insane amounts of Atkins’ tribal-industrial drumming (with a creepy smattering of vocals and etc. from the others), pretty much founding the backbeat for generations of “alternative percussionists.” Atkins himself would go on to make Killing Joke a legend, and then batter and pound Nine Inch Nails into musical godhood. That sound of a gorilla beating up a tractor ubiquitous on industrial-spliced rock since the 80s? That’s Martin.

Brit ex-patriate Atkins' own band Pigface and label Invisible work out of Chicago, and that becomes a running joke as he tries to narrate the in-between scenes of his DVD release *Sixteen Days In China: A Documentary By Martin Atkins* (MVD), pretending to be in China describing his Asian dark night of the soul signing bands in Beijing with the Sears Tower behind him, etc. But yes, Atkins really went there himself in October 2006 and recorded bands like PK-14, Tookoo, The Subs, and others, who all play at the D-22 club in downtown Beijing. His mission ended up on the terrific anthology *Look Directly Into The Sun*, and individual releases from the female-led hard rock band The Subs and others are either out already or on the way. Atkins ended up immediately signing the accessible but catchy Snapline to Invisible before he came back, draping their American-debut red vinyl seven inch in a cut-up poster from the notorious Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, as he scares up some left-behind cymbals (while producing the really fascinating various groups) he avoids the all of the Starbucks outlets popping up everywhere. Instead, he urges the viewers to consume the wonderful green brews from tea-houses everywhere the American chain is not.

While Atkins was in Beijing, CBGB's in New York closed, and he feels as if the punk rock spirit fugued from NYC into D-22 with a whole new life — spawned in the ashes of a violent movement which originally meant (as he says) “the end of art, skills passed down from generation to generation... from people tortured, killed, and even forced to commit suicide.” Atkins doesn't argue that the CR wasn't fought on solid grounds of economic reform, just that the immortal spirit of music and art couldn't be destroyed. “While I watched CBGB's close on CNN in my hotel room, I wanted to be at the birth of that vibe (in Beijing) rather than dancing in the remains of that lingering smell of the toilets of the old vibe.”

Atkins has done a masterful job with this self-written/directed/produced doc, including both his own ideological wrestling with Chinese political repression with his own emotional terrorism of his personal assistant who set up a three night, several band festival for Atkins at D-22, booked rare studio time for the really creative regional bands against all the odds, and tried to keep the compilation album production for the project within a stretched budget. It's a warts and all approach, a melee of fresh Chinese punk, post-punk, funk, art-rock voices mixed with Caucasian fear and confusion — feeling not unlike one of your favorite exotic-sounding music genre-transcending albums made in perilous times. Atkins is smartly hilarious throughout, his own DIY spirit inspiring everyone around him to perform and create on their own terms.



Sixteen Days in China trailer

The somehow still cherubic, peroxided, nerd-glasses-wearing drumming icon begins the international rock and roll adventure story with an observation of how Chinese CNN automatically obliterates a report of a shooting on the Tibetan border — they headline it, and then the screen goes blank. The story no longer existed. And then he ends the journey back in Chicago working on the releases for the bands he he recorded, and sees an American CNN report in which a Starbucks is being closed in Beijing due to the people wanting a homemade green tea kiosk. He sets his TV to record the story he barely caught when they run it again the next hour — but the channel doesn't. That story disappears here, too, just like the shooting on the Tibetan border. Next hour up the newscasters announce the signing of Paul McCartney to Starbucks' label — but when Atkins calls Starbucks' publicity office to find out more, he discovers they don't even have any information about McCartney signing to the coffee chain's boutique label — it was rushed through four months before they were meant to make the announcement, to take over the memory of the Starbucks being forced out of Beijing. “That's spin!” he snaps.

Now the reason why punk-inspired music is planting hardy, rebellious seeds all over the world doesn't seem so mysterious, and the power of creative young people to persevere seems that much more important and less exotic in other lands. As Atkins himself surmises, "Language is weird, intent is weird, but music is fucking cool."

This entry was posted on Tuesday, August 19th, 2008 at 8:16 am and is filed under [KEXP, Reviews](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

3 Responses to "Beijing Rocks: Public Image Limited's Martin Atkins in China"

1. *Justin Farley* Says:

[August 19th, 2008 at 11:49 pm](#)

KEXP keeps my faith in the future of music

2. *Pete Smith* Says:

[August 22nd, 2008 at 5:41 am](#)

Agreed... They seem to have a true passion for integral music, which is well represented in this is excellent piece.

3. *Chris Estey* Says:

[August 22nd, 2008 at 12:13 pm](#)

Thanks, guys!

How many influential radio stations let guys like me write about stuff like this on its blog? So many great people work for the station, helping to change things.

BTW, Martin freaking Atkins wrote me because of this! Nearly gave me a heart-attack. I love how KEXP brings the people together! And it's all about the music.

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