

# FEATURES

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PAGE 13

Tiger Huang, a regular performer at EZ5, will sing at the bar's 18th anniversary concert at Taipei International Convention Center.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF TIGER HUANG

Pop idol and composer Emil Chow, center, in a show last year at EZ5, which features three different acts each night performing Chinese-language and Western pop music.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF EZ5



**EZ5 LIVE HOUSE**  
**ADDRESS:** 211, Anhe Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市安和路二段211號)  
**TELEPHONE:** (02) 2738-3995  
**OPEN:** Daily from 12pm to 2pm (lunch) and 8pm to 1:30am. Music starts at 9:45pm every night  
**ADMISSION:** NT\$600 to NT\$850 depending on the performer. Cover charge includes two drinks  
**ON THE NET:** Schedule changes monthly. Go to [www.ez-5.com](http://www.ez-5.com) for the latest lineup (in Chinese only)

[ THE WEEKENDER ]

## Flagship performance lost at sea

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND BRADLEY WINTERTON  
 STAFF REPORTER AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Technical proficiency is no substitute for a good yarn, and whatever else the CKS Cultural Foundation's flagship production of *Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man* (黑鬚馬笛) that premiered at the National Theater this weekend may be, it never develops into a gripping story. Rather than an amazed meander through the bizarre coincidences that made a Presbyterian missionary from Canada a cultural icon of Taiwan's development, it plods through the main events of George Leslie Mackay's life with the humorless determination of a schoolteacher preparing students for an exam.

The profoundly constricted conception of what can only be described as a hagiography of Mackay undermines every other quality of the production. That Mackay dedicated his life to Taiwan and was a conscientious missionary is an undisputed fact, and that he loved Taiwan and its people is more than probable, but these points are labored to the exclusion of virtually all other ideas, unnecessarily underscoring an ideological motivation for the creation of this opera. Mackay emerges as a cardboard cutout, and while the opera follows him quite literally from birth to death, this presentation of his life achieves neither operatic grandeur nor emotional depth. His reflections on the beauty of Taiwan seemed to have been cribbed from some of the more egregious publicity material published by the Government Information Office for the consumption of tourists. Even an extended scene in which Mackay comes into conflict with local temples over his medical and religious practices is bland, and one cannot get away from the suspicion that all rough edges have all been smoothed over in the interests of political correctness and the avoidance in the opera of even the slightest suspicion of controversy.

That said, baritone Thomas Maglioranza (who plays Mackay) does a sterling job with the thin material that he is given, impressing with his conviction. If his character is flat, then the rest are flatter still (if that is possible), and the strong cast of Asian opera talent is unable to shine.

The relationship between Mackay and his wife (soprano Chen Mei-ling), a shadowy figure in the history books and an opening for the show's creators to give their imagination free rein, never really goes beyond idolatry of the great man.

Director Lukas Hemleb must be congratulated for his very creative stage design, using a series of concentric rectangles that form a series of independently articulated platforms and give the stage enormous dynamism. The use of projections, however, was not as successful. Clearly intended to inject an element of historical realism into the show, for the most part they managed to be little more than a distraction. Images of Mackay writing home, one of the many clumsy devices used to reveal the mind of the protagonist and move the story forward, served to cover changes to the set, but I found the fact that he seemed to be using a felt-tipped pen unreasonably annoying.

The opera, which was sung in English and Taiwanese, had subtitles in both Chinese and English. While the presence of English subtitles was definitely welcome, they would have benefited from editing, or at least proofreading, to avoid the numerous typos and basic grammatical mistakes that are unacceptable in such a high-profile international production.

While the production overall showed a high level of proficiency from the performers and the technical staff, as a work of art it didn't go much beyond the realm of historical propaganda. One couldn't help feeling sad at how much effort had been lavished on the presentation of a chapter from a junior high school history text. Even the exact amount of money that Mackay raised in Canada for the creation of the Tamsui Oxford College (牛津學堂) is laboriously brought up.

Looked at in the context of the many experimental operas that have been produced in recent years, one can see that the money and the high level support for *Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man* has certainly paid off in the quality of the presentation. What is still missing is a creative sensibility to direct these resources to make something more satisfying than a bald narrative of a worthy life.

