

Hong Kong's own punk rock revival is proving a potent medium for social consciousness. Sophie Taylor reports from the moshpit



HARD CORE

FROM THE HEART

THE LEAD SINGER of King Lychee, Alex Chung, is close to tears. He lunges across the stage and dives among his fans at a sweaty gig at the Warehouse, in Aberdeen. "You give us strength," the 23-year-old growls in Cantonese. "We will not let you down."

His frenzied audience storms the stage and soon all that can be seen is a musician's peroxidized mohawk haircut and drummer Kevin Li's raised sticks.

It's a typical night out with Hong Kong's independent musicians. There are about 100 "indie" bands in the SAR and their young players and fans seek urgent catharsis. King Lychee's concert hall reeks of rebellion, but not self-destruction. No one is drunk and the only sign of smoke is in the overheated amplifiers. The event's more of a revolution than a riot. The band and their fans are singing about poverty, self-respect and love mainly through "hardcore" music – an impossibly fast and loud revival of punk rock, which usually sounds angry, but isn't really. "There's a lot more positive energy in hardcore because it's based on an urgent message of social change," says King Lychee founder Riz Farooqi. "People think hardcore is just about beating people up, but it's not. Hardcore is more than just the music – it's about community."

Yet at times these "indie" groups sound more like social workers than musicians: they give their fans personal advice, discuss Hong Kong's problems and encourage young people to pursue their beliefs. The "indie" community is more concerned about the substance of its lyrics than its commercial appeal.

Bands' musical genres vary, but they are bonded by a social conscience – of wanting to change society as nu-metal band Fat Job's song *Zhen Jok (Be Brave)* explains: "You have to carve your own path to create a bright future/ but don't just talk/ actually do it."

The bands have plenty of issues; the flaws of the public-education system, racism, the ill-treatment of the elderly, and discrimination against women. When numbers such as King Lychee's *Sickened Eyes* have lyrics such as: "I run far away/ plagued by lies/ of commercialised lives/ Mould the way that you should live/ cloaked in designer labelled dreams", the "indie" mood is a long way away from the rosy sentimentality of Canto-pop. "Most Hongkongers merely see music as simple entertainment; we want to revolutionise the way people think," says Li, 26.

Some indie bands have put their inspiration into practice, too. King Lychee, for instance, have helped a charity distribute food to the homeless, raised money for families of Sars victims and are holding a concert in aid of the victims of the Tuen Mun bus tragedy on August 17.

Nelson Cheung, 22, who sings for another band, Hardpack, is working at a social centre this summer, and most indie musicians have day jobs. Sex, drugs and no alcohol – and rather than free love, it's love Hong Kong.

"We are extremely patriotic when it comes to Hong Kong," says Farooqi. "This is our home and we can't handle it falling apart under the leadership of someone who has no clue."

While King Lychee's members are veteran "activists" who, says 26-year-old Farooqi, have "always taken part in demonstrations ranging as far back as the annual Tiananmen candlelit vigils in the 90s", other musicians have been galvanised by the Article 23 furor. Hardpack's K.K. Li, 22, says members of his band demonstrated on July 1. "We're not political as such, but Article 23 is a big issue, so we wanted to do something," he says.

Feminist group Hard Candy believe the security law is justified but rushed, however. "Every country has security laws," says the band's singer, Tong Pui-yun, 19, even though she believes the government is out of touch with the public, and has written a song, *Hey Leader*, to say so.

Ng Wai-wa from 5 Disciplines also supports Article 23, but agrees its deliberation process is too hasty, saying: "You can't take all your gripes against the government and use them as an excuse to oppose absolutely everything they do." Chan Chun-ho, Fat Job's 22-year-old bassist, adds: "We do follow politics, but we are young and need to digest the issues first because we are afraid of misleading our fans."

Some indie bands gripe that the government ignores their social work. "For [the government], underground 'rock' music is still just a scene that the noisy scum of Hong Kong take part in," says Fa-

rooqi. "We're such a socially responsible band that it's a shame the government doesn't get involved." The Pakistani, who grew up in Hong Kong, adds: "No one wants to overthrow Hong Kong, but I have to deal with racism every day. If you want to be an international city, you can't have that sort of thing."

Independent music is nothing new to Hong Kong, but it has always been a foreign import. The city went through a punk-rock phase in the 1990s, but this was mostly made up of students at international schools. Hong Kong punk pioneers, such as the early 90s band Pregnant Men, had a hard time winning over local Chinese students, who saw the scene as an exclusive club for foreigners. Although other bands popped up in Pregnant Men's wake, such as Tokyo Sex Whale, Mrs Wong's Noodle Shop, and That Guy's

play with all kinds of bands, and get a more mixed crowd as a result," Li says. With the formation of several bands in King Lychee's wake, the scene is definitely Made In Hong Kong. "The entire punk rock and hardcore mentality has now been localised and that's just a healthier situation," says Farooqi. "And by 'localised', I don't mean just a Hong Kong-Chinese thing – I mean it's become a scene that really involves all types of Hong Kong people, people who call Hong Kong home."

Nevertheless, some music industry insiders argue that the indie scene is neither that local, nor significant. "All this music is based on western hardcore," says Universal Music artist and repertoire manager Cello Kam. "This scene will not go above ground, it will remain underground." MTV Networks Asia marketing



Guitarist Riz Farooqi (top) whips the Warehouse crowd (left) into a frenzy during a typically high-octane King Lychee (right) show at the Aberdeen venue earlier this year. Photos: Karl Chiu



Belly, the scene would dry up every few years when the expatriate musicians left for universities abroad. What's more, the bands sang in English, which excluded locals who had a poor grasp of the language. When Farooqi returned to Hong Kong from university in America in 1999, he realised the language barrier was the main reason why the Hong Kong indie music scene had dwindled and promptly started a bilingual music magazine, *Start From Scratch*, to introduce Cantonese speakers to its culture. He also founded King Lychee, the first punk/hardcore band to break out of the expatriate-dominated mould and spearhead a grassroots Cantonese following. Their songs are a mosaic of Cantonese, English and a smattering of Tagalog and the band's members are all from Hong Kong.

The local scene is smaller these days, but there's an intimacy at the gigs. "We

and communications manager Mok Hoyan disagrees. "Many of the lyrics reflect the state of mind of young people which gives them another platform to speak out their feelings and opinions."

General manager of EMI Hong Kong's international department, Wong Chi-chung, adds: "Songs from King Lychee always touch on social issues like the environment and child abuse. They are more sensitive, freer to voice the things around us. Plus they sing what they write, unlike many Canto-pop singers who just sing what the lyricists write."

Independent bands King Lychee, Fat Job, Choke, 5 Disciplines, Guan 36, San Fan and Bei La Cha Chan Ting will perform at the Warehouse Teenage Club, 116 Aberdeen Main Road, Aberdeen, at 3.30pm on August 17. \$40; profits will be donated to the families of the Tuen Mun bus tragedy.

A grassroots sport that's a cut above

The British Lawn Mower Racing Association's Grand Prix is a gruelling test of devotees' bottoms and blades, writes David Wilson

BRAVING THE FULL force of the sun, the master of ceremonies mounts the podium and works the crowd. It consists of other burly men who, by and large, like him have opted for the boiler-suit look or the leather-trousers-and-bare-chest alternative.

This could be a rally except the atmosphere here in Pulborough in the south of England, feels even more informal and tribally male. The few women in evidence tend to be young, fit and attentive to the needs of their partners. The only razzmatazz is flags – the Union Flag, the George Cross and the Jolly Roger fluttering from tents.

Inquisitively, three Hell's Angels circle the perimeter of the arena, which is simply a field. The vehicles soon to be whizzing around the straw bale-lined track are infinitely inferior to their own, boasting limited horsepower and zero suspension. Welcome to the slow and punishing world of lawn mower racing.

August 2 sees the highlight of this weird sport's calendar: the gruelling 12-hour marathon that starts at 8pm. Ratcheting up the tension, the MC says: "If anyone ends up lying on the track with blood squirting out from their leg, tell the command centre." Laughter.

"If you're just going into a pit, please give a hand signal... a polite hand signal," he adds. Raucous laughter.

"And no mucking around in the loos," the MC warns, revealing that last year somebody staged a dirty protest. Numb silence. "It's probably not you but the people who visit," he says reassuringly.

The MC proceeds to bang on a bit and then, after a flurry of tuning and tinkering, the entrants are off – sort of: one lawnmower crawls, coughing, no more than six metres before its handlers grab, revive and shove it back into the action. The combined roar sounds very different from what you hear at Le Mans, punctuated by sputter and crackle.

This poor man's Grand Prix was launched by the head of the British Lawn Mower Racing Association (BLMRA), 63-year-old former rally driver Jim Gavin, with the help of some friends, 30 years ago. They had been sitting around in a pub bewailing how expensive motor sport was becoming when some-

body looked out the window, saw three lawnmowers and suggested mowers would make good, cheap vehicles.

He was not serious but the drinkers decided to stick up a notice advertising a lawnmower Grand Prix. To Gavin's astonishment, 50 people responded and the race took place.

"It was a great success, it was great fun. The Grand Prix lasted only about 15 minutes but, by golly, it was some race and we realised we had something here."

Since then, Gavin has ensured that the sport he invented remains democratic – motor-racing for the masses. Nobody is allowed to soup-up their vehicle, which must be bought readymade rather than craftily designed for the contest. Gavin actually prefers it if competitors use an old mower "past its sell-by date" and a lot of the machines do look as if they have been in the wars.

The top speed any driver can achieve, between relay petrol changes every 40 minutes, is about 70km/h. But even at 55km/h, according to Gavin, locomotion becomes painful, thanks to the lack of suspension. "Your spine starts to come up through your brain," he says.

On what kind of man chooses to suffer this degree of discomfort, Gavin just says: "Anybody who's daft enough." Nobody, not even he, has a clue which crew is going to win on the day – it could be The Champion Dung Spreaders, The Mutt's Nuts, The Damp Furry Bit Appreciation Team or just about any of the other 37 rivals.

Luck, all drivers agree, is critical. As the sun goes down and the track becomes ever barer and more rutted, the drivers grow dirty and dazed. When the din finally diminishes the next morning and the rivals stagger from their vehicles for beers and hugs, the victor turns out to be a team called Northerners Kick Grass which did look a lot tougher and a lot more serious than the others.

All power to them. They completed 353 laps and covered no less than 305.6km at an average speed of 25.2km/h. They must be ecstatic about enduring so much pain for so long at such a lick. That is, if they can still walk.



PEOPLE

'High Noon' at the House

The western *High Noon* has emerged as one of the most popular films requested by American presidents for screening in the White House. The Gary Cooper classic was watched by Bill Clinton 20 times, while Dwight Eisenhower watched it three times, reports the *Los Angeles Times*.

Among other favourite movies presidents have used to take their minds off running the country are *Casablanca*, *The Bridge On The River Kwai* and *Audrey Hepburn's Sabrina* and *Roman Holiday*.

The presidential preferences have been revealed in a documentary, *All The Presidents'*



Films. The documentary used as its main source a log kept by Paul Fisher, the official White House projectionist between 1953 and 1986.

Photos: AP/Reuters

Fleiss sobs in court

Former "Hollywood Madam" Heidi Fleiss sobbed on the witness stand yesterday as she testified that actor Tom Sizemore stubbed a cigarette out on her, smacked her in the face and verbally abused her during a year-long relationship.

But lawyers for Sizemore, best known for playing a gruff sergeant in *Saving Private Ryan*, told a jury that Fleiss was a "liar" who had invented the allegations. Prosecutors said they had photographs of her injuries and tapes of his threats.

Fleiss, who famously spent three years in prison for attempted pandering, was the first witness in Sizemore's trial on 16 charges of domestic violence, threats, witness intimidation, property destruction and obscene calls. Fleiss claims the actor lost



his temper when they appeared on the Howard Stern radio show to promote the film *Black Hawk Down*. "Howard Stern asked me if I liked *Black Hawk Down*, and I said I didn't," Fleiss, 37, said through tears. "I said it was too violent for me, that I liked films like *Bambi*." After the show, she said, Sizemore "was verbally abusive and put his cigarette out on me. It was terrible". Reuters

Moss to pose nude

Kate Moss is to appear nude and un-airbrushed on the front cover of a US magazine.

The supermodel was snapped by different photographers for nine collectible cover shots of provocative fashion magazine *W*, *Ananova.com* reported. She posed for photographer Chuck Close for the images inside the magazine, which are expected to be some of the most controversial *W* has published.

W's creative director Dennis Freeman claims the full-frontal nudity gives more credit to readers than most magazines, adding that Moss was the obvious choice to be the subject of this project.

"Kate has been our muse – ours and our photographers' – for the simple reason that there are so many aspects to Kate's personality," he said. "She's a woman, she's a



child, she's a tomboy, she's very sexual, she's smart, she's funny, she's good, she's bad. "She's probably one of the most beautiful, ordinary-looking women, and that makes her interesting."

Silent Stones upset Spain

British rock veterans the Rolling Stones postponed a concert in the Spanish coastal resort of Benidorm as frontman Mick Jagger, who turned 60 a fortnight ago, succumbed to laryngitis.

The concert was the Stones' last performance in Spain as part of their *40 Licks* tour, due to end in London next month.

The Stones have already thrilled their Spanish fans on this tour with concerts in Madrid and Barcelona.

Meanwhile, Chinese promoters have said they are trying to bring the Rolling Stones to the mainland in November after two concerts scheduled for April were postponed due to the Sars outbreak. Reuters