

Festivals of all stripes

Scarlett Li is out to show that live music events are key to the future of the mainland's music industry, writes **David Eimer**

Making money from music on the mainland has proved almost impossible in recent years. Even before downloading songs for free became the norm, there was no music-buying culture among young people. If that was not enough, the wary official attitude towards Western-style musicians, the limited number of venues and the lack of exposure from the mainstream media, all conspire against budding music moguls.

But music executive Scarlett Li Dai believes that she can succeed where others have failed. Having organised last year's inaugural Zebra Music Festival in Chengdu, she is convinced that festivals are key to the future of the mainland music industry.

"Before there were records and CDs, we had Mozart and Beethoven and they survived on live performances. If they could do it, so can we," says Li, as she gears up for this year's three-day event. "There's a huge market for live music."

She has ambitious plans to turn Zebra into a festival to rival the largest in Europe and the US.

"I think China has the capacity and the market to stage very big music festivals, but we don't yet have one that can equal a Glastonbury in Britain or a Coachella in the US," says Li. "The main reason is that to establish any big music festival takes time. It takes money, brains, good co-operation with the local government and the determination to continue running even at a loss. I want to build Zebra into that sort of music festival 10 years down the road."

That's a bold statement given the history of such events on the mainland. Even established festivals such as the annual Midi and Modern Sky events are subject to the whims of officialdom and have had to move to different cities or cancel because they clashed with sensitive anniversaries or special events.

Some, such as the Beijing Pop Festival, have given up completely.

Li is perhaps the most high-profile female music executive on the mainland. Before founding Zebra Media - which provides music for a cable music channel and companies such as Nokia and China Mobile - she ran Star TV's Channel V and was one of the few mainland-born senior executives working in Hong Kong's media sector.

A determined 38-year-old whose jeans and training shoes belie her corporate background, Li certainly talks a good festival. That is perhaps what leads her to claim that 150,000 people attended Zebra last year.

"That would put it on the same scale as Glastonbury," says Archie Hamilton, whose Shanghai-based promotion company Split Works organises the annual Jue Festival and runs the China Music Radar website. "I haven't seen a Chinese festival that has had more than 10,000 people on any given day."

Li admits Zebra did not make a profit last year, another reason to doubt her attendance claim. Yet she does not need to inflate the crowd figures because Zebra was judged a success.

Zhang Changyu, head of A&R at the Maybe Mars record label in Beijing, says: "I think in terms of organisation it was the best festival we played last year."

Two of its bands, Gar and Carsick Cars, the darlings of the mainland alternative rock scene, were there.

Zebra also broke new ground by giving space to 17 non-governmental organisations alongside the bands and DJs.

"There were lots of NGOs in Sichuan after the earthquake and I thought they should market what they were doing to young people. I wanted to introduce the concept to the people coming to the event because it's a new one for Chinese youth. A lot of them don't know what NGOs are," Li says.

For the NGOs, it was a chance to make direct contact with volunteers and workers. Du Juan, founder of C-Nature, an organisation that promotes ecology through recycling, says: "People were really receptive. There's always a good atmosphere at a music festival and when people are happy it makes it easier to introduce new ideas to them."

Chengdu was chosen as the location for Zebra because Li organised a fund-raising concert there after the 2008 earthquake. That enabled her to build relationships with local officials.

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Scarlett Li (above)

"I found the Chengdu government surprisingly open-minded," says Li. "I think the authorities are a lot more open now. When I started doing events in 1997 it was very different. We'd get stopped because the singers had low-cut dresses or yellow hair. That sort of thing isn't a concern now."

However, Ding Taisheng, publicity director for Modern Sky, would not comment on Beijing's attitude to the festival, presumably for fear of jeopardising this year's event. The organisers of Midi, China's longest-running festival, admit that despite their 11-year history it has not got any easier.

"There's a lot of bureaucracy and that makes it really difficult to book bands," says Shan Wei, Midi's vice-general manager. "You can only sell tickets after you have the permits. And you need to do marketing and promotion, so it always ends up being a last-minute rush. You have to get everything ready in two months and it's a big festival; we're expecting 20,000 people each day."



Promoter Scarlett Li wants the Zebra Music Festival in Chengdu to rival major overseas events such as Britain's Glastonbury. She claims 150,000 people attended last year's festival. Photo: Nick Otto

Nor is it easy to attract foreign bands, both because of financial considerations and the Ministry of Culture's scrutiny of performers' lyrics and history. Last year Modern Sky were denied permits for all foreign acts. After Bjork's "Tibet, Tibet" chant at a 2008 gig in Shanghai, everyone from Oasis to Bob Dylan has been refused the chance to appear on the mainland.

That means festivals mainly feature local bands, which at least allows them to build a profile.

"Four years ago there were probably only 50 or so people in Shanghai going to gigs every weekend. Now, it's more like two to three thousand. Everybody loves music and now the infrastructure is developing," says Hamilton.

A festival-going culture is also emerging. "Young people don't buy CDs, but they like to see bands live. I think that's why there are more and more festivals now," says Shan.

Social networking sites help spread the word, while low ticket prices of 80 yuan (HK\$90) a day also draw crowds. But that makes it difficult for festivals to turn a profit and for bands to make a living.

Li believes that live music, especially festivals, along with the increasing market for mobile phone downloads, will be the backbone of the mainland industry for the foreseeable future. It's for that reason that she is planning to stage further events.

"I want to create more festivals in different locations. They'll be different styles; some will be jazz or feature older performers."

Being a woman in the male-dominated music industry gives Li a certain novelty, but she is keen to play it down. "I don't think the musicians care."

More important is the legacy of the years she spent working for Rupert Murdoch and Star TV. "What I learned from him is that it's the majority who are important, not the elite," she says. If Li can tap into the masses on the mainland, then Zebra will be around for a while yet.

