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活民族誌

Cultivating an Alternative Mode of Existence:
an Ethnography of the Musical Activities and Lives of
Taipei's Veteran Indie Rockers

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摘要

本論文是一個關係台北獨立搖滾音樂老將的音樂活動的人類學記事。在他們所屬的歷史與都市背景下去做描述，筆者首先說明本地老牌的獨立搖滾樂隊如何進入困境重重的音樂世界，其主要動機並非在於獲得主流的成功、名望或是財富。筆者接著處理本地獨立搖滾樂隊所處的社會文化背景與其生活軌跡，以便更好地去理解這些音樂經驗和感覺在他們生活中的作用。憑藉著這幾年的參與和觀察本地獨立搖滾音樂現場與一系列的正式訪談及表演裡，筆者提出，台北的獨立搖滾樂手尋求培養另類的存在模式，讓他們，在台北，得以脫離做為普通高校學生或白領上班族苛刻的日常現實。該詮釋表明本地獨立搖滾音樂及其樂手的獻身，能正面地被理解為是某種形式的社會文化抵抗。不順從、非循規蹈矩去生活的獨立搖滾樂手，也凸顯了極其重要的作用，他們致力於在地現場，為他們提供了手段和社會軌跡，尋找靈活的收入來源和強大的感官體驗，享受社會聯繫感和自我認同。

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ethnographic account of the musical activities of Taipei's veteran indie rock musicians. Following a description of these activities in their historical and urban context, I first show how the involvement of local veteran rockers in the difficult world of music is not primarily motivated by aspirations to mainstream success, fame and wealth. I then move on to look into the socio-cultural backgrounds and life trajectories of local veteran rockers so as to better understand the sense of these musical experiences and the role of music in their lives. Relying on several years of participant observation in the local indie rock scene and a series of formal interviews with performers, I propose that Taipei's veteran indie rockers seek to cultivate an alternative mode of existence that enables them to disengage from the harsh daily realities of ordinary high school students and white-collar workers (*shangban zu*) in Taipei. This interpretation suggests that the commitment of local rockers to music and their bands can positively be understood as a form of socio-cultural resistance. It also highlights the paramount role of the musical activities in the non-conformist approach to life of veteran indie rockers, as their involvement in the local scene offers them means and social loci to find flexible sources of revenue and enjoy powerful sensory experiences, social connectedness, and a sense of self-identity.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 - About the author and this research project

I was 15 years old when I bought my first rock record. A month before, an American band from Chicago with the odd name of The Smashing Pumpkins had just released a double album entitled *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*. I remember I hated it the first time I listened to it, but the second time around, it hit me. Not only could I not stop listening to the album, but I began to believe this band was the greatest thing in the world. From that moment on, I knew rock music would always be part of my life.

It was November 1995, and the type of music called alternative rock was already well into its golden age, with bands like Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and my idols at the time, the Smashing Pumpkins, topping the charts and reaching out to massive audiences across the globe, including my French-speaking hometown of Quebec. As I would soon realize, the story of my conversion to rock music was not different from that of millions of people of my generation.

Over the next 15 years, my fascination with rock music and the rich musical tradition in which it is rooted was one of the few consistent vectors shaping the very fabric of my existence, in ways I could never have foreseen as a teenager. Following extended stays in Europe and undergraduate studies in French literature, I arrived in Taipei at the end of 2006 with the simple ambition of teaching French while exploring the social landscapes of this part of Asia. It was here that my love of rock music would take all of its sense, notably by serving as a key socio-cultural bridge to facilitate my

integration in the country. Indeed, I rapidly discovered that Taiwan, too, had more than its share of local rock lovers who spent most of their time playing, listening to, and talking about rock music. Out of curiosity, I began frequenting a few live venues in Taipei that presented concerts by local rock bands who played their own songs and acted independently from major record labels. Those were my first encounters with Taipei's independent – or indie – rock scene, of which I have been a close follower ever since. In these small but lively circles, I had the chance to meet great friends, and I must admit that, to this day, Taipei's indie music scene still feels more like home to me than any other social environment in Taiwan, Europe, or Canada.

However, my interest in the local music scene reached a completely different level at the beginning of 2008, a year and a half after I quit my job as a language teacher to enter the anthropology department of National Taiwan University. It is around that time that my good friend Georgy Yang, leader of an indie rock band called Black Summer Days, asked me to join his group as a guitarist; an offer that, as a music lover and amateur musician, I simply could not refuse. For a period of approximately 18 months, I had the immense privilege and pleasure to be an integral part of the band's musical activities¹, from rehearsals and songwriting to live performances, while learning the craft of rock music with my accomplished bandmates Georgy, Punk, and Jingang; himself a veteran drummer and highly respected figure among Taiwanese musicians. More than being just an amazing time, this experience changed my life, and totally transformed my perspective on music, on Taipei's indie scene, and on the very nature and meaning of the musical

¹ I consider becoming a member of Black Summer Days all the more so unique a privilege that there are only a handful of foreigners who play with bands mainly composed of Taiwanese musicians. The lineups of the vast majority of indie rock bands in Taipei tend to include exclusively members of Taiwanese or foreign origin.

activities of the bands that participate in it.

But being part of a Taiwanese indie rock band was first and foremost a deeply human and anthropological adventure. It gave me the chance to perform with a certain number of Taipei's indie rock bands, and allowed me get to know personally hundreds of other local musicians. Several of them became good friends, and, in the process, I became one of the few privileged witnesses of their life stories. It also enabled me to observe the activities of some local groups from an insider's point of view, which made me fully realize how playing in an indie band in modern Taiwan and living the way these people do is not merely some form of entertainment, as is commonly believed by the bulk of Taiwanese society. These activities most often imply a strong commitment to a series of distinctive experiences and perspectives on life and the surrounding socio-cultural environment.

Halfway into my involvement with Black Summer Days, I decided to use the opportunity of my thesis project to try to offer some insights on these people's stories—the stories of my musician friends and acquaintances, whose activities and life trajectories largely bear the marks of a general lack of public understanding and support. Therefore, I sincerely hope that readers who are unfamiliar with the local indie music scene will find in this dissertation a useful introduction to the world of Taipei's indie rock musicians, and that it will contribute to creating more awareness and recognition of these people's meaningful endeavors and overall contribution to modern Taiwanese society.

1.2 - Motivations, objectives and literature review

In early 2008, I became a rhythm guitarist in Black Summer Days, the band of my

friend Georgy. Our common fascination with music was the base of our friendship, but I soon noticed that music occupied an even more important place in the lives of my bandmates than in mine. One day, after informing the band via SMS that I could not make it to our weekly group rehearsal, I received a message back from one of the band members: “Try not to do that again, music is all I have in my life.”

His words surprised me. I began contemplating the meaning and overall importance of musical activities in my friends’ lives. Obviously, what was merely for me – at least in the beginning – some sort of social experiment meant something very different and more important to some of them. And my co-members of Black Summer Days were not the only ones to have such an intense connection to their musical activities. There were at least several thousand indie rockers like them in Taipei who, despite the improbability of commercial success – a topic I shall discuss later in this thesis – nonetheless poured a substantial amount of their time and all their heart into their musical endeavors, from writing and listening to music at home to rehearsing in practice rooms and performing live with their band².

I became genuinely interested in understanding better who these indie musicians were, what kind of existence they had and why their band and music in general was so

² In a 2009 M.A. thesis, Huang Shi-Wen estimated the total number of indie acts (including bands and single artists) playing different types of popular music and in all regions of Taiwan to 784 (Huang 2009: 38). From that number, 527 played only once or twice over the year during which the investigation was conducted. I personally judged this number to be largely underestimated, knowing that about 360 Taiwanese rock bands applied to the 2012 Spring Scream festival alone, and that Huang forgot several important live houses in his calculation. This prompted me to come up with a rough estimation of my own based on the rock bands that I know, that received subsidies from the government, and that performed at the Underworld, at the Wall, at Legacy and both Riversides between March and May of 2012. I estimated the number of active indie rock bands based in Taipei to be around 300. This number excludes bands and artists identified to types of music other than rock (utterly pop, folk, or jazz). According to my assessment, about half of these bands perform regularly. This would mean that there are between 1000 and 2000 active indie rock musicians in Taipei; much more if we include all those who currently do not have a band or play with individual artists. One must keep in mind that the rock scene is only a part of Taipei and Taiwan’s larger indie music scene.

important for them. As I deepened my practical experience in the countless details of the sometimes-thrilling-yet-immensely-fastidious craft of the modern rock musician, fundamentally simple yet elusive questions appeared. Why do local veteran indie rockers persist in playing music if mainstream success for their bands seems so out of reach? What are these painstaking musical activities about if not gaining wealth and fame? What is the role of musical activities in the lives of these people?

Those are the essential questions that prompted me to carry out this research project. Another element of motivation came from the limited amount of literature on Taiwan's indie soundscapes. There is a near absence of English research about Taipei's indie rock scene; a gap which the current work can hopefully contribute, in part, to fill. It is true that rock music is an increasingly popular subject of M.A. theses by graduate students in Taiwan and abroad. But, very few works in Chinese have offered a comprehensive presentation of Taiwan's indie music or an explanation of the meaning of these activities in the Taiwanese context. It is my sincere hope that the personal observations and interpretations reported in these pages can help the reader learn more about and make better sense of the lives and involvement of these young Taiwanese adults in the realm of music – and perhaps by extension better sense of the endeavors of their fellow indie rockers in other regions or countries. As such, the objectives of this research are essentially ethnographic and interpretative in nature. I sought to accomplish this task in a way that is primarily accessible and useful for English-speaking and non-Taiwanese readers who are not familiar with Taipei's indie rock scene, Taiwanese society in general, or the craft of the modern rock musician. I invite these foreign readers to see this thesis as a general introduction to Taipei's indie rock scene and the specific

experience of being an indie rock musician in Taipei. Also, the present work offers a substantial amount of insights and interpretative leads that can hopefully provide food for thought for people who are already acquainted with the Taipei's indie rock music, thereby stimulating further discussions on the subject.

Ultimately, I expect this work to offer a contrast to the majority of academic investigations of music-related phenomenon, due primarily to my unique perspective as a foreign member of the indie rock scene in Taiwan. The journey from naïve foreigner to (partial) insider in Taipei's indie rock scene enabled me to provide a more human and experience-driven angle on the activities, lives and experiences of indie rock bands in Taipei. Therein possibly lies the main value of this work.

The particularity of this thesis becomes clearer when compared to the body of existing literature on rock music phenomena, both in Taiwan and in other countries. As of 2012, a growing number of academic efforts, albeit somewhat limited in terms of scope and thoroughness, are being devoted to Taiwan's indie music scene. An author who arguably stands out is Ho Tung-Hung, sociologist and popular music specialist at the Fu Jen Catholic University. Although his Ph.D. dissertation, reports and communications about Taiwan's popular and indie music world are concerned with questions that differ greatly from this project, his work provides substantial ethnographic data and accounts that greatly help to understand the development and present-day realities of Taipei's indie rock circles. Another very useful English publication is the December 2007 edition of the "Fountain Arts and Living" magazine, which offers a comprehensive introduction to the history of Taiwanese popular music through several portraits of major figures, music events and movements (including Taipei's indie rock domain). Other interesting reads by

foreign observers of Taiwan's indie music scene are Mack Hagood's (2008) and Wendy Hsu's (2008) articles, which respectively discuss the "liminal" position of indie musicians in Taiwan and the transnational character of Taiwan's indie rock scene.

In recent years, several M.A. theses (in Chinese) have been produced by Taiwanese students of various institutions and academic branches. Primarily based on case studies of specific bands and investigations of the economic and political context of Taiwan's indie rock domain, these researches have discussed issues pertaining to band practices and aesthetics (Chu Meng-Ci 2001, about local metal band Chthonic; Chang Kai-Ting³ 2010, about indie band 1976), to socio-political identity (Mon Ya-Fen 2007, about L.T.K. Commune), to the localization process of rock music in the country (Cai Yue-Ru 2006; Fang Mei-Jung 2008), to the weaknesses of local rock bands in terms of management and career development (Ding Yi-Wen 2004), as well as to the tensions between Taiwan's indie domain, popular music industry and cultural policies (Jeng Kai-Tung 2005; Young Tsang-Yu 2008; Huang Shih-Wen 2009; Chang Being-Yen 2009).

Rock music scenes around the world are also the object of increasing attention in the English-language scholarship. Perceiving indie rock as a large cultural movement that encompasses various types of actors (performers, fans, labels, etc.), several researchers have produced thorough discussions of its core representations, symbols and aesthetic specificities, as well as of its socio-cultural and commercial practices (ex: Hibbett 2005; Hesmondhalgh 1999). A more common approach in social sciences, ethnomusicology and cultural studies has been to interpret rock and pop music performances as enactments of various types of collective identities and representations by indie musicians and concert-

³ Chang Kai-Ting's thesis offers on pp. 22-25 a very useful table that summarizes 14 M.A. research projects about indie music in Taiwan produced by students between 2001 and 2009.

goers. Hence we now have detailed accounts of the construction and expression of regional, national, socio-political and gender identities within specific local indie (or underground) rock scenes, types of music, or aesthetic forms. a few examples of such scholarship are the research and publications of Cushman (1995) on the rock music counterculture in soviet Leningrad and post-communist Saint Petersburg, Seca (2001) about the musical practices and social representations of underground musicians in Paris, Wallach (2005) on the role of local indie rock scenes and the democratization process in Indonesia, Davies (2006) on Hamilton's indie rock subculture, Rogers (2008) on the practices, mindsets and historical context of Brisbane's indie music scene, and Ligot (2012) on the cultural identification of "Taike Rock" (台客搖滾) and Taiwanese traditional rap (台灣味唸歌).

Given the highly complex and profoundly elusive nature of the subject at hand, each of these approaches yields an important contribution to the understanding of rock music and musical activities.. Yet taken together as a body of work (in its most general fashion), it fails to adequately address certain fundamental questions that I, speaking as an amateur indie musician, would like to see explored. Whether offering a blueprint of the indie rock symbols and ideology, an interpretation of the socio-political meanings permeating musical practices and expressions, or a macro-level perspective on the rock music business, such work (again in its most general form) can be described as being somewhat detached from the subjective realities of rock musicians themselves. As a result, most of these accounts fail to see what I would describe as the "global human picture" of rock activities, and tell very little about the basic *experience* of being in a rock band in a given society. Indeed, the majority of the research on popular forms of music,

while focusing on the practices, symbols or representations observed in rock music scenes, barely stops to consider *why* musicians engage in such activities in the first place, as if being passionately committed to rock music were an all-too-common, self-evident phenomenon that does not require careful reflection on the particular sense of these activities. In order to understand human payoff of these painstaking activities, we must re-examine the experience of being an indie rock musician through the lens of the larger socio-cultural context in which these social actors evolve.

A few publications do address issues that are similar to those orienting the present research. In his 1999 ethnography of what he calls the “commercial hard rock scene” of Akron (Ohio), Berger mentions that, “beyond the situational goals of fun, most rockers join bands in pursuit of fame and wealth” in an attempt – unsuccessful for the most part – to “sidestep the stultifying life plan of high school, college, family and work” (Berger 1999: 51). Other examples include the seminal ethnographers of music scenes that are Finnegan (1989), Cohen (1991), Gay (1991), and Frith (1992), who all attest in their studies (or article in Frith’s case) that, beyond the desire for financial gain, a longing for certain types of social experiences, related among other dimensions to live performances, sociality and identity, were key motivations for their informants’ *hobbyistic* involvement in music. While observing that the “possibility of ‘making it’” and “the quest for success [were] a major motivation and preoccupation” for rock bands in Liverpool, English anthropologist Sara Cohen also notes that a band could provide “a means by which friendships were made and maintained” (Cohen 1991: 3). The social benefits of being in a band are also highlighted by Rogers (2008), who mentions that the “importance of

friendships and status forged within the scene” is an “integral part” of the satisfaction of rock musicians in Brisbane (Rogers 2008: 647).

The present thesis certainly shares general ethnographic objectives with these authors. Yet most of the latter are concerned with a large variety of questions that diverge from or go far beyond questions pertaining to the meaning of these musical activities for local rockers, and thus provide little detail on this issue.

An exception is Jennifer Milioto’s 2008 ethnography of Tokyo’s hardcore music scene, based on a small sampling of the scene’s different venues, musicians, performances and practices (from rehearsal to marketing activities). Apart from adopting a participative approach analogous to the fieldwork I have done with Taipei’s indie rockers, Milioto’s also seeks to understand the meaning of music performances for Tokyo’s underground hardcore musicians themselves. However, her interpretations differ greatly from mine, illustrating just how deeply each socio-cultural context uniquely informs the local manifestation of global cultural phenomena.

Indeed, by focusing exclusively on the story of Taipei’s veteran indie rock musicians and the role of their musical activities and bands within their life project, the present monograph shows significant contrasts with most of the English and Chinese-language scholarship mentioned above. The scope of my investigation was limited to the activities and lives of indie rock musicians, with little attempt being made to address the entire local or transnational indie rock culture, music itself or the different types of actors involved in a music scene. Also, I assumed that the activities and life project of Taipei’s veteran indie rockers take their meaning from the socio-cultural, historical and physical context in which they take place. For this reason, I made only a limited use of existing

literature and theory on international and Taiwanese rock music, preferring to rely mainly on the observations, insights and information gathered over several years of active participation, networking and fieldwork in Taipei's indie rock scene.

During all these years, I sought primarily to better understand what the musical activities of Taipei's veteran indie rockers mean, and what particular role their involvement with their band, in the local music scene and in the world of music plays in their life. In order to achieve a more thorough understanding of this human phenomenon, it appeared useful to first produce a general profile of local indie rock acts, as well as a working description of what their musical activities involve. Additionally, it is necessary to situate these musical activities within the specific history of Taipei's indie rock music scene. Hence the following secondary research questions which steer the second and third chapters of this monograph: What is the historical context of Taipei's current-day indie rock scene? What are the musical activities and careers of a typical indie rock band in Taipei? Building on initial answers to these questions, I went on to examine the economic realities of local indie rock bands, and to ask if veteran indie rockers aim at mainstream success or celebrity.

Chapter two will offer a short historical overview of the development of Taipei's indie rock scene, highlighting the fact that, in the two decades that followed the lifting of martial law and the emergence of an original indie music scene in the late 80s, Taipei's indie rock bands have been facing a marked lack of interest and comprehension from the Taiwanese music industry and society in general. Not only have local rock acts largely remained marginalized by the music business and mainstream soundscape, but Taipei's live houses have been regarded with great suspicion (and sometimes even outright

hostility) by the city's authorities and the residents of some neighborhoods.

Chapter three will start with a portrait of Black Summer Days and OverDose, which will be complemented with an explanation of why these two bands are representative of the variety of acts found in Taipei's current indie rock scene. Section 3.2 will describe the predominant dimensions of the musical activities of local indie rock bands (rehearsing, songwriting, recording and performing) with a marked emphasis on the specificities that pertain to these activities in the particular socio-cultural and urban context of Taipei's indie rock scene. In the last section of the chapter, I will detail the difficult relationship of local veteran indie rock bands with the local music business, while maintaining that the aspiration for mainstream and economic success, if not completely absent among local indie rockers, is far from representing a major motivation for their continued involvement in the world of music.

Relying on these insights, I will examine the band activities of Taipei's veteran indie rockers within the larger context of their personal backgrounds, of the *normal* existence of ordinary students and young adults in Taipei, and of the socio-cultural realities of Taiwanese society. This process will be guided by three main questions: What particular set of social experiences, values, attitudes and backgrounds are typically associated with the continued participation in an indie rock band in Taipei? How do these experiences, values, attitudes and backgrounds that are typical among local veteran indie rock musicians contrast with those of average young people in Taipei? In light of these findings, what are the musical activities of local veteran rockers about?

In the later phases of my fieldwork, I came to the conclusion that the band activities of a majority of veteran indie rock musicians in Taipei could best be described

as the cornerstone of an alternative mode of existence that shows substantial divergences from the dominant model for life in the Taiwanese society. Through their continuous involvement in the world of music and the local indie music scene, local veteran indie rockers seek to cultivate a non-conformist way of life and resist the rigid and traditional (or simply *conventional*) type of life that Taiwanese institutions and parents expect the younger generation to adopt. This topic will be developed throughout the fourth chapter, which will start with a short presentation of the regimented daily life of ordinary students and full-time workers in Taipei, and of the traditional mindsets that prevail in the majority of Taiwanese families (4.2). These remarks will serve to outline important contrasts in the four subsequent sections, in which I will explain how, through their musical activities, local veteran indie rockers can cultivate an alternative mode of existence based on the following four key dimensions: a unique set of powerful sensory experiences, emotions and enjoyment (section 4.3), flexible sources of income or opportunities to find music-related employment (section 4.4), social connectedness (section 4.5), and a sense of adult and distinctive self-identity as rock musicians and member of the local cultural elite (section 4.6).

1.3 - Research area and methods

As mentioned earlier, the primary objective of this thesis is to offer an account of the musical activities of indie rock band musicians in Taipei based on the roles that these activities play in their lives. I sincerely hope that the information and perspectives herein exposed can contribute to the reader's understanding of what it feels, implies and means to be a musician in Taiwan. Yet, a series of delimitations must be identified, so as to

define which types of musicians are encompassed in the discourse that will follow and which ones exceed its given scope.

First, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by “indie”. The use of this term – a contraction of “independent” – can sometimes be problematic. Indeed, its meaning is loosely defined and has been known to vary greatly over the years in the writings of a legion of scholars, journalists and observers as well as in the vocabulary of musicians and fans. In accordance with what appears to be the common treatment of the term in academic literature, indie music specialists David Hesmondhalgh (2009) and Ryan Hibbett (2005) both use “indie” as referring to a type of music “at the intersection of various aesthetic, social, and commercial phenomena” (Hibbett, 2005: 55). At the same time, Hibbett recognizes the “makeshift quality” of such denominations, and abstains from proposing a clear definition of the term. It is not my intention to discuss in depth the meaning or implications of the notion of “indie” in these pages. Still, I must mention that the meaning of the term that prevails in this text varies significantly from the abovementioned usage.

In a lot of contexts, other definitions of the term prevail over its aesthetic component. It must indeed be added that the notion of “indie”, as applied to a whole range of bands and record labels throughout the world, predominantly conveys a sense of opposition to “major” record companies or “popular” music artists⁴. Such is the case in Taipei’s indie rock scene, where “indie” usually designates bands and singers of all types of popular music who perform their own original material and are not aligned with a major record company. Interestingly, the terms “indie” (獨立), “alternative” (另類) and

⁴ Thereby the contradiction, attested by several scholars, that arose when music labeled as indie became mainstream in the 1990s.

“underground” (地下) are used as virtual-synonyms⁵. This usage might well be anchored in the hierarchic configuration of the country’s soundscape. The Taiwanese music market is dominated in an overwhelming fashion by a small and extremely exclusive circle of pop superstars (along with their supporting management and record companies, or the extensions thereof)⁶. Despite the indisputable presence of a large gray zone between indie and popular⁷ – especially in terms of business practices and values – the gap in popularity and revenue between Taiwanese idols and the rest of local bands and singers is such that the vast majority of artists who are not part of the idol regime can be said to share similar economic conditions⁸. This situation is especially true among indie rock bands, the most popular of which (ex: local band 1976) have to keep exceptionally active to thwart off the precariousness or rapid decline that has marked the story of so many other local bands⁹. Facing this considerable disparity, concerns for aesthetic differentiation among the country’s marginal indie scene understandably fall second to the need for an expression

⁵ This phenomenon was captured by Jeng – himself a longtime musician in the scene – in the first pages of his thesis: “本文主張，主流/大眾/地上、獨立/另類/地下之間的互動是一種相互辯證的動態關係...” (Jeng 2005). A similar correspondence between the terms “indie” and “underground” can be found in several theses referenced in this work.

⁶ Ironically enough, one of the largest (if not the largest) music label in Taiwan, Gold Typhoon (金牌颶風 – representative of local idols like A-Mei and S.H.E.) claims it is “independent” because is not one of the three international major labels with established branches in Taiwan (Universal, Sony and Warner). Yet, its dedication to mainstream popular music, considerable market share in the Chinese world and transnational operations can hardly be likened to those of most independent labels in the world.

⁷ Observing that several artists and labels are in fact positioned in-between these two categories, Jeng Kai-Tung suggests in his thesis (2005) that indie and popular should be understood not as definitive opposites, but as interrelated poles of a same continuum that stretches over several criteria, including creative and business practices, level of popularity and income, or values. For example, a lot of albums released by major labels in Taiwan (ex: Warner, Sony BMG, etc.) are in fact only distributed under a specific deal, while the production duties and management of the artists are carried out by smaller organizations. This phenomenon has made it increasingly difficult to determine which artists are indie or not, thereby seriously compromising the meaningfulness of the term itself.

⁸ See section 3.2 and 3.4 for more details on this subject.

⁹ Between 2006 and 2010, 1976 has released 3 studio albums (plus 2 EPs) and has performed on average 37 times a year, which is a lot by Taiwanese standards (Source: Chang Kai-Ting, 2010). In an informal conversation at the Underworld, bandleader A-Kai mentioned to me that most of the band’s revenue indeed came from performances, and that, as of 2012, 1976 was still playing live about once a week. To my knowledge, this makes 1976 the most active band in Taiwan.

that best represents a common economic reality. This situation might partly explain the usage of the term “indie” that seems to prevail in Taipei. Such is also roughly the sense of this word as it is used in this thesis.

The exclusive objects of interest of this monograph are the musical activities and lives of Taipei’s indie rock band musicians who constitute Taipei’s indie rock scene. By “musical activities”, I am referring to what Berger calls “musical experience”. This “includes the full range of settings where music life is carried out” (Berger 1999: 23), from listening to music at home to performing in a live house, via recording music tracks and socializing in the scene. It must be made clear that this thesis focuses solely on original indie bands that are based in Taipei. Here I am pointing at bands that perform music that they create themselves – which excludes so-called “cover bands” – and whose members live permanently in Taipei, regardless of their city of origin. In addition, this monograph is concerned only with rock bands that fall within the indie category. I did not consider highly popular rock bands that work within the frame of a major Taiwanese label (as mentioned above). Virtually all rock bands in Taiwan can be labeled “indie” – the most notable exception being the famous Taiwanese rock group Mayday (五月天).

This ethnographic discourse is also about band musicians, which refers to local musicians who are part of a music group that operates under a common band name. This means that indie rock singer-songwriters who perform under their personal name (or artist name), for example Deserts Chang (張懸) or Mavis Fan (范曉萱), are excluded from the scope of this thesis, even though they are accompanied onstage live by a full rock band. Another important criterion of demarcation of the present monograph concerns rock music. In the realization of this research, I devoted all my attention to bands that

play a style that roughly falls in the verticals of rock and of most of its aesthetic variations, including hard rock, alternative rock, reggae, punk, post-rock, funk, blues-rock, Britpop, nu metal, and electro-rock. Without seeking to draw an absolute line between aesthetic categories, I largely steered away from bands that can be described as predominantly electronic (ex: DJs), heavy metal, jazz, pop, hip-hop, folk and other related types of music (ex: Taiwanese traditional music, as performed by Labor Exchange – 交工樂隊).

I decided to largely exclude single indie singer-songwriters and bands that play styles other than rock from the present research, even though a lot of the information gathered in these pages may also apply to them. This decision results from a personal choice as much as from ethnographic concerns. Although the said bands and artists are a very important part of Taipei's larger indie domain, these can be said to differ on various aspects from local indie rock bands, especially in terms of instrumental setup (ex: the use of specific instruments), relative place and prospects in the local music market and industry, internal functioning, socio-cultural identification, lifestyle, attitudes, etc. I indeed came to notice that, not only do the experiences and stories of these non-rock indie musicians and singer-songwriters often show significant discrepancies from local indie rockers, but these performers tend to be anchored in different live houses and/or specific circles of bands, fans and promoters than the majority of indie rock bands in Taipei¹⁰.

¹⁰ While this thesis assumes the existence of an “indie rock scene” in Taipei, one must keep in mind that other “scenes” have formed around other types of music, for instance folk or metal. It goes without saying that these distinctions between “scenes” are convenient but artificial constructions, the purpose of which is ultimately to provide a rough outline for a complex sociocultural phenomenon. In reality, the majority of indie and popular music circles in Taipei are tightly intertwined and overlapping. It is not the goal of this monograph to address in depth this issue.

It must be acknowledged that the peculiar context that led to the realization of this research greatly contributed to shaping both its strengths and weaknesses. As hinted in the two previous sections, I was already participating in (and closely observing) Taipei's indie rock scene when the desire to better understand the life of local rockers drove me to deepen my investigation in the more formal framework of a master's thesis. My fieldwork was carried out between early 2008 and the summer of 2011, mainly in the natural continuation and intensification of my social life and activities in the local indie music scene. During this formidable journey, I acted as guitarist of local rock band Black Summer Days for about 18 months, participated in the organization of a few music events, attended more than 150 performances (sometimes up to three per week), and loyally frequented the various social hubs of Taipei's indie rock circles that are the Underworld, the Wall, and the Artist Village (in 2011), as well as several practice rooms and instrument shops. I was very fortunate to be part of an extended circle of friends and acquaintances in Taipei's indie music scene. Whether at concerts, nights out in bars, private gatherings, or other types of social occasions, I spent countless hours sharing beers, "hanging out" and discussing music and life with a lot of local musicians.

I never hesitated to ask questions, choosing to immerse myself as much as possible in every moment and pay full attention to my interlocutors (i.e. my informants). For this reason, I preferred to take ethnographic notes only after returning home, and completely ruled out doing so during informal conversations. I conducted 13 in-depth interviews, 8 of which were made in coffee shops and digitally recorded, for a total of 15 hours of discussion. The remaining 5 interviews were conducted in more crowded places (ex: outside a music venue), and I limited myself to taking field notes. Most interviews

were made with friends who were kind enough to “do me this favor”¹¹).

On several occasions, interview meetings were cancelled at the last minute by the informants. I thus realized that persisting in using this method would risk alienating some of my friends and acquaintances in the scene, which would be detrimental to both my academic project and my social life. But I also came to notice that there was a limit to what could be learned through formal interviews. My most precious insights were gathered and confirmed little-by-little, as I met new people in the scene and got closer to some of them. In retrospect, it appears very unlikely that I would have seen and learned so much about the lives of local rockers had I employed a more formal approach. Besides, I soon understood that a lot of local rockers are men and women of few words. When asked questions in a somewhat formal context – especially when their interlocutor is a foreigner with whom they are, after all, not that familiar – most of them will provide only a short and commonplace answer (Ex: Q. “Why do you think you like to play in a band?” A. “I don’t know... Because it makes me happy.”). A post on Facebook by one of my key informants illustrates very well this reluctance to justify or make sense of everything in one’s life:

I do some things because I like them. When did this way of thinking start being wrong?

I play music because I like it.

I get up in the morning to watch the NBA because I like it.

I hang out with this bunch of friends because I like it.

I do...[this and that] because I like it.

Do we absolutely have to have a goal when we do these things? Can’t we keep on doing these things simply because we like them?¹²

All things considered, it seemed more appropriate to collect insights in a more natural

¹¹ Most of these interviews were carried out between 2009 and 2010, in the first stage of the project. A list of my informants has been appended at the end of this thesis.

¹² Interviewee A, Facebook post, September 2011.

way, by letting the human mechanisms of friendship do their work, while being on the constant lookout for insights that were relevant to my research.

The data collected via participant observation and interviews was then complemented by a substantial amount of information found on the Internet, including music-related websites and personal pages of my contacts on social networks (ex: Facebook). Given the personal nature of some of the information disclosed in these pages, I deemed it preferable, upon consideration, not to mention any names when quoting or providing examples taken from the discourses and lives of my informants.

A lot of the key in-depth insights that raised my awareness and helped to articulate my understanding of my object of investigation came from the few bands and individual musicians with which I was most familiar. These included Black Summer Days and OverDose; the two bands portrayed in section 3.2 of this thesis. The great majority of these insights were then verified or contrasted on multiple occasions with several other local rockers and observers, so as to acquire a sample that is, to some extent, representative of veteran indie rock musicians in Taipei. Still, it might be useful to reiterate that the sole purpose of this monograph is to provide familiarity with and interpretation of the musical activities and lives of indie rockers in Taipei. I thus invite the reader to consider the information gathered in the following pages with a sound circumspection, and to further pursue his or her own perspective on the subject.

I am fully aware that the modalities of my fieldwork and my personal experience in the scene cannot but imply a series of involuntary focal points, which can rightfully be perceived as so many potential weaknesses of this ethnographic work. For one thing, there is a limit to what one can apprehend of such a vast and complex human

phenomenon as an indie rock scene. If I was close to some individuals, bands and circles (ex: bands that usually perform at the Underworld and the Wall), it is undeniable that I was less familiar with other important people and places that compose Taipei's indie rock scene (ex: more popular bands that are regulars at the two Riverside venues). Also, I must admit that my close social network counted only a few female musicians. This is particularly unfortunate, because some of the most popular and seasoned bands of Taipei's indie rock scene are fronted by women (ex: Go Chic, White Eyes, B.B. Bomb, Braces, My Skin Against Your Skin). This thesis does, however, include a substantial amount of information and insights gathered from conversations with female rockers. Besides, it is relevant to think that, apart from a few particularities (ex: the object and extent of parental pressure), much of what can be said about male indie musicians in Taipei also applies to female rockers in Taiwan.

Other potential biases in this thesis most likely result from the fact that the music scene, as well as Taipei's entire socio-cultural landscape, is in constant evolution, which makes it very difficult for one to keep track of all changes that occur over time. For instance, my understanding of the indie scene and the lives of local rockers took its form between 2008 and 2011 via my involvement and friendly association with a series of veteran indie rockers (born between 1975-1985) who had been active musically for at least 5-8 years. These veteran indie rockers, who can now be said to belong to the "older" generation (or "前輩"), represent the main focus of my thesis, and it is undeniable that I am somewhat less personally acquainted with the new waves of young indie musicians that have emerged in recent years.

Furthermore, this monograph purposely emphasizes ethnographic data over data

analysis and theoretical discussion. I fully agree with Harris Berger, who states that “we [ethnographers of music-related phenomena] must conceptualize our study object as lived experience and interpretation as a partial sharing of meaning” (Berger 1999: 12). In this task, I sought to straddle the fine line between emic and etic accounts (or between insider and outsider perspectives). Without claiming to follow the principles of phenomenology (which encompasses both deeper and larger analytic aims), the interpretation developed in this thesis relies on a sizeable sum of experience-near insights gathered through years of fieldwork and participation in the scene to tell the story of Taipei’s veteran indie rockers. I roughly limited myself to situating the musical activities of local rockers into the context of their lives and socio-cultural environment, and to seeing how the main features of their experiences and approaches to life contrast with the conventional life trajectory of ordinary people in the Taiwanese society. Also, I judged it preferable, out of concerns for simplicity and economy, to not venture deeply into investigation methods like symbolic analysis or hermeneutics. However, further analysis of the data at hand using various approaches from anthropology, sociology, ethnomusicology or even psychology could certainly have proved fruitful for this research.

Chapter 2 - A short history of Taipei's indie rock music scene

2.1 Introduction

Seeing local rock bands performing their own original songs is a fairly recent phenomenon in Taiwan compared with Euro-American countries, where rock first originated in the 1950s. It is not until the 1990s that an original rock music scene emerged in Taipei, as local independent rock bands gained some presence in the local soundscape. Among other factors, the imposition of martial law by the Kuomintang in Taiwan up until 1987¹³, or more concretely, the extremely tight grip they exercised on social and cultural life, was a major factor in the late development of a popular interest in rock music and culture among Taiwanese people. Over the two decades following the lifting of martial law, rock slowly took its place in the imagination and daily life of an increasing number of young Taiwanese people. But general enthusiasm for such music has never really reached the widespread popularity it enjoys in Europe, Japan and the Americas.

In the early 1990's, an authentic creative rock music scene emerged in Taiwan thanks to a handful of pioneers, mainly young musicians, entrepreneurs, and devoted music lovers. Their individual and group initiatives showed extraordinary resilience, and determined the further development of an original rock scene in the country. One must acknowledge that, all these years, playing in a rock band, regularly attending rock concerts in live houses and investing a significant amount of time in rock musical activities for a sustained period has remained a marginal phenomenon in Taiwan, and this

¹³ Martial law in the R.O.C. lasted from 1948 to 1987; almost 40 years.

even in Taipei, the largest agglomeration and arguably the most cosmopolitan city in the country. To this day, Taipei's indie rock scene can still be considered substantially – some could even say abnormally – smaller than that of other metropolises of comparable population size around the world¹⁴.

Very few formal publications have been dedicated to the historical development of Taipei's independent rock music scene. A number of theses by local students do include partial treatments of various elements pertaining to the history of the scene. Unfortunately, most of these accounts appear as either too precise in their focus (for instance by depicting the history of a particular band) or too succinct, general or sometimes even too muddled to represent reliable sources. The three most useful resources I found were the following: first, the work of music enthusiast and prolific blogger Jeph Lo (羅悅全), which includes a series of articles and a precious book entitled *Secret Bases – A Musical Map of Taipei*¹⁵ (秘密基地 – 台北的音樂地圖, 2000) that covers a variety of topics related to Taipei's past and present music culture¹⁶. Secondly, the work of Ho Tung-Hung, sociologist and popular music specialist at the Fu Jen Catholic University, who has also been a very active figure in the advancement of indie music in the country, notably through his past involvement with local indie label Crystal Records (水晶唱片), and his current role as co-owner and spokesperson of the Underworld live house in Taipei. Among Ho's several publications on Taiwanese music, the most

¹⁴ There has never really been more than 8 to 10 live houses in Taipei City. In comparison, Tokyo is said to have between 300 and 450 live houses, depending on the definition.

Source: www.japantoday.com/category/arts-culture/view/tokyos-live-house-music-scene-set-to-go-global and 2012, Kyohei Miyairi, The Recitalization of Live Music Scenes in Japan, IAMPS 2012 (presentation).

¹⁵ Personal translation in English of the original title in Chinese.

¹⁶ A great sum of Lo's writings are available on his blog at <http://jeph.bluecircus.net/>.

instructive on the history of the local rock music scene is arguably his Ph.D. thesis (in English), entitled *The Social Formation of Mandarin Popular Music Industry in Taiwan* (2003), which offers detailed insights into the activities of an independent label of the 1980s-1990s as part of a thorough account of the development of the music industry in the country. A third essential resource is the December 2007 edition of the *Fountain Arts and Living* magazine; a publication funded by the Taiwanese Ministry of Culture. Edited by American journalist David Frazier – who has also been an event organizer and explorer of the Taiwanese music scene for several years – this special edition entirely dedicated to Taiwanese popular music consists of a large collection of short profiles of influential Taiwanese music artists of all types (including indie rock), as well as a few historical overviews of the different periods that marked the development of popular music in the country.

I must inform the reader that, in the absence of a systematic and authoritative publication on the subject, the history of Taipei's indie rock scene remains a formidable puzzle, the multiple pieces of which each interested researcher must patiently stitch together into a necessarily subjective narrative of the past. This is what I have tried to do here. In my case the process was made even more uneasy and venturesome because I am a foreigner who has witnessed only a small piece of this history.

My historical narrative is based partly on the abovementioned resources, but also on dozens of hours of informal conversation with several long-time participants of the scene, some of whom, like Randy Lin (林志堅, veteran rock DJ) and Zhang Xianfeng (better known as 阿峰, founder of Taipei's first real indie live house) were important actors in the shaping of the scene. The various fragments of my understanding of the

scene's history were then meticulously verified, complemented and amplified with a vast amount of scattered information found of various music blogs and websites created by venues, bands and fans, as well as in articles taken from major local newspapers. The information at hand may be interpreted in many different ways, or presented so as to support various discourses. I thus encourage the interested reader to go beyond this simplified account and pursue his or her own assessment of the past, which might very well be more accurate than mine. If the reader finds mistakes or missing elements in the following pages, these are to be attributed to my person only, not to my friends and informants who were gracious enough to share their experience and knowledge with me.

It is not my objective to produce a detailed and comprehensive diachronic synthesis of the development of an independent rock music scene in Taiwan. This formidable task should be carried out by someone with capacities, experience and contacts superior to my own. I shall rather limit myself to offering a few factual and interpretative leads to understanding the past of Taipei's indie rock culture. So doing, I would like to draw the reader's attention on the fact that Taipei's indie rock scene is fairly young, and that since their beginning more than 20 years, the activities of local rock bands have remained an exclusively marginal phenomenon in the context of the Taiwanese music industry, mainstream media and public at large. Readers can also consult the two diagrams added at the end of this thesis (Annexes 1 and 2), which outline the history of the main live houses in Taipei, as well as of some of the most important bands, festivals and events that have marked Taiwan's indie rock scene.

2.2 - Taipei's soundscape from the 1960s to the 1980s__

In the two decades that followed the Second World War, the Taiwanese music market was mainly dominated by imported music from Japanese pop artists and local Taiwanese-language (Taiwanese Hokkien or “台灣閩南語”, commonly called “台語” in Taiwan) adaptations of popular Japanese songs. An original Chinese pop music industry would gradually conquer mainstream audiences towards the late 1960s, thanks notably to the emergence of stars like Yao Su-Rong (姚蘇蓉) and Teresa Deng (鄧麗君), to the creation of the first television stations (starting from 1962) and to the enforcement of Chinese as Taiwan's predominant language by the Kuomintang¹⁷.

Parallel to this, Anglo-American popular music, mainly brought by American soldiers and media stationed in mass on the island in the 1950s and 1960s¹⁸, was immediately adopted by successive generations of young Taiwanese people and rapidly gained some prominence in the local soundscape. These forms of western music, from rock and roll in the 1960s, contemporary folk and disco in the 1970s, to rock in the 1980s – all of which were generally referred to as “western popular (hit) music” (西洋熱門音樂) by the media – appealed to students and youngsters throughout the country via a series of evening programs on mainstream radio stations (both English and Chinese-language stations) airing rock hits from foreign music charts. Also key in the

¹⁷ Source: Scheihagen, Eric. *Music of the 1950s and 1960s*. In *Fountain Arts and Living* 4 (December): 24-28.

¹⁸A substantial number of US intelligence officers and military personnel (a permanent presence of more than 10 000 active personnel) were based in Taiwan on several sites (including air bases) throughout the country between the escalation of the Korean War in 1951 and the official recognition of the PRC by the US in 1978. Sources: Su Wei-Hsuan (2011) and Wikipedia entry for “Military Assistance Advisory Group”.

development of a rock audience in the country was the broad distribution of cheap pirate copies and compilations of popular Anglo-American and Japanese records, all of which were tolerated by authorities due to the R.O.C.'s late imposition of international copyright laws¹⁹.

Generally speaking, the adoption of western popular music by local youngsters was considered with suspicion by Taiwanese authorities and older generations, with spontaneous and provocative types of music like rock and disco being deemed decadent and harmful to social order. Repression of self-expression, entertainment, as well as of western and Japanese cultural influences remained omnipresent in Taiwan, even after martial law, with the authorities' attitude ranging from uneasy tolerance to direct crackdowns on overt identification with alternative (sub)cultures (ex: having long hair during the hippie movement in the late 1960s, or direct censorship of subversive music material)²⁰.

The success of western popular music on local radio stations and the development of a rock music audience among urban youngsters were also accompanied in Taipei by a flourishing Anglophone music scene, anchored in a few clubs and restaurants, where music lovers could go to listen and dance to their favorite western hits performed live by semi-professional bands of both local and foreign origin. Originally stemming from the nightclub scene created in the 1960s and 1970s for the entertainment of American troops based in the country, these establishments soon became an important part of Taipei's nightlife for both foreign and local music fans²¹. Also importantly, this "cover" live scene

¹⁹ Source: Ho 2005: 78.

²⁰ Source: Ho 2005: 96.

