

Chinese punk: 'As things get larger, you attract attention'

Presented by



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If your sole exposure to China's contemporary arts scene has been the Opening Ceremonies of the Olympic Games, you may believe that the only Western music to have filtered through to Beijing consists of national anthems and musicals featuring Sarah Brightman. For an antidote, may we suggest Martin Atkins's documentary *Sixteen Days in China*. The energetic young rock bands featured in the film, playing on the cramped stage of the Beijing club D-22, seem as though they could be time-travellers from New York's CBGB in the heyday of the punk scene.

Having drummed in John Lydon's post-Sex Pistols project, PiL, the England-born, Chicago-based Atkins is well-placed to bring this music to the rest of the world. *Sixteen Days*, written, directed and edited by the inveterate multi-tasker, presents his trip to Beijing in October, 2006, during which he intended to record and perhaps sign a number of bands from the city's fledgling underground rock scene to his DIY indie label, Invisible

Records.

On a cellphone from the streets of Chicago, he says that he found the bands' music "really cool and interesting for someone who grew up in the punk rock thing in England and then the early '80s in New York City. There's a sound and a feeling that's reminiscent of that." Nonetheless, he insists his trip wasn't motivated by nostalgia: "What's really exciting is [what happens] once a few of the wilder, brighter ones get that out of their system. I think that my interest is almost anthropological, more than, 'Hey, this sounds like The Fall!'"

The grainy, gritty video footage of Beijing bands in *Sixteen Days*, and Atkins' more polished recordings of their music on the CD *Look Directly into the Sun*, demonstrate a scene in transition. Some bands are directly copping from their forebears (e.g., the kids in *Demerit*, with their dyed Mohawks, who perform a faithful cover of The Ramones' *Blitzkrieg Bop*); others are branching out, like *Snapline* (an art-rock trio augmented by a frantically-programmed drum machine) and the avant-noise duo *White*.

In working with Chinese musicians, Atkins had to overcome divergent, even clashing, expectations. In one scene from the film, he calls in three "master musicians" to play traditional instruments in the studio for his *China Dub Soundsystem* project; they turn out to be young girls whose manager is encouraging them to play Bob Marley-

style reggae.

"I'm not pretending to be culturally informed," says Atkins, "It was just like, 'What's that weird-shaped thing? Hit it again there. It sounded good to me.' There's a moment where I'm going backwards and forwards with this girl, because she didn't want to play her erhu [a Chinese violin] in a way that she thought was playing it badly." His experience in the studio suggests China's evolving relations with the West, and the problem of communication: "I think there's going to be a lot more backwards and forwards before we even know where any of this is going."

Chinese punk will likely not, Atkins contends, bring about a new cultural revolution. The bands' English names and lyrics bespeak a desire to succeed outside of China rather than a commitment to punk's stereotypical rebellion. In any case, as Atkins points out, "the early punks were like, 'Smash the system! Oh, EMI? Major contract? Where do we sign?'"

Association with Western acts, however, can have its pitfalls. According to Atkins, the Chinese government tends to ignore bands who play to 200 people in D-22, "but as things get larger, you attract attention." When Sonic Youth travelled to Beijing, their support of the Tibetan freedom movement led the authorities to cancel the scheduled opening set by local rockers Carsick Cars. "Someone was going to get punished," says Atkins. "They knew they couldn't cancel Sonic Youth, because then they'd have another kind of problem. I think maybe China is learning to choose if not the best [option], then the 'least worst.'"

"There's a lot of criticism of China for so many reasons, that go from human rights to Milli Vanilli lip-synching [in the Olympic Opening Ceremonies]. I tend to view things a little bit differently. To me, it's all unfolding, and the change there isn't going to come with one big pronouncement and a ringing of a liberty bell. It's tiny incremental change, and however it comes - the discussion about Milli Vanilli, McDonald's, Starbucks, or copyright laws - it's

movement."

For his part, Atkins is planning to release albums by Chinese groups through Invisible imminently, and to return to Beijing this fall to check in on the scene. While he admits that his initial trip and the resulting film were in part an attempt to "question my entrepreneurial abilities," he maintains that he himself isn't just another predatory capitalist looking to profit from the economic opportunities opening up in China. He gifted some high-quality microphones to D-22, and Look Directly into the Sun, he says, "is hardly a money-spinner. If someone buys a copy, they get a free T-shirt and a laminated pass to D-22. That stuff is a pain in the ass to do, but it's fuelling to the scene. It plants a seed."

• *Sixteen Days in China* is available on DVD from MVD Visual. *Look Directly into the Sun* and *China Dub Soundsystem* are available from Bloodshot Records.