

Travel and Leisure: Notes From Taipei's Underground

The shape of Taiwanese popular music is changing at Taipei's live music cafes, most of them located in the Gongguan district near two of the city's main university campuses.

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It's four p.m. on the first day of Formoz Festival 2007 and I'm standing in Zhongshan Soccer Stadium among sweaty music fanatics, waiting for opening act Dean & Britta to start playing their set. Never heard of them? No worries, neither had I - until someone gently informs me that they were members of seminal American "shoe-gazer" rock bands Galaxie 500 and Luna. The stadium is dusty and only half-filled, but many in this enchanted congregation sport vintage T-shirts of their favorite bands. Some of them whisper to each other about how they can't believe Dean and Britta are finally here. You feel your distinct lack of rock music snob credibility.

Britta: "Should we just start?"

Dean: "I think so, Britta."

Britta: "Uhm."

The audience holds its breath, perhaps a little shy with their English. My friend Sonny has finally had enough of waiting. He yells a drawn-out "YES!" between cupped hands. Britta: "Was that a yes? Do I hear a yes?"

The audience does not respond. Some turn around to stare at Sonny while fanning themselves with concert programs.

Britta: "I guess that's a yes. Okay - 1, 2, 3-ah-one-two-three-four-"

The subtle melodies roll and Dean and Britta's fans fall into a nodding trance. I joke to Sonny that he officially kickstarted the 2007 Formoz Festival.

This year's festival offered a vastly diverse aural feast. Over the course of three frenzied days in late July, a record 101 bands and artists performed everything from rock, punk, folk, and heavy metal to hip-hop and electronica before rapt audiences. Augmenting an already-impressive lineup of local talent, foreign performers flew in from as far away as Japan, America, Britain, and France. The organizers' claims to having put together the most significant musical congregation in Taiwan's history are credible. Most significantly, none in the festival's lineup are what you would call "mainstream," but the crowd still surges by the tens of thousands to see art-rock demigods such as Yo La Tengo and Mercury Rev.

Where do Taiwanese audiences hear of such obscure artists anyway?

Situated in the casual Gongguan area - near both National Taiwan University ("Taida") and National Taiwan Normal University ("Shida") - is The Wall, the largest underground music venue in Taipei's embattled "live house" pub circuit. Like many other live music bars, The Wall has regularly faced legal woes, smarting fines, noise complaints, and police harassment since live music venues are not a business category eligible for operating permits. Does a live music venue register itself as a bar? A nightclub? A theater? No one knows, but a surprisingly strong number of music-bar owners and devoted aesthetes have pushed this particular issue at packed public hearings at the Legislative Yuan.

While expatriates tend to think of Taiwan in terms of its discipline and commercialism, Taipei's youths seem poised to overturn this stereotype. In a drama heavily covered by the media, artists and student activists scuffled with police when the city government emptied and barricaded Treasure Hill (an artist village written up favorably in The New York Times) in a morning raid. The story seems reminiscent of '60s and '70s counterculture in America and Europe. Are Taipei's youths finally standing up - with social freedom and artistic expression helping their cause?

To borrow the slogan of the Pots Weekly - a Village Voice-esque alternative rag popular among college students - Taipei's bohemian scene is "kicking if you want it," and the Gongguan district stands as its spiritual home.

The vanishing karaoke ballad

Those who considered Taiwan's pop music to be overwrought and maudlin may rejoice. While pop stars like Jay Chou and S.H.E. still dominate airwaves and commercial endorsements, the musical terrain of Taiwan has undergone a quiet revolution over the past decade.

Taiwan's "Mandopop" (Mandarin pop) music has long enjoyed market success in China, Singapore, Southeast Asia, and the rest of the Chinese-speaking world. Since the Internet boom, however, the strength of Taiwan's record sales has dwindled from 1997's impressive NT\$12.8 billion (US\$388 million) to 2005's shockingly low \$3.2 billion - because, many say, of widespread Internet piracy and file-sharing. Where pop megastars waned, however, quirkier niche music thrives.

"It's now increasingly difficult for large record companies to pin down target audiences," says Daphne Lee, a senior promotions manager at Warner Music Taiwan. "Instead of relying on TV and radio to define their musical diets, Taiwanese listeners can now actively seek out a diverse range of independent artists on the Internet."

Welcome to Web 2.0, where critics' blogs, artist MySpaces, YouTube music videos, and good old word-of-mouth outstrip corporate marketing in cultural currency. Whereas older record company producers handpicked promising youths and sculpted them into popular idols, the indie ethos emphasizes a grassroots DIY philosophy, where small home-grown artists are personally in control of their output and marketing.

