

AROUND TOWN

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The sounds of dreamy
contemplation

U.TA specializes in a style rarely encountered in Taiwan's indie-music scene: dream pop

BY ANDREW C.C. HUANG
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



“When I'm writing, it's mostly when I'm in a dejected or melancholy mood,” says Yu Lei (魚雷), songwriter, vocalist, guitarist and frontwoman of the band U.TA (屋塔). “I can't really just spout off at people. As a result, these emotions come out in the music as commentary on people and on the world.”

U.TA specializes in a style rarely encountered in Taiwan's indie-music scene: dream pop. With hypnotic whispering vocals reminiscent of the Cocteau Twins, the band's music is unlike anything you've heard in the pop market since Faye Wong (王菲).

“I became enchanted with the dream pop sound when I heard songs [in that style] by Faye Wong,” Yu Lei explains, adding that she got to like Cocteau Twins and Mazzy Star later on. As the band's leader and songwriter, Yu Lei's taste for atmospheric, contemplative music defines her band's style.

“All in all, this is not very happy music,” she says.

U.TA evolved from its former incarnation Zibet, a band Yu Lei joined during her college years. After graduation, she and bassist Garry moved on to form U.TA in 2005. On Sunday evening they will be performing the last show of a three-month promotional tour in support of their new EP, *Good, Night*, which was released this July.

The four-track CD is a dream-drenched musical journey of existential



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAGIC LANE MUSIC WORKSHOP

questioning, with Yu Lei's sensual voice crooning over a flowing sonic river of overlapping bass and echoing synth. *To Live* (活著), a track revamped from a song composed during the band's Zibet phase, explores today's world. With moaning and whimpering vocals, *Obsession* (著迷) details the different forms of romantic obsession. *What* (什麼) tackles the theme of alienation in modern urban landscapes, and *Flower* (花) questions the nature of love and trust.

“I chose this [CD] title because I think this album makes a perfect bedtime sound track. It's the kind of music you can listen to while contemplating what happened to you today and what it means,” says Yu Lei, who was interviewed by phone on Wednesday. “With our music, you don't

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: U.TA (屋塔)
WHEN: Sunday at 8pm
WHERE: Kafka on the Seashore (海邊的卡夫卡), 2F, 2, Ln 244, Roosevelt Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路三段244巷2號2F). Tel: (02) 2364-1996
ADMISSION: NT\$400 at the door, NT\$350 if purchased in advance
ON THE NET: utaband.blogspot.com; www.streetvoice.com/uta25; mspace.com/uta25

always have to pay attention to the lyrics. Sometimes, you can just wallow in the atmosphere.”

The band released its first EP, *Boys & Girls* (男孩 女孩), in 2006 and produced two additional singles before this year's release. This rather thin output can be attributed to perfectionism and a stubborn insistence on stylistic integrity, which results in songs that are ethereal and textured, slow-building, and always ultimately rewarding.

“I don't like to release a song until I am satisfied with it,” says Yu Lei.

“We weren't that aggressive before because of the nature of an amateur band,” she adds. “It wasn't our focus

until we signed with the current label to release this EP commercially.”

Yu Lei works as a graphic designer by day and is also studying fashion design. Garry is a salesman at a stereo store. With her background in design, Yu Lei pushed the indie-rock ethos to the limit by printing CD covers and burning copies of the band's first two singles herself.

She says she wasn't thinking about the long-term value of the CDs at the time. “We did it more out of budgetary concerns because we would have had to order a significantly larger quantity if we had chosen to print by machine.”

Unlike most bands who aspire to perform at bigger and bigger venues, U.TA prefers more intimate settings.

“Our music is ideal for the night and for a quiet setting. We have performed at outdoor festivals where our music is easily drowned out by the noise,” says Yu Lei. “I love cafes and live houses where people can listen carefully and enjoy the music. When I am performing, I need to create a space to envelop the audience. When something goes wrong, that space is compromised.”

Recently, Yu Lei has noticed that U.TA's fan base seems to be getting younger.

“It used to be that our audiences were older, sophisticated people with more life experience,” she says. “The world is less happy these days, even for young people. They need the cathartic release they can find in our music.”

[FILM REVIEW]



PHOTO COURTESY OF HUAYI BROTHERS MEDIA CORPORATION

Who's the rat?

Unlike other movies released to coincide with celebrations for the PRC's 60th anniversary, 'The Message' cares more about entertaining its audiences than shoveling propaganda down their throats

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

After changing tack to produce such Chinese blockbusters as *Assembly* (集结号) and *If You Are the One* (非诚勿扰), Taiwan's Chen Kuo-fu (陳國富) returns to the director's chair and shares it with China's Gao Qunshu (高群書) for *The Message* (風聲). Adapted from Chinese writer Mai Jia's (麥家) novel of the same title, this big-budget blockbuster is an espionage thriller set during the Sino-Japanese war in the early 1940s.

Among the slew of films made in time for the 60 anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China — including *City of Life and Death* (南京!南京!) and *The Founding of a Republic* (建國大業) — *The Message* is a well-crafted genre flick that's more interested in entertaining its audiences than whipping up anti-Japanese sentiment or heavy-handed propagandizing.

It is 1942 Nanjing, where the invading Japanese have set up a Chinese puppet government. After a series of assassination attempts, it becomes clear that there is a double agent in the regime's intelligence unit who is working for the resistance.

To capture the mole, codenamed the Phantom, ambitious Japanese officer Takeda (Huang Xiaoming, 黃曉明) sends a fake message through the regime's intelligence office, which he knows will be leaked to the resistance. The officials who handle the encoded message are then rounded up and transported to an isolated mansion in the mountains to be tortured and interrogated.

The five suspects are expert code-breaker Li (Li Bingbing, 李冰冰), sassy stenographer Gu (Zhou Xun, 周迅), tough military intelligence chief Wu (Zhang Hanyu, 張涵予), portly “councilor” Jin (Chinese comedian Ying Da, 英達) and the flamboyant “officer” Bai (Taiwan's Alec Su, 蘇有朋).

Over the next five days, Takeda and his underlings do their best to crush the quintet, both physically and mentally, to find out who is the snitch. The five soon realize that the only way for them to survive is to turn on each other.

Set mostly in the European-style mansion, *The Message* is a contemporary variation of the locked-room mystery in which the audience is presented with clues and encouraged to solve the puzzle as the suspects quarrel and scheme against each other. Smartly written by Chen, who directed the 2002 thriller *Double Vision* (雙瞳), the story line may feel somewhat unrealistic at times, but the film is essentially a well-executed piece of entertainment that keeps the drama moving at a snappy pace and is anchored by solid performances.

The Message owes much of its enchanting 1940s mien to the impeccable art and costume design of Tim Yip (葉錦添). Taiwan-based Jake Pollock, whose previous works include *Respire* (呼吸), *Do Over* (一年之初) and *Yang Yang* (陽陽), makes his China debut with lush cinematography dotted with swooping aerial camera-work and sweeping crane shots that deliver a restless energy.

Embellished by showy CGI effects such as a telegram's electric charge pulsing through cables, the movie glazes with visual opulence. The mansion is never framed without swirling shots and fluttering camerawork, making it reminiscent of the haunted castle in *Dracula* movies.

The Message provides a grand stage for its stellar cast. Zhou effortlessly carries the dramatic weight through the movie with a distinct charm that hints at inner depth. Li draws viewers into her agitated state of mind with an aura of delicacy and quietness. Taiwan's Su makes the transition from soap opera star to serious actor, delivering an enjoyable, campy version of Leslie Cheung's (張國榮) memorable role in *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王別姬). However, as a gay man whose main function is to provide comic relief, Su's character must die a horrible death. It's an unfortunate example of the reproduction and exploitation of stereotypes that has always plagued mainstream cinema, one that contrasts with the film's efforts to portray the Japanese villains as actual human beings.

Film Notes

THE MESSAGE (風聲)

DIRECTED BY:
GAO QUNSHU (高群書) AND CHEN KUO-FU (陳國富)

STARRING:
ZHOU XUN (周迅) AS GU XIAOMENG, LI BINGBING (李冰冰) AS LI NINGYU, ZHANG HANYU (張涵予) AS WU ZHIGUO, HUANG XIAOMING (黃曉明) AS TAKEDA, ALEC SU (蘇有朋) AS BAI XIAONIAN, YING DA (英達) AS JIN SHENGUO

RUNNING TIME:
120 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN MANDARIN AND JAPANESE WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY