

Fine China

Martin Atkins heads East.

by John Vettese

Published: September 16, 2008

WA MERICA HAS GOTTEN A BIT STALE FOR ME," MARTIN ATKINS murmured when I caught him on his cell last week.

To be fair, he was wandering the aisles of a Chicago-area Target with his kids at the time. But Western cultural stagnation goes a ways toward explaining why this famed Goth-industrial drummer — and agitator at the helm of the carnivalesque collective Pigface — has been hanging out in Beijing.

Think about it: The guy came to New York when he was 20 and made brutal noise with legendary post-punkers. Public Image Ltd. Killing Joke. No way is Grizzly Bear going to compete with that — never.

"Part of me was looking for that adrenaline again," Atkins concedes. And what better place to start than an emerging global superpower with a thorny history of oppressing its populace?

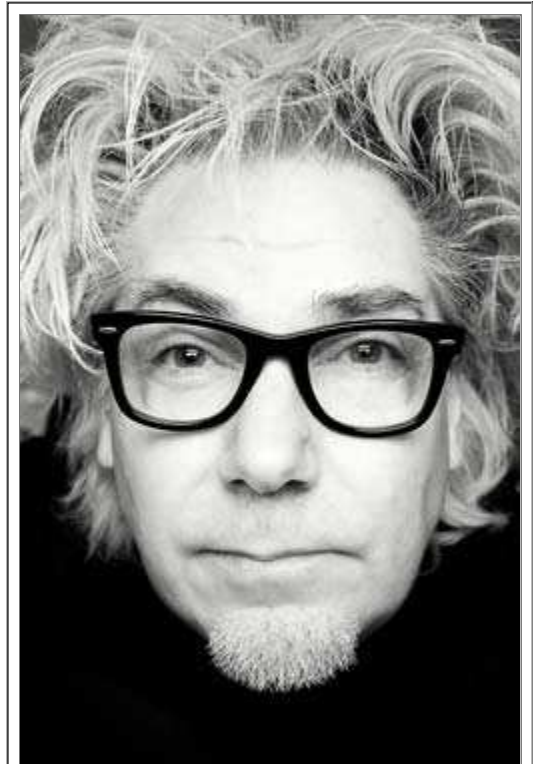
A tip from a demo-hawking fan teaching English in China prompted Atkins to look into the country's emerging rock scene. Turns out, it had the venom and vigor he remembered from the Lower East Side. There were The Subs, a minimalist rock trio with a singer who can wail like Lydia Lunch. The vaunted no-wave movement echoes across Snapline; P.K. 14 does an SST-era Sonic Youth thing; and Carsick Cars actually toured with Sonic Youth. Energized, Atkins packed some recording gear and record contracts and booked a ticket to Beijing.

The initial trip in 2006 is chronicled in *16 Days in China*, a lively documentary of the scene and a poignant examination of the cultural divide which he'll screen at 941 Theater Sunday evening. The kids in these bands — rabid fans of Atkins' musical oeuvre — are thrilled to meet him but also reluctant to sign with his label, Invisible Records.

It's a general mistrust of Westerners, but also a desire not to be commoditized. At one point, P.K. 14 singer Yang Haisong dismisses the notion that they're representative of youth culture, something he associates more with pop music and supermarket radio.

Some agreed to join him in the studio, cutting tracks for the 2007 compilation album *Look Directly Into the Sun*. Three signed deals. And Atkins isn't jerking those guys around; he boasts without irony of his "52-point marketing plan" to break those bands in the states.

This is where Atkins the savvy tour expert kicks in. He teaches about the business of touring at Columbia College Chicago, and packaged 20 years of collected wisdom into a book, *Tour:Smart: and Break the Band* (Soluble LLC). (After the screening, he'll give his boilerplate Tour:Smart talk and take questions.) When he saw a promoter put together a mini-run of two unknown Beijing rock acts, he got miffed. "The question you're asking America by doing that is 'Do you like these two bands?'" he grumbles.



[\(CLICK IMAGE FOR LARGER VERSION\)](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

PITTSBURGH:
A CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Ground-breaking artists.
Genre-bending art. Premieres
you can't see anywhere else.

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF FIRSTS
OCTOBER 10-25

VisitPittsburgh

And it doesn't work that way. Beijing's bands need to be eased gradually into the consciousness of the West; first by select comp appearances, then perhaps supporting a tour with an established headliner (Atkins hints Pigface might bring Snapline along when they take to the road in '09). A U.S. release should follow, then a package tour with other buzzing acts from their country. Put them in too big a venue too soon, and "You've just shit the bed on the China scene."

Atkins clearly hasn't lost his agitator's edge. But young bands the world around should be thankful he's turned sage.

16 Days in China screening with Martin Atkins | Sun., Sept. 21, 6:30 p.m., \$10, 941 Theater, 941 N. Front St., 215-235-1385, invisiblerecords.com

© Philadelphia City Paper