Testifying to Taiwan's growing consciousness of independent music, the three-day Hohaiyan Rock Festival attracted a record 400,000 attendees to Fulong Beach this July. As with Formoz, none in the artist lineup can be found on packaging for bottled drinks. The vast scale of this year's Formoz Festival leaves little hint of its origins as a casual hang-out event for Taipei musicians in 1995. Folk-rock outfit Sodagreen and piano rock trio Tizzy Bac's prominence at this year's Golden Melody awards have local media predicting an indie music renaissance in Taipei.

However, the indie concept is far from new, even in pop-crazed Taiwan. 1987's Taipei New Music Convention promoted critics'-choice records by Western underground bands and featured performances by local singer-songwriters. 1988 saw the birth of Double X, widely recognized as Taiwan's first underground rock act. Both Spring Scream and the Formoz Festival started in 1995, while Hohaiyan started in 2000. The wildly popular Mayday band broke out of the pub circuit around 1999, while Jay Chou's meteoric rise to stardom proved that even shy and awkward indie-pop songwriters can

make it big. At its worst, indie music stands next to boutique clothing, artisan foods, and fair-trade coffee as the latest accessory in tepid yuppie posturing. In its commercialized incarnation, the indie aesthetic is a paradoxically anti-consumerist consumer pattern that makes a fashion statement out of disdaining mass culture. At its best, however, indie music is willing to risk the strange and the unhip to deliver scorching honesty - as is the case with Taipei's post-rock darlings Sugar Plum Ferry. In any case, what most distinguishes Taipei's present indie music climate is its growing visibility and increasing dialogue with mass culture.

Beyond the college crowd

When asked why most "live house" bars are located in the Gongguan area, the manager of The Wall (who goes by the single name of Orbis) notes that "listeners of independent bands have traditionally been intellectually curious college students from Taipei's elite universities. Opening a live music venue near NTU and the Shida university neighborhood just made sense." Orbis, who also coordinated this year's Formoz Festival, adds that "it's only after Taiwan officially adopted the two-day weekend schedule that our listeners really diversified beyond the college crowd."

On a Tuesday night, the Riverside Café in Gongguan is surprisingly packed to capacity for a double-bill concert by indie-pop bands OK Bomb and Your Low End. Even among Taipei's most knowing "scenesters," OK Bomb and Your Low End are far from famous. Yet the crowd spills over to the bar's exit staircase. While the crowd consists mostly of college students, a few families with young children can be seen lounging at the larger tables.

The lights are appropriately dim and the small venue hosts a maximum of 200 people. Unlike many American rock venues, few listeners truly move to the music. In fact, given the chance to sit, few people choose to stand at all. Though the amplifiers pump out high-energy guitar riffs and lilting solos, the laconic audience members huddle at the tables, nursing gin and tonics in a jazzy sort of quiet appreciation.

A little odd by American rock club customs, but the appreciation is sincere.

Further down Roosevelt Road, The Wall hosts a similarly devoted crowd. Founded in 2003 and named after seminal British psychedelic band Pink Floyd's 1979 album, The Wall has grown into Taipei's definitive rock music mecca, earning must-see mention in New York Magazine's travel column. The venue is largely owned by TRA Records, which co-organizes the annual Formoz Festivals. Taipei's city government, though slow to legally recognize live house venues, still introduces events at The Wall in its free tourist publication Cultural Express.

The music emporium consists of three underground alleys that host a café-bar, a tattoo parlor, a second-hand instruments shop and two of Taipei's more prominent independent music boutiques: White Wabbit and Metal Gate Records. As their names suggest, Metal Gate stocks obscure hard-rock records while White Wabbit stocks mellow indie-folk/rock/pop/electronica fare. While far from a musical behemoth, The Wall wields such cultural cache in Taipei's arts scene that smaller record labels and artists have protested with cries against the hegemony of the "TRA-Wall-Formoz Gang." The oldest venues in Taipei's current live house circuit are Underworld and Witch House - the former an elaborately painted and graffitied punk rock cavern near Shida, and the latter a singer-songwriter's café and pro-feminist hangout near Taida. Both were established in 1996.

"Compared with New York City or Tokyo, Taipei's live-house indie music scene is extremely minute," says Marty S. Hodulick, a native New Yorker and former Taipei resident. He owns Pacifiction Records and avidly exports records by Taiwan's bands to audiences abroad.

Hodulick adds, though, that Taiwan's scene is unique in its intimacy. "Only a couple of live houses have remained

constant hangouts for indie musicians and artists, and these places still are frequented by those who've achieved some success. Consequently, the audience will include musicians as well as fans. I've even heard about new bands forming from fans who met with musicians at live houses."

