Beating a tribute to honourable retreat

On first listening, several tracks from *The Honourable Retreat* – "a musical tribute to the end of colonial rule" – are too jazzy and slick to have any relevance to the record's historic theme.

But this original album, produced by Australian musician John Huie, cannot be judged on first impressions or a single track. Unlike most albums that dominate the local pop market, this is one to be savoured and digested in its entirety.

Released last week, the concept album features a group of Hong Kong freelance musicians – Anthony Ho on the Scottish small pipes and Highland bagpipes, Wong Hae playing one Chinese stringed instrument, the *erhu*, Kwok Wai-sze the *guqin*, and Anthony Fernandes and Hamish Stuart on drums.

Many of these instrumentalists are part of the local jazz scene and know each other well.

The recording is an odd, but refreshingly interesting mish-mash: in the space of 10 tracks there are the majestic Scottish bagpipes, Celtic tunes, traditional Chinese folk music, acoustic guitar and funky jazz.

Technically, Celtic tunes and ancient Chinese music blend in well together because both are based on the pentatonic scale.

"It's a British and Chinese sort of sound . . . an historical sort of sound," Huie says. "The title track is to portray the majestic feeling of the tune and the importance of it."

While *The Honourable Retreat* can be described as a dignified and romantic work, it is not political – despite its title.

For instance, Huie initially planned to have a picture of Mao Zedong (毛澤東) on the album cover but later changed his mind because he thought it would be too political. Instead, the sleeve now features an old group photograph of British and Chinese soldiers with faded prints of Queen Elizabeth's head and two coats of arms.

As for the title, Huie explains that Governor Chris Patten, after searching for a substitute for the term "handover" during one of his addresses to the Hong Kong people, came up with "the honourable retreat".

"The phrase has a special place in Hong Kong, but that was the first time I had heard it, and I knew straight away it had to be the title of the CD I was working on," the 39-year-old Huie says.

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In many ways, *The Honourable Retreat* is an album that has been waiting to happen. After all, the territory is already swamped with handover merchandise such as T-shirts, $1,997 feasts, books, movies and watches. It was just a matter of time before a handover record appeared. Has the record production team joined the bandwagon in capitalising on the idea too?

Huie points out he is not a businessman, although he concedes the title of the album may give the impression he is taking advantage of an important moment in history.

He says: "But there are also events like Christmas. There are people who sell air. At least I have produced something tangible, something you can listen to."

While the group had a clear idea of the concept behind the album, when it came to actual production, much improvisation was called for because no one knew whether this collaboration would work.

Fernandes, also 39 and a well-known figure in local pop music, admits to knowing nothing of Huie's concept when he was invited to take part in the production.

"But I heard [the title track] and liked the tune from the start," says the Indian-born drummer. "It gave me some ideas of what John was working on."

Ho, who has played the Scottish small pipes for 15 years, says he was interested in both the idea of a handover album and playing for a jazz album.

But at the beginning he thought mixing Scottish pipes with Chinese music would sound odd. "So we experimented and eventually it worked well," Ho says.

The track *King Kong* featured a mystery guest. Thus the credits for the track read: "Who knows what his name is? He just stumbled in off the street at midnight, did it, and then disappeared down Lockhart Road, never to be seen again."

Several tracks in *The Honourable Retreat* feature excerpts of historical writings, including an English soldier's account of the attack on Chu'en-pi Fort in 1841, which is read by Martin Dowds.

"I thought it was nice to do something different," Huie says.

Huie, who came to the territory in 1990, tries out some novel ideas on how to project and represent Hong Kong musically. *Trouble In Wan Chai* is particularly clever, mixing nostalgic Chinese music with bar noises.

Other Hong Kong-related tracks include the acoustic *Eve Of The Handover*, and *Top Of The Dragons Back*.

Send 'er Down, which starts out as a jazz-rock instrumental and develops into a rousing Celtic melody, is more personal. Huie, from Sydney, says the production embraces memories that cling to him.

"The tune is actually about John Ziegler Huie, my grandfather, who, during the harsh droughts of outback Australia, would fire a cannon at the sky in the hope that this might help send down the rain," he says.

"Apparently, it never worked."

The last track, *Movin' On Ahead*, is a love song ("but not Canto-pop style") about his recent marriage as well as the future mood of Hong Kong after the handover.

Fernandes says *The Honourable Retreat* is no flashy Canto-pop album and the only packaging is its cover.

It is not labelled a "jazz album" so as to avoid giving the public preconceptions about its content.

"The music is from the heart," he says. "People buying this album should have an open mind. I think its very title says it all. The album has a deeper [meaning] and should get people thinking."

The Honourable Retreat *is now available from HMV.*