²¹ Such type of live rock performances are still part of the nightlife in several Taiwanese cities, but the number of establishments offering such events seems to be shrinking rapidly due in part to the massive

(as we could call it today) allowed several generations of Taiwanese musicians to live out their love for modern popular music and refine their musical skills while receiving a reasonable pay for their efforts. Nonetheless, the development of Taipei's Anglophone music scene in general was constantly hindered during martial law by severe restrictions from the government, notably concerning the content of published material, or the location, frequency, and importance of live performances²².

The number of fans and events of foreign popular music in Taipei nonetheless multiplied over the years. Playing well-known hits and emulating famous western artists remained the overwhelming norm for local musicians until the mid- 1990s, with only little attention being paid to original songwriting. It should be noted, however, that a rich tradition of popular songwriting was initiated in 1970s Taiwan by folk singer-songwriters like Lee Shuangze (李雙澤), Hu Defu (胡德夫, also known as “Kimbo”), Yang Xian (楊弦) and Li Jianfu (李建復). These singer-songwriters were among the first local independent musicians to engage actively in creating and performing their own musical material, in what is oftentimes referred to as the “Taiwanese Campus Folk Song” movement (校園民歌)²³. Reacting against the overwhelming popularity of Anglo-American rock and folk artists (ex: Bob Dylan, Simon & Garfunkel, etc.) among young

popularity of KTV establishments.

²² Source: Ho 2005: 78. Ho also writes: “*Before the late 1980s, all songs had to be granted permission by the government before publishing. So record companies had to send songs with lyrics and scores because the government not only censored the content but also the musical arrangements, lest the tunes were too similar to Chinese or Japanese songs.*” (Ho 2005: 159). There were also strict restrictions of Taiwanese language material aired on TV and radio.

²³ Sources: Chinese Wikipedia entry for “校園民歌” and Scheihagen, Eric & Frazier, David. *Campus Movements*. In *Fountain Arts and Living* 4 (December): 36-38. Several books, theses and other resources in Chinese provide a thorough account of the history of the Taiwanese Campus Folk Song movement, including Zhang Zhao-Wei's (張釗維) 2003 work entitled “誰在那邊唱自己的歌”.

Taiwanese music fans, these artists advocated the creation of modern and authentic Chinese folk music. The works that emerged from this period were generally marked by the use of acoustic guitars, piano and refined arrangements, and can be described roughly as a mix of traditional Chinese melodies and Anglo-American contemporary folk influences. Lyrics were filled with artful poetry, emotionality, and intellectual concerns, with themes ranging from depictions of daily life and popular culture to reflections on national identity. Contemporary folk circles rapidly developed in campuses and cafés throughout the capital, and soon caught the attention of major Taiwanese record labels, radio stations and national television channels, who decided to invest in its mainstream potential. A multitude of open music contests were organized in universities to spur musical creativity among young music lovers and enable the music industry to recruit promising young talents. Some of these events, such as the “*Golden Rhyme Awards*” (金韻獎, held sporadically between 1977 and 1984), as well as the “*Golden Melody Awards*”²⁴ (金曲獎, held between 1971 and 1972) and “*College Town*” (大學城, 1981-1983) TV show series, were even broadcasted during prime time on television. This helped develop popular interest for local singers-songwriters and performers, while greatly contributing to the overall growth of the entertainment media in Taiwan.

As a result of the appropriation of this new folk music and its market by the popular music industry, local contemporary folk music would take a more casual, conventionalized and ultimately more commercial aspect in the decades that would

²⁴ Here the reader must not confuse the weekly “金曲獎” TV show from the 1970s with the annual event of the same name, which has been rewarding a selection of outstanding artists of the Taiwanese music industry since the 1990s.

follow²⁵. Yet, the Taiwanese Campus Folk Song movement left an important legacy to the world of Taiwanese popular music; an influence that is still highly palpable in the country's current indie music scene²⁶.

2.3 - The emergence of Taipei's indie rock scene in the 1980s and 1990s

The 1980s were a period of important socio-political transformations in Taiwan. With its economy already established as one of Asia's most prolific and diversified, the country quickened its pace on the path of globalization, neoliberalization, and democratization. Under increasing pressure from the new business elites and popular movements – notably the “Taiwanization” movement (台灣本土化運動)²⁷ calling for a just recognition of Taiwan's distinct culture and sovereignty vis-à-vis Mainland China – the KMT progressively loosened its grip on Taiwanese politics, society, and culture. This culminated with the lifting of martial law in 1987 and the nomination the following year of Taiwanese-born Lee Teng-hui as head of State. The 1980s saw the small Taiwanese music business quickly develop into a multimillion dollar (\$US) industry. In this process, Taiwan imposed itself as the unrivaled center of “Mandopop” – a common abbreviation for Chinese popular music – as the activities of music labels based in Taipei not only exploded in the country, but also throughout Asia²⁸. Taiwanese pop stars like Tsai Chin

²⁵ Source: Ho 2005: 156-157.

²⁶ Taipei's modern folk circles created a strong “precedence” for young local songwriters that inspired them to write and perform their own songs. It also had a deep musical influence on the generations of pop and folk musicians that followed. A substantial portion of Taipei's non-rock music scene, including iconic figures like Cheer Chen (陳綺貞) or Deserts Chang (張懸), owes a great debt to the new folk movement of the 1970s and 1980s, while contemporary folk has remained very omnipresent in the Taiwanese mainstream soundscape up to this day.

²⁷ Source: Chinese Wikipedia entry for “台灣本土化運動”.

²⁸ Source: Frazier, David. *Mando-Pop's Roller Coaster Ride*. In *Fountain Arts and Living* 4 (December): 56-61. Most prominent Mandopop labels consisted of partnerships between international major labels and local Taiwanese labels. This situation changed in the late 1980s, when international labels established themselves directly in Taiwan (see chapter 5 of Ho's thesis [2005] for more details on the subject). The

(蔡琴), Angus Tong (童安格), Luo Dayou (羅大佑), and most prominently Teresa Teng (鄧麗君) – the latter widely considered the most famous Chinese pop singer of all time – dominated the local music market and achieved formidable success in other Chinese-speaking countries. One of the collateral effects of this commercial explosion of Mandopop idols would be the consolidation of the individual singer or singer-songwriter as the supreme figure and authoritative model of the Taiwanese music world, for both record labels and the public. Towards the end of the decade, as restrictions by authorities over the local media and cultural life softened, Taiwanese-language folk and pop music was reenergized, and large-scale musical events became more tolerated.

It is in this climate of great social change that a Taiwanese indie rock scene would slowly start to emerge. In the shadow of the enormously successful Mandopop music, western rock music appealed to a limited audience mainly composed of musicians and students; the usual customers of the pirate music market that had been thriving in Taiwan since the 1960s. Loud, flamboyant and slightly excessive in nature, rock music conveyed a multi-faceted counter-culture of iconoclasm, self-affirmation and hedonism that contrasted sharply with the traditional values of self-restraint, filial piety and respect of authority that were (and are still to this day) prevailing in Taiwan. Understandably, rock music had until then essentially remained a “western thing” in the minds of most Taiwanese music lovers; a type of music championed by Anglo-American artists that local bands could at best emulate onstage. It can be assumed that, to some degree, this categorization of rock music as an essentially “foreign” (or non-Taiwanese) type of music

domain of Mandopop extended primarily over Hong Kong, Singapore, Mainland China and Malaysia. Taiwanese pop megastar Teresa Teng was also massively popular in Japan. The development of the Mainland Chinese musical market was made possible by the politics of opening implemented by CPC Chairman Deng Xiaoping.

has lingered up to this day in the perceptions of the public at large.

For local rock musicians, to form a band with the objective of writing and performing original songs made no economic sense in the 1980s. What the party-seekers in Taipei's live clubs wanted to hear was music that they already knew.²⁹ Thus, entertaining people by playing approximate cover versions of western rock hits was a more profitable (and in the end, much less risky) enterprise than trying to conquer a disbelieving public with original rock material – even more so with rock songs in Chinese or Taiwanese. Other possible career trajectories for the most skilled local musicians included working as a session player by pop record labels, or as a music producer for the film or pop music industry. Such were also the prospects (and conceptions) at the time among most of the few young Taiwanese people who were bold enough to take up guitar, drums or singing, trying their best to make it more than just a casual hobby.

There were a handful of bands and individual songwriters who did decide to challenge the status quo. Two identifiable Taiwanese rock bands that are most widely considered to be among the first to have engaged in consistent rock musical creation were Double X (XX 樂團), a psychedelic/post-rock group reportedly founded in 1985 by frontman Sisse Chao (趙一毫), and Assassin (刺客), a metal band formed the same year³⁰. Despite their early creation, the near absence of opportunities to perform live practically confined these two bands to the practice room until the end of the decade, when these and other rock groups started to see more activity with the development of a small niche for dedicated rock hangouts in the Taiwanese capital.

²⁹ Lo, Jeph (2000).

³⁰ Sources: Sisse Chao and Double X' official Facebook page and online Encyclopedia of Taiwan's entry for “刺客”.

In my opinion, one of the most decisive forces at play in the genesis of Taipei's underground rock scene was probably a small and daring organization called Crystal Records (水晶唱片). Started in 1986 by Jen Chiang-Ta (任將達)³¹, this indie record label staffed by young music enthusiasts devoted itself to the production, commercialization and promotion of so-called “new Taiwanese music” (台灣新音樂), an umbrella term referring to music that is less “commercial” and more authentically “local” and “artistic” in its aesthetics, ideas and production process, as opposed to the monolithic idol manufacturing of the mainstream pop industry³². Besides distributing music from Anglo-American indie rock bands, Crystal Records played a significant role in laying the groundwork for the creation of an original Taiwanese indie rock scene. The label first sought to develop public awareness and open a market for local and foreign alternative artists via radio shows and small music magazines (entitled *Wax Club* and *The Rocker* [搖滾客]). To encourage local musicians to create their own material, it went on to organize Taipei's *New Music Festival* (台北新音樂節) between 1987 and 1990, which in its four editions gave future local music stars like Wu Bai (伍佰) and Lim Giong (林強) their first chance to distinguish themselves³³.

In addition, Crystal Records was directly responsible for the production of Taiwan's first indie rock records – an album by Double X called *Lying Idiots* (白癡的謊

³¹ Sources: Ho 2005: 218 and online Encyclopedia of Taiwan's entry for “水晶唱片”.

³² The creation of Crystal Records was likely inspired, at least in part, by the relative success of European and American indie record labels, which in the late 1980s had already proven that a different business model based on different values was a possible enterprise. For more details on Crystal Records, see Ho 2005: 218-270.

³³ Both artists also released their first record with Crystal Records in the early 1990s.

言) released in 1988. This album was followed shortly after by several other influential releases, including a Taiwanese-language and stylistically eclectic album entitled *Songs of Madness* (抓狂歌)³⁴, completed in 1989 by a collective of musicians creating under the name Blacklist Studio (黑名單工作室). This and Double X' second release entitled *Put Myself Out* (把我自己掏出來) were respectively deemed too subversive and depraved in content by the Kuomintang government, and were thus banned in the country. Fortunately, these were the last examples of direct censorship of rock musical productions by the Taiwanese authorities³⁵.

In hindsight, it is clear that the members of Taipei's early indie rock circles, like Crystal Records, Double X and Assassin, endured a full decade of public skepticism and official opposition, and thus rightfully deserve to be considered among the handful of pioneers who started to build an indie rock scene in Taipei's from the ground up.

Yet, the blatant lack of interest in original creations by local rock music fans and musicians, coupled with the absence of an appropriate venue in which to perform, greatly limited the growth of Taipei's burgeoning rock scene. Meanwhile in western countries, the late 1980s saw rock music gain massive popular momentum with the rise of the MTV network³⁶ and a new generation of prolific rock artists. As several Anglo-American

³⁴ Source: Chinese Wikipedia entry for “抓狂歌”.

³⁵ Source: Yahoo Blog entry “台灣地下音樂先驅 - 趙一豪《把我自己掏出來》” in *從台灣聽世界 Listen to the world from TW*.

³⁶ MTV, acronym for “Music Television”, is an American cable television network dedicated to music-related content (ex: video clips, concerts, interviews, reviews, etc.) targeting young audiences of teenagers and young adults. In the 15 years that followed its launch in 1981, its main themes were mostly taken from the rock culture, which it greatly contributed to bolster and spread around the world. MTV Mandarin (now MTV Taiwan), the content of which included a significant amount of Anglo-American material, was created in 1995. Another important music network that broadcasted a considerable flow of Anglo-American

rock idols (ex: David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Bruce Springsteen) already at the peak of their global stardom, and a multitude of hard rock bands (ex: Kiss, AC/DC, Van Halen, Bon Jovi, Guns N' Roses) firmly implanted worldwide or on the verge of cult-like celebrity, more recent types of rock music were about to achieve mainstream popularity. These notably included heavy metal (with famous acts like Metallica, Iron Maiden, but also the Japanese band X-Japan), alternative rock (ex: Sonic Youth, The Cure, R.E.M., as well as Luna Sea in Japan) and grunge (ex: Nirvana, Pearl Jam, The Smashing Pumpkins)³⁷. In the same period in Hong Kong, a group called Beyond became the first Chinese rock band to make its way to the top of the music industry, garnering major commercial successes and wide acclaim throughout Asia between 1987 and 1993³⁸.

Back in Taipei, the missing pieces to the creation of a local indie rock scene would gradually come into place in the first half of the 1990s, as some of the enthusiasm for rock music that had transformed an entire generation of Europeans and Americans began reaching their fellow young music fans in Taiwan. The desire to create original rock material slowly spread to more local music lovers, with songwriters like Wu Bai and bands like Orient Express (東方快車), the L.T.K. Commune (獨水溪公社), Scrap Metal (廢五金), Sticky Rice (糯米糰), and Groupie (骨肉皮) joining the small group of early indie rock non-conformists. Taipei's small rock culture also strengthened, with several

music at the time was Channel V (founded in 1994).

³⁷ Just to give an idea of the turmoil generated by alternative music in America, it is interesting to notice that Nirvana's second album *Nevermind*, released in 1991, completely surprised the music industry by outselling *Dangerous*, the highly-praised album of pop legend Michael Jackson (source: The Billboard 200. In *Billboard*. January 11, 1992). Alternative and grunge music was less acrobatic in terms of music skills and were not only very appealing to teenagers in general, but also quite accessible to less experienced musicians. Grunge music was at the forefront of the Euro-American rock scene when a local indie rock scene emerged in Taipei in the mid-90s.

³⁸ Source: Chinese Wikipedia entry for "Beyond".

rock-themed bars and rock “cover” live houses putting down their roots in the Daan district; a development spearheaded by well-known local bar owner and ex-radio anchor Ling Wei (凌威)³⁹. In search of a regular stage, most original indie rock bands tried to get booked in cover live houses of the time, especially in two metal hangouts called Woodentop and Men, Dogs and Ants (人狗螞蟻). There, they challenged the emulation norm by performing their own material instead of the expected rock hit covers. Apart from a few isolated successes – including the relative popularity of Wu Bai, Orient Express, and Assassin throughout Taiwan in the early 1990s – the strategy proved vastly ineffective, with the bands receiving at best only mixed reactions from crowds and bar managers⁴⁰. Also, the sincere but limited support from experimental theater companies and their small venues (ex: Tian’s Secret – 甜蜜蜜) could only offer a temporary solution.

Bored of this enduring deadlock situation, the singer and leader of rock band Groupie, A-Feng (阿峰 – whose full name is Zhang Xianfeng), decided to draw on all of his resources to create his own live house dedicated to the performance of original music by local rock bands. His venue, fittingly called “Scum”, opened in 1994, and immediately became the first major hub of Taipei’s indie rock circles. Many long-time observers and participants of the scene, like veteran DJ Randy Lin – a constant participant and promoter of the scene since its very beginning – even consider Scum’s arrival as the single most important factor behind the development of an original indie rock scene in the country⁴¹.

³⁹ Ling Wei is best known for his Roxy bar series, which have been a key part of Taipei’s rock-oriented nightlife for now close to 30 years. Readers interested in the history of Ling Wei’s bars in Taipei can consult Jeph Luo’s work online. For more details, see Lo, Jeph (2000).

⁴⁰ Source: Lo, Jeph (2000).

⁴¹ It might be worth adding that a year before the takeoff of Taipei’s underground rock scene in 1994,

To stimulate creativity among local bands, owner A-Feng demanded that each group's performance included at least one original song⁴². The response by young Taipei musicians and rock enthusiasts was formidable, and the number of active rock bands soon exploded in the capital. Bands like Ladybug (瓢蟲), Tuolaku (拖拉庫), Luantan (亂彈), Clippers (夾子電動大樂隊), Back Quarter (四分衛), 1976, The Chairman (董事長), Echo (回聲), Mayday (五月天), Sugar Plum Ferry (甜梅號), Totem (圖騰), The Peppermints (薄荷葉), 88 Gava Seedz (八十八顆芭樂籽), and Chthonic (閃靈), all of which would go on to shape Taiwan's rock sound and become prominent figures of Taipei's modern music culture, were all founded between 1995 and 1998, either during Scum's existence or within three years after it definitively closed down.

As Jeph Lo observes, the presence of indie live houses in Taipei greatly stirred the passion and creative potential of local amateur musicians⁴³, while also helping to generate a positive and dynamic atmosphere around the creation and performance of original Chinese and Taiwanese-language rock music. From an aesthetic point of view, the underground scene that emerged in the early live venues of the mid- 1990s featured a large mix of rock music (ex: metal, punk rock, hard rock, post-rock, etc.), and saw what Mao Ya-Fen calls “a change of emphasis from public politics to personal politics” in the

Michael Jackson and Bon Jovi presented two large-scale and highly mediatized concerts in Taipei, which gathered more than 30,000 people each. Michael Jackson and Bon Jovi performed again in Taipei a few years later, respectively in 1996 and 1995. It seems probable that these events also contributed to instilling a passion for rock music and performance in a lot of young local rockers.

⁴² Source: Informal discussion with Zhang Xianfeng, 2010.

⁴³ Original quotation from Lo (2000): “從演唱會和發片的熱絡程度可以看得出，表演場地的存在，的確激發出樂團的創作潛力”。

themes addressed in the lyrics of local rock performers⁴⁴. These characteristics are still representative of Taipei's present-day indie rock scene.

Very importantly, the mid 1990s saw several other intrepid rock devotees get involved in the development of Taiwan's rock culture. The names of two young American amateur musicians living in Taiwan, Jimi Moe and Wade Davis, are particularly notable. Inspired by their participation in the 1994 Taipei Broken Life Festival (台北破爛生活節) – a small multidisciplinary art and music festival organized by Taipei's avant-garde art circles⁴⁵ – the two friends decided to create their own indie music festival in the Kending area. The event, called Spring Scream (春天吶喊), rapidly grew in popularity and scale to become a must-attend annual rendezvous of Taiwan's indie bands and young music lovers, and still exists to this day. This event in turn incited a group of students, including the future creators of the Northern Universities Rock Alliance (北大專搖滾聯盟), to organize the first edition of a gathering that would become the famous Formoz Festival (野台開唱) – Taipei's largest rock music event held annually from 1995 to 2008⁴⁶.

The Scum adventure came to an end in 1996 after three changes of location and a considerable number of fines of all types issued month after month by the authorities. A-

⁴⁴ Mao Ya-Fen bases her assessment on Ho Tung-Hung's account of the evolution of the local rock scene in the 1990s. Here is the full quotation, taken from Mao Ya-Fen's thesis (毛雅芬 2007, p. 58): "The change of emphasis from 'public politics' to 'personal politics' can also be detected in the underground-music scenes of the late 1990s. Underground bands, such as Ladybug, 1976, Sticky Rice, Tolaku, The Scrap Metal and Dunkee Order, tended to deal with personal feelings in their songs. From the perspective of a pop music critic like Tung-Hung Ho, this new generation of underground music artists has lost the rebellious sentiment and avoided engaging in social resistance."

⁴⁵ The Taipei Broken Life Festival, held only twice in 1994 and 1995, was probably Taiwan's first outdoor indie music festival. The main organizer was Wu Zhongwei (吳中煒); the owner of then coffee shop and art/music venue Tian's Secret (甜蜜蜜) that closed in 1994. Source: online Encyclopedia of Taiwan's entry for "破爛生活節".

⁴⁶ Source: Lo, Jeph (2000) and Chinese Wikipedia entry for "野台開唱".

Feng's live house, not unlike most music venues in the capital, was by Taipei standards a very unwelcome neighbor in urban communities due to its loud presence and the perceived hazardous character of the people and activities it hosted⁴⁷. In addition, the lack of categories specific to live music in corporate registration legislation prevented the venues in which such music was performed from obtaining proper operating licenses – a situation that continues to the present day – making the venues easy targets for complaints from discontented residents and the police.⁴⁸ However, other live houses soon emerged to become the new headquarters of Taipei's indie rock scene⁴⁹, starting with Roxy Vibe (established in 1997 by owner Ling Wei), Zeitgeist (聖界, founded in 1998 on Freddy Lim's initiative), and the Underworld (地下社會) – the latter arguably being the most iconic venue of Taipei's indie rock scene for the past 15 years.

The mindsets gradually shifted among Taipei's bands and live audiences in the second half of the 1990s, as composing and performing original songs became the accepted norm in the live rock music scene. After more than a decade of marginality and confinement in the underground, local rock artists finally managed to gain more attention from the public and the music industry. In 1996, Wu Bai (accompanied by his band China Blue) reaped the benefits of more than five years of sustained stage presence throughout

⁴⁷ Source: Informal discussion with Zhang Xianfeng.

⁴⁸ Another possible influence was then Taipei mayor Chen Shui-Bian's crackdown on prostitution, which also led authorities to put extra pressure on night clubs. If the authorities are now more tolerant vis-à-vis live houses in Taipei, most of them are still highly vulnerable to spontaneous pressure from the police and committees of neighbors. In this sense, Scum's difficulties are very representative of the situation of most live houses in Taiwan up to this day.

⁴⁹ Local rock bands performed at the Witch House for some time in 1997, but had to stop due to complaints for noise. Since then, music performances have continued at the Witch House, but in an "unplugged" setting. It is also worth mentioning that Roxy Vibe was established in the previous location of another of Ling Wei's live houses, called B-Side, which was created in 1995 and closed its doors the same year. B-Side did however reopen in 2002 at another location, but did not present live concerts due to complaints by neighbors. It served as a rock bar and after-hour hangout for nearly 10 years. Source: Lo, Jeph (2000).

the country by becoming the first Taiwanese rock artist to garner considerable commercial success with his third album entitled *The End of Love* (愛情的盡頭)⁵⁰. The industry reacted by seeking to produce similar results with other rock musicians, this time with bands instead of the conventional pop idol. A few local groups like Luantan (UFO Records/Warner – 1997 and 1999), Sticky Rice (PolyGram – 1997), Scrap Metal (Sony – 1998), and Tuolaku (Sony – 1999) released albums with major labels⁵¹. Despite being well received by the music community – Luantan notably won the Golden Melody Award for Best Group (最佳演唱組合獎) in 1998 and 2000 – sales of these releases seemingly did not meet the expectations of record companies⁵². Tellingly, only one local band would truly stand out from Taipei’s indie rock scene of the 1990s, namely the now-famous rock quintet Mayday (五月天), which was literally propelled to the top of the popular music industry in 1999 following their first full-length release simply called *Mayday’s First Album* (五月天第一張創作專輯 – Rock Records)⁵³.

2.4 - The evolution of Taipei’s indie rock scene since 2000

By and large, the experimentation with rock bands yielded mixed results for major

⁵⁰ The album, which was released under giant local label Rock Records, sold more than 600,000 copies in Taiwan alone. Source: Wu Bai’s official website (wubai.com).

⁵¹ Source: Lo, Jeph (2000)

⁵² Like David Frazier suggests in Fountain Arts and Living Magazine, the formidable decline of record sales worldwide under the development of peer-to-peer technology most likely contributed to the Taiwanese industry’s focus on conservative assets and methods – predominantly the production and commercialization of Mandopop idols. Source: Frazier, Davis. *Mando-Pop’s Roller Coaster Ride*. In Fountain Arts and Living 4 (December): 56-61.

⁵³ The album –produced and distributed by Rock Records – reportedly sold more than 300,000 units, with most of the bands successive full-length releases approaching or surpassing this figure. Mayday is unquestionably the most popular Taiwanese band in history. The group also achieved cult status in the entire Chinese-speaking world, notably garnering formidable success in China. Source: Chinese Wikipedia entry for “五月天”.

Taiwanese labels, which largely shied away from rock music and the band formula during the next decade, limiting their involvement in the careers of local indie rock groups to occasional distribution deals. Also, virtually no other local rock group has achieved significant mainstream success since Mayday's 1999 breakthrough, with the notable exception of pop-rock band Sodagreen (蘇打綠) in 2006⁵⁴. As a new generation of Taiwanese pop megastars emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000's (ex: A-Mei [阿妹], Jay Chou [周杰倫], Jolin Tsai – [蔡依林], S.H.E.), the Mandopop industry increased its monopolization of media, public attention and the local music market, making it very difficult for indie rock bands to reach larger audiences and gain notoriety outside Taipei's small indie circles. The 1990s and 2000s also saw the rise of the local KTV culture, which rapidly became the favorite way for Taiwanese people of all age to consume music⁵⁵. Soon large KTV chains like Holiday and Party World proved how lucrative the KTV industry could be by garnering more profits than even the largest record companies in the country, thereby also greatly contributing to push both the Taiwanese soundscape and mainstream listening habits further down the road of conservatism and standardization, thus cementing the supremacy of the Mandopop ballad.

But the near absence of mobility between the local indie rock scene and the higher spheres of stardom far from discouraged local bands and rock enthusiasts from devoting themselves to their musical activities and the development of Taiwan's rock music

⁵⁴ Soda Green garnered considerable mainstream popularity between 2005 and 2007 after winning the Hohaiyan Festival music contest and releasing a series of albums and singles under contract with famous producer Lin Wei-Zhe (林暉哲), who operates under the name "Willin Music" (林暉哲音樂社). Source: Chinese Wikipedia entry for "蘇打綠".

⁵⁵ Source: Bronlow, Ron. *I Sing, You Sing, We All Sing for KTV*. In *Fountain Arts and Living* 4 (December): 49.

culture. Since 2000, Taipei's indie music scene has grown in maturity and diversity, while firmly establishing itself as a vital component of the city's cultural life. The number and quality of local bands improved dramatically over the years, with groups like Totem (圖騰), Tizzy Bac, Fire Ex (滅火器), Coach (教練), Bearbabes (熊寶貝), B.B. Bomb (BB彈), and Mojo joining the first wave of bands from the 1990s at the forefront of the Taiwanese indie scene. This development in turn had a positive influence on the prospects of young indie labels such as TCM Music (角頭音樂 – active since 1998) and White Wabbit Records (小白兔唱片 – created in 1999), which were involved throughout the decade in the commercialization and/or production of dozens of releases by local bands.

New live houses soon appeared and broadened Taipei's indie landscape. The Riverside Music Café (河岸留言藝文咖啡), founded in 2000 by renowned musician and producer Geddy Lin (林正如), and more importantly The Wall (這牆藝文展覽空間)⁵⁶, the Underworld (地下社會) and Witch House (女巫店), have been the cornerstones of Taipei's indie music scene throughout the last decade, while reaffirming the Shida-Gongguan (師大-公館) area as the nexus of Taiwan's rock culture. Additionally, the number and scope of indie music events of all types held in and around Taipei increased considerably over the last decade. A good example of this evolution was the Hohaiyan Rock Festival (貢寮

⁵⁶ The Wall includes a record shop, practice rooms, a bar/coffee shop and 600-person capacity live house jointly. It was created in 2003 by Spring Scream's organizer Jimi Moe, Formoz Festival's mastermind Freddy Lim, and local band The Chairman's singer A-Ji (阿吉 - 吳永吉 of his full name).

國際海洋音樂祭), a music festival held each summer since 2000 at Fulong Beach (福隆海水浴場), which rapidly grew into a large-scale event attracting tens of thousands of people over three days of indie and pop music concerts⁵⁷.

In Taipei, the Formoz Festival grew in scale to establish itself as the city's largest indie music festival. The main architect of this success was Freddy Lim (林昶佐, simply known as "Freddy" in the scene), singer and leader of local black metal band Chthonic (閃靈), who in 1997 took up the reins of the Northern Universities Rock Alliance: a small gathering of campus music enthusiasts that grew into an authentic business structure dedicated to the development of rock music in Taipei⁵⁸. Since then, Lim has yielded an outstanding contribution to the promotion and concrete advancement of Taiwan's rock and indie music culture on many levels, notably as a musician (with Chthonic, one of the world's most popular black metal bands), concert organizer (with the Formoz Festival, but also the Spirit of Taiwan [台灣魂演唱會] - Justice for All [正義無敵音樂會] and Free Tibet [西藏自由音樂會] music events)⁵⁹. His functions over the years also included those of co-founder, co-owner and director of major live venues (Zeitgeist and The Wall) and a

⁵⁷ The activities of the Hohaiyan Music Festival includes a highly anticipated music contest (or "battle of the bands") for local indie groups that has revealed several talents of Taipei's indie rock scene such as 88 Guava Seedz, Tizzy Bac, Totem, and White Eyes.

⁵⁸ The Northern University Rock Alliance was successively renamed "Music Revolutionary Army of Taiwan" (台灣音樂革命軍), then *Taiwan Rock Alliance* or TRA (台灣全國搖滾聯盟, changed along the way to 螞蟻暴走音樂事業團隊). It ceased its activities at the end of the decade.

⁵⁹ Freddy Lim, but also his closest collaborators (including some of the bands which participated regularly in the events he organized) were controversial figures for some time in the local music milieu due to their strong political views (expressed on stage and in the media), their support for Taiwan's independence, the political character of some of their musical events (most notably for the independence of Taiwan and Tibet), but also for the direction towards which their efforts contributed to steer the local music scene's evolution.

multi-purpose cultural organization called TRA Music (台灣全國搖滾聯盟).

Other key promoters of indie rock music in Taipei were the indie musicians and rock enthusiasts grouped around the Underworld live house, including Tsung Ming (宗明), Ho Tung-Hung (何東洪), Randy Lin (林志堅), Dizzy Ha and Wang Yuankang (王元康, a.k.a. “秋生”, guitarist of local metal act “666”)⁶⁰. Thanks to their efforts and ingenuity, this small but unique establishment has successfully overcome countless periods of hardship, and has resiliently continued to embrace the role of acting as a genuine musical, social and artistic laboratory for local indie bands and live music fans.

Despite a few setbacks in the late 2000s (including the end of the very popular Formoz Festival), Taipei’s indie rock scene seems to have maintained a slow but steady progression over the past few years. Taipei has seen the recent creation of a few successful live houses, including the Riverside Ximen Live House (河岸留言西門紅樓展演館, the second Riverside venue opened in 2008) and Revolver (opened on Roosevelt Rd. Sec. 1 by foreign music lovers in 2011), but also more importantly the Legacy Taipei (傳音樂展演空間): a large-scale live house established in 2009 in the Huashan 1914 Creative Park (華山 1914 文創園區). Founded by Landy Chang (張培仁), prolific concert organizer and promoter of Taiwanese indie music, and local pop star Harlem Yu (庾澄慶

⁶⁰ Please note that I am not familiar with the entirety of any of the Underworld’s social. I limited myself to naming some of its members that were identified by friends and acquaintances as key actors in the history of this venue. It is also worth mentioning that some of the owners and several of the music passionates who have supported the Underworld over the years were previously active with Crystal Records, which closed in 2002.

better known as “哈林”)⁶¹, this venue promises to be the type of establishment that Taipei’s indie scene needs to move up to the next stage (literally) of its evolution. With its capacity of more than 1200 people, its elegant yet casual atmosphere, and its rich musical program – a well-balanced mix of indie bands, local pop stars, and renowned international artists – Legacy has demonstrated its capacity to attract more diverse crowds than the city’s smaller live houses. In other words, this new venue bears the potential to greatly participate in pulling Taipei’s underground rock scene out of its basements to present it in a more accessible setting. This marked attempt at reaching out to urban crowds actually seems to reflect a general tendency within the scene in recent years, as outdoor afternoon festivals, small performances and music-related events in coffee shops, bookstores and campuses have multiplied throughout the city, especially for folk-rock and other *softer* types of indie pop and rock music.

After more than two decades of struggle, it seems that Taiwan is finally starting to recognize the value of its status as a leading indie music powerhouse of the Chinese world. This recognition has led the Taiwanese government and indie promoters to promote it both domestically and around the world. Beginning in 2007, the Taiwanese government (via the Government Information Office, or GIO – 中華民國行政院新聞局) has been allocating generous funds to the development of local rock bands. Part of a massive initiative seeking to reinvigorate Taiwan’s music industry, called the Pop Music Flagship Project (流行音樂產業旗艦計畫), the financial support now available to bands

⁶¹ Landy Chang’s is also the founder of Streetvoice, a popular online music platform, as well as of the Simple Life Festival (簡單生活節). It is worth mentioning that, like The Wall Live House, the Legacy is a fully independent organization that, according to its manager Arthur Chen, doesn’t receive any financial support from governmental institutions. The Legacy itself rents its space in the Huashan 1914 Creative Park from the city government.

includes substantial grants for recording albums and participating in music events abroad⁶².

According to several observers of the scene, the quality of recordings and performances by local indie rock bands has improved significantly over the past few years, while a new generation of bands has established itself in Taipei's indie rock scene. Relative newcomers like White Eyes (白目), Aphasia (阿飛西涯), Hang in the Air (盪在空中), OverDose, Kou Chou Ching (拷秋勤), Mary See the Future, My Skin Against your Skin (激膚) and Macbeth (馬克白) have already made their mark in the Taiwanese indie scene and deserve to be watched attentively in the near future.

I here take the liberty of bringing the reader's attention to two young bands that, in my view, have distinguished themselves over the last couple years. First, reggae-rock band Matzka deserves a mention for winning the 2011 Golden Melody award for best band and developing a sizeable fan base throughout Taiwan. The group seems poised to become the next Taiwanese group to achieve massive popular success in the Chinese-speaking world.

The second band, indie electro-rock group Go Chic, fronted by charismatic singer Ariel Zheng (鄭思齊) and inventive songwriter/guitarist Sonia Lai (賴思勻), can rightfully be perceived as the Cinderella band of Taipei's indie rock scene. Despite going largely unnoticed in Taiwan, Go Chic has a good chance of becoming the first Taiwanese group to earn its place on the international indie rock scene. Thanks notably to the active support of foreign music promoters and world-renowned Canadian electronic musician

⁶² See sections 3.3.3 and 3.3.4 for more details on the government's subsidies to local indie bands.

Peaches⁶³, Go Chic has been able to participate in several world-class music festivals and has done a series of successful live house tours in Europe and America.

With creative young bands, past generations of pioneers, independent promoters and government now combining their efforts to extend the field of possibilities for local groups, Taipei's indie rock scene is likely to continue to grow in diversity over the next few years. New opportunities present themselves to local rock bands – notably thanks to the government's subsidy program and the developing collaboration between indie music circles of Taiwan and Mainland China. However, the increased presence of foreign indie acts in Taipei, which large crowds spend surprisingly high sums to see live, arguably represents a new source of competition for the attention of local music fans.

More concerning is the fact that, in the summer of 2012, the Underworld live house was forced to close temporarily under the pressure of an association of conservative neighbors (師大三里自救會) campaigning against the increasing number of small restaurants, stores and visitors in the Shida area, in the hope of improving the quality of life of local residents⁶⁴. This event is yet another sobering reminder that, despite the progress made over more than 20 years of rock culture in Taipei, nothing can be taken for granted by local indie bands and venues.⁶⁵ Marginality in the domestic

⁶³ Peaches notably helped record and produce Go Chic's second album from her Berlin base in 2011 and 2012. Go Chic's 2011 live house tour in Europe and America was mainly organized by Macao-based Panda Management.

⁶⁴ Readers who seek more information on this episode of the Underworld's troubles history may consult the Underworld's main page (<http://underworld-taipei.blogspot.tw/>) or read the following article penned by David Frazier: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2012/07/11/2003537448/3>.

⁶⁵ Apart from the difficulties experienced by the Underworld, a few other events have highlighted the precariousness of live venues in Taiwan and have somewhat echoed the past episodes of government crackdown on alternative culture that were commonplace in the country not so long ago. For instance, live music venues throughout Taiwan have come under increasing pressure from authorities following a deadly fire in March 2011 at a nightclub in Taichung (readers may consult the Chinese Wikipedia entry for “[台中市傑克丹尼夜店火災](#)” for more details on the incident). The near-closure of the Witch House in 2011

market and the financial precariousness of local music venues remains as much a problem today as it was some 15 years ago.

2.5 - Concluding remarks

In my discussions with the current crop of indie rockers, I found that those who are familiar with the past two decades of indie rock preceding them see in it the difficult yet fascinating beginning of a new chapter of Taiwan's music history. They think of dozens of important predecessors – bands, individual artists, organizers and promoters – who, despite having largely remained in the shadow of the Mandopop regime, have nonetheless succeeded in touching thousands of local music enthusiasts and inspiring a new generation of indie rockers to live out their passion for music. They think of key live houses, events, festivals, social circles and episodes of adversity that have marked the evolution of the scene. In short, they see a young yet immensely rich music tradition in the making that has contributed to shaping their existence, in which they now actively participate with their friends and fellow indie musicians.

Local indie rockers are also well aware of the relative marginality and precariousness of their passion in the context of the Taiwanese music market and their larger socio-cultural environment. They realize that their situation is not very different from that of their predecessors, and that they will face a lack of recognition and support from the local music industry, entertainment media, mainstream soundscape and society at large. Therefore, they know that, given the current and past dispositions of the music

following noise complaints by neighbors, and the suspension of indie rock performances at the Artist Village Café the same year for a mix of similar complaints and economic considerations (owners thought that jazz and blues concerts would draw wealthier customers) after a few months of flamboyant success are two other examples of this phenomenon.

business, the economic prospects are very bleak for local rock bands in Taiwan. Yet one must acknowledge that rock culture is firmly implanted in Taiwan and that playing music is more common among local youngsters than it was 20 years ago. Also, the recent endorsement of indie music by the Taiwanese government, the growing number of audiences at music concerts in Taipei, the surprising increase of small festivals organized throughout Taiwan in recent years (especially in the summer of 2012), and the opening of local indie music to foreign music markets (including the massive Chinese market) are signs that things are changing rapidly in Taiwan's indie scene and that the possibilities for local rock bands. It is against this complex historical background that the stories of today's indie rockers in Taipei unfold.

Chapter 3 - Overview of the careers, features and musical activities of some veteran bands and musicians of Taipei's indie rock scene

3.1 - Introduction

Two main objectives will be pursued in parallel throughout the following chapter. The first is essentially descriptive, as I will provide an ethnographic account of the typical story, musical activities and economic conditions of indie rock bands in Taipei. To my knowledge, very few publications offer a concrete picture of what playing in an indie rock band in Taipei consists in⁶⁶. This chapter attempts to partially rectify this gap by offering substantial insights into the daily realities of local rock bands, thereby helping the reader who is less familiar with the subject to better understand the distinctive features of Taipei's indie rock scene and of local rockers' musical experience.

Section 3.2 will consist of a short presentation of the evolution, features, achievements and ambitions of Black Summer Days and OverDose: two local rock bands which can be considered representative on several aspects of the variety of bands that currently compose Taipei's indie rock scene. Section 3.2 will offer an overview of the musical activities of local rock bands, with an emphasis on the singular approaches of local rockers to rehearsing, songwriting, recording and performing, and on the particular conditions in which these activities take place. In so doing, I will notably stress that to play in a rock band entails a key social dimension, but also very importantly, that the learning of rock musicianship and the development of a rock band are painstaking

⁶⁶ Theses by Huang (2009) and Jeng (2005) are exceptions on that regard: both expose some of the practices and problems of local rock bands in the context of the local media, government policies and the popular music industry.

enterprises that hardly go without hard work and strong personal commitment. Additionally, I seek to provide the reader with a rough “feel” of the inherent technicality of the modern rock musician’s craft, this aspect being essential when it comes to understanding what these musical activities are about. In section 3.4, I will delineate the place of local rock bands in industry, media and public, and provide some insights into their attitudes towards the economic realities of their trade.

This chapter also serves a more argumentative purpose, as it aims at making better sense of the involvement of Taipei’s indie rockers in music. First, I will show that playing in a band is a very intricate and painstaking activity that requires considerable amount of time, concentration, energy, motivation, self-learning and resources. Indeed, for the majority of Taipei’s veteran indie rockers, being in a band is much more than a means of being entertained, as many non-musicians think it is, and must rather be understood as a very serious engagement, some dimensions of which are more akin to genuine work. I will then go on to stress that, despite the discrepancies in popularity and ambitions among local indie rock bands, the activities of the vast majority of bands do not generate enough revenue for its members to make a living. Furthermore, local indie rockers based in Taipei face serious physical, socio-cultural and economic barriers to their development and pursuit of mainstream success, the most important of which will be exposed in the three sections of this chapter. In section 3.4, I will build on the ethnographic and discursive elements at hand to argue that, given the current dispositions of the Taiwanese music industry, media and public at large, mainstream popularity can be considered nearly unreachable at present for the overwhelming majority of local indie rock bands. Also, the discourses and approaches of local indie rockers (i.e. what they do and do not

do) strongly suggest that the main goal of their musical activities is not to achieve mainstream breakthrough, nor to reverse the regime that prevails in the local music market. Having reached this temporary conclusion, I will move on in the fourth chapter to interpret the involvement of local veteran indie rockers in the world of music from within the larger context of their socio-cultural environment and personal backgrounds.

3.2 Portrait of two representative bands of the local indie scene

3.2.1 - Black Summer Days – General Presentation

Black Summer Days, simply called “BSD” by band members and friends⁶⁷, was an indie rock band formed in 2004 under the initiative of Georgy Yang (born in 1978, also known as “喬治” among local musicians). After nearly 8 years of existence, Black Summer Days officially disbanded in the spring of 2012 (during the writing of this thesis) for various reasons, including the pressure of increasing disagreements on the aesthetic direction of the band. To my knowledge, BSD had never had a substantial fan base, and had not achieved any particular form of popular success. Yet, the band’s live performances were generally well received and garnered warm applause from audiences, especially in small and crowded venues such as the Underworld.

BSD’s music style can be said to fall within the category of “hard rock”; a type of rock music that was very popular in Anglo-American music from the 1970s up until the late 1990s. It is characterized by extensive use of loud and distorted electric guitars,

⁶⁷ The two bands at the core of this ethnography, Black Summer Days and Overdose, use exclusively their English name in all contexts, and appear to have no “official” Chinese name. This situation is far from being exceptional, as it could be estimated that between 30% and 45% of all indie bands based in Taipei seem to also use almost exclusively their English name. Examples of such bands notably include Go Chic, Skaraoke, Mojo, My Skin Against Your Skin, Green!Eyes, Mary See the Future, and many more.

strong rhythm sections and elaborate guitar solos. Georgy however maintains that Black Summer Days was first and foremost a blues band; a conclusion that the audience of the band's performances may not unanimously draw. Although virtually all rock music is arguably rooted in blues music, BSD's compositions, for the most part, did not correspond to the common representation average music fans have of blues music, which usually features distinctive riffs and improvised solos played in 12-bar chord progressions. The band's music rather appeared more like standard rock music, based on more varied verse-chorus song structures. BSD's musical references consisted of a mix of blues (ex: Stevie Ray Vaughn) and "classic" rock bands from the 1980s and 1990s (especially hard rock bands Kiss, Bon Jovi, Aerosmith, and AC/DC), so-called "glam metal" bands (ex: Guns N' Roses and Mötley Crüe), a few punk rock groups (ex: Motörhead); some blues-rock artists (Tom Petty), popular Japanese rock bands (ex: Yellow Monkey), and a series of Britpop groups (ex: Oasis, Blur).

