



The Killers vocalist Brandon Flowers, center left, with bandmates, from left, Mark Stoermer, Dave Keuning and Ronnie Vanucci. PHOTO: AP

He's a killer

Brandon Flowers is a very rare thing: a rock 'n' roll superstar with charisma — and no bad habits

BY ALEXIS PETRIDIS
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Brandon Flowers sits bolt upright in his train seat. So handsome you feel like putting a paper bag over your head the minute you meet him, his teeth a gleaming testament to the might of American dentistry, he is nevertheless not merely visibly uncomfortable but audibly uncomfortable, too. His conversation is punctuated with a high, fluttering giggle that seems to have nothing to do with amusement and everything to do with anxiety. Interviews make Flowers nervous. (A few days later, when I see him at a photoshoot — where a fearless snapper faces the prospect of becoming the first person in history to be charmed to death — Flowers is sweet, endlessly amenable and positively radiates good humor, a change of mood he explains with admirable candor. "I'm a lot more confident in my handsomeness than my wisdom," he says.)

I have tried to make small talk about his children — married in 2005, he has one son and another due next month, hopefully during a two-week break in The Killers' touring schedule — and about the festivals The Killers are traipsing around, but Flowers seems no better equipped for small talk than he is for

breathing underwater. He answers politely, but monosyllabically, then silence falls over the first-class carriage on Eurostar, which is conveying him to yet another festival, this time in Belgium. His fear of flying is only one among a panoply of traits you might assume would preclude Flowers from a career as an international rock star. Indeed, that is something Flowers neither looks like — he has the face of a wholesome 1950s matinee idol — nor behaves, nor talks like. He is wont to describe The Killers as a "business." "Well, it is a business. People want their rock stars to be stumbling around and we're not that way. I can't help it if I'm businesslike."

It is a job at which he is awesomely successful. In five years, The Killers have been fast-tracked into the upper echelons of musical superstardom, where U2 and Bruce Springsteen ask him to join them on stage. Meanwhile, artists who once stared down from Flowers' bedroom wall turn up to pay homage: The Cure's Robert Smith, David Bowie, Pet Shop Boys, even Morrissey (the latter having apparently recovered after a starstruck teenage Flowers, waiting on his

table in a Las Vegas restaurant, attempted to deliver a heartfelt eulogy with his mushroom pizza and was removed by a bodyguard for his trouble). Their 2004 debut album, *Hot Fuss*, sold more than 7 million copies, was nominated for five Grammys and went to number one in Britain, Australia and Argentina. Its follow-up, 2006's *Sam's Town*, almost perfectly replicated its success: 7 million copies shifted, number one around the world, awards won. At the end of last year, their third album, *Day & Age*, went three times platinum in the UK alone.

Flowers is very much the band's public face. General knowledge of the rest of The Killers amounts to: looks like the guy from *My Name Is Earl* (drummer Ronnie Vanucci), has curly hair (guitarist Dave Keuning) and nothing whatsoever (bass player Mark Stoermer). It's not as if he hasn't been interviewed before, which makes his obvious unease all the more peculiar. But then Flowers is a very peculiar kind of rock superstar. He is a practicing Mormon, who claims his devotion to a religion that frowns upon alcohol, tobacco, tattoos, premarital sex and body piercings has only been

strengthened by five years in the godless world of rock 'n' roll. He is a man who refuses even to swear on stage — "It's just a cheap way to get a rise out of the crowd," he sniffs — yet swiftly gained music press notoriety for gobbly starting feuds with other bands, among them Radiohead, whom Flowers suggested should try writing some proper songs again, and emo bands such as My Chemical Romance, whose music he described as "dangerous." He is an anglophile who briefly considered thumbing his nose at Mormon orthodoxy by getting an Oasis tattoo, but who has taken other US artists to task for being insufficiently patriotic, particularly when it came to their views on the presidency of George W. Bush. "I'm not saying we should be complacent, but you should try and find some hope. Which I didn't get out of 60,000 kids who aren't from America screaming, 'I don't want to be an American Idiot.' I didn't like it."

He is the youngest of six, born to parents from the same Las Vegas trailer park. His family were so resolutely blue-collar that he literally snorts with incredulity when asked if they were in any way musical or artistic. "No," he says, as if I'd just asked if his father ever landed on

the moon. "My dad worked in a grocery store. His father did as well. Mom worked in a fast food restaurant called Taco Time, which later became my first job as well."

