

Japanese composer and musician Yoshihiro Hanno made his fifth visit to Taipei early this month to help promote Lee Chi-yuan's new film, *Beautiful Crazy*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ATOM CINEMA

ENOUGH COMPUTER



Yoshihiro Hanno began writing music for films in 1998 with 'Flowers of Shanghai' and is well known for his forays into electronica. Ho Yi asks him about his latest cinematic score and finds out why he's no longer keen on digital music

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

A jazz fan from the age of 10 and a member of an experimental hip-hop group in his youth, Japanese musician and composer Yoshihiro Hanno made a splash on the electronica scene in 1997 when he released the highly acclaimed album *King of May* on Belgium label Sub Rosa.

Since then, Hanno has built an illustrious career based in Tokyo and Paris and enjoyed a substantial following in Europe. His sound has been described variously as jazz, dub, hip-hop, house, minimal, samba and contemporary classical music.

Hanno entered the movie industry when he was invited to work on Hou Hsiao-hsien's (侯孝賢) *Flowers of Shanghai* (海上花) in 1998. He went on to compose for Hou's *Millennium Mambo* (千禧曼波, 2001) and Chinese director Jia Zhangke's (賈樟柯) *Platform* (站台, 2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (任逍遙, 2002) and *24 City* (24城記, 2008).

In Taiwanese director Lee Chi-yuan's (李啟源) *Beautiful Crazy* (亂青春), which was released commercially on Friday of last week, the 41-year-old musician uses the piano and string instruments to set the mood for Lee's cinematic poem about three teenage girls and their friendship, desires and betrayals.

Taipei Times: What drew you to the project of 'Beautiful Crazy' in the first place?

Yoshihiro Hanno: The delicate emotional expressions among the three actresses, the equally delicate camera movements, and the

inseparable relation between the two.

TT: How did the film inspire you to create the score?

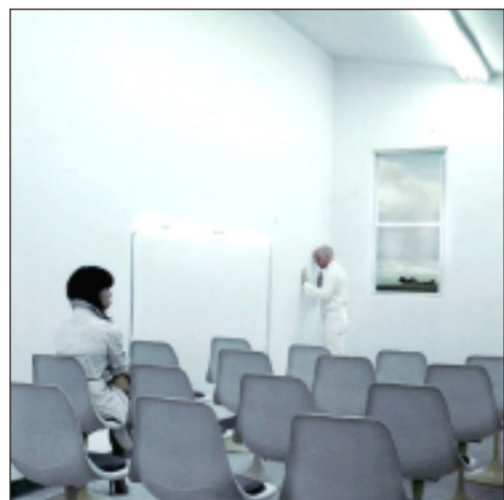
YH: When I compose for a film, I pay close attention to the sense of temperature and humidity the image exudes. It [*Beautiful Crazy*] inspired me to express musically the feeling of restlessness and agitation experienced by the three adolescent girls.

TT: [Describe] your experiences working with directors Hou, Jia and Lee?

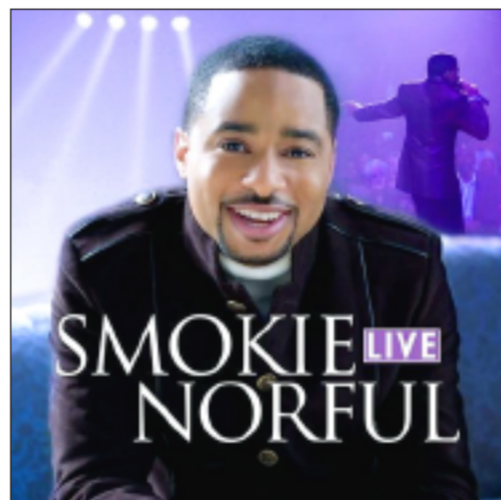
YH: Hollywood movies feed you sad music when you are supposed to feel sad and happy tunes when you should feel happy. [Hou, Jia and Lee], of course, don't work that way. The visuals in their works are strong enough. Our job is to figure out together where music is needed and make the image complete with the audio. When Lee works, he thinks of the story and music simultaneously. So he already has a clear idea about when and where the music should come out beforehand. Jia is the most meticulous and detailed among the three when it comes to giving instructions. Hou is the most challenging to work with because he doesn't even tell me what he wants. The only thing he keeps telling me is: "Just do whatever you like," which makes me less sure about what I should do (laughing).

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The Future Will Come
The Juan MacLean
DFA



Live
Smokie Norful
EMI Gospel



Unstoppable
Rascal Flatts
Lyric Street

The looming future is a mere diversion on the Juan MacLean's second album, a dance-floor odyssey with subversively pensive designs. "Left me for the great unknown/Lost you to oblivion," Nancy Whang sings more than four minutes into the opening track, *The Simple Life*. Her words, floating mournfully over a disco beat and a pulsating bass line, are among the first on the album. She goes on to voice a more direct complaint — "Now you're gone," repeated as a refrain — that seizes on pain in the present tense.

The Juan MacLean, which formed early this decade, hasn't always been so forthright with feelings. As an outlet for the electronic programmer John MacLean, the group was once inclined toward vogueish robotic posturing, as on *Less Than Human*, its 2005 debut. Some of that coldness resurfaces here, most plainly on a track called *A New Bot*. But MacLean has also turned his ear to human relations, a reliable source of tension. He's singing much more and making no discernible effort to dress up his unschooled voice.

MacLean's production on the album combines synthesizers with live instruments, for a grittier sound than before. His working band features Whang, the drummer Jerry Fuchs and the members of a duo called Holy Ghost!

(emphasis theirs). The group's clearest inspiration is early-1980s synthpop, by the Human League and others.

Among the borrowed elements is a male-female vocal tag team with accusatory undertones. *One Day* and *The Station* efficiently nail a he-said, she-said dynamic; another track is called, plainly, *Accusations*. In Whang, a member of the dance-punk band LCD Soundsystem, MacLean has a formidable opponent, someone who can sing the line "I get so emotional these days" with disquieting cool. "Just because I'm flesh and blood/Doesn't make me weak or fragile," she states elsewhere, credibly.

By contrast MacLean's attempt at naked vulnerability, on a ballad called *Human Disaster*, may be this album's biggest misstep. But at least that song dissolves right into a near-perfect closer, *Happy House*, which was released as a single last year. Here, riding a giddy house groove, Whang once again makes her feelings known. "You are so excellent," she sings, and once again the future barely registers as a concern.

The second track on Smokie Norful's new album, *Live*, seems to know how you anticipate and absorb patterns in music much better than you do.

Norful, a smooth but powerful singer in the Donny Hathaway mold, is the

pastor of a church outside Chicago, though he recorded this album at a 2,100-seat theater in Memphis, Tennessee. At the beginning of the song he sounds as if he were about to sermonize.

"I will bless the Lord at all times," he proclaims (here the drummer starts counting off the tempo on the high-hat cymbal), "and his praises shall" (a slugging, windup drum pattern) "continually" (the horn line begins) "be in my mouth."

It's on. The melodic line, full of funk, repeats twice, and the composed core of the song, *I Will Bless the Lord*, begins.

Then Norful rap-sings a chorus about fighting the enemies of faith, with the horns and keyboards punching out a snakey shape stressing the upbeats, a counterpoint to the eighth-note swing of his delivery.

The chorus answers in persevering staccato, repeating the song's opening words. So much information already, but here comes a gorgeous, moody Stevie Wonder-like bridge with a key change, then eight bars of transition, delaying the re-entry into the song, and Norful says: "I don't know about you, but I will bless the Lord at all times! And his praises shall continually be in my mouth!"

The audience has been given its spot: It uncorks. (The recording engineer

boosts the cheering.) But there are still three and a half minutes left of call and response, increasingly ambitious, between Norful and the chorus. It could be 15 or 20 minutes; it doesn't matter. You've been dealt in.

Gospel may be the last remaining pop genre in which live albums make sense and mean something, because it operates on a built-in context of real time. Even a slick concert recording like this one refers to the tension-and-release patterns of a church service, and the vamps, transitions and intermittent sermons are part of its strength.

Live, Norful's first record in three years, contains all new material. He wrote at least part of most of the songs here, except for Lionel Richie's *Jesus Is Love*, and the album includes guest appearances from the singers Tye Tribbett and Heather Headley, which aren't its best moments. Not every song blows out like *I Will Bless the Lord*. (*No One Else* comes close, using the pop-gospel convention of raising the key a half-step at regular intervals, suggesting ascension.)

But even the ballad *Dear God*, with Norful singing and playing piano, accompanied at first only by strings and chorus, moves into flyaway magic. He stops to preach; the chorus returns to sing, "I am totally set free." Norful keeps

stepping further into superman territory, drawing out single words into longer melodic runs. He is free from depression, from heartache, from disappointment, from trials, tribulations, worry, doubt, "the enemy," "my haters."

Two songs on *Unstoppable*, the sixth studio album by the pop-country behemoth Rascal Flatts, prominently feature voice-mail messages left undelivered as reminders of how things once were. Another involves a phone call that's never going to come. These aren't commentaries on the persistence or obsolescence of technology, only a reminder that you can be let down even from a distance, and that Rascal Flatts lives for the letdown.

Relationships cut short before their time have long animated this group, which thrives in that space just after the rupture: set adrift, bleating for help, hoping sheer volume can heal the wounds. It has worked in the past, making for some of the group's most transcendent songs: *What Hurts the Most*, which laments things left unsaid; and *These Days*, which puts a brave face on remembering the one who got away.

The front man, Gary LeVox, is a shameless, flexible singer, best when at the edge of collapse. But even though the songs on *Unstoppable* largely stick

to familiar lyrical themes (the best is *Here Comes Goodbye*, written in part by the former *American Idol* contestant Chris Sligh), LeVox sounds uncommitted; there's no tension in his voice.

Unfortunately, the album is filled with blank and unspecific emotions that, without LeVox's pyrotechnics, are distractingly dull. Worse, when Rascal Flatts does emphasize details, it sounds derivative. *Close*, with its 1980s-rock guitar work, recalls Keith Urban, and *Summer Nights* ("Let that Igloo cooler/Mark your piece of paradise") is a crude rip from Kenny Chesney's flip-flop collection.

For Rascal Flatts — the most region- and style-neutral of all mainstream country acts — specificity is a death knell. So it's no surprise that it retreats to its comfort zone, even when tackling difficult subject matter. The album closer, *Why*, is per usual about someone special who left too soon. But in this case that person committed suicide, a topic other singers might whisper around, but one LeVox believes deserves his vocal pomp. Rightly, it turns out: This is the most impassioned song here. "God only knows what went wrong," LeVox sings, "and why you would leave the stage/in the middle of a song."

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