

Too much, too young

He betrayed women and boxing and today is haunted by voices in his head.
A repentant Mike Tyson bares his soul

BY SIMON HATTENSTONE
THE GUARDIAN, LOS ANGELES

The temperature seems to drop by 20 degrees when Mike Tyson and his minders enter the room. "Have I got to be nice to this guy?" he asks the filmmaker James Toback. "No," Toback replies. "You can be as hostile as you like."

Yet Tyson doesn't seem to have the energy to muster up much hostility. He is wearing a baggy pinstripe suit that fails to disguise what's going on underneath. His belly squeezes out of his black shirt, and he can barely drag his size 14 feet along with him. His almost-beard, white flecked, is more oversight than design. His head slumps to the side as if his massive pit bull neck can't quite bear its weight. Everything is such an effort. He speaks quietly, lethargically, like a man who has been on a heavy dose of antidepressants for too long. His Maori facial tattoo, once so warrior-like, looks benign today. He could be Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*, the half-gentle giant who strokes the things he loves to death.

"Hello, legend," I say. Tyson looks confused, uneasy, says he doesn't take compliments well. But, for good or bad, Mike Tyson is a legend. Many experts would argue that he was the greatest heavyweight boxing champion — or at least should have been. Sure, he didn't have Muhammad Ali's wit or grace, but as a knockout puncher, none could match Iron Mike. He won his first 19 professional fights by a knockout, he was the youngest world heavyweight champion at 20, unbeaten in three years, so far ahead of the pack that there were no rivals. Then things started to go wrong.

His former wife, the actor Robin Givens, went on television in 1988 alongside him and announced that he was a terrifying manic depressive and that their marriage was pure hell. In 1990 he lost his first fight to 42-1 underdog Buster Douglas. He'd become lazy and complacent, seduced by alcohol and drugs. In 1992 he was convicted of rape and deviant sexual misconduct, and served three years in jail. It should have destroyed him, and he might well argue that it did, but, amazingly, within a year of his release he regained his world title. Then, once again, he chucked it all away.

Since retiring four years ago, Tyson has done little with his life. He has boxed in a few exhibitions, put on more weight, got in trouble with the law again: in 2007, he was convicted of drunk-driving after almost crashing into a police car. Three bags of cocaine were found on him, and he was given a day in jail, three years' probation and ordered into rehab. That is when Toback, an old friend, asked Tyson, now 42, if he could make a film about his life.

The result is extraordinary — pretty much a 90-minute monologue, some of it stream of consciousness. What emerges is a man who finds it impossible to censor himself. He talks vividly about growing up with a promiscuous mother who might have been a prostitute and about a father he never knew, stealing drugs from dealers as a 12-year-old, detention center and being taken under the wing of the boxing coach Cus D'Amato, all while he was barely into his teens. Tyson is not a man who went off the rails. He was born on the skids. Somehow, and all too briefly, he managed to transcend his traumatic destiny.

We arrange to meet in the Hollywood Hills at the opulent house of another filmmaker friend, Brett Ratner. There are Warhols in the toilet, Bacons in the kitchen, Giacomettis on the sideboard, Toback at the center of the conversation, but as yet no Tyson. "We could be here a while — Mike's been held up." Toback and his entourage grin at each other. It's not the first time the boxer has delayed them.

Toback is disarmingly honest about why Tyson makes such a great subject. "The movie is like the aftermath of an earthquake. It's Mike standing there amid the rubble and wondering why he has survived. Ultimately, what I feel comes through is a struggle to justify his continuing existence because the highlights of his life are gone. Usually tragedy ends in death, but here's a tragic figure who has survived. And now that I'm here, what do I do?"

Their friendship goes back 23 years. Toback, an experimental filmmaker obsessed with all things sexual, had just finished making *The Pick-Up Artist* with Robert Downey Jr when Tyson popped into the wrap party. "He was 18, hadn't become world champion yet. He'd heard about the orgies in [American football player] Jim Brown's house and he was like, 'Tell me about those orgies.' Then he wanted to know about the acid trips." Toback felt that young Tyson was almost too curious.

Tyson arrives a couple of hours late. Years ago, there would have been dozens in his entourage, now there are only three. One stands over me, legs splayed, eyeballing me as I talk to Tyson. It's intimidating, but also quite funny — rather than protecting Tyson, he seems to be making sure I don't escape. It's a hot winter's day in LA. We are in the garden, the sun is beating and a rivulet of sweat is running down Tyson's nose. I ask what he has learned about himself from the film.

"When I watched it alone, I realized why people had certain opinions about me. When I was upset, I got upset like everybody else, but

I'm an extremist, so when I got upset, I took it to the next level. I took it to the level of being almost violently upset. And I realize, if I was sitting next to that guy, he'd make me nervous. That guy was impulsive. Unpredictable." He wants to believe — he has to believe — that is the old Tyson.

What shocked him most? "I thought I was a dick when I was crying." This is Tyson the macho man speaking, wary of losing face in front of his buddies. But that's one of the most moving moments in the film, I say — he's talking about how he was bullied as a boy. "Well, that's your opinion, of course. Only." He talks quietly, with that familiar lisp, but the answer carries a hint of menace.

As a boy, Tyson was small, fat and bespectacled, weak with asthma and alone but for the pigeons he bought with stolen money. When kids picked on him, he just ran away. One day an older bully took one of his pigeons and popped its neck in front of him. That was the first time Tyson hit out. He surprised himself because he was good at fighting, enjoyed it, found it empowering. After that, he says, people wanted to be his friend.

"I'm a good guy, I'm a good brother. There's nothing wrong with me. Just don't push me too far, you know. I'm sure everyone has a breaking point in their lives." It's hard to know whether he's addressing the old bullies or me. Tyson's speech has a hypnotic, incantatory rhythm to it. It was D'Amato who transformed his life.

After being picked up by police at 12 with US\$1,500 in his pockets, Tyson was sent to a detention center, where he learned to box. On his release he was put in touch with D'Amato, a coach in his 70s who had discovered Rocky Marciano and Floyd Patterson. D'Amato welcomed him into his home, fed him, educated him, trained him, disciplined him, loved him. Tyson had never known anybody like this. The two became inseparable.

"Me and Cus were two megalomaniacs sitting there talking about our future, what we could do. You understand? Two guys — we didn't have anything — talking about what we could do. I imagine myself being 13, 14, watching a great fighter fight, talking about why he is a great fighter, and asking Cus, 'Cus, how could I beat that guy if I was to fight him? What would you tell me to do to beat that guy?'" D'Amato told him that becoming a champion was more a mental and spiritual discipline than a physical one.

In 1982, aged 14, Tyson went to the junior Olympics and broke any number of records, including the fastest knockout (eight seconds).

D'Amato told him he needn't worry about being bullied again, and Tyson knew he was right. He chokes on his tears. "Coz I knew I would fuckin' kill them if they fucked with me."

The most important thing he learned, he says, is that he wasn't dependent on others for his survival. "I didn't need to take the handouts. It was just psychological motivation, refusing to accept what you had always accepted, refusing to accept welfare, refusing to accept being bullied any more, refusing to live your life unlawfully." As he talks, the man who minutes ago was paralyzed by uncertainty radiates a frightening conviction. "I took it to extreme levels. Success is something you work hard at, you put your nose to the grindstone and you do everything you can. You're hungry, you're grinding, and you're still not guaranteed success. So I took it to another level. I said, 'I'm going to die to get this. I'm going to dedicate my whole life to it. Second place is not going to do it, I'm going to be champion. And being champion is not going to do it, I have to be the champion that nobody will ever forget to the end of this planet.'"

Millions dream of being champion. Did it feel good being one of the few who succeeded? The diffidence returns: "That's where it gets complex. It gets tricky. I think anybody can do it because I don't think much of myself. I think if I can do it, anybody can do it." The trouble is, he says, he hears so many voices in his head, and they are so often at war with each other.

I ask if he feels more pride for the great

things he achieved or shame for the bad things. "I don't know. Both become irrelevant. By thinking about the bad things, I start to feel really low and depressed. When I start to think about the good things, I just get pride and egotistical. So I try to leave them both alone."

