

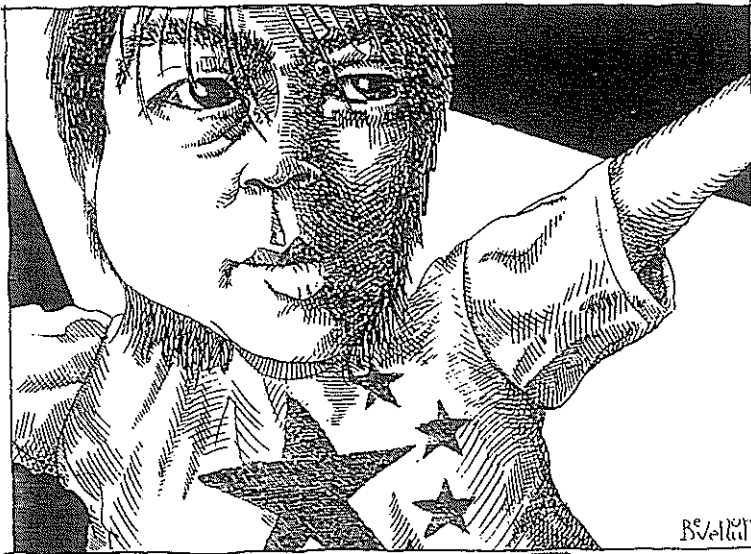
## Stacey Szewczyk MUSIC

### China Star: Fuck Karaoke, We Want Rock 'n' Roll

THERE ARE TWO SOLD-OUT SHOWS AT THE Bottom Line on the last Thursday in August. "The last time this happened was a Steve Earle show," a chatty usher says. "You ever hear of Steve Earle?" The Heartbreakers' "Chinese Rocks" begins to blare from the speakers. "Apparently he's a big country star," he continues absent-mindedly. "Most people I know have never heard of him."

The club is filling to capacity with casually dressed 20- and 30-somethings. Maybe 95 percent of them are Chinese. There are one or two children in the audience, and a couple of elderly men bearing photographic equipment with the tolerant composure of those present in an official capacity. Here and there stunningly beautiful girls appear and momentarily distract the usher. Out in the middle of the room, at a front-row table, a gangly kid in a green polo shirt and egg-shaped glasses is gesturing excitedly to his companions.

Suddenly the place goes berserk, as Cui Jian (sway jen) takes the stage with the six members of his band. Most appear to be ethnically Chinese, their beefiness attesting to their northern heritage (with the jazzy saxophonist's reserve a dead giveaway). The exceptions are the swarthy guitar player from Madagascar and the hippie percussionist, who could be a Spin Doctor. Cui Jian himself is wiry and compact, with a round face and features that appear to have been swiftly and deeply carved. His hair, that essential rock 'n' roll signifier, is barely shoulder length in the back, with bangs falling into his eyes. It's one of the longest haircuts in the room. (Bateerfu,



CONFERRING THE CUI ENERGY.

the hippie percussionist, is the hairiest.)

They're China's first true rock 'n' roll band, and Cui Jian its first rock icon. Though he's virtually unknown in the West, there are about a billion people in the Far East who'd give a month's wages for a ticket to a Cui Jian gig.

The band launches into the first song. The intricate rhythms and complex arrangements may be jarring to Western ears, but the rest of the audience recognizes it and acknowledges it with carefully contained ebullience. In surprisingly strong English, Cui tells them it's the first show he's ever played to an audience that's managed to remain seated. He looks out at us and proclaims, "We are conferencing the same energy." Conferencing the same energy? "We are conferencing the same energy," he repeats. The kid in the front row hoots and high-fives the air, and Cui launches into another song.

The band starts cooking and the audience grows increasingly demonstrative—the whistles and the frantic song requests raise the ambient volume by several decibels. At one point, Cui approaches the mic and holds forth into the din. "Reality is a storm. The spirit is an egg. My mother is the world, my father a flagpole. WE ARE BALLS UNDER THE RED FLAG!" The audience erupts—it's the title of the next song.

