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Double-decker Death

After 50 years, a London icon is fighting to stay on the streets.

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Golden age returns

Jin Haili reports on a new album to be released in Shanghai that gives new energy to the classic jazz tunes of the 1930s





Right: Shanghai-based Australian composer John Huie who produced the collaborative album, "Shanghai Jazz." Above: Chinese trumpet player Fu Hwa is one of many Shanghai artists who perform on the album, which will be available in the city in November. — Shen Kai/Wang Rongjiang

With chic jazz venues popping up across downtown areas, Shanghai seems to be ready for its next golden age of jazz music. But while most are hailing overseas musicians, one Shanghai-based Australian composer is dusting off the gramophone to replay tunes from the 1930s and 1940s — believing that's the real Shanghai jazz.

Sitting in his studio, John Huie clicks the mouse, and the whole room is filled with sound. The voice of a diva starts to sing in a remarkable Peking Opera style accompanied by trumpet.

"It's such an amazing merge of different cultures," says the soft-spoken Huie.

The clip was from Huie's extensive collection of old Chinese jazz music.

He began collecting music when he first heard the song "It's Never Too Late." He had the song on an old cassette for many years when he was in Hong Kong during the early 1990s.

Not knowing why, Huie used an excerpt of the song in the tune "Eve of the Handover" from "The Honorable Retreat," an album he created for the 1997 handover of Hong Kong, which was commended by the Prince of Wales of Britain.

"It wasn't just the fact that this was Chinese jazz that attracted me to it. It also just seemed so black and seductive. I have loved the old style arrangements of the American jazz giants, and it was also happening in Shanghai around the same period. It led me to listen to more old Chinese recordings," Huie says.

On his first trip to Shanghai two years ago, Huie was stunned by the amount of culture oozing out of the city. Never before had he fallen for a city but it was obviously love at first sight.

"I have never seen so many bars and restaurants in one place, and although the musicians have had little exposure to jazz since the late 1920s, many of them have grown to be world-class performers," Huie says.

But Huie noticed that none of the musicians he went to see were producing CDs. So he embarked on a project to have these unknown performers record an album of some of Shanghai's most precious and classic songs from the 1930s.

The "Shanghai Jazz" CD has been released by EMI Music Hong Kong and will be available in Shanghai in November.

The song selection reads like a top 20 list of a 1930s pop chart with tracks like "The Love You Can't Get," "Give Me a Kiss," and "Let's Love Tonight."

To re-create the classics, the first move was the revival of the band Clear Wind — as a tribute to the first all-Chinese jazz band "Qingfeng Wu Yuedui" (or the Clear Wind Dance Band) in Shanghai. The band was formed in 1935 at the request of Du Yuesheng, the notorious gangster of old Shanghai.

"We used the name of Clear Wind to remind people that jazz used to be an indecent thing, a background score to the gambling, extortion, opium trafficking and prostitution which characterized old Shanghai at the height of its infamous age of decadence," Huie says.

"But with today's economic and social reform, Shanghai is finally experiencing a long-awaited cultural resurgence and I am lucky to be part of it with some of the best musicians in this city," he says.

Among them are vocalists Coco, Carrie, Ginger and Rebecca; trumpet player Fu Hwa and Feng Yucheng; pianist Huang Jianyi and other young but talented musicians who saw the launch of "Shanghai Jazz" as an opportunity for extensive cooperation.

"I have adapted old Shanghai tunes before but the 'Shanghai Jazz' project was a completely new experience," says saxophonist Zhang Xiaolu, who also teaches at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

Zhang's grandfather and two uncles were all saxophonists at local cabarets.

"This album is a summary of what the jazz generation has done over the past decade, and it is especially meaningful when we do it with all these famous songs in Mandarin," Zhang says.

For Coco's fans, it is probably the first time you've heard him sing a Chinese song.

"I have been thinking for a long time to do my own jazz music, or at least not just imitate Western works," Coco says. "So when John came to me with the scores and asked if I would like to join in, I said 'yes, sure, let us go'."

"It's like getting drunk in the city's luxurious past and rediscovering ourselves — who we are, where we have come from," he says.

"Shanghai Jazz" has already caught the attention of people overseas.

The Clear Wind band will perform at the Hong Kong Arts Festival next year and music festivals in Canada and Singapore. Australian Oscar-winning director Susan Baker is about to embark on a documentary about the revival process.

"This project has been a wonderful part of my life. I am particularly grateful to these young musicians. They truly understand the meaning in the music and they are continuing to revitalize the great jazz tradition of Shanghai every night, sparking the world's imagination," Huie says.