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Film Review. Down: Indie Rock in the PRC.

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/marc_moskowitz/10/

DOWN: Indie Rock in the PRC. *Written, produced and directed by Andrew Field and Jud Willmont; shot and narrated by Andrew Field. Shanghai: Willmountain Films; Field Note Productions, 2012. 1 DVD (52 min.) In Chinese and English, with English subtitles. <http://chinarockdoc.com/>. (Parties interested in acquiring this film may contact Andrew Field directly at shanghaidrew@gmail.com.)*

DOWN: Indie Rock in the PRC is directed and produced by China scholar Andrew Field and filmmaker Jud Willmont. *DOWN* offers a range of footage of Chinese rock musicians performing in clubs and at concerts. Beijing is the centre of China's rock scene and as such the film primarily focuses on that locale, but it also includes footage from Wuhan and a concert held in the outskirts of Shanghai. There is an even mix of narration, interviews and music, giving the film a well-balanced feel.

The interviews and music are primarily in Chinese with English subtitles but there are also several English-language interviews. Andrew Field narrates to provide important links and insights to connecting scenes. Interview settings range from taking a trip on a train, to street restaurants, to back rooms and offices. The film primarily focuses on the contemporary moment but it also offers some archival footage of the Cultural Revolution that is nicely contrasted with contemporary shots. Similarly, the club footage is wonderfully juxtaposed with everyday street scenes. The people interviewed are charming, insightful and at times demonstrate a welcome sense of humour.

The film's interviews include Western expatriate club owners and independent company representatives. It also provides interviews with a Chinese record shop owner, a music festival organizer, and a range of musicians who talk about what it is like to try to make a living in the industry. They provide several important insights into the development of music and outline some of the most important musical trends over time.

It should be noted that the film's editor plays a little fast and loose with what one is actually seeing. The film frequently overlays soundtracks onto live video footage. This is edited fluidly enough that it often creates an illusion of listening to live performances. Viewers unfamiliar with the Chinese language might miss the fact that the lips often are not in sync with the music being played. The disadvantage to this approach is that one does not gain an accurate feel for the seeming chaos of club scenes. In the club footage one does not hear people talking, the sound distortion of bad equipment or poor room acoustics, or even the many moments when a performer might sing off key. Some might say this approach challenges the integrity of the footage.

The advantage to this approach is that the music is much cleaner and far more pleasant to listen to, and it is used to connect scenes more fluidly without interruption. In other words, the viewer gets to listen to the music at its best. Indeed, at times, the film feels like a publicity video for the bands.

Given Chinese rock's marginal status both in and outside of China's borders, the choice to show the music in its best light is perfectly understandable.

Another issue that one might take with the film is that it does not problematize the musicians' claims about Chinese rock in spite of questionable assertions about the music's "authenticity" or "uncontrived" nature. For the most part the film depicts a world in which musicians, club owners and concert organizers are all unified in their attempt to promote rock for the benefit of the people. The ways that one's different positions in the music industry might put them at odds with each other, even to the point of economic exploitation, are not addressed.

One of the strengths of the film is that it provides a compelling taster for different musical styles that the film provides. It also gives a feel for what the music venues for this musical genre look like. What the film does best is to provide a wealth of insights about how musicians see their worlds. Often, those interviewed are remarkably articulate in explaining Western influences (from Bob Dylan to Nirvana) and the ways that the music originated in the West but quickly localized to become something exciting and different. They eloquently link China's contemporary rock scene with the hippie movement of the US—marking it, correctly I think, as a cultural transformation rather than merely a musical development.

The interviews with the musicians provide a range of impressive insights about the nature of Chinese society in relation to the sometimes overwhelming cultural, economic and political transformations of the last decades. One of the most culturally telling accounts is an interview of a female musician who talks of the intense stigma of being a rock star as opposed to the high status of her parents who are professors. Interviews with mainstream audiences watching a Cui Jian concert who know nothing about rock are juxtaposed with the intensely insular and remarkably devoted fans of alternative rock music who are featured in the rest of the film. The size of the Cui Jian concert also nicely contrasts with the far more intimate, and at times anemic, size of audiences for the majority of the performances in the film.

DOWN is wonderfully filmed, nicely organized, expertly edited, and in many ways feels like a big budget production. It would work equally well as entertainment at home or in the classroom. All in all, it is the best documentary that I have seen on contemporary music in China and I highly recommend it to anyone interested in studying music or popular culture in China.

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