Meanwhile, at the German Cultural Center on Tuesday, three times as many people showed up for jazz saxophonist Tony Lakatos as there were seats. He was in concert with three Taipei residents, Chris Stiles (piano), Martijn Vanbuel (bass) and Ed Schaefer (drums). Not sure what to make of the large turnout, or indeed of the show, I consulted some Taiwanese jazz musicians in the audience. Pianist Nathan Tu (杜迺迪) said that Lakatos's style was essentially bebop, and that the auditorium and its acoustics were ideal for this kind of lineup.

"His technique is intuitive and unhesitating," said trumpeter Rita Chao (趙彥婷). "His flow of musical ideas is remarkable, and his articulation superb."

Fellow saxophonist Mark Chen (陳傑杰) found his playing smooth, and appreciated the way he spelled out his chords clearly and exactly. His tonal color was admirable, he said.

Lakatos told me he was on his way to Japan where he'd played more times than he could remember, but that this was his first visit here. His reception, though, suggests he'll be back again soon.

I left marveling at what the center achieves. Today it was jazz, and last time it was 19th-century German lieder. I've heard a cappella and Bavarian zither, and everything attracts a sizeable audience, though rarely as big as Tuesday's. There are art exhibitions too. No other foreign representative office in Taiwan appears to do anything remotely comparable.



Thomas Maglioranza, center, makes the most of an overly pedantic script in *Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man*.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF NITC

# The livin' is still easy

*EZ5, a live music venue in business for 18 years, is a favorite among Taipei residents looking to see intimate, live performances from well-known and aspiring pop musicians*

BY DAVID CHEN  
 STAFF REPORTER

It's Monday night and the house is packed at EZ5 Live House, a bar hosting live music shows on Taipei's Anhe Road (安和路). The atmosphere is electric with excitement and anticipation, felt through the clinking of beer bottles and chatter of the 150 or so people in the dimly lit room. Everything goes quiet when singer Tiger Huang (黃小琥) steps on to the stage.

She fills the entire room with her powerful voice, and sways with the poise and presence of a veteran lounge singer. The entire audience claps along with her rendition of Chic's classic disco tune *Le Freak*, listens quietly as she sings *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* and cheers loudly after her delivery of Taiwanese and Mandarin pop classics.

This is a typical scene every Monday at EZ5, known as one of the best places to hear both established and aspiring Taiwanese pop musicians live in an intimate setting, any night of the week. The bar celebrates its 18th year this Saturday with an already sold-out concert for more than 3,000 people at the Taipei International Convention Center (台北國際會議中心大會堂) that features many of its regular singers, including Huang.

The patrons set EZ5 apart from the average Taiwanese pub with live music. They come to listen to music, not just to socialize.

"It's very lively here and you might talk [before and after shows], but people really concentrate on watching the performance," says Eric Chuang (莊睿程), an EZ5 regular for more than 13 years. "There's probably no other place like this... where the singer and the audience have good interaction."

EZ5 is by no means Taiwan's first "live house," the term used commonly here for a live music club, but it is one of the more successful.

Hosting singers like Huang has certainly helped. She started performing at EZ5 when it opened in 1990, around the time she made her break into the Chinese-language pop music world. She continues to be major draw for customers, one reason why owner Max Hsu (許理平) schedules her exclusively for two-hour shows on Mondays.

All other nights feature three different singers, who each play a 45-minute set. Performers include well-known crooners like Julia Peng (彭佳慧), who sings on Tuesdays, and lesser-known artists such as Liu Wei-jen (劉偉仁), who enjoys a following among regular patrons.

Hsu recruits and hires all of the singers, who sing mostly Western pop covers, Mando-pop and Taiwanese folk songs, backed by the house band. He chooses them by one criterion: can they sing live? And being a star is no guarantee of landing a gig — it sometimes even goes against the singer.

"We've had 'stars' who couldn't cut it on stage

because their sound only works in the recording studio. They might not have enough 'punch' or may not know how to sing properly in a live setting," said the energetic 40-year-old, who looks younger than his age but sounds older with his gruff smoker's voice. "Why do we [EZ5] promote live music? Because we think live music is real music, it can move people."

Hsu says the idea for EZ5 was inspired by past visits to clubs in the US such as the House of Blues chain, New York City's CBGB and various blues clubs in Chicago. The nuances of a live music setting, where the people, performers and the mood can change day to day, have always appealed to him.

"I might hear a singer sing one song today, and the next week that singer will play the same song and it will be completely different," he said. "I think that's what's fun about live music."

With its wooden floors and tables and a lingering smell of cigarette smoke, EZ5 has the feel of a classic neighborhood pub and is like a second home for its regulars. Eric Chuang rarely makes weekend plans with his friends — they automatically know to meet at the bar. He says he likes the "warmth" and the "family" feeling among the bar staff and the regulars.



## PLANET POP

India's entertainment capital of Mumbai is in a state of shock due to the terrorist attacks across the city, with reports of at least one Bollywood superstar sleeping with a gun under his pillow.

Mumbai is home to the Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood.

Iconic star **Amitabh Bachchan**, who has played the role of superhero in several Hindi movies, described it as a "terrible situation" that disturbed him.

"As the events of the terrorist attack unfolded in front of me, I did something for the first time and one that I had hoped never ever to be in a situation to do," Bachchan an icon of the Hindi cinema wrote on his blog.

"Before retiring for the night, I pulled out my licensed .32 revolver, loaded it and put it under my pillow, for a very disturbed sleep," he said.



French first lady Carla Bruni-Sarkozy is joining the global fight against AIDS.  
PHOTO: AP

Bachchan said he was glued to the TV screen late on Wednesday night when security personnel battled the terrorists who killed 125 people across the city formerly known as Bombay.

Today is World AIDS Day, and MTV is marking the 10th anniversary of its AIDS awareness campaign this year with an hour-long documentary by singer and Destiny's Child founding member **Kelly Rowland**.

The music channel launched MTV Staying Alive in 1998 and has produced films, competitions and celebrity tie-ins to educate young people about the risks of HIV and AIDS and encourage them to talk about it.

The latest initiative is a video diary featuring Rowland who along with **Beyonce Knowles** helped launch the successful girl band Destiny's Child in 1990. The group split in 2005.

In *The Diary of Kelly Rowland*, the 27-year-old travels to South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and the US and meets young people affected by HIV/AIDS and those trying to educate people about the risks.

Starting today, the video can be watched at [www.staying-alive.org](http://www.staying-alive.org).

**Travis McCoy**, lead singer of hip-hop band Gym Class Heroes, will be the Staying Alive Foundation's ambassador in 2009. **Beyonce**, **Mary J Blige**, **Justin Timberlake** and **Sean "Diddy" Combs** have also lent their names to the campaign over the last decade.

According to MTV, 33 million



Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan sleeps with a gun under his pillow.  
PHOTO: EPA

people are infected with HIV globally, and the daily death rate from HIV/AIDS is 6,000 people.

French first lady **Carla Bruni-Sarkozy** will also take up a role in the global campaign against AIDS, marking a new departure for the model-turned-popstar.

Bruni-Sarkozy married President Nicolas Sarkozy in February, less than three months after they met, in a whirlwind romance that generated a blaze of publicity.

She has since released a new pop album, which she had started working on before she met Sarkozy. But she said she wanted to dedicate herself to humanitarian work.

The Elysee, the presidential palace, said in a statement on Thursday that the first lady would work with the Geneva-based Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

She will give more details about her new work at a press conference today.

Back in the US, popstar Whitney Houston is denying rumors of a reunion with ex-husband **Bobby Brown**.

A report in Wednesday's *Chicago Sun-Times* said Houston and Brown had been spotted out and about in Georgia looking romantic, but the singer's publicist Nancy Seltzer calls speculation that the exes are getting back together "a complete fabrication."

Houston and Brown divorced in April 2007 after 14 years of marriage. During their tumultuous union, Brown was arrested on drug and alcohol charges, and Houston twice entered drug rehabilitation programs. Houston has custody of their teenage daughter, Bobbi Kristina.

Playwright **William Gibson**, whose *The Miracle Worker* won awards and thrilled audiences with its hopeful tale of the teaching of deaf and blind Helen Keller, died at age 94 this week in Massachusetts.

The play won three Tony awards, Broadway's highest honor, for best play, best actress for **Anne Bancroft** and best director for **Arthur Penn**. A 1962 film adaptation, again with Penn directing, won Oscars for Bancroft as best actress and **Patty Duke** as supporting actress, while Penn and Gibson were both nominated.

Gibson earned another Tony nomination for the musical *Golden Boy* starring **Sammy Davis Jr.**

—AGENCIES