

# FEATURES

MONDAY, MAY 25, 2009

PAGE 13

BY JAMES REED

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

It's a simple question, really. But no one huddled around the table at the Harvard Square bar has a good answer.

Why has Boston's Passion Pit become one of the most talked about bands in indie rock this year, based solely on a short, seven-song album that frontman Michael Angelakos recorded two years ago in his bedroom as a Valentine's gift for his girlfriend at the time?

Angelakos looks at his bandmates, clustered together with beers in hand at the subterranean Shay's, and offers his best guess.

"We know we're a hype band, and we know exactly how it works," he says, pushing back his crown of curly dark hair. "We know how lucky we are. We don't have any kind of ego about it. We're really kind of surprised that any of this is happening."

But it is. And fast. The hype, starting last year, came from the usual sources — online music blogs and eventually magazines that deemed Passion Pit the next band you must know — but it also rippled outside your typical hipster audience. Kanye West, for instance, has written about Passion Pit a few times on his blog, at one point commenting on how "sick" the drums sound on the band's song *Cuddle Fuddle*.

The avalanche of early buzz has been promising — and landed the band high-profile gigs at big festivals like South by Southwest in March and Austin City Limits in October. But Tuesday marked the band's grand entrance on a national stage. *Manners*, Passion Pit's stunning full-length debut, was released on the boutique Frenchkiss Records in this country, but it's on Columbia in the UK, an interesting paradox that gives Passion Pit both indie and mainstream cred.

It makes sense that a major label has latched onto Passion Pit. The music industry can no longer force-feed hit bands to independent-minded music fans like it used to. Every year there's at least one or two sleeper

hits that emerge to everyone's surprise, from Bon Iver to Grizzly Bear. Like any other business, the industry has to tap into the indie market and produce its own successes, making sure to keep its corporate marionette strings tucked away.

Chris Zane, who produced *Manners*, says that the hype can cut both ways. "I think the challenge is to get people to listen to this album with semi-normal expectations," he says. "I think the hope is that it goes much further than the jaded blog kids in our circle and really hit the 16-year-old girls who live in Missouri."

Of course, we've heard all this talk before about Boston's next big band. The past few years are littered with boldface names — the Click Five, Will Dailey, Boys Like Girls — that eventually fade into more low-key profiles. The Click Five, following a string of stadium shows, recently wrapped up a monthlong residency at the cozy Lizard Lounge.

Maybe it's because they're all 22 or 23 (Angelakos turned 22 on Tuesday), but the men of Passion Pit — including Jeff Apruzzese, Ian Hultquist, Ayad Al Adhamy, and Nate Donmoyer — behave like the most unlikely rock stars, silly instead of swaggering. They all still suffer from varying degrees of stage fright. They fret over who's the biggest dork ("Hey, man, I embrace it," Al Adhamy crows).

The guys are amused that all their interviews have involved questions about the porno called *Passion Pit*. (Contrary to published reports, the band didn't take its name from that film; for the record: They're fans of it.)

But the public doesn't see this unassuming side of Passion Pit. It sees yet another hyped band emerging seemingly out of thin air. Angelakos understands the band's detractors who might resent Passion Pit's swift ascent. In fact, he's surprised the backlash hasn't started already.

"People don't trust you until you've been around for two or three years. When you become a name that sticks,

then they'll start giving you a decent look," he says. "I feel like now we're just a flash in the pan to them. But I think this record distinguishes us — we're not MGMT, we're not Vampire Weekend, we're not Hot Chip."

Some of Passion Pit's refreshing appeal comes from how it formed. Angelakos had no intentions of starting a band when he released *Chunk of Change*, the EP he gave to his girlfriend, until it became a word-of-mouth sensation around Emerson College, where Angelakos was a student. He started selling the album, burned at home on his computer, for US\$4 a pop.

Hultquist remembers one of Angelakos's first solo performances with the *Chunk of Change* material.

"He had this one show where it was just him and a laptop and — no offense — it wasn't that impressive," Hultquist says to Angelakos's apparent surprise. "I knew people liked the music, and I liked the music, and I thought it would be fun to play [with a band]."