Maybe the great tragedy in Tyson's life is that by the time he became world champion, D'Amato had died. He lost his moral compass and found himself surrounded by acolytes who encouraged his excess. He bought houses by the dozen, he had more than 130 cars, he bought lavish gifts (usually cars and jewelry) for women who had sweet-talked him for a couple of minutes. At his peak, he could command US\$30 million for a night's work, and he earned more than US\$300 million in his career. By 2003, he was bankrupt.

Now, he worries the film might be too successful and he will end up with "too much money and pussy" again. "It's pretty dangerous. I become accustomed to it." He has either had no money or a ridiculous amount in his life, and he feels safer with none. Does he miss the drama of his old life? "No, I was addicted to drama."

In the film he calls Desiree Washington, the woman he was convicted of raping, "that wretched swine of a woman" and insists he was not guilty.

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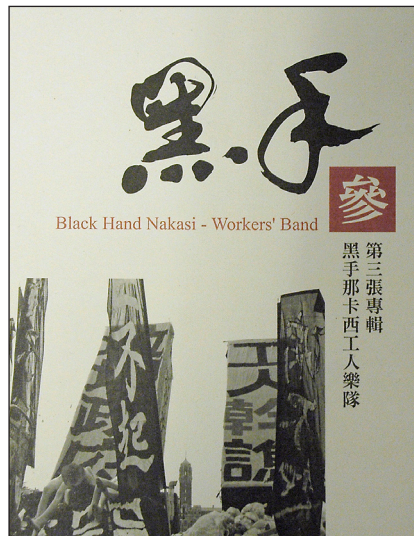
Black Hand Nakasi Workers' Band

(黑手那卡西工人樂隊)
Black Hand III (黑手那卡西工人樂隊第三輯)
Self-released
www.nakasi.org

Black Hand Nakasi Workers' Band (黑手那卡西工人樂隊) is a group of labor activists who devote their musical talents to their cause. They see themselves as a bridge between folk music and social activism: they regularly hold music workshops to help Taiwan's working classes "use their 'language' to sing out, speak out."

On this third album, Black Hand Nakasi acts as a backing band for people like Chang Hsi-chu (張錫助), a truck driver who wrote and sang *Monologue of a Truck Driver* (司機的心痛).

The song begins as a mournful nakasi melody, with Chang crooning in Hoklo about his grueling work shifts. The tune grows into a loud rock tune full of heavy metal riffs, with Chang swearing to carry on for the sake of his family.



The liner notes include passable English translations and provide information on each song, which often consists of personal testimonies from the album's participants.

Do My Music (老子搞音樂), written by parking attendant Wang Ming-hui (王明惠) with the help of Black Hand Nakasi, could serve as Black's theme song.

Wang sings about discovering song-writing: "What's a 'note'?/I don't understand 'key'/Then there's 'chord'/Add to that 'beat'/What are these things?" (啥是note/不動key/他們到底是什麼東西?/還有chord加上beat這些又是什麼玩意?).

In the song's chorus, he sings that Do Re Mi Fa So is a "good weapon that you can keep on using." The tune is spirited and its nakasi-flavored rock instrumentation has a "Taiwanese flavor" that *taike* (台客) rockers could only wish for.

In addition to the slightly dated folk and rock that dominates the album, a few modern idioms get thrown into the mix, such as *I Want My Day Off* (我要休假). The tune is an electronica/hip-hop number with rousing choruses from Indonesian, Vietnamese, Thai and Filipino workers, who each take turns blurting out the song's title in their respective languages.

Although a few songs are rough around the edges, this album could be seen as honest folk music without romance or pretense.

— DAVID CHEN

Tizzy Bac

If I See Hell I Won't Fear the Devil (如果看見地獄，我就不怕魔鬼)
Wonder Music (響的音樂)
www.tizzybac.com

Tizzy Bac has always been one of a kind in Taiwan's indie scene. The band's piano-driven pop has made it



stand out among noise-loving punks, metal heads and post-rock shoegazers. The trio's third studio release, *If I See Hell I Won't Fear the Devil* (如果看見地獄，我就不怕魔鬼), shows a band more comfortable than ever with its quirky but catchy pop-rock sound.

The title track, borrowed from a sentence written by a 10-year-old girl in her grammar homework, best expresses the overall mood of the album. Playful electronica beats and synthesizer sounds evoke childlike innocence, while the eerie hum of the musical saw sets a fearful tone in the background. The song builds into a rocking crescendo and resolves with wistful melodrama worthy of a Queen song.

In a recent interview with the *Taipei Times*, vocalist and pianist Chen Hui-ting (陳惠婷) cited pop culture movies as one of her songwriting inspirations. This is evident in the album's cinematic opener, *Iron Bac* (鐵之貝克), which rocks with dreamy wonder and builds into a series of emotional bursts. On the refrains, Chen's graceful piano riffs grow chaotic and bounce back and

forth between bassist Hsu Che-yu's (許哲毓) driving, distorted bass lines and drummer Lin Chien-yuan's (林前源) exuberant cymbal crashes.

A band without a guitarist can be a relief but also a challenge, and Tizzy Bac does well in this regard. On *Heather*, Chen's piano adds a sense of flowing space to the half punk-, half prog rock-flavored backdrop by Lin and Hsu. Hsu employs electronic trickery on 1,000 *Whites of My Eyes* and *The Last Confession* by using an electric guitar simulator on his bass, but the effect blends in seamlessly with the song.

Chen's siren-like voice and flawless delivery is showcased in *Danny is Gay* (丹尼爾是Gay) and *Playoff* (季後賽). She sings with intensity and precision, yet has a touch that always comes across as light and soothing. While the English lyrics to the rock ballad *Shall We Dance* may not immediately resonate with native speakers, her voice remains captivating.

— DAVID CHEN

Three Day Bender

Truce
Self-released
Myspace.com/threedaybendertaiwan



Three Day Bender, an expat trio from Taichung, offers a taste of its blues-flavored pop rock with this debut offering.

The six-song EP opens and ends with two versions of *Mac*, featuring a soulful vocal duet sung by drummer, guitarist and songwriter Pat Reid and bassist Catharine Brown.

Reid, who produced the EP, keeps Taiwanese audiences in mind with a Mandarin song, *I Have Love* (我有愛). Its heart-on-sleeve lyrics look cheesy on paper (You are beautiful/I can't be without you/Love me/I love you, 妳是很美麗，我無法沒有妳/Love me/我愛妳), but the song works. Reid avoids being sappy and delivers the vocals dark and sweet.

Christopher Bailey's impressive electric guitar playing is showcased on the EP's title track, with hair-raising vocal harmonies from the band. The band cooks on *Bender*, a funky swamp blues written by Brown, with some searing harmonica solos by Greg Ford.

At the end of the day, *Truce* feels thin, only because the songs are catchy and leave you wanting more.

— DAVID CHEN

Rice and Love (愛吃飯)

Hohak Band (好客樂隊)
Wind Records (風潮音樂)

Rice and Love (愛吃飯), the new album by Chen Guan-yu (陳冠宇) and the Hohak Band (好客樂隊), derives from a worthy ambition to celebrate the simple life close to nature and to push away the artifice and toxic environment of the big city. There is a combination of music and an ideological imperative of a better, cleaner life that is made amply clear from the list of organic rice farms listed as part of the liner notes.

It is a useful and interesting list, more



so indeed that the postcard-perfect pictures of Chen in various farmer-like poses in the paddy fields of Taitung.

Rice and Love (愛吃飯) is more about rice than it is about music, and though it is pleasant enough to listen too, the album has such a total lack of urgency that it is in constant danger of becoming elevator music. This is exaggerated further by the bossa nova rhythm behind the rather anodyne acoustic guitar, which is the dominant musical style on the album.

Even a number like *Stamping the Rice Fields* (踩下去), with its attempt at the repetitive beat of a planting song, fails to generate much energy.

"I'll push my trouble into the ground," Chen sings, but clearly the troubles are not very great, and the comparison has a preppy self-regard that verges on the annoying. Despite its ideological commitment to a return to the land, the music has none of the ties to traditional rustic music that can be found in the early works of *Labor Exchange* (交工樂隊), in which Chen started his musical career. The tag line of the album is "Rice: a staple for the body; Music: a staple for the soul." Unfortunately, Chen provides listeners with a pretty thin diet.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW