



Wu Bai and China Blue, in costume for their new album, *Spacebomb*. From left to right: keyboard player Big Cat, drummer Dino Zavolta, singer and guitarist Wu Bai, and bassist Shiao Chu

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Set phasers to stun

Whether it's rock, Taiwanese folk, or 'taike' chic, Wu Bai refuses to be pigeonholed into one style or genre. He spoke with the 'Taipei Times' about songwriting, his latest album, 'Spacebomb,' and why it's his most liberating work yet

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

On paper Wu Bai (伍佰) looks like a typical superstar in the Mandarin-speaking music world: He has released nearly 20 studio albums, many of which were best sellers; he easily fills stadiums in Taiwan, China, Singapore and Malaysia; and he's dabbled in acting and endorses a handful of commercial products.

Yet the 40-year-old singer-songwriter and guitarist is unique among his peers. With a new album released last month, Wu Bai has dodged the creative malaise that seems to afflict many long-established Mando-pop artists. He enjoys a broad appeal, earned partly because of his originality — he writes all of his songs, and is considered a pioneer in modern Taiwanese music for putting Hoklo lyrics to rock grooves. Stylistically he's a musical chameleon. From album to album, he shifts from hard-edged blues rock to nostalgic-sounding Taiwanese folk, from Chinese ballads to electronica.

I met Wu Bai at an upscale Italian restaurant in Taipei near the office of his management company, Moonlight Music (月光音樂). He was instantly recognizable from a distance as he sat in a corner booth, puffing on a cigarette. His gruff baritone voice makes him sound brusque at first, but he is friendly and enthusiastic when discussing his music. Occasionally, a goofy charm breaks through his famously cool demeanor.

Why does he often change musical styles? "Because I am never satisfied," he says with a laugh. "When I do something, I'm interested in it ... When I do something it's got to have value to me, and it's got to have meaning. When I search for a new [feel for an album], I try to do something that I think is good, and good for Chinese records."

SPACE IS THE PLACE

Spacebomb, recorded with China Blue, his band of nearly 20 years, is about a group of human space travelers in the year 2406 and was inspired by Robert Charles Wilson's science fiction novel *Spin*.

For Wu Bai, the novel opened his mind, but not to the world of science fiction as much as new creative possibilities.

"I had many things I wanted to say" about "societal problems," including unemployment and Taiwan's television media, which had been boiling in his mind since finishing his previous album two years ago. "But when you want to say something, you need a point of view, you want an attitude ... What I wanted to say was quite serious. How could I take this serious thing, sing it and make it entertaining?"

By taking the characters of his songs into outer space, he says they could look back at the chaos and confusion of their home planet with clarity and a "sense of humor." The first song, also titled *Spacebomb*, is a rock number with a futuristic feel, full of playful computer synthesizer sounds and guitars that sound like laser guns.

The distance of outer space also gave Wu Bai a new way to vent his views on the current state of Taiwanese society. As the album progresses the space travelers reflect on the shortcomings of their world, including fashion crazes in *Fashion Dog* (時尚狗) or the melodramatic TV media in *News Show* (新聞秀). "I could be more direct without making it embarrassing or awkward," he says.

ENTERTAINER OR ANGRY SOCIAL CRITIC?

Wu Bai sees himself first and foremost as a popular entertainer, one that just happens to write what's on his mind. "I always put into my songs what I think of as society's shortcomings, my dissatisfaction with them. But I don't think [listeners] really care so much about these things."

He prides himself on creating music that might be slightly unconventional for pop but is always accessible: "My music isn't just for musicians — taxi drivers listen to it and get it," he says.

"Many people think my music is *taike*, (台客) suitable for both old and young," he says, referring to the once-derogatory term in Taiwan that inferred low-class or lack of style but is denoted street chic credibility and Taiwanese pride. "Old people and young children can all sing it ... it has a very strong Taiwan flavor to it."

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Wu Bai (伍佰) and China Blue
Spacebomb (太空彈)
Moonlight Music (月光音樂)
www.wubai.com



1976
Asteroid 1976 (1976 這個星球)
Sony BMG Music Entertainment (Taiwan)
www.mod1976.com



Jing-Jing's Note (倫語錄)
Jing Huang (黃靖倫)
Warner Music



Passiwali
Chalaw
Taiwan Colors Music

Wu Bai (伍佰) never seems to tire of changing styles, looks or sounds. Such restlessness from a pop artist can easily backfire, but Taiwan's "King of Rock" has consistently shown a knack for following his creative whims without alienating his audience.

His latest album, *Spacebomb* (太空彈), should be no exception. It's fun, fresh rock 'n' roll that satisfies both the mind and spirit. Inspired by Robert Charles Wilson's science fiction novel *Spin*, Wu Bai cast himself and his band China Blue as space travelers from the year 2406. In search of a new world to inhabit "so mankind can survive," they ponder the shortcomings of the world they left — the subject of many of the songs.

The album, sung entirely in Mandarin, opens with the title track, setting the space exploration theme with a funky drum beat and laser synthesizer sounds. The vibrato effects from the tremolo bar on Wu Bai's guitar and robotic-sounding vocal refrains do the 1980s proud. The song has some of the playfulness of early Talking Heads, which is offset by Wu Bai's bravado delivery of the chorus hook, *Watch out for my spacebomb!* (小心我的太空彈). Depending on your mood, you might find it funny in an almost Spinal Tap kind of way — or you'll be bobbing

your head and pumping your fist in the air. Either way, the tune is catchy.