BSD's live sound, with the band in its rock quartet configuration, could first be described as very "raw", in reference to its simple, unadorned and unfiltered overdriven guitar and bass textures. Jingang's skillful and hard-sounding drumming style – highly praised among local indie musicians – was another major feature which, when merged and harmonized rhythmically with the bass and electric guitars, contributed greatly in creating a powerful and energetic rock sound. The guitars and bass were tuned half a step lower from the standard tuning⁶⁸, and were doubled in many accentuated sections of the songs (i.e. both guitars play the same line), thus adding a heavy and somewhat "dark" feel to the music. On top of this came Georgy's powerful yet warm voice, often

⁶⁸ This type of lower guitar tuning, referred to as the "D#/E b tuning", is very popular among rock musicians because it makes the guitar sound heavier and facilitates singing.

accompanied by Jingang on backing vocals⁶⁹.

In concert, BSD mostly played the band's own compositions, but occasionally also one or two so-called "cover" songs, especially when asked to perform for more than an hour. As of 2011, BSD had a music collection of 23 songs⁷⁰ in total, which figured either on a record produced in 2007 or were performed live at some time in the band's history. Apart from this record, the only way to listen to BSD's music outside of live concerts was to access the band's Myspace page⁷¹, on which 6 demo versions of songs were available, or to get acquainted personally with one of the band members and ask him to give you a CD or share some MP3 files. Only about 70% of BSD's songs were performed regularly in concert, although the band did occasionally enjoy performing a song that had not been played live for a certain time.

All of BSD's songs, except one, were composed for the most part by Georgy, then fine-tuned and arranged together with other band members. The only exception to this was a single song, in which the music and lyrics – in English – were composed by Georgy and I during my stay with the group. Apart from this one song, which I also sung live at a few concerts in the beginning of 2010, all other songs were sung by Georgy. Most lyrics, also written by Georgy, were in Chinese, with only one song written entirely in English. Four other songs either bore an English title (ex: a song called *Problem Child*) or included an English line in the body of the text.

⁶⁹ Jingang usually used a microphone headset : a piece of equipment owned by very few Taiwanese indie musicians, which allowed him to move more freely behind the drums while singing or speaking to the crowd. The use of this equipment spared him the annoyance of having to turn the head almost completely to his left to sing through an overhead microphone.

⁷⁰ This number only includes completed songs, and does not account for an important sum of unfinished songs, pieces of songs, or songs that were completed but deemed not suitable for the band.

⁷¹ Myspace is a popular social entertainment and network website often used by music bands around the world to present their music. The Web address of BSD's Myspace page (still accessible today) is <http://www.myspace.com/bsdrrr>.

3.2.2 - Black Summer Days – short history

Not unlike a lot of local indie bands, BSD's lineup underwent several changes over the years. The group was founded in 2004 by Georgy, shortly after he completed his military duties. BSD initially appeared as a trio, with Georgy, the bandleader and main songwriter on rhythm guitar and vocals, bassist A-Zong (阿宗) and drummer Mark (馬克)⁷². Only a year after the band's creation, bassist A-Zong left and was immediately replaced by a young bassist called "Punk" (龐克), whom Georgy had met four years earlier when he was working at the counter of the APA Rock Academy. The same year, the band added lead guitarist Xiaohuang (小黃) to its lineup, only to see him leave less than 12 months later to complete his military service. In 2006, the band's first drummer was replaced by drummer Laowu (老吳), and BSD kept on performing as a trio for slightly more than a year. Such was the band's lineup when I became friends with Georgy in 2007, and started to attend their concerts regularly. That same year, I also had the chance to accompany BSD on their trip to the Kending area for the popular Spring Scream Festival. In 2007, the band completed its first and only record, an eponymous album including 10 tracks that was produced by A-Feng (阿峰), a friend and ex-singer of early indie band Groupie (骨肉皮) and founder of the Scum live house in the mid- 1990s.

⁷² Such a configuration can be said to be very typical of the world of rock music in general, but also of Taipei's indie rock scene, as a vast majority of local bands are composed of one or two electric guitarists, a bassist, a drummer, and a vocalist – a position often assumed by one of the guitarists who then simultaneously sings and plays the guitar. A lot of variations do however exist according to individual aesthetic choices or specific types of rock, like post-rock, which is generally characterized by instrumental compositions that require only few or no vocals at all.

This album was not sold anywhere and could only be acquired at the band's concerts by asking one of the group members. Through 2006 and 2007, BSD performed on a roughly bimonthly basis in three main live venues: the Underworld, Bliss⁷³ and Velvet Underground (地下絲絨)⁷⁴. The band also performed at a few band contests and special musical events.

At the end of 2007, drummer Laowu was forced to quit the band to complete his compulsory military service. The band performed for the last time with its original drummer on a Wednesday night at The Wall, dressed in military uniforms to mark the occasion. At the time, the remaining band members did not have any immediate solution to Laowu's departure, an impasse that resulted in the interruption of BSD's musical activities for a certain period. It is at that time that I and Georgy started playing music together, first very casually in an improvised "cover band" with Georgy on bass and vocals, me on guitar, and a friend of Georgy's on drums. Soon, Georgy invited me to participate in an "experimental" configuration of BSD as an acoustic trio (with acoustic guitars replacing electric guitars) and without a drummer. It became clear after only a few practices together that this project would yield only mixed results. Luckily enough, Georgy became aware that experienced drummer Jingang (金剛 – a nickname which translates as "King Kong" in English), with whom he had played before in the last performance of the early local rock band Groupie (骨肉皮), had just left his previous metal band and was looking for new musical challenges. Georgy jumped on the occasion,

⁷³ Bliss was a music bar located on Xinyi Rd., near the intersection with Dunhua Rd, which attracted a steady clientele of foreigners. It closed its doors in the beginning of 2010.

⁷⁴ Velvet Underground was a live house and restaurant first located in a basement next to the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Life Tower opposite Taipei Main Station. It moved and re-opened in the Ximending area in January 2009, but failed to attract regular audiences and finally ceased its activities around the end of 2010.

and invited Jingang to join BSD to reform the group as a rock quartet, with me as rhythm guitarist.

The first concert of the newly revived BSD – also my first live performance with the band – was at the Velvet Underground (then located in the Ximending area) in spring of 2008. Over the 18 months that followed, BSD played live once per month on average – a rather low frequency in comparison with a majority of local indie bands – either at the Underworld, Roxy Roots (a live house previously located in the NEO19 Complex on Songren Rd. that closed in autumn 2010), the Riverside Music Café (河岸藝文咖啡) near Gongguan, or Bliss (near the Xinyi-Dunhua intersection).

During my journey with BSD, the band did not seek to perform in live houses outside of Taipei or to participate in any music contest or festivals around the island (ex: Spring Scream or the Hohaiyan Rock Festival). The reason for this was most likely a mark of respect for drummer Jingang, who understandably felt, as he often said, “tired of these things” after “having been there and done that too many times before” over the course of his long-time presence in the scene⁷⁵. Another factor explaining the band’s limited live presence was bassist Punk’s compulsory enlistment in the military. Thanks to great devotion to the band and a fortunate assignment near Taipei City, Punk managed to practice and perform with BSD on weekends during most of his military service. Also, the group may not have performed live very frequently, but it nonetheless kept on practicing and composing on a regular basis, adding 7 new songs to its repertoire over the 18 months of my participation in the band.

⁷⁵ Jingang was and is still today a drummer much in demand. On some occasions, he played drums for up to three bands at some festivals in the past. Other than with BSD, Jingang acted as the regular drummer of another band called “Jindowin” (筋斗雲), but has also served as a replacement drummer for various indie and professional bands in the last year, notably the popular indie group Peppermints (薄荷葉).

BSD's lineup changed again in the summer of 2010, when I left the band to focus on pressing academic and professional tasks. I was replaced a few weeks later by experienced guitarist Caitou (蔡頭), who was invited to step in after I quit the band in late 2009. In the two years that followed, BSD practiced, composed and performed more sporadically, as Georgy, Punk and Jingang gradually got more committed to full-time professional activities⁷⁶. For various reasons, communication issues and growing discontent appeared among band members, which ultimately led to BSD's official disbandment in April of 2012. The members did not, however, give up playing music, and soon set out to find other partners for new musical projects.

3.2.3 - OverDose – general presentation

OverDose is an indie rock band formed in Taipei in 2003 around two core members: guitarist, bandleader and main songwriter Kit, and singer Xiaojun (小君). The band's lineup evolved progressively to definitive configuration of five musicians in the summer of 2005, with lead singers Xiaojun and Kalis, guitarist and DJ Kit, bassist Xiaoheng (小亨) and drummer S.D. (小恐龍).

The band's music changed considerably over its eight years of existence, as the members' musical tastes and objectives developed. From heavy metal, the band's creations evolved into a more diverse and accessible style encompassing several types of music. Yet, OverDose has up to this day been largely recognized in Taiwan as a “nu metal” band; a hybrid types of heavy rock music that has been highly popular worldwide

⁷⁶ Over the past few years, both Jingang and George have mostly been occupying positions that are related to music: Jingang still works today in an instrument shop, while Georgy is a sound engineer in a live house. As for Punk, he has mostly worked as a full-time bartender in various pubs around Taipei.

since its emergence in the late 1990s. Guitarist Kit indeed confirms famous American bands Korn and Limp Bizkit, key nu metal pioneers, as some of the main inspirations behind his music, along with the Taiwanese band XL (特大號), themselves regarded as the first flag-bearers of nu metal music in the country. However, for most veteran music fans, the most obvious reference to describe OverDose's music is probably the Californian group Linkin Park, which also features catchy verse-chorus songs, heavy and "deep" sounding rhythm guitar sound, as well as a highly contrasted mix of conventional, heavy metal and hip-hop style vocals. Other acknowledged influences to the band's music include a vast array of influences such as electronic music, post-rock, Japanese rock, industrial music, and Taiwanese popular music, which shows the band's commitment to musical exploration.

With over 30 original songs, OverDose can easily perform more than an hour and a half of its own compositions in concert, which has become a norm for the band when performing in larger live houses like The Wall. Most of the band's music, including the digital loops used in live performances, is first composed by guitarist Kit, and subsequently arranged with the help of other band members⁷⁷. The lyrics, mainly consisting of Chinese texts, are written by Xiaojun, Kalis, and Kit, and do also include numerous segments in English⁷⁸. 10 of the band's best songs were released on two extended plays⁷⁹ of five tracks each, entitled "*OverDose*" (2006) and *Seconds to Doomsday* (在毀滅前 – 2010). The latter album was produced in collaboration with Toro

⁷⁷ This detail concerning the composition of OverDose's songs is not made explicit in the booklet accompanying the band's releases, in which song credits are generally attributed to the entire band.

⁷⁸ The song "*Rippling*" (漣漪) is the only OverDose song so far written predominantly in Taiwanese.

⁷⁹ Extended plays (simply called by the abbreviation "EP") are albums that usually contain between 4 and 7 songs, which is less than a full album (also called "long play" by contrast, with 10 to 15 songs) but more than a single (1 to 4 songs).

Production, the band's contracted manager since 2008, and distributed in record stores throughout the country. Production of both records was for the most part carried out by guitarist Kit himself. Another product of this collaboration was OverDose's first two official music videos released simultaneously in fall of 2010 for the songs *Rippling* (漣漪) and *Crying Love*, both of which were broadcasted on specialized television channels (ex: MTV Taiwan), video sharing websites, as well as KTV chains. Both of these videos were quite successful online, garnering more than 150 000 views combined on YouTube.

The band does enjoy a certain popularity in Taiwan and Hong Kong – where it performed in 2010 – and can be said to have a substantial base of fans and followers essentially composed of high school and university students. However, mainstream success has not yet materialized for OverDose. The band still receives little financial compensation for its few performances and recordings, and does not enjoy a regular presence in the local media.

3.2.4 - OverDose – short history

OverDose's formation and development can in many ways be regarded as a typical Taiwanese band story, based on school friendships and marked by the successive crossroads taken by a group of young people as they grow up and face the imperatives of adult life in modern Taiwanese society. The band has its origins in senior high school, where guitarist Kit and singer Xiaojun, both students of the same school, played together with other classmates in a heavy metal cover band⁸⁰; an increasingly common

⁸⁰ Interestingly enough, Kit and Xiaojun's early high school was called "Ecstasy", which is arguably in the same semantic field as "OverDose".

extracurricular activity among high school students in Taipei. In 2002, the two friends, then only 17 years old, attended together the Hohaiyan Rock Festival in Fulong for the first time. They were thrilled by their experience and, after being encouraged by well-known artist Desert Zhang to keep on playing music, formulated the common wish to perform one day on the festival's largest stage.

After graduating from senior high school in 2003, Kit and Xiaojun opted for universities in Taipei, but saw all other band members leave to study in southern and central Taiwan. The two friends decided to keep on playing music and quickly found then second guitarist Xiaoheng, as well as a new drummer and a bassist to form a rock quintet; OverDose was born. Right from the beginning, the band's objective was to create original songs as a way to stand out from the mass of cover bands that filled the practice rooms all over the city. Influenced by his recent discovery of the famous American band Korn, Kit steered the group's style towards nu metal; a type of music then relatively unexplored in Taiwan. The same year, OverDose performed for the first time at a student festival held at Xiaojun's university, playing only two original songs⁸¹.

Motivated by the relative success of their first live appearance, the band members then set out to take songwriting more seriously, despite slow progress and evident skill limitations from band members. The first change in OverDose's lineup occurred in 2004, when the band's first drummer quit, only to be replaced by S.D., a more talented drummer met by Kit at his musical instrument store. His arrival consolidated the group's overall capacities, and shortly after, the quintet began to perform in live musical events organized in Taipei's practice rooms (which were a more common phenomenon back

⁸¹ According to Kit, these two first songs were not fully completed at the time of the performance, and he couldn't help but to laugh when recalling how the band kept on playing and playing the same verse and chorus without knowing how to finish the songs.

then) and small live venues. It is also around that time that Kalis, one of Xiaojun's close friends, started to get involved on an occasional basis with the group before becoming a permanent member of OverDose the following year.

According to Kit, the year 2005 was a crucial turning point for OverDose. At the beginning of the year, the band performed for the first time at The Wall, only to return soon after, this time opening for Taiwanese nu metal band XL. These two live appearances in Taipei's largest live house at the time gave band members the impression that they "had achieved a certain position" in the local indie scene⁸². More self-confident than ever, the band then applied to participate in the three most important indie music festivals in Taiwan: the Spring Scream Festival (held in Kending in April), the Hohaiyan Rock Festival (held in Fulong in July), and the Formoz Festival (held in Taipei in August). To their great surprise and disappointment, OverDose's applications were all unsuccessful, while most of their friends' groups, on the contrary, were accepted in those events. This setback was a hard blow for the band's morale and prompted a series of doubts among band members. Three of them reported feeling depressed⁸³ for the rest of the year. In July of the same year, OverDose had to face yet another difficult situation, as their original bassist decided to quit the band to play a different style of music. This time, disappointment gave way to plain sadness, and doubts were raised about the bassist's replacement, or even about the band's survival.

Yet, OverDose's members refused to give up⁸⁴. Then second guitarist Xiaoheng

⁸² Original Chinese quotation: 我們到了一個位置. Interviewee B, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, May 2011.

⁸³ The original terms used by my interviewee were "悶" and "失落". Interviewee C, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, March 2011.

⁸⁴ At a musical event held in the summer of 2005 at Shih Hsin University (世新大學), Xiaojun and Kit

agreed to take up the vacant position of bassist, thus leaving Kit as the band's only guitarist, and calling for a complete reengineering of the group's repertoire and style. The band kept on performing and writing songs, notably coming up with the song *Icarus' Dream* (伊卡洛斯的夢), the band's first song in its new configuration and most popular composition at the time, which featured the type of powerful and catchy chorus that would become one of the band's trademarks in the years ahead. *Icarus' dream* was soon followed by a series of new songs which helped OverDose to overcome its tough year in 2005 and approach the coming year with a renewed confidence. Indeed, the band was selected to perform in all three major Taiwanese music festivals in 2006, and kept on appearing in these and other large-scale events every year until now⁸⁵. According to band members, OverDose's participation in the band contest event of the Hohaiyan Rock Festival – held on what is arguably the largest stage with possibly the largest audience an indie band can have in Taiwan – was a landmark moment that meant the realization of the band's ultimate objective at the time.

Instead of disbanding and moving on with other life projects, the band decided to keep on playing and significantly increase its activities. OverDose went on to perform in several festivals and live houses while recording their first official album; an eponymous EP of five tracks released at the end of 2006. This in turn opened up substantially more opportunities to perform all over Taiwan, as the band's countrywide notoriety slowly built up in the years that followed. The group's compositions gradually shifted towards a

shared their disappointment of not having been selected for the Spring Scream Festival with established indie musician Desert Zhang who, once again, gave them encouragements and urged them not to give up playing music. Guitarist Kit referred to this moment as highly influential in the band overcoming this period of hardships.

⁸⁵ Starting from 2006, OverDose has appeared in all six editions of the Spring Scream Festival, in the three remaining editions of the Formoz Festival, in four of the last six editions of the Hohaiyan Rock Festival, as well as in three editions of the Mega Port Festival (大港音開唱) held in Kaohsiung.

slightly more accessible type of heavy rock, but also kept on bearing the increasing influence of bandleader Kit's continuous exploration of electronic rhythms and melodic elements. The years 2009 and 2010 also stand out in OverDose's stylistic evolution, particularly with the addition of the distinctly poppy yet aesthetically daring song *Crying Love* and guitarist Kit's first DJ performance as an introduction to the band's concert at The Wall.

Seeking to reach larger audiences, OverDose started to collaborate officially in 2008 with band manager and former Taiwanese music idol Toro (郭葦昀). In the two years that followed, OverDose caught the attention of a few major Taiwanese records labels. The band did hold a few meetings with managing personnel of some labels, but systematically refused all proposals that were made to them. According to group members, the labels were mainly interested in the band members' "good looks", but not in their music. Had they signed a deal with one of these companies, OverDose would probably have been transformed into an "idol" band (偶像), and required to participate in a multitude of mass entertainment programs on television such as talk shows and TV series – low-class and empty material in the group's view. To add insult to injury, the group could not have kept on creating and performing its own material, but would have been forced to play pop songs chosen and written by the label themselves. OverDose's members vehemently opposed such business practices, and refused any kind of close collaboration with the local industry (apart from eventual distribution deals).

Thanks to their manager's substantial investment, OverDose still managed to produce and release by themselves the band's second EP, entitled *Seconds to Doomsday*. The album, along with OverDose's first two music videos, was released in June 2010.

Toro's promotional efforts also significantly increased the groups' presence in universities and in various high-profile musical events⁸⁶. In the period that followed the release of its last EP, OverDose made an average of two or three formal live appearances a month, which can arguably be considered a rate of activity similar to that of the most popular local indie bands.

I first met some of OverDose's members in 2008. Over the past three years, Kit, Kalis and Xiaojun have become some of my dearest friends in Taiwan. I also attended most of the groups' performances and activities in the Taipei area in 2009 and 2010, up until Kit's departure for the military in November of the same year, which was marked by a week-long series of improvised unplugged concerts in various cities all over the island. For the band's last engagement on New Year's Eve in Kaohsiung, Kit was replaced on guitar by a long-time friend of the group. Ten days after the concert, Kalis and Xiaojun also joined the military for their obligatory service. During that time, the band members kept on working on future musical projects on their weekends off, while S.D. acted as drummer of popular local indie band Go Chic for their series of concerts around the world and the recording of their new album.

After being suspended for over a year due to Kit, Kalis and Xiaojun's military duties, OverDose's activities resumed in the beginning of January 2012 with a 2 hour long concert at The Wall. As of summer of 2012, the band is once again in the process of recrafting its repertoire to give it a more electronic and modern texture. According to the band, the objective is to be original and to reach out to international electro-rock fans

⁸⁶ Examples of such particular events notably include short performance at a theme party held in September 2010 at the very popular Luxy Nightlife Complex in Taipei and a live appearance at the 2011 New Year's Eve concert of Kaohsiung City (2011 高雄市跨年晚會) alongside various local music celebrities (although OverDose's performance was scheduled at the very end of the concert, after the live broadcasting of the event on TV had stopped and most spectators had already left).

beyond the Taiwanese borders.⁸⁷ Despite facing increasing pressure in their daily life, all members of OverDose have proved themselves willing to develop their band's popularity, while also diversifying their involvement in the world of music with individual and collective musical projects.

3.2.5 - How these bands are representative of Taipei's indie rock scene

Black Summer Days and OverDose, while perhaps not an ideal sampling, can nevertheless be considered to be representative of two major types of bands found in Taipei's indie rock scene – if we may operate such a rough distinction for descriptive purpose. The above presentation of the status and stories of these two bands can indeed be used to identify and illustrate a series of opposing characteristics or tendencies that apply to several other bands, and allow to somewhat account for the considerable diversity found in Taipei's current indie rock scene.

The contrasts between the two bands range over several dimensions, an obvious one being that of the music styles or categories in which they fall. Black Summer Days is a self-proclaimed blues-rock and hard rock group, two types of music which peaked from the 1970s to the early 1990s, while OverDose can be categorized as nu metal (with increasing electro-rock and pop-rock influences), a more recent type of hybrid rock popularized in the late 1990s. This distinction is not only manifest in the musical aesthetics and tastes of each band, but must also be understood as far-reaching affiliations to two traditions of rock history that encompass numerous other aspects, such as fashion and stage presence. These dissimilar musical identities can be partly explained by a second notable difference between the two bands: that of age. Georgy and Jingang, the

⁸⁷ This approach and ambition is rather new in Taipei's local scene, and OverDose might very well have been inspired by the recent international grassroots success of local electro-rock band Go Chic.

key members of BSD, were respectively born in 1978 and 1969, and have been musically active since the beginning of the local indie rock scene in the mid- 1990s. In comparison, OverDose's members were born in 1984-1985, and started to get involved in the early 2000s. The musical sensibilities and activities of both bands, then, emerged and developed during different periods in the history of the local scene and rock music in general. To some degree, and despite the fact that BSD and OverDose have been active for a comparable number of years, it would be fair to say that the members of the two bands belong to two "generations" of local rock musicians. As such, the two bands are somewhat representative of today's indie rock scene in Taipei, which regroups indie rockers between 20 and 45 years of age, and also encompasses a relatively large array of aesthetic categories, from alternative to post-rock and reggae to electro-rock.

Another significant distinction between the two bands most likely lies in their respective objectives in the music world. BSD, as a musical project, harbors no particular commercial ambitions. As such, it can be likened to the bulk of local bands, which enjoy only minimal popularity, and can be called the more "underground" rock bands. On the other hand, OverDose's members positively hope to achieve more sizeable success, or even to "make it" locally or internationally, and thereby generate more substantial income from their musical efforts. A similar aspiration is shared by the several groups that form what can be perceived as the forefront of the local indie scene. This includes bands that have distinguished themselves in various ways over the years (ex: White Eyes with their first place at the Hohaiyan Rock Contest, or Go Chic with their successful tours and industry relationships abroad). Other groups such as Totem, BearBabes, Sugar Plum Ferry, and Fire Ex. can all be said to fall in this category. These more popular bands are

generally used to performing one or two sets (for a total up to two and a half hours) in larger venues (ex: the Wall, Ximending Riverside, Legacy) and festivals (ex: the Hohaiyan festival, or previously the Formoz Festival) across the island, while underground bands like BSD usually play shorter sets in smaller live houses (ex: the Underworld, Revolver) and events (ex: the Beastie Rock Festival) in Taipei.

In turn, this divergence with respect to motives and popularity has multiple implications regarding the nature, main features and range of music-related activities among local indie bands. Without entering too much into details (see section 3.2 of this chapter for more development on these issues), it would be fair to say that the level of activity of OverDose is more significant than that of BSD, therefore also demanding much greater commitment (essentially in terms of time and energy).. While bands like OverDose regularly devote several evenings per week and sometimes entire weekends to songwriting, recording, preparing arrangements and rehearsing, bands like BSD could only manage to practice on average once a week, with members usually investing a limited amount of time to the creation or recording of new material. The amount and quality of promotional contents and recordings produced by each band is yet another important dimension that differentiates the activities of BSD and OverDose (and other bands of comparable popularity). In addition to two music videos, OverDose also has to its credit two EPs (extended plays) of relatively high quality (especially their 2010 release entitled *Seconds to Doomsday*), the quality of which is at least sufficient to be categorized as “market releases” (according to the classification exposed in Annex 3). As for BSD, they have no music videos, and have only completed a single full-length album that was recorded and produced entirely with more modest means in the band’s practice

room, and thus falls within the category of so-called “DIY albums” (idem) not intended for commercial distribution.

This discrepancy in the types and relative quality of the bands’ outputs is closely connected to the modes of operations implemented by each band. OverDose’s activities were supervised and supported for a few years by a registered manager who provided funding and took on several promotional and booking duties⁸⁸. In contrast, the members of BSD were personally responsible for the entirety of their band’s activities, including recording, booking, and funding.

To sum things up, the ambitions, relative local popularity, degree of commitment, amount of creative output, quality of recordings, technical intricateness of performances, and modes of management of Taipei’s indie bands can be used to identify two poles of a continuum that can be observed in the scene, on top of which can be added the stylistic and “generational” criteria. But beyond the important differences between these two poles, one must keep in mind that all local indie rock bands evolve within the same socioeconomic and cultural context, which entails an equally harsh load of obstacles, limitations and pressure.

The most prominent characteristic of this shared condition is the fact that, to my knowledge, the vast majority of indie rock bands in Taipei, whether they rank low on the popularity scale or whether they enjoy a substantial fan base (ex: OverDose, Mojo, Totem, etc.), cannot live entirely (and probably not even partly) off their musical activities. In other words, Taiwan’s indie scene is consigned to a mere margin of the local music market, meaning that indie rock bands in Taipei exist despite a near complete

⁸⁸ As of 2012, OverDose stopped their collaboration with their previous manager and took care of booking duties by its own.

absence of substantial economic gains⁸⁹. As such, the great majority of local indie bands could rightfully be labeled as “underground” bands – thus the relative correspondence between the terms “indie”, “underground” and “alternative” when referring to Taiwanese rock bands – even if oftentimes the quality of their output, the list of their achievements or the ambitions that they display seem to suggest otherwise. The small number of bands that have achieved some kind of mainstream breakthrough over the past 15 years of indie rock music in Taipei is in itself unequivocal evidence that there is virtually no mobility in Taiwan between the indie spheres and mainstream soundscape. When it comes to economic success, the more underground bands and the more popular acts are on a similar level. For these reasons, I would argue that the information about the musical activities and economic realities of local groups exposed in this thesis apply to the vast majority of indie rock bands in Taipei⁹⁰.

Another important challenge to the activities of local indie bands that clearly stands out in the stories of OverDose, Black Summer Days, and the majority of bands is the obligation for all Taiwanese young men to complete a full year of military or civil service, generally on a military site away from their hometown. Among all difficulties that come from social realities in Taiwan, this is perhaps the most emblematic and inexorable threat to the existence and development of local rock bands. Over 5 years of networking in the local scene, I have seen countless groups dissolve permanently, or

⁸⁹ It must be noted that greater popularity within the scene does indeed lead to more substantial revenue, for example better compensations for performances and occasional appearances in events sponsored by companies. However, the recurrence and total amount of these revenues once divided among band members are usually too low to represent a steady source of income for a single musician. Also, whatever higher compensation there is for the more popular local bands must be offset against the significantly higher costs (ex: in equipment, rental of practice rooms) and more considerable amount of time that require the activities of a more successful band. The question of the income generated from performances and record sales will be discussed further in this chapter.

⁹⁰ More evidence will be provided in the subsequent sections of this chapter to show that the vast majority of indie rock bands in Taipei share a similar economic condition.

otherwise completely interrupt or drastically limit their musical activities as a result of losing one or several of their members to compulsory military service⁹¹. Young Taiwanese men over 18 years old are usually drafted after the completion (or interruption) of their studies at university between the age of 22 and 26. The result is that compulsory service often acts as transition – or coming of age – between the teenage years and adulthood. As some of my informants explained to me, military service in the Republic of China is usually characterized by daily routine and long periods of idleness, which leaves young men plenty of time to think about their past and reevaluate their future. After returning from the army, the lives of many indie musicians change. I was told that a sizeable proportion of them do not return to their band, often completely abandoning their musical activities to engage in other life projects. Without entering too much into details, it would be reasonable to say that, more than a mere “inconvenience”, the compulsory military service in Taiwan is a genuine and very serious problem for virtually all local bands. As such, it must be reckoned as one of the key factors that deeply influence the activities of local bands, of which the following sections will offer a more precise account.

Besides the abovementioned features of Black Summer Days and OverDose as two typical local rock bands, the personal backgrounds, lifestyles and trajectories of their respective members can also be regarded as highly representative of most veteran rockers in Taipei. It is worth highlighting that none of the members of both bands is married (nor has children), that all but one still live with their parents (or in an apartment that belongs

⁹¹ An interesting exception to this phenomenon is local band Go Chic, which is composed of three female musicians and one male drummer, who had the chance (or misfortune) to be exonerated for medical reasons. This situation allowed Go Chic to enjoy a steady and more normal growth in its activities year after year, and the odds are that the band’s success story would have been very different had the band been predominantly composed of male members.

to their parents), that most of them have attended university and generate the largest part of their income from music-related occupations (ex: private music classes in a “rock school”, sales in an instrument shop, or sound engineer, etc.). Furthermore, all of BSD’s and OverDose’s members come from a working class background, which is the case of the vast majority of Taipei’s indie rockers. These important dimensions will be treated more in details in chapter 4.

3.3 General overview of musical activities of local indie rock bands

3.3.1 Practice sessions and practice rooms in Taipei’s indie rock scene

One of the most predominant and universal dimensions of playing in any music group is the necessity to regularly devote a significant amount of time to group rehearsals. Naturally, Taiwanese indie rock bands are no exception to this rule, and practice sessions are among the top priorities of a band’s weekly agenda. In that regard, rehearsals come only second to live performances, the preparation for which is ultimately their very *raison d’être*. Most established bands of the local indie scene rehearse either in their own locale – generally an old basement flat that they rent and turn into a practice room (練團室) – or in one of the city’s numerous specialized musical establishments that offer, among other services and products, fully equipped practice rooms which bands can rent by the hour. As it will be exposed further in this section, rehearsals of local indie bands are in fact subjected to important limitations imposed by the physical realities and social habits inherent to Taipei City’s densely populated urban area⁹².

⁹² Taipei’s metro area (which includes Taipei City, New Taipei and Keelung) has a population of about 7 million people. The city itself is a very hectic and densely populated area, with a population density of 15 200 inhabitants per km², which is the 7th highest among the world’s large cities (source:

For most active local indie bands engaged in songwriting or with upcoming live performances, band practices are held once or twice a week, each session lasting between two or four hours. Time and place of rehearsals tend to be regular, but can vary greatly among bands according to the schedules of each group member⁹³ or because of issues of room availability. Generally speaking, most local indie bands will practice at least once in the few days or hours preceding a performance to perform last-minute fine-tuning and practice the actual list of songs to be played at the concert. Band practices are also an integral part of the songwriting process, as it is during group sessions that song ideas – usually brought in by one particular member – are turned into full compositions and further refined or “arranged” together with the group.

Apart from serving rehearsing and songwriting purposes, group practices must first and foremost be understood as the main training ground of the rock musician. These are necessary occasions for him or her to acquire and confirm his or her mastery of all the subtleties of the rock musician’s craft. This very specific set of skills can be described as partly physical and intellectual in nature, and encompasses both the tightly intertwined dimensions of rock performance and songwriting. Indeed, it is through months and years of regular practice sessions that musicians integrate the drill-like automatisms of playing the band’s songs, but also develop their musical cohesion as a group and sharpen their sense thereof. Additionally, one must consider that band practices represent one of the rare – if not the only – opportunities other than live performances where Taipei’s indie

<http://www.citymayors.com/statistics/largest-cities-density-125.html>). This data is somewhat distorted by the presence of steep hills in and around the city (with the Yangmingshan National Park reaching into the city’s northern districts of Shihlin and Beitou). The downtown district of Daan (大安), where most live houses are, has a population density of 27 500 people/km² (source: Taipei City Government’s official website - <http://english.taipei.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=1084529&ctNode=29491&mp=100002>).

⁹³ This aspect can become an issue especially for bands based in Taipei, where the pace of life is frenetic and people tend to be substantially busier than in other Taiwanese cities.

rock musicians can play and hear their instruments (including their voice) at high volume levels⁹⁴. As a matter of fact, this detail is particularly important given that one's overall control over the different parameters of his or her "sound" – i.e. the sound produced by his or her amplified instrument and the different effects that are applied to it – and its contextual balance in relation to the sound of other instruments at different moments of each song is a quintessential dimension of a rock musician's skills; one that can only be acquired through regular and long-term experience.

For these reasons, band practices can be perceived as genuine working sessions that require assiduity and concentration, although they might be approached with various levels of formality by different groups. Also, being directly exposed to loud music for more than two hours while focusing on what you actually play, on the texture and level of your instrument's sound, as well as on that of other band members is in itself an exhausting activity. For BSD, but most likely also for virtually all local indie rock bands, concerns for efficiency generally oblige that the different band members have an excellent or at least functional mastery of the songs when they enter the practice room. This requires that group working sessions be preceded by the appropriate time of individual practice at home (or in a practice locale). In addition, band members are explicitly or implicitly given particular tasks between sessions, for example to practice a specific segment or come up with a guitar line to integrate into a new song in progress⁹⁵.

⁹⁴ Most of guitarists and bassists practicing at home will connect headphones to their amplifiers or play at low volume levels not to disturb their neighbors, family members or roommates. Even singing is often considered too annoying, as attested by several musicians. A good example of this is that of composer and soloist Pierre Hujoel, a Belgian musician friend based in Taipei, whose daily singing practices in his apartment, although nowhere nearly as loud as the sound of an amplified and overdriven guitar, have been the cause of severe conflicts with neighbors, landlord and even police over the past 3 years.

⁹⁵ As it will be addressed further in this thesis, the most active of indie musicians think constantly about music or their band, ex: ideas for new songs, arrangements, how to improve sound quality, acquisition of new equipment, etc.

It follows that the amount of time being devoted to musical practice, both inside and outside of the practice room, can sometimes be considerable, which demands a substantial dose of self-discipline. Besides, group practices and group musical activities as a whole cannot take place on the required regular basis without a certain spirit of commitment and sacrifice from each band member. Exceptional situations aside, the vagaries of everyday life shouldn't encroach upon the band's scheduled rendezvous, as rescheduling or postponing a group session, especially at the last minute, can easily have a negative consequence on a group's activities.

In a metropolis like Taipei, there are very few options available for a band in need of a place to practice. A popular solution among well-established indie bands is to have their own practice room. If a lot of famous Anglo-American bands are known to have started as "garage bands"⁹⁶, the majority of Taipei's indie groups could rightfully be called "basement bands". Indeed, the only suitable spaces for the exceptionally loud activities of a rock band that are both affordable and located within the city perimeter are the largely disused basement rooms found here and there in Taipei. While the costs of rent are generally not a problem (rent for BSD's past locale was around \$TWD 6,000 a month), the initial challenge resides in finding an appropriate place and avoiding conflicts with the neighbors⁹⁷. The solution most often takes the form of a mutual compromise

⁹⁶ Indie bands from American and European suburb areas are typically practicing in a friend's basement or garage, which originated the cultural icon of the "garage band", taken up by journalism and marketing, ex: "garage rock", Apple's music production software "Garage Band", or Metallica's album "Garage Inc."

⁹⁷ For example, Georgy had been looking for a decent practice room for two years before one of the members finally found one. For this reason, it is common for local bands to take on a room left vacant by a group. A lot of non-marginal basements would be available for bands, but rental and renovation fees of such spaces generally exceed the financial capacities of indie rockers. Before reforming as a quartet in 2009, BSD was expelled from its practice room in the basement by residents of the 2nd floor, even though there was no full drum kit in the practice room and the band was playing on afternoons. Most local musicians will acknowledge that Taipei citizens tend to have a very repressive attitude towards the slightest noise disturbance at home, may it come from direct neighbors or nearby buildings. Live venues in Taipei

(sometimes explicit), where the nearby residents tolerate the band's presence on condition that group members practice within agreed time brackets – nighttime sessions are usually tantamount to trouble – and do their utmost to limit the noise; two rules that also apply to Taipei's live houses. Another common approach is for two or three local bands to share the same practice room, as is currently the case with OverDose. This not only allows bands to split the rent and other fees related to the transformation of the room itself (ex: addition of flooring or soundproofing material), but also to combine the pieces of equipment or furniture possessed by different band members to create a more complete practice locale, which could eventually be used as an amateur recording studio. However, having expensive equipment in a non-inhabited basement implies major security concerns, while cohabitation with other bands and residents of the same building can potentially pose scheduling problems.

For these and other factors, many bands prefer to trade the apparent convenience of having their own locale for the flexibility of renting a practice room in one of the several “rock schools” (ex: The Ball 音樂教室 – located in the basement of The Wall Live House, at the intersection of Keelung and Roosevelt Rd.) and musical instruments shops (ex: Yamaha) that can be found here and there in Taipei City. Such was notably the case of BSD during the entire period of my involvement with the band, but also of OverDose, which practiced at the APA Rock Academy (阿帕搖滾教室 – located in the Ximending area) for most of the band's existence. Rental fees vary between \$TWD 150 to 400 per

are also not foreign to noise complaints by neighbors. The artistic and managerial changes at the Artist Village Café in autumn of 2011 and threats against the Witch' House Café the same year are two recent examples of this situation. To the defense of complaining citizens, it is no secret that the sounds of drums and bass guitar highly resonate in concrete buildings. For this reason, good locations are also found underneath commercial buildings. Then again, rent is generally more expensive in commercial areas.

hour. Most of these establishments consist of one to three large and fully equipped practice rooms for bands, along with a few smaller rooms used for private rock music classes – an important business in Taipei’s indie rock scene – or individual instrument practice. In these establishments, students can learn after school how to play the electric or acoustic guitar (a favorite), the bass guitar, the drums, the keyboard, or how to sing in private classes with an experienced musician, who is almost always an established member of the indie scene⁹⁸. Also, a small array of common accessories for instruments (ex: drum sticks, guitar strings, picks, cables, etc.) can generally be bought at the counter. Following the typical setup of most rock groups, the equipment found in those fully soundproofed practice spaces is highly standardized. It usually includes a drum kit, two guitar amplifiers, one bass guitar amplifier, a few microphones with stands, one amplifier and a pair of speakers for the microphones, a small mixing console⁹⁹, some lecterns, as well as a few chairs or poufs. In principle, musicians only have to bring their own instruments (ex: guitars and bass guitars) and a set of guitar effects or accessories (ex: wires, double bass drum pedal, etc.), but since the quality of the material varies greatly from one place to the other – especially that of the drum kit – some musicians prefer to bring their own pieces of equipment¹⁰⁰. In addition, availability is often an issue with

⁹⁸ The idea of learning to become a rock musician by taking classes in a small “rock school” might appear singular to a lot of European or American rockers, where learning an instrument is usually done in an autodidact fashion. However, such a practice is consistent with the prevailing methods of education in the Taiwanese society, which emphasizes competitiveness, and encourages children and workers alike to prepare for entrance examinations, take extra Chinese, math or science lessons, or learn foreign languages, arts or music with an experienced instructor. Such training most commonly takes place on week nights and weekends in establishments called “cram school” (補習班), a category which can be said to encompass rock schools/practice rooms.

⁹⁹ A mixing console (alternatively called “audio mixer”) is an electronic device through which the different sound inputs (ex: guitar, bass and microphone amps) are routed so as to balance the volume and properties of each sound. Mixing equipment is an integral part of all sorts of sound processing, not only in music, but also in other media like radio and television productions.

¹⁰⁰ For example, Jingang always brought his snare drum and a cymbal to band practices, while Georgy

practice rooms, particularly in case of last-minute rescheduling or during weekends, where students and bands crowd the rehearsal spaces¹⁰¹.

Taipei's physical environment exerts a sizeable pressure on the conditions in which rock bands and apprentice musicians refine their skills, both in group and individually. By confining band practices to marginal basements or specialized establishments, the city's overcrowded human environment causes rock groups and many individual musicians to see the time openings for practice limited by economic considerations (ex: monthly rent or hourly rental fees), other people's use of such spaces (ex: shared basement or practice room in a rock school), the scarcity of suitable locations to set up a practice room, the close proximity of neighbors, and general business hours. This in turn leaves less time for group experimentation or spontaneity in creation¹⁰² and forces bands to adopt a more efficient and economical approach to rehearsing and songwriting. The potential importance of these aspects should not be underestimated, especially when considering that writing a complete song takes a considerable amount of time¹⁰³, and that a band cannot hope to reach a professional level in music without daily and extended sessions of group work. In other words, writing and arranging new songs or

often brought his own microphone.

¹⁰¹ This situation forces many bands to constantly alternate between a few places. While practicing mainly at The Ball in Gongguan, BSD also had sessions in at least eight different establishments in 2009-2010. Renting fees were split among band members or deducted from the band's earnings from performances in live houses. The band finally integrated its last private practice room in the summer of 2010.

¹⁰² For example, most bands that I have known over the years in Taipei, to the difference of several Canadian and American bands of my acquaintance, cannot spend much time in the practice room to fine-tune their songs or improvise (or "jamming" in music jargon). To my knowledge, only few local bands have the habit of simply getting together in the practice room and playing freely to see what comes out of it. This situation cannot but have a negative impact on the amount and probably also on the quality of the output of local bands. In fact, renting practice rooms in rock schools merely represents a temporary solution for any band willing to invest a substantial amount of time and energy in the development of their band.

¹⁰³ For instance, it took approximately 3 months of back-and-forth in the practice room for BSD to come up with a first complete version of "Dark-Sweet Suicide", a song I originally co-wrote with Georgy. Also, a band's songs repertoire can be subjected to constant modifications, as I could particularly witness with BSD and OverDose. In some ways, a rock song remains a perpetually unfinished project, and most bands constantly invest some time to improve their existing material.

achieving a professional-like level could very well be a much greater challenge for Taipei's indie rock bands than for musicians living in other parts of the world.

On the other hand, Taipei's urban realities, which in some ways represent an obstacle to the activities of Taipei's indie rock bands, are one of the reasons behind the success of the city's numerous rock music schools. One must acknowledge that these establishments greatly contribute to the development and shaping of the local indie and popular music scenes, notably by offering all music fans – adults and students alike – an affordable access to well-equipped rehearsal spaces, various resources for learning and improving musical skills, as well as places of social interaction between musicians.

Practice rooms and the rock music schools that house them can indeed be perceived as authentic social hubs for local bands that visit them regularly to rehearse, for students who take lessons once or twice a week, as well as for their “teachers”¹⁰⁴ who work there mainly on weeknights and weekends. Beyond their musical (or technical) purpose, regular band practices are the occasion for members of a same band to spend a little time together, chat about various topics, and often share a drink or dinner before returning home. Practice locales are thus a key place of sociability within Taipei's indie rock scene; a place where musicians get to know other bands, while a certain degree of familiarity inevitably develops over time between the employees (and sometimes also owners) of these establishments and their customers. Some practice rooms even serve as “hangouts” and gathering places for some members of the local indie circles¹⁰⁵.

Yet, it is for teenagers that the social dimension of rock schools is arguably the

¹⁰⁴ Students call their instructor “老師” (*laoshi*), and will keep on calling them that way for a long time, even after they start performing and become established members of the indie scene.

¹⁰⁵ Such is notably the case of The Ball, located within the Wall underground complex, which can arguably be considered one of the preferred hubs of heavy metal musicians in Taipei.

most meaningful. Not only do rock music lessons become one of the few regular brackets of social interaction in a student's daily life (besides home, school and sometimes a cram school), but they also represent a unique environment where youngsters can see experienced musicians in action, whose music skills, demeanor and attitudes are generally an object of admiration and emulation for apprentice musicians. Music lessons offer teenagers the opportunity to interact with these adult figures on a regular basis, not only within the context of the student-teacher relationship, but also on a friendship-based level. These experiences can have a significant influence on a young person's self-confidence and identity. Such was the case of several of my informants, who admitted that the substantial amount of time they spent in rock music schools during their teenage years left a positive and enduring imprint on them.

Equally important to their function as rehearsing spaces and social hubs, the city's numerous rock schools also play a key role in the economic dynamics of the indie music scene. Teaching students and young professionals how to play an instrument in a rock school is the main source of income for a lot of Taipei's veteran indie rockers. This flexible yet fairly lucrative mode of employment allows established indie musicians to avoid having to take a more conventional full-time job, and thus enables them to dedicate considerably more time to their musical activities or social life. This topic will be discussed more in details in section 4.4 of this thesis.

3.3.2 Songwriting and creative approaches of local indie rock bands

Composing and performing original material are the main activities that separate creative bands (創作樂團), which compose Taipei's indie rock scene, as opposed to so-

called “cover bands”; the latter being previously the norm in the city’s live houses before the creation of the local indie (or underground) rock scene (see chapter 2 for more details). Rock songwriting requires particular creative skills that differ greatly from the sole mastery of an instrument¹⁰⁶. While many instrumentalists or vocalists rapidly become good or even remarkable performers, only a few musicians are actually capable of composing music that is both original and appealing to people, and even fewer of them succeed in doing so on a consistent basis. It is interesting to notice that most of the established bands at the forefront of today’s local indie rock scene were not formed by young music “virtuosi”, neither by those considered the most technically proficient – notably among the apprentice musicians of high school popular music or guitar clubs (社團 – herein referred to as “*shetuans*”). Most local rock bands rather tend to be founded on the initiative of daring and hard-working young people who possess more modest (yet sufficient) playing skills, but wish to distinguish themselves socially. For instance, most guitarists among my informants acknowledge to have deliberately chosen creation to pure instrumental prowess at some point in the early moments of their musical development, as a way to stand out from fellow classmates or music *shetuan* members¹⁰⁷:

¹⁰⁶ Rock songwriting for most local bands usually involves composing music and the lyrics of a song. In this section, I voluntarily insist on the first dimension, as my experience in the scene made me realize that rock bands in Taipei tend to spend considerably more time composing and arranging the music (which includes vocal melodies) than they do writing the lyrics. Also, the diversity of themes developed in the lyrics of local indie rock bands is so vast that it would be very difficult to produce valid generalizations on the question.

¹⁰⁷ I here take the liberty to borrow a quotation of guitar instructor Wang Wei (王偉) from Wang Qi-Zhong’s thesis (2008). In the following words, Wang Wei portrays what he calls the “sensitive students” (as opposed to the “technical students”), which matches very well the characteristic attitude towards instrumental learning and virtuousness of most local indie rockers that I know: “These people do not practice that much. Their life consists in taking music classes, skipping school, writing songs, and practicing with their band. Most of them are university students, their level of knowledge is higher. Their interest in guitar is usually sparked by English rock [from England], which is not the kind of thing you see often in guitar learning structures in Taiwan, it’s more low-profile. Usually, they’re touched emotionally by the atmosphere of a

Our goal [during senior high school] was to compose our own songs, because there were already a lot of good cover bands out there. [...] I've always been interested in things that were different (不一樣), that's why I do all this. Nowadays, everybody plays guitar and plays well. Let's imagine I want to become a great Taiwanese guitarist, very technical, I could never be as good as [Chthonic's guitarist] Jesse [“小黑” in Chinese]. Impossible! I always wanted to create my own uniqueness (獨特性).¹⁰⁸

According to a long-time drummer in the scene, the origin of his first original indie band, was an expression of a similar desire from him and his musician friends to differentiate themselves from the other apprentice musicians at their university:

Our singer and bandleader thought that there were too many guys and only guitarists in our music shetuan. She then convinced us to create an original band [創作樂團] without a guitarist.¹⁰⁹

This desire to stand out from the mass could very well be a generalized personality trait among local indie musicians; an attribute that could explain in part their early interest in playing and writing rock music.

Local indie bands also tend to form around the key figure of a main composer – usually a guitarist. Having observed the practice sessions and inquired about the songwriting process of many bands over the years, I also came to realize that the main composing force of most local indie rock bands is generally centered on a single leading songwriter¹¹⁰. In other words, the commitment of each band members to songwriting – but also other aspects of a band's activities, including promotion – tends to be very unequal among members of local indie bands. In most of the bands with which I got acquainted personally, the songwriting process is usually initiated by the main

band's music, and they wish they can create material that conveys a similar atmosphere, their entire life can even be said to gravitate within such an atmosphere. By practicing some cover songs, they can get into this atmosphere, and then they write their own music.” (Free translation of Wang 2008: 12)

¹⁰⁸ Interviewee C, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, March 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Interviewee D, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, October 2010.

¹¹⁰ This tendency can be partly verified in the credits of indie rock releases.

songwriter/bandleader, who first comes up with the rough outlines of a song. The role of the rest of the band is often limited to sharing impressions on the proposed material, and working individually and as a group to “arrange”¹¹¹ the lines for their respective instrument or polish specific elements of the melody or structure¹¹². This tendency of concentrating most songwriting duties on a single member enables a lot of local veteran rockers – especially drummers and rhythm guitarists¹¹³ – to be part of two or more bands simultaneously. This phenomenon is very common in Taipei’s indie rock scene, and might very well be the sign among local indie rockers of a certain emphasis on some specific dimensions of their musical experience to the detriment of others¹¹⁴.

The fact that a lot of local rockers divide their efforts between a few bands and also the rather challenging socio-cultural and physical context in which local indie rockers practice and write their material has led to another important phenomenon that I have come to notice over the years: namely the rather limited volume of creative output yielded by the majority of active indie rock bands in Taipei. This phenomenon can be explained and interpreted in different ways. The dearth of suitable and regularly accessible practice rooms in Taipei, as well as the challenges stemming from the idiosyncrasies of social life in Taiwan (ex: the frequent break up of band lineups because of the military service) can partly account for this situation. But a young musician I met at an OverDose concert in early 2012 had another explanation for this. He shared his

¹¹¹ In the context of local rock music, to arrange (編曲) a song roughly equals to determining what instrument and who plays what at which part of the song. The term is most commonly used to refer to the process during which a draft version of a song is turned into a more complete creation.

¹¹² One must keep in mind that, for a band that practices weekly, it can take up to a few months of thinking, trial and error, and fine-tuning for all the pieces of a song to come together.

¹¹³ Experienced drummers are extremely sought after in Taipei, and it is not rare to see a drummer play with more three or more bands at the same time. Band leaders and main songwriters, on the contrary, usually limit themselves to only one band and occasional side projects.

¹¹⁴ The question of the motivations of local rockers will be addressed further starting from section 3.4 of this chapter.

perception with me in these approximate words:

You know, a lot of bands [in Taipei] write a few songs, and will play these same songs over and over again for 5 years or so. It's hard to write songs, but I still think they're a bit lazy.¹¹⁵

Without fully agreeing with this assessment, I voluntarily admit that there might be a little of truth in my informant's point of view. One can indeed easily imagine that, if a band has reached a certain status within the local indie rock scene and plays music for other motivations than economic success, there is no particular reason why they should not be satisfied with a somewhat minimal creative output. After all, the vast majority of Taipei's indie rockers are first and foremost part-time musicians, who have other important obligations to attend (ex: work, family, girl- or boyfriend, etc.). Besides, I observed that several veteran groups, once they have a basic repertoire of songs, switch their focus to aspects of rock musicianship other than the creation of new material, for example the preparation of new arrangements, recording, or refinement of the band's sound in live performances. Such was notably the case of Black Summer Days during my time as the band's guitarist.

When observing the choices of musical aesthetics of local indie rock bands, one is led to think that most of these groups compose and perform music primarily for their personal enjoyment, and not for economic considerations or to meet the expectations of the public or the industry – the latter being mainly focused on the production of romantic ballads and catchy pop songs to be featured in large KTV chains and radio stations. When asked to describe their music, local bands readily name a series of well-known American, Anglo-European or Japanese bands as main reference or inspiration, most of which are easily recognizable when listening to their music. Unsurprisingly, listeners who are not

¹¹⁵ Interviewee E, interview by author, field notes, Taipei, Taiwan, February 2012.

very familiar with rock and related types of music will find that the music of the vast majority of indie rock bands in Taipei show important discrepancies with the milder or more accessible forms of rock (or pop-rock) that can be commonly heard in Taiwan's mainstream soundscape (ex: Mayday, Jay Chou, Wu Bai). Choice of heavy-sounding or "non-KTV-friendly" types of rock music (nu metal, grunge, punk, post-rock), unorthodox or lengthy song structures, minimal or experimental arrangements, use of screams or amateurish singing styles, extensive (and even slightly abusive) use of guitars and sound effects, and limited sound quality; such are some of the major aesthetic features – commonplace in the rock repertoire – that make the music of the majority of local rock bands seemingly incompatible with the notoriously discriminating Taiwanese mainstream airwaves. Although indie rock music occupies a sizeable place in the mainstream markets of Europe and America, such has not been the case yet in Taiwan. I

in most cases, performers themselves know that their aesthetic choices, for instance the choice of a loud guitar sound and aggressive voice over more accessible arrangements, is not going to get them closer to mainstream popularity in Taiwan. Yet, as will be exposed more in detail in section 3.4, most local rockers are well aware that mainstream breakthrough for rock bands in Taiwan is nearly impossible under the current dispositions of the local music industry and market. In this context, one cannot blame them for making good use of this aesthetic license to create whatever they like.

It is commonly reported that opposition to mainstream music and its industry is a key component of the indie rock ideology and aesthetic orientation of indie rock groups around the world (notably in the indie rock scenes of Hamilton [Canada] and Tokyo, as documented by Davis [2006] and Milioto [2008]). Yet my observations suggest Taipei's

indie rockers aesthetic choices appear to be primarily justified in terms of sheer personal preference rather than being motivated by some kind of antagonism. Even though most local rockers show a strong detachment from the Taiwanese music industry and a certain level of disagreement with its business practices, I noticed that direct criticism of the pop (or pop-rock) stars and their labels is not a very recurrent theme in the discourse of my informants. On several occasions, I even heard some of my friends and acquaintances in the scene praise Mandopop idols for their hard work and skills, or overtly admit that they were fans of certain pop singers. Also, bands like Mayday and Sodagreen – which were part of the indie scene before their rise to stardom – don't seem to be vastly despised for “selling out” and “going mainstream”¹¹⁶.

The music performed by the majority of bands in Taipei, and even more so in the music of bands based in other Taiwanese cities, is generally quite consistent with the canons of rock music since the 1990s (ex: alternative rock, punk-rock, pop-rock, post-rock, etc.). A certain conservatism seems to be prevailing among local bands, as very few of them seem to be committed to pure musical exploration, at the risk of sounding utterly “weird” to their audiences¹¹⁷. This contrasts sharply with aesthetic tendencies found in, for example, Tokyo's indie music scene, which is said to produce an “*endless stream of*

¹¹⁶ In a similar line of thought, my observations led me to think that the vast majority of bands that form today's indie rock scene do not overtly (or consistently) express political messages through their music and performances. This tendency indicates a certain break from the early years of Taipei's indie rock scene, which, according to several accounts from active musicians and available literature, saw a greater proportion of active bands publicly assume critical, political and cultural stances (ex: Labour Exchange, L.T.K. Commune). Admittedly, the current political climate in Taiwan is much less tumultuous or tensed than it was in the early 1990s. While the increasing use of Taiwanese Hokkien (台語 or 閩南語) or aboriginal languages by local indie rock bands can rightfully be perceived as a pacific reaffirmation of a socio-cultural identity, only a few groups brandish strong socio-political opinions (most notably iconic local metal band Chthonic).

¹¹⁷ A few local bands do however deserve to be described as “experimental”, a notable example being locally praised Sonic Deadhorse (音速死馬): a one man band that integrates video, sampling and intricate electronic accompaniment and live guitar to create powerful rock atmospheric performances.

*strange music*¹¹⁸; a phenomenon I could observe first hand thanks to the recurrent (and often very surprising) performances of Tokyo indie bands at Taipei's Underworld live house. This could suggest that the main objectives of Taipei's local rock bands are not entirely artistic in nature, or that the desire for originality among bands is weighted against an equal will to be easily recognized by audiences and peers.

My observations also suggest that aesthetic choices of local rock bands might well be the result of a general desire to stand out within the local scene and acquire a sense of distinctive self-identity. Like David Frazier points out, "the Internet now has bands diving into micro-genres of whatever they downloaded and then decided to make into an identity for themselves." (Huang & Frazier: 104). Indeed, the vast repertoire of rock music offers an endless variety of aesthetic categories ("micro-genres" in Frazier's words – the differentiation of which is highly subjective), which enables virtually any band to choose his "own" style and acquire a sense of self-distinction compared to the other bands around them.

This phenomenon forces the consideration of context in one's assessment of a band's relative *originality*. For instance, I noticed that only a small minority of bands seem to be aiming at "taking on" foreign music markets, or coming up with material that would be significantly original when compared to the existing repertoire of bands in Europe, America and Japan. One must keep in mind that, unlike many successful European or Anglo-American bands, Taipei's indie groups have until now mainly evolved in what fundamentally remains a local context, still largely remote from the international music market. In other words, local bands have predominantly conceived their music and

¹¹⁸ Dominique Leon, from the Pitchfork music website, cited by Milioto (2008: 32), full version accessible at: <http://dusan.satori.sk/i/txt/nihon02.php>

performances so it stands out within the Taiwanese soundscape – not the international music market. It follows that, for local bands, to be successful first and foremost means to find a local niche and distinguish themselves from the styles of other local rock bands. One can hardly deny that, to some extent, to create good music in the likes of successful Anglo-American or Japanese rock bands and contribute to cultivating a Chinese or Taiwanese-language repertoire in these types of rock music represents a challenging and meaningful enterprise in itself. After all, groups like Funky Brothers, OverDose, Matzka, Fire Ex and Aphasia can rightfully think of themselves as among the Taiwanese leaders in their respective type of rock (in this case, funk-rock, nu metal, reggae-rock, punk and post-rock – all styles that have a longer tradition in the West and Japan, but have been only recently introduced in Taiwan). Yet each one of these bands remains perfectly aware that most of their music is not very special when put against the tens of thousands of bands now active on the international scene. Ultimately, to judge whether a musical creation is original or not is generally a question of point of view and context.

Besides, most observers of Taipei's indie rock scene would acknowledge that, in purely musical terms, a unique *Taiwanese sound* can be distinguished in several types of rock music (in my opinion, most notably in reggae, post-rock and alternative rock) in Taipei's indie rock scene. This singular *sound*, albeit very hard to define precisely, might very well stem from the influential role of a few pioneering local bands in the young history of the scene (ex: Ladybug, Sugar Plum Ferry, L.T.K. Commune, The Peppermints, Tuolaku, etc.) and the unique rhythmic signature of Chinese and Taiwanese lyrics. Also, The use of traditional instruments or melodic patterns (mostly of Chinese or aboriginal origins) by a few bands (ex: The Chairman, Totem) arguably adds an

additional element of uniqueness to Taipei's indie rock soundscape.

Most of Taiwan's music enthusiasts would acknowledge that Taipei's indie rock scene has undergone rapid changes in recent years. A sign of this transformation is the fact that some indie rock bands from Taipei have substantially increased their presence in Asian, European and American live houses and festivals in 2010 and early 2011¹¹⁹. This indicates that the links between the Taiwanese indie scene and foreign music circles are getting tighter, which will potentially open up new opportunities for local indie rock bands to engage the international music scene in a more confident and sustained manner. This increased exposure of local bands to foreign audiences is sure to have a major influence on the creative approaches and aesthetic choices of Taipei's indie rockers. For instance, it is very likely that local rock bands will be more able to project themselves beyond the Taiwanese borders, and thus will increasingly aim at writing music intended not only for the more limited (and arguably more conservative) Taiwanese public, but also for music fans across Asia, Europe and America. In my view, this transformation has already begun, as more and more bands write English material (ex: Go Chic, Silent Toads and Forests), or use particular technologies and more progressive arrangements to try to be at the edge of the latest trends in their specific style (ex: OverDose in electro-rock music).

¹¹⁹ Among the several appearances of Taiwanese indie artists abroad in 2010-2011, Go Chic's European and American live houses tour, Matzka's South American tour as well as Fire Ex' and White Eyes' performances in live houses of the American East Coast are notably worth mentioning. Also in 2011 and 2012, about 10 Taiwanese indie bands participated in the SXSW Indie Festival in Austin (Texas) and – and garnered positive feedback from the public and the media. Readers interested in more details on the event may refer to David Frazier's excellent article published in the Taipei Times of Tuesday March 24th 2011. 13 Taiwanese bands also participated in the 2010 edition of the Modern Sky Festival in Beijing. However, it is important to specify that the great majority of these performances abroad were made possible thanks to substantial funding from the Taiwanese government via its Government Information Office (GIO). See section 3.3.4 for more details on this topic.

3.3.3 Local indie rock recordings

Another important part of any indie band's musical activities is the recording, production, distribution and sales of the group's music. This dimension is also key to understanding the economic realities of indie rock bands in Taipei. Like the control of sound in live performances, the making of good recordings is a genuine type of engineering that requires a unique set of technical skills and knowledge. Through years of patient and recurrent experimentation, some indie rockers in Taipei come to acquire (mostly by themselves) a consistent mastery of this craft, which can be learned in virtually no school or training center in Taiwan¹²⁰. The reader who is less familiar with the inherent technicality of music recording and the different types of recordings that commonly circulate in Taipei's indie music scene can consult Annex 3 at the end of this thesis, which provides a few introductory details on the topic.

Virtually all of Taipei's active indie rock bands regularly invest a substantial amount of time and resources in the production of recordings, whether or not they are intended for market release¹²¹. A lot of local groups limit themselves to recording demo versions of their songs and making them available for free on the Internet (on platforms

¹²⁰ In most western countries, specialized schools and music academies do offer formations in sound engineering. To my knowledge, such formations are still unavailable to this day in Taiwan. The vast majority of professionals and people who are knowledgeable in this craft in the country have learned through practical experience or direct collaboration with a mentor. Most of music recording and production is made using a type of software called digital audio workstations (DAW). Given the inherent complexity of such software and the fact that a vast majority of these computer programs are exclusively available in English, one can imagine all the motivation and passion required from Taiwanese indie musicians who engage in such a painstaking learning process. In most bands, only one or two members tend to have a higher level of proficiency in sound engineering and the use of music software (usually the band's main songwriter), yet most local indie musicians possess a functional mastery of this craft.

¹²¹ It is far from uncommon to see bands garner certain popularity in the scene without releasing much material on the market or the Web. Such was notably the case of local group Funky Brothers for a few years. This phenomenon reaffirms to a certain extent the predominant "live" character of Taipei's indie rock scene. The duration of a recording process for a full length album of about ten songs varies according to a multitude of factors, but usually takes anywhere between a few days and a few weeks for most Taiwanese indie bands.

like Facebook, MySpace or SoundCloud) until an opportunity to produce a more refined recording presents itself. Local bands with little financial resources that wish to have physical copies of their music and improve their recording skills, in order to finance, produce and sell their albums mostly on their own (so-called “DIY albums”, like the one produced by Black Summer Days). Printing CDs is the main expense related to the production of a DIY album. According to my informants, to print 1000 copies of an album in Taiwan can cost between \$TWD 25,000 and 60,000 (\$TWD 25 – 60 per album). Other expenses may include occasional compensations for studio time (if the album was not recorded in a musician’s home studio) and help for post-production. Based on my observations, it is very unlikely that most local rock bands sell more than a few hundred copies of their DIY albums (usually sold for \$TWD 200 to 300), thus offering only minimal compensation for the time and money invested in the realization of their record¹²². Besides the occasional album sales – which are naturally more than welcome – most local groups mostly use their DIY album as a visiting card that can be given to event organizers as a sample of their music or exchanged between indie bands and fans on the occasion of live performances or music festivals (ex: Spring Scream).

In contrast with DIY albums, local indie music albums released on the market (“market releases” in short) tend to be recorded entirely in professional – or semi-professional – recording studios with better equipment and the support of experienced technicians for post-production steps. This generally leads to substantially higher levels of recording quality, but at much higher costs than a DIY album. The renting of studio time for a few days of recording, compensation for the recording and mixing engineer(s),

¹²²Albums of bands can usually sell for \$TWD 150 – 400 at the door during their performances. BSD’s DIY album is a good example of the poor sales usually generated by DIY albums of local rock bands. As of 2012, boxes full of CDs are still stored in Georgy’s room and my apartment!

costs of mastering in a professional studio, and the printing of CDs and album covers can add up to total costs of between \$TWD 250,000 (approx. \$USD 8,300) for an average album and over \$TWD 1,000,000 (\$USD 33,000) for high-end indie productions. Needless to say that these are considerable sums for young indie musicians coming from a working class background.

Still, an increasing proportion of indie rock bands in Taipei have been able to produce and release professional or near-professional albums on the local market over the past few years. The main force that made this possible is arguably the 2007 implementation of a subsidy program by the Taiwanese government that offers grants to selected bands for the production of an EP or full-length album (this program will be described slightly more in details later in this section).

Once the production of an album is completed, local bands who wish to release their work usually sign an agreement with a music distributor, whose role is generally limited to delivering the artist's album via its network of record stores and online clients in exchange for a percentage on each sale¹²³. As of 2010, the Taiwanese independent record label that distributed the largest number of indie rock albums in Taipei was Himalaya Records Corporation (喜瑪拉雅音樂事業)¹²⁴. Their collaboration with music groups generally excludes further involvement in the promotion of the albums. The few Taiwanese indie labels that are active in both the production and distribution of local rock groups, including White Wabbit Records (小白兔唱片 – producer-distributor of the post-

¹²³ According to some informants, the band usually receives around half of each sale after deduction of the shop's margin. In average, between TWD\$ 100 – 150 of each sale goes to the band.

¹²⁴ This assessment results from a personal calculation of a sampling of over 50 local indie rock releases. Here are a few examples of Taipei rock bands whose albums have been distributed by Himalaya Records between 2007 and 2010: 88 Guava Seedz, White Eyes, Random, Totem, The Tube, Mary See the Future, Pipeloyd, Bearbabes, Respect, Telephone Booth, and many more.

punk bands Aphasia [阿飛西雅] and Goosander [川秋沙], and owner of a record store in the Shida area) are substantially more involved in the marketing of their bands' album. Such is also the case of Gold Typhoon Records (金牌大風 – previously subsidiary of the major label EMI), who was an exceptional partner in the distribution and promotion of OverDose's second market release "*Seconds to Doomsday*"¹²⁵.

Prices for indie albums vary between \$TWD 250 and 450 for a hard copy in stores and at concert venues, and \$TWD 100 – 300 (\$TWD 20-30 per song) for download in MP3 format from an online music platform such as iTunes, KKBox or iNDIEVOX.

My inquiry suggests that a majority of the local indie albums released over the past few years have been produced in whole or in part with some form of financial support. In Taipei's indie rock scene, this funding mainly takes two forms. First, financing for an album and its promotion can be a part of a deal with an indie record label or of a larger contract agreement with a band management company (ex: OverDose with Toro Production), the latter being fairly common among indie bands who enjoy substantial success and popularity (ex: Tizzy Bac, Echo, Totem, and Fire Ex, to name only a few). In both cases the organization or person providing the resources is eventually compensated by a certain percentage (or in some cases that I won't disclose here, the entirety) of record sales.

For the vast majority of indie rock bands, the main problem with this type of agreement is that the great majority of the leading organizations that control the Taiwanese music industry obviously do not believe in the economic sense of investing in

¹²⁵ Golden Typhoon Records was not a partner in the production of the album, which was entirely carried out by OverDose's members with technical support from a local music studio.

indie rock groups. Consequently, most of private financing for local indie rock albums in Taipei comes from smaller indie organizations with much more limited means (ex: White Wabbit Records, Uloud Music Co., Wonder Music [彎的音樂], etc.), or occasionally from new or more daring companies or patrons (ex: Toro Production, OverDose's previous agent)¹²⁶.

In 2007, the Taiwanese government created a third mode of financing for indie bands in the form of a subsidy program which every year selects 20 to 45 indie artists (indie rock bands as well as established figures of the pop industry) to receive an average of \$TWD 300,000 (approx. \$USD 10,000) for the recording of a music album¹²⁷. Now in its fifth year of existence (as of 2012), the initiative is implemented by the Government Information Office (GIO) of the R.O.C. and falls within a larger strategy entitled the Pop Music Flagship Project (流行音樂產業旗艦計畫) which aims at revitalizing Taiwanese musical outputs and expanding the international presence of Taiwanese music artists – popular (Mandopop) and indie alike.

Very importantly, the project also allows local indie bands to receive sponsorship

¹²⁶ According to OverDose's band members, Toro's promotion and sponsoring of OverDose's activities was motivated by pure personal interest in indie music, as well as a desire to undertake new challenges in the music market.

¹²⁷ The program is called “補助樂團錄製有聲出版品”, which roughly translates to “*Subsidy to bands for the production of an album*” (no official English translation of the program's title could be found). It is funded by a \$TWD 2.1 billion (USD\$ 70 million) budget adopted by the Legislative Yuan in January 2010 under the Cultural and Creative Industries Development Act (文化創意產業發展法). The sums and number of grants provided each year vary between \$TWD 160,000 - 500,000 (\$USD 5,000 - 16,000) given to 15 to 45 bands (in 2012, 45 bands received \$TWD 300,000 each). The program works similarly to research scholarships imparted in Taiwanese universities. It includes a selection committee, official announcement of the winners, as well as an official presentation of the “results” (“發表會“ in Chinese), for which a special concert entitled “Taiwan Band Festival” is held annually. The funds granted are sufficient to cover most of an album's production costs (depending on its length and quality), and must not be reimbursed later on by the bands. The Pop Music Flagship Project also offers funding for organizations that promotes Taiwanese pop music (有聲出版品創意行銷補助). Readers seeking more details on this subsidy program may refer to the website of the Ministry's of Culture's new Bureau of Audiovisual and Music Industry Development at http://www.bamid.gov.tw/BAMID/Code/allowance_music901.aspx.

for touring and participating in music events abroad¹²⁸. Between 2007 and 2010, approximately 150 grants for the production of a CD have been distributed to veteran groups (ex: Tizzy Bac, LTK Commune [獨水溪公社], Back Quarter, 88 Guava Seeds, White Eyes, etc.) as well as newer bands in the indie scene (ex: Go Chic, Mary See the Future, Macbeth, OCD Girl, etc.). This program makes government support the main source of funding for local indie music releases in the country, accounting for approximately 40% to 60% of all albums and EPs released commercially by Taipei indie rock bands in recent years¹²⁹. It is reasonable to think that a majority of local indie groups who received government subsidies wouldn't have been able to produce recordings of such quality had they not been granted such financial support. For example, a few bands admitted that they would probably have limited themselves to making a DIY album had a government subsidy not enabled them to collaborate with professionals for the production of their album.

While it is very unlikely that government subsidies will have a significant impact on the economic realities of the vast majority of indie rock bands in Taipei, they undeniably represent a boost to Taiwan's indie music by greatly facilitating the access of local indie bands to professional music resources. From a general standpoint, the injection of public funds in local music production has most definitely contributed to strengthening the various layers of professional music-related skills in the country. This not only includes local indie rock groups, the quality of recordings and overall musicianship of which has arguably improved over the years, but also sound technicians,

¹²⁸ The majority of appearances of Taiwanese bands abroad were almost entirely sponsored by the Taiwanese Government Information Office as part of this subsidy program.

¹²⁹ Personal estimation made based on a collection of 70 local indie rock records, complemented by the examination of local rock albums on sales at the White Wabbit Store in the Shida area in March 2011.

engineers and promoters who work in small studios or organizations throughout the island. These in turn play an important supporting role in Taiwan's vibrant popular music industry.

The massive involvement of the Taiwanese government in the financing of recordings and touring abroad is generally perceived positively among Taipei's indie rockers. Except for a few skeptic individuals, most local rockers with whom I discussed the subject did not seem to have much critical concerns about the particular meaning or implications of receiving public funds for the realization of their musical projects. A majority of bands are indeed eager to apply for a grant, which represents a concrete way to develop themselves musically, to bolster the activities of their band (i.e. to produce more output as a band), to get more established in the scene, or experience the thrill of performing in a different country (in the case of grants for participation in a music event overseas).

Yet, the involvement of the Taiwanese government in the music production, touring and promotion of pop and indie music artists has drawn harsh (and, in my opinion, legitimate) criticism from a few indie musicians and observers of the scene¹³⁰. Opinions on the matter vary, but from my point of view, one of the risks linked to this policy would be the increasing reliance of local rock bands on government subsidies and their further detachment from economic imperatives. With such a "convenient" access to full grants, local indie bands might well become less inclined to proactively seek new ways to fund, produce, and release their music.

¹³⁰ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to make a consistent assessment of the implementation and effects of the government subsidy programs. Readers interested in a more thorough critical outlook on the potential role of the government in the local indie music scene can refer to a study carried out in 2005 by Ho Tung-Hung and other collaborators, entitled *A Research on Problems of Taiwan's Popular Musical Performance Industry* (桃園縣九座寮文化協會: 2005).

Another issue that has particularly caught my attention in recent years is the seemingly unfair distribution of resources among artists and organizations that compose the indie scene and the higher spheres of the local music industry. It indeed appears that a handful of bands have received subsidies to produce albums or to perform overseas suspiciously often, and that a substantial part of the funding is controlled by a small number of circles in the scene that include certain organizations, agents and artists – some of which sit on the evaluation committees that allocate grants. This issue deserves to be looked into further in the near future by members and observers of the scene, as it is a growing cause of disenchantment and tension in Taiwan’s indie music circles.

To make a good album and have it released on the market most likely brings little economic payoff for the vast majority of local indie rock bands, even when most of the recording costs are covered by government subsidies. Although this monograph lacks the necessary data to prove it, a few years of conversations with local indie rockers have led me to think that sales of indie rock music, either in CD format or on online platforms, only count for a small portion of music sales in Taiwan – itself an already sinking market. Besides, I noticed that releases of albums by local rock bands usually draw only minimal attention among mainstream Taiwanese media. For local bands, the income generated by album sales can at best be expected to cover the production costs or generate a minor profit that becomes insignificant when divided among the members of a band. Also, for those bands which have contracts with a record label or a band management company, the largest part of album sales and royalties is generally devoted to paying back the initial investment in the making of the record¹³¹. This general situation, coupled with the

¹³¹ The question of royalties of local indie music in Taiwan is notably raised by the massive popularity of karaoke establishments (simply called “KTV” in the country). The music catalogues of the most popular

increased digitalization of the music market, could partly explain why, according to my observations, most local rock bands do not believe much in the commercial value of their recordings, and thus invest minimal efforts into their promotion.

Obviously, the motivations for making an indie rock album are to be found elsewhere than the promise of profiting off record sales and royalties. Thus the main value of indie rock market releases in Taipei does not lie in their economic return, even though they are presented as consumer goods. Not unlike demos and DIY albums, indie market releases serve as status symbols and promotional tools that expose the bands to the public and other actors of the music circles. For Taipei's indie rock bands, making an indie market release notably represents one of the necessary steps to acquire greater status, get established within the local music scene, and draw (as well as sustain) the attention of local indie music fans. Like performing in renowned live houses and music events or earning awards at music contests (ex: the Hohaiyan Rock Festival), to produce an album of high quality is perceived as a personal achievement and a way for Taiwanese indie bands to prove their professionalism and value as music artists¹³². A similar logic arguably applies to the making of music videos (MVs), which increasingly become a standard marker of standing as much as a promotion tool to be displayed online and in local KTVs.

KTV branches in Taiwan (ex: Cashbox Partyworld [錢櫃] and Holiday KTV) do include a few hundreds songs of local indie rock bands. However, as it was explained to me by one of OverDose's members, the compensations received by indie bands in return of the use of their music by KTVs is virtually null. Rigid contractual terms not only give negligible sums to the artist each time a client "orders" one of their songs on the establishment's system (a tiny fraction of a Taiwanese dollar), but also allegedly include a clause that specifies that clients must watch the entirety of a music video for each such occurrence to be "valid" and thus be subjected to compensation.

¹³² Indie rock albums in Taipei are usually released in special concerts (usually called "發片演唱會"). These events tend to be exceptional moments of celebration for band members, but also gather larger crowds of friends and supporters. This contributes in part to giving these nights an extra feeling of collective enthusiasm. It must be noted that release concerts are oftentimes the occasion for a band to meet its public again after the relative period of isolation required for the preparation of an album.

The purpose of indie rock releases was partly explained to me by one of my informants when questioned about his band's decision to conclude a deal with a management company for the realization of an album and a music video:

I wanted people to know [us and our music], so we made an MV. The production budget for the album was very small, so we took care of it ourselves [with the help of a friend who is also a sound engineer], we recorded with a very limited budget, including mixing, printing, cover design, everything. Most of the money was put in the MV and the broadcasting [on TV and radio]. Because of this chance to release a record and an MV, we became real Taiwanese artists. Even if we're not famous, it already gives us the opportunity to perform in more concerts, including on university campuses. You have to do this, if not, you go tell people that you're great, but nobody will invite you. Since [we have the albums and the videos], we more than doubled the money we receive when playing [in live houses] and on campuses, because we have a company, two records, and an MV. All this for doing the same thing as before.[...] Still there's no serious money in there for us. To make money is not our main goal, not now. We just want more people to see us and know us.¹³³

In addition to the medium or long-term benefits mentioned in the above quotation, to produce a DIY album and a market release can rightfully be perceived as a significant feat that yields a positive impact not only on one's self-identity as a musician, but in the negotiation of this identity with members of their family and social networks. Some of my informants talked in length about the necessity in Taiwan to show the public and their parents symbolic or economic evidence of one's proficiency in a specific field of activity in order for the legitimacy of their efforts and lifestyle to be *recognized* (被認同) by them. This phenomenon will be treated more in detail in chapter 4.

3.3.4 Live houses and indie rock performances in Taipei

A group's efforts in rehearsals, songwriting and recording culminate in live performances that represent the high points of a local indie band's activities. . The average frequency at which most indie rock bands in Taipei perform live ranges from one

¹³³ Interviewee C, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, March 2011.

to three times per month. This recurrence can vary significantly according to a band's popularity, its involvement in the scene's different social networks, its overall level of proactiveness in seeking occasions to perform, the personal involvement of its members in the band, as well as its readiness to perform in other Taiwanese cities¹³⁴. One must however keep in mind that Taiwan's indie rock scene is quite small given the sizeable population of the island. There is only a handful of live houses where local indie rock bands can perform in the country, even in Taipei, which means that tours across the island can only include a few dates¹³⁵. Besides performing in the capital's few live houses, indie rock bands based in Taipei also commonly appear at various music events and festivals organized all over the island (the majority of which take place in the summer) as well as occasional musical events held in local universities. In Taipei, Friday and Saturday are the liveliest nights in the indie music scene, although some dedicated live houses present performances by indie bands on several weeknights.

The majority of Taipei's live houses offer compensations to indie bands for their performance, which generally consist of a combination of a guaranteed amount and a percentage of ticket sales¹³⁶. Naturally, these remunerations can vary significantly from place to place or according to the popularity of the bands involved. These can amount to \$TWD 1,000 – 12,000 for average local indie bands performing in small venues, and can

¹³⁴ Some indie musicians are busier with professional occupations than others, which greatly limits their availability for concerts outside of Taipei. For example, BSD has not played outside Taipei over the past 4 years, probably due to the band members' working schedule. According to my observations, Taipei's busiest bands in recent years have probably been 1976 and 88 Guava Seedz, who played up to 7 times a month all over Taiwan in 2011. Curiously enough, some of the most popular indie rock bands, like Tizzy Bac or Sugar Plum Ferry, perform slightly less frequently on average than the bands that compose the core of the local scene, but receive higher compensations for each performance.

¹³⁵ Folk-pop artists can perform in a few more venues (ex: cafés) and events than rock bands, as their performances require less equipment and are less of a disturbance in terms of noise than those of rock artists.

¹³⁶ In most live houses, these compensations include a certain number of free consumptions at the bar for performing bands.

exceed \$TWD 40,000 for the most sought-after groups. Remunerations tend to be lower (sometimes even null) for festivals and outdoor events that include a lot of bands, except when more popular bands are invited to perform as main headliners¹³⁷.

Well ahead of record sales, compensations for live appearances represent the most regular and substantial source of income generated by Taipei's local rock bands¹³⁸. However, only in rare cases can such show fees become both a major and sustained source of income for local indie rockers, especially given that all sums received must be shared among band members¹³⁹. Still, the sums that bands receive for their performances is generally sufficient to cover its various expenses (ex: rent for practice rooms, small equipment, etc.), or allow beer and food to flow abundantly on a lively after-concert celebration.

Taipei's indie rock bands rely largely on regular music programs of live houses

¹³⁷ Spring Scream (春天吶喊吶), held in the Kending area, the Freak Out Beast Festival (吵年獸) and the Beastie Rock Festival (巨獸搖滾音樂祭) are three examples of outdoor events for which average performers do not receive compensations. This doesn't seem to dissuade many local bands from participating in these events, the latter generally estimating that an "occasion to perform" and good times are fair rewards for their efforts. More large-scale festivals like the Hohaiyan Rock Festival do offer headlining bands more substantial show fees.

¹³⁸ The transformations of music markets over the past 15 years have greatly increased the economic importance of live appearances for virtually all popular music artists around the world. More precisely, the developments of the Internet and information technology, especially digital music formats, digital downloads and peer-to-peer download platforms, have allowed hundreds of millions of people to access freely or at minimal costs an increasing proportion of the music that is released in the world. This form of piracy (free access to copyrighted material) has been widely tolerated worldwide and is even almost totally unrestricted in countries like Taiwan and China. According to an article published in the Economist in 2008 (http://www.economist.com/node/10498664?story_id=E1_TDQJRGQ), sales of CDs have fallen drastically worldwide since 1998, while touring became more profitable than ever. These transformations have greatly hit traditional record labels, which are still in the process of rethinking their business models and overall role in the music industry. The increasing importance of live performances in the modern music industry has also been highlighted in a study carried out in 2005 by Ho Tung-Hung and other collaborators, entitled *A Research on Problems of Taiwan's Popular Musical Performance Industry* (Ho and al. 2005). I highly recommend readers who seek more details on the situation of live houses in Taiwan to read this work (available only in Chinese).

¹³⁹ A few musicians in the scene play in two or more relatively popular bands, and do take a more substantial part of their monthly income from performances. These musicians usually combine live appearances with a few weekly music lessons, which allows them to come by quite easily. See chapter 4 for more details on the lifestyles of Taipei's indie musicians.

and the work of organizers or booking agents of special events (ex: music festivals) for opportunities to perform. Concerts are generally booked a month in advance¹⁴⁰ (a few months in the case of the Wall and Legacy) and usually feature two to three bands playing similar types of music¹⁴¹. Each band usually plays a single set of approximately one hour (7 to 12 songs)¹⁴². According to my observations, only a small portion of bands that compose Taipei's indie rock scene organize particular music events outside of the regular circuit of live houses and festivals, or contribute regularly to the organization of concerts in existing live houses. Contrary to the practices of live houses in several other large cities worldwide, most of Taipei's regular live venues don't require local bands to commit themselves to pay a substantial "rental fee" for the use of their establishment, equipment and staff. The habit that prevails in Taipei's indie live houses consists in hiring local bands to perform for a specific night. Generally speaking, the task of promoting live indie rock events and selling tickets is predominantly carried out by venues themselves¹⁴³. Most of the time, bands limit themselves to creating a Facebook event and

¹⁴⁰ Most live venues have one or two persons in charge of booking bands and putting together a schedule before the beginning of each month. Among bands, band leaders usually assume the responsibility of communicating with live houses and concert organizers. After a while, bands become part of the scene's different social circles, in which everybody knows each other and information circulates quickly. For the majority of local groups, only a few emails or phone calls suffice to arrange a concert date. For large festivals like Spring Scream or the Hohaiyan Festival, bands are either invited by the organizers, or must go through a selection process, which implies sending an application and a demo a few months in advance. Participations in festivals and special events abroad are usually organized via booking agents in Taipei who specialize in inviting foreign bands in Taiwan and sending local bands overseas. These agents usually enjoy contacts with local government agencies (who sponsor most appearances of Taiwanese bands overseas) and foreign agents and event organizers.

¹⁴¹ Concerts at the Underworld typically feature two bands. The custom among local bands is to have the most popular or renowned of the two bands play last. Special events and parties featuring a live DJ are sometimes organized on Saturday nights. Performances at the Wall regularly feature only one popular indie band, notably on the occasion of an album release.

¹⁴² The term "set" roughly refers to a one hour segment of a live concert. More popular indie rock bands with more material can perform two sets (ex: 1976, OverDose), with a 15-minute intermission between each sets.

¹⁴³ Taipei's live houses mostly promote their events via diverse Internet platforms, including their own websites, Facebook, BBS, and other dedicated websites (ex: iNDIEVOX, StreetVoice, Gigguide, etc.). Also, live houses and concert organizers often use traditional media like flyers, posters, and ads in

sending invitations to the members of their online social network¹⁴⁴.

As of 2012, only the Wall requires local bands to take active part in the promotion of their event by having them sell a substantial number of advance tickets, generally at a discount group price¹⁴⁵. This requirement can sometimes represent a formidable burden for local bands and is not unanimously supported by local indie rockers. In Taipei's live houses, compensations for performances are usually calculated on the total number of tickets sold at the door (ex: half of all ticket sales). This means that, apart from being encouraged by venues to invite as many people as possible to attend their shows, local rock bands are offered economic incentives, but are not submitted to any particular pressure to sell tickets or invite friends and fans to attend their performances.

This situation can be said to represent a two-edged sword. On one hand, local rockers do not have to worry too much about ticket sales, which gives them more liberty both in terms of creativity or time to invest in the promotion or preparation of a concert. On the other hand, such a practice can arguably contribute to the detachment of local bands from concerns for promotion and profitability, and eventhe overall quality of their music and performances.

alternative publications (ex: the weekly newspaper POTS [破報]) to announce larger events.

¹⁴⁴ Some bands even content themselves with posting the date and time of their next concert on their band's Facebook page. It must however be noted that most bands have a considerable number of "friends" and "followers" on Facebook. For instance, bands like My Skin Against Your Skin, Go Chic, The White Eyes, Silverbus, and OverDose have between 4000 and 7500 followers (or people who officially "like" the band) on Facebook (as of early 2012). Fire Ex (approx. 16000) 1976 (24000), BearBabes (approx. 26000) and Tizzy Bac (approx. 35000) are among the local indie rock bands that have the largest online networks.

¹⁴⁵ According to Milioto (2008) and Japanese musicians who visit Taipei, most of live houses in Tokyo implement a "pay-to-play" system in which indie rock bands have to rent the entire live house to perform. Bands thus assume most losses or profits that their performance may generate. A similar system is implemented by The Wall in Taipei, which requires bands to "buy" in advance and resell a certain number of presale tickets; between 20 and 150 tickets per band, none in the case of more popular acts. This practice is called "包票" in Taiwan. Tickets that bands fail to sell become a pure loss for them. This requirement from the Wall is not without drawing criticism by some musicians and observers of the scene, and several bands admitted being less inclined to play there unless this practice change. A critical outlook on this and other issues related to the orientation and business practices of Taipei's live house can be found in the section 3.4 of Huang's thesis (2009).

At the beginning of 2012, there were approximately seven indie rock live houses in Taipei¹⁴⁶, which is probably the most it has ever counted at any moment in the history of its indie rock music scene. Indie music venues have had the unfortunate tendency to quickly come and go in the Taiwanese capital, with several of them lasting only a few years or even months at a certain location before being forced to relocate or close permanently. There are a few reasons for this. One is that such establishments have always had to overcome high rents and a rather limited clientele. But these hurdles are not the main threat to the prosperity of local live houses. More importantly, local bars and spaces presenting live music shows in Taipei have constantly been subjected to various forms of pressure from neighbors (who regularly file noise complaints) as well as local authorities, whose zealous fines for ambiguous license, fire protection or minors-related issues have threatened or caused the premature decline of many live houses over the two decades of the city's indie rock scene¹⁴⁷. Though new venues have opened to replace

¹⁴⁶ This estimation includes the following establishments: the Underworld (capacity of ~100 people – Shida Rd.), the two Riversides (~200 people in Gongguan and ~300 people in Ximending), the Wall (~600 people – intersection of Keelung Rd. and Roosevelt Rd.), Legacy (~1200 people – intersection of Zhongxiao E. Rd. and Bade Rd.), Revolver (~75 people – Roosevelt, Guting area), and Pipe (~200 people –Gongguan riverside area). I call “live house” an establishment that holds live performances by original indie bands (who perform their own music) more than one night a week. The number of live houses could be said to vary according to the frequency and form of performances. For example, I excluded the Treelage Café, the Artist Village Tavern, The Shelter, Vicious Circle, Roxy Mini, Roxy Rocker from this list, as the regularity of their music events still has to be confirmed. Also, several cafés and bars in Taipei, including the Witch House (女巫店) and the Kafka on the Shore (海邊的卡夫卡), organize so-called “unplugged” performances each week, where acoustic guitars and various percussions replace electric guitars and full drum sets. A few lounge bars (Ex: Sappho on Anhe Rd.), art spaces (ex: Nanhai Gallery [南海藝廊]), concert spaces (ex: 909 APA), bookstores (ex: ESLite [誠品]) and nightclubs (ex: Luxy) also occasionally hold live performances by local indie bands. It is important to mention that none of these music venues is sponsored officially by Taipei City or the Taiwanese government. A timeline of live houses in Taipei has been included in Annexes 1 and 2 at the end of thesis for the readers' perusal.

¹⁴⁷ Live houses and nightclubs in other cities across the island face similar problems. Waves of increased pressure by the authorities are often sparked by particular circumstances. For example, several live houses in Taipei closed due to the somewhat indiscriminate crackdown against prostitution and various types of bars and venues in Taipei City initiated in 1997 by then city major Chen Shui-Bian. The island's live houses found themselves yet again under close scrutiny from authorities in early 2011 following the death of 9 people in an accidental blaze during a performance at a nightclub in Taichung.

them, at least three important indie venues were run out of business in 2010 alone (Roxy Roots, Velvet Underground and Bliss).¹⁴⁸. Recently in the summer of 2012, the events that surrounded the temporary closure of the Underworld in the Shida area highlighted once again the fact that live houses in Taipei have evolved on a very narrow path (see section 2.4 for more details on the Underworld's difficult situation)¹⁴⁹.

Thanks largely to the resilient efforts of small circles of passionate rock lovers, Taipei's indie rock scene is now well anchored around the few live houses that have managed to survive until now, despite countless obstacles and a constant state of precariousness. Here I am referring mostly to the Underworld, the Wall, the Riverside, as well as a more recent newcomer: the Legacy¹⁵⁰. Apart from the Legacy, the Wall, and both Riverside locations, most of the live venues that existed in the past or do exist today in Taipei have functioned as both a live house and bar. The Pipe is situated somewhat away from the city, on a riverside park, while the Wall, the Underworld and the Gongguan Riverside are all located in basements. Such *marginal* locations arguably reinforce the characteristic atmosphere of "underground-ness" and intimacy that

¹⁴⁸ New live houses in Taipei include the Revolver and, for a time only, the Artist Village. Under the initiative of ex-band members Punk and Georgy, the Artist Village Café started to present shows by indie bands in early 2011. Complaints from neighbors and other occupants of the Artist Village caused a change of personnel and business orientation in the summer of 2011. As of early 2012, rock-related concerts are still organized sporadically at the Village Café, but the establishment cannot be counted anymore as one of Taipei's regular rock live houses.

¹⁴⁹ Live houses in Taipei have been subjected to sustained pressure from real estate entrepreneurs, conservative neighborhood committees and unpredictable authorities. On the other side, these establishments have enjoyed outright support from young music fans, the artistic community and a few progressive officials in the government. As of 2012, indie rock circles are still waiting for the government to take active measures to ensure the survival and development of a solid network of live houses in Taipei and other major Taiwanese cities. Such measures would notably include changing the laws that govern the registration of music live houses in Taiwan, and assisting such establishments so as to ensure their compliance with local safety regulations.

¹⁵⁰ The Witch House, a café located in the Gongguan-Taida area, has also been an important contributor to the indie music scene over the last 15 years. I did not include this noble establishment in my list since it holds only unplugged performances. This makes that most local rock bands, with their loud electric guitars, bass, drums and singing, do not usually perform there. The few rock bands that do play at the Witch House have to make substantial changes to adapt their performance to the venue.

characterizes Taipei's indie rock scene.

The type of program presented by each live venue, their atmosphere (or style), as well as the crowds that they attract vary from one place to the other. The Wall and the Legacy, Taipei's largest live houses, mostly feature a mix of Mandopop, Cantopop and folk-rock stars (ex: 謝安琪, 張震嶽), popular local indie artists (ex: Matzka, 1976, Echo, Tizzy Bac), and international indie, pop, metal or rock acts (ex: Toe, Lamb of God, Blonde Redhead, Tahiti 80)¹⁵¹. Both Riverside venues offer a program mainly composed of moderately popular Taiwanese pop and pop-folk artists, but also include a few well established local indie rock bands (mostly at the Ximending location) as well as varied jazz and blues ensembles (exclusively at the Gongguan location).

Taipei's remaining live houses – most of them “*bars with bands*”, to quote one of my informants – are much smaller venues than the Wall or the Legacy, and feature essentially local indie rock bands from across the popularity scale, with occasional appearances by Japanese indie rock bands and other groups composed of foreign expats¹⁵². The Underworld, Taipei's longest-lasting live house, has remained true to the original spirit of musical nurturing found in Taipei's underground indie venues of the 1990s, and has persisted in offering new and veteran groups alike the opportunity to perform on a regular basis. The Revolver and The Pipe are the most recent additions to

¹⁵¹ Over the past years, the Wall has welcomed an increasing number of foreign bands, including several international and Japanese post-rock and metal bands, and Japanese rock and pop artists (“J-Rock and “J-Pop”). Such acts mainly attract crowds composed of youngsters and teenagers under 25 years of age who represent the Wall's main audience. Tickets for such concerts usually exceed TWD\$ 1,000, which is more than double (sometimes triple or quadruple) the price of tickets for popular local indie bands. In contrast, the Legacy generally draws a more mature crowd than the Wall.

¹⁵² The Wall and the Legacy (or the agents who organize concerts in these venues) usually pay for the travel expenses of the bands they invite. This is however not the case of the Underworld and Revolver, which has more limited means. Foreign bands that play in these smaller venues pay most of their travel expenses by themselves to come share their passion for music with Taiwanese indie musicians and fans.

the capital's circuit of live venues, and their music offer is as eclectic as that of the Underworld, but also includes more recurrent DJ performances.

Viewing a performance in Taipei is relatively affordable, although the shows often end early. Ticket prices for live performances of local indie rock bands on weekend nights in Taipei range from \$TWD 300 to 600¹⁵³. Indie rock performances usually start between 9:30 and 10:30 pm at smaller venues like the Underworld and Revolver, and around 8 pm at larger venues like the Legacy and the Wall. Concerts seldom extend over midnight, which is a norm observed by virtually all live houses in Taipei.

The composition of the crowd at concerts varies depending on the band's popularity, the venue, and the type of bands featured. Generally speaking, the core of the audiences who attend the performances of the majority of local indie rock bands consists of the band's companions, close friends and acquaintances from the band's extended social network, which usually includes other indie musicians. On the other hand, live concerts of more popular acts in large live houses can draw several hundreds of teenage and adult spectators from the general public. The vast majority of audiences at the Wall, Legacy, and the Ximending Riverside are almost exclusively Taiwanese, particularly at performances by local indie bands¹⁵⁴. Crowds at the Revolver, the Underworld and the

¹⁵³ In small venues like Pipe, Revolver and the Underworld, the entry price usually includes a drink. It is also worth mentioning that, if audiences at the majority of local indie rock performances tend to be rather small, the programs at the Wall and the Legacy show that there is indeed an increasing demand for live indie music in Taipei – an assessment shared by Arthur Chen, manager of the Legacy, according to a recent interview (source: <http://www.gigguide.tw/article-93>). Interestingly enough, large audiences of Taiwanese youngsters and young professionals do not hesitate to pay large sums (usually between \$TWD 1,200 and 3,000 - \$USD 30 - 100) to go see performances by Euro-American or Japanese indie bands, but are much more reluctant to pay \$TWD 500 (\$USD 16) or less to go see local rock groups. The increasing presence of foreign bands in Taipei's larger live houses can rightfully be perceived as a major source of competition for local indie bands in terms of attention from local concert-goers and access to prime performance spots (ex: weekend nights at the Wall).

¹⁵⁴ In the past 5 years, my foreign friends and I – I usually bring a friend or two to concerts to introduce them to the local scene – were very often the only foreigners in fairly sizeable crowds at indie rock shows at the Wall or the Ximending Riverside.

Gongguan Riverside usually include a sizeable proportion of foreigners – often more than 40% on some nights at the Underworld¹⁵⁵. According to some of the Underworld’s staff, only a few students from nearby universities – most notably the NTU and NTNU, which totalize more than 45 000 students – frequent their venue. Similarly, a short informal survey carried out in 2009 in the department of anthropology at the NTU indicated that only a small fraction of my classmates were regular concert-goers or were even familiar with Taipei’s indie rock bands. These elements suggest that there is a significant gap in terms of lifestyles and values between local rockers and the majority of young people of their age in Taipei. (In chapter 4, this phenomenon will be treated in more detail).

In addition, it is important to mention that distinct social circles have been built around some live houses and other key organizations of Taipei’s indie music circles. This phenomenon arguably leads to a complex dynamic of sympathies, exclusiveness and even slight tensions within the local indie music scene. Certain bands can easily be identified as regular performers at and close associates of particular venues (ex: Go Chic, 88 Guava Seedz, Macbeth, and OCD Girl at the Underworld, or Fire Ex, Sugar Plum Ferry, and Orangegrass at the Wall), and music fans can assume to see them being featured regularly on the venue’s program. It is important to specify that a lot of indie musicians are also official employees or collaborators of some venues, which can be a significant factor behind the relational dynamics at play within the local indie scene. One of the concrete manifestations of this social complex could be the fact that certain bands associated with

¹⁵⁵ This situation is probably due to the Underworld’s convenient location on Shida Rd., at the heart of one of the major hubs for foreigners in Taipei (especially Chinese language students). Also, the Underworld’s long tradition as an alternative rock hangout, its late opening hours, its cheap beer, as well as its stuffy yet intimate and quite unique atmosphere make it one of the favorite places for foreigners who enjoy live music or wish to explore the local indie music scene. A similar portrait can be made of the Revolver, which was opened by two foreigners in what used to be a local pub.

a specific venue (and its “clique”) seldom perform in the live house of a “less familiar” circle. This has some important implications for local bands, as being close to the few music circles that enjoy good contacts with Taiwanese policy makers and influential figures of the local music world can greatly facilitate access to resources (ex: funding from the government) and opportunities (ex: perform in various music events in Taiwan or abroad).

When chatting with local rockers, one can occasionally hear a few spontaneous disagreements or irritations concerning the musical style, doings or orientation of some bands or figures of the local indie scene. Yet there isn’t to my knowledge any genuine conflict among circles of bands and venues, and it would be incorrect to overemphasize the importance of any contentious elements in the scene. The distinct social circles that exist within the local indie rock scene remain tightly interconnected, and do form a sizeable community in which everybody knows and supports each other (albeit generally in an implicit fashion).

Given the limited opportunities for indie rock bands in Taiwan, several local groups openly wish to develop their activities abroad, including in English- and Chinese-language markets (interest in Mainland China has increased substantially over the past few years following the ease of Sino-Taiwanese tensions under two consecutive KMT mandates) This widespread yet hypothetical aspiration may in part stem from a common desire to repeat the success stories of a few Taiwanese bands and idols on foreign stages. For local rock bands, the icon of this victory against the odds is arguably indie metal band Chthonic (閃靈), which achieved a significant notoriety on the international metal scene before being recognized and garnering wide admiration in their home country.

Besides, the links between the indie rock circles of Taiwan and those of Japan, China (including Hong Kong), North-America and Europe have greatly developed over the years, with more and more bands from Taipei being invited each year to participate in music festivals and small tours throughout the world. It must however be noted that this increased presence of local groups abroad is largely due to the substantial funding and support provided by the Taiwanese government, which showcases the country's indie musicians as international ambassadors of modern Taiwanese society and culture¹⁵⁶. The relative isolation of Taiwan and its great distance from the large music markets of Europe and America – in which indie rock music and live performances are much more popular – makes it likely that only a tiny portion of these appearances of local indie rock bands in foreign music events would have been possible without government funding.

In the absence of government subsidies, indie rock bands from Taipei can still manage to secure a few performances outside of Taiwan, especially in neighboring Asian countries, with Tokyo, Hong-Kong and Beijing being the most common destinations. Unfortunately, the little revenue generated from these performances is usually insufficient to cover all travel expenses, which means that, more often than not, bands have to pay some of their costs from their own pocket. The rapid growth of the popular music industry and indie rock scenes in Mainland China unquestionably offers opportunities for Taiwanese indie artists to develop much larger fan bases than in Taiwan. Yet to reach out to the public and organize tours in China represents a great challenge that requires

¹⁵⁶ Over the past years, overseas representations of the Taiwanese government have organized several concerts and tours featuring Taiwanese indie rock bands, notably in the United-States and Canada. These events were often part of larger cultural events, ex: the Taiwanese night at the yearly SXSW Festival in Austin, Texas, or the Taiwanese Cultural Festival of Canada. According to my informants, the government covers almost all of the bands' expenses when they participate in such events overseas. However, the bands do not seem to take much extra revenue from these trips. See section 3.3.3 for more details on the sponsoring of indie band activities by the Taiwanese government.

substantial financial means and contacts the kind of which remains almost exclusively available to the organizations at the top of the Taiwanese music industry¹⁵⁷. Most indie musicians and observers of the local scene will agree that having the chance to perform abroad is a positive thing for Taiwanese indie bands – mostly in terms of personal experience, confidence in one’s musicianship and overall motivation to keep on playing music. But it is far from assured that there are genuine possibilities of significant success for Taiwanese indie rock groups in foreign markets, or that increased appearances overseas will have a significant impact on their popularity at home.

For both performers and music lovers, indie rock shows are very meaningful and cheerful social events impregnated with emotionality, friendship, but also – some nights more than other – a sizeable quantity of alcohol. It goes without saying that each of the city’s live houses offers different musical experiences to bands and live music fans. Yet a more detailed account of a concert night might help the reader better understand what kind of human phenomenon local indie rock performances really are. For this purpose, I shall depict a typical Black Summer Days concert on a Friday night at the Underworld¹⁵⁸. This allows me to include an insider perspective in my description, but to some degree, the illustration below might be somewhat less representative of performances by more successful indie bands in Taipei’s larger venues (ex: Legacy).

It would be impossible to account for the experience of performing in an indie

¹⁵⁷ It must be noted that a few agents and promotion groups of Taipei have started in recent years to help local indie bands to perform in various music events in China, Korea and Japan, yet on a relatively small scale. Such groups notably include ICON Promotions (爾康文化) and The Wall.

¹⁵⁸ Black Summer Days performed several times at the Underworld during the 18 months of my participation in the band, and the account below is an amalgam of these personal experiences. Also, it goes without saying that the atmosphere and succession of events during a concert at the Underworld differ from those of shows in Taipei’s larger venues. However, concert nights at the Underworld can be thought as highly representative of the events in the various music houses that have made the history of the scene over its 20 years of existence (ex: Scum, Roxy Vibe, Bliss, Velvet Underground, Revolver, etc.).

music house without describing the specific equipment that greatly contributes to shaping this experience. The range of sound equipment found in Taipei's live venues is roughly similar to that found in rehearsal rooms, the difference being measurable mostly in terms of quality and size. The presence of two very important types of equipment does however distinguish a live house from a simple practice room. First, the stage lighting system, the function of which is to enhance the overall visual atmosphere of the stage using a series of effects and spotlights of different shapes and colors¹⁵⁹. Secondly, a sound reinforcement system¹⁶⁰, which picks up the sound from the musicians' instruments and voices using a series of microphones, then amplifies it (thereby also allowing the sound engineer to equalize or enhance it) and sends it back in two main directions through two distinct sets of speakers: one set for the audience, which consists of larger speakers at high volume, and the other set called "monitor", which consists of a few smaller speakers located on the stage's floor and oriented inward for the musicians to hear what they are playing¹⁶¹.

This system calls for thorough adjustments before each performance of the sound inputs and outputs between the venue's sound engineer and the musicians. This procedure is called "soundcheck". Even though soundchecks in small venues like the Underworld usually require no more than 15 minutes, the members of the first band to perform are

¹⁵⁹ Virtually all music houses in the world are equipped with lighting systems of variable complexity. In most venues, this system is operated by a technician from a console installed at the back of the room.

¹⁶⁰ This system is usually called "PA system" (which stands for "public address system"). A sound engineer operates this system from a mixing console located at the back of the room or next to the stage.

¹⁶¹ The use of two different sets of speakers (a larger one oriented towards the audience and another one turned toward the band) often causes a certain discrepancy between what the performers hear onstage through their amplifiers and monitor speakers, and what the audience hears through the venue's main loudspeakers. This phenomenon is the reason why performers are sometimes not aware that there is an issue with the sound, as the problem, which might be obvious or annoying for the public, might not be noticeable from the stage. Ex: an imbalance in the output levels of instruments that causes a guitar to be almost inaudible (or, on the contrary, too loud) for the public.

expected to arrive at the live house about an hour before the concert to set up their material and go through the sound adjustments with the sound engineer before most of the audience reaches the venue¹⁶². There is usually 10 to 30 minutes of interval between the end of the soundcheck and the actual beginning of the concert; time for band members to take their complimentary drink and try to relax by exchanging a few words with friends and acquaintances while listening to rock music played through the loudspeakers. Few rockers will admit it, but a certain tension is easily palpable among local rockers in the few moments preceding a performance. After all, if live concerts are an occasion of celebration, they are first and foremost a serious affair for local indie bands; a task that requires a massive amount of time in its preparation and a high dose of concentration and rigor in its execution.

When the time comes and everybody seems to be ready, the musicians reach their respective positions onstage. The CD music played through the loudspeakers stops¹⁶³, all eyes turn to the performers. And the concert begins. With the lights dimmed to minimum inside the venue, the use of multicolor spotlights to illuminate the stage both blurs and magnifies the musicians' movements in the crowd's eyes. Sound levels at local indie rock shows are generally pretty high – oftentimes too high for unfamiliar ears. Also, most music fans will agree that listening to a band's record does not prepare one for the actual

¹⁶² In Taipei's small live houses, the second band carries out a quick soundcheck in front of the crowd after the first band's performance. Time limitation often leaves musicians insufficient time to adjust all the parameters of their sound (ex: guitar effects and amps) or the overall balance of each instrument in the band, which can reflect negatively on the quality of a performance. For this reason, larger live houses like the Wall or the Legacy usually conduct a more thorough soundcheck of more than 15 minutes several hours before the show. To obtain a good sound in a larger room also demands more adjustment, and more popular indie bands tend to show greater perfectionism in their settings.

¹⁶³ The rock music played in the venue's sound system before and after each set offers a sonic context to the performance. It suggests a sort of continuity between the recorded music of well-known artists and that of performing local bands, and can be said to invite both the audience and musicians to experience and perceive the concert in the spirit of the rock tradition.

experience of attending to a live performance by this same band. Most local rock performances tend to use loud music and sharp sonic contrasts to display a general sense of sensual and emotional intensity that requires corresponding attitude and dispositions from members of the audience to be appreciated best.

When performing onstage, the vast majority of local indie rock groups, including Black Summer Days, tend (tended) to be quite sober and casual in their dress and behavior, without risking too many spectacular impromptu gestures that could be judged by the crowd as an excess of spontaneity or mannerism. This tendency contrasts sharply with the expansive and sometimes zealously choreographed gestures of intensity displayed by a great number of Japanese indie rock bands. In comparison, the attitude of most indie rockers in Taipei conveys a more “inward” kind of intensity, mixed with an impression of interior focus and appreciation of the music they are playing¹⁶⁴.

A similar restraint is usually displayed by the audience during performances at indie rock concerts in live houses and festivals in Taipei. Most crowds tend to remain largely still, with the exception of head nodding in tune with the rhythm. However, local audiences usually show great warmth in their cheers and support for bands at the end of each song; understandably more so when their friends are in the band. Not unlike Taiwanese pop stars, local indie bands have the habit of chatting profusely with the audience between songs. They tell funny anecdotes about band members (to joke about a musician’s hair, weight, clothing or supposed sex appeal is a classic), give details about a song’s meaning, share thoughts about the group’s history, promote the sale of a CD or t-shirt, and most importantly, generously thank their fans and friends for their continuous

¹⁶⁴ The Chinese adjective “認真”, which roughly translates to “displaying a conscientious stance when facing an important task”, reflects very well the general attitude displayed by a majority of local rock musicians during performances.

support¹⁶⁵. It is a convention among indie rock audiences in Taipei to ask performers to play one more song by repeatedly shouting the English term “encore” at the end of the concert. Despite time constraints, bands generally play one or two extra songs, after which band members set out to pack up their equipment, while conversations from the crowd and rock music once again fill the venue’s atmosphere.

The prevalent mood among local indie rockers after their performance is usually very upbeat. As they come off the stage, the rock stars of the night generally look beaming and satisfied as they are welcomed with smiles and congratulations by friends and members of the audience¹⁶⁶. Most musicians then put their equipment in a corner of the venue, and mingle with the crowd to listen to the other bands play (if there are any) while sharing drinks with their friends or getting acquainted with other performers and music fans. Most indie rock concerts in Taipei also represent very lively social occasions, which more often than not extend up until late at night, either at the venue itself – small live houses like the Underworld are also bars which seldom close before 4 am – or in a restaurant somewhere else in town¹⁶⁷. The *party* dimension of indie

¹⁶⁵ Local indie bands are always extremely polite and thankful to their audiences, no matter how small they are. According to my observation, the ability to entertain the public and catch its attention when talking in between songs can play a substantial role in a band’s popularity in Taiwan. A spectacular example is rock band Totem, which is based in Taipei but comes originally from the Taidong area (all band members but one are of aboriginal descent). The band has been a favorite of local music fans for several years not only because of their solid songwriting, but also for their comical presence and interactions on stage. Other bands, like OverDose, prefer to share some of their personal impressions and worldviews with the public, while continuously encouraging their young fans to pursue their dreams. Since the installation of a screen and video projector on the side of the stage at the Wall, it is common to see bands screening homemade videos of the performers’ activities and lives, thereby reinforcing the connection between the group and its fans.

¹⁶⁶ The Wall and the Legacy sometimes hold autograph and photo sessions for fans after performances by local indie bands. These sessions are very popular among concert-goers, and are a good way for bands to reach out to their fans and create hype. Some bands, like OverDose, can even spend more than an hour talking to their fans after their shows. When asked about it, the band’s members said that they greatly enjoyed this opportunity to get to know their fans, and that it greatly motivated them to continue playing music.

¹⁶⁷ Naturally, each band and circle of friends has its own habits when it comes to after-concert celebrations. BSD members usually stayed for a few hours in the venue where they played. As for OverDose, the band’s

performances is something greatly appreciated and sought after by most veteran rockers Taipei, and a majority of local indie groups are willing to perform for free if the event promises to be a fun social gathering.

From an indie rock performer's point of view, concerts in live houses are a genuine feast for the senses and the mind. One can imagine that singing or playing an instrument in front of a crowd while standing at the center of the visual and musical mayhem produced by the instruments, the amplifiers and both lighting and sound systems represents a completely different experience from rehearsing in a practice room. In some ways, to go on stage means to leave briefly the comfort of *normal* everyday life and the quiet mass to expose oneself to the public's criticism. Understandably enough, the crowd's eventual appreciation and encouragements are very gratifying and well-deserved rewards for a successful performance. This intense mix of tension and formidable excitement aroused by the particular physical and social context of the live indie concert can be said to induce some kind of altered state of consciousness, or "*adrenaline rush*" as some local musicians describe it. When performing live with Black Summer Days, I sometimes felt some kind of strong inner exhilaration. One has the very pleasant impression of inhabiting a different sensorial reality, as if totally carried away by the loud music, the instrument, and one's senses.

It is in these moments, when the musicians perform within this overstimulating environment, that the personal automatism and *chemistry* between band members developed through repeated practice manifest themselves and serve rock musicians best.

performances are always attended by a larger number of friends, and very lively gatherings usually take place after shows, either in a local fried food restaurant (熱炒店) or in a park until dawn. Going for a group hot pot (火鍋) is also a classic among local bands, while several bands that are more associated to the Underworld have the habit of hanging out in the Shida park after their performances.

Still, the performer cannot afford to lose sight of the multiple tasks at hand, as he must simultaneously pay attention to several details in order to make sure that the concert unfolds smoothly. For guitarists and bassists, the guitar's tuning as well as the right balance of one's instrument within the overall sound, including the proper sound output level and adjustments of the amplifier and effect devices, represent only a few of the important elements to be monitored at all times. After all, as one my previous BSD bandmates expressed it, "maybe we [local indie rockers] are little more than amateur musicians, but we at least have to act as if we were professionals"¹⁶⁸.

For many indie rock musicians, the sensorial intensity that characterizes live performances is also accompanied by an equally rich spectrum of emotions. It goes without saying that each person experiences and makes sense of these feelings in his or her own way. But I quickly came to notice that not all indie rockers were inclined (or capable) to talk in details about this rather personal topic. One of my informants, a guitarist for a local rock band, was one of the few to formulate an elaborate answer to my questions:

-- How do you feel when you're onstage?

It's very fun to be onstage. It's an energy... the display of some kind of energy (一個力的一個展現). What I enjoy the most is the variations in the feelings expressed (表情). When you listen to music, you have some feelings. So when you perform, you enact (運動出) these expressions personally. This has become a need for me... I have to perform live from time to time. Some people go to the gym, but for me, it's to play the guitar live.

-- What do you express or feel exactly?

Abstract emotions. Some things that people wouldn't feel ordinarily. But by

¹⁶⁸ Interviewee F, interview by author, field note, Taipei, Taiwan, April 2009.

playing music, you can diverge (走彎) from this normal path. I think that performing can make a person experience some emotions that differ from the emotions you feel in your regular life at that moment. For example, maybe I'm rather happy in my life, but when you perform you can experience even stronger happiness, sometimes also deep sadness. It's not that I feel oppressed and that I want to vent off on stage or anything. No. It's just that you experience many more intense feelings when you perform than you do in everyday life. I think this is something everybody needs and should do.¹⁶⁹

While my informant's explanation focuses on the personal dimension of indie rock performances, other local rockers emphasize the profound satisfaction of performing live:

I guess all musicians like to play live. From the first time I performed until now, I have a feeling, it's very important... you rehearse for so long in the practice room, then you go onstage and perform, there's people who listen to you, this is an incomparable feeling. Even if there's no real money involved, even if there are very few people, only 10 people, if there's one person who listens carefully to your music and gives you some feedback, then it's even more precious.

Most musicians in the world will acknowledge that playing one's own original songs and receiving a crowd's enthusiastic applause is in itself a very gratifying experience that can reflect very positively on one's self-esteem – and this regardless of the exact size of the crowd. After all, it takes only a handful of supportive people in the audience to make for a magic night at the Underworld or Revolver. Similarly, to play at the Wall or the Legacy, even when filled at only a third of their total capacity (which approximate 600 and 1000 people respectively) or in a large-scale event like the Hohaiyan Rock Festival is doubtlessly an even more thrilling and potentially life-changing experience for local rockers¹⁷⁰, as expressed by this informant:

When we played in Fulong [at the Hohaiyan Festival], we did not play very well, but it was an intense moment. I have very blurry memories of our show, my

¹⁶⁹ Interviewee G, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, September 2010.

¹⁷⁰ Please note that I have never performed myself with Black Summer Days at the Wall, at the Legacy, or any large music festival, although the band played in large live houses and festivals a few times before and after my involvement with the group.

mind sort of blanked out [腦袋空白], there were too many people, at least ten thousand. When we played our last song, we asked the crowd to scream our band name. I was deeply touched [很感動] that so many people screamed our name! After our performance, we watched Totem's show [圖騰樂團] from backstage, and I cried, I don't know why. [Later] we had a party at a friend's place, we set off some fireworks. That night, I had the feeling that my way of thinking changed completely, I thought that this [our band] was not over yet [還沒有結束]. I still wanted to continue playing, I thought that no matter what we do in the future, it would be good [不管做什麼都好].¹⁷¹

Also, a text message I received from Black Summer Day's frontman Georgy after a performance at the now defunct Bliss music house in autumn 2008 (before I joined the group) gave me a foretaste of the deep satisfaction that local indie rock musicians can feel after a performance, even in front of a small crowd (Bliss had a capacity of not more than 75 people):

Me: "Sorry, I could not make it to Bliss! How was the show?"

Georgy's reply: "Man! The concert was great! I feel like the king of rock and roll!"

I was later able to understand Georgy's impression more fully when I started performing with the band. Clearly, there is a phenomenon of pure identity transcendence at play. Each indie rock concert makes the performer feel like he¹⁷² is more than just an ordinary guy. He is a rock musician who, just like his favorite rock stars, creates music, performs under the spotlights, is applauded by crowds (and also, for more popular local bands, is asked by fans for autographs and pictures after performances), and celebrates with bandmates and friends. For a few hours, life is more than just the ordinary succession of daily routines, ordinary feelings, and commonplace interactions. Concert nights transport indie musicians into an alternate reality made of intense sensory experiences and

¹⁷¹ Interviewee C, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, March 2011.

¹⁷² Please note that the masculine is used in this paragraph only to lighten the text.

emotions, to which must be added a particular sense of connectedness with bandmates, friends and the public¹⁷³. Both my fieldwork and my personal experience strongly indicate that this rich experience plays a defining role in the lives of indie rockers in Taipei, and is probably one of the most fundamental (and curiously also one of the most overlooked) dimensions to consider when making sense of their musical activities and life trajectories.

3.4 - Are the activities of Taipei's indie rock bands about achieving mainstream popularity and success?

The previous sections have highlighted that playing in an indie rock band in Taipei is a painstaking and complex enterprise. Why do these young people – the musicians of Taipei's current indie rock scene – invest so much time, energy, and resources in their musical projects? Could these strenuous activities be motivated by an aspiration to wealth or public fame? How do local rockers assess and approach the economic aspect of their band's activities? And how far in the music business can an indie rock band really hope to go in Taiwan?

Over the course of my fieldwork and experience in the scene, I was brought to think that, understandably enough, virtually all indie rock bands in Taipei dearly wish to succeed, or at least to achieve some sort of success. More likely than not, a majority of

¹⁷³ According to my personal experience and observations, continued live performances greatly contribute to creating an “esprit de corps” as well as enduring bonds between band members, not unlike competition (and especially victory) does in sports team. Furthermore, my informant's analogy (abovementioned) between his own need to play music live and that of other people to go to the gym might, in some ways, not be far-fetched at all. To perform with an indie rock band can be described as a very uplifting and life-affirming activity that encompasses key physical, psychological and social components – not unlike the practice of exercise in a gym. One can also imagine how rock musicians come to develop a certain addiction to performing live, the same way regular gym-goers soon crave for a workout if they cannot do any for several days in a row.

them would very much welcome mainstream popularity (and most of what it entails) if it materialized as a result of the natural continuation of their musical activities as they intend them, but not under any form or at any cost. Yet the discourses and approaches of local rockers reveal that they are well aware that significant economic success, if not impossible, is a very unlikely scenario for their band(s), especially given the unfavorable complex in place in the Taiwanese music industry and the limited attention that local rock acts draw from major labels, mainstream media and the broad public. In the following pages, I will discuss the economic situation of indie rock bands in the local music market and the attitudes of indie rockers toward the economic dimension of their activities, based on the answers that emerged from the information exposed earlier in this chapter and on repeated discussions about the subject with several musicians and observers of the local indie rock scene¹⁷⁴.

The first element to keep in mind when assessing the possibilities of local rock bands in Taipei is the important limitations that the physical and socio-cultural realities of the Taiwanese metropolis impose on the musical activities of indie musicians. The city's densely populated environment notably makes it very difficult for local rockers to practice their instrument or voice at home and find a proper locale to rehearse and work on their music without angering neighbors. Also, the presence of a 12 months compulsory military service in Taiwan indisputably has a very disruptive effect on the development and musical ambitions of many local bands. To these basic challenges we must add the quite conservative character of social life in Taiwan, especially the fact that most parents

¹⁷⁴ It is not the main objective of this thesis to identify the exact reasons of the marginal situation of indie rock music in Taiwan, or to account accurately for the historical and socio-cultural contexts that led to the modern-day configuration of Taiwan's music industry. . Readers interested in this issue can consult the works of other observers of the scene, including Ho (2003).

are not very supportive of their children's involvement in the world of rock music (this will be addressed more in details in the next chapter).

These are only a few of the factors that make it substantially more difficult for indie rock bands in Taipei than for similar bands in other cities and societies around the world to achieve a professional level in terms of musicianship and quality of output, regardless of the place that indie rock music occupies in the local music market¹⁷⁵. Nonetheless, a substantial proportion of Taipei's veteran indie rock bands do achieve over time a very advanced level of proficiency in the various dimensions that compose the highly complex craft of the modern rock musician (ex: mastery of an instrument, stage performance, songwriting, sound engineering, music recording and production, etc.). More than just hobbyistic musicians, a lot of local indie rockers can rightfully be described as semi-professionals, and sometimes even full professionals. According to my informants and myself, considerations for talent or musicianship alone cannot account for the lack of economic success of indie rock groups in Taiwan, neither can such considerations differentiate consistently the few indie artists that achieve some form of breakthrough from those who do not.

The most significant obstacle to the commercial success of local indie rock bands most likely comes from a general lack of attention and recognition from Taiwanese industry, media and public. The cultural and economic order that has characterized the Taiwanese music industry and mainstream soundscapes for the past 30 years, both in their past and present configurations, have been for the most part largely unfavorable to indie rock groups. For one thing, the Taiwanese soundscape is nowadays dominated by a

¹⁷⁵ A majority of my informants think that a considerable gap in musical skills and creativity exists between Taiwanese and Japanese or Euro-American rock bands, who generally face much less obstacles to their regular musical activities and development as musicians.

limited number of artists (mostly Mandopop and pop-folk idols) and their supporting organizations. These enjoy a spectacular monopoly over the mass entertainment media and the public's attention, and generate massive revenues via large performances throughout Asia, record sales, royalties from KTV chains, commercial endorsements and television appearances. Local indie bands, on the other hand, have remained vastly overlooked by Taiwanese mainstream audiences and media (ex: radio, television, popular magazines, etc.) over the past 15 years, and most of the limited media content dedicated to the local rock culture has come from bloggers, a few music websites and alternative publications¹⁷⁶. Some of the motives of this lack of interest from local media and larger public were pinpointed to me by one of my informants:

Taiwanese people only recognize [認同] idols, and they recognize everything that the idols do: drugs, girls, etc. There were no bands before in Taiwan, only idols. That's what people are longing for, deep inside they want to become idols, and they want to sing pretty little songs in KTVs. There's no way for us to change the habits of people, it's been there for more than 30-40 years. They won't listen and tell you 'your bass or your guitar sounds great! Is it you who recorded this? How did you make this song?' What our parents tell us when we're small is 'famous singer' (歌星), you have to become a famous singer like Teresa Teng (鄧麗君) or Kao Ling-Feng (高凌風), not a musician.¹⁷⁷

This amounts to saying that local rock groups, with their somewhat less accessible rock music, live performances and emphasis on musicianship can only be considered

¹⁷⁶ Understandably enough, some members of Taiwan's indie circles hold a grudge against mainstream local media. The main reasons for this are clearly explained in this excerpt from a declaration dating from 2004 and signed by more than 75 bands and organizations of the scene in support of a movement demanding the creation of a "reasonable" public television channel in Taiwan: "The musical content we now hear and see in the mass media is only the tip of the iceberg of the entire music creation that happens in Taiwan. The Taiwanese entertainment media business can in no way reflect the reality of musical creation because it only broadcasts music videos produced with enormous funds, and only asks questions about gossips, not about music.[...] A fully public television system could provide a channel of communication for emerging music artists, and could give more people the chance to listen to new and creative music, thereby promoting the endless potential of the music culture." Source: http://www.bigsound.org/publicmedia/weblog/cat_about.html, free translation, originally from Zheng's thesis (2005).

¹⁷⁷ Interviewee H, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, April 2009.

marginal by a public and media that has long been accustomed to the cult of ubiquitous idol figures and their consumption in a series of convenient media (ex: television news, talk or game shows, KTV, magazines, large-scale and romanticized performances, etc.)¹⁷⁸. Most people in Taipei, including youngsters and young professionals, indeed seem to prefer the security of singing songs that they know, drinking and eating with a few friends in the private and intimate space of a KTV room to the more risky option of going to see a performance by local rock bands with which they are not familiar. Also, the large and sustained attendance at concerts by foreign bands reveal that internationally acclaimed Euro-American acts exert a stronger appeal on Taipei's rock music fans than local indie rock groups.

With the mainstream triumph of Mandopop, the largest portion of music business in Taiwan lies in the hands of a few artist promoters, major transnational corporations, and KTV chains that can rightfully be identified as the main architects and benefitters of this regime¹⁷⁹. These dominant organizations have been largely steering away from the model of the original rock band for now more than 10 years, and have preferred to stick to the very approach that has made their success in the country: the cash and media intensive production of pop idols (and also of a few *boy and girl bands*, which are merely an extension of the idol model – ex: S.H.E.). Furthermore, the leading organizations of

¹⁷⁸ Most Taiwanese song idols combine several functions and can be seen and heard literally everywhere in the various layers of the local media landscape (not just the entertainment media), from radio, music videos, movies, advertisement, TV shows, magazines, etc. Also, the close ties that Taiwanese record labels enjoy with radio and TV stations is attested in a few theses and publications, including Huang's thesis (2009: 64-65).

¹⁷⁹ Three international conglomerates and two Asian labels dominate the Taiwanese market: Sony Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group, Universal Music Group, as well as Rock Records and Gold Typhoon Records (which was formed in 2008 when Gold Label bought the Taiwanese and Chinese subsidiaries of giant label EMI, itself mostly absorbed by Universal in November 2011). Also, large Taiwanese KTV chains like Party World and Holiday, whose profits surpass those of record labels, play a predominant role in the shaping of Taiwan's mainstream soundscape (Source: Huang & Frazier, 2007). Readers interested in the development of the music industry in Taiwan can consult Ho's thesis (2005).

the music industry seem to be at the source of a similar marginalization of the largest part of the local rock repertoire. This is notably carried out via a subjective filtering of music types in the multiple music contests that these same organizations hold or sponsor in major cities and universities throughout the island¹⁸⁰.

Lacking the financial resources, grassroots support, commercial expertise, media coverage and connections to create a high quality musical offering, and more importantly, to package and promote it in the appropriate way to reach up into the mainstream, virtually no indie rock band in Taipei can compete with the local Mandopop establishment¹⁸¹. Some might think that a potential solution for local indie rock artists would be to adapt to the current market and conform to the models, requirements and methods of major labels. To do so would generally imply being turned into idols, delegating most creative duties, and performing other people's material. This eventuality is vehemently opposed by virtually all of Taipei's rock bands – including OverDose, which has had discussions with a few major labels in recent years, as mentioned in section 3.2.4. For several local rockers, to abide by the industry's practices would represent an act of *perversity* (“變態” in the words of one of my informants¹⁸²); an unacceptable departure from the approaches, objectives and mindsets that pervade their

¹⁸⁰ According to my observations and the accounts of a few informants, the selection of winners is carried out by a jury composed of figures of the popular music industry, which obviously tends to favor individual singers or folk-rock singer-songwriters over rock bands. Most veteran indie rockers with whom I have raised the topic greatly condemn this form of “formatting”, and usually avoid participating in such contests. The most popular of these events are generally sponsored by major labels and entertainment media, while some are even broadcasted on television. This suggests that the main purpose of such events is indeed to help labels find new talent for the local pop music industry and provide content for the entertainment media.

¹⁸¹ Public media can potentially play a significant role in the development of an audience for different types of music and the promotion of indie artists, as it was demonstrated in several Euro-American countries, including in England (with the BBC) and Canada/Quebec (with the CBC/Radio-Canada). Readers interested in more details about the subject can consult the study produced by Ho, Tung-Hung and al. (2005).

¹⁸² Interviewee I, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, June 2011.

attachment to their musical activities¹⁸³. Thus, the lack of attention from the public, the media and the industry overall severely limit the economic prospects for the large majority of indie rock bands, even for those that enjoy a sizeable popularity at a national level. Indeed, the careers of even the most sought-after local indie rock bands more often than not stagnate short of significant mainstream success, while the entire indie scene, despite its remarkable liveliness and colorful presence in Taipei, is nonetheless relegated to a narrow margin of the Taiwanese music market.

Many members of the local indie scene, like this particular informant, offer a deeper explanation of the near-absence of rock bands in the country's mainstream soundscape:

After Mayday and Luantan released CDs (in the late 1990s), everybody thought that, in the future, rock could become part of the mainstream. But large record companies never made this happen. They were not familiar with this kind of business. So it split up again: popular (流行) and rock.[...] Abroad, all the rock music that we listened to in the 1990s was packaged by major popular labels.

-- Couldn't it be because the market in Taiwan is too small?

I don't think it's because of the market. I think it has to do with the business practices of these companies, they are afraid of changing the market.

-- The explosion of alternative music in Europe and America in the 1990s was also accompanied by a massive social movement among young people. There was no such thing in Taiwan, right? Could this explain the situation with rock music in the country?

¹⁸³ The insistence on performing original material can rightfully be perceived as a commitment to a principle of "authenticity", as opposed to the assumedly "artificial" or "forged" performances of pop stars. Yet, this commitment seems to go by itself and remains largely non-verbalized among local rockers. The question of authenticity is discussed profusely in the literature on rock music, rightfully so given that the international indie music movement emerged originally – and still appears today – as a reaffirmation of the "DIY" approach in reaction to the business practices of major music corporations. Yet authenticity is not, at least according to my observations, a moral warhorse of Taipei's indie rockers against the Mandopop regime. As I hinted earlier in section 3.3.2, very seldom have I heard local rockers condemn pop idols or other bands for being "fake" and singing songs that they didn't compose themselves. The main criticism that I heard among Taipei's indie rock musicians was not directed at pop artists themselves, but at the business practices and narrow-mindedness of the industry.