Sponsored Feature

Prime Source Forum

Expert insights into international trade policies and on-line consumer trends in China were just two of the topics covered during the fifth Prime Source Forum from 29 - 31 March, 2010 at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre that brought together over 400 delegates from 29 countries and regions.



Janet Fox, SVP, director of sourcing of JCPenney and chairman of USAITA told delegates that despite the mention of protectionism, it is unlikely there will be any sudden changes in trade policies affecting the textile and apparel trade between the US and Asia and in particular, China. "I don't think the US consumer is ready to pay higher prices for apparel and textiles made in China that tighter trade policies could mean," Fox told delegates.

Delegates also heard from a panel how inter-Asia trade agreements were helping to offset the impact of the trade drop between Asian textile and apparel producers with the US and Europe. The panel of high-profile experts included Dr. Peter Pineisi, president of Euratex, Willy Lin, chairman of Textile Council of Hong Kong and Myung-keun Ha, executive vice-chairman, Korea Federation of Textile Industries.

Another highlight of the eight sessions presented over three days was the upsurge of on-line apparel retailing in China, which has doubled annually for the last three years. Henri Mura, executive chairman of VIPTEHUI Group told the audience that while e-commerce set-up costs were significant, this was an effective way of reaching increasingly sophisticated consumers. He noted the absence of US and European brand names available on-line had opened the way for young mainland companies to build their own brand names. "There are a rapidly expanding number of consumers that choose to purchase goods such as apparel via the internet rather than

through traditional brick-and-mortar retail," Mura told the audience.

A feature of this annual event are the Workshops dealing with operational issues held on the day prior to the actual Forum where following the opening address by Nancy Nord, the US Commissioner of the Consumer Product Safety Commission, delegates heard a panel of experts express their views on the role buyers and suppliers could take to demonstrate leadership in the global apparel supply chain.

A special address on "Global Sourcing after the crisis - Lessons learnt - is China still the number No 1 Sourcing Country" was presented by Professor Dr Helmut Merkel, managing shareholder of EurAsia and Hans-Werner Scherer, chairman of the EOS Group. Participants also gained valuable insights from keynote speaker, Andrew Wu, group director of LVMH China on "Cultural Understanding of China in Rapid Transformation - Beyond Luxury Consumption".

Consumer trends in the US and Europe were discussed in depth by a panel of experts including Hong Kong-based David Dodwell, Ben Simpfendorfer, chief China economist of RBS, Douglas Hsu, chairman & CEO, Far Eastern Group and Premal Udani, chairman of India's Apparel.

Cost-effective innovation was another topic that drew widespread interest from participants. Joachim Hensch of Hugo Boss suggested creating "hot spots" to inspire designers' creativity. Panel member, Roger Lee, COO of TAL also focused on ways to inspire staff to learn new skills.

Global sourcing strategies were looked at in detail by a panel of experts moderated by Thomas Nelson, MD at VF Asia and, Marc Champagnon of Li & Fung, Craig Dana of Ann Taylor and Andrew Lo, CEO of the Crystal Group.

Sustainable sourcing was another topic explored by a panel including Philip Chamberlain, Buying head of C&A and Tobias Fischer, regional



Tobias Fischer, Regional CSR Manager of H&M said sustainability is part of our every day's business decisions.

CSR manager of H & M.

Organised by APFL Ltd, the Prime Source Forum provides a strong platform for industry representatives and senior managers to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing manufacturers, suppliers and retailers involved in the production and sale of garments and textiles. Sponsored by luxury crystal manufacturer, CRYSTALLIZED™ - Swarovski Elements, the international structure of the event also provides delegates with a unique opportunity to network with business leaders and industry representatives across the entire spectrum of apparel and textile industry.

The Forum also received high profile participation from adidas, Ann Taylor, AWI, Bossini, Fountain Set, Jockey Intl, Jones International, New Balance, Nike, Pacific Brands, Polo Ralph Lauren, Target and YGM. The next year event will be held from 30 March - 1 April 2011 in Hong Kong. For more information, visit www.primesourceforum.com

Buzz in the air as music fans count down to holidays

Festival-goers on the mainland can choose from a number of events over the Labour Day holidays from May 1 to 3.

Zebra Music Festival (Chengdu, below)
Venue: Tulips Flora Park (Yujinxiang Huahui Gongyuan) in the Xindu district



Line-up: includes rockers Dragon Tao and Proximity Butterfly; folk groups Elephant Fan and Zhao Mu Yang; groups such as Asaf Avidan & the Mojos from Israel, and Sodagreen and Monkey Pilot from Taiwan.

For information: www.myzmf.com/enshow.shtml

Midi Music Festival (Beijing)
Venue: Haidian Park, 2 Xin Jian Gong Men Lu, Haidian district
Line-up: Mongolian folk collective and "Chinagrass" pioneers HangGai; hip hop group Yin Ts'ang; rockers AK-47; Carsick Cars; Voodoo Kungfu; electro band Yufemen; folk rock group Nanwu; Hong

Kong's King Lychee; Singapore's Inch Chua; Stalingrad Cowgirls from Finland; and indie band Audio's Pain from Spain.

For information: www.midifestival.com

Strawberry Music Festival
In addition to its annual music jamboree in October, indie label Modern Sky is hosting the alternative Strawberry Music Festival at Tongzhou Canal Park in suburban Beijing.

The tentative line-up, which overlaps in part with the Midi festival, includes Queen Sea Big Shark; Pet Conspiracy; Re-Tros; rockers New Perfume and Boys Climbing Ropes from Shanghai.



Thomas Nelson, MD of VF Asia voiced his views amongst the crowd of delegates.