

# CULTURE

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[ THE WEEKENDER ]

## ‘Electron’ electrifies, ‘Wild Cursive’ a stroke of genius

Cloud Gate’s rendition of the last segment of its acclaimed ‘Cursive’ trilogy showcased the talents of principal dancer Lee Ching-chun

BY DIANE BAKER  
STAFF REPORTER

Dancer/choreographer Sun Chuo-tai (孫稅泰) has delivered another well thought-out, polished and humorous commentary on modern-day society — a meditation on growing dependence on all forms of electronics, with *Electron* (電子).

His 8213 Physical Dance Theater (8213 歌舞劇場) performed at the tiny Guling Street Theater (姑蘇街小劇場). The space may be small, but it is perfect for the company’s very intimate pieces. You need to be close to see the performers’ expressions, the small twitches of the fingers, the vibrations of the body.

Sun’s caution last week not to sit in the front row because of the sweat that would fly was a good one. He and his two colleagues, American dancer/choreographer Casey Advanta and Taiwanese dancer Yogi (Chan Tien-chen, 詹天甄), wore white, short-sleeved neo-prene scuba-diving suits that must have felt like saunas under the stage lights, but worked very well during the black-light segments that reduced the dancers to just their white shells.

*Electron* began with the three hooked up to white cords that connected them at the neck to a hook-up in the ceiling — very *Matrix*. From spasmodic heaves while lying prone on the elevated flooring, the dancers progressed to robotic mannequin moves until they were able to break free of the umbilical cords and explore their new world.

While the topic may have been weighty, Sun, as usual, used a combination of sight gags and verbal interplay to keep the audience smiling while making them think.

Near the end of the show, Sun sits on a stool, scuba suit pulled half-way down, wearing some kind of electronic headpiece and what turned out to be a vibrating belt around his waist (the kind that is supposed to help the wearer lose weight without actually exercising) and a remote control in each hand. He looks as majestic and stern as any mandarin in one of those old ancestor portrait scrolls, at least until he turned on the remotes and started to vibrate.

One last clever touch was that the show’s program was given out in the form

of a DVD — so you needed an electronic device to read it.

Sun has frequently said that he will continue dancing and choreography until he feels that he has nothing more to say. Let’s hope he doesn’t run out of ideas anytime soon.

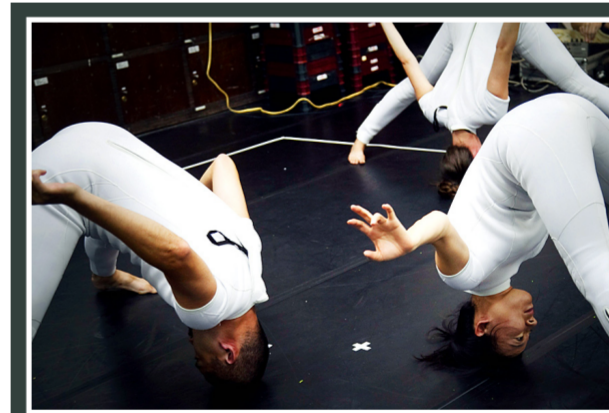
Just a few blocks away physically, but kilometers in terms of scale, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre performed their next-to-the-last show of their current run at the National Theater on Saturday night. *Wild Cursive* (狂草) was a fast-paced rendition of the final segment of company founder and artistic director Lin Hwai-min’s (林懷民) *Cursive* trilogy.

Like watching a calligraphy master at work, *Wild Cursive* may appear spontaneous, but it is tightly controlled and well thought-out. The 70 minutes just flew by, almost in silence, so quiet was the audience. The score by Jim Shum (沈聖得) and Liang Chun-mei (梁春美) is a seamless mix of chirping crickets, waves, foghorns and temple bells, each perfectly complementing its particular segment without drawing attention away from the dancers or overshadowing their breathing, which is so essential to the piece.

Despite the solos and duets, at heart *Wild Cursive* remains an ensemble piece. Nevertheless, it was wonderful to see to see principal dancer Lee Ching-chun (李靜君), albeit in an all-too-brief solo. With the exception of her short piece in last week’s *Cursive II* (行草貳), she has been seen far too rarely on the National Theater stage in recent years.

The graphic black-and-white simplicity of the staging — from the scrolls of translucent rice paper that descend from the rafters with lines of ink slowly trickling down them, to the simple black costumes — provide the perfect setting for the dance. Kudos go to lighting designer Chang Tsan-tao (張贊桃), while credit for the staging goes to Lin Hwai-min.

Though some reviewers have called the piece “arid,” I relish its starkness, and it was wonderful to be able to see the full trilogy in one place.