While Tokyo hosts some 120 underground music bars, Taipei's numbers hover around a mere dozen. But the survival of these few venues had been hard won.

Sincerest form of flattery

There was a time when Taipei's rock music scene was dominated by copycat cover bands.

In the early '90s, live rock pubs Wooden Top, Rock Formation, and Man Dog Ants were the hippest names among Taipei's rock haunts. Like today's The Wall, Underworld, and Riverside Café, all these bars were centered in the Gongguan district, where a combination of low rent, curious college students, and foreign backpackers fostered a haven for artistic appreciation. The listener's musical palates, however, were limited to songs by Western artists.

Award-winning music blogger Jeph Lo remembers the era as a time when bands defined themselves by their repertoire of cover songs rather than their oeuvre of original music. Covers for The Eagles, Metallica, Bon Jovi, and Guns n' Roses would draw rapt crowds to Man Dog Ant. By contrast, when Wu Bai (now canonized as "the King of Live" performance by local media) tried to sing his own compositions at the bar, the audience dispersed and the owner suggested that he perform Western favorites instead.

In 1994, Man Dog Ant burned down in a tragedy that claimed the owner's life. In the same year, the Scum music bar opened its doors on Roosevelt Road under the direction of rock band Groupie, whose credo required artists to perform songs they had written themselves. Amidst the frenetic flux of Roosevelt Road's musical landscape, Taipei's first true underground music venue was born.

The dangers of sounding too "Western" still loom large among Taipei's bands. Spend a few nights at Underworld or Riverside Café and you notice that many - if not most - musicians choose to pepper their songs with inexplicable English lyrics. Decade-old indie band 1976 proudly describes their sound as "Mod" (a '60s working-class London subculture) and the entrance to The Wall's stage is spray painted with the lyrics to Radiohead's mopey hit song "Creep." Nevertheless, most indie bands who achieve mainstream followings and critical acclaim are those who manage to fuse Taiwanese culture with Western sounds.

Asked about the difference between foreign and Taiwanese musicians, Orbis responds that foreign artists are more technically skilled. "Let's just start at the most basic level: Taiwanese musicians do not have garages or basements to practice music in," he notes. "They live close to neighbors in cramped apartments. Their parents don't want them playing loud rock music. Their neighbors complain. The frustration is twofold for aspiring drummers - the most they can do is rent out expensive rehearsal rooms and practice once a week."

Orbis also worries that Taiwan's artists have become such musical omnivores that they lose touch with the local flavors. "Taiwan's indie scene is not really revolutionary or avant garde. What we have are artists who congeal artistic influences from various cultures. The new generation has YouTube and MySpace, and they're great for that kind of grab-bag aesthetics. But in terms of true counterculture and bohemianism? No." This sounds suspiciously like a symptom of delayed postmodernism. But then again, Western and Eastern, and high- and low-brow culture have intermingled to such a degree in Taipei that calling anything "postmodern" risks the redundant. The blurring of mainstream and underground cultural lines seems like just another receding frontier. "The indie-versus-mainstream divide seems arbitrary now," says

Warner Music's Daphne Lee. "Look at SodaGreen and [pub singer-songwriter] Deserts Chang. Their popularity and market success now trump a lot of 'mainstream' artists. Today's listeners are very active in seeking out and supporting artists they like."

With Taiwan's music scene awash in such categorical deconstructions, Marty Hodulick seems confident in its future. "Taiwanese underground bands have less of a fashion sense [but] emit more of a sense of urgency, intensity, and honesty," writes Hodulick in *Island of Sound* (www.islandofsound.com), his online memoir of Taipei's underground music scene. "And more often than not, these bands truly demonstrate skill and creativity that equal Japanese and Western independent music."

What the Taipei indie scene lacks in sheer mad experimentation, technical proficiency, and ironic knowingness, it makes up with good humor and a positive can-do energy. And how fitting - after all, this is the island that made history by reinventing its economy in the span of just 50 years. Perhaps its musical and pop-cultural history is poised to do the same.

FINDING THE SCENE

Posh music emporium The Wall has long since outsized New York Magazine's "down-at-the-heels" write-up. For directions and concert schedules, see: <http://www.the-wall.com.tw>

Boasting grungy graffiti-covered charm, Underworld on ShiDa Road is an old favorite among musicians.

See: <http://www.underworld-taipei.blogspot.com/>

Fans of folk music and a brainy pro-feminist ambience will appreciate Witch House café near the NTU campus.

See: <http://www.witchhouse.org/>

Riverside Café lies in the basement of Kafka by the Shore, a literary urban-folk venue next to the Taipower Building on Roosevelt Road. See: <http://www.riverside.com.tw>"