I think that, behind such phenomena, there must be a guy who makes money. He understands that young people need this anger, so he sees this band and makes this MV and promotion so as to make young people buy this record. In Taiwan, there's no such guy. Here, if they want to sell CDs, they think there's only one image (形像) they can choose: the pop idol. They don't know how to do other things, and they're afraid of not making money.[...] Let's imagine I take a CD from a Taiwanese rock band and have students from the NTU [the largest university in the country] listen to it, maybe they'll like it. But I don't have the money to have everybody listen to it. Such phenomena don't happen naturally. Things like MTV in the 1990s, behind them there's business people who have a vision. They can reverse the situation, but Taiwanese business people don't dare to do so. In Japan however, they did it well.¹⁸⁴

According to my observations, a lot of Taipei's rock musicians, including some of the rare veteran musicians who have achieved some economic success at a mainstream level, share a similar perspective on the music establishment and the situation of indie rock music in the country. They do seem to believe in the potential of the music they create, but think that they lack the means to sell it to a larger public. Apart from casting a thick shadow on the prospects of indie rock music in Taiwan, such an assessment can be seen as having the convenient effect of granting a greater overall freedom to local indie rockers. By attributing all economic agency to corporate entrepreneurs, one relieves indie musicians of the responsibility of their own failure to reach out and appeal to larger audiences, as such failure appears as the mere product of a fatality imposed by higher spheres of the commercial world. To some degree, being confronted with an indomitable economic complex becomes a license for indie rock bands to do whatever they want without much consideration for market factors perceived as out of control. In the case of Taiwan's indie rockers, this does not often result in a lot of musical experimentation, but it does help them cope with a lack of exposure.

As a matter of fact, one cannot help but wonder if a majority of local rock bands

¹⁸⁴ Interviewee G, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, September 2010.

have not somehow come to accept the current state of the local indie rock scene and the relative position of their band within it. And this regardless of the industry's questionable practices, or the numerous challenges and limitations that have hampered the activities of local rock bands over the years. While several local rockers don't mince words to deplore the actual situation of rock bands in the country, I have seldom heard calls among local rock bands to "revolt" against the music establishment in place, nor have I seen any materialization of a strong collective will and organized action to change things. I notably observed that very few of Taipei's indie rock bands showed proactivity, creativity and risk-taking when it came to promoting their music, reaching out to new audiences or the media, seeking sponsors, advertising their performances and mobilizing music fans to attend them, enlarging or solidifying a fan base, or seeking to add new performance opportunities to the city's small indie rock domain¹⁸⁵. The increasing ease with which local bands can access government subsidies for the production of a record (as detailed in section 3.3.3) can also be thought to contribute in the long term to furthering the detachment of local bands vis-à-vis the business aspect of modern rock music.

This prevalent attitude of *laissez-faire* that I sensed in recent years among the bulk of local bands was manifest in the words of one of informants, taken from a discussion about the local music industry and the situation of rock music in the Taiwanese soundscape:

¹⁸⁵ Arthur Chen, manager of the Legacy (Taipei's largest live house), makes a similar assessment of the limited concern for promotion and economic imperatives among local indie bands in a 2012 interview conducted for the website Gigguide: "I think the present bands pay too much attention on the development of their own music than to (developing) their audience/fans. It doesn't sound that important because there's not much connection with music, but the situation would become sort of an indulgence in self-admiration. In other words, by writing songs for yourselves, you may have been playing for decades but your audience is still small. That happens very often." (Source: <http://www.gigguide.tw/article-96>). The weaknesses of local indie rock bands in terms of management, professionalism and career development was also attested by Ding Yi-Wen in her 2004 research.

Music is not important for everybody. For me it's something very profound (很深的東西) and irreplaceable, but you cannot require that it be the same for everybody.[...] So we can try to do or change what's in our reach, but I don't think that the world has to become any different just because I think differently.¹⁸⁶

This starkly realist perspective implies a withdrawal from the public sphere. This is likely partly due to the fact that, contrary to indie bands in western countries, the vast majority of Taiwanese indie rock groups are left on their own, without a clear path and with only exceptional precedents to follow up to mainstream or international success¹⁸⁷. A majority of Taipei's veteran indie bands would certainly like to make a living with their music and performances, but never has one of them told me in concrete terms how they planned to achieve this. It is indeed understandable that, after having witnessed the failure of the near-totality of their predecessors to achieve a game-changing breakthrough, the majority of rock bands that compose the present-day scene do not know exactly what to do, where to start, or whether the eventual gains that could be garnered from a more proactive approach are worth extra efforts and risks.

The formidable odds that indie rock bands face in Taiwan could very well have generated a situation in which the indie rockers who keep on playing music during most of their twenties and thirties are not those whose priority is to achieve economic success. For the veteran indie rockers who keep involving themselves in world of music and in the local indie music scene, it is the process itself that counts. Their entire mode of existence

¹⁸⁶ Interviewee B, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, June 2011.

¹⁸⁷ In Taiwan, less than a handful of local rock bands can be said to have achieved substantial economic success. These most notably including pop-rock bands Mayday and Sodagreen. If the path to success is practically blurred out in Taiwan, this same path appears much more clearly in Europe, America and Japan, where audiences, media and music entrepreneurs pay substantial attention to artists playing types of music other than pop (including rock). In these countries, good indie bands have reasonable chances of developing their career by touring extensively in small- and medium-size venues, or by catching the attention of radio anchors, journalists, booking agents and record labels.

is built around their musical activities and the social environments of the local indie scene. My observations indeed suggest that the prevailing attitude among local indie rockers who have established themselves in the scene mainly consists in keeping on doing their own thing (i.e. to play music, participate in the scene while maintaining an alternative lifestyle) in the best conditions possible, while remaining on the lookout for any opportunity that may present itself (ex: occasions to perform, to produce and release a record, or to participate in music events overseas). In other words, it is as if the bands that compose Taipei's current indie rock scene, having accepted (or assumed) their inevitably small role in the Taiwanese music market, have moved on to make the best out of the resources at their disposal within the limits of the Taiwanese indie music scene. They are holding down the indie rock fort in case "the time of bands" ("樂團的時代", a common expression in the scene's narrative) finally comes to Taiwan. To me, it is this oversight of abstract economic motivations and the emphasis of other vital aspects of musical activities (whether this emphasis is voluntary or the product of unfavorable conjectures) that nurtures the spirit of comradery and the collective quest for self-realization that are, in my view, distinctive and precious traits of Taipei's indie rock scene.

3.5 - Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have sought to provide a representative overview of the stories, main musical activities and economic realities of the majority of veteran indie rock bands in Taipei, based on an extensive fieldwork and personal experience as participant in the local scene. Local rockers invest a tremendous amount of time, energy and resources in

their musical activities, whether in actual rehearsals, songwriting, recordings, and performances, or in the acquisition of the various skills that are inherent to these craft of the modern rock musician. This substantial commitment indicates that to play music for these people is something more than just a hobby. It is something of great importance that plays a defining role in their lives. Yet my observations show that achieving economic success is not the main objective of the vast majority of Taipei's indie rock bands. The presence of important limitations and the improbability of an economic success under the current configuration of the local music industry is definitely one of the main factors that has shaped Taipei's indie rock scene and the music activities of local rockers over the years. These inhibiting conjunctures don't seem to undermine the motivation of Taipei's indie rock musicians to keep on engaging consistently in their musical project and in a music-centered lifestyle. The surprising longevity and enduring level of activity of local rock bands over several years indeed show that there is a strong spirit of resistance in Taipei's indie rock scene. However, this ongoing struggle does not seem to be primarily grounded in a will to defy the local music industry's tight control on the Taiwanese music market. Clearly, motivations of a different order are at play here.

Excluding concrete ambitions of mainstream fame and fortune leaves the essential questionings of this thesis largely unanswered. What are the musical activities of Taipei's veteran indie rockers about? What exactly is the role of these activities in their lives? How to interpret this enduring involvement in the world of indie rock music?

The above description of the band activities of Taipei's indie rockers suggests that, beyond their musical aspect, these activities also encompass fundamental and far-reaching social, emotional and professional dimensions for those who take part in them.

The observation that several local indie musicians tend to turn away from approaches that would improve their chances of achieving mainstream success with their band(s) suggests that most of them favor and seek to maximize some of these other aspects of their musical experience and involvement in the Taiwanese rock scene. As part of my research, I set out to put the musical activities of local rockers in their broader human context to see if this could help make better sense of the kind of payoff that local indie rockers reap from all the efforts they invest into their musical activities. I therefore invite the reader to pursue this investigation by taking a closer look at the personal trajectories and socio-cultural environment of Taipei's veteran indie rockers.

Chapter 4 – Musical activities of local indie rock musicians as the cornerstone of an alternative mode of existence

4.1 - Introduction

By exploring the discourses, socio-cultural environment, lifestyles, backgrounds, and personal trajectories of my friends, acquaintances and informants in Taipei's indie rock scene, I realized that the musical activities of the majority of local veteran rockers were not primarily driven by precise objectives like the ambition of achieving celebrity or fortune – a perspective made very implausible given the economic context in which Taiwanese indie rock bands have evolved ever since the creation of the scene. Instead, the musical activities of most indie rock musicians in Taipei appear as the cornerstone of a larger life project, lived out day by day, which represents an authentic reaction against the conventional daily lives and trajectories of the majority of students and young adults in Taipei. More specifically, I came to the conclusion that local veteran indie rockers who get involved persistently in the world of music and the local indie scene do so to cultivate an alternative mode of existence based on the following elements: (1) a particular set of sensory experiences, emotions and enjoyment, (2) avoidance of the the “shangban zu” (上班族 – the Taiwanese equivalent of the Japanese *salaryman* or Anglo-European white-collar class) life style, and an access to a sense of (3) social connectedness, (4) and an adult and distinctive self-identity. As a crucial part of these meaningful pursuits, not only the musical activities of local rockers but also their particular backgrounds and material lifestyle allow them to experience and maintain such an alternative mode of existence.

Like the previous chapter, the following pages incorporate both descriptive and argumentative content. Section 4.2 will offer a short portrait of the socio-cultural environment of Taipei's local rockers. This overview will essentially feature an introduction to the tensed relationship between parents and children in the context of the traditional Taiwanese family, as well as a short depiction of the typical life trajectories and highly regimented daily existences of the large majority of Taipei's high school students and middle-class workers. In the subsequent sections, I will go on to develop some of the elements hinted at in chapter three and explain more in detail how the musical activities of local indie rockers provide not only an access to a particular set of powerful sensory experiences, emotions and enjoyment (section 4.3), but also opportunities and skills to generate flexible income, or land jobs that suit their interests (section 4.4). I will then argue that musical activities of local indie rockers offer the means and social loci to experience social connectedness (section 4.5), and social distinction as rock musicians and cultural elite (section 4.6).

In each of these segments, I will provide extra insights into the personal life trajectories and mindsets of my informants in order to show how these contrast with the everyday existence and life trajectory of ordinary students and *shangban zu* of similar socio-economic and cultural upbringing. I will also describe some of the main dimensions of their struggle with the pressure stemming from everyday economic imperatives, their parents' expectations and the high competition of the Taiwanese educational system and job market. Additionally, I will discuss how the specific backgrounds and lifestyles of local rockers potentially enable them to maintain an alternative mode of existence that is built around their musical activities. With this broad

approach, I aim at drawing a short but representative overview of the story of an average veteran indie rocker in Taipei. This in turn will hopefully help the reader to better understand the meaning of these people's life project and the nature of their attachment to their band(s), to Taiwan's indie rock scene, and to rock music in general.

4.2 - About the traditional Taiwanese family and the life of middle-class students and *shangban zu* in Taipei

Before going further, it is necessary to outline the traditional character of most Taiwanese families and the daily realities of most students and young adults in Taipei. This short portrait should help the reader to situate the singular activities, trajectories and familial backgrounds of Taipei's indie rockers (the subject of the subsequent sections) within the larger context of Taiwanese society.

Readers who are familiar with social life in a community or country of Chinese cultural roots are well aware that Taiwanese parents – and very often also grandparents and other close relatives – play a preponderant role in the shaping of young people's lives. To some degree, the effect of familiar authority figures and their expectations tends to be more pronounced and obvious throughout the lives of Taiwanese people than in most families of Western Europe or North America. For this reason, relationships (and *negotiations*) with parents can hardly be excluded nor treated separately from the core of any account of the lifestyles and academic and professional trajectories of local young adults, regardless of their particular interests or activities. At least, such is the conclusion that emerged from my fieldwork and overall experience in the country.

One of the keys to understanding the role of parents in the lives of young

Taiwanese people is the concept of *filial piety* (孝): a Confucian principle – part of the philosopher’s theoretical system for social order – that has been at the very core of the Chinese tradition for nearly two and a half millennia, and still pervades the Taiwanese social fabric to this day. Filial piety can be roughly presented as a general guide of conduct and thought that places the relationship between an individual and his or her father and mother as a central moral priority, while particularly highlighting one’s sense of duty towards his or her parents and ancestors¹⁸⁸. It notably stipulates that one is obliged not only to take care of his or her parents during (as well as after) their lifetime, but also to generally abide by their will and show them utmost respect in all circumstances.

More than just an abstract set of principles, filial piety plays a very concrete role in Taiwanese society, and this throughout the existence of basically all Taiwanese people. To some extent, its presence as a cultural norm in Taiwan can be seen as reinforcing the role of children and grandchildren as vital financial providers and caregivers of elderly family members (ex: parents and grandparents). This aspect is particularly important given the minimal level of social insurance, welfare and pension provided by the government of the R.O.C. to adults and elderly people¹⁸⁹. But the implications of filial piety on Taiwanese social life go much further than this honorable social function. Its precepts notably induce a dimension of authority in the relationship between children and their parents. The presence of a major communicational and cultural gap between the 1970-1990 generation (people now in their twenties, thirties and early forties) and the

¹⁸⁸ Source: Chinese Wikipedia entry for “filial piety”.

¹⁸⁹ In Taiwan, the workers of only a few trades (ex: teachers, civil servants, or servicemen) benefit from substantial and extensive welfare and pension after their retirement. There is however a comprehensive health care system that offers good coverage to practically all citizens and foreign residents of Taiwan.

generation of their parents is very manifest in the life stories of the great majority of young people in Taipei. In line with the tenets of filial piety, a majority of Taiwanese parents impose a strict moral order marked by discipline and traditional values on their children throughout their development. This regime usually includes a constant pressure to reach a good economic situation as an adult in order to support one's parents financially, and eventually to marry and have children who will perpetuate the family's last name¹⁹⁰.

As a cornerstone of the Taiwanese moral order, filial duty is a key part of the definition of what it means to lead a *normal* life in Taiwan. Even in Taipei's modern and more international urban context, obedience to filial piety (expressed in Chinese under the verbal form “孝順”) can be felt in the daily behavior and character of a majority of Taiwanese young people. When making important life decisions, most of them usually strive not to upset nor contradict openly their parents, while also showing great personal restraint in their daily existence¹⁹¹. Also, my observations have shown that both young people and parents tend to suffer greatly from the unavoidable episodes of misconduct, rebellious behaviors, or failure to abide by the parents' will that inevitably occur at all

¹⁹⁰ Filial piety traditionally applies differently to sons and daughters, as well as to elder and younger sons. Parents used to – and still do to some extent – have different and greater expectations from their elder son than from their daughter(s). However, this tradition has been subjected to important changes over the years in Taiwan, and expectations from parents tend to be increasingly similar for both sons and daughters. In a 2008 article about Taipei female indie music icon Wan-Ting and Taiwan's indie music scene in general, ethnographer Mack Hagood points out that “gender plays a particular role in Taiwanese indie music, as patriarchy ironically gives women room to play, leading to their greater representation in music” (Hagood 2008: 93). Apart from confirming the sizeable number of female musicians in Taipei's indie music scene, my observations unfortunately do not allow me to produce further considerations regarding the allegedly exceptional character of the female representation in the scene, or to link this phenomenon to the attribution of particular gender roles in the context of the Taiwanese family.

¹⁹¹ For example, a lot of Taiwanese parents do not allow their daughter to spend the night outside of home before their marriage. Judging by examples taken from my social network, most young women who are subjected to such a rule will largely abide by it – although not without working around it secretly from time to time – sometimes well into their thirties and even if they have a boyfriend.

stages of one's life. As a matter of fact, a certain spirit of obedience to authority, partly rooted in the ideals of filial duty, can be said to permeate the entire social life in Taiwan. Most Taiwanese parents indeed expect their children to favor safety and pragmatic considerations (the adjective “現實” was often used by my informants in this context) over their personal interests or ideals of happiness when making important life decisions. I should mention that the parents of indie rockers are seldom supportive of their children's musical endeavors, and do still pressure them to give up their pursuits, a topic I will explore further in the following sections. A vast majority of Taiwanese parents insist on the importance of favoring schoolwork over extracurricular activities, of doing one's utmost to be accepted in the country's best universities, of choosing a discipline at university with good job prospects over one's favorite subject, of living at home until marriage, of finding a steady yet generally very demanding full-time job (commonly expressed by the verb “上班”) rather than a more fulfilling but less stable employment, or of getting married and having children instead of opting for a different relational lifestyle. If some exceptions and variations do exist, this highly conservative model for life can be considered the predominant discourse among parents of young Taiwanese adults born between 1975 and 1985¹⁹². Such is also the type of life that a majority of local youngsters of this generation come to accept at some point in their life – usually as a direct

¹⁹² While the present chapter does include some critical perspectives on the conservative character of social life in Taipei, it is not the objective of this work to produce a comprehensive assessment of the life trajectories and representations of present-day Taiwanese parents (i.e. the generation now aged in its late forties, fifties and sixties). One must keep in mind that, as mentioned in section 2.2, Taiwan has underwent major socio-economic and political transformations over the past 40 years, including processes of industrialization and democratization, and a spectacular increase in terms of standard of living. In order to be properly understood, the particular values and attitudes of the past Taiwanese generation – as well as the evolution thereof – must be situated in its historical and sociocultural contexts; a task that can unfortunately not be carried out in this thesis.

consequence of their family's insistent pressure or of an enduring period of financial precariousness.

The traditional values and moral order pertaining to the parents-children relationship can also be said to pervade the whole Taiwanese society, from social life in classrooms and companies, to cultural institutions like male-female relationships and weddings. Here, I particularly invite the reader to consider the highly conservative aspect of everyday life and overall condition of most high school students and full-time workers in Taipei.

Engaged in the country's highly competitive and strenuous test-centric educational system, junior and senior high school students are generally the object of substantial pressure and strict control from their parents. High grades are the absolute priority, and it is very common for families to add to their children's already tight schedule by having them stay after class to do extra schoolwork. A lot of children are also sent to additional Chinese, math, science or English classes on week nights and weekends in specialized establishments – the notorious *cram schools* or Taiwanese *buxibans* (補習班). With such a heavy burden of homework (and in some cases also housework) most young people are left with very little spare time to develop personal interests or see friends. This is especially the case in the last year of junior high and senior high school, where children have to redouble their efforts in preparation for the entrance examinations leading to the country's best senior high schools and universities¹⁹³.

¹⁹³ During those crucial years, schools notably shorten summer vacations to have their students do a general revision of the previous years' material. It is also not uncommon for parents to suppress all of their children's extracurricular activities during this period to ensure total dedication to their school duty. Personally, I realized how tensed the last year at senior high school can be for local students through my activity as an English instructor in the first year of my stay in the country. Also, I once met a 17 year old

For a majority of students in Taipei, this daily pressure eases during the 3 to 6 years that the majority of them spend at university (usually from 17 to 24 years old). Although most undergraduate programs still require a considerable amount of work (especially in the country's best academic establishments and most sought-after disciplines), the flexible schedules of universities tend to leave students with substantially more leisure time than in high school. However, the increasing emphasis on pursuing advanced studies in Taiwan or abroad oftentimes forces local students to devote themselves almost entirely for a period of a few months to more than a year to their preparation for entrance examinations to a Taiwanese graduate school (called “research institutes” in Taiwan – 研究所), English proficiency tests (ex: TOEFL) or other aptitude tests (ex: GMAT) usually required by North-American and European universities.

Following graduation, completion of their compulsory military service (for young men), returning from a few years of study abroad or the termination of their studies, the vast majority of young adults have little option but to seek a full-time job in Taiwan's very competitive employment market¹⁹⁴. Full-time employment in an office or in the service industry is the overwhelming norm in Taipei, and the lifestyle of the urban working class is the prevalent mode of existence in the country's major cities. It is no secret that the realities of full-time employment in Taiwanese companies are among the

exchange student from France at a small rock music contest in Taipei County who, despite her remarkable level of Chinese, had her spend the year in a class of 14-15 year olds. The reasons for this was that the direction of the local senior high school and parents feared she would represent a major distraction for students of her class would she been allowed to study with students of her age, who were in their last year at high school, and thus in preparation for the challenge ahead. This example illustrates the climate of fierce competition reigning in Taiwanese junior and senior high schools during the year that precedes national examinations.

¹⁹⁴ The Chinese expression “出社會” (literally “getting out into society”, which can be translated as “leaping into the real world”) is generally used in Taiwan to refer to the official beginning of one's professional life after the completion of his or her education.

harshest of all developed countries. Apart from exceptionally long working hours – which usually include unpaid daily overtime and occasional work on weekends – a majority of full-time positions can be described as low-paid (TWD 30,000 or approx. USD\$ 1,000 per month on average¹⁹⁵), extremely demanding and highly repetitive, while relations among coworkers and with the management are too often characterized by severe competitiveness, rigid hierarchy, and as abuse of authority¹⁹⁶. Promotions and salary raises are not only generally very difficult to acquire, but also come at a cost. As a worker receives more responsibility in a local firm, his or her salary increases (up to TWD 45,000 – 60,000, between USD\$ 1,500 and USD\$ 2,000 for a position as a project manager), so do the overall pressures and the number of weekly hours he or she has to deliver.

The social realities described above represent the predominant socio-cultural backdrop against which the story of Taipei’s indie rockers unfolds itself. Not only do these elements enable one to highlight some of the particularities of the life trajectories and backgrounds of local indie rock musicians, but more importantly, these can help make better sense of the meaning of their musical activities and way of life in general. Such will be my objective in the following sections, using the different roles of musical

¹⁹⁵ The revenues of ordinary full-time workers of virtually all trades are exceptionally alike in Taipei. Monthly wages of employees between 25 and 35 years old usually vary between TWD\$ 25,000 and 35,000 NT. This situation where all full-time jobs share similar wage conditions makes one of my informants (interviewee A) say cynically that “Taiwan is in fact more socialist than Mainland China!”

¹⁹⁶ The International Institute for Management and Development, one of the authorities on questions pertaining to world business competitiveness, estimated in 2010 that the average number of hours a person worked per year in Taiwan was 2,074 (for a weekly average of 39.88, without subtracting holidays and vacations), which is 10 to 15% more than most western countries (Source: IMD World Competitiveness Online 2010). However, these numbers would certainly be deemed very conservative to most people who are familiar with the Taiwanese society, as daily overtime – usually unpaid – and work on weekends are very commonplace among workers, especially in Taipei. The harsh working conditions that prevail in Taipei can even be thought to represent a genuine social problem: according to most of my friends and acquaintances in the country, a substantial proportion of Taiwanese full-time white collars feel overworked, bored, and *alienated* in their professional life.

activities in their lives – the key interpretative elements of this thesis – as avenues of exploration into the lives of Taipei’s indie rock musicians.

4.3 - Indie rock musical activities as an access to a unique set of sensory experiences, emotions and enjoyment and an alternative to the perceived monotony of high school, university and full-time work

One of the major discoveries that I made during my experience and fieldwork in Taipei’s indie rock scene was that, for local indie rockers, musical activities provide an access to a range of powerful sensory experiences that the ordinary activities of an ordinary life in Taiwan, from high school to daily full-time work in adulthood, simply cannot provide. More precisely, by devoting a large portion of their time to musical activities like listening to music, watching music videos, attending live concerts (or watching videos thereof), playing an instrument, writing songs, acquiring new equipment, rehearsing with their band(s), and especially, performing live, indie rock musicians actively seek, experience and cultivate richer and stronger feelings, emotions and sheer pleasure than they would allegedly experience were they leading a *normal* life. The subtle and far-reaching nature of this powerful phenomenon makes it very difficult to account for it in detail – an effort that would require much greater capacities and resources than those pertaining to the present monograph. That is why, not unlike most of my informants themselves, I will limit myself to outlining this particular role of musical activities in the lives of local indie rockers using simple words. Words like those of this particular informant, captured in a conversation about his “dream in life”, which illustrate well the place of music in the existence of a lot of musicians in Taiwan and around the world:

I hope I can keep on using music to make my life more ‘feelingful’, whether it be by making music for others or receiving other people’s music.¹⁹⁷

Interestingly enough, the most fundamental element that drives Taipei’s indie rockers to get involved in musical activities, what continuously fuels their motivation to keep on playing and thereby contributes to shaping their entire lives might simply be a deep enjoyment and craving for the range of stimulations that their musical activities provide them. Allusions to some kind of addiction to this particular set of sensory experiences, without which “something would be missing in life”, are recurrent in the discourses of my informants, but were also attested by a few other researchers in the field of rock music¹⁹⁸.

The high-point of these sensory experiences unquestionably resides in live performance. As I described in the previous chapter, stage appearances can be very powerful moments that can sometimes transport the rock performer into a blissful sensual and emotional otherness that contrasts sharply with the sense of reality that one ordinarily inhabits in everyday life. For reasons of economy, I will not repeat nor document further in this segment how unique and intense the experience of indie rock performances can be (readers may return to the section 3.3.4 for some details on this phenomenon).

However powerful live performances may be, the bulk of music-related sensory experiences and enjoyment pervading the everyday existence of local indie rockers takes

¹⁹⁷ Original quotation from my informant: “希望可以一直用音樂這件事情讓我的音樂有感覺，不管是我做音樂給別人還是我接受別人的音樂”。Interviewee B, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, June 2011.

¹⁹⁸ These words by a Parisian underground musician, quoted by French sociologist Jean-Marie Seca in 2001, reveal an similar attachment to the sensations that rock music can provide (coupled with an opposition to the monotony of a regular day job): “[I] really feel something [in music] that I personally couldn’t find anywhere else in society, or through work... I won’t say ‘Yeah, I had a good day at work today!’ This won’t give me all the things that [music gives me]. If I didn’t do it [play music], sincerely[...] there are things I think I wouldn’t have experienced.[...] It’s hard to explain, but it’s a trip I have never felt anywhere else. It’s adrenalin. It’s passion!” (free translation from the original French, Seca 2001: 72).

the form of a rather quiet, personal, and sometimes challenging exploration of the endless universe of music (a dimension which can be said to encompass songwriting). This exploratory process is ostensibly geared toward generating successful live performances, but its value as a vector of satisfaction unquestionably extends further. Whether they are familiarizing themselves with new music or with the culture, the craft and the technicalities of music (ex: music theory, analysis of existing music, research about some equipment or sound effects, etc.), most of Taipei's indie rock musicians live out and cultivate their passion in a multitude of simple moments marked by the enthusiasm and sheer pleasure of creation, discovery, learning and sharing. Rock music offers a formidable defense against boredom, as there is always something to do, create, practice, learn, discuss or think about for active indie rock musicians. Feeding endless hours of enthusiastic discussion are music-related topics such as the acquisition of new musical equipment, various issues pertaining to sound quality, reviews of recently bought music, personal musical experiences and projects, news about upcoming concerts, recent events on the Taiwanese indie scene or the deeds of fellow musicians, appreciations or analysis of some artists' music and skills, as well as anecdotes from the lives of rock stars. Such discussions act as a social bridge among Taipei's indie rock musicians and rock enthusiasts

As a matter of fact, the average indie rocker in Taipei is nothing like the cliché image of extreme hedonist and urban delinquent often associated with the rock musicians in the global popular culture¹⁹⁹. In reality, most local rockers are rather geeky boys and

¹⁹⁹ The sensations and enjoyment that local indie rockers seek are quite different from the more extreme types of excitement pursued by young people who frequent Taipei's nightclubs, or KTV establishments. The dissimilarity is even more pronounced when compared to the city's shady (but vastly tolerated) high-class KTV and "judian" (酒店) milieus, which are highly controversial but nonetheless represent an

girls who spend most of their free time sitting at home, playing around with music software or an instrument, watching music videos or reading music-related articles online, and rehearsing with bandmates. In so doing, local rockers not only gradually acquire an encyclopedia-like knowledge of popular music in its multiple aspects – especially the Taiwanese, Euro-American and Japanese rock repertoires – but also develop significant skills in the intricate *science* of sound engineering and music production²⁰⁰.

The stories of my informants reveal that this fascination with the various dimensions of rock music, musicianship and culture is rooted in adolescence. It can be linked to a reaction against the perceived monotony of high school life, and to a rejection of a life devoid of acute feelings and powerful sensory experiences. To see how some local indie rockers became interested in rock music and culture can help to better understand the overall meaning of music activities in their lives, while also helping to identify some particular elements of the backgrounds of Taipei's veteran indie rockers. In the most typical of cases, a distinct fascination with western and Taiwanese rock or related popular music seem to have emerged at an early age, generally at junior or senior high school, with youngsters paying particular attention to media content like MTV and

integral part of Taiwan's entertainment culture. While cheap beer and light drinks with some friends are popular among local rock music enthusiasts, the drug consumption, repeated alcohol abuse, high degree of sexual casualness commonly found in Taipei's clubbing scene are largely excluded from even the most heated celebrations in the local indie rock circles. Besides the schedules and environments of live venues like Legacy and The Wall (not unlike the Zeitgeist live house before it) were conceived to include youngsters under 18 in their clientele. Indie rock performances usually start and finish much earlier than a night out in one of Taipei's hyperactive discotheques, while the casual atmosphere of camaraderie and equality between men and women that prevails in the indie rock spheres offer a sharp contrast with the spectacular display of gender stereotypes that can be seen on a Saturday night in Taipei's entertainment areas such as the Neo 19 (Xinyi district – 信義區), the Eastern District (better known as *Dongqu* – 東區) or Linsen North Road (林森北路). From my personal observations, these few elements are good indicators of the general spirit that prevails in the local indie rock scene.

²⁰⁰ This topic will be addressed further in section 4.4.

radio shows²⁰¹. The strong figure of the rock star in action, along with rock music's unique capacity to spark great enthusiasm and emotional reactions, may partly explain this mysterious appeal for music among teenagers, as expressed by one of my informants:

In junior high school, I began watching MTV, that's how I started being really interested in music.[...] I wanted to play guitar because of rock bands. At first it was the image, playing the guitar, like rock musicians. It was the imagination I had of it, but I also liked the music a lot, I thought it was great, and the melodies I created for myself in my head were not bad too.²⁰²

From the moment of their early discovery of rock music on, music rapidly became a key part of their leisure time and inner world of the young music enthusiasts, as the overall appeal of rock music seems to initiate a long crescendo and expands to other dimensions of musical experience.

For a majority of my informants, this exploration started by learning an instrument (most often the guitar) and sharing this interest with specific classmates and friends²⁰³. Here, a few singularities can be highlighted from the stories and backgrounds of Taipei's veteran indie rock musicians. During high school, a lot of future local rockers started to invest a substantial amount of attention and time outside school to their fascination with music, which oftentimes included guitar classes and involvement in a music *shetuan* on top of countless hours of practice, music listening and songwriting at

²⁰¹ This phenomenon highlights that the entertainment media can play a key role in the development of listening habits and cultural trends among young people and the general public. On a different note, a certain sensibility to music or art in general, whether it was innate or induced by the participation in music classes at an early age, also seems to represent a contributing factor. A lot of Taiwanese parents have their children take private lessons of classic instruments like the piano or the violin. About half of the musicians I know have mentioned having taken such classes as a child, but most of them do not seem to have particularly enjoyed the experience. Still, it is more than likely that these classes do contribute to instilling some degree of sensitiveness to music that can later be applied to various types of music and art.

²⁰² Interviewee G, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, September 2010.

²⁰³ Interestingly enough, most of the Taiwanese bassists and drummers that I know personally started to play their instrument either because of a supposed "lack of talent" at guitar or because of a manifest need for a bassist or drummer to form a band with friends in high school or university.

home²⁰⁴. A participation in an early cover or original band (an activity which a majority of my informants did undertake in senior high school) as well as a little time for social life (a very important dimension in the teenage years of all my informants) must also be added to the portrait of Taipei's typical rocker. Most of my informants admitted that they were bored at school at the time, and were more interested in their daily musical and social activities. The personal background of indie musicians reveals that a lot of them come from rather permissive families (by local standards) that did not particularly push them to achieve outstanding academic results, or incite them to stay in school after class to study (a very common practice in Taiwanese high schools)²⁰⁵. It is also worth noticing that none of my informants mentioned having attended extra classes in a cram school (*buxiban*) during their teenage years, which suggests that they had more leisure time at their disposal than a lot of their classmates. This relative openness of parents towards the extracurricular leisure time and activities of their children – a trait which a lot of European or American readers might take for granted – is a somewhat less frequent phenomenon among families in Taipei (at least for the generation born before the lifting of martial law in 1987)²⁰⁶. More importantly, it can be identified as one of the key factors that determine who among young music apprentices will quit early, and who has the chance to invest oneself more substantially in music and eventually become an established musician in the local indie scene.

The example of this particular informant, despite the inevitable idiosyncrasies

²⁰⁴ According to my observations, high school and university music *shetuans* played a limited role in my informants' early interest for rock music, if not as a hub that offered material support and social occasions that in turn enabled apprentice musicians to know each other and further develop their interest outside school.

²⁰⁵ A few of my informants' parents could be qualified as exceptions in Taiwan, in the sense that they were generally open to and supportive of their children's early interests and projects.

²⁰⁶ This element can indicate a rather lenient attitude towards academic performance, the presence of economic limitations in families (cram schools can be quite expensive), or a combination of both factors.

pertaining to his personal life, can be held as overall very representative of the early steps in the world of music of many local musicians that I have known over the years:

I started playing the guitar at the end of junior high school because I was bored. My grades were good and I used the money I received from a scholarship to buy a guitar and take guitar lessons. In senior high school, I went to the guitar shetuan, but it wasn't much fun because I went to a private school, and everybody stayed at their desk after class to study.[...] I did not have any opportunity to perform, so I kept on practicing on my own and with some classmates. We were going three times a week to APA [a well-known rock school located in the Ximending area]. In senior high school, schoolwork gives you a lot of pressure, but you still want to play music [玩團]. So you have to work hard to be good at school [很努力把書唸好], because your parents will only let you play if you have good results. My mom let me do whatever I wanted, it did not matter to her. Most of my classmates were taking extra classes and stuff at night to study, but I did not do that at all. I told her [my mother] that there were other things I wanted to do, and she said it was ok as long as I did not turn bad [不要變壞就好]. Parents at home think that if you're doing ok at school, you're a good kid. So that's the approach I used... [我就用這樣的方式...].²⁰⁷

Among other things, the above quotation illustrates the potential role of an early interest in band musical activities as a reaction against – or potential remedy for – the relative monotony that characterizes the lives of most teenage students in Taipei. This example also allows me to highlight another trait that can be found in the backgrounds of an increasing majority of young rockers in Taipei, namely a natural aptitude for school, or at least the absence of major problems in that aspect of their life. This last point could be key in Taipei's socio-cultural context. As explained by my informant, even in the rather tolerant families, the relative freedom and space to develop personal interests – or from the usual perspective of Taiwanese adults, to *entertain* oneself as pleased after school hours – is often granted by parents with the general condition that their children maintain good grades.

²⁰⁷ Interviewee C, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, March 2011.

A large proportion of the local indie rockers I got acquainted with over the years had a university degree. It is generally during their time at university that younger bands get more seriously engaged in their musical projects and start to establish themselves in the scene. In this process, the range and intensity of their musical experiences also increases. Future veteran bands notably start to perform more regularly and in front of larger crowds at live venues and music festivals, release their first album (or EP), attend more concerts by local and international artists, and socialize more consistently in the indie music circles.

The marriage between a serious involvement in a band and studying at university might at first seem uneasy. But this tension is more apparent than real, as university years usually represent the period in which Taipei's indie rockers can devote themselves the most fully to their musical activities. Local indie rockers tend to avoid career-oriented and highly competitive branches like law, business or engineering, and prefer to register in language-, arts-, humanities- and communication-related programs. In addition to being more in line with their personal interests, these programs give them access to good universities without requiring exceptional results in nationwide examinations²⁰⁸. Also, such disciplines are generally less demanding and more flexible than others, especially if compared to the austere working schedule of Taiwanese senior high schools. In short, this approach allows them to (at least partially) comply with their parents' expectations of

²⁰⁸ When it comes to schools and university in Taiwan, the most important criterion is generally the reputation of the establishment rather than the specific program in which one studies. In their application to universities, students usually have to choose three disciplines that they would like to study (in order of preference). This way, a lot of applicants whose first two choices were more competitive disciplines (like law or international business) end up being accepted only in the department that they chose third, very often a discipline that is traditionally less sought-after (ex: social sciences or foreign languages). Still, a lot of local students prefer to go to a more prestigious university, or potentially try to switch to a different program in the second year or for their M.A. rather than going to a less prestigious school to study a discipline that corresponds to their interests.

academic success; to widen their professional options for the future; and to allow them to dedicate a maximum amount of time and attention to their band – where their heart and true interest is.

Additionally, university is very often used by local musicians (but also a lot of young Taiwanese men in general) as a device to *save some time* before going to the military or entering the job market²⁰⁹. By taking only a few classes per semester and taking leaves of absence when opportune, young musicians can stay up to 5 or even 7 years at university, which allows them to devote the largest part of their agenda to music and a part-time job²¹⁰. Studying at a slower pace and for a prolonged time also allows them to be more able to select a less inconvenient moment to do their military service and avoid the predictable increase of parental pressure that usually follows the completion of their studies (or leave therefrom).

These advantages to attending university are apparent in the trajectories of several of my friends and acquaintances in the scene, including this particular informant, who managed to greatly develop himself as a musician during his studies thanks to a minimum of sacrifice and tactful negotiation:

When I was small, my parents encouraged me to pursue my interests (做我的興趣), but then they wanted me to go to university, so I went to university for them. I took 5 years to graduate. I once told very frankly to one of my professors that, in fact, I really did not want to study (我根本不要唸書). [I met up with him] and told him: ‘I’m sorry, but this month, I [and my band] will be releasing an album. I simply have to do this. But this month it’s the mid-term exams. I really

²⁰⁹ Young Taiwanese men are usually called up for their compulsory military service a few weeks to a few months after they lose their student status, i.e. when they do not register to university or do not apply for a temporary leave at the beginning of a semester.

²¹⁰ In some cases, studies seem to occupy such a marginal place in the lives of indie musicians in Taipei that they hardly mention it in conversations, and their lifestyle barely shows any particular trace of academic activities from the exterior. In some cases, it is only after several months and even years of acquaintance with some of my musician friends that I learnt that they were indeed still officially students.

want to complete my studies. I want to do it, but I realized that it's for my parents, I don't want them to worry about me. So please don't make things too difficult for me.' The professor understood my position and helped me to apply for a temporary leave without being expelled, so I could graduate the following year.²¹¹

According to my observations, this example is very typical of the general attitude of local rockers toward studies: a majority of them do go to university and try to make the best out of these years, but they don't generally wish to invest themselves particularly in the realization of academic objectives. Several of my informants, now in their late twenties and early thirties, admitted being bored by campus life and remaining quite distant from it, as most of their life was happening outside the campus. Over the years, plenty of cases of local rockers who interrupted their formal education or did not pursue further studies were brought to my attention, a majority of which appeared to be the result of thoughtful life decisions; not a question of aptitude at school. When forced to choose between staying in Taiwan with fellow bandmates and family, or pursuing advanced studies abroad – which would often irremediably imply the end or temporary dissolution of their band – several local musicians prefer not to leave their band and invest even more energy into their musical activities²¹². Such was notably the case of one of my informants, whose love for his group and loyalty to his friends incited him to refuse a full scholarship to study in the United States.

The alternative character of the music- and sensations-centered lifestyle of a majority of veteran rock musicians in Taipei is made obvious when it is contrasted with the rather austere life regime of the urban *shangban zu* (the Taiwanese white-collar class).

²¹¹ Interviewee H, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, April 2009.

²¹² Each summer, numerous bands in Taipei split or lose members for reason of studies abroad. One notable example of this phenomenon are rock bands “The Tube” and “Mojo” which both took a long “break” (the verb “休息” is commonly used to refer to such situations) after some of their members left to pursue further studies.

Most of my friends in the scene, some of whom do currently work or have worked full-time in the past, are rather uncomfortable with the working class' conventional mode of existence. Such is notably the case of one of my informants: a veteran indie guitarist, guitar instructor, and theater performer, whose life is dedicated to the pursuit of art, intellectual discussions and powerful experiences in general. The personality and particular background of this informant definitely make him a very singular individual in the local indie scene, yet his distance from the *shangban* lifestyle (and inner incomprehension thereof) nonetheless illustrates a common stance among bands in Taipei:

If I can imagine to 'shangban'? [laugh] I guess I can imagine... it's simply not fun. No way [不行]. I try to keep myself in a condition that makes me feel 'alive' [保持一個活著的狀態], to work full-time is not really living [上班比較不像活著]. It's not natural.[...] Musicians and artists have a different role [in society]. People have strong needs for such things, for example, to listen to music.²¹³

One can easily understand how, for people who have experienced and are longing for the intensely sensitive and emotional stimulation that music and a rock band's activities can provide, the more prosaic realities of full-time work simply don't *feel* like being *really* alive. The highly fragmented working history of some of my informants also speaks in this sense. Among other examples, the professional trajectory of several of them shows that they have a particularly low tolerance for boredom and for the lack of respect from bosses in the workplace. This made them change job on a frequent and unpredictable basis – in most cases much more frequently than they changed bands. As it will be described more in details in the next section, several rockers prefer to do a few small jobs in the indie scene or in the music or service industry rather than occupying a regular

²¹³ Interviewee G, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, September 2010.

white-collar position. There are also several occurrences of people who go back to university, giving music lessons, and developing their band's activities after having worked full-time for a number of years.

Some local rockers are very outspoken when it comes to criticizing the conventional life trajectories of Taipei's *shangban zu*. The reasons for their opposition are multiple and go beyond the fear of an emotionless life or concerns for time management. The decision not to pursue a white-collar career also results in part from general considerations for quality of life. When asked about what differentiates his approach to life from that of the local working class, one of my informants, a veteran indie musician and music instructor, renders his vision of things in surprisingly strong words:

To me, to work full time (上班) is to live just to make money. You work for your boss, you do lots of things for him, but in the end you gain nothing more than money. [...] Most people have the same dream, like their parents told them, of having a stable revenue, building a family, having a pension. Everybody does the same things for these same goals, until they're old [emphasis on “老”]. I think it's a horrible thing. They accept to be put into the same model until they're old and die. Terrible! Of course people who have money, they can do what they want, but their worries exceed their fortune. They're so afraid not to have money, now and when they're old. But how can you know how long you'll live? How do you be sure that in the future your life will be better? [When you work full time], you can barely rest, you're always tired, you can't do what you like. When you do what you like, it's only to relax. But me, I get up in the morning, I'm already relaxed. I don't have much money, but I have enough to eat, I have friends, I can go to the movies... When I'm ready to make music, I can invest 100% of my attention into it.²¹⁴

The semantic field and conceptual oppositions that permeate this informant's discourse reveal a few key components of the critical outlook that some indie rockers pose on the *shangban* life trajectory. To dedicate oneself to a full-time job is depicted as a failed strategy that consists in the sacrifice of one's personal happiness and satisfaction in

²¹⁴ Interviewee H, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, April 2009.

life for money and a hypothetical sense of security. In this view, the working class' narrative is also associated with typified ideas such as oldness (vs youth), death (vs life), stress (vs calmness), worries (vs peace of mind), tiredness (vs energy), hypothetical future gratification (vs palpable immediate gratification), restraint (vs freedom), or sameness (vs originality), the counterparts of which are implicitly attributed to the musician's non-conformist way of life. The human costs of an ordinary full-time job seem too great and unreasonable to some local rockers. According to my experience, a majority of local indie rockers share a similar perspective on the mode of existence of the Taiwanese white-collar and the role of work, money and security in one's life decisions.

The insistence on powerful sensory experiences, freedom and quality of life among Taipei's indie rockers also suggests that a majority of them might not want their musical activities to become a major source of worries, stress and restriction; not unlike a regular full-time job. This could partly explain why most rock bands in Taipei prefer to maximize the enjoyment and social dimensions of their musical activities rather than investing themselves fully in the formidable and highly risky enterprise of achieving a mainstream breakthrough in the world of music²¹⁵. It goes without saying that the strong criticism (and in a lot of cases, outright refusal) of a more conventional life trajectory sets local indie rockers as marginal in the Taiwanese society; a situation which raises a few questions regarding their economic condition. Yet it must be specified that a lot of indie rockers in Taipei can afford (literally) to hold such a critical discourse on the white-collar lifestyle, as their musical activities, Taipei's music circles, but oftentimes also parental support allow them to compensate rather easily for the gap in revenue that incurs from a refusal to join the regular workforce. This topic will be the object of the next section.

²¹⁵ Please see section 3.4 for more details on the economic realities of Taipei's indie rock bands.

4.4 - Indie rock activities as a means to acquire the skills and opportunities to generate income and find alternatives to the *shangban* way of life

Apart from the fear of a monotonous and sensationless existence mentioned in the previous section, the difficulty to conjugate full-time work and musical activities on the same is another major reason for which a majority of Taipei's veteran indie rock musicians seek an alternative to the *shangban* mode of existence. For those who want to be able to focus on their musical projects, it is imperative to find a more flexible way of generating revenue, and equally important to adopt a corresponding material lifestyle. Fortunately, the social connections, musical skills and practical knowledge that local rock musicians acquire through their musical activities can give them access to a variety of flexible sources of income. When coupled with a rather minimalistic lifestyle and some form of parental support, the limited revenues thus produced can suffice to sustain one's social and musical activities for an extended period of time. Also, the professional skills of the veteran indie rocker can offer long-term prospects for stable and full-time music- or sound-related positions in the Taiwanese media or music industry.

Most young Taiwanese adults receive substantial pressure from their family to find a full-time job with stable income, especially after they leave university and have completed their military service. The problem is that, even for local veteran indie musicians who would like to please their parents' expectations, to be able to simultaneously hold a regular job and remain extensively involved in music proves to be

a highly difficult task. As it was exposed in the previous chapter, actively developing a rock band is a very demanding endeavor that requires a large part of one's time, attention and energy – so much which cannot be spent in a full-time office job. It is feasible to sustain a minimal level of regular activity in a band (ex: to practice once a week and perform once every month) while working 45 to 55 hours a week. Such was notably the case of Black Summer Days in the last few years of the band's existence. However, only a minority of indie musicians are capable of investing a sufficient portion of their leisure time to maintain a substantial creative output and perform weekly in cities throughout the island. As a singer and bandleader in her mid-twenties once said to me, “when you get home after having worked 9 hours, you're tired, and you simply don't feel like writing music. Songwriting requires a certain space.”²¹⁶

And as I mentioned in the previous chapter, revenues from live performances alone are, for a vast majority of bands, much too limited and inconstant to enable several band members to pay for their living expenses. These compensations can at best represent a welcome supplement. Also, it is no surprise that the vast majority of all young indie musicians who play in a band in Taipei give up music after a few years, oftentimes under the insistence of their parents. One of my informants witnessed this situation over nearly a decade of involvement in the local indie music scene:

Let's say I want to keep on playing music. I graduated from university, I served in the military, I now have to work, but I still like the stuff I'm interested in. 70% of my attention goes to practical matters (我 70% 現實), so there's only 30% left for my interests. Then it goes down to 20%, maybe after a year there's only 5% left, because there's more and more stuff coming, and because your interest won't enable you to fully maintain your way of life (維持你的生活).[...] In the beginning, everybody likes these things [like music], so in senior high there's a lot of bands, but less at university, then everybody goes on to take care of down-

²¹⁶ Interviewee J, interview by author, field note, Taipei, Taiwan, December 2011.

to-earth matters [維持現實的事情]. I think that people who do this [play music] in Taiwan are the ones who really love it, they will persist in doing it, and will persist for a long time, because they chose to do this right from the beginning.²¹⁷

Among other things, such a discourse suggests that, beyond one's attachment to his or her musical activities, what sets local veteran rockers apart from those who abandon music along the way is their capacity to provide for pragmatic imperatives while also devoting a significant portion of their time to their musical endeavors. The opportunity to do so also greatly depends on the level of pressure and/or support they receive from their parents (as it was hinted in section 4.3 in relation to high school years), as well as on their access to alternatives to a demanding full-time job.

If the revenues generated by the activities of a vast majority of bands in Taipei are minimal, a lot of veteran rockers do manage to find other ways of sustaining themselves financially within or around the country's music scene. Indeed, the multiple establishments that comprise Taipei's music scene, from practice rooms and instrument shops to management companies and live houses, offer many possibilities for part-time employment that allow a lot of indie musicians to make a decent living (at least for a few years).

Indeed, it is reasonably easy for local veteran indie rockers to use some of their knowledge, experience and contacts acquired through their participation in the indie music scene to generate income. The most representative manifestation of this phenomenon is probably the vast popularity of music classes in Taipei. A majority of the local indie musicians I have been acquainted with over the years generate part or most of their revenue from guitar, bass, drums or singing lessons to youngsters and adults in one

²¹⁷ Interviewee C, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, March 2011.

of the city's numerous rock schools²¹⁸. Hourly wages can vary between \$TWD 400 – 800 per hour – a much higher hourly wage than most full-time jobs in Taiwan – thereby offering the double advantage of a flexible working schedule and a sizeable source of revenue²¹⁹. Several veteran rockers also generate substantial income by composing background music for advertisements and other media content. But more importantly, live venues like The Wall, Legacy, Riverside, and the Underworld, as well as music promotion companies (ex: Icon Promotions) are known to include several indie musicians on their payroll, either as sound engineers, multitask assistants, concert organizers or waiters. Even if some positions in such establishments are near full-time, owners and managers are well aware of the realities of playing in a band and are generally much more willing to accommodate their employee's off-work activities than the management of ordinary Taiwanese companies.

For most indie musicians who wish to devote a significant amount of time to their musical activities, the capacity to generate a substantial income through part-time or flexible near full-time employment is typically accompanied by the choice of a somewhat minimalistic lifestyle, as well as a form of basic support from their parents. The most characteristic feature of this lifestyle is arguably the fact that the majority of the indie musicians I got acquainted with over the years were still living with their parents, in some cases well into their thirties²²⁰. While the traditional and overall conservative character of the Taiwanese society arguably hinders the musical and personal endeavors of a majority

²¹⁸ To name just a few examples, Jingang (BSD's former drummer) and OverDose's members Kit, Xiaojun and S.D. have all been engaged extensively in teaching for several years.

²¹⁹ The total income an experienced music instructor can generate can sometimes exceed that of most white-collar workers in Taipei. For instance, one of my acquaintances, drummer in a local band, makes more than \$TWD 50 000 (\$USD 1 600) a month by teaching the drums part-time in a rock school.

²²⁰ This situation is far from being unusual in Taiwan, where the tradition demands that children leave the parental home only when they get married. Cultural habits are changing in Taipei, and it is more and more common to see young adults in their twenties rent a room outside of home.

of local rockers, several of them can also be said to benefit greatly from this situation, as the traditions that pervade the familial space – for example, parents’ expectation that their children live with them until they get married – partly enable them to maintain their unconventional lifestyle.

Furthermore, a large majority of the veteran indie rock musicians that I know have working middle class origins. This notably means that most of them do not have the burden of supporting financially their family. On the contrary, they count on their parents to provide simple material support if necessary (ex: food, shelter and occasional financial help). This means that the money from a part-time job can be directly used to sustain one’s musical activities (ex: buy some equipment, rent a practice room) and social life, or even to pay for yearly trips to music events abroad (ex: Fuji Rock in Japan).

Veteran musicians can be said to receive somewhat less pressure from their parents to start working full-time or get married than a lot of other Taiwanese young adults. This potentially represents another particularity of the family background of a lot of local veteran rockers’. For those who live at home, the free shelter provided by parents greatly compensates for the musicians’ lesser revenue, as well as for the occasional hassle of their parents’ insistence for them to change their way of life. Such a material situation usually leaves them with enough flexibility to develop their musical projects or be more patient when it comes to find a job that better suits both their interests and needs.

A lot of local rockers with a more stable income often prefer to rent their own room or apartment outside their homes, oftentimes with their companion or friends with whom they can share living costs. Taipei can be considered a very affordable city compared to other world capitals, especially in terms of food prices and rent. According

to several of my informants who lived on their own, a near full-time position (ex: sound engineer in a live house) or the combined incomes of two people working part-time is enough to make a comfortable living in the Taiwanese metropolis²²¹.

In some ways, the option to work part-time for a certain number of years in order to dedicate a substantial portion of one's time to musical endeavors can be thought to represent only minor risks in Taiwan. Apart from the rather minimal gap in revenue, which can be compensated for by more modest consumption habits and lifestyle, the local work market is such that, if their financial situation requires it, Taipei's indie rockers can always return to a life of full-time employment without worrying about repercussions. This relative security allows local veteran rockers to focus on living and planning the present and near future of their existence rather than sacrificing the present for long-term gratification or security. Tellingly, my observations suggest that several local veteran rockers conceive more anxiety at the thought of losing their band or having to take on a job that they dislike than they are concerned about not finding a job (or about their distant future in general). It is also worth mentioning that marriage and raising a family are avenues that a vast majority of veteran rockers seem to exclude or cast off to a vague future. I have witnessed only two cases of married couples over 6 years of networking in the scene.

²²¹ According to Numbeo.com, the world's largest database about the cost of living worldwide, consumer prices in Taipei are approximately 49% cheaper than in New York city. Some major discrepancies include the prices of basic necessities, like average rent prices (average rent in Taipei is less than one third that of New York) and restaurant prices (about 70% cheaper in Taipei, with inexpensive meals costing about \$USD 3). However, local purchase power is lower in Taipei than New York due to lower average salaries in the Taiwanese capital. Source: www.numbeo.com. Incidentally, I would like to mention that I have yet to see a Taiwanese indie musician living in precarious conditions. This somewhat differs from the stories, common in the American and European music scenes, of musicians who take high risks and pour all their resources and time in their musical career (ex: by quitting school and moving with a band to a large city like New York in the hope of drawing more attention).

Interestingly enough, the life trajectories of several of my informants showed that local indie rock musicians who need money or who are in the later phases of their career as indie musicians have better professional prospects than their parents might think. As it was described in chapter 3 and section 4.3, playing in a rock band entails (or more exactly “requires”) a substantial amount of hard work that takes the form of extensive autodidactic learning, practice and creation. One must not underestimate the value on the Taiwanese job market of skills and pragmatic experience in the multiple dimensions of musicianship. Contrary to America and Europe, only a few training programs in the fields of sound and music production are offered in local universities, while there is still to this day no academy or training center dedicated to these crafts in the country. The main ways to acquire such skills and knowledge for Taiwanese people are personal experience, particular mentorship with somebody already accomplished in this trade, or formal training in one of the expensive and highly competitive schools in western countries.

Therefore, extensive participation in the indie rock scene and investment in a band’s musical activities can, in the long term, lead local rockers to a whole range of full-time positions worth considering after several years of more consistent dedication to musical projects. Such positions notably include being a sales or repair specialist in musical instruments shops, a sound engineer in broadcasting organizations, a specialized technician in recording studios and in the entertainment industry, a session player for popular artists, or even a music composer for media companies.

This situation suggests that, with regard to indie music, the oppositions between personal interests and down-to-earth considerations, or between the immediate entertainment of a music-centered life and the ulterior rewards of a more conventional

lifestyle, are more apparent than real. Indeed they might be completely erroneous or irrelevant (or greatly exaggerated) when looking at the future prospects of Taipei's veteran indie rockers. Apart from its use in a band or personal context, the practical knowledge acquired through such industrious *leisure* activities (as they are largely viewed in the Taiwanese society) as playing in a rock band definitely represent valuable assets that can enable local veteran indie musicians to find a position that better suits their interests and desired way of life than a conventional white-collar job. Yet the fact that these professional skills are not acquired through a formal formation and not legitimized socially by a diploma – a particularly important marker of success and personal advancement in Taiwan – can explain why their value is not recognized by a majority of people, including parents of Taipei's veteran indie rockers.

4.5 - Indie rock activities as an access to means and environments that enable one to experience social connectedness

Friendship and sociality are fundamental dimensions of all rock musical activities. Yet my observations suggest that this aspect is of especially great importance among Taipei's indie rock bands. In this section, I will point out that rock musical activities serve as a bridge between band members and other comrades of local indie circles, while performances and the several key locations of the scene respectively serve as genuine social highpoints and hubs.

Some readers might find it odd that I insist on emphasizing the prominent place of friendship in the lives of local veteran indie rockers. But this aspect of their way of life arguably presents striking contrasts with that of most Taiwanese people of their age.

Taiwanese youngsters tend to devote the largest part of their limited social life²²² during high school and university to group activities in public places (ex: a meal at a restaurant, sports activities, etc.) with present or past classmates (“同學”, herein referred to as “*tongxue*”). More intimate social activities, like going to a friend’s house after class and sleepovers, are much less commonplace in Taiwan than in North America or Europe. Additionally, my experience in the country has taught me that communication habits among youngsters and adults alike are usually marked by great restraint. Discussions among most high school students, university classmates or adult coworkers seldom go beyond casual subjects pertaining to school and everyday life, and only few people talk spontaneously about the more personal aspect of their existence (or ask their comrades about it). One of the implications of this phenomenon would be that it is somewhat less natural for average Taiwanese teenagers to get closer to each other and deepen relations with individual friends, yet alone to encounter or provoke communicational contexts that are favorable to sharing and bonding emotionally with others. In other words, one could say that the social circles of most Taiwanese youngsters are based around a common affiliation to an institution (such as family, school, *shetuan*, work, or a religious community), and that there are fewer intimate friendships based on extensive in-depth personal interactions with particular individuals.

Interestingly enough, I came to observe that virtually all of a Taipei’s indie musicians enjoy vast social networks – considerably larger than most young people in

²²² One must keep in mind that a large portion of children and youngsters in Taipei have a very austere daily schedule that comprises a remarkable load of schoolwork and oftentimes also regular evening or weekend classes in cram schools. Understandably enough, such a regime leaves them with very little time to devote to their friends. See section 4.2 for an overview of the typical daily existence of high school students in Taipei.

Taipei²²³ – that comprise both large circles of acquaintances (that extend far beyond their *natural* circles of classmates) and a certain number of very close friends. The latter usually includes fellow bandmates and other members of the indie scene. Looking more closely into the past of informants also reveals that these strong and extended friendships generally stem from a shared interest in music or from direct musical collaborations during senior high school or university. The origins of the bonds that unite the members of some of my informants' bands are good examples of this phenomenon:

Interviewee I: I and [the band's singer] were in the same junior high. Every day after class, we used to play basketball, and then we'd go to his house nearby to listen to music and talk. That's how we became close friends, and how everything started.²²⁴

Interviewee C: In senior high, I did not know him [the band's singer] that well. We were in the same school, but in different programs and different *shetuan*s. He was in the guitar *shetuan* and I was in the popular music *shetuan*. I saw him play [the guitar], and I went over to him and pretended to care about what he was playing so I could tease him afterwards. But I kept on talking to him sometimes, and then I realized he could sing pretty well. So I invited him to join our band and replace our singer at the time, who wasn't very good. We rapidly became good friends, and at the end of senior high we were very close.²²⁵

Both anecdotes highlight how the simple fact of sharing an interest in music can play a key role in getting young individuals to know and gradually appreciate each other. This capacity of activities (or common interest in a particular activity) to serve as a social bridge between people is well understood by educators across Taiwan. All high schools and universities in the country have several extracurricular activity-based *shetuan*s, the guitar and popular music *shetuan*s representing only two examples of this phenomenon.

²²³ Some psychosocial studies, including the works of Weisskirch and Murphy (2004), have highlighted the link between strong interest in rock-related music and higher levels of socialization and overall sensation seeking among American university students.

²²⁴ Interviewee I, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, June 2011.

²²⁵ Interviewee C, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, March 2011.

But musical activities – and, as a matter of fact, possibly also music itself²²⁶ – can be said to go further in that regard than most other activities regularly practiced by Taiwanese students (ex: team sports). The particular context of an indie rock band is not foreign to this phenomenon.

There are no easy answers to the question of why the atmosphere surrounding indie rock bands is an exceptionally favorable environment to create bonds between people. It is an elusive phenomenon that can be best understood from an insider's point of view. One of these reasons that can be outlined pertains to the collaborative essence of a creative band. A rock band can be described as an extensive collective artistic and social project aimed at creating and performing musical material. As such, musical creation and performance demand each member to input consistent efforts and show a certain degree of personal (or emotional) involvement throughout the entire process. For a band to function and last several years, a certain climate of mutual agreement, understanding and support must prevail between the few people involved. These basic requirements alone oblige band members to exchange constantly about their perception of virtually everything that concerns the band and its music. This makes the activities of a rock group a context of particularly consistent and oftentimes emotionally charged interpersonal communication.

Another reason why strong emotional links tend to rapidly emerge between bandmates is probably the simple fact that rock groups represent close associations of music lovers who share and live out a common fascination with music. Members of a band not only come to spend a substantial amount of time in each other's company for

²²⁶ Taiwanese KTVs illustrate well the power of music to conveniently create bonds and provide settings in which people can communicate and get closer to each other through sharing of musical moments (interestingly enough, without people actually having to talk much).

regular practices and other band related meetings, but also frequently share moments of powerful sensory experiences and emotions, both on and off the stage. Together, bandmates experience the exaltation of performances and social occasions, a strong sense of accomplishment (ex: after successful live appearances), but also sometimes sour adversity and disappointment²²⁷. Additionally, the fact that most rock bands are especially keen on spending time drinking alcohol (mostly beers) with friends at musical events and various social occasions arguably contributes to the creation of close bonds between Taipei rockers (alcohol is known to have strong disinhibiting effects). Some of my informants indeed cited particular nights of drinking and celebration with bandmates and friends as key moments in their band's history. Altogether, these powerful moments of close comradeship and adversity can only translate over time into strong bonds between band members, thereby creating some of the most profound and enduring friendships that I have witnessed among young people in Taiwan.

Local indie musician's themselves also greatly treasure these friendships, sometimes openly likening their band to a genuine *family*, as expressed by several of my acquaintances in the scene²²⁸. After years of close and successful collaboration, the links that unite band members become strong and unique enough to be interpreted by some local veteran rockers, including this particular informant in the example below, as the

²²⁷ The development of band OverDose (summarized in section 3.2.4) illustrates very well the emotional ups and downs that members of a rock band in Taipei can go through over the course of their indie career.

²²⁸ While it is very frequent among young Taiwanese people to call good friends *brothers* or *sisters* (ex: 兄弟, 妹妹, 哥哥, etc.), my informant's words refer to real family members (“他們像家人一樣”). In her 1991 survey of Liverpool's rock scene, Cohen notes that “[a] band offered an active social life, enabling its members to establish, maintain, enrich, and deepen friendships by putting them in touch with new people and by consolidating already existing relationships. [...] One man described being in a band as ‘a bit like being in a family’” (Cohen 1991: 36).

result of *yuanfen* (“緣分” – or “relational destiny”)²²⁹:

Some things happened that made us think that we have to keep on being together. We've been through a lot of things together. That's *yuanfen*. [...] There's clearly a feel of *destiny* [in English], a conviction that we'll keep on being together and doing this [playing music]. The bonds between us are too strong now. [Despite all the problems out there,] being with these guys calms me down. It's easy for me to relax with them.²³⁰

Most readers will readily acknowledge the paramount importance of belonging to a solid group of friends. Yet Taipei's frenetic socio-cultural landscape may make such groupings even more important. As a collective endeavor, a rock band represents a unique locus that enables indie musicians to realize themselves in a context of mutual cooperation and support. Collective achievements of a band reflect on all individual members, regardless of the exact contribution of each individual involved. Similarly, single band members do not generally bear alone the weight or risk of an eventual collective flaw or misstep. In contrast, the highly competitive institutions of Taiwanese high schools, universities, companies, and more often than not also traditional families and the gaps that exist between generations exert a considerable pressure on young people, with the impending threat of individual failure constantly hanging over their head²³¹. One can easily imagine that for youngsters and young adults who have to fight their way through the multiple expectations of their socio-cultural environment, the regular company of trusted bandmates as part of indie musical activities may well represent a precious break from an otherwise strenuous social existence. At least, such a

²²⁹ Wikipedia defines “*yuanfen*” as “*a Buddhist-related Chinese concept that means the predetermined principle that dictates a person's relationships and encounters such as the affinity among friends or lovers. In common usage the term can be defined as the 'binding force' that links two persons together in any relationship.*” Source: English Wikipedia entry for “Yuanfen”.

²³⁰ Interviewee I, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, Jun 2011.

²³¹ See section 4.2 for a few details on the exceptional harshness of Taipei's high school regime and working culture.

contextualization offers a very plausible explanation for my informant's feeling of relative calm when spending time with fellow band members (as mentioned in the above quotation)²³².

The actual importance of the bonds that unite the members of a same indie rock band in Taipei might not appear very clearly at first to exterior observers, especially to foreigners who are not familiar with the modes of interpersonal interaction of Taiwanese students and young adults. Bonds between longtime bandmates in Taipei are generally very strong, yet their interactions can be void of any explicit manifestations other than marks of everyday familiarity – not unlike those between true siblings. Evidence of great affection do however show on special occasions, such as the temporary or definitive breakup of a band for reasons of military service or other projects. These can often lead to very emotional or even tragic moments, both on and off the stage. Among other examples, the final concerts of local bands OverDose and BSD before the departure of one or several of their members for the army were marked by spontaneous and out-of-the-ordinary expressions of attachment and sadness²³³. The solid attachment that exists between local bandmates is well exemplified by this quotation taken from a conversation with one of my informants about the departure of his band's first bass player a few years ago:

²³² In his investigation of Brisbane's indie rock scene, Rogers attests that music often served as a means to counter a feeling of anxiety during teenagehood and early adulthood: "The musicians felt they were perpetuating and participating within a creative sphere that had, at some earlier point in their lives, soothed anxiety. For many, it was the anxiety stemming from daily life as an awkward, isolated teenager." Rogers also notes that "the engagements these musicians have with music-making are unstable and barely bring commercial success or public recognition, but they do, in a very real way, act as a balm for individual feelings of isolation, past and present" (Rogers 2008: 646-647). From my perspective, the same could be said about the involvement in music of Taipei's veteran indie rockers.

²³³ On a few occasions, I have seen some local rockers cry or being very emotional during or after their last performance with their band before joining the military or going abroad to study. From a personal point of view, I must admit that quitting Black Summer Days in 2010 to focus on academic and professional tasks felt like splitting up from a much beloved girlfriend after a few years of relationship.

We had played together for 2-3 years, from the first to the third year at university. Some of us cried a lot. I was very sad too. I thought the band was over. We did not know what to do, find another bass player? How could it be right? Our band is not just about playing music, it's about playing with friends, if one of your friends goes away, somebody else can come in, but the old feeling is not there anymore.[...] I think if someone leaves the band now, it will be the end of [this band]... Maybe there will be other projects, but it won't be [this band] anymore.²³⁴

What the abovementioned elements suggest is that, after a certain time of common involvement in a band, friendship itself rather than musical objectives could very well become the predominant force guiding the activities of a lot of indie rock bands in Taipei²³⁵. In other words, it might be more useful to first understand Taipei's indie rock bands as stories of friendship before considering them as solo musical projects. Unfortunately, this aspect seems to be too often overseen in recent academic literature about rock music²³⁶.

The role of friendship in the Taiwanese indie rock scene can help us better understand many of its nuances. On the one hand, friendship could partly explain why Taipei's veteran indie rock bands tend to have remarkable longevity despite the general

²³⁴ Interviewee C, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, March 2011.

²³⁵ On the few occasions that came to my attention where a local rock musician left his band without giving up rock music or taking a break for other projects (which is demonstrated by the fact that he joined another band shortly after) relational issues appeared to be the main reason involved. Disagreements about musical aesthetics or other decisions pertaining to the band usually represent apparent symptoms of an underlying schism. This phenomenon was first pointed out to me by one of my informants who explained in these words the reasons why he departed from his first band several years ago: "In a band, you spend a lot of time dealing with relational stuff [...] I often say, bands split or prosper (樂團分分合合), musicians come and go (人來來去去), and most of the time it has nothing to do with music. The original reason is not music, but it will influence music indirectly. If I'm not happy to see you (看這個人不爽) and you want me to play a certain way, I'll think to myself 'I don't want to'. From that moment on, it already has nothing to do with music, but there's emotion in there. Maybe I wanted to play that way originally, but seeing him makes me not wanting to play in this particular way." Interviewee D, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, October 2010.

²³⁶ Recent documentaries, including "*Some Kind of Monster*" (2004) on world famous metal act Metallica and "*The Story of Anvil*" (2008) on the metal band of the same name, have highlighted the predominant role of friendship in the story of a few rock or metal bands (albeit in totally different contexts than Taipei's indie rock scene).

absence of significant income²³⁷; the latter being a factor that, according to my limited experience, seems to have a greater influence on the time indie bands remain active in countries like Canada and the United-States. On the other hand, the paramount importance of friendship in local rock bands might also have a negative effect on the overall quality or level of their output. It is a very common practice among a lot of now famous Anglo-American bands, in their uncompromising pursuit of success and music quality, to change one or several of their members if they judge their contribution to the collective effort insufficient. According to my observations, such is much more rarely the case among indie rock bands in Taipei, which must first be understood as *communities of friends* rather than *communities of interests*. A majority of local bands indeed seem to prefer to tolerate members who have fewer skills but are good friends instead of replacing them with more proficient musicians. To prioritize friendship only makes sense if a band's objectives are more personal and social in nature than purely economic or artistic. As mentioned before, this is a likely consequence of the improbability of commercial success in Taiwan.

The limited environment of the band itself is only one of the several social loci in which local indie rockers evolve. Apart from devoting a lot of themselves to the relationships with bandmates and other close friends, the majority of veteran indie musicians in Taipei greatly enjoy fraternizing with other musicians and music enthusiasts. This situation is well reflected by the vast social networks that musicians develop over time via their involvement in the Taiwanese indie rock scene. The socialization of local rockers in Taipei's indie music circles begins during their teenage years, with a common

²³⁷ It is worth noting that the vast majority of the bands mentioned on the graph included at the end of section 2.4 are still active to this day (as of spring 2012).

interest in rock music serving as a bridge to meet other young music enthusiasts, active musicians, and music instructors in the context of music classes in a rock school, participation in a music or guitar *shetuan* in high school, and regular visits in instrument music shops. Yet it is not until late adolescence and the early twenties that the social life of local indie musicians becomes substantially livelier. It is usually around that time that young rockers reach their maturity and that their bands start to perform in live houses, music competitions, festivals and other events throughout Taiwan. In virtually all of Taipei's indie rock circles, the love of music goes hand in hand with the love of friendship and good times with comrades. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a majority of live concerts in Taipei's live houses are highly sought social occasions, particularly for performing bands and their friends. Continued celebrations that follow concerts on weekend nights more often than not turn into memorable moments of comradeship²³⁸. When they do not perform, local musicians can still be regularly seen in the crowd at the Legacy, the Wall, Revolver, and the Underworld; the latter being a favorite late night hangout for several members of the scene. Also, one must keep in mind that a lot of local musicians work part- or full time in live houses, rock schools, studios, instrument shops and cafés, which can only add to an already vast circle of bandmates, colleagues, friends and acquaintances.

Most local indie rock musicians will also acknowledge that performances are privileged moments of connectedness between musicians onstage and the crowd²³⁹. As

²³⁸ Another element that highlights the primacy of good social times over economic success among most Taiwanese indie rock bands is their willingness to perform and participate actively in music events that offer no compensation but are lively social gatherings, like the Spring Scream festival or the Beastie Rock festival.

²³⁹ Cohen also attests that, during rock performances, “the relationship and dialogue between audience and performances can be such that even if they do not know each other a rapport is established, highlighting the social role of the gig” (Cohen 1991: 39).

local rockers share their personal creations and receive the public's support, a peculiar type of communicational dynamics takes place, in which the emotionally charged and sensation rich context of a good concert night somehow brings the band and members of the audience closer to each other. Several of Taipei's veteran indie rockers also actively seek to strengthen the feeling of connectedness with their audience by chatting with fans both during and after performances. From a performer's point of view, to experience such unique moments of social interaction can be a very comforting experience that also reflects positively on the perception one has of oneself, something that will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

4.6 - Indie rock activities as a means of establishing and strengthening a distinctive and adult self-identity as rock musicians and cultural elite

Another very important phenomenon that was highlighted in my fieldwork was the crucial role that musical activities and involvement in the Taiwanese music scene play in the construction and negotiation of self-identity among Taipei's veteran indie rockers. This identity can be interpreted as having several aspects, as local veteran rock musicians wish to acquire a sense of distinction within the country's indie music scene, but also very importantly seek to be recognized as genuine and attention worthy rock musicians (or artists), as cultural elite, and generally also as full grown-ups (or "capable agents") by the Taiwanese music industry, the public, their families and society at large. Additionally, the stories of Taipei's veteran rockers reveal that this pursuit of self-identity does not amount to a play between multiple and mutually opposing identity. It must rather be understood as a genuine attempt from these people to establish a self-identity

that is consistent with all the spheres of their lives – in other words, to become and be recognized as a specific somebody.

The definition and application of analytical notions related to the question of identity has been the object of endless debates spanning over multiple disciplines and research domains. This makes the use of identity, as well as of most other affiliated concepts (ex: self-image, self-identity, identification, social identity, cultural identity, personal identity, etc.), highly problematic for most ethnographers, who face a delicate impasse. Indeed, identity will most likely remain an elusive and problematic concept that cannot easily be defined without referring to itself (or more exactly, to one of its kindred terms). But although it is essentially an abstract phenomenon, it operates as an undeniable denotative force in the realm of human experience, and thus can hardly be avoided when it comes to accounting for the distinctive self-representation(s) that each person or group is given and seeks to establish for him/her/itself. Milioto encounters an analogous situation in her research. Without offering a definitive solution to the problem, she bases herself on the conceptions of anthropologists Nancy Rosenberg and Barry Shank to put forward the dynamic, multi-layered, interactional and performative character of identity. She proposes a working definition of the concept: “[Identity] is [...] the construction of one’s conception of their subjective-self – who one is – which is accomplished through acting in the social world” (Milioto 2008: 44).

The conception of identity that underlies the occurrences of this notion in the following pages is largely congruent with Milioto’s rendering. It is not the objective of this monograph to engage in theoretical discussions about self-psychology, nor to address the multiple problems pertaining to the use of identity-related notions in the field of

ethnography. I will limit myself to draw some of the main lines of the identity that Taipei's veteran indie rockers seek to establish in the context of their socio-cultural environment, based on the observations garnered during my fieldwork. Still, I would like to highlight that the pursuit of identity, as the discourse and behavior of my informants led me to think, is an active process of negotiation in the social sphere that results from simultaneous drives to belong to a (or multiple) group(s) and distinguish oneself from the anonymity of the masses. Also, I wish to explain an added nuance of perspective in my account by using the term "self-identity". The reason behind this usage is that this section mainly focuses on the identity of local indie rockers as perceived and experienced from their own point of view, and not through the exterior gaze of the Taiwanese society.

Taipei's indie rock scene encompasses a substantial number of bands, music fans, live houses, rock bars, rock schools (or practice rooms), instrument shops, small record labels and promoting organizations, each of which is composed of and led by music enthusiasts – adults between 25 and 45 years old for the most part – who share not only similar interests and worldviews, but oftentimes also a way of life and common issues. Within this small yet supportive portion of society – on the fringes of Taiwan's music market, mainstream cultural landscapes and working-class regime – Taipei's indie rock scene offers local rockers the means and social arena to distinguish themselves socially, or more particularly to become *somebody special* and acquire a strong sense of self-identity as a rock musician. A similar phenomenon of identity formation through participation in a music scene is attested by Milioto (2008) and Shank (1994) who agree that "the performance of new, sometimes temporary but nevertheless significant identities is the defining characteristic of scenes in general as well as their most important cultural

function” (Shank 1994: x). In Taipei, this pursuit of self-identity is made all the more meaningful by the fact that it is oftentimes contested by the lack of recognition that local rockers often encounter from their familial and larger social environment, for which these musical activities generally appear as mere amusements from immature adolescents.

Over the years, I had the chance to witness how the social sphere formed by Taipei’s indie bands and their audience, despite its somewhat limited size, does actually constitute a rather accessible and supportive environment in which local rockers can readily seek and obtain recognition of their value as rock musicians. This recognition and support is accessible to virtually all indie rock performers, without a marked emphasis on any specific hierarchy that could potentially be induced by differences in levels of popularity, of seniority in the scene or of proficiency in one aspect or another of the music trade. New bands tend to be accepted very quickly in the scene, and can generally find the understanding, advice and moral support needed to go on with their musical projects and desired way of life from more established members of the scene²⁴⁰. By enabling them to develop both social relations and musical activities, the involvement in the scene has a very empowering effect on young and veteran rockers alike. This pragmatic experience of society can arguably be likened to an early “leap into the real world” (出社會) for young adults, inasmuch as it allows them to inflect positively their life trajectory, to gain self-confidence and construct an adult self-identity and existence outside of the boundaries of school and family. This dimension is oftentimes of even greater importance for young indie musicians who gain a certain financial independence

²⁴⁰ Most of the local rock musicians that I came to know personally over the years mentioned having received at some point or another of their early career much needed encouragement and help from more experienced and established figures of the scene. All of them readily confirmed that this support had a positive and significant impact on their determination to keep on playing music.

by working part-time in the scene, as it was exposed in section 4.4 of this chapter.

I mentioned in section 3.3.4 how the pure excitement and warm support of friends and indie music fans that local indie rockers experience during live performances (in large venues and events and smaller ones alike) can make oneself feel *special* – i.e. like something more than just ordinary people. Performing can indeed instill a sense of being an authentic rock musician, or even something akin to legitimate rock stars who rightfully belong to the larger tradition of rock music²⁴¹. The reputation of local veteran rockers oftentimes extends well beyond the limits of Taipei via the small network of indie live houses and events in other major Taiwanese cities (especially in Kaohsiung and Tainan) and in other Chinese-speaking countries (mostly Hong Kong and Mainland China). Over time, several veteran bands can acquire an even greater sense of achievement and distinction in some niches of the Taiwanese soundscape by becoming one of the local leaders in a specific type of rock music (see section 3.3.2 for more details), regardless of the actual popularity of their band. On the individual level, an experienced musician who teaches music for a living can rapidly achieve personal status by being recognized as “teacher” (老師) by apprentice and established musicians of the scene.

This sense of self-identity and personal distinction is manifest in the attitudes and demeanor displayed by local indie rockers in social contexts in and around Taiwan’s indie

²⁴¹ To push the analysis further, one could say that this self-identity as (potential) rock stars, even though it is not recognized by the Taiwanese mainstream and music industry, can be claimed by virtually any local indie rock band in Taipei. Contrary to local rock scenes in other countries, for example Tokyo’s indie rock scene, practically no local rock band has achieved public stardom (Mayday, Sodagreen and F.I.R. being isolated exceptions of controversial aesthetic affiliation). The absence of clear instances of rock bands at the top of their trade (and which are publically recognized as such) blurs the distinction between average and promising bands, or between amateur and professional acts. This distinction eventually becomes somewhat irrelevant in the Taiwanese context, whereas other markers of social status such as “teacher” [老師] bear more importance). This in turn creates a situation in which virtually any band can believe for itself or claim to belong to the country’s current or future rock elite.

music scene. When encountered in a live house or a practice room, a majority of Taipei's veteran indie musicians aged between 23 and 35 show a distinctive mix of self-assurance, moderate extroversion and overall coolness²⁴². One could indeed say that, on top of their warm friendliness, local rockers are not without asserting a certain assurance of *being somebody* in the human environment of the scene. This rough portrait wouldn't be of particular significance if the contrasts weren't so striking with the majority of Taiwanese people of their age, especially with the typical university student in Taipei (ex: at the National Taiwan University, or the National Taiwan Normal University); the latter appearing overall as much more shy, impressionable, agitated, and always exceedingly polite²⁴³ – even more so in the company of foreigners.

As I mentioned in section 4.5, local indie rockers tend to draw a substantial amount of social activity around them. A majority of them enjoy some social prominence in their extended social network, as well as a certain ease to create contacts and communicate with people of the opposite sex. What can be said about the attitudes of male indie musicians equally applies to female indie rockers, whose naturally strong but composed presence and casualness – in all respects equal to that of their fellow male rockers – arguably stands out in Taipei's female landscape. This is particularly the case when compared to the self-effaced character of a majority of female students of their age, or to the exuberant and somewhat provocative style that has become the norm in Taipei's nightclub scene.

²⁴² The English Wiktionary defines the term “coolness” as: “Of a person, not showing emotion, calm and in self-control.”

²⁴³ Some elements of fashion arguably magnify this discrepancy. Local indie rockers generally stand out with their more casual and oftentimes rock-inspired clothing style (ex: jeans with holes, Converse brand sneakers, leather jackets, t-shirts with logo of a famous band), occasional out-of-the-ordinary haircuts (ex: long hair, partly shaved head), tattoos, earrings (for women as well as men) and other accessories (ex: wallet chains).

Judging by this demeanor and appearance, one could have the impression that local rockers have no doubts about their self-identity, about the value of the type of person that they are, of the music they play, or of the kind of life that they lead. Yet, by getting to know several of them better, one might realize that these seemingly self-assured figures are more modest than what some could expect from local *rock stars*. Virtually all local rockers with whom I've had the chance to get acquainted over the years, from the unknown underground bands to the most popular acts, are also inhabited by a deep and general sense of lucid humility that can be surprising at times. This peculiar mix of confidence and modesty somehow suggests that maybe some doubts are prone to creep into the identity and lives of Taipei's veteran indie rockers.

One must consider that for Taipei's indie rockers, to dedicate oneself to musical activities and participate in the island's indie rock scene is equal to choosing an unconventional means of social distinction. This more often than not implies a refusal of some of the predominant markers of status that pervade the Taiwanese social order (along with their acquisition pathways). By preferring not to seek academic excellence or wealth, not to pursue advanced studies (in Taiwan or abroad) with the aim of accessing the social status and potential security of a career in more recognized fields like business, law or engineering, not to *shangban*, and not to get married and start a family, a large number of local indie rockers do effectively disengage from the *normal* and highly competitive modes of social realization that pervade the Taiwanese society²⁴⁴. As it was pointed out explicitly or hinted in several sections of this work, the atypical self-identity

²⁴⁴ Some of the likely reasons that motivate such a disengagement from Taiwan's conventional life trajectory were exposed earlier in section 4.3, and 4.4 of this chapter. These notably include the incompatibility between full-time work and music, fear of a sensationless and monotonous life, and general concerns for quality of life.

and approach to music, life and social distinction that local rockers favor entails important discrepancies with the dominant models implemented by the different spheres of the Taiwanese society, both among the majority of young adults of their generation and within the Taiwanese music business. In other words, Taipei's indie rockers are well aware that they appear as marginal in the Taiwanese society. As one of my informants puts it, they are "misfits", and they know it.

The near-contempt of the Taiwanese music industry and mainstream public and media toward local indie rock bands (as detailed in the previous two chapters) is a very important aspect of this phenomenon. I argued in section 3.4 that most of Taipei's indie rock bands do not seem to despise as such the benefitters of the Taiwanese Mandopop establishment, nor do they seem to be particularly eager to consider concrete collective or individual actions to change the prevailing order of things in the local music industry. A lot of local indie rockers are nonetheless convinced of the potential of their music as well as of the value of their efforts, and do make modest yet heartfelt claims to more mainstream recognition – if only in discussions among peers. Most of the criticisms I have heard over the years were directed at the music corporations, the entertainment media and the mainstream public for its obsession for the manufactured glamour of pop idols and a handful of original megastars from the past, against the work, talent and creativity of the new generation of *genuine* musicians that are Taipei's indie rockers:

Frankly speaking, most people don't recognize [不認同] the work that people like us [indie rock musicians] do. Taiwan is an 'idol environment' (偶像的環境). You have to be handsome, sing beautifully and behave well on stage to be accepted by people. [...] When Taiwanese people look at idols, they only look at the surface (表面). [...] At least abroad, people can accept different styles of music, like jazz. [...] When grown-ups look at us playing music, they think 'you're not Mayday (五月天), you're not Wubai (伍佰), so you're nothing' (你們

就不是東西)。I think that most people think of me as a child who plays music. They think that there's no way you can be fit for the stage (符上台面).²⁴⁵

While I have heard only few local rockers outside of my informants express their opinion on this very subject, it appears more than likely that a lot of Taipei's indie rockers think that their self-identity as Taiwan's genuine rock music elite ought to be recognized not only within the small indie music circles, but by a much larger portion of the mainstream public. The above quotation illustrates a desire for widespread consideration, but it also exposes the full extent of the general dismissal and marginalization of local indie rock musicians in Taiwan. This feeling of “being nothing” or only “children” in the eyes of others mentioned by my informant – a recurrent theme in the discourse of my acquaintances in the scene – suggests that the massive lack of recognition to which local veteran rockers are subjected could be far-reaching enough to negate even their self-identity as competent grown-ups and social agents.

It must indeed be highlighted that, in addition to the critical eye of the Taiwanese music industry and society at large, most local veteran rockers must face even greater challenges to their personal projects and self-identity at home. As I mentioned in section 4.1, concerns for long-term economic stability are an important priority for most Taiwanese parents²⁴⁶. For them, the musical activities of their children generally appear as little more than a trivial mode of entertainment unworthy of a serious adult's life, and this regardless of the amount of effort that is put into their projects or the overall importance of music and the local indie scene in their lives. Similarly, if playing music,

²⁴⁵ Interviewee H, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, April 2009.

²⁴⁶ Whether a full-time white-collar job is more stable than a career in the field of music is a question that does not go from itself, especially in today's job market. Please see section 4.4 for a few details on the job prospects of indie musicians in Taipei.

having a rich social life, working part-time and living at home is fine for a large number of indie musicians, it rarely is for their families. I noted in section 4.3 that the parents of Taipei's indie rockers tended to be somewhat more lenient regarding the leisure activities and lifestyles of their children during high school and university. Yet the majority of my informants – now in their late 20s and early 30s – admitted regularly receiving various degrees of pressure from their family members for them to abandon their alternative self-identity and life trajectory in the favor of a more conventional existence. Most of the time, such a *normal* way of life would entail finding a stable job, generating more income, supporting their parents financially, getting married, starting a family, and so on.

To continue playing music and living a non-conformist life for many years in spite of parental pressure requires immense will and a strong spirit of resilience from Taipei's veteran indie musicians. Communication (and/or negotiation) between local indie rockers and their family members on such fundamental questions tend to be highly difficult and result in tensions that can linger for several years. Frictions with parents are a very sensitive issue for a lot of local indie rockers. Several of those with whom I attempted to broach the issue – especially more distant acquaintances – gave only short answers, or brushed off the topic as being “too serious” (太嚴肅). My few years of networking and friendship in the scene have led me to think that the potential impact of this lack of recognition from close relatives on the musical activities and lives of Taipei's indie rock musicians – and thereby on the shaping of Taiwan's entire indie music scene – must not be underestimated. As a matter of fact, the self-assurance displayed by several local rockers, especially when seen in the company of other fellow musicians, can sometimes evaporate completely when they talk about the situation with their family. Some of my

informants, despite being veteran indie musicians who have achieved a certain status in the scene, acknowledged being regularly hit by doubts about whether continuing to dedicate a substantial amount of time to music was the right thing to do or not. Also, I witnessed on several occasions some of my acquaintances from the scene being deeply affected or in a state of near despair about their parents' incomprehension and strong disapproval of their way of life. What is at stake here for local veteran indie rockers is not only their future in the world of music, but their motivation and capacity to positively inflect their life the way they intend to – in other words, their sense of personal agency. Understandably enough, to see their interests, efforts, and ultimately, their call for self-determination crudely dismissed by their family, if only in words and not through more concrete means of pressure, can greatly sap the musician's self-confidence and motivation to go on with their personal projects²⁴⁷.

Most of my informants perceive their family's lack of recognition and pressure as something inevitable in the context of the traditional Taiwanese family. Without falling into nihilist mindsets or rejecting the totality of the established socio-cultural order and its impact on their lives, local veteran rockers must however engage in a critical dialogue with Taiwan's cultural orthodoxy, so as to legitimize their non-conformist life decisions and self-identity. Such is notably the case of this particular informant, who questions the soundness of his parents' views on his future and their conception of filial duty:

The older I get, the more [my parents] worry about me. Get married, money, house... If I take a regular job [上班] like everybody else, I won't be happy, but I will make you [my parents] happy. To keep on doing this is not reasonable [不合

²⁴⁷ While it is particularly marked and recurrent in the lives of Taipei's indie rockers, this situation is not limited to people who engage in creative activities. Issues of communication and mutual comprehension between parents and children are extremely common in Taiwan, especially when unconventional life trajectories and behaviors are involved (ex: homosexuality).

理]. Now I worry about their worries [我擔心他們的擔心]. It's not as serious as they say. You just have to be healthy, that's all. Parents in Taiwan have a very traditional conception of life. I know what they think. But to me, to respect filial duty (孝順) is not about money or providing for your parents (扶養你的父母). More importantly you have to be happy and in good physical condition so you can take care of them later.²⁴⁸

This criticism oftentimes extends to other perceived aspects of their countrymen's habits of thought and behavior. One of my informants' declamations about the intrinsic value of difference in modern societies illustrates this particular mindset:

Taiwanese people have difficulties to accept new things, because sameness is safe. Abroad, people are drawn to new things, they try to do things differently. It's cool. In Taiwan, if you try to do something different, people think you're abnormal (與眾不同), that you only try to be cool (裝酷). People laugh at others who are different, they say it's weird (奇怪), or else their parents will scold them. This is horrible.[...] The entire educational system in Taiwan, from childhood to adulthood, is about being like everybody else. This is why everybody wears uniforms in school.[...] But to be creative you have to be different and open-minded. This is repressed in Taiwan. There's a big difference with other countries. People who play music in Taiwan have the same problem. Other children grow old and have kids, get married, live in a good house, shangban... why can't you be the same? But the fact that I'm not like other people doesn't mean that what I am and do is not good (不代表我不好).[...] Europe has a lot of culture and art. Other people from other countries look at us [Taiwanese], they don't know what we're doing, how we can be so close-minded (封閉).²⁴⁹

Most of my friends and acquaintances in the scene, including several of the informants quoted in this thesis, strongly condemn the conservative character of Taiwanese society. This phenomenon is generally perceived among them as the main factor explaining the struggles of indie rock musicians in the country, especially the lack of recognition from parents and mainstream public. Also, my fieldwork suggests that a lot of local veteran rockers readily embrace their relative marginality by identifying themselves as cultural elite, notably on the strength of their original musical activities, alternative way of life

²⁴⁸ Interviewee H, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, April 2009.

²⁴⁹ Interviewee H, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, April 2009.

and progressive worldviews. According to this particular informant, the contribution of local indie rockers to the Taiwanese society should be understood in terms of socio-cultural advancement rather than using material or economic standards. As one of my informants expressed it, one of the important roles of indie musicians is to “offer a choice; to say that there are different ways you can live your life”²⁵⁰. Several of my friends and acquaintances with which I raised the topic readily identified themselves with this assessment of their social relevance, yet not without romantically admitting that they felt their contribution was being totally overlooked by the public and people of their generation.

Despite their resistance to key dimensions of the established socio-cultural order in Taiwan, the reaction of most local rockers to the fundamental disagreement with their parents can be described as very tempered, in the sense that it is largely void of direct confrontation or outstanding marks of revolt²⁵¹. According to my informants’ stories, their most common approach to this conflicting situation consists in maintaining a relative status quo (in which the parents’ traditional approach to life is neither fully agreed to nor completely excluded in the future), while seeking to have their parents gradually accept the alternative identity and mode of existence that they have developed through their involvement in the music scene. For local rockers, a way of reducing their

²⁵⁰ Interviewee L, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, April 2011.

²⁵¹ Respect for the basic values of filial piety (i.e. one’s general respect and responsibilities toward his/her parents) can probably account in part for the rather peaceful attitude of most local rockers towards their family’s challenging stance. Yet it is worth mentioning that a lot of them literally *cannot afford* to alienate their parents because they still need their family’s financial support – if only on rare occasions. There are, it is true, some occurrences of minor mischiefs during high school and university in the background of several of my informants. Most typically, a lot of young Taiwanese rockers voluntarily engage in inconsequential behaviors that parents almost certainly meet with strong disapproval. These often include (but seldom go further than) getting tattoos or piercings, dressing as one pleases, smoking, going out in live houses or bars, or coming home late. Besides representing repeated manifestations of an opposition against moral and physical control from parents and school authorities, such conducts should probably be understood as modes of (re)affirmation of one’s sense of self-identity and agency to shape his/her own existence; not as claims to total freedom.

parents' mistrust in their life decisions, gaining more recognition from them and lessening familial pressure is to use musical skills to generate a substantial income. Section 4.4 of this chapter explained how a lot of Taipei's indie rock musicians succeed in using their musicianship and contacts within the local music scene to acquire a relative financial autonomy. An additional way of convincing their family of the soundness and value of their efforts is to garner markers of achievement in the music world, even though the acquisition of such markers represents only a peripheral priority for them. One of my informants, who struggled with his family's disregard for his unorthodox life trajectory before making his mark in the Taiwanese music landscape, summarized this situation in one of our interviews:

Go ask other musicians. What percentage of them are supported by their parents? What percentage decide in the end to stop playing? It's beyond what we can imagine. But parents look at the results (結果主義). If you become successful, there's a chance they will recognize what you're doing (當你有成就的, 他們可能會認同你). I don't give a shit [said in English]. I don't want you [my parents] to look at the result. In the process, I have to become aware that I don't care about the result. Then why do you care?²⁵²

These words highlight that, playing music and participating in the local indie music scene, though it bears no or little economic importance for local bands, might however serve more symbolic purposes in the negotiation of the identity of local indie rockers with their social surroundings. Participations in individual or group music contests (mostly for younger musicians and bands), the costly but non-profitable production of an album (notably via the attribution of a government grant), and free or minimally compensated performances in large or medium-scale festivals or events (in Taiwan and even more so

²⁵² Interviewee K, interview by author, digital recording, Taipei, Taiwan, January 2012.

abroad) represent significant markers of distinction and achievement that contribute to a greater recognition of one's musical efforts and self-identity as genuine and respect worthy musician – both from family and the public sphere²⁵³. Over the past years, I personally witnessed a few such scenarios in which the parents of friends and acquaintances in the local indie music scene gradually became less concerned about their children after witnessing their relative success in the country's indie music scene.

The critical mindsets of a majority of local veteran rockers and the way they approach their struggle with their parents suggest that what local rockers are mainly seeking is not a momentarily relief from so-called “normal life”, but a consistent self-identity and an enduring – yet different = mode of existence.. Unlike the phenomenon observed by Milioto in Tokyo's hardcore music scene, the musical activities of Taipei's indie rockers do not amount to a kind of social role-play, in which indie rockers perform subversive but temporary identities in the marginal atmosphere of the music scene only to return to conventional identities after reintegrating in the familial and public spheres²⁵⁴. According to my observations, the pursuit of Taipei's veteran indie rockers is of a very different order. For one thing, the lives of local indie rock musicians are not nearly as compartmentalized as that of some of their fellow rockers in Tokyo; not that this tendency is not commonplace in Taiwan²⁵⁵. Most of my informants, especially those who

²⁵³ From this viewpoint, one can see how the recent endorsement of Taiwanese indie music under the form of subsidies for the release of an album and participation in music events abroad can be very helpful for local indie bands, despite the minimal economic profitability of this policy for the bands themselves.

²⁵⁴ I could personally confirm the factuality of Milioto's account of this social phenomenon in Japan in a few discussions with some Japanese indie bands that performed in Taipei. On one occurrence, two male musicians, members of one of Japan's leading post-rock bands, admitted that they told their wives they had quit playing music several years ago. Consequently, their wives totally ignored that their husbands were still active musically and were performing on a weekly basis.

²⁵⁵ It goes without saying that Taiwan is a totally different socio-cultural universe from Japan. Yet it is not rare to see people in Taipei (notably university students and male businessmen, at least according to my experience) lead several parallel lives to work around limitations imposed by family (ex: parents or

work within or around the local music scene, display roughly the same demeanor, casual style, discourse and self-identity at different moments of their daily lives, whether they are in a live venue, at home or at work. More importantly, local veteran indie rockers calmly face and try to inflect their parents' expectations and perceptions in the hope of seeing the value of their efforts, life choices and identity recognized by their families and larger socio-cultural environment. This leads to think that the musical activities and approach to life of local indie rock musicians amount to a genuine attempt at establishing an alternative yet coherent way of life and identity within the Taiwanese society. These might not necessarily be permanent, yet they do not fundamentally represent a form of play with multiple identities.

Undeterred by the difficult challenge of changing their socio-cultural environment, Taipei's veteran indie rockers can nonetheless maintain a consistent sense of self-identity via their involvement in the local music scene. For the main objective of these people who keep on being active in the country's indie music scene for years – without significant economic success, which must be highlighted once again – is not to gain full recognition from their families, the music industry, mainstream audiences and Taiwanese society at large. It is simply to build and sustain an alternative life for themselves and become the kind of person that they wish, despite the adversity they encounter from their socio-cultural environment, and within the limits of their means and capacities. The small and intimate domain of Taiwan's indie music, by providing a vital counterbalance against the systematic disregard from traditional families, the local music industry and mainstream public, enables them to do just that.

spouse). To my surprise, I noticed that such is much less the case among indie rockers than in other urban cultures, including Taipei's entertainment and nightclub scenes.

4.7 - Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I claimed that Taipei's veteran indie rockers, by continuing to involve themselves in the difficult, fascinating universe of the indie rock music scene,, can be seen as proactively pursuing an unconventional type of existence that differs significantly from the conservative model for life prevalent in Taiwanese society. This sought-after existence is particularly rich in sensory experiences, emotions, strong human bonds, and sociality, as well as offering time flexibility and opportunities to realize themselves, cultivate their passion, and become the kind of person that they wish to be. Musical activities and the manifold dimensions that they encompass play a fundamental role in this particular approach to life, as they provide local rockers with a means to establish and sustain such a life experience. The background and discourse of my informants also suggest that this personal investment in a music-centered existence is rooted in a desire to escape (or temper) the bitter everyday reality of average students and *shangban zu* in modern Taipei, to disengage from the conservative life trajectory traditionally followed by the majority of Taiwanese people, and to make a better life for themselves within the limits of their socio-cultural environment.

For Taipei's veteran indie rockers, this journey usually starts in junior or senior high school with the development of an interest in rock music, following which their musical activities rapidly develop into a powerful vector in the shaping of their lives well into early adulthood and beyond. In the process, music becomes a privileged locus of cherished sensory experiences and enjoyments, as well as of their social life, their self-identity, and oftentimes also their livelihood. In other words, it becomes an irreplaceable

cornerstone of their entire existence. Hence the words of my ex-band with BSD: “Music is all I have in my life.”

Information gathered during fieldwork, especially the insights on my informants’ relation with their parents, indicated that the singular life decisions of Taipei’s veteran indie rockers set them as positively marginal in relation to Taiwan’s socio-cultural orthodoxy. In the same way that indie rock bands are largely ignored by the local music industry and mainstream audiences, the value of the musical endeavors and way of life of veteran indie rock musicians is usually not recognized by their families and a majority of Taiwanese people.

In a 2008 paper, American ethnographer Mack Hagood builds on the concept of “liminality” – here intended in a non-ritual sense – as used in the works of anthropologists Victor Turner and Liisa Malkki to account for the “structural position on the interstices of recognized roles and identities” (Hagood 2008, 85) of Taiwanese indie rock musicians like Huang Wan-Ting; original member of pioneer rock bands Ladybug (瓢蟲) and Varo. Without discussing the theoretical considerations that underlie Hagood’s interpretation, I in turn take the liberty of borrowing this notion to summarize the overall situation of local veteran indie rockers with regard to a few categories that pervade the worldviews of their human environment.

As shown in the different sections of this chapter, the activities, approach to life and trajectory of Taipei’s veteran indie rockers are generally perceived as ill-defined by their parents and the bulk of the Taiwanese society. This blurriness unmistakably represents a challenge to the realization of their endeavors and self-identity. For instance, most of Taipei’s indie rock musicians are more than just casual or hobby musicians, yet

they are not regarded by the largest part of society (including their parents) as genuine artists or professional musicians.

Veteran indie rockers also make use of the greater freedom conferred by certain “liminal” statuses to sustain an alternative mode of existence. Most notably, a lot of local veteran rockers live a life in-between teenagehood and adulthood, as they still live with their parents, but live a semi-autonomous life outside of university and home (notably featured by the development of large social networks as well as extensive musical and professional activities). Similarly, several of them voluntarily extend their stay in university – the “liminoid” space of passage from the unskilled youngster to the trained professional – and maintain a peaceful status quo with their parents, in which they do not completely conform to nor entirely negate their parents’ expectations for university education, career, stable revenue and marriage. This in turn allows them to decrease the pressure from family following their official “leap into the real world”, and also to avoid conflicts with their parents and to ensure continuous material support from them, thereby diminishing overall costs of living and freeing up some time that can be invested in music or social life.

The oppositional stance that a majority of veteran indie rockers take on vis-à-vis the Taiwanese socio-cultural orthodoxy also entails a substantial measure of pragmatic compromise and modesty. As it was shown in this monograph, most of my informants do not seek to conform to the standard mode of existence that prevails in their society. Still, very few (or even none) of them display an openly confrontational attitude, and only seldom is their alternative approach to life claimed vocally as a defiance to the prevailing socio-cultural order.

Yet, in a way, the lives of local veteran indie rockers speak for themselves, and provide clear insights on the sense of their project. The pursuit of a different life built around music nevertheless remains a bold enterprise that goes against the Taiwanese socio-cultural norm, and can rightfully be understood as a quiet but active form of resistance. This resistance is directed against the austerity, monotony, and solitude that pervade the lives of ordinary students and full-time workers in modern Taipei; against the constant challenge to one's sense of self-identity and self-agency posed by pragmatic imperatives and the expectations of traditional families; against the nearly inexistent economic prospects of indie rock music in Taiwan; as well as against the marginalization of their musical endeavors by parents, the music industry and the public in general. Rock musical activities and Taiwan's indie rock circles play a vital role in this phenomenon, and can be respectively understood as the privileged means and main locus of this social withstanding.

If the general aspiration of veteran indie rockers is to cultivate a non-conformist way of life, then the success of this project must be measured in terms of its capacity to be sustained in time rather than in function of the achievement of discrete goals. This interpretation is partly supported by the presence of a leitmotif of “persistence” (“堅持” in Chinese) in the discourse of my informants. In this sense, Randy Lin's assessment of the situation of the Underworld – Taipei's most iconic live house – can also be applied to the musical activities and alternative way of life of local veteran indie rockers: “Have we been successful? In my philosophy, as long as you're still there, it means that you haven't failed”²⁵⁶.

²⁵⁶ Original quotation in Chinese: “我的哲學是，只要你存在，就表示你沒有失敗”。Randy Lin, interview by

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

The main objective of this monograph was to tell the story of Taipei's veteran indie rockers and make better sense of their way of life and involvement in the world of music. In doing so, I first highlighted how the activities of indie rock bands are shaped by the historical, economic, socio-cultural and physical contexts in which they evolve. The lack of resources for local bands and more importantly, the indifference they face from the Mandopop and KTV establishment, the entertainment media and the mainstream public, prevent virtually all mobility on the highly hierarchized grounds of Taiwan's music market. This makes stardom and economic success nearly impossible for the vast majority of Taipei's indie rockers. Despite these grim prospects, a rich and lively indie rock scene exists in Taipei, peopled by young adults whose resilience, agency and desire for an unconventional life cause them to value dimensions of their musical experience unrelated to money and fame.

These musicians make the best out of their situations by understanding their limits, and seeking out challenges and opportunities that remain within their grasp. For these people, to be in a band and participate in the local indie scene is neither a business, nor a play on multiple identities, nor a mere pastime, but a way of cultivating a mode of existence that differs from the *normal* and austere everyday realities and trajectory of ordinary students and white-collar workers in modern Taipei. As the cornerstone of this alternative way of life, the musical activities of local veteran rockers provide them with the means and socio-cultural loci to find flexible and interesting sources of revenue, to cultivate social connectedness and to generate a strong sense of self-identity, while also

allowing them to indulge in a wide range of uniquely powerful sensory experiences, including moments of transcendent joy on stage. One of the implications of this interpretation is that, the key human dimensions of playing in a band, some of which are often neglected in academic and popular understanding of musical activities, might be essential to understanding why millions of people engage consistently in indie rock music and local indie music scenes around the world.

The conclusions found in this ethnography do at times contrast with those of other researchers, most notably Milioto's interpretation of Tokyo's hardcore scene (2008), and these areas of difference stress the need to ground one's understanding of human phenomenon within local contexts, as behaviors and activities that are superficially the same sometimes betray fundamental differences of motivation and meaning. Still, to some degree, the four main aspects around which this account of the way of life of Taipei's indie rockers (and the role of their musical activities therein) were articulated could potentially serve as a basic model that could help make better sense of other "alternative" (or unconventional) modes of existence or experiences centered around various types of human activities. By seeking to grasp (1) what kind of sensory experiences or emotions a particular activity provides, (2) what kind of social relations it fosters, (3) what kind of economic advantages it provides, (4) what kind of self-identity it allows one to construct, and then, most importantly, contrasting these elements with the perceptions of ordinary everyday reality prevalent among major actors, one can acquire a rough but concrete understanding of the everyday lives of, for instance, Wall Street stock traders, high-level amateur athletes, or active military servicemen.

Naturally, the present monograph and the methodology that led to its realization

are not without several limitations and weaknesses. The data, observations, interpretations and remarks expressed in this thesis, while aimed at producing an accurate account of their object, are inevitably tainted or even biased to a sizeable extent by subjectivity, as they are the product of a personal fieldwork experience and of an equally individual perspective on a diverse and complex socio-cultural phenomenon. I invite the reader to exercise a sound critical mind in his reception of this work, and to confront or go beyond its content using other accounts produced by participants or observers who have different viewpoints on Taipei's indie rock scene and its performers.

Furthermore, the elements of interpretation gathered in this thesis are little more than an attempt at constructing a representation that can hopefully acquaint readers with a piece of human experience that is less familiar to them. As such, this simplistic and non-exhaustive portrait, based on a limited and imperfect sampling, necessarily fails to account for the reality of all veteran indie rockers in Taipei, nor for the true nuances, diversity and interplay of connected phenomena (on both local and transnational levels) that exist in the local indie rock scene. Flagrant examples of such shortcomings include the assumption that an "indie rock scene" in Taipei can be isolated from Taiwan's larger indie music scene, and the little attention paid to the particularities of women's involvement. Also, one must keep in mind that every aspect of Taipei's indie music scene is evolving rapidly, from the identity and realizations of its performers to the contingencies of the music market... Continual monitoring of the events that occurred during the redaction of this thesis proved challenging, and it is likely that the accounts included in this monograph will be obsolete in only a few years. Still, it is my sincere hope that the present ethnography has shown that in order to understand the meaning of

musical performances, one must understand the specific context in which they take place and the variety of social experiences that the world of music enables performers to access.

I also hope that this thesis can encourage and point the way toward future research. It goes without saying that this monograph does not even scratch the surface of the inexhaustible objects of research that are rock music and the lives of indie rock performers. Unquestionably, playing rock music – whether in Taipei or in any other society around the world – is about much more than the dimensions outlined in this thesis. In order to produce a more detailed account of the story of local indie rock musicians and the meaning of this story, each of the aspects addressed in these pages would need to be documented by more substantial data. This would of course call for more meticulous fieldwork, including repeated interviews with a greater number of formal informants. More refined questions and data analysis would also be required, which would ideally involve more extensive use of available anthropological, sociological or psychological theories and accounts. For instance, a Bourdieusian perspective on the activities and life trajectories of local veteran rockers would most likely throw some light on the social and symbolic dynamics at play in Taipei's indie scene, and help to make even better sense of the practices, conceptions and motivations of its performers.

Comparative analysis is another valuable approach that has been largely neglected in this work. While the present thesis is not completely void of contrasts and references to other ethnographies on rock music scenes, further comparisons and discussions could help identify in what regards and to what extent the realities of Taipei's indie rockers are

different from or similar to those of other Taiwanese musicians (ex: indie musicians of other types of popular music), or to those of their fellow rockers in other societies. Such a project would require much more time and resources than I possess.

Academic objectives related to the world of music, as part of social sciences' quest to document and account for human diversity, are by their very nature, worth pursuing. Perhaps the most important contribution of this monograph to the greater discussion occurring in academia is the sense of rebellion it identifies among indie rock musicians in Taipei. Interpretations of local rock (sub-)cultures worldwide as movements of socio-cultural opposition have been produced and contested profusely in the literature on popular music phenomena (especially in the field of cultural studies). The fundamental reason underlying Taipei's veteran indie rockers involvement in the realm of music might after all simply be a modest and pragmatically sound pursuit of happiness and self-realization – a pursuit rooted in fundamental and probably also universal human aspirations. Yet my observations suggest that, in the context of Taipei's indie music scene, their way of life take the form of of genuine resistance against the dominant cultural practices of their society, although only few of my informants do claim so verbally²⁵⁷. This of course raises troubling questions on the reasons and assumptions behind the general lack of understanding and support with which such a project is met outside the local indie music scene, in the larger socio-cultural contexts of Taiwanese families and society. When putting aside considerations for *normality*, one can interpret the musical activities and unconventional mode of existence of local indie rockers as a solution to a series of commonplace problems that pervade life in modern Taiwanese society (and

²⁵⁷ More extensive investigation would be required to determine to what extent local indie rock musicians oppose the Taiwanese cultural orthodoxy in the long term and can be considered a vector of cultural change in Taiwan.

probably also in contemporary societies worldwide). Seen from this angle, the way of life of Taipei's veteran indie rockers offers a reflected vision of the kind of social world we inhabit. A world in which, perhaps, it is difficult for people to escape isolation and create meaningful bonds with others, to fight monotony and pursue intense emotional and sensory experiences, to reject the anonymity of the masses and acquire a sense of distinction and self-agency, or to avoid grueling study or working regimens in favor of a daily schedule that leaves sufficient spare time for healthy or self-fulfilling activities.

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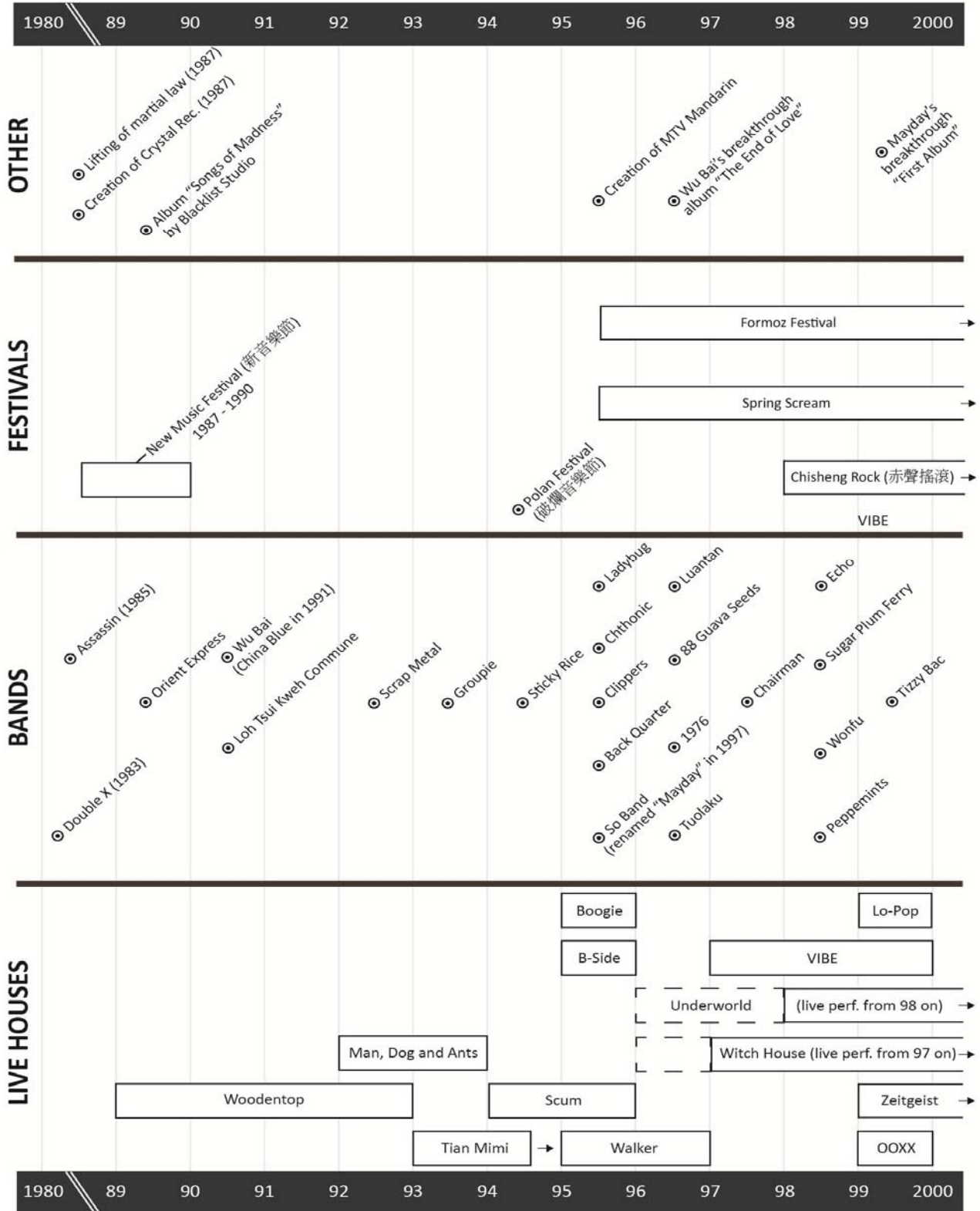
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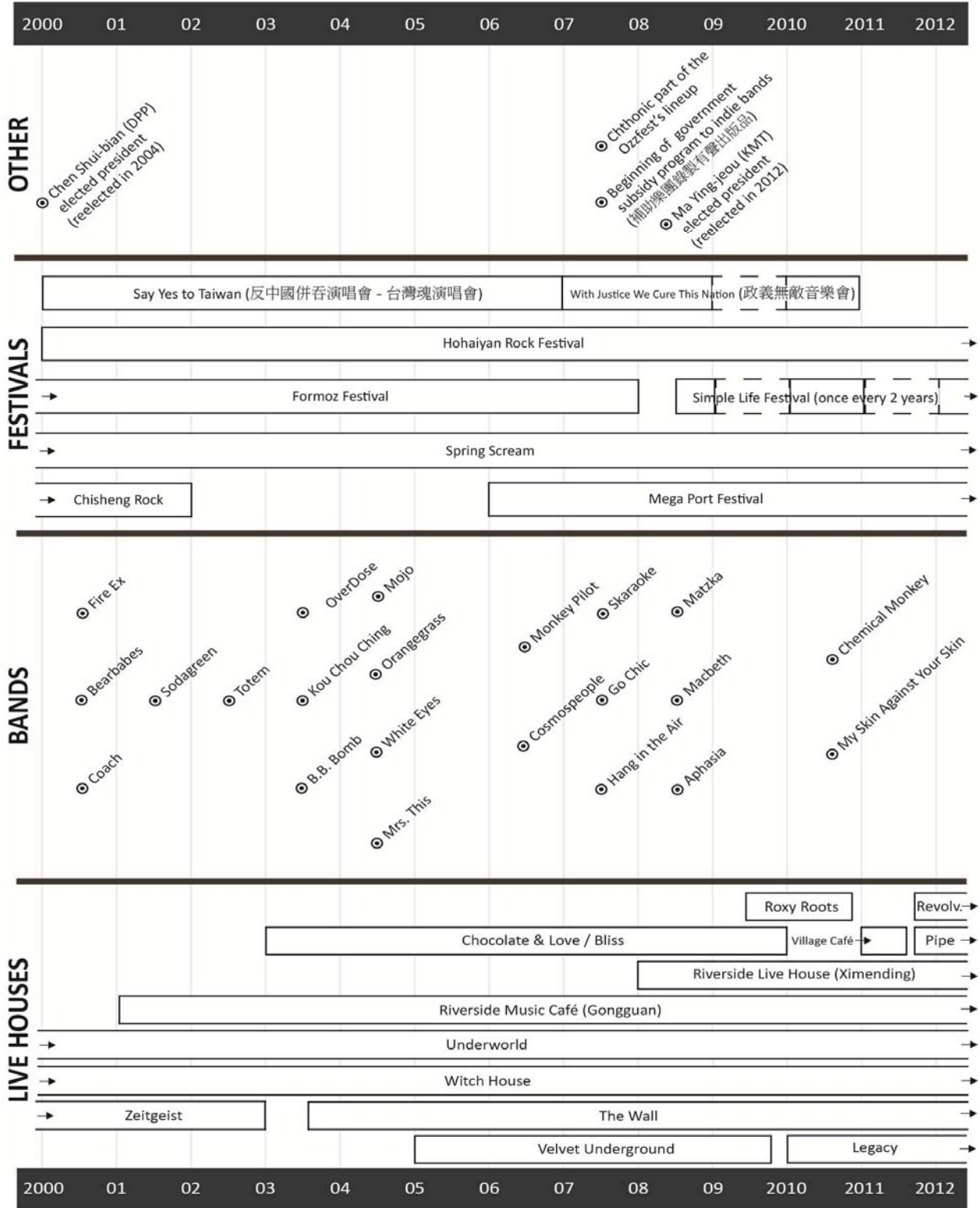
ANNEX 1

Timeline of Taipei's indie rock scene – from the 1980s to 2000



ANNEX 2

Timeline of Taipei's indie rock scene – from 2000 to 2012



ANNEX 3

The inherent technicality of music recording and the different types of recordings found in Taipei's indie rock music scene

Recordings that circulate in Taipei's indie rock scene can roughly be divided in three types according to their intended use, recording methods, and level of refinement in production²⁵⁸. First, the “demo”, the most common type, is an individual and unpolished recording of a song's draft version. Such a recording is produced mainly to be used as a reference in the songwriting process or as a sample of the band's music. Secondly, the amateur “DIY” or “home” album, which is a printed collection of a band's original songs. It is usually not intended for release on the market, and is essentially produced on a Do-It-Yourself approach by band members and friends, either at home, in a band's private practice room or in a friend's recording studio. Thirdly, the “market release” – or record intended therefore – which usually involves collaboration with professionals from a recording studio and a record label for production and distribution.

Although the three types of recordings mentioned above differ from each other in terms of quality and technical means, the sets of skills, equipment and techniques required by their production (as well as the very purposes underlying their realization) are closely akin to each other. To facilitate the understanding, DIY albums and market releases can be regarded as three manifestations of a same continuum, which ranges from the more basic demo recording to the more complex and polished market release.

A vast majority of active rock bands in the world, amateurs and professionals

²⁵⁸ These categories are constructions based on personal observations. Their purpose is not to be exhaustive but only to facilitate the sharing and explanation of a phenomenon.

alike, constantly produce demo recordings of their songs. Demos can roughly be defined as recorded sketches of songs. Their level of completion can vary considerably, from the simple use of a small digital voice recorder and a guitar to put a song's structure on tape, to the more elaborate recording of a song's finished version, which comprises multiple instrumental or vocal lines. Their general purpose is to serve as a reference in the different musical activities of a band, including songwriting, band practices, and the making of albums. A lot of indie bands also record their practice sessions so as to be able to better analyze the group's sound and performance²⁵⁹. While most demos are predominantly intended for a group's internal use, a lot of Taipei's indie rock bands invest a substantial amount of time and efforts to produce more polished demo versions of their songs, which can be accessed via the band's webpages²⁶⁰. This material then provides fans, friends and booking agents with an idea of the band's music, and may incite the interested public to come attend their performances. Online publication of demo songs is widespread not only among less popular bands (or those that don't have a DIY album or market release) but is also frequent among some of the more established and popular local bands.

Thanks to the technological advances of the past twenty years, producing demo songs of reasonably good quality is now in reach of anybody who has access to a fairly high-performance computer, music instruments, various music paraphernalia (ex: microphones, sound card²⁶¹, synthesizer, etc.), as well as a little space to put and use this

²⁵⁹ Such was notably the case of Black Summer Days' practices, which were recorded using any recording device available, for instance a recording pen, a video camera, or a recording device plugged directly into the mixing console.

²⁶⁰ Live houses in Taipei usually include links to songs and video clips of performing bands on their website as part of their online promotion.

²⁶¹ Sound cards are pieces of electronic hardware used to manage the input and output of sound both to and

material. A lot of Taipei's indie musicians turn a part of their home into a small recording studio, where band members can get together to record their demos²⁶². The production process itself is centered on the use of a type of software called digital audio workstations²⁶³, which acts as virtual music studios that enable musicians to record, playback, edit and combine multiple audio lines coming from different audio sources (called "tracks"). Musicians can either plug their instrument (ex: guitar, bass, synthesizer, etc.) or amplifier directly in the computer or use microphones (ex: for vocals, drums, or anything else) to record the different instrumental parts of their songs. Music software can also be used to create synthesizer lines and digital rhythms which imitate the sound of real instruments and spare local musicians the hassle of recording real synthesizers or drums²⁶⁴. Once the different instrumental and vocal lines of a song are recorded, musicians can arrange them, add audio effects and rework different aspects or details of the demo²⁶⁵, to finally export the song to a digital audio format like MP3 or WAV for easy circulation and listening. The use of such technology is now generalized in modern audio

from a computer. In a way, a sound card serves as a "bridge" between real-world sounds (ex: any kind of instrument recorded through a microphone) and the digital codes and processes of a computer. External sound cards are oftentimes called "audio interfaces".

²⁶² This was notably the case with BSD. Most of the band's demos were recorded in a combination of Georgy's room, my apartment, and a friend's place (where an electronic drum kit was available). Another common practice among musicians who have an apartment outside of their parent's home is to setup a makeshift recording space in an empty room.

²⁶³ In technical literature, the term digital audio workstation is often shortened to its abbreviation "DAW". Local indie musicians usually refer to this type of software by its specific brand name. Some popular DAW brands include Steinberg Nuendo, Propellerhead Reason, Ableton Live, Pro Tools, and Logic Pro. Since DAW software – like most music production software – is very expensive to buy, a vast majority of Taiwanese indie musicians use pirate versions, which can easily be downloaded for free from the Internet. DAW software is also the main production tool for composition in electronic music (ex: techno music, trip-hop music, industrial music, etc.)

²⁶⁴ To record drum tracks of good quality is substantially more difficult than with other instruments. That is why a few rock bands compose digital drum tracks directly within the DAW software (ex: OverDose's 2011 demo song *Rock On*) or use an electronic drum kit to record the rhythmic tracks of their demos (ex: BSD's 6 demo songs recorded in 2010).

²⁶⁵ The steps of music production that follow the actual sound recording and arrangement are commonly referred to by the umbrella term "post-production".

recordings, from the dubbing of films to all types of productions in the music industry.

Anybody who has some knowledge of the world of music is well aware that the production of a more polished demo song can demand a substantial amount of time, efforts and concentration. Besides the abovementioned technical intricacies of sound, software and post-production, an additional challenge comes from the playing and singing of the song for recording purposes. In order to produce a good recording, one must have an excellent mastery of a song's instrumental and vocal lines, as any small imperfection (ex: a guitar note played slightly off beat, a little hesitation in the "attack" of a chord, a slight lack of intonation in the voice, etc.) usually reflects negatively on the quality of the entire demo. This often forces musicians – especially less experienced ones – to try multiple takes and spend hours recording a single instrumental track for a song²⁶⁶. This difficulty can oftentimes extend the production of a single demo song up to a few days and nights of intensive work. Yet it is undeniable that working extensively in the studio – with or without the assistance of music professionals – can only have positive effects on the musical skills and self-confidence of local indie musicians. As I experienced it personally in the past years, recording is the occasion for each band member to deepen one's mastery of sound processing in general and of the band's repertoire, as it requires a much greater precision in the sound control and play than during band rehearsals and performances.

The next category of recordings commonly found in Taipei's indie rock scene, DIY albums, can roughly be understood as collections of improved demo songs. These are still produced almost entirely by band themselves, but with more emphasis on details

²⁶⁶ This difficulty is practically doubled when attempting to superpose two vocal or instrumental lines for better effect of "depth" in the sound. This practice is standard in all quality recording processes.

so as to achieve a greater overall quality²⁶⁷. The production process and techniques remain chiefly the same as with demo songs, with more time being invested in the recording and post-production steps. For example, a common difference between local demo songs and DIY albums is the recording of real drum tracks (as opposed to the use of an electronic drum kit or digital rhythms generated directly within the DAW software). In order to minimize costs, actual recording usually takes place at home, in the band's practice room or at a friend's recording studio. All production steps – including the design of the album cover – are generally being taken care of by band members, often with the help of a musician friend who has more experience in the specific tasks of recording, mixing and mastering. Hence the designation “Do-It-Yourself album”. The credits (in English) and indications accompanying an album entitled *Drop* produced in 2006 by Taipei indie band Blue Velvets is fairly representative of local DIY albums:

Produced by Blue Velvets
Live drums and vocals recorded at Weiway Studio, Taipei
All other instruments recorded in our homes
Mixed by Tao Chiang [guitarist and bandleader] except for
Track 8 mixed by 阿政 [A-Zheng] and Track 2 mixed by 阿政 [A-Zheng] and
Tao

Once the recording and post-production processes are completed, the audio files and the cover design are sent to a company specialized in the printing of CDs and CD covers. According to BSD's bandleader Georgy, to print 1000 copies of an album in Taiwan can cost between \$TWD 25,000 and 60,000 (\$TWD 25 – 60 per album). This sum, along with occasional compensations for studio time and help for post-production, represents the main cost entailed by the production of a DIY album, which must be entirely covered

²⁶⁷ This however doesn't necessarily mean that DIY albums sound better than demo songs. A band's recording and production skills can still be considered the main factor that determines the quality of a demo or an album.

by band members themselves.

DIY albums are generally not intended for market release, but are distributed by bands themselves on an informal basis. Fellow indie musicians and music fans can often buy a band's album (whether it is a DIY album or a market release) at indie concerts for \$TWD 150 – 400 at the door. Crowds are often invited to do so by performers during the show as a way of supporting the band and local indie music. It is also not unusual to see local indie event producers and record companies produce DIY compilations of songs by indie bands. These are then sold at a minimal price (or even distributed for free) as a way to draw the attention of indie music fans on a few promising indie acts²⁶⁸. Besides, the CD covers of market releases equally tend to show more elaborate and polished design or art work than improvised DIY albums²⁶⁹.

In contrast with DIY albums, local indie music albums released on the market (“market releases” in short) tend to be recorded entirely in professional or semi-professional recording studios with better equipment. Market releases also involves greater attention to post-production steps of mixing and mastering, which is usually carried out from experienced technicians²⁷⁰. This generally allows achieving substantially

²⁶⁸ A good example of such DIY albums is a compilation of live performances by 15 local indie bands entitled *Welcome to the Underworld* (歡迎來到地下社會現場合輯), recorded and produced mainly by Slater Chiang (the sound engineer of the Underworld at the time) for the Underworld, and distributed to audiences at the end of 2010.

²⁶⁹ Like with DIY albums, the graphic designs of a majority of albums released in the local indie scene appear to be carried out by band members themselves or by friends of theirs. However, indie bands with more financial means often entrust specialists with all design duties, especially since they prefer alternative formats to the traditional paper album cover slipped into a transparent plastic case.

²⁷⁰ Mixing of Taiwanese indie records is generally carried out in Taiwan, and prices can vary a lot according to the involvement of the sound engineer in the making of the album. On the other hand, mastering of music recordings, i.e. the preparation of the final master tapes before CD printing, requires very precise skills and equipment, and is almost always carried out by dedicated music mastering studios which enjoy a solid reputation in the international music industry; like West West Side Music Studio (New York State, USA) and Glenn Schick Mastering (Atlanta, USA) in the two abovementioned examples. The band's music files are usually saved on a CD or DVD, sent abroad, and then sent back to Taiwan once the mastering complete. Costs for mastering abroad vary between USD\$ 50 – 200 (TWD\$ 1,500 – 6,000) per song.

higher levels of recording quality, but at higher costs than a DIY album. Renting of studio time for a few days of recording, compensation for the recording and mixing engineer(s), costs of mastering in a professional studio, printing of CDs and album covers, and more; to my knowledge, the total costs can vary between \$TWD 250,000 (approx. \$USD 8,300) for an average album and over \$TWD 1,000,000 (\$USD 33,000) for high-end indie productions. Released in 2010 by veteran rock band 88 Guava Seedz, the 10-track album entitled *Worse than an Animal* (比獸還壞) can be seen as a typical market release of Taipei's indie rock scene. The album's credits read as follows:

all lyrics by A Chang [a.k.a. 阿強 , singer, guitarist and bandleader] except 10,
by 林倩 [Peppermint's vocalist and bandleader] & A Chang
all music by 88 Guava Seedz
Produced by Slater C and A Chang,
Recorded by Slater C at Rebel Sound Studio and 393-B1, Taiwan²⁷¹
Mixed by Slater C at Rebel Sound Studio, Taiwan
Mastered by Alan Douches at West West Side Music

Mostly for budget considerations, a vast majority of local bands seek the help of friends or acquaintances for technical support and access to a studio; in 88 Guava Seedz' case Slater Chiang, an established sound engineer in Taipei and a long-time friend of the band, who owns a small recording studio (Rebel Sound Studio). It is worth noticing that several veteran indie rock musicians (ex: 88 Guava Seedz, OverDose or Mary See the Future) possess sufficient knowledge and skills to handle most of the production tasks in the studio with occasional supervision and support from more experienced sound engineers. A few popular indie bands with more resources at their disposal (or simply with better

²⁷¹ This indicates that Slater C acted as recording engineer for the album, and not that he actually played any instrument in the production process. This mention might be confusing to readers who are unfamiliar with the world of music production.

connections within the local music industry) will associate with one of the few established music production structures in Taipei, which allows them to benefit from better recording conditions and more thorough assistance from veteran sound professionals for the production, recording and post-production of their album. Examples of such musical projects include the second album of Taipei punk band Fire Ex (滅火器), released at the end of 2009 and entitled “*A Man on the Sea*” (海上的人). The album results from the collaboration with music professionals from The Wall Live House, the Riverside Musicians Studio (河岸音造錄音室) and the DGS Studio (大吉祥錄音室) – all of which are small but prominent organizations within Taiwan’s indie rock soundscapes:

製作 Production: Andy Baker & Fire Ex

錄音 Recording: Andy Baker & 龔聖傑 Jack Gong @ [Riverside Musicians Studio] & [DGS Studio]

配唱指導 Vocal Producer: 吳志寧 Zulin (04.05.07.08.09)

混音 Mixing: Andy Baker @ [DGS Studio]

母帶後期製作 Mastering: Glenn Schick @ Glenn Schick Mastering [Atlanta, USA]

出品 Publishing: 有料音樂 Uloud Music Co., Ltd.

出品人 Publisher: 傅鉛文 Orbis

藝人經紀 Talent Management: 有料音樂 Uloud Music Co., Ltd.

The quality of recording produced by local indie rock bands has been constantly improving over the decade. The recent involvement of the Taiwanese government in the production of local indie music has contributed to increasing the pace of this development.