Nevertheless, life in the Flowers household was far from without incident. His father was an alcoholic who stopped drinking when Flowers was 5, then converted to Mormonism in the 1980s following a religious epiphany, demanding to be baptized so quickly, there was no time to find a church and the ceremony had to be performed in a nearby swimming pool. Flowers watched — "It was great" — and, the odd cigarette or vodka Red Bull, and the business with the Oasis tattoo notwithstanding, has stuck with Mormonism ever since. "It's a blessing for me. I've been thrust into a situation where I'm around a lot of people who don't believe. I just haven't been easily persuaded. The older I get, the more comfortable I get with it. Having a child reinforced my belief that we're created. There's just no doubt for me, not a thread of doubt in my mind, that there is a God."

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[CD REVIEWS: TAIWAN]



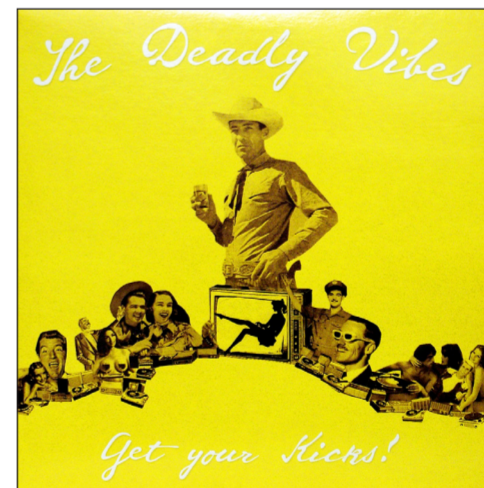
Chou Hwei (周蕙)
Chou Hwei (周蕙)
Go Gold Music



Chang Hwei-mei (張惠妹)
A-mit (阿密特)
Golden Typhoon



Peggy Hsu (許哲珮)
Fine (美好的)
Wonder Records



Deadly Vibes
Get Your Kicks!
Self-released

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
AND DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTERS

When Chou Hwei (周蕙) released her first album a decade ago, she was widely tipped to become one of the four lesser "Queens of Heaven" (四小天后) of the Chinese-language music scene along with Jolin Tsai (蔡依林), Stefanie Sun (孫燕姿) and Elva Hsiao (蕭亞軒). Her place has since been taken by Fish Leong (梁靜茹) (see Feb. 18 *Taipei Times* review).

Her most recent album, a self-titled release with a particularly first-person outlook, does not bode well for an upturn for her career. Chou is a talented singer with a voice that can take on many colors, and it is a testament to her vocal skills that one can actually sit through the first two tracks on the album — the first a particularly ill-advised duet with martial arts star and wannabe crooner Jackie Chan (成龍), the second a track titled *Chou Hwei*. Surely having a self-titled song on a self-titled album is just a little too self-referential even for the notoriously narcissistic world of Mando-pop. "Every cell of my body is going wild/come enjoy the music with me, yeah ..." Nuff said. Though if you ignore the lyrics, this is actually quite a nice bubblegum number.

The orchestration of *Chou Hwei* is overall of a very high standard, with plenty of unexpected little

departures, such as the striped down *Keeping Faith* (守約) with a simple piano accompaniment, or the clever mix of electronica and plucked guitar in *Complicated*. Even her most conventional Mando-pop ballads, such as *My Protector* (守護者), have a degree of controlled elegance that can be quite appealing in contrast to the overblown sentimentality of the genre as a whole.

Chou Hwei moves along the well-beaten path of the Mando-pop mainstream, with occasional digressions along the way to keep things interesting. Only one track, *Night Moves* (夜動), is an absolute dud, when she strikes out into atmospheric Cocteau Twins territory and gets utterly lost.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Pop *A-mit* (阿密特) into the CD player and the first thing that greets you is a barrage of Metallica-like wall of drums and guitars. A-mei is rocking out big time, and while *Open the Door, See the Mountain* (開門見山) is not completely convincing as a heavy metal outcry that romance is dead and you should just take what you can get, it has the virtue of novelty for Taiwan's first lady of song.

Fortunately, although A-mei (張惠妹) is no Chrissie Hynde or Debbie Harry, she has the performing chops to carry off these forays into angst and cynicism

in *Black Eats Black* (黑吃黑) and *Animal Sentimentality After Falling in Love* (相愛後動物感傷), even if the bad girl persona is as much of a pose as the ridiculous images of her in a black sequined cat suit that adorn the liner notes.

The mood of alienation and anomie even seeps into more conventional ballads, such as power pop piece *Divided Self* (分生) and works particularly well in the heavy rock Taiwanese anthem *Come If You Dare?* (好膽你就來), which is good fun, even if owing a huge debt to Wu Bai (伍佰). The title track *A-mit*, sung in the Bunun Aboriginal language, is also something of a novelty and will doubtless be hugely appealing to the pseudo metal/punk musical ethos that many Aboriginal boys aspire to. While musically it looks back to the days of massive drums and feedback-drenched base, the mixture with traditional singing styles and lyrics that tackle the homesickness of youths cut off from the lives of their local communities gives this track considerable interest.

Then there are songs like *OK*, which is redolent of the frenetic earnestness of Simple Plan, but without the sophistication. But then, A-Mei makes it pretty plain in this concept album that she is letting out her inner wild thing, and it ends with *Rainbow*, one of the mellowest tracks on the album, where she sings: "When I find out

where happiness is/help me on with my makeup/join my silliness, laugh at my fears." A-mei, or A-mit, as she is on this album, certainly gives us a few laughs in this venture into previously uncharted territory.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Nearly a decade ago, Peggy Hsu (許哲珮) made a splash in the pop scene with a hit debut album, *Balloon* (汽球), which earned her the best newcomer accolade at the Golden Melody Awards, in addition to similar awards in China and Singapore.

Hsu's cutesy, honeyed voice and immaculate song arrangements appeal to Mando-pop fans, but she sticks to the edge of the mainstream with her concept-driven songwriting. The 28-year-old singer-songwriter's latest album, *Fine* (美好的), is an ode to the sweetness of childhood and "the finer things" in life. While the topic isn't exactly groundbreaking, Hsu, for the most part, deals with her subjects with sensitivity and nuance.

The album starts with the musings of a boy who dreams up an imaginary friend portrayed in the jazzy *Di Di Di* (滴滴滴). After the friend appears, their world grows more surreal. Fish swim around them and cotton candy "turns into clouds."

But Hsu doesn't let the imaginary

world serve as a mere mindless escape. Hints of the real world creep in: the boy tells his friend "we'll stamp out those terrible people's tempers" and pleads "after a while, please don't leave me."

Hsu's keen arrangement skills and flawless vocal delivery will draw appreciation from pop mavens. There's her fluid phrasing in *Fell in Love With a Circus Ringleader* (愛上馬戲團團長), which has an arrangement drawing from acid-jazz and J-pop, and the slick bossa nova grooves and beautiful harmonies of *Sunlight Lover* (日光戀人).

The title track, a gentle acoustic number with a cello and jazz harmonica accompaniment, waxes sentimental about a lover. While the lyrics seem to dwell in platitudes, Hsu delivers the song with sincerity and depth.

Overall, the album has a pristine and innocent charm. Hsu, who had the starring role in the popular children's theater show *Lil' Flora* (小花), conveys a strong sense of confidence in connecting with her listeners.

— DAVID CHEN

First they were *ke-ai* (可愛), now they're bad boy rockers. Five years ago as The Daymakers, this trio of expats from Ilan, made female audience members giggle and swoon with their loud 1970s zoot suits and cutesy Chinese lyrics.

Once the gimmick wore thin, the

band members switched instruments (from bass, drums and guitar to two guitars and drums) and their pop-punk sound turned into raw garage rock.

Get Your Kicks!, a 7-inch vinyl record that comes with a CD-R of MP3s, is a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am affair that shows The Deadly Vibes at their best.

Vocalist and guitarist Jason Copps whines and whoops through *Man I Love That Rock 'N' Roll* with abandon. On *Get Your Kicks*, brash guitars twang along with a Mississippi Hill Country blues groove played at a punk tempo. Like The Daymakers, The Vibes are good at sticking to a simple theme in their repertoire, even at the risk of parody. *Use It or Lose It* almost gets campy with lyrics like "use it like a bad girl should ... do it like your mama said you never should." But at the end, it's hard not to give in to the song's catchy chorus hooks.

You Really Got Me Goin' purrs like a drag race theme, with its slick and tight rhythm changes. The title of the EP's final track, *Good to Be Bad*, could neatly sum up the band's motto, if it had one.

Get Your Kicks! is full of rousing rock, but The Vibes aren't trying to give you goose bumps. They want to see sweat on the dance floor.

— DAVID CHEN