

# FEATURES

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[ WEEKENDER ]

## Back in black

Ageless and defiant, AC/DC has managed to stay on top without going digital

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK



Top: AC/DC members, from left, Brian Johnson, Angus Young and Malcolm Young at the Peninsula Hotel in Manhattan last month. Above: Wal-Mart has set up special areas devoted to AC/DC merchandise in each of its stores. AC/DC's new album, *Black Ice*, will be sold in the US only at Wal-Mart starting today.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

In a tastefully luxurious suite at the Peninsula Hotel in New York, Brian Johnson, the lead singer of AC/DC, is crooning the opening lines of *It's a Wonderful World* while he waits to have his picture taken. Although he's known for belting out AC/DC's hard-rock songs, he can also sing delicately about trees of green and red roses.

Suddenly he clears his nasal passages with a giant snort and cracks up laughing. "What's green and goes backward at 100 miles an hour?" he asks in a northeastern English accent. Across the room the brothers Angus and Malcolm Young, the band's guitarists, start laughing along with him. Even at their age — Angus is 53, Malcolm is 55 and Johnson is 61 — the members of AC/DC can't resist a gross-out joke.

The band's music hasn't matured much either, to the delight of its fans. AC/DC has always delivered an aggressive take on rock's raw essentials: slicing guitars, driving rhythms and lyrics about sex, drink and rock 'n' roll. Its new album, *Black Ice*, which will be sold in the US only at Wal-Mart starting today, is its most focused release in almost two decades, full of the first-pumping riffs and shout-along choruses the band is known for. And it is expected to be one of fall's biggest rock releases.

Gradually, and without getting much media attention, AC/DC has become the most popular currently active rock band in the US, to judge by albums sold. Since 1991, when Nielsen SoundScan started tracking music sales, this Australian band has sold 26.4 million albums, second only to the Beatles, and more than the Rolling Stones or Led Zeppelin. Over the past five years, as CD sales have cratered, AC/DC albums have sold just as well as or better than ever; the band sold more than 1.3 million CDs in the US last year, even though it hasn't put out any new music since 2000. And with *Black Ice*, increased visibility for the band's catalog at Wal-Mart and a tour that starts on Tuesday of next week, it's possible that AC/DC could sell more CDs overall this year than any other act in pop music.

AC/DC's commercial success flies in the face of conventional music industry wisdom. The band does not sell its music online and has never put out a greatest hits collection or allowed other musicians to sample its songs. At a time when most pop acts give fans the opportunity to have it their way by offering downloadable tracks and remixes, AC/DC gives listeners a different choice: its way or the highway.

"You get very close to the albums," said Angus, relaxing on a couch while sipping a cup of tea. Without the schoolboy uniform he's famous for wearing onstage, he comes off calm and soft-spoken in a black T-shirt, blue jeans and Converse Chuck Taylors. Like his brother he's short and slight, about 160cm and 50kg.

"It's like an artist who does a painting," he added. "If he thinks it's a great piece of work, he protects it. It's the same thing. This is our work." The band has said it does not want to break up its albums to sell individual songs as iTunes usually requires.

AC/DC's decision to focus on selling CDs has put it at the

center of an industry debate about whether even superstar acts can continue to dictate the way their music is sold. Although Kid Rock and Buckcherry had recent hits without iTunes, that online store is now the largest music retailer.

The band's reluctance to break up its albums may stem from a stubborn belief in their power. But AC/DC also has a reputation of being business savvy and a tendency of skipping an easy paycheck to preserve its long-term interests. The band has also been reluctant to license its music for advertising.

"They have a purist approach," said Steve Barnett, the chairman of Columbia Records, a division of Sony Music Entertainment. (He also managed the band from 1982 to 1994.) "Their instinct was always to do the right thing for fans, think long term and not be influenced by financial rewards."

AC/DC's insistence on selling albums has almost certainly helped keep its sales from declining. And although many music executives believe that not selling tracks online leads fans to download music illegally, AC/DC's music is downloaded from file-sharing sites less than that of Led Zeppelin, which does sell music digitally, according to BigChampagne, a company that monitors peer-to-peer services.

AC/DC gets less attention than many bands it outsells. Its songs receive less airplay than those of Aerosmith, according to Nielsen Broadcast Data Systems. Its members get less attention in gossip columns than the children of the Beatles. And it has never been a critical favorite. The band makes no pretense to art, and its lyrics often contain what might be called single entendres.

For this, and much else, Angus is unapologetic. "People say it's juvenile music, but pardon me" — he speaks these last two words with exaggerated politeness — "I thought rock 'n' roll was supposed to be juvenile. You sing what you know. What am I going to write about — Rembrandt?"

Much of AC/DC's appeal lies in the group's consistency, its unwavering focus on cranking up the rhythms of early rock into stadium-sized anthems. Although AC/DC has fans of all ages, it is almost unique among 1970s bands in that it never tried to grow up with its audience. The band never experimented with different genres, made an "unplugged" album or even recorded a ballad, and none of its songs sound rooted in a particular time.

The group's raw aggression is as relevant to teenagers who listen to its albums on iPods as they were to those who heard them on record players. *Back in Black*, which has sold 49 million copies worldwide since 1980, according to Columbia, could serve as a catchy soundtrack to teenage frustration for as long as it exists.

Like a blues song come to life, Angus Young is a seventh son. His parents emigrated from Glasgow, Scotland, to Sydney, Australia, where his older brother George joined the Easybeats, the pioneering rock band known for *Friday on My Mind*. Obsessed with rockers like Little Richard and Chuck Berry, Angus and Malcolm

formed AC/DC in 1973 when they were teenagers, and won a reputation for giving raucous concerts after their sister suggested that Angus perform in his school uniform.

"Most of the time I'm quiet, but when I put on that suit it gives me that kind of confidence," Angus said. "I suppose the music sounds aggressive but I was never that guy, really."

AC/DC had its first big hit in the US when the producer Robert John (Mutt) Lange gave its guitar riffs a pop shine on the 1979 album *Highway to Hell*. The next year, after the singer Bon Scott died in a misadventure with alcohol, the band recruited Johnson. The group's next album, *Back in Black*, has sold about 22 million copies in the US, making it the fourth best-selling album in American history.

Since then AC/DC has lost its way (*Fly in the Wall*, 1985) and recaptured its old energy (*Razors Edge*, 1990). But its catalog kept selling. "High school kids were discovering this band while they weren't even doing anything," Barnett said.

In 2003, after the rights to AC/DC's previous albums reverted to the band, Barnett acquired those rights for Sony. In 2006 he renewed that deal and acquired the rights to the album left on the group's recording contract with Warner Music. Under his direction Sony reissued the old albums in nicer packaging, negotiated to put the band's music in movies like *School of Rock* and *Iron Man* and released several DVDs and DVD box sets. The most popular of these, *AC/DC Live at Donnington*, has sold more than 800,000 copies, making it the label's best-selling DVD; it will provide the basis for an AC/DC edition of the video game *Rock Band*.

These days the band's members don't spend much time together between albums. The Young brothers split their time between London and Australia; the drummer Phil Rudd lives in New Zealand; and the bassist Cliff Williams and Johnson live about a half-hour apart in southwestern Florida. Johnson enjoys driving sports cars and recently came in third in an event at the Sebring International Raceway in central Florida.

Over the last several years Angus and Malcolm would come up with riffs and ideas on their own, then meet to work them into songs. When they had enough material for an album, they called Barnett, who recommended that they work with the producer Brendan O'Brien, who has also made albums with Pearl Jam and Rage Against the Machine.

"The AC/DC music that I remember most is *Highway to Hell* and *Back in Black*, which I view as pop songs done in a very heavy ferocious way," O'Brien said. "Angus and Malcolm were writing songs that had a lot of hooks and my only job was to make a record that made people say, 'I've missed AC/DC, and I'm glad they're back.'"

## Cops pack rifles for boneheaded reggae raid

BY RON BROWNLOW, DAVID CHEN, TOM WALK AND BRADLEY WINTERTON  
STAFF REPORTERS AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



Jamming good with Ray and Barry.

PHOTO: RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES

It was like *Reno 911!* at VU Live House on Saturday night.

Revelers at the Reggae Me Crazy festival hosted by the Ximending club had to start their partying late because an uninvited guest crashed the show — the police.

Apparently the clueless cops heard the word "reggae" and assumed they'd be able to bust a bunch of potheads, getting themselves written up in the country's sensationalist papers for saving Taiwan from the scourge of reefer madness.

Taipei's finest pulled out all the stops for their face-off with the hippies, arming themselves with semi-automatic assault rifles that looked like AR-15s, riot helmets and bulletproof vests.

Unfortunately for the heat, they busted the joint before the first band — High Tide, who put on a killer show — even started playing, which made them look like glorified doormen at the front entrance as all the customers waited outside, smoking cigarettes and drinking cheap beer from 7-Eleven.

If the law wanted THC that badly, they should have gone to Bliss. THC was there — Taipei Hip-Hop Crew, that is — busting out rhymes for Barry Smit's going-away bash. Smit, who was full owner of Bliss, formerly Chocolate and Love, for the past four years, sold the bar to Travis Bannert and Oliver Campbell and is moving to Taitung with his wife to open a guesthouse near the ocean. Following opening act The Originals and preceding THC's set, Smit rocked out with his own band, Crossroads (whose guitarist, Ray Anthonie, is absolutely wicked), with covers of songs such as *Ziggy Stardust* and *Suffragette City*. By midnight the crowd of mostly foreigners was so large it filled both levels of the bar and spilled out onto the sidewalk along Xinyi Road. When the party finally ended around 7am, Smit treated the half-dozen or so people who were still there to breakfast.

On Thursday indie-rock veterans Yo La Tengo played for some 300 people at The Wall (牆), the second night of a two-night run. The New Jersey-based trio was in top form as they rocked the house with ear-piercing jams, stunned the room with beautifully quiet ballads and had the audience laughing throughout the evening.

The band started at a brisk pace with three loud and driving songs. They kept the momentum going as each tune ended — after the opening number, guitarist Ira Kaplan and bassist James McNew quickly switched instruments and positions on stage to play *I Should Have Known Better*, an organ-tinged, 1960s rock-sounding number from the group's 2006 release *I Am Not Afraid of You and I Will Beat Your Ass*.

Kaplan and McNew changed places again for *Pass the Hatchet, I Think I'm Goodkind*, the opening track of the album. By then the band was fully warmed up and Kaplan picked up his stride, pouring out notes of blistering distortion from his electric guitar. Drummer Georgia Hubleby kept a steady beat as she created shimmering waves of sound on the cymbals, and McNew held the song together with a hypnotic bass line.

The set then shifted to quieter, less distorted sounds: Hubleby's hushed vocals on the ballad *Tears Are in Your Eyes* held the audience at rapt attention; Kaplan switched to piano for the mid-tempo pop number *The Weakest Part*; while the funky *Mr. Tough*, with steady falsetto vocals from McNew, drew cheers and got the audience dancing.

Kaplan's guitar-playing grew more inspired throughout the night. During one solo late into the band's 90-minute set, he swung his guitar in a controlled frenzy, causing the feedback to squeal in endless variations, much to delight of the audience.

The band came back with a four-song encore, which they began by asking for requests. Kaplan picked out an audience member wearing one of the band's T-shirts, who asked the band to play *You Can Have It All*, a tune sung by Hubleby. Kaplan drew laughs as he played a mock drum solo, throwing his drumstick into the air and then catching it clumsily.

McNew then led the band through Sun Ra's zany and funky *Nuclear War*. The band's third Taipei appearance ended as Kaplan thanked a fan he met off-stage for coming to both of the band's shows at The Wall. They obliged the fan's request: the Velvet Underground's *I Found a Reason*.

Elsewhere this week, the 100-seat auditorium of Taipei's German Cultural Center was filled to overflowing for Friday evening's concert by the German a cappella group Klangbeizirk. The four-person lineup, two men and two women, first demonstrated a sound machine that recorded and then replayed their input, allowing for the illusion of more than four singers. Sometimes they used it, but mostly not. Instead, they gave softly breathed renderings of often well-known numbers, sung with the microphone close to the lips and accompanied only by the snapping of fingers.

Most songs were in English, ranging from Michael Jackson to the Beatles (*Blackbird Singing in the Dead of Night*, sung as an encore, received an ovation). But there was one Chinese item too, and another in German. Altogether the tone was relaxed, with audience participation invited at one point, and eagerly given. You felt that the free entry, plus free wine in the interval, were not all that had brought the mostly young audience along.

The event was part of the Taiwan International Contemporary A Cappella Festival. Other participants include Sweden's Irmelin, Japan's Takarabune and Kaichiro Kitamura and Germany's Vocalente. The festival continues in various locations until Saturday.

## PLANET POP



Actor David Duchovny, who recently sought treatment for sex addiction, has separated from Tea Leoni, his wife of 11 years and mother of their two children, *People* magazine reported on Wednesday.

The former *X-Files* star and Leoni, an actress, separated some time ago.

Duchovny, who plays a womanizing novelist on the US television series *Californication*, has left a rehabilitation center for sex addiction after successfully completing a program, his attorney said last week.

Duchovny and Leoni, currently starring in the comedy *Ghost Town*, married in May 1997 and have a 9-year-old daughter and a 6-year-old son. It was a second marriage for Leoni and a first for Duchovny.

Life is increasingly imitating art for David Duchovny. PHOTO: EPA

In January, Duchovny won a Golden Globe Award as best actor in a comedy for his role as Hank Moody, an oversexed single dad and novelist struggling with writer's block in *Californication*.

He is expected to start work soon on a new movie called *The Joneses*.

The jury in *Britney Spears'* trial for driving without a valid license ended their first day of deliberations on Friday without reaching a verdict, court officials said.

Jurors will resume deliberations at 9am today following a two-day trial that pop diva Spears, 26, was not required to attend. The trial went ahead after the singer rejected a plea deal that would have seen her fined US\$150 and given one year's probation.

The case stems from an August 2007 incident when paparazzi trailing the singer caught her bumping a car in a parking lot and driving away.

Prosecutors say Spears was later discovered not to have a valid California license. She is charged with a misdemeanor — punishable by jail or a fine — but for a first offense Spears is unlikely to receive a custodial sentence.

Spears' defense argued the star held a valid Louisiana license at the time of the incident and was not legally required to hold a California permit because she was



Britney's back.

PHOTO: AP

not living permanently in the state at the time.

Spears — who hit rock bottom in January when she was twice rushed to hospital for psychiatric treatment after losing custody of her two young sons — appears to have got her career back on track.

Her new single *Womanizer* went to the top of *Billboard's* Hot 100 singles chart this week, her first No. 1 on the ranking since 1999's *Baby One More Time*.

Oscar-winning actress Angelina Jolie intends to keep up her nomadic, Earth-wandering lifestyle alongside partner Brad Pitt, with all six of her children in tow, and hinted in a TV interview on Thursday that they may adopt a seventh.

Jolie, who in July gave birth in France to twins, a girl named Vivienne Marcheline and a boy named Knox Leon, said during an appearance on NBC's morning

news show *Today* that she sees no reason to slow down despite her growing brood.

"One day [the children] are probably going to want to stay in one place for a very long time as they get certain friends," she told *Today* co-host Matt Lauer in an interview to promote her new film, the period drama *Changeling*.

"But, you know, so far we've just moved them a lot, and they like moving. They like packing their bag before the next adventure, and they like making new friends wherever we go," Jolie said.

"And I think part of it, we'd like to maintain that," the 33-year-old actress said. "We'd like them to be those kind of adults where they can find home wherever they are in the world and they can find friends wherever they are in the world."

In addition to the twins, Jolie and Pitt are parents to four other young children — adoptees Maddox, Pax and Zahara, and their first biological daughter, Shiloh. Responding to questions from Lauer, Jolie said she and Pitt were considering adopting still more.

"It depends," she said. "I mean it's important ... you can't adopt, you can't even start the process until any new children are 6 months old to understand how the new family has settled." —AGENCIES