Most of these people have followed Cui's career for years without any hope of actually seeing him play. When the set ends, they roar their approval. There's no way they're leaving without an encore. They start a barrage of rhythmic clapping, chanting Cui Jian's name in rounds. A foot-stomping jam is deliriously orchestrated and exhorted by the skinny groover in the front. When the band finally reappears he flies up onto his table, and the

rest of the room shoots to its feet behind him. Soon people are dancing in the aisles, pumping their fists—two girls in front of me do the bump.

For the encore, the band is bashing out a couple of songs from *Rock & Roll on the New Long March*, Cui Jian's galvanizing debut album. Though the songs are only about six years old, for this audience they resound as anthemically as, say, "Louie, Louie." Most of the audience knows them word for word. Cui initiates an impromptu singalong. The audience is really getting into a groove when Cui shouts, "Fuck karaoke, we want rock 'n' roll!" Everyone goes absolutely wild.

After one more song, Cui waves good-night and leads the band offstage again. The audience still won't have it. The show can't possibly be over until they hear Cui's biggest hit, "Yiwoshoyo"—the song many of them came to hear. "YI-WO-SHO-YO!" they chant, as the house lights come on and the Ramones come charging from the speakers. Cui appears again to loud cheers and applause, but only to say that he has to save his energy for the 10:30 show. Though clearly disappointed, the audience accepts this stoically.

On Saturday morning I get a call from Cui Jian's publicist, postponing until Sunday the interview scheduled for that afternoon. Cui's passport has been stolen, and he's mired in the ordeal of replacing it over the Labor Day weekend. Prestige Modern Arts Exchange, the San Francisco-based corporation that organized his abbreviated U.S. tour with funding from Citibank, *Asian Week*, AT&T and Asian soft drink giant Jianlibo, is on the case.

When I get to the hotel—the Arlington, a sort of Chinese version of the Chelsea on 25th St.—on Sunday, I'm half-expecting a Chinese-style cadre of bureaucrats with cellular phones in the lobby awaiting further instructions. Cui Jian's been called the Bruce Springsteen of Beijing, after all—China's John Lennon and Lou Reed rolled into one. But there's not a

## MUSIC

single Cui Jian wannabe, stoned groupie or mah-jongg-playing bureaucrat to be seen. No bodyguards or police. No one, in fact, except for a pretty young rep from Prestige consoling two weary companions, who appear to have been up all night, cajoling stringpullers at the consulate or pounding beers at Lime-light. I give her my name. A lanky Chinese college kid slumping behind the front desk, surrounded by clocks set to Beijing and Tokyo time, buzzes Cui's room.

I'm thinking about how hard it is to reconcile Cui Jian's phenomenal success in China with his relative obscurity in the West—about how China is still a world unto itself—when he steps out of the elevator, an unassuming figure in denim cutoffs and a red flowered blazer with a vaguely military cut. He seems to have had a late night too, judging from a general lag in his bearing; otherwise he has the healthy glow of those who eat right and don't smoke. We deliberate for a moment where to do the interview. I suggest Madison Sq. Park. "Is it cold out?" he asks. His previous stops in San Francisco and Boston involved run-ins with cold fronts.

But it's a spectacular late-summer day; there are sunbathers in the park. We sit on a bench—China's number-one rock star distinguishable from the offbeat Chelsea mavens around us only by a subtle gravity in his manner and the odd cut of his clothing. I ask him about his early influences.

Growing up in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s must have been something like growing up in Washington during the Cold War. Cui Jian, who is Korean on his mother's side and musical on his father's, learned to play the trumpet and joined the Beijing Symphony Orchestra in 1981. Then he got interested in Western pop music and

started writing songs—an activity that in 1987 resulted in his politely being asked to quit the orchestra. After that he supported himself through live performances with a seven-piece band he assembled, and with money they were paid to record an album.

Chinese record companies differ fundamentally from American ones; they exist solely to commission musicians to make records for the cultural enrichment of China. There is a certain amount of luck involved, however, in landing an offer. "I wrote two songs that became famous," Cui Jian explains. "So people started paying attention and record companies wanted me. I was pretty lucky, but also people liked me... I wasn't so interested in the money at the time. I just wanted to have a lot of time in a studio, and I finally finished my first album... From that I learned a lot about arranging music."

