



Pedal to the metal

Linkin Park frontman Chester Bennington talks about how the Internet is changing music, his solo project Dead by Sunrise, and the new album his band plans to release next year

BY RON BROWNLOW
STAFF REPORTER

A little more than a decade ago, Chester Bennington was flipping burgers at Burger King and was so poor that a skateboard was his primary means of transportation. Then he joined nu-metal band Linkin Park, and in 2001 their debut album, *Hybrid Theory*, a radio-friendly blend of hip-hop and heavy metal, shot to the top of the charts, where they have remained ever since. Their three studio albums, *Hybrid Theory*, *Meteora* (2003) and *Minutes to Midnight* (2007) have all been No. 1 on the Billboard Charts in the US, and have sold more than a total of 250,000 copies in Taiwan, where they first performed in 2007 in front of 40,000 fans at Taipei's Zhongshan Football Stadium (中山足球場), in what organizers touted as the country's highest-selling foreign concert since Michael Jackson.

Staff Reporter Ron Brownlow recently spoke via phone with Bennington, Linkin Park's lead singer, ahead of his band's return visit to Taiwan as part of next month's 2009 Summer Rock Summit (夏日搖滾高峰會).

Taipei Times: In the late-1990s, after listening to a demo, you quit your job and moved your family to California to join Lincoln Park. What made you do that?

Chester Bennington: A little man that lives inside my head [pauses for effect]. I'm a very emotional person, I'm a very gut kind of guy. I would say that in a lot of ways if you looked at how [Linkin Park's other frontman] Mike Shinoda looks at things and how I look at things, we probably look at things in two different ways but we somehow come to the same conclusion. So I didn't analyze it very much. I find that when I just go with my gut and I just go with the whisper that's in my heart, in my head, it generally tells me the right choice to make. When I over-analyze I find myself in trouble. So when I heard the demo I was like, "I'll go out there." When I heard the music I knew right away that it was

nothing like anything I had ever heard before. That sometimes can be really bad [laughs]. In this case it was really good, and right when I heard the music all sorts of really great melodies started popping into my head and I was like, "This is a sign. I need to go, I need to do this. I need to go out there. This is the real deal."

And when I moved out there I did see that it was the real deal. From the very first day of practices we were already a kick-ass band. I was like, "This is a no-brainer. This is my chance. I'm only going to get one opportunity to do this. I want to do this with my life and if I don't take chances to make it happen then it's not going to happen." So I quit my job, moved out, moved to Mike Shinoda's couch, lived in the back of my car, in a really shitty apartment that had the roof cave in on it. And while doing that pretty much made a record that changed six guys from various parts of southern California and one guy from Arizona's life completely for the rest of their existence [laughs]. It could have very easily turned out to be nothing at the same time. It could have been a fine experience and I could tell my grandkids, "Yeah, at one time I moved out to California to try to be in this band." It could have been one of those things too. But I knew somewhere inside, something told me, "This is the one, you need to go."

TT: That demo, is this something we've heard before?

CB: There's got to be some versions of the song out there. The demo was part of an EP they had already made as a band. They sold it at shows and passed copies around. The songs that I heard were on there. The difference was that the copy they sent me on one side had just music, and the other side had music with their old singer on it. When I listened to the music the first time, I listened to it without the vocals. One song ended up being on *Hybrid Theory* but we changed all the melodies to it.



Linkin Park lead singer Chester Bennington and his band return to Taipei next month. PHOTOS: AP AND REUTERS

(Later during the interview, a media handler says the name of the song Bennington referred to was *Forgotten*, from Linkin Park's debut album, *Hybrid Theory*.)

Linkin Park got its start in California in 1996 when high school friends Mike Shinoda, Rob Bourdon and Brad Delson formed a band. After high school, the three added Dave Farrell, Mark Wakefield and Joe Hahn to their group, which was called Xero. Later, when Wakefield, the band's vocalist, and Farrell left, the band changed its name from Xero to Hybrid Theory, and Bennington was brought on as the new vocalist based on a referral by Jeff Blue, vice president of Zomba Music. At Bennington's suggestion the band changed its name again, this time to a purposefully misspelled version of the name of a park in Santa Monica, California. They posted MP3s to their Web site and enlisted a "street team" of fans around the world to help them promote their music. After numerous rejections from record labels, Linkin

Park signed with Warner Bros Records, where Blue was now vice president, in 1999. *Hybrid Theory* sold 14 million copies and was the world's top-selling album in 2001.)

TT: In one case someone at a record label told you, "We wouldn't sign you for a fucking million dollars." What made you keep pushing with this band even when people weren't signing you?

CB: There was no question in our minds that we did not suck. We thought definitely that the people that were meeting with us were questionable in their ability to identify music that did not suck. We were just like, "They don't get it yet. They don't get it. We kick ass and we know that. And people are listening to us and people are coming to our shows."

We didn't play a lot of shows, we would sit in our rehearsal space and write songs and rehearse the songs we wrote and see how they were performed live. And if we didn't like it we would go back in the studio at Mike's house and rewrite them. We basically wrote and we didn't play until we had songs that didn't suck. And so when we'd play we'd invite our friends and 300 people would show up and they would go tell their friends, "This did not suck. You have to see this band." Then the next thing you know 600 people would show up. It wasn't like we were up there every week playing a lot of live shows like a lot of bands do. So when we go turned down we were like we had already made up our minds that we were going to do this. And we just decided that we're going to have to do this without a label. We're going to have to do this on our own.

So we started a street team, we followed the hip-hop street model of kids on the street passing out mix tapes. We did that with our music, we passed out CDs with our music on them. At concerts we had kids going to shows with the bands they liked and handing CDs to people at the show. They'd end up handing the CD to their friends. If their friends liked it we told them to tell their friends to contact

us, and we'd make them part of the street team and we'd start sending them CDs to pass out. By the time we released *Hybrid Theory*, I think we'd passed out over 250,000.

TT: Mike Shinoda recently said your new album is going to be so unique that "they're going to have to come up with a new genre name for what this record is."

CB: It's going to be called *Space Rocks*. No, I'm just kidding [laughs]. It's going to be called *Old Metal* [pauses] ... No, actually, it is definitely going to be more difficult to place us in terms of genre. I think that in the beginning we were considered a metal band. Then we kind of became an alternative band. And now we're kind of both and a hip-hop group. It's becoming increasingly more difficult also to be in this band and write songs simply because we've written so much stuff, so much material that no one's ever heard, that only us and our producers have heard.

Now Rick Rubin's working on this record with us as well. If he thinks he hears anything he heard during the process of making *Minutes to Midnight* or ever before he's like, "That's done. That song is gone." So we all kind of look at things like that now because we don't want Rick to go, "That sounds like so-and-so from 10 years ago."

(Rubin, who produced Linkin Park's most recent album, *Minutes to Midnight*, is famous for co-founding Def Jam Records with Russell Simmons while Rubin still a college student, and for getting hip-hop Run-DMC and rock group Aerosmith to collaborate on a cover of Aerosmith's *Walk This Way*. Rubin is also known for rejuvenating the late Johnny Cash's career with a series of albums on Rubin's label American Recordings, and, more recently, for producing albums by U2, Green Day and Metallica. Rubin and Linkin Park are currently working on a new album slated for release early next year.)

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[TECHNOLOGY REVIEWS]



From left: Hewlett-Packard's PhotoSmart Premium printer; the Disney NetPal netbook from Asus; Pentax's waterproof Optio W8 camera; and the Sony Vaio NW, a Blu-ray equipped notebook computer. PHOTOS: BY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

A NETBOOK DRESSED UP IN DISNEY, WITH PARENTAL CONTROLS

The Disney NetPal from Asus (US\$350, coming in early next month) is a beefed-up Eee PC Netbook with thicker hinges, a spill-proof keyboard and onboard parental controls, and no shortage of Disney-themed frosting.

Once you get past the mouse-ear-shape Web cam, this is really just a typical Intel Atom-powered Windows XP netbook. There are three USB ports and an SD slot, a VGA graphics port for school reports and a headphone jack. The Wi-Fi/Webcam combination could make Skypeing with a grandparent an option.

The case comes in pink (aka Princess Pink) or blue, and there are two hard-drive options, either the 160GB model or a more shock-resistant 16GB solid-state drive model.

The Netpal has extra online security features, so you can decide what your child sees through the customizable Disney desktop. A scheduler, hidden behind a password, lets you decide which games your child can play and when. If you want to limit your child's time with Webkinz or Free Realms to after school, and make it inaccessible at bedtime, that's your call.

A CAMERA THAT LAUGHS AT POOLSIDE MISHAPS

Pentax adds to the lineup of swimming snapshooters with its new Optio W80, which can withstand a dunk off the deep end down to 5m. It can shoot underwater photos and high-definition video for up to two hours, according to its maker.

The Optio W80 is also built ruggedly enough, its maker says, to handle dust,

temperatures down to minus 10°C and drops of up to 90cm.

Pentax has been poolside since 2003, when it introduced its first waterproof camera (the Optio W80 is an update of last year's Optio W60). Today, the rugged camera market has expanded to include models like the Fujifilm Finepix 233WP, Olympus Stylus Tough 8000, Canon PowerShot D10 and the Panasonic Lumix DMC-TS1.

The new Pentax is at the high end of the price scale. But the 12.1-megapixel Optio W80 has some nice specs, including a 5X lens, the ability to capture high-definition video, image-stabilization technology and face-recognition technology.

The Optio W80 will come in a choice of red, gray or blue when it hits stores this month.

THE LAPTOP THAT BECOMES YOUR BLU-RAY DVD PLAYER

It was exactly three years ago, on June 25, 2006, that Samsung shook up the home entertainment category by shipping the industry's first Blu-ray disc player, the BD-P1000.

The price was US\$1,000, a princely sum in those days. Today, that's still a lot of money.

Consider, then, the release this month of a Sony Vaio notebook computer for US\$880 that plays Blu-ray discs and includes HDMI output for TVs. The specs of the notebook, the Vaio NW, is in line with the competition: Intel Core 2 Duo processor, abundant connectivity options and what looks to be an excellent 15.5-inch wide-screen display.

Some might call the NW a halo product, but if you put the NW in the proper context, it starts to make some

sense. Panasonic recently announced the availability of an US\$800 portable Blu-ray player.

But Sony counters with an interesting proposition: If you were going to spend US\$800 on a portable Blu-ray player, why not drop an extra \$80 and get a computer too?

A PRINTER THAT NAVIGATES DIRECTLY TO THE WEB, NO PC NEEDED

It's hard to get excited about a new printer, but the new Hewlett-Packard PhotoSmart Premium with TouchSmart Web might be an exception.

The printer (available this fall) has a Web user interface that connects to your PCs and the Web via built-in Wi-Fi. Wireless printing is nothing new, but the way that the printer directly connects to the Web to print photos,

coupons, maps, event tickets and more is head-turning.

The printer is an all-in-one device that prints, faxes, copies and scans. You navigate the TouchSmart Web feature via a 4.33-inch touch-screen control panel that has an unusually intuitive interface.

Using TouchSmart Web, you can connect directly to Snapfish (the online photo-sharing site that HP owns) to print photos from the site. You can also plug a memory card into the printer and upload to your Snapfish account directly from the printer, no computer necessary.

The printer even lets you view trailers of movies from DreamWorks on its LCD, although it seems unlikely that anyone would choose to do that. More useful: You can download and print coloring pages for the children from DreamWorks.