

CD Reviews: Taiwan

It took TV talent show *Happy Sunday* (快樂星期天) champion William Wei (韋禮安), aka WeiBird, three years to release his debut album after winning the series. The result, *Wei Li-an Debut Eponymous Original Album* (韋禮安首張同名全創作專輯), brims with a rare folk-rock elegance that establishes Wei as one of the most polished singer-songwriters of his generation.

On the anthemic *Story* (故事), a homage to Maroon 5's *This Love*, Wei builds a paean of youthful romantic yearning with his sun-kissed vocals and tingling guitar chords. "In this story, the ending is not the most important thing," he philosophizes.

With *Reason* (理由), Wei flirts with rhythmic jazz and gets it down pat. With credible ad-libbing and jamming motifs in the background, he croons about idiotic procrastination with irreverent wit and musical verve.

In the contagious *Sunflower in a Cloudy Day* (陰天的向日葵), Wei achieves a melodic catchiness reminiscent of the works of Taiwan's indie queen Cheer Chen (陳綺貞). The track begins with a calm, lulling guitar melody and builds into a climactic piano chorus.

On *More Perfect* (完美一點), the theme song to China's romantic comedy *Sophie's Revenge* (非常完美), Wei crafts a Mando-pop-meets-lounge-jazz gem with laid-back vocals and soothing melody.

Wei updates *Good Weather* (好天氣) and *Waiting Slowly* (慢慢等), tracks from his EP that was released last year, and arranges them with more emotional urgency and maturer vocals.

The album holds together as a coherent folk-rock album with occasional nods to jazz. Neither a powerhouse nor a virtuosic singer, Wei's warm vocal timbre is appropriately complemented by songs that wax poetic on romantic infatuation and life's joys.

Though he's a charismatic singer who has garnered significant attention through his appearances on a TV talent show, Wei opted to use an illustration rather than a close-up of his photogenic face on the album cover. Perhaps the intention was to encourage audiences to pay attention to the music rather than his good looks. But with an album this entrancing, that isn't an issue.

— ANDREW C.C. HUANG



WeiBird (韋禮安)
Wei Li-an Debut Eponymous Original Album
(韋禮安首張同名全創作專輯)
Linfair Records
www.weibird.com

An Italian embarks on a journey through East Asia and tells the stories of his travels using what was originally an American idiom — this is jazz drummer Pietro Valente's debut release *Tales From the Far East*.

The 27-year-old native of Padua, in northern Italy, composed eight tracks inspired by a nine-month trip to Thailand, China, India and Taiwan. He lived in Taichung in 2007 and 2008 and was active in the jazz scene in China and Taiwan.

On appearances alone, the album theme comes across as a little cliché, with song titles that sound like outdated TV travel show sound bites (*Red Light in Bangkok* and *The Spirit of India*). Then there's the cover design, adorned with fortune cookie typefaces and a Chinese dragon emblazoned on the CD. Tourists might find it cute.

For the most part, though, the music is worth the trip. Valente is a talented drummer with a larger-than-usual presence in a small jazz ensemble. He catches your attention like a rock drummer would, but not because he can get loud.

Always on the move, Valente chases tone and color, extracting every drop of sound he can from the drum kit, whether it's thunderous rolls from the floor toms or cymbal splashes that sizzle and simmer. The drums are busy, but rarely overbearing. The pensive opening track *Di Mare in Male* is a nice example of Valente's keen awareness of mood and atmosphere.

He's backed by a highly competent quartet — a pianist, bassist and tenor saxophonist — and together they weave familiar Chinese melodies with modern jazz on *Shanghai Today* and *Wide Breath in Beijing*, an interpretation of the Chinese folk song *Jasmine Flower* (茉莉花).

These tunes give a sense of genuine appreciation for the delicate, elegant side of traditional Chinese music, but Valente sounds most at home on the very funky *Muswing*, a tribute to kids playing on the streets in India.

In his eagerness to give us a snapshot of his journeys, Valente sometimes overdoes it. In *Shanghai Today* he inserts sampled recordings of ambulance sirens and honking horns, which robs the imagination (the tenor saxophone does a fine job on its own). It's songs like the buoyant, bossa nova-tinged *Last Mango in Taiwan* that leave a lasting impression.

— DAVID CHEN



Pietro Valente Quartet
Tales From the Far East
Self-released
www.pietrovalente.com

A noisy fog lingers throughout *Boyz & Girl's* self-titled debut, and never lifts. That's part of the beauty of this shoegazer rock album, which is full of otherworldly dreamscapes conjured up by reverb effects, a barrage of guitars and synthesizers and post-punk songcraft.

The album is worth a listen straight through from beginning to end. It opens with *Ghost Parade*, an aptly titled number saturated with sustaining fuzz and high-pitched squeals, artfully wielded by guitarist and vocalist Jon Du (杜澤威), one of the group's three "Boyz."

The "girl," guitarist and vocalist Ban Ban (班班), aka Bamban Lin (林以樂), surprises as the emotional center of the band. She has a high-pitched, childlike voice that was cute and charming with her previous indie-pop band *Freckles* (雀斑).

With *Boyz & Girl*, she sounds eerie and spooked, like a kid trapped in a nightmare. In the dark rocker *Watch Out! Aikly Is Dead*, her whip-cream airy timbre gets drenched in reverb and wrapped in a gauze of distortion. Her soaring cries fuel the song's exhilarating pace.

Things really start to blossom on *Cannot Touch*, a slow-motion sequence built on a hypnotic rhythm played on drums that sounds like it was recorded in a deep cavern. There are no guitars, just ambient synthesizers that shadow Ban Ban, as she whispers and sighs a singsong melody. The ethereal mood brings to mind M. Ward's more recent albums.

The synth orchestration continues in the spacey instrumental *Passengers*, which then gets foiled by *Kiss Me Blindly*, a grimy, garage/blues-rock romp. Here the album takes a surprising but rewarding turn — Ban Ban's sassy, spot-on delivery is a sudden breath of fresh air, and relieves some of the tension from the previous songs.

Boyz & Girl's noisy soundscape grows to be more inviting, and the emotional space feels warmer in the later tracks. On a side note, a lot of the lyrics are barely audible without repeated listening, or they're simply buried in the mix. But the mood and atmosphere are pitch-perfect.

— DAVID CHEN



Boyz & Girl
Boyz & Girl
Self-released
boyzandgirl.blogspot.com

"I love summer," croons Bearbabes' female lead singer and bassist "Cookie" on the opening track of *Year After Year* (年年), which cries out to be played during an oceanside drive with the windows rolled down.

It's also well-suited for a stroll on a scorching city pavement. The Bearbabes, a trio that has been around since 2000, play everything from slowcore rock to upbeat power-pop that is radiant but far from saccharine.

This second album, said Cookie in an interview printed in the band's promotional material, is about "loss." On the radio-friendly *Rockable*, it hurts so good, especially when she hits those yodeling notes during the choruses.

Cookie turns on the charm with her honey-smooth voice on *Firefly* (螢火), a beautiful piano lullaby, but she's no Mando-pop prude. She drops the F-bomb without flinching on *Sick N' Tired*, the band's only song written entirely in English and a great alt-country-flavored tune with spacey pop choruses.

Guitarist Wei-jun (魏駿) has the band scorching on *A City Without December* (沒有12月的城市), matched by top-notch drumming from Chen Tai-yuan (陳泰元), who also plays with another indie-rock trio, Windmill (風靡坊).

Dig deeper into *Year After Year*, and the band's cohesiveness and maturity as musicians only becomes more apparent. In *Dear Stranger* (親愛陌生人), they venture into psychedelic pop territory without getting too carried away. *Monster* (怪物) is a dreamy, slow-burning number that is one of the better examples of Taiwanese indie rock.

— DAVID CHEN



Bearbabes (熊寶貝樂團)
Year After Year (年年)
Himalaya Records
bearbabes.com.tw

Hardcover: UK

Softcover: UK

Rescues and romance

Alan Furst's newest tale of intrigue and derring-do finds its protagonist turning up the erotic heat

BY JANET MASLIN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

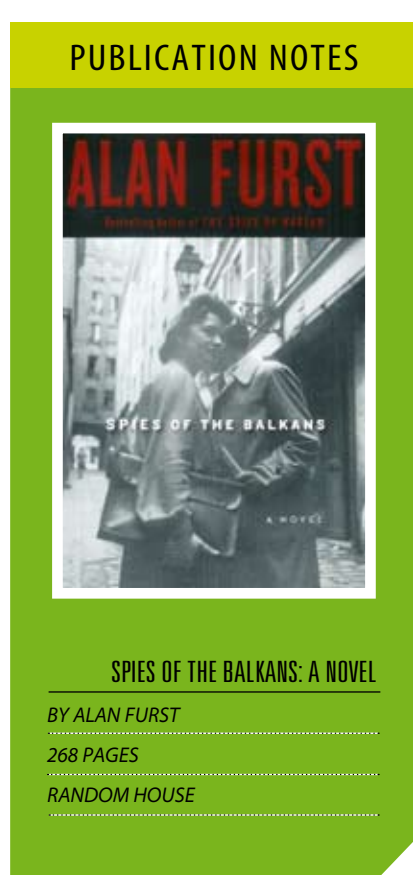
The man around whom Alan Furst's new spy novel revolves is Constantine Zannis, a highly placed police official in Salonika, Greece. In late 1940, as *Spies of the Balkans* begins, Zannis' specialty is discretion. He heads a new department charged with handling delicate situations. Is a politician being blackmailed by a prostitute? Call Zannis. Has a woman of some importance killed her husband and then insisted she's glad he's dead? "Naughty girl," Zannis says, giving the Furst hero's characteristic knowing shrug.

Furst has written so often about such men, the intrigue that surrounds them, and their subtle, intuitive maneuvering that he risks repeating himself. But Zannis is a younger, more vigorous version of the prototype than some. And he is Greek, which adds a whole new perspective to Furst's view of Europe before and during World War II, given the strategic importance of Greece's ability to resist German domination. If shades of its personal drama are by now familiar to Furst's readers, this book's larger and more important geography seems new.

In 1939, Greece's prime minister, General Ioannis Metaxas, said "that the old Europe would end when the swastika flew over the Acropolis." The Nazi flag did not rise over the Acropolis until April 1941. *Spies of the Balkans* is about the time in between, when people like Zannis were forced to get their bearings in an increasingly hostile world and to become rescuers to those fleeing more perilous places. Furst's gift for exquisite calibration transports the reader back to a realm where characters like Zannis could determine the limits of their authority only by testing it to the extreme.

Zannis does not enter *Spies of the Balkans* as a freedom fighter. Like any of Furst's insouciant spies in the making, he starts off with an almost casual view of the dangers mounting around him. And at first those dangers don't make much of a dent, although Zannis is inconvenienced when his paramour of the moment, Roxanne, an Englishwoman who runs a ballet school, is suddenly summoned home. Although Zannis is extremely astute as a matter of professional necessity, he hasn't noticed that she might also be a British spy.

By the time "an infinitely defective



SPIES OF THE BALKANS: A NOVEL
BY ALAN FURST
268 PAGES
RANDOM HOUSE

Englishman" arrives, perhaps in Roxanne's place, who calls himself Escovil and purports to be a travel writer at a time when carefree travel is a thing of the past, Zannis has become more watchful. He is made even more so by a quasi-seductive encounter with Emilia Krebs, a Jewish woman from a wealthy German family. *Spies of the Balkans* can be positioned in terms of time, fear and uncertainty by the facts that Emilia is openly married to a Nazi colonel, and that both of them feel that they are safer together than apart.

