

CULTURE

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Pop a band that dresses in black leather, wears ghoulish white face paint and sings about the multiple depths of hell, Chthonic (閃靈) wields an impressive amount of star power, both on and off stage. The five-person ensemble, whose members call their music "extreme metal," is the country's best-known rock export and an indie success story.

In 2000, Chthonic (pronounced "thonic") was the first Taiwanese band ever to be invited to perform at Japan's Fuji Rock Festival. The band soon gained a cult following after signing with a US label and playing at metal festivals in Japan, North America and Europe. In 2007, the group landed an opening slot on British metal legend Ozzy Osbourne's Ozzfest tour, taking in 24 major American cities.

Today Chthonic is signed with Spinefarm, part of Universal Records, and has just completed a 30-date tour of North America and Europe in support of its latest album, *Mirror of Retribution*, released in mid-2009 and produced by Anthrax guitarist Rob Caggiano.

And the hype is only getting bigger, at least in metal circles. Last year, Chthonic beat venerated heroes such as Megadeth and Slayer in British magazine *Terrorizer's* readers' poll for best band, taking second place.

So, what next? "Now we are in the fashion business," joked front man and singer Freddy Lim (林昶佐) in an interview last week with the *Taipei Times*.

It certainly looks that way for bassist and band spokeswoman Doris Yeh (葉湘怡), who has been enjoying the spotlight as a rock starlet. She was featured as one of the "hottest chicks in metal" in the US bi-monthly *Revolver* and is in the magazine's 2010 calendar. Homegrown publications have also caught Doris fever. Yeh graced the cover of men's magazine *FHM* in 2008 and she features in a five-page spread in this month's edition of *GQ Taiwan*.

While Yeh may be stoking metalhead yearnings, darker fantasies are to be found on Chthonic's latest CD, which contains a barrage of machine-gun drumbeats, distorted guitar riffs, and vocals that range from guttural to screeching.

Mirror is Chthonic's most refined work to date, released in two versions, one in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese) and the other in English.

"We wanted to write an album that tried to include the whole philosophy of hell, of Oriental hell," said Lim, who drew on Taoist mythology to write the lyrics, which include images like "a mountain of knives" and phantoms with their tongues ripped out.

Modern Taiwanese history plays a major role in Lim's story. The liner notes to *Mirror of Retribution* tell an elaborate backstory that takes place at the time of the 228 Incident, when Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) troops massacred hundreds of civilians.

The album's hero, Tsing-guan, is a mystic who sets out to help his friends in the 27th Brigade, a volunteer youth militia that fought against KMT troops who marched into Taichung in the weeks after the 228 Incident.

To help the militia, Tsing-guan uses his supernatural powers to enter the spirit world to steal the "Book of Life and Death," which holds the key to controlling life in the mortal world and has the power to reverse the course of history.

The songs depict Tsing-guan's journey through the multiple levels of hell (there are 18 main levels and 10 courts of hell, according to Lim), where he engages in epic battles and gory encounters with ghosts, beasts and other wicked creatures.

But Tsing-guan fails to retrieve the book and save his friends. In the final song, he is banished to the edge of hell, where he is shackled to the *Mirror of Retribution* and forced to serve a "timeless sentence" of watching his comrades butchered by "the tyrannical regime"; he watches as his "motherland," and eventually the universe, disappear.

"We like tragedies," said Lim, who used the 228 Incident as the backdrop because "the history makes the story seem very real."

Finding inspiration in Taiwanese lore is nothing new for Chthonic, whose past albums contain stories about crossing the Taiwan Strait and battles between Aboriginal and Han Chinese spirits.

Lim's creation of a heavy metal mythology takes its cue from the Scandinavian black metal bands he admires. "I need something local [so] I can feel the same kind of anger and sadness like the Scandinavians," he said.

Lim is the owner and founder of The Wall (這牆), Taipei's biggest indie rock venue. But he is perhaps most visible for his vocal support of Taiwanese independence and criticism of China's human rights record.

In 2003, he organized the first Tibetan freedom concert in Taipei, which was headlined by the Beastie Boys. In 2008, he started a civic group, Guts United, to rally the youth vote for the Democratic

Progressive Party's presidential campaign. Such activities might be a turn-off for some music fans, but Lim and Yeh are unapologetic. "As citizens, we have to care about politics very much, especially in a situation like Taiwan, where we are trapped in a very complicated international-political [position]."

"Because you don't care about politics, you think we care too much," said Yeh of those who criticize Chthonic's stance. "But as a human, as a citizen, to care about politics is very natural." Does Lim hope fans will adopt his views? "No, I don't," he said. "Music is music. I try to write songs and compose an

Stars from the underworld

Chthonic, Taiwan's most loved metal band, continues to see its celebrity status grow with the release of *Mirror of Retribution*

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER



Chthonic is more hellacious than ever with its newest release. PHOTO COURTESY OF CHTHONIC



Chthonic bassist Doris Yeh has been enjoying the limelight lately as a cover girl. PHOTO COURTESY OF CHTHONIC

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

JAN. 1 TO JAN. 7



1 Rainie Yang (楊丞琳) and *Rainie & Love...?* (雨愛) with **26.17%**

2 F.I.R. (飛兒樂團) and *Let's Smile* (讓我們一起微笑吧) with **8.26%**

3 Alien Huang (黃鴻升) and *Love Hero* (愛&英雄) with **8.1%**

4 Jeremy Liu (劉子千) and *Mr. Why* with **5.75%**

5 Magic Power (魔法力量) and self-titled album with **4.84%**

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

The BBC's best-paid star said on Thursday he was quitting after 13 years, having decided not to re-negotiate his high-salary contract, which had attracted criticism.

Jonathan Ross, 49, got into hot water in 2008 for on-air lewd prank phone calls made to a veteran actor, which then drew attention to his reported US\$28.6 million, three-year deal.

It was expected that Ross would have been asked to follow other top presenters at the license-fee funded British Broadcasting Corporation and accept a pay cut.

Ross presents a chat show and the BBC's film review program on television, a Saturday radio show and occasional television specials. His contract runs out in July.

"Over the last two weeks I have decided not to re-negotiate when my current contract comes to an end," he said in a statement. "No negotiations ever took place and ... my decision is not financially motivated."

He said he would happily have stayed with the BBC "for any fee they cared to offer, but there were other considerations."

The broadcaster suspended Ross for 12 weeks without pay over the

prank calls affair, triggered when he and comedian Russell Brand left messages on the answerphone of Andrew Sachs, a star of the cult comedy series *Fawlty Towers*, about Brand's liaisons with the actor's granddaughter.

In other job-related news, Charlie Sheen is back at work on *Two and*



a Half Men, and his producer said on Saturday that the audience at the actor's first show taping since his arrest was "incredibly supportive." Sheen taped an episode of the top-rated CBS comedy on Friday. He was arrested Christmas Day in Aspen, Colorado, on suspicion of domestic violence and other charges. Sheen's wife, Brooke, told police he put a knife to her throat, an accusation the actor denies.

Attorneys say the couple wants to reconcile.

Sheen showed up at work on Monday last week and rehearsals went well, said Chuck Lorre, the show's creator and executive producer. He said the incident wasn't ignored, but wouldn't say how it came up backstage.

Lorre said Sheen seems to be doing as well as he can under the circumstances.

"We did a live show in front of a studio audience and it was a big success for us," Lorre said. "We just came back to work." A day before the taping, Pitkin County Chief Deputy District Attorney Arnold Mordkin said that a Colorado

Charlie Sheen, right, is ready to bury the hatchet with his wife, Brooke Mueller. PHOTO: AFP

judge ruled that Sheen must appear in person on Feb. 8 for an Aspen hearing on suspicion of felony menacing, domestic violence and other charges.

Socialite Casey Johnson was already dead when an ambulance was called to her Los Angeles home, according to the woman who made the emergency call.

A recording of the call was posted on TMZ.com on Saturday.

The woman, who was not identified, described the Johnson & Johnson heiress as "ice cold" and said Johnson's hands were turning blue. The woman also said there are two other people at the home, and they all believed that Johnson was dead.

Johnson, 30, whose father is New York Jets owner Robert "Woody" Johnson, was found dead in her Los Angeles home on Monday last week. A dispatcher asked the woman if she thought the death was a suicide.

"I don't know if it's a suicide," the caller said. "Very often, her medication gets all screwed up. It's probably because of that." Johnson had been an insulin-dependent diabetic since childhood but it was not immediately clear whether that contributed to her death. An autopsy



Socialite Casey Johnson, left, was already dead when an ambulance was called to her Los Angeles home, according to a woman who telephoned the emergency services. PHOTO: AFP

on Tuesday was inconclusive and the results of toxicology tests aren't expected for weeks.

Johnson, dubbed the "baby-oil heiress" by the *New York Post*, lived her life on the tabloid pages. She partied with high school friend and fellow heiress Paris Hilton and announced last month that she was "engaged" to bisexual reality TV star Tila Tequila.

Johnson was charged last month with burglary and receiving stolen property for allegedly taking US\$22,000 in clothing, jewelry and other items from a friend's home. She pleaded not guilty and faced a hearing next month.