

Looking relaxed despite several busy days of speeches and media interviews in Taipei, Didier Grumbach, the head of the organization that organizes Paris Fashion Week, patiently received another round of reporters in Shiatzy Chen's flagship store on Zhongshan North Road early Saturday morning.

Grumbach is the president of the Federation Francaise de la Couture, du Pret-a-Porter des Couturiers et des Createurs de Mode, the most important organization in the French fashion industry. The Federation promotes new designers and represents the interests of fashion brands by protecting intellectual property rights and assisting in marketing and publicity.

It is best known, however, for selecting the designers that show in Paris Fashion Week and determining which design houses can bear the highly esteemed haute couture label.

Born in 1937, Grumbach has fashion in his blood — his family founded C. Mendes, which held manufacturing licenses from top haute couture houses. Grumbach's career has included stints as chief executive officer of C. Mendes, president of Yves St Laurent Inc and president of Thierry Mugler. He is also the author of *Histoires de la Mode*, an influential reference work on the history of French fashion.

Grumbach gave a talk on Jan. 9 at the Xue Xue Institute (學學文創志業) to industry insiders (and Vice President Vincent Siew, 蕭萬長) about how Taiwan could make an impact on the world fashion scene. On the topic sheet, however, was also a more pressing issue: the effects of the current global economic crisis on high fashion.

Sluggish consumer spending has made it difficult for some designers to justify the expense of a runway show, which can cost up to US\$100,000. In New York City, designers who have dropped out of that city's upcoming fall 2009 fashion shows include Vera Wang and Betsey Johnson. And in Paris, Viktor & Rolf recently eschewed the runway in favor of debuting their spring 2009 line on a Web site as "a take on what a fashion show might be in the future," the designers said. There have also been reports that representatives from high-end department stores Neiman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman will not be attending the spring/summer 2009 haute couture shows in Paris later this month.

Even before the economic crisis hit, the fashion world was undergoing several major paradigm shifts. The advent of "fast fashion," in which looks from the runway hit mass-market retail stores with a speed impossible before the advent of the Internet, has put pressure on designers to churn out new styles at a ramped-up pace. Fashion houses, including Burberry and Escada, have started introducing mid-season collections in order to put fresh looks in their stores, bringing into the question the relevance of the semiannual fashion weeks in Paris, New York City and Milan.

While he says that it will have to adapt to keep up with the new marketing cycle, Grumbach still firmly believes in Paris Fashion Week. He also defends the importance of haute couture, saying that it gives new designers a chance to present their point of view without the pressure of competing for attention from retailers during the ready-to-wear shows (the Paris haute couture shows for each season are presented several months after Fashion Week).

"Many of the important brands now have to take orders before their ready-to-wear fashion show are even presented," says Grumbach. "That is why we encourage new designers to show in the couture calendar when they are invited, so first they can take their orders and then they can put on the runway what they need to put on the runway, which is the new ideas that they have thought of."

Dressed in a sharp black Issey Miyake knit jacket, Grumbach offered more of his thoughts on the relevance of fashion weeks and the impact of corporatization and globalization on the creative process of designers.

Taipei Times: The economic crisis is forcing some designers to find alternative ways of presenting their collections, while Viktor & Rolf have pulled out of the spring 2009 fashion week in order to experiment with showing their clothing online. With all these things happening, what

is your argument for the relevance of fashion week?

Didier Grumbach: A fashion show is a necessity when there is need of a demonstration. If it is innovative, provocative or controversial, then it has to be presented on a moving body. If a collection is not provocative, then it does not need a fashion show. Newness is always slightly vulgar and you must not be frightened to be vulgar, because creation is rapture and if there is no creation, then there should not be fashion shows.

In Paris, everything we show must be exported to America. If a collection only sells in France, then we never show it on the official calendar. We don't care about the designer's nationality. We have 10 different nationalities represented on the runway. There is no nationality on the runway, there cannot be. But what is really important is to open a way for the industry to continue. If there is no creation on the runway, then the industry is wrecked. Creativity is more important than marketing; creativity is tied to a brand. The brand is more important than the product itself. When you buy a Hermes necktie for a gift, you do not care that it is twice as expensive as another necktie, because you have an entire universe in it that you relate to.

TT: There have been reports that representatives from Neiman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman are skipping the haute couture shows in Paris later this month. Fashion magazines are sending fewer editors as well. Are couture designers concerned about the impact this might have on their business?

DG: Couture is in fact not an industry, it is a *savoir faire*, a craft, and is a complement to ready-to-wear. When haute couture was organized and structured the way it was in 1944, there was no ready-to-wear as we know it today. Everything was made for you. Creative ready-to-wear did not exist. Today Chanel and Dior, the most mythical couture houses, are also at the same time among the biggest exporters of ready-to-wear, and without their ready-to-wear lines, their couture lines could not exist. Ready-to-wear is the reality, but couture is an essential element of the image. It is a service. If you love Christian Lacroix, you buy Christian Lacroix ready-to-wear, but when you have a special occasion, you have Christian Lacroix couture made for you. Couture is something that is a plus, but it is not the heart of the business and it cannot be.