Making a record is one thing, creating a cool sound is another. To fully appreciate the significance of rock 'n' roll in China, you have to imagine the birth of cool in a land so distant, where the customs are so strange. I ask Cui about his first experience of live rock.

"It blew my mind. It was 1985. I didn't know much about rock 'n' roll. There was a band named Beijing Underground. They were all foreign students. Actually, the guitarist still plays with me. It was a small party, mostly foreigners. I couldn't believe the amazing sound... It was really touching. It made me feel modern, young, strong. It gave me energy."

Before Cui Jian, the sort of communal revelry that's essential to rock 'n' roll was virtually unprecedented among China's traditionally reserved young people, outside of sports events, political rallies or the rare arena show by a visiting act like Wham! or Jan & Dean. This made Cui Jian's early shows highly experimental, even risky. You can imagine how government officials reacted to several thousand young Chinese rocking out at Cui's

gigs. A gravelly voiced provocateur, he stirred up his audience's worst instincts—abandon instead of control, restlessness instead of passivity. He also had the popular hero's gift for double entendre, which he occasionally used to criticize the state of modern China.

"Yiwoshoyo," his best-known song and one of his most haunting, is known by a number of titles in English, from "I Have Nothing" to "Without a Dime." Some fans hear it as a romantic plea for artistic and emotional purity in an increasingly material world. Others say it's an indictment of the current system. It became the anthem of a generation who listed "the right to organize dances without prior consent from the authorities" as one of their demands at Tiananmen Square. With the result that Cui Jian was banned from live performances of "Yiwoshoyo," or anything else, for a couple of years.

He and his band went underground. A cult following developed in major cities around China; "Yiwoshoyo" became a number-one hit in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia. When the ban was lifted in 1989, Cui emerged a major artist and released *Rock & Roll on the New Long March*. In 1991 he released his second album, *Solution*, made China's first music video, "Wild in the Snow," and won an MTV Viewer's Choice Award for it. His next one was backed by MTV. In 1993 he starred in and wrote the soundtrack for the movie *Beijing Bastards*. Last year he released *Balls Under the Red Flag*, his third album.

It's been called his most mature work. Cui seems to be drifting farther away from traditional rock 'n' roll with each successive album. Where *Rock & Roll on the New Long March* was a collection of highly danceable prole-rock songs laced with a smattering of traditional Chinese instruments, *Solution* was much more varied and complex, combining funk, rap and reggae with instruments like the suona (Chinese oboe), gu zheng (a zither-like instrument) and Chinese drums.

*Balls Under the Red Flag* is so sharp and densely layered that the basic guitars-and-drums rock seems to have receded to a vestigial state. Cui says the record's staccato intricacy is the natural extension of his effort to create a contemporary pop sound that's distinctly Chinese. More than the sound of Chinese instruments, he says, the sound of the Chinese language dictates the form of the new songs.

"I think that every kind of music is based on language. For instance, if you use English to sing salsa music or Cuban music, I don't think it will work so well. I really think the Chinese language has to have a different kind of basic sound, like some of the traditional Chinese instruments have. [But my music] is absolutely different from traditional music, because the spirit is influenced by rock 'n' roll, Western pop music..."

"English, I think, is perfect for rock 'n' roll, because it's not so hard, not so soft. Chinese pronunciation is hard. Everything is *dot-nah-nah-nah*... The words don't connect. It's a heavy sound, so the music has to be as heavy as the language."

It's a risky experiment. After selling over 10 million records in East Asia (with rampant piracy and home recordings exponentially increasing the number of copies in circulation), Cui Jian has clearly attained what in the West would be called superstar status. Yet it's not at all certain that his fans will come around to this new style he's pioneering. For "a lot of people in China," he says, "it's too noisy and rough."

It's also noteworthy that Cui's example has not inspired a string of upstart bands to create a music scene in Beijing. That would involve a certain amount of rebelliousness that's simply not the norm yet in China. After 10 years, Cui Jian is not just China's most successful rock musician—he's still the only one.