‘Electron’ contemplates our growing dependence on electronics.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF 8213 PHYSICAL DANCE THEATER



The Monsters of Folk: from left, Conor Oberst, Mike Mogis, Jim James and M. Ward.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

## Lo-fi and low-key

Even in the cross-pollinating world of indie rock, *Monsters of Folk* is something of a rarity

BY MELENA RYZIK  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The Monsters of Folk claim not to remember who exactly came up with their name — some smart-aleck roadie or tour manager or booking agent. But they know that it’s tongue-in-cheek, sort of. The foursome — Conor Oberst, 29, better known as Bright Eyes; Matt Ward, 35, better known as M. Ward; Jim James, 31, the frontman of My Morning Jacket, who lately prefers to be known as Yim Yames; and the producer and multi-instrumentalist Mike Mogis, 35 — are all outside names and voices in indie rock. But they’re about as threatening as a knock-knock joke. Or maybe a noogie.

Hanging out together in a SoHo hotel room recently, they seemed one boyish wisecrack away from giving each other one. Their evident camaraderie is also audible on their self-titled debut album, out tomorrow from Shangri-La Music. Given their musical stature, the record was highly anticipated in indie circles as a collection of finely wrought songs with no overarching theme except that they are not all that folk. The collaboration — and the name — was spurred by a 2004 triple-bill tour, when they discovered how well they got along.

“The world needed a Monsters of Folk,” James said, sitting on an antique green couch, his arm around Oberst. “And we answered the call.”

What did that call sound like?

James howled and said, “It sounded like dying Virgin Megastores and dying newspapers, dying trees, collapse of an empire, rebirth of a nation.”

Ward, who had made coffee for everyone and was serving it in espresso cups, piped in. “We all have a lot of the same instincts about the music,” he said. “There’s just a lot of overlapping circles. I think it’s safe to say. I think we started developing trust, the way a family would.”

Bearded (James, resplendently; Mogis, modestly) and wearing scruffy outfits (Ward, flannel; Oberst, embroidered hippie shirt), they did look sort of familial — a family of lo-fi kingpins. (By consensus, Mogis, the producer, is the father figure.) But even in the cross-pollinating world of indie rock, Monsters of Folk is something of a rarity, with three singer-songwriter-guitarists, all essentially in their prime in terms of critical appreciation, robust fan bases and artistic sway, and a common audience.

Bloggers and reviewers have been quick to call them a supergroup, a thorny label. “The very problem with the word supergroup is that you do expect it to be times four, and I think this is going to be much more qualitative than quantitative,” said Bobby Haber, chief executive of CMJ Network, which tracks music trends among college-age

listeners. “I think these guys want to go out there and do what they’ve always done, but just do it together.” Given their lengthy careers, he added, “I think it’s going to be embraced.”

But to hear the band members tell it, the project was a lark done mostly for their own pleasure.

“We were all really, really curious to see what would happen if we actually made the record and what it would sound like,” Ward said.

The three songwriters contributed five songs apiece, and each sang lead on his own material. Mogis collaborated on finishing each track, and all songs are credited to the group, with the members playing all the instruments. Their styles and voices — winsome and gravely for Ward; plaintive and twangy for Oberst; lyrical and roots-rocky for James — remain distinct, even on songs like *Say Please*, the first single, in which they harmonize.

The record opens with *Dear God* (*Sincerely MOF*), an electro-tinged track James wrote with the idea that each lead singer would take a verse. (Oberst added the “Sincerely” part to the title.) They shared ideas on the orchestration and debated the track listing.

The Monsters had caveats about which label they’d sign with: they wanted one with which no member had other ties, and they were interested in a younger company. Though they had other offers, the band members said, Shangri-La won the one-record deal. The label was founded two years ago by music industry veterans. Jeff Ayeroff, the co-chairman, was a top executive with Virgin and Warner Brothers and had helped produce Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Roy Orbison and Tom Petty as the Traveling Wilburys. He brushed off blogger comparisons to that group, though he did volunteer that James was the Orbison of Monsters, the “secret sauce.” He instead likened them to Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. “I call it an uber-group, not a supergroup,” he said archly.

Though musicians today are accustomed to broadcasting their every move, the Monsters of Folk kept their collaboration quiet, partly out of concern that it wouldn’t actually coalesce.

After months of group discussion and sending demos to one another via e-mail, they finally met in the studio that Oberst and Mogis built in their shared backyard in Omaha in February 2008; Ward, who lives in Portland, Oregon, and James, who is from Louisville, Kentucky, stayed in the guesthouse there. The tryout session went well enough that they reconvened in Malibu, California, a few months later, then eventually returned to Omaha to finish the album. But altogether their studio time amounted to only a few weeks.

“We started the record with no expectations of making a record, which was a part of the liberating enjoyment of making the music,” Mogis said.

They hung out together in their off time too, cooking and driving around. In California they rented a convertible — “a sweet silver Sebring,” Oberst said — and cruised, blasting *Be Thankful for What You Got*, the 1970s soul hit by William DeVaughn, the only music other than their own they listened to. “It’s like the best song ever,” Oberst said. “Jim played it on repeat for about six days straight.”

That shared affinity for retro sound comes through in their album, recorded largely on vintage equipment. For a group vocal, Mogis even tried having the threesome sing into one mic, “old-school style,” he said. It didn’t work — their volumes were too different — so they used separate mics but recorded simultaneously.

“You needed that camaraderie, that sort of, like, when he’s done, I pick it up here,” Mogis said, “because if you’re just overdubbing that and you come in cold, it doesn’t feel right.”

But experimentation was part of the process; though all are multi-instrumentalists, they are not typically drummers, except on this album. On *Losin’ Yo Head*, a rowdy track recorded in one take, Oberst was on drums, Mogis on bass, Ward on guitar and backup vocal and James on lead vocals and guitar, amplified through a big Marshall Stack. “I felt better about that one,” Oberst can be heard saying at the end.

“It’s just such a different energy, of smashing this song with four people who are all kind of halfway going, am I doing this right?” James said. “As opposed to when I make a record with My Morning Jacket: that’s comfort, like a pinpoint, precision drill.” With Monsters of Folk, “You’re afraid the house is going to fall apart, but that’s what makes it fun, that energy.”

It felt like “we were high schoolers jamming in our garage,” Mogis said.

## PLANET POP

### TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

SEPT. 11 TO SEPT. 17



1 Sodagreen (蘇打綠) and *Summer Fever* (夏·狂熱) with 19.42 percent of sales

2 Color and *Color First All Original Album* (COLOR 首張全創作專輯) with 12.55%

3 Compilation album *Faith Map* with 8.6%

4 Cosmos People (宇宙人) and *Cosmos People* (宇宙人) with 5.51%

5 Jam Hsiao (蕭敬騰) and *Princess* (王妃) with 5.34%

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

Beyonce Knowles will perform in Malaysia next month, two years after canceling a show in the Muslim-majority country after protesters threatened to disrupt the concert because of her sexy image and clothing.

The R’n’B superstar’s upcoming show is already drawing the ire of conservatives in this country, where female performers are required to cover up from the shoulders to knees with no cleavage showing. Knowles said on her Web site that she will take the stage at a stadium in Kuala Lumpur on Oct. 25.

Knowles canceled a planned concert two years ago following protest threats by Malaysia’s opposition Islamic party. At the time her talent agency said the show was called off due to a scheduling conflict.

Sabki Yusof, youth vice head of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, said yesterday that they would send a protest note to the government over the concert. He said it was the government’s “responsibility to protect the people of Malaysia” from what he described as immoral Western influences.

“We are not against entertainment as long as it is within the framework

of our culture and our religion,” Sabki said. “We are against Western sexy performances. We don’t think our people need that.”

Meanwhile, music producer and convicted murderer Phil Spector says life behind bars is driving him “insane.” “This 24/7 lockdown life is slowly driving me insane and killing [me],” Spector, 69, wrote in a letter to a fan that was posted online on Friday.

Spector, who revolutionized pop music in the 1960s with his “Wall of Sound” production technique, is serving a minimum of 19 years in prison for the murder of actress Lana Clarkson.

In the letter written in July to a fan, Spector complained that he was unable to “say goodbye” to anyone, or organize his business affairs before going to prison.

“How cruel but apparently not unusual,” Spector wrote. “And they call this a ‘civilized’ society. Bugs live more civilized beneath their rocks!”

Leonard Cohen, one of the stars Spector worked with before Spector withdrew from music in the 1980s, was released from a hospital in Spain hours after collapsing on stage during a concert.

Organizers of his Friday night



Beyonce, above, is bound for Malaysia, while Leonard Cohen, right, is recovering from food poisoning.

PHOTOS: AGENCIES

concert in the eastern city of Valencia said the Canadian singer-songwriter, who turns 75 this week, had fainted on stage after being stricken with food poisoning.

Witnesses told Spanish media that

Cohen was performing *Bird on the Wire* about half an hour into the show when he lost his balance as he went to pick up a guitar.

He was saved from falling by backing singers, but moments later he collapsed again and was helped off stage to receive treatment from a medical team in the concert hall. He was then taken by ambulance to hospital, from which he was discharged in the early hours of Saturday.

A member of his band, Javier Mas, came out almost an hour later to tell the thousands of people gathered in the Luis Puig Velodrome that Cohen was suffering from a stomach complaint and would not be returning to the stage that night, but that he hoped to reschedule the show for another time.

Cohen quit the music scene in the early 1990s, living at a Buddhist monastery in California. But he was forced to return after he was swindled out of his retirement nest egg by his former manager.

His most recent album, *Heather*, was released in 2004. And last year, he embarked on his first world tour in 15 years.

Also embarking on its first tour in more than a decade is Pavement, one of the most influential indie-rock bands of the 1990s. The band’s label, Matador Records, announced on Thursday that Pavement will reunite for a tour — and only a tour — to begin on Sept. 21 next year in New York’s Central Park.

Though not hugely commercially successful, the California-based band is widely credited for its influential low-fidelity sound and ramshackle artistry. Pavement broke up in 2000. Several of its members have since released solo material, most notably its lead singer and songwriter, Stephen Malkmus.

—AGENCIES