The other nine tracks offer ample variety, from the cool, reflective mood of *Sunny Day* (天晴時刻) and its tasteful guitar work to the cosmic swamp jams of *Shining Wizard* (閃光魔術) and the eerie *News Show* (新聞秀). With the rich palette of electric guitar and synthesizer sounds and solid, tight grooves, there's never a dull moment throughout *Spacebomb*. Credit goes to China Blue, Wu Bai's band of nearly 20 years, for bringing his sonic vision to life.

The cinematic feel and pacing of the album come from the pop star in Wu Bai, who wants to entertain most of all, and on his terms. He has certainly accomplished those goals here.

— DAVID CHEN

If there were a sound track for Taiwan's geek-chic set, often called the "artsy youth" (文藝青年) in Mandarin, it would likely be music from the pop-rock band 1976. Their latest album *Asteroid 1976* (1976 這個星球) is a new milestone for the group because they have signed with Sony BMG, marking their first relationship with a major label. The four-piece also adopted a new songwriting approach, writing many of their songs and fleshing

them out in the recording studio instead of developing them at live shows.

Fans worried about 1976's indie street cred can relax. The group has stuck with what they do best, crafting Mandarin songs housed in Brit-pop beats and mod-rock style, and this seventh release shows a band in fine form. The rhythm section, consisting of drummer Warren Lin (林雨霖) and bassist Lin Tzi-chiao (林子喬), is tight; and guitarist Zac Chang (張崇偉) does an impressive job in shaping the songs with deft technique and versatility. Chang has a good sense of rhythm and texture that brings out the emotional core of songs like *Non Adult March* (發光的格子) and the anthemic *Knut* (努特).

Vocalist Chen Ray-kai (陳瑞凱), who goes by the name Ah-kai (阿凱), has a syrupy voice that seems to nod to Morrissey and The Cure's Robert Smith, with its angst-tinged and mopey leanings. One thing to appreciate about Ah-kai's singing is his near-whimsical delivery, which favors mood over pop aesthetics. In the cheeky *In Clubbing We Trust* (撒野俱樂部), he sings the catchy chorus with pleasing precision but belts out the verse with a devil-may-care attitude.

The album's production values are slick enough to help 1976 win a wider

audience in the Mandarin-speaking world. While the band may be reluctant to embrace full mainstream exposure, their left-of-center pop fills a void in Taiwan music scene for music of both style and substance.

— DAVID CHEN

Singapore-born Jing Huang (黃靖倫) was one of the highlights of the third season of the CTV's *One Million Star* (超級星光大道) pop idol pseudo-reality show. His androgynous voice, shyly humorous demeanor and clever way with words won him a huge following, particularly after he scored something of a triumph with his rendition of Cheng Yi's (鄭怡) *Here Comes the Rain* (小雨來的正是時候), a campus song (校園歌曲) classic. After that the variety shows simply couldn't get enough of him, making much play of his strong command of falsetto. Everyone wanted to get him to sing like a woman. This is slightly less than he deserved, for although a long way from being a huge musical talent, his voice and style are not without interest. With *Jing-Jing's Note* (倫語錄), his debut album, the producers have done their usual trick of stripping his voice of most of its personality and given him songs that make him sound like Karen Mok (莫文蔚) on a bad day. The

opening track, titled *A Phrase a Day* (每日一句) is the only exception and is almost worth the price of the album. The clever lyrics play off the album's Chinese title, which makes a playful reference to the *Analects of Confucius* (論語), and the song is packed with clichés, from shoo-bi-doo-bi-doo transitions to the kind of electric guitar solo that would have sounded dated in the 1980s, but all is managed in a playful way that elicits smiles rather than sneers.

For the rest, there are plenty of very correct Mando-pop ballads that are proficient enough to please the fans and have allowed *Jing-Jing's Note* to hover in an out of the top five since it was released, but these are unlikely to make a lasting impression among anyone else.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

There are plenty of fun things about *Passiwali* (巴西瓦里) by Chalaw (查勞), who describes himself as a "young Pangcham man passionate about music." His enjoyment of music is evident from the very first track, *The Numbers Song* (Sagalima 數數歌), a playful drinking song sung in the Amis language that mixes a vaguely Hawaiian vibe on ukulele with a Latin rhythm, bringing to mind scenes of iced mai tai on

palmy beaches, hot skin, cool breezes, good friends and not much to do until tomorrow. It's a wonderful introduction to an album of relaxed and playful tracks. Invention flags sometimes, as the good times blur into one another, but the music is never less than pleasant, and in almost all of the tracks, a little attention is often well repaid by an appreciation of Chalaw's friendly, unassuming personality.

A simple song like *How Are You?* (你好嗎?), with its mix of Amis, Japanese, Chinese and English, works surprisingly well, and repeated listening reveals it to be less of a gimmick that it might first appear. Others, like *Leave Me Alone* (不要煩我), which elicits the mood of a pub rather than the seaside, are rather less successful, probably due to Chalaw's desire to emulate an urban cool that sits uneasily with his natural rustic mood. This is a fault shared by the title track, which with its canned ocean sounds and other studio effects, feels over-produced and artificial. More successful are efforts such as *The Old Man's Schoolbag* (老人書包), with its casual referencing of *Those Were the Days, My Friend*, hints of flamenco, and Chalaw's own rough-edged fireside vocals. In *Passiwali* the rough is better than the smooth.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW