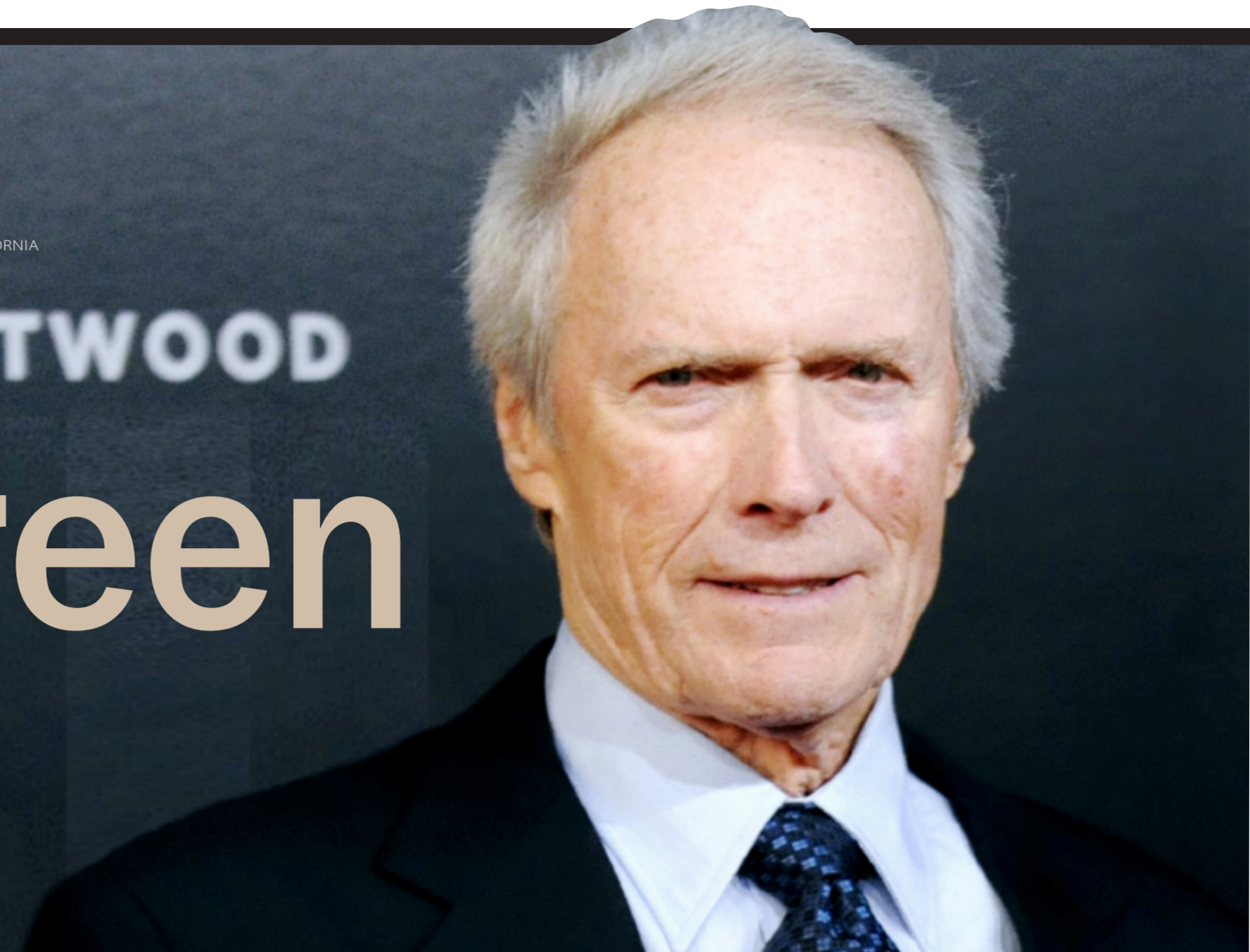


BY EMMA BROCKES
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CLINT EASTWOOD

Ol' green eyes



Clint Eastwood, one of the last American heroes, talks about films, politics, aging ... and the truth about that spat with Spike Lee

People who have worked with Clint Eastwood invariably talk about the first time he rang and the effect of his creaky, whispery voice on their nervous system. In a studio on the Warner Brothers lot in Burbank, California, his arrival is counted down in paces between the coffee urn and the biscuit tray, while outside people queue for a chatshow next door and executives glide to lunch in their golf buggies. Eastwood enters with an awkward, loping gait, as from another era. He has made films of every stripe in the past 10 years, but for most of us he will always be that man: who starts a fight in a saloon, who defends a lady's honor, who, now that Paul Newman is gone, is one of the last American heroes. Or, as he puts it with conscientious self-mockery and a flash of his green, green eyes, "the jerk from the plains."

Longevity in Hollywood can inspire embarrassing devotion and Eastwood, heading towards 80, finds much of what comes his way unseemly. Men have a hard time comporting themselves in his presence; women make regrettable observations about his green eyes. The myth is so established, one forgets that in the 1960s and early 1970s, he made a lot of schlocky, forgettable westerns as well as classics such as *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*. The cowboy, marshal or gunslinger whose idea of showing emotion is to shift a cigar from one side of his mouth to the other is a heroic type we are supposed to have outgrown. And yet the glamour persists, entwined as it is with ideas of what it is to be American and a nostalgia, perhaps, for less officious eras.

Eastwood didn't say much in those films, but what he did say — "You didn't hear the lady, did you, boy?" "Cool it, cowboy," "Next time I'll knock your damn head off" — compacted over time into legend. Even the most banal line — "Put your pants on, chief" — was transformed by Eastwood's growl into something sounding like wisdom.

Today he settles in his director's chair with the cool,



Angelina Jolie, above left, stars in Clint Eastwood's film *Changeling*. PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

polite detachment he reserves, one imagines, for outlaws and journalists. There are spots of high color on his cheeks that make him look, oddly, rather vulnerable and take the menace out of his pointy incisors. Eastwood's tough-guy image was always leavened by something soft at the edges, the beauty spot above his lip, the fact that he was, throughout the 1960s, very obviously a man who got as much use out of his hairdryer as Warren Beatty. He worked hard to break the mould of that early career in a way he now jokes about. Eastwood is about to cast for a film about Nelson Mandela, adapted from John Carlin's book, and when I ask who will play him, he looks devilish and says, "I'm going to play him. I'm going to show you my versatility." (It will actually be Morgan Freeman. "Perfect casting for Mandela.")

One way or another, Eastwood's interests always seem to come back to the issue of heroism, particularly to the unsympathetic hero. In his new film, *Gran Torino*, he plays Walt Kowalski, a trigger-happy, cantankerous old bigot

(imagine if Henry Fonda in *On Golden Pond* had been armed) who learns over time to love his Asian neighbors more than his petulant family and to make a great sacrifice for them. It sounds corny, but it's a better film than *Million Dollar Baby*, the sentimental Oscar-winner he directed in 2004 and in which he played a similar role. Once Eastwood stops snarling and overacting — a pitfall of directing oneself — he turns in a touching performance and the film is funny and moving and unexpectedly shocking. Did he want to play Walt from the off?

"Yeah."
"Yeah?"
"Yeah."

Right. Eventually, he continues: "Yeah, I liked the dilemmas he had to go through. I liked the message of antique America that is maybe obsolete. Walt may be obsolete." He laughs gently. "But he does learn new things. And that's what makes it interesting. You take a guy who's way out opinionated, insulting to equal opportunity" — this sounds like a phrase he's had to adjust to — "an insulter, and you put him with people where he's antagonistic as hell. And then all of a sudden he looks in the mirror and says, 'I have more in common with these people than my own spoilt, rotten family.' He's realizing these folks like having him around, even though he's not particularly on the surface likable."

The film nervously calibrates Walt's bigotry by going overboard with examples of affectionate racial mockery between Irish, Italians and Poles to show that, you know, there are levels to these things. I ask whether he was anxious about getting this tone right. "I wasn't anxious about anything. I figure one thing when you get to my age is, what can they do to ya?" Likewise, he bats away being overlooked at the Oscars. *Gran Torino* was number one at the US box office but didn't get a single nomination. "I have had three films nominated out of the last five I've made. I just make the

film the best I can. The rest is political stuff and posturing. I'm not terribly good at that. I think our message was as good as any message out there this year. There we are."

At some point, the reticence of Dirty Harry and Joe Kidd turned into the old-age misanthropy of Walt Kowalski and Frankie Dunn, and when, in 2000, Eastwood made *Space Cowboys* with Tommy Lee Jones and Donald Sutherland, the joke was it should have been called Grumpy Old Astronauts. At 78, he is still wiry and tough looking, but his posture is bad and his famous whisper sounds, occasionally, like the frailty of age. "Eighty is just a number," he says. "A lot of people are old at 40." No twinges of vanity when he sees himself on screen? "It's too late for vanity. If I was 30, maybe, I'd say, 'Hey, that's not a good angle.' But there is no good angle now. So you just kinda accept it and go ahead."

Eastwood is kept young, perhaps, by his family; he has seven children who range in age from 12 to their early 40s. The 12-year-old daughter, Morgan, lives with him and his second wife, Dina Ruiz, a former TV anchorwoman from Arizona. He married his first wife, Maggie Johnson, when he was 21 and had two children with her. They didn't divorce for 30 years, during which time he had a child with Roxanne Tunis, two with Jacelyn Reeves and one with Frances Fisher, while conducting a long relationship with the actor Sondra Locke. I wonder if Morgan thinks he's cool or embarrassing. Eastwood looks surprised. "I think she thinks I'm a cool dad. We get along very well. I have a teenage daughter as well. And I think they think I'm all right. I'm not totally objective. I don't think they think of me as a guy who should be their grandfather. I used to joke about it: that my kids didn't give me any grandchildren, so I just had my own grandchildren."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

[CD REVIEWS: TAIWAN]



The White Eyes (白目)
Get My Body If You Want It
Himalaya Record Corporation (喜馬拉雅)



LTK Commune (濁水溪公社)
Sapphire (藍寶石)
I Love Bass (愛貝思有限公司)



Cheer Chen (陳綺貞)
Immortal (太陽)
Avex



Fish Liang (梁靜茹)
Fall in Love and Songs (靜茹&情歌—別再為他流淚)
B'in Music

Here's a band to watch out for. The White Eyes play garage rock but avoid the trap of getting lost in their own noirish, playful sound. Keeping everyone's attention is lead singer Gao Xiao-gao (高小糕), whose girlish voice leads a swirling storm of electric guitars and retro-punk beats.

No No No starts off this five-song EP and is a fun, emotionally dynamic number. The band's sonic DNA gets laid out in the first 20 seconds: a fuzzy distorted rock riff from the guitar on the left, a laser ray sound from the guitar on the right, then a "Wha-oh!" from Gao, lifting the song into a tension-building groove that explodes into grungy angst. Her voice turns sultry at the bridge, and her moaning is both creepy and sexy.

The droning, hypnotic *Narcissism Personality Disorder* (自戀人格異常) builds into a frantic groove that hides ska and funk beats underneath. The song, a character sketch of a person who feels suffocated in a relationship, resolves nicely by leaving listeners to wonder about a "secret" yet to be told.

Gao shows promise for her versatile vocals, which no doubt played a role when the White Eyes won the Ho-Hai-Yan Rock Festival's (海洋音樂祭) battle of the bands in 2008. She sings with brash,

youthful verve and thankfully never falls into gimmicky cutesiness. For its part, the band is tight when it needs to be, and treats the songs with the right balance of roughness and polish.

Comparisons to Sonic Youth and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs are inevitable in light of the band's overall sound, but there are hints of Taiwanese indie rock in their music, particularly in the dreamy musing and post-rock stylings of *A More Beautiful Life* (多美好的人生) and *All the Things*.

The White Eyes say they plan to release a full-length album later this year. Until then, this EP will satisfy a craving for fun, raw rock 'n' roll.

— DAVID CHEN

LTK Commune's (濁水溪公社) new album, *Sapphire*, is more of the same. But that's a good thing, especially if you're a fan of the group, considered by many to be the first real *taike* (台客) rockers. LTK's penchant for combining outrageous stage antics, working-class karaoke pop, modern rock and social satire has made them one of Taiwan's most beloved non-mainstream bands for a decade.