TT: What is the value of haute couture then to the fashion industry?

DG: The brands that we all know were founded by artists who expressed themselves on the body rather than on a canvas. Yves St Laurent was an artist, Balenciaga was an artist and Chanel was a precursor to them. There is a big difference between couturiers and a stylist, who brings a collection into the retail market. That is a job that can be learned and that can be taught. But the creativity cannot be taught. It is a gift and something that we cannot invent.

If you have already been selling at Barneys New York for years, it means that your product is differentiated and you have brought something new to the market. In the end, fashion is an industry and the designer has to compromise, but during a certain period of the designer's life, it is art, it *must* be art, if not, there is nothing and a brand cannot last.

TT: Can you tell me about the reaction of the French fashion industry to "fast fashion"? With the Internet and quicker production cycles for retailers, many designers now feel like they need to do mid-season collections in order to stay relevant. What kind of impact will fast fashion have on the ready-to-wear industry?

DG: Fast fashion means that the same lady can buy Chanel and Zara, but at the same time there is no reason why designers of the new generation cannot compete with Zara. That is why we encourage designers, and especially the new generation of designers, to manufacture in China, and most of them do in the same way that their predecessors gave assignments to Italian factories. The world is opening up today, especially with the Internet. You can sketch a design in Paris and produce [it] in Shanghai or in Taipei.

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The economy is on the outs, but fashion is always in

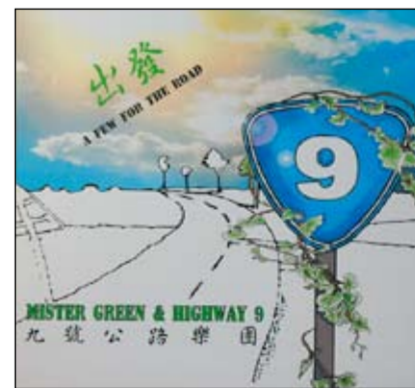
Didier Grumbach, head of the most important organization in the French fashion industry, talks about how the global economic crisis is affecting the world of style

BY CATHERINE SHU
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PHOTOS: AGENCIES

[CD REVIEWS: TAIWAN]



Rachel Liang (梁文音) Poems of Love (愛的詩篇) Universal

Rachel Liang's (梁文音) release of *Poems of Love* last month marked a relative high point in the slew of albums that have come out of the first two seasons of CTV's *One Million Star* (超級星光大道) pop idol "reality" show. The series has generated a number of success stories already, and although Liang's album has been slow in coming, it has certainly been worth the wait for her fans. Compared to other recent albums from *One Million Star* alumni, *Poems of Love* (愛的詩篇) is remarkably free of gimmicks and bombast, and relies solidly on Liang's strong, expressive voice.

The songs are very firmly placed within the mainstream of the Mandopop ballad, and all the conventional musical tropes are present and correct. The album is far from innovative, but there are some decent songs, the most successful being the playful *Peppermint and Nail Scissors* (薄荷與指甲剪), which is cute, trivial and a good deal more evocative than the more strenuous romantic lyricism that characterizes most of the other tracks.

The predominant mood of sweet sorrow is enlivened by *You Can Now Stop Loving You* (可以不愛了), a narrative ballad of young love, which has just a hint of snarkiness to give the otherwise sugar-sweet lyrics a little depth. There is also *The Most*

Joyous Thing (最幸福的事), which has a catchy chorus and just the right degree of technical difficulty to show off Liang's vocal command without any ostentatious display.

Sadly, little musical reference is made to Liang's Puyuma (卑南族) heritage, making it impossible to assess her potential as the next Samingad (紀曉君). This is disappointing to anyone who noticed Liang's moving performance of *Song of the Wonder* (流浪記) in *One Million Star*. The raw emotions of loss and alienation in that song brought out the depth of her vocal expressiveness in a way that is only very occasionally evident in this album. — IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Orangegrass (澄草) Cumulonimbus (積雨雲) Uloud Music

When Orangegrass' lead singer and guitarist Klark Chung (鍾禮學) told the *Taipei Times* in a recent interview that he liked rain, he wasn't kidding. He and his band named their first full-length album *Cumulonimbus* (積雨雲), a meteorological term for the puffy clouds that cause heavy rainstorms. Nearly every song is filled with the "wet" sounds of reverb-drenched guitar distortion and a wide palette of snare drum smacks and cymbal crashes.

Orangegrass is sometimes described as a post-rock band with a singer, which works as a description for those in a hurry. The album has a distinct

atmosphere built on a large collection of electric guitar tones, yet each song avoids over-abstractness and has a clear form. Chung's guitar pours out drifting sheets of sound that range from quiet rumbles to screeching howls, but in the end the noises serve the music, particularly on songs like *Tumbler Gold Fish* (杯子金魚).

The vocals are delivered with a combination of dreamy detachment and youthful verve. When the music gets loud in *Goodbye My Friends*, Chung sings softly but assertively, and he occasionally breaks into emo-tinged sneers on tunes such as *And Go* and *Exercise* (詞題).

Chung says he tends to come up with the structure and sonic idea for a song before writing his lyrics, which often gravitate towards loneliness and youth. The album decidedly sets its overall tone by beginning and ending with the sounds of children in a playground. In the first track, the band enters the picture with a barrage of pent-up, angst-ridden rock sounds, while on the final track the guitar sound is acoustic and resolves with a sad but hopeful sentiment.

The album is impressive for balancing consistency and variety — the "stormy" mood prevails throughout, yet each song develops in a different, satisfying direction. Sometimes the band gets a little heavy-handed; on the title track they added recorded sounds of rain and thunderstorms, as if worried their theme wouldn't get

across. But the music succeeds in speaking for itself, and with clarity.

— DAVID CHEN

Nanwan Sisters (南王姐妹花) Nanwan Sisters, Honey Voices (南王姐妹花 中古美少女篇) Taiwan Colors Music (TCM, 角頭音樂)

The Nanwan Sisters are a singing trio of close friends from Taitung. They grew up singing the songs of their native Puyuma heritage with another childhood friend, the award-winning singer-songwriter Pau-dull (陳建年), who conceived and produced this recording of both original and traditional folk songs.

The album is aptly titled — the Nanwan Sisters' harmonies are sublime and indeed sound as sweet as honey. Here Pau-dull presents their voices with a sensitive ear while displaying his talent for songwriting and composing. He penned five of the album's nine tracks in the Puyuma language and played nearly all of the backing instruments, which range from percussion and acoustic guitar to the piano and flute.

While the music is rooted in tradition and the concept is inspired from childhood memories, the album is far from a collection of old museum pieces. Pau-dull creates a fresh, contemporary sound with prudently chosen and tasteful arrangements. The acoustic guitar intro to the breathtaking and wistful *Romance of*

Two Rivers (雙河戀) hints at Irish folk music, while double bass, mandolin and an accordion lend a Mediterranean feel to *Soul Sisters* (姊妹花). Yet the sisters' voices always remain the centerpiece and the melodies have a timeless feel.

With its warmth and intimacy, this album is very much a family affair. *Mother's Wrath* (媽媽的花環) features a chorus of voices of Puyuma singers from Pau-dull and the sisters' extended musical family, including Jiajia (家家) and Leo Chen (陳永龍). The album ends with a celebratory medley of drinking and wedding tunes, which includes recorded excerpts of a village party where revelers laugh and clink their rice wine glasses.

Nanwan Sisters, Honey Voices also marks a refreshing and solid addition for TCM records, which continues to carve its niche as a label for indie-rock and Aboriginal artists who celebrate a musical spirit that might be described as uniquely Taiwanese. — DAVID CHEN

Mister Green and Highway 9 (九號公路樂團) A Few for the Road (出發) Himalaya Record Corporation (喜瑪拉雅)

Sometimes you just need a dose of straightforward, feel-good rock, and Mister Green and Highway 9 offers such grooving solace with *A Few for*

the Road. The group is led by Canadian expatriate Jason Grenier, who sang, played guitar and wrote all the songs for this debut album at his current home in Hualien County.

At the start, the lyrics are unapologetically direct, and delivered heart-on-sleeve. Anyone wishing to escape the urban grind will relate to the first track *Farewell to the City*. As Grenier sings: "Sick and tired of living my life, getting told to stop and when to go by the traffic lights/Glass, concrete and steel, block after block."

Act of Will, which playfully flips back and forth between reggae and fast rock, is a humorous song about trying to stay on the wagon: "Mary Jane I adore you/Don't be mad when I ignore you/It hurts me more than it hurts you/To say no to you."

The moods grow denser as the album progresses. *Home on the Range* treads along at a steady but weary pace, offering a tip of the hat to the Neil Young school of guitar distortion. *Oh, My Darling Boy* is an acoustic number with a classic Irish folk flavor, while *Paradise* rocks out with American-heartland charm.

The songs are sung mostly in English, but Grenier makes sure to express his affection for his adopted homeland as he sings on the final track, *Angels*: "Taiwan/This song I give to you/Beauty and freedom (台灣/這首歌給妳/美麗與自由)." — DAVID CHEN