But Emilia is also still in a position to help other Jews escape from Germany through Greece, via a route that is increasingly vital because others have been closed. "For Europe," says one of the many figures in this book's large international tableau of characters, "it's like slipping out the back door." As a police official, Zannis has a suddenly crucial power: He can name certain individuals as wanted criminals and ask that they be extradited to Greece. But this process requires many delicate steps, and *Spies of the Balkans* pieces them together

with Furst's usual acuity for trans-European scheming. In the process, he incorporates enough historical background to establish how unstable Greece in general, and Salonika in particular, have been, and how age-old Balkan enmities still cast long shadows. The book is dotted with kleptics, evzones, Ustashi and other fierce, exotic fighters from this region.

Furst is better at establishing Salonika's subjugation to the Ottoman Empire than he is at making what, for him, are atypically blunt sexual innuendoes. Ordinarily, he is a writer of very few words and inversely strong impact when it comes to eroticism; here, there are times when he must strain a bit to establish Zannis' sexual bona fides. "Strange, but it just now occurs to me that the ottoman is an extraordinary piece of furniture, ingenious," Roxanne remarks at one louché moment. Why? "Because you can, you know, also sit on it."

However acrobatic this dalliance may be, it's also over very early in *Spies of the Balkans*. That leaves Furst time to incorporate an almost de rigueur flirtation between Zannis and the wealthy, imprisoned wife of an important man — a man so important that, if Greece falls, he will have both a ship and yacht at his disposal for purposes of making a getaway.

Her name is Demetria, and she's not much of a match for the more effortlessly devastating women for whom Furst's incurable romantics always fall. Or perhaps *Spies of the Balkans* simply has different priorities. In any case, urgent concerns about the fate of Europe easily eclipse the book's efforts to contrive star-crossed amour.

Oddly and wonderfully, Zannis' most tender relationship is not with a woman. He must help everyone in his extended family when the wartime crisis finally erupts. That means saying goodbye to his brave grandmother, who vows that the family will not go hungry if it can hang on to its sewing machine.

But of all the qualities that make Zannis one of Furst's most appealing protagonists, his rapport with a four-legged family member is one of the best. By now, the ultimate grand-scale nobility of his characters may come automatically to Furst. There's something more fresh and idiosyncratic in the way this one cannot bear to lose his dog.

Taking it to the limit

Legendary mountaineer Walter Bonatti brings the perils and poetry of 'extreme climbing' to life in 'The Mountains of My Life'

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

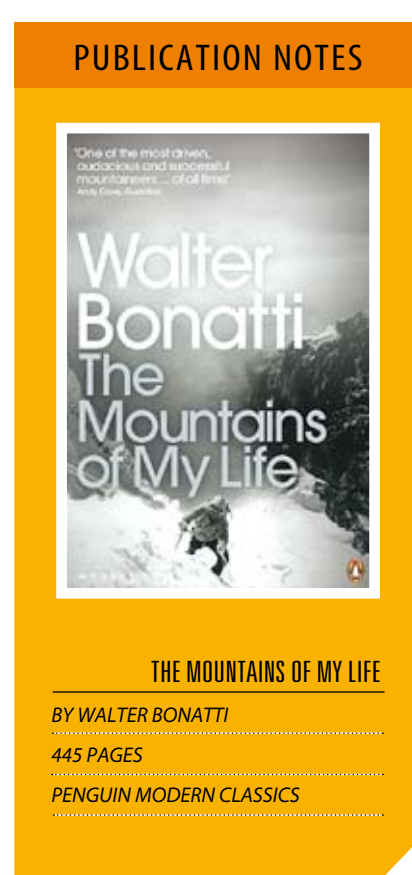
In 1965 the famous Italian alpinist Walter Bonatti spectacularly ended his career of "extreme climbing" by pioneering the most direct route up the north face of the Matterhorn, alone and in winter. Many people ask why men climb mountains, and often by the most difficult routes they can find. In the account of his last sensational feat in this wonderful book Bonatti offers a reason, almost as an aside. As he settled in for the night on a tiny ledge surrounded by rock, ice, blackness and intense cold, he could see Zermatt and the life of the valley below him. It was a life, he writes, "perhaps easy and alluring to one who, like me, was suspended between earth and sky, but so banal and disappointing, a man had to run away from it and somehow finish up here."

Bonatti started young. He recalls how in the summer of 1949, aged 19, he and a friend climbed the north face of the Grandes Jorasses in the Mont Blanc group by the hideously precipitous Walker Spur. They couldn't afford balaclavas, and their knapsacks, containing a few apples and tomatoes, were army surplus. Their rope was frayed hemp and they'd made their pitons themselves from an iron bar. It's small wonder that these days Bonatti is an opponent of "Himalayan methods" in the Alps — advance parties who prepare the way with fixed ropes and tents — just as he's skeptical of the benefits of sponsorship. He prefers to use the methods that sufficed for his 19th century predecessors such as Whymper — boots, an ice axe, a hammer and pitons, a rope, and little else.

On his third attempt, Bonatti conquered the Grand Capucin, a granite pinnacle in the Alps whose east face had up to then been thought unclimbable. The Italian city of Monza erupted in frenzy on his return, but his mother, long a victim of high blood pressure, was overcome by the excitement and suffered a fatal collapse. Bonatti was 21.

At the age of only 23, Bonatti was chosen to be a member of the 1954 Italian expedition to climb K2. This was seen as an enormously important project, something that would restore Italy's national pride after its defeat in World War II. In the event it led to controversy that would pursue Bonatti for the next 40 years.

The two Italians who'd been



THE MOUNTAINS OF MY LIFE
BY WALTER BONATTI
445 PAGES
PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

selected to attempt the summit set off to establish a final camp at some 8,100m, while Bonatti and a Pakistani porter called Mahdi were told to follow them and take up oxygen cylinders, spending the night in the summit pair's tent. Progress for everyone was extremely slow at that altitude and as night fell Bonatti and Mahdi hadn't found their colleagues and the vital tent. Because their dangerous position made any movement in the dark out of the question, Bonatti and Mahdi were forced to spend the night in a shallow depression they'd scraped in the snow. At dawn they descended to the original, lower camp, leaving the oxygen when they'd spent the night, as the leading pair had told them to do in their last voice contact.

Mahdi lost his fingers and toes to frostbite and gangrene as a result of that night. Later an Italian newspaper printed two articles that suggested Bonatti had secretly planned to reach the summit with Mahdi ahead of the other two, that he had somehow been responsible for Mahdi's frostbite, and that he had used some of the oxygen himself (despite not having the

masks to make this possible), causing it to run out two hours before the successful pair reached the peak the following day.

Bonatti felt that he had effectively been abandoned by the pair in the only available tent, and could well have died, along with Mahdi, as a result. When he sued the Italian newspaper for libel, a court hearing found entirely in his favor. Rumors persisted in Italian climbing circles, however, and the disillusion that resulted led him to embark from then onwards on a largely solo climbing career.

After he retired from climbing in 1965, Bonatti explored remote places around the world as a correspondent for an Italian magazine, returning to, among other places, Patagonia, where he had achieved sensational success back in 1958, though failing to conquer the steeple-like Cerro Torre.

He had seen some disasters happen. On an attempt on the Central Pillar of Freney on Mont Blanc in the summer of 1961, for example, four of his companions lost their lives, each in different circumstances, but all essentially by freezing to death following extreme fatigue.

The Mountains of My Life is a collection of accounts culled from Bonatti's nine books, together with some other material such as translator Robert Marshall's analysis of what actually happened on K2. It's the detail, much of it poetic, that makes this book come alive, and no account of one perilous ascent is like any other. But cold is cold whoever you are, and sharing three dried bananas between four people brings home the brutal situation on an icy rock face at night, however celebrated those involved might happen to be.

Sometimes in daydreams I see the 21-year-old Bonatti on the summit of the Grand Capucin, eating an apple and laughing into the sun. He stands for youth, something that will never come to any of us again. And climbing is an activity appropriate to the young — not done for money, or even fame, but to assert that you're alive, something done in the short space in a human life when it can be done. And looking back, the old mountaineer can think "I can't do that now, but I did it once." Climbing, in other words, is a consolation for mortality, and there aren't very many of those.