



**MYSTERY MEN**  
Okkervil River keeps it quizzical on new set



**ALL THAT JAZZ**  
Impulse! Records marks 50th anniversary



**SIZZLE REEL**  
Hot summer planned for Beyoncé, Brit, Rihanna



**EYE OF THE STORM**  
Glasvegas rechannels energy on second CD

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# MUSIC

**GLOBAL** BY JENNIFER CONRAD

## CHINA ROCKS

The Beijing Scene Keeps Getting Hotter, And Indie Rockers Are Coming To The USA—Five Chinese Bands To Watch

**W**hen Carsick Cars take the stage at a midsize club in the center of Beijing, 600 or so fans hang on every word and nod along to their distortion-heavy anthems. As the three-piece breaks into the chorus of their hit “Zhongnanhai,” the audience rewards them by pelting them with unlit cigarettes.

Crying out from a few graffiti-flecked bars in Beijing, a young breed of Chinese indie rockers, led by acts like Carsick Cars, is making noise internationally, with state-side appearances lined up for this year.

Back in the old days—and in China, where everything moves hyper-fast, that means the '80s—rock'n'roll was just trickling into a formerly isolated society and musicians were looked on with suspicion by the government. Today, music artists still have to be careful—lyrics are vetted by censors—but they're mostly left alone to cultivate a small but fervent fan base. Several professional venues and countless summer festivals offer performance opportunities, while a growing experimental and DIY scene lives on the fringes.

Modern Sky (formed by a Chinese musician) and Maybe Mars (launched by an American expat who was part of New York's East Village scene in the '80s) are two of the most prominent Beijing indie labels, and they support many of the bands.

For its releases, Maybe Mars typically does a first run of 5,000 CDs, which are available digitally worldwide. But the financial realities of making music in China mean that bands often rely on corporate sponsorship (Converse sponsored Carsick Cars' performance at this year's South by Southwest conference) or innovative ways to blend music and commerce. Modern Sky created a digital platform called M-Digi (mdigi.com.cn) aimed at the Chinese youth market with curated, sponsored, music-oriented content, including storefronts (Doc Martens footwear, vintage-style T-shirts), video chat and games. Still in its beta stage, M-Digi also funded several Modern Sky bands' tours of the United States and produced original documentaries about the tours.

While Beijing musicians turn their backs on the materialist leanings of many of their peers in a newly affluent China, they also bristle at being seen through a purely political lens or being asked to be spokespeople for their generation.

Zhang Shouwang, frontman for Carsick Cars and the best-known indie rocker in China, argues that bands from other countries can write about their feelings without constantly having to talk politics. “I understand journalists need some kind of story from us,” he says. “But in other ways it's not fair, because they wouldn't ask so many political questions with a German band or a European band.”

“Maybe the Western audiences think we represent part of the youth culture in China, but as a matter of fact, we feel like we're only individuals,” Re-TROS frontman Hua Dong says. “Consider us as a very, very small window through which to explore other musicians and get to know other Chinese bands. Perhaps this is the only thing that we can bring to the Western audience beside our music.”

This year alone, at least seven Chinese bands will appear stateside and more will pop up at international festivals. Here are five that are bringing a new face of China to the world:



HANGGAI

**1 CARSICK CARS**  
Formed in 2005, Carsick Cars' songs strike a chord with young people in Beijing and owe a musical debt to Sonic Youth, a band they've toured with. Last month the Maybe Mars band appeared at South by Southwest, and is now gearing up to play for its biggest audience, opening for pop stars Wang Xiaokun and Wang Luodan at Hangzhou Stadium, in a concert organized by Coca-Cola. It's a strange combination of distortion-heavy indie rock opening up for Mandopop, but Shouwang says he's hoping to reach at least a few new fans. They're also planning another tour of the United States this fall or winter.

**2 DEMERIT**  
Punk band Demerit takes up residence in Beijing's gritty eastern suburb of Tongzhou, a scene the members pay tribute to in their anthem “TZ Generation.” “Tongzhou is cheap,” says frontman/bassist Spike (aka Li Yang). “The city center is suitable for making connections and fake friends, for consuming things. None of that is of any use to us.” The group will join the Vans Warped tour for its last two weeks, as well as play a few dates on the West Coast and in New York in August and September. On a visit to Beijing in 2007, Public Enemy bassist Colonel Hardgroove discovered the band and went

on to produce its first album, which Maybe Mars released. “I know what the punk scene was in New York back in the late '70s, and these guys are the real deal,” says Hardgroove, who'll be recording Demerit's second album, “The Fuse Box,” this summer in New York. “They're committed to the music and live it 24 hours a day.” Demerit also has a vinyl-only split 10-inch with German punk act SS20 in the works.

**3 HANGGAI**  
Mixing its own arrangements of traditional Mongolian folk music with rock (the band cites Pink Floyd as a seminal influence), Hanggai has put on some of **continued on >>p46**

LATEST  
BUZZ>>>NICKI MINAJ  
JOINS BRITNEY  
SPEARS TOUR

After several days of rumors and being “in talks,” Nicki Minaj was officially confirmed as the special guest on Britney Spears’ upcoming *Femme Fatale* tour on April 12 in a post on Spears’ official website. The tour begins June 16 in Sacramento, Calif., and is scheduled to wrap Aug. 13 in Toronto. The trek’s all-female lineup will also include Jessie & the Toy Boys and Nervo on every tour stop. Tickets for select markets go on sale on April 30 at Ticketmaster.com and LiveNation.com. Citi card members will also have access to presale tickets through Citi’s Private Pass Program.

>>>LEON  
RUSSELL TO HIT  
THE ROAD

Elton John’s mission is accomplished. A year ago he set out to raise Leon Russell’s profile, and in the last nine months they have released “The Union,” toured together and performed with the *Speaking Clock Revue* project of “Union” producer T Bone Burnett. In addition, EMI released a “best of” album this month, John and Russell appeared on “Saturday Night Live,” and on April 20, Cameron Crowe’s documentary on the making of “The Union” will premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York. Now, Russell is returning to his pre-“Union” touring routine. On April 21, he will head to Australia for a brief tour, then return stateside for a three-week trek of the West that starts April 29 in Santa Barbara, Calif.

>>>PRINCE  
ANNOUNCES  
21-DATE L.A. RUN

Prince will continue his residency-style *Welcome 2 America* tour with a 21-date stand in Los Angeles, beginning on April 14 at the Forum. The artist made the announcement during a phone call to TBS’ late-night show “Lopez Tonight” on April 7.

Reporting by Jem Aswad  
and Phil Gallo.



ROCK BY DEVON MALONEY

## LONG DISTANCE

Will Sheff And Okkervil River Prepare To Release ‘I Am Very Far’

Will Sheff has been having some big-budget dreams lately.

“You know how you have those dreams that are like a big Hollywood blockbuster? Some dreams are normal and some are epic,” he says. “They [say] there’s something more meaningful you’re supposed to get from those dreams.”

The correlation seems almost too obvious: As Sheff talks dream interpretations, his band Okkervil River’s fifth full-length release, “I Am Very Far,” is poised for a May 10 release on Jagjaguwar Records. The album, produced by Sheff, features 11 carefully orchestrated tracks that push sonic boundaries even by Okkervil River standards.

“Will went into this album knowing

he was going to have the freedom to write and record however he wanted to, and I think that shows,” Okkervil River’s manager Ben Dickey says. “It’s a deep, diverse collection of songs.”

But that doesn’t mean the album’s intricacy was planned: During the course of more than a year, the band undertook countless hours of repeated recordings, improvisations and rehearsals. While some songs feature performances by more than 13 musicians in a live studio, others were recorded by the core band and then rehashed piecemeal, recorded again and again, then overdubbed with orchestral tracks to achieve the perfect sound.

To complement the album’s purposeful diversity, Jagjaguwar has de-

fined its marketing as decidedly mysterious, according to co-founder Darius Van Arman.

“We decided to focus on the concept that this is the Okkervil River record that different people are going to take different things from,” Van Arman says. “Consistent with this approach, all of the advertising, artwork and descriptions we’ve used in connection to the marketing [of the album] all have an enigmatic bent.”

In addition to giving four preview performances at this year’s South by Southwest festival, the band has offered a free download of the song “Wake and Be Fine” for subscribers to its e-mail newsletter. The group also debuted the song live on “Late

Night With Jimmy Fallon” in January.

The amount of work surrounding the album’s creation shows how far the band has come since its 2005 breakout record, “Black Sheep Boy,” which drew the act national attention at SXSW that year. (The band’s following two albums, “The Stage Names” and “The Stand-Ins,” peaked on the Billboard 200 at Nos. 62 and 42, respectively.)

Sheff says that with “I Am Very Far,” he felt more confident in the band’s ability to achieve what it wanted.

“Around the time of ‘Black Sheep Boy’ I started getting a sense of how the ‘darkroom’ [of my abilities] was laid out—sort of like, ‘Oh! There’s stuff over here on this table and then there’s this over here,’ ” he says. “Ever since then it’s been a lot easier to make things happen that I’m picturing and wanting.”

The album is the band’s first release following Sheff’s venture behind the soundboard last year, to produce rock legend Roky Erickson’s album “True Love Cast Out All Evil.” The record, which featured performances by Okkervil River, earned Sheff a Grammy Award nomination for its liner notes.

And the spotlight on Sheff is intentional. Van Arman says Jagjaguwar has concentrated on “doing a better job as a label of really talking about who Will Sheff is [and about] his special narrative or literary skills.”

The album hasn’t yet been released, but Van Arman says he’s nevertheless confident.

“Our gut,” he says, “tells us that it’s likely that this album will be the best-selling Okkervil River album yet.”

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Beijing’s most compelling live shows. The members are ethnic Mongolians from different parts of China who aim to preserve Mongolian music and cultural traditions—but their shows are also a rollicking good time, especially the shout-along “Drinking Song.”

After spending last summer playing world music and heavy metal festivals in Europe and appearing in Australia and New Zealand earlier this year, in June the act will play Bonnaroo, as well as dates in Chicago and New York. New album “He Who Travels Far” was produced by JB Meijers (Solomon Burke) and Ken Stringfellow (who has played with the Posies, R.E.M. and the re-formed

HEDGEHOG (inset)  
and RE-TROS

Big Star) and will be available in May from 4Q Records.

**4 HEDGEHOG** A long-running band signed to Modern Sky, Hedgehog just released its latest pop-spiked rock album, “Honeyed and Killed,” but now the group is

moving in a more post-punk and noisy direction, a move that frontman Zo attributes to maturing and wanting to make songs that are more musically interesting. Besides putting on consistently tight live shows, the band holds a trump card in the form of Atom, Hedgehog’s tiny

drummer known for her exuberant performances—some fans say she’s worth the price of admission alone. In September the band will tour with domestic art-rock act Xiu Xiu.

**5 RE-TROS** Short for Rebuilding the Rights of Statues, Re-TROS offers intense performances of its post-punk sound, which echoes Public Image Limited and Gang of Four. Earlier this year, the latter British band invited the Beijing act to join it on tour in Australia. Re-TROS also caught the attention of Brian Eno, who added keyboard parts to the band’s 2007 debut EP, “Cut Off.” Full-length album “Watch Out! Climate Has Changed, Fat Mum Rises . . .” was released in 2009. Before the end of the year, the group will tour the United States and record its next album in New York.

OKKERVIL RIVER: ALEXANDRA VALENTI; RE-TROS: JENNIFER CONRAD