The album's hodge-podge of musical styles offers a glimpse of the band's

musical sense of humor. One of the album's early tracks, *The Answer* (無解), sounds like corny Chinese pop straight out of a Hong Kong detective flick. *Useless Youth* (青春無用) flaunts raunchy rock riffs and synthesizer sounds that scream 1980s.

The funky *Cold Summer Night* (冰冷夏夜) sounds like it belongs on the sound track for a spaghetti western starring Taiwanese gangsters, if there were such a thing. *Why I Exist* (何必有我) takes LTK to their noise rock and punk roots, while *Psychedelic Hill* (迷幻山崗), one of the album's catchiest tracks, mixes late 1960s Beatles, country rock and indie pop.

Underneath the humor there are strains of social commentary. In *Homesickness* (出頭有機會) a laborer tries to remain optimistic while out of work, but the song's hokey pop hooks make his predicament seem all the more bitter.

In terms of overall sound, *Sapphire* is more refined than the band's earlier output, with a few slick horn arrangements and clean pop production. Some die-hard fans might pine for a return to the punk-nakasi fusion of albums like 1999's classic *Taik's Eye for an Eye* (台客的復仇,

literally "Revenge of the Taiké").

But LTK's twisted, zany spirit remains as strong as ever, and *Sapphire's* extensive liner notes provide full English translations of the Mandarin and Hoklo lyrics for fans to soak it all in.

— DAVID CHEN

Cheer Chen (陳綺貞) started small, but with her new album *Immortal* (太陽) she is quite clearly standing tall on the Mando-pop stage. That's not to say she has completely lost her singer-songwriter street cred, but *Immortal* is a relatively big production, containing tracks with orchestra and all the effects of a professional studio.

There is one simple acoustic number, *Going to England Next Week* (下個星期去英國), which harks back to Chen's early career of simple lyrics set to guitar. A song about the breakup of a long-distance relationship, it is both contemporary and nostalgic for the days of the campus song, and has a matter-of-factness untinged by self-pity.

The majority of tracks go for a bigger impact, using orchestral and studio effects. One of the most appealing of these is *The Edge* (魚), with its catchy chorus and sophisticated lyrics, which manages to be introspective without

being self-indulgent.

In this album, the former philosophy major is often tempted into rather woolly cerebration about the meaning of life and love.

Another black mark is that the vocal style in a number of tracks is eerily similar to Faye Wong's (王菲) in hits such as *You're Happy (So I Am Happy)* (你快樂所以我快樂). This is particularly evident in the opening number *Rebirth* (手的預言) and *Take Away* (一首歌，讓你帶回去), with their listless, enervated delivery. Chen does this quite well, but the similarities tempt one to dismiss the songs as too hopelessly derivative in style to warrant close attention.

The album as a whole, with English song titles (which bear no relation to the titles in Chinese) hinting at deeper philosophical concerns, comes over as just a tad pretentious, but is worth a listen for a lyricism that reflects a more thoughtful attitude to the standard Mando-pop love ballad.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Aprotege of music impresario Jonathan Lee (李宗盛), Fish Liang is one of the more attractive products of Taiwan's music industry. Although she was born in Malaysia, Liang's musical career has

mostly developed in Taiwan. She now has nine albums to her credit and has established a reputation as a master of the love song.

The lushly romantic opening track *Don't Cry for Him Anymore* (別再為他流淚) is rather blandly conventional with its piano and plucked string accompaniment, but it's followed up by the playful *No Ifs* (沒有如果), which is a clever mix of vocal and instrumental styles, shifting from a boppy chorus, nodding toward electronica and letting rip with nostalgic solo riffs from guitar. Then it's back to piano and strings with *Hold Me Tightly* (用力抱著), before shifting again into rhythm and blues-tinged duet with compatriot Gary Tsao (曹格). And so the album rings the changes, covering plenty of stylistic ground and proving that Liang is very much here to stay.

The stripped down number *That's Why Love Is That Way* (愛情之所以為愛情) shows off Liang's proficiency in handling the shifts in key and changes in pace beloved of the KTV cognoscenti. Lyrically, *Fall in Love and Songs* makes little effort to break new ground, and while this is a much more assured production than something like Cheer Chen's *Immortal*, it is also a lot less interesting.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW