

AROUND TOWN

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PAGE 13

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Jen Shyu live at Sappho de Base
WHERE: B1, 1, Lane 102, Anhe Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市安和路一段102巷1號B1)

WHEN: Tonight from 9:30pm to 10:30pm
DETAILS: No entrance fee

ON THE NET: www.jenshyu.com; www.myspace.com/jenshyu

Riffing on her roots

American singer
Jen Shyu explores
new horizons in
Taiwanese folk music

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

Vocalist and experimental jazz musician
Jen Shyu plays tonight at Sappho de Base.
PHOTO BY STEVE SCHREIBER, COURTESY OF JEN SHYU

While her music rings familiar with the sounds and structures of jazz, American vocalist Jen Shyu simply prefers to use the terms “improvised” or “creative” in reference to her music. “I hate using the word jazz, but as a point of reference I have to use it,” says the Peoria, Illinois native, who performs tonight at Sappho de Base in Taipei. Her show comes at the end of a three-month research project in Taiwan, where Shyu studied Hengchun folk music (恆春調) and Aboriginal music under a grant from the US-based Asian Cultural Council. Tonight she plans to perform traditional Hengchun songs and her own music.

Shyu’s compositions indeed go beyond conventional jazz, often drawing from her Taiwanese and Chinese heritage. In her song *Chapter 1 Number 5*, she sings verses from Lao Tzu’s (老子) Taoist classic the Tao Te Ching (道德經) in both Chinese and English, riffing or scatting to post-bop grooves.

The “freedom” of jazz led Shyu to explore her ethnic roots. After finishing her degree in opera-singing at Stanford University, Shyu realized “it wasn’t me” and started to sing jazz in San Francisco, where she became involved in a small but “vital” music scene led by a local arts organization, Asian Improv Arts.

The group offered Shyu an “encouraging community” of not just Asian Americans, but a multicultural mix that included Brazilian, Cuban and American Indian artists who often collaborated together in experimental projects. Shyu’s work in various collectives planted the seed for one of her current groups, Jade Tongue, based in New York City.

With Jade Tongue, Shyu experiments by mixing different languages: she sings in Hoklo, Mandarin and English while backed by a standard jazz ensemble, which includes a bassist, drummer, pianist and trumpeter. Having also trained in theater and dance, Shyu incorporates modern dance elements in live performances.

Her work is not merely for the sake of experimentation. “I would like to give [Western

listeners] a kind of new perspective of what Chinese or Taiwanese music is or can be, or from a Chinese-Taiwanese artist [viewpoint], what that music can be or what that expression can be.”

Shyu combines jazz phrasing and hints of opera technique on her rendition of the Hengchun folk tune *Thinking Back* (思想起, also known as *Melody of Nostalgia*), the signature song of the late Taiwanese folk music hero Chen Ta (陳達), who Shyu cites as an inspiration. “When I heard his voice,” she says, “I really realized I needed to go to Hengchun and find out more about this man.”

In learning traditional Hengchun songs, Shyu also picked up the genre’s main instrument, the *yueqin* (月琴), or moon lute, which she will play tonight on several numbers. But the 30-year-old says that the main purpose of her studies is not to learn to perform traditional songs on stage; instead, she wants to see how they can inform her own. This trip, she says, has been about “internalizing the music.”

Shyu has made similar research trips in the past: she studied music and dance in Brazil and went to Cuba several times to study Afro-Cuban music and the history of Chinese Cubans. And while she has been exploring her Taiwanese heritage through her father’s side, her mother is from East Timor, which could be the site of her “next project,” she says. “It’s all very cumulative,” she says of her numerous artistic interests. “I see it as a life-long journey.”

One constant for Shyu is her focus on improvisation skills, which she continues to hone with her mentor, jazz saxophonist Steve Coleman. In addition to her own projects, she sings and records as a member of Coleman’s New York City-based ensemble, Five Elements, which she will join in Portugal next week for a performance.

She says one challenge of playing in Coleman’s group is that “we never know what’s going to happen next.” For example, a cue from the drummer could suddenly have the band playing a different song, which means the musicians must know every song well and be ready to play them at any time. Singing for the group, she says, has taught her an important lesson for improvisation: “You have to know everything in order to be free.”

[FILM]

‘1895’ not one for the history books

The Hakka-language epic portrays one of the biggest battles in Taiwan’s history with neither imagination nor entertainment value

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

A cinematic account of national history is never an easy task for filmmakers, who must do justice to the past yet produce a movie that is more entertaining than a teaching aid.

Based on *Ching Da Kuei Di* (情歸大地), a novel by Li Chiao (李喬), one of Taiwan’s best-known Hakka writers, *1895* (一八九五) brings to life the Hakka militias’ resistance to Japanese troops after Qing Dynasty China was defeated in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894 to 1895) and ceded Taiwan to Tokyo under the Treaty of Shimonoseki.

The ambitious work is educational at best and, with its barely passable storytelling techniques, is unlikely to attract an audience that goes beyond educators and students.

Local starlet Cheryl Yang (楊謹華) plays the role of Huang Hsien-mei, the virtuous wife of Wu Tang-xing, played by Wen Sheng-

hao (溫昇豪). A well-educated young Hakka, Wu organizes guerrilla resistance against the Japanese together with two Hakka leaders, Jiang Shao-zu (姜紹祖), played by Chang Shu-hao (張書豪), and Hsu Xiang (徐驤), played by Wu Hao-sheng (吳皓昇).

Though the Chinese high officials who proclaimed the short-lived Taiwan Republic in response to the Treaty of Shimonoseki flee to China, leaving the Hakka militias to their own devices without sufficient rations, money or munitions, the resistance forces manage to keep the Japanese from advancing south.

The guerrillas persist and casualties mount. Carting supplies to the front with other villagers, Huang sees her husband, for the last time, before Wu and his men lose a decisive battle on Bagua Mountain (八卦山) in Changhua County, which saw about 4,700 Japanese and 14,000 Taiwanese fighters killed.

The film’s lack of funding — the budget was NT\$60 million — is acutely felt. Instead of turning the more than modest funds into inspiration for imagination, director Hung took an aesthetic approach that is more slippers-and-spears television than cinematic by having

some 30 extras running about aimlessly in the battle scenes, which are touted as the film’s high points.

The most bothering, if not purely absurd, part of the movie occurs in the scene when Aboriginal, Taiwanese and Hakka comrades are seen standing together in an act of unity. Used as human props, two extras in Aboriginal garb remain faceless in the shade throughout the scene, never to reappear.

1895’s cast members give passable performances with the exception of veteran actor Li Xing-wen (李興文), who plays a Taiwanese bandit and delivers well-appreciated comic relief without turning his character into caricature.

Young Japanese actor Koichiro Kijima fails to impress as Ogai Mori, the famed Japanese physician and novelist who was sent to Taiwan in 1895 and, in the film, attempts to give the occupying army a human face in the guise of a benevolent colonist.

Returning to the director’s seat after his feature debut, the rom-com *Pure Accidents* (純屬意外), director Hung is likely to go unnoticed with this ambitious, yet flaccid epic.

Film Notes

1895 (一八九五)

DIRECTED BY: HUNG CHIH-YU (洪智育)

STARRING: WEN SHENG-HAO (溫昇豪)
AS WU TANG-XING, CHERYL YANG (楊謹華)
AS HUANG HSIEN-MEI, CHANG SHU-HAO (張書豪)
AS JIANG SHAO-ZU, LI XING-WEN (李興文)
AS LIN TIEN-PA, KOICHIRO KIJIMA AS OGAI MORI

RUNNING TIME: 110 MINUTES

LANGUAGES: IN HAKKA AND JAPANESE
WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



The cast turns in passable performances
in *1895*. Pity about the director.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREEN FILM PRODUCTION