

Folk explosion

Rock stars might get all the glory, but to really experience Beijing bohemia, check out the folk scene. **Jennifer Conrad** and **Gissing Liu** find out why folk is the new rock

We're not going to lie: as much as we love Beijing rock 'n' roll, if we read one more article rehashing the same clichés about the burgeoning rock scene, we're going to scream.

Largely ignored by the Western press, some of China's most interesting music is coming from its folk musicians, who often combine traditional techniques and ethnic minority instruments with modern songwriting. What's more, these gigs are packed with hip

young Chinese fans, all baying for the next glimpse of folk's hottest bands.

Last year, the first instalment of the Ditan Park Folk Festival was a refreshing antidote to May's more rock-heavy festival season. Drawing 3,000 people over two days, the atmosphere was laidback as kids played in the park and attendees sprawled out on the grass in pure folkstacy. Even the rock festivals aren't immune to the folk invasion, and this year both the Midi and Strawberry festivals

host several folk acts, proving there is more to it than just niche appeal.

We can provide the introduction, but it's time to get out there and see it all for yourself.

Setting the scene

Beijing's stages regularly see musicians reinvigorating traditional music from all corners of China. Here are some of the top acts from across the country.

Mamer

From Xinjiang

Instruments *Dombra* (a stringed instrument Mamer calls 'the soul of Kazak'), *kobuz* (another string instrument), Kazak wind instruments.

The story An ethnic Kazak from the north-west corner of China, Mamer (both on his own and with his band Iz) draws on traditional songs but makes music that sounds thoroughly modern. 'I'd like to produce music which is suitable for the present – a new musical style with traditional minority elements,' Mamer tells us. Close your eyes during one of Iz's sets and you could be listening to progressive New York noise rock.

Hear for yourself Pick up Mamer's solo album, *Eagle*, with a guest appearance by Bela Fleck on banjo, or check out Iz's album *Iz 2007*.



Xinjiang



Key albums

Incantation by **Wild Children** (songs that blew in from the north-west with incanted vocals and multi-part harmonies); *We Can't Help Kissing Each Other* by **Low Wormwood** (soothing tunes from the Lanzhou band); *In Distance* by **Wang Juan** (a pretty collection of songs from singer-songwriter Wang Juan); *Birds That Can Fly High Don't Land on the Backs of Oxen That Can't Run Fast* by **Xiao He** (Xiao He's first album set the bar high); plus *Red Bulldozer*, a compilation album conceived by blind folk artist **Zhou Yunpeng** to raise money for blind children.

Shanren

From Yunnan and Guizhou

Instruments *Xianzi* and *qingqin* (four-stringed plucked instruments), *xiangu* (a traditional drum), guitar, bass.

The story These south-western boys, whose name means 'mountain men', mix minority instruments and perky plucking with a hippie jam-band feel. 'When we have shows, we see the atmosphere of the venue then decide whether to use electric or acoustic instruments,' says guitarist and vocalist Qu Zihan. 'We hope to learn more traditional Chinese music, but it takes time to learn it from the origin.' Their gigs provoke a lot of dancing – and occasionally inspire male audience members to rip off their shirts.

Hear for yourself Watch them at the Midi and Ditan Park Folk festivals, and at Jianghu on Fri 7. *See listings.*



Yunnan

Hanggai

From Inner Mongolia and the Mongolian parts of Qinghai and Xinjiang

Instruments *Taobuxuur* (two-stringed lute), *morin khuur* (horse-head fiddle), cow and horse bells, Buddhist bells, shaman drum, vintage four-string banjo, *sanxian* (three-stringed lute), guitar, bass, customised drums.



The story

Singer Hurcha, who looks like a linebacker stuffed into traditional Mongolian dress, cuts a commanding figure as he shouts the band's

name: 'Hanggai!' It's an old Mongolian word for an idealised landscape of mountains, rivers and trees. The band's rollicking take on Mongolian folk gives the feeling you're drinking the night away in a yurt. With a side of throat singing, they've become one of China's most popular indie bands abroad, touring in the US and Europe. They're currently at work on a new album, co-produced by Ken Stringfellow, who has played with Big Star and even REM.

Hear for yourself See them at the Midi and Ditan Park Folk festivals, and at *Time Out's* folk showcase; buy their album *Introducing Hanggai*.

Xiao He



From Originally from Hebei, He Guofeng, or Xiao He as he's better known, has been a staple on the Beijing folk circuit for a number of years.

Instruments Guitars and minority instruments, but mostly his elastic voice that

draws on traditions including Peking opera.

The story The folkie from another planet, Xiao He's largely improvised shows are as much performance art as music gig. As far as the development of his signature sound – with shrieks, taunts, song fragments and acoustic guitar – the artist, who is also part of the group Glorious Pharmacy, says 'it's a long story, which connects to my diet, health, daily timetable and hormones. It changes all the time and is characterised by freedom, independence and craziness. I just like to watch and see.'

Hear for yourself Watch him at the Midi and Strawberry festivals, and pick up his two-disc album *The Performance of Identity*.

Zhang Quan



From Gansu
Instruments Guitar, *dombra*.

The story Headliner of this year's Ditan Park Folk Festival, Zhang Quan was a founding member of Wild Children, one of the original folk bands on the scene. 'I didn't know the term

'folk music' until long after I knew the music,' says the musician, who grew up in Gansu and Qinghai. 'I learned the farm culture of the Yellow River, and this music is the only way for local farmers to express their feelings. Anyone who grew up in that environment has this music in their blood.' Today, Zhang Quan plays as a solo artist, making beautiful use of the *dombra*.

Hear for yourself Catch him at the Ditan Park Folk Festival (Sat 8) and at Mako on Fri 21.

Where to hear folk

These venues have regular folk gigs where you can discover new talent

Jianghu Bar

A cosy *siheyuan* off Nanluoguxiang, this is the place to watch Chinese Bob Dylans in action.

7 Dongmianhua Hutong, Dongcheng district (132 6922 7168; jianghu.bj.cn). 东城区交道口南大街东棉花胡同7号

Jiangjinjiu Bar Watch the best folk acts in this chilled bar. 2 Zhongku Hutong (between Drum and Bell), Dongcheng district (8405 0124). 城区钟库胡同2号

Mako Live House This new live music venue has already hosted gigs by Hanggai, Mamer and Bai Shui. 36 Guangqu Lu, Chaoyang district (5205 1112/3). 朝阳区广渠路36号红点艺术工厂

Tiny Salt Tiny Salt overcomes its mall setting with a good sound system, black décor and a cool loft. SOHO Shangdu North Tower, Third Floor, Room 2308, 8 Dongdaqiao Lu, (5900 0969). 朝阳区东大桥路8号SOHO尚都北塔B座3层2308

Zuiyuefeng This tiny bar run by musicians regularly hosts folk gigs. 18 Andingmen Xi Dajie (6405 4482; www.zuiyuefang.com). 安定门西大街18号(二环边北锣鼓巷口东30米) Kelly Zhang