From there, the band lineup gradually coalesced with some of Hultquist's fellow Berklee students. The music Angelakos was writing was specifically electronic, so he decided the band needed to adhere to the same aesthetic.

"We decided early on that the best way to do this is to have as many keyboards as possible," Angelakos says. "Because we're all guitarists, we approach keyboards like guitars. We're not great keyboardists, but that's not the point. Our sound is very full and polyphonic."

Still, with the album now measuring up to the hype, he knows the band's moment could be fleeting.

"People are either going to really love it or really hate it," Angelakos says. "But the response has been so surprisingly positive that I don't think we really quite understand what we're walking into. We know it's going to be pretty fun from now on."

Boston's Passion Pit consists of, from left, Jeff Apruzzese, Nate Donmoyer, Ian Hultquist, Ayad Al Adhamy and Michael Angelakos.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

[ THE WEEKENDER ]

## The virtues of innovation and minimalism

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND DIANE BAKER  
STAFF REPORTERS

It is a rare thing for an executive producer to receive a standing ovation in a theater, but Kenneth Pai's production of the classic *kun* opera (昆劇) *The Jade Hairpin* (玉簪記), was, above all else, about his passion and new vision for this ancient operatic form.

On Friday, he brought an audience at the National Theater that ranged from high school kids to elderly opera aficionados to its feet when he appeared at the end of the curtain call. During the interval, Pai had been virtually mobbed by girls wearing the distinctive green-and-black uniforms of the Taipei Municipal First Girls' Senior High School (北一女中), who were there in force.

Pai had set out to make *kun* opera chic and cool and just good plain fun: *The Jade Hairpin* achieved all of these. Pai's new aesthetic for *kun* is difficult to pin down. There are no startling departures from convention. It is more about overall quality, a look, a knowing sophistication that immediately announced itself as something new and stylish.

From the opening sequence, the production values were evident in the sophisticated lighting, the simple, elegant set, the magnificently understated costumes and the discipline of the chorus line. Considerable attention to technical details, from the sound quality to the use of the follow spot, contributed to the overall effect, and this care is something that other local productions could learn from.

The two young stars, Shen Fengying (沈豐英) and Yu Jiulin (俞玖林), were in fine form, and despite the archaic manners of an opera style that dates back almost five centuries, they managed to prove that young love is a constant, however it is expressed.

In a scene in which the two young characters get to know one another while playing the zither, their elaborate courtesies are a source of humor, but this never undermined the beauty of the music — provided by a Tang Dynasty *zheng* (箏) performed by Li Xiangting (李祥雲) — or the poetry of the lyrics. This balancing act was maintained throughout the nearly three-hour performance.

The show finished with a scene that combined complex choreographed movements to imitate, on an empty stage, a dangerous meeting on a turbulent river, and some passionate arias in which the love birds pledge their eternal love to each other.

One very small fly in the ointment was the quality of the English surtitles. Although superior to what is generally seen in the few traditional productions that sport English surtitles, the quality was uneven and certainly could have done with thorough editing.

Upstairs in the Experimental Theater, Lin Wen-chung's (林文中) latest work, *Small Songs*, kept dancers rooted to a confined space, much like his WCdance troupe's premiere piece, *Small*. Instead of a Plexiglas cube, however, his design team came up with a rectangular platform.

Lin has made a virtue out of minimalism. He has a real flair for reducing the space and time needed to convey his ideas while giving you richly layered, finely nuanced works. His works bring to mind Persian miniatures, those small worlds that mix reality and dreams and become more complex the longer you look at them.

While Lin is capable of filling an entire stage, the score for *Small Songs* was an intriguing mix of songs by the Mexican-American singer Lhasa de Sela. *P.S. I Love You* from the film of the same name, *Love You to Death* from *Cape No. 7* (海角七號), a *nangun* (南管) piece, excerpts from Handel and Mozart and *Song to the Moon* from the Czech opera *Ruslaka*.

The latter was used in the segment titled "A song of Wenchung and Ruping" danced by Chiu Yu-wen (邱鈺文) and Chang Chih-chieh (張智傑) that segued from a lovely pas de deux to a friendly but exhilarating competition. It was a beautiful and moving tribute by Lin to his wife, Wang Ru-ping (王如萍), a dancer with the Jose Limon Company.

Lin himself appeared just briefly, leaving most of the work to his five dancers, especially the exceptional Chiu and Lin Hsiao-yuan (林筱園).

While "minimalism" was the word that sprang to mind with Lin Wen-chung, "articulated" seemed to be the word to define Wayne McGregor and his Random Dance company's production *Entity* at Novel Hall on Friday night.

In McGregor's choreography, the joints of the body — from the neck to the shoulders, elbows, hips, knees and ankles — are twisted and cocked to allow the body to turn in unexpected directions. Like Lin, McGregor strips away all the excess, a minimalism reflected in the set by Patrick Burnier (who also designed the black briefs/white T-shirt costumes) — three screens held up (or down) by structures that look like catapult rigs.

*Entity* began and ended with a stop-motion short video projection made from photographs of a racing greyhound taken by 19th-century photographer Eadweard Muybridge. Just as Muybridge's Animal Locomotion works allowed viewers to clearly delineate the movements of running animals, McGregor's choreography takes apart his 10 dancers' bodies and puts them back together in unexpected ways.

Friday's show at Novel Hall was a fascinating introduction to one of the most innovative choreographers working today.



*Small Songs* makes a maximal impact in a minimal space.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LIN WEN-CHUNG



Riding a wave of hype, the members of Passion Pit release their debut album without worrying about the backlash

## PLANET POP

Art house director **Tsai Ming-liang** (蔡明亮) ended the 62nd Cannes Film Festival's main competition on Saturday with a display of stunning visuals in his latest movie *Face* (臉).

It was a fitting end to the Cannes festival's race for the coveted Palme d'Or, which was due to be awarded early this morning Taiwan time and has included some remarkable visual moments from human longing through to futurism as well as sweeping vistas displaying the force of nature.

"The image is extremely important to me. The image is central in my films," said Tsai at a press conference held on Saturday to mark the Cannes premiere of *Face*, which is about a Taiwanese director making a film at the Paris Louvre museum, based on the story of Salome.

Tsai assembled his usual group of actors including **Lee Kang-sheng** (李康生) for *Face*. However, he has also added leading French actors **Jean-Pierre Leaud** and **Fanny Ardant** as well as French model-turned actress **Laetitia Casta** to tell his story of Salome and the first



century AD King Herod.

Tsai's *Face* is one of a slew of Asian movies included in Cannes' main competition with six of the 20 films competing for the Palme d'Or from Asian filmmakers.

They also touch on a range of themes such as gay desire, a father seeking revenge and a priest-turned vampire along with gangland terror in Manila.

Oscar-winning actor **Sean Penn** has called off his divorce from **Robin Wright Penn** for a second time, not long after seeking legal separation. Weeks after saying he and his wife of 13 years will separate on the grounds of irreconcilable differences, Penn has withdrawn a court application filed in Marin County near San Francisco, the *New York Daily News* reported, citing court records.

Actor **George Hamilton** has had his right knee replaced. His publicist, Jeffrey Lane, said the elective surgery was performed on Thursday in Chicago. He said the 69-year-old Hamilton, who sports a perm, first injured his knee while starring in *Chicago* on Broadway, and decided to have his knee replaced after he injured it a second time when he competed on the second season of ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* in 2006.

Hamilton is expected to return to Los Angeles this week.

Britain's unlikely singing sensation **Susan Boyle**, the frumpy church volunteer who wowed the

French actor Jean-Pierre Leaud, left, puckers up to director Tsai Ming-Liang, center, as they arrive on the red carpet for the screening of their film *Face* at the 62nd Cannes Film Festival in southern France on Saturday.

PHOTO: AP

—AGENCIES