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I Know It’s Only Rock’n’Roll (But They Don’t Like It)—The Sequel …

Jeff Wasserstrom
University of California, Irvine, wasserstromjeff@gmail.com

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By Jeff Wasserstrom

My next posts were all supposed to deal with my recent trip to China, but news about the long-awaited Guns’N’Roses release, “Chinese Democracy,” stirring up controversy in China is something that I can’t resist weighing in on. I won’t go into details about whether or how it has actually been banned in Beijing, as you can find out about that other places, including here and here. And I don’t need to fill you in on the China-related content of the album (a work I hasten to admit I haven’t heard yet), as that is covered thoroughly in an excellent Huffington Post piece by David Flumenbaum.

Still, two things make it hard for me to stay silent. First, I don’t think anyone has so far made an obvious and lame Shakespearean pun (but one that still has a point): I think that this Rose (album) by any other name would have been quite different indeed in terms of impact in China. Yes, as Flumenbaum notes, the title track has lyrics that deal with hot-button topics, but had these words been buried in an album called “Madascar” or “I.R.S.” (the names of two other tracks), it might at least have taken longer to be banned or draw fire from Chinese netizens. (Of course, this isn’t a sure-fire argument. I was amazed to see copies of Cui Jian’s “The Power of the Powerless” for sale in Beijing around the turn of the millennium, at a time when he was still having trouble giving public concerts. Surely, the title is or can at least be read as an allusion to Václav Havel’s 1978 work, yet this slipped under the official radar.)

Second, this Guns N’ Roses phenomenon gives me the final item to add to a long gestating “Top Five List” of “The Weirdest Rock Music Moments with Chinese Characteristics” of the last 30 years. When Bjork caused controversy early this year, I blogged about that for China Beat and Shanghaiist, and in doing so brought in some of these moments (the Icelandic songstress making waves with a Shanghai
conference reference to Tibet surely qualifies), so there'll be some repetition here. But this list, in chronological order, will contain some novelties as well.

1) John Denver singing “Rocky Mountain High” (and doubtless other numbers as well) to Deng Xiaoping when the Chinese leader was in the U.S. in 1979. The final moments of that musical performance are immortalized in the Long Bow Group’s award-winning “The Gate of Heavenly Peace,” which also shows Denver telling Deng that the American people wished China success in its newest “Long March” (toward modernization). I later realized that Denver’s performance for Deng is probably one reason songs of his like “Country Roads” were among the American ones played most often when I lived in China for a year in the mid-1980s.

2) The Carpenters hit it big in China in the mid-1980s. I’m not sure if there is a clear reason for this (can anyone enlighten me?), but their music seems to have had even greater staying power than Denver’s in the PRC. I heard “Top of the World” playing when I first rode the sight-seeing tunnel under the Huangpu River: maybe not a bad choice, as even though the ride has a light show that might seem better suited to a psychedelic band than the Carpenters, and even though when the tune plays you are deep underground, the ride takes you to Pudong where the world’s tallest building now stands. And when I visited the Bird’s Nest stadium earlier this month, the song playing over the P.A. system was “Every Shalalala” (so something about that trip slipped into this post after all).
3) A Jan and Dean Concert Plays a Role in the Student Protests of 1986. This story is told in my earlier post on Bjork, so no need to repeat it here—just wouldn't be a complete list without it mentioned.

4) Billy Bragg goes to China and wants to talk politics with local rockers, but they steer the conversation to what sort of amp he uses. This is just one of many vignettes that could have made the list that are recounted in Linda Jaivin’s *The Monkey and the Dragon: A True Story about Friendship, Music, Politics, and Life on the Edge*, a memoir about the pop critic and novelist’s friendship with Taiwan folk-singer turned Tiananmen activist Hou Dejian, and the curious intersections between rock and politics in the PRC in the late 1980s and 1990s.

5) Bjork Goes to Shanghai…again, nothing new to say after Part 1, but no list would be complete without it...

This has been posted concurrently at Shanghaiist.

Tags: Rock and roll, shanghaiist