

New Business Models

The Contractors rap about doing business in the big city

interview by Leon Lee

Don't be fooled by the pointy shoes and man bags – these girls can rock! Formed by three building contractors with a passion for music and construction, the trio met bidding on a project and have been partners ever since. Up until now their smoky electric sound has been heard at building sites and smaller venues around town, but now they're bringing their "rock with urban characteristics" to a larger audience. In anticipation of their new album, *Music for Buying Art*, to be released this month, *tbj* sat down with the three vixens at Lan to discuss everything from how they met to their musical aspirations.

tbj: Tell us about yourselves. How did you end up working together?

Contractor Yao: We were each bidding on this huge project. In the end, they gave it to another company, who totally stole our idea. Months wasted wining and dining.

Contractor Weng: After the results were announced Contractor He was livid, cursing like a taxi driver – and she's the calm one.

Contractor He: We stormed out of the meeting room and saw Contractor Yao sulking in her Audi blasting Snoop Dog. So we went to dinner and quickly discovered that she drinks like a fish.

CW: We have similar music, food and lifestyle tastes. We're the same kind of people.

CH: Erguotou and gold cufflinks.

CY: Cufflinks or pointy shoes?

CH: Tough call. You're right – pointy shoes.



Contractor Yao motions to a waiter.

CW: Hang on (searches through her man purse, but comes up empty handed). Aiya, all out!

Contractor Yao orders a xiao er.

tbj: Your favorite materials and colors?

CY: I like green and red.

CH: Mmmmm, gold. That's both a color and a material, isn't it?

tbj: What's in the man purse?

CW: Let's see ... Daily ration of erguotou, Zhongnanhai ciggies, extra cash, cell phones, keys to the Audi in case my driver quits again, contracts and face tissue.

CY: Some papers, identity cards (some real and some fake), cigarettes, couple of cell phones, lighter, lipstick and a brick of cash.

CH: I actually don't carry anything in my bag. It's just an accessory that I have with me at all times because it makes people believe I have money and authority. In fact, the bag itself is only that, a repository for concepts.

CW: You're just jealous because we get to carry the cash.

CH: I don't need to carry cash, because you do it for me, Biiiaaatch.

tbj: Who are your inspirations and influences?

CH: Pan Shiyi, Ai Weiwei, Dick Cheney, Halliburton and Bechtel, Gianni Versace, Snoop, P. Diddy and Wang Fei.

CY: Bill Gates, Deng Xiaoping and of course Trump.

CW: What's the big deal with being super rich? We don't want to be just another super rich company. We have ideas and feelings we want to express. We want to connect with our audiences – our clients – and that's why we started a band. We do it for the people, the fans, the clients. We'd be nowhere without our clients. We especially like dumber clients. They inspire us.

tbj: How do you see yourself in the context of China's growing economy?

CY: Our construction and buildings are invaluable. We also manifest and

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PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE CONTRACTORS





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realize people's hopes and dreams for a new China.

CW: For example, when you drive around Beijing, all these building names like MOMA, Chateaux and Palm Springs ... they didn't just happen on their own! We think long and hard to label our projects with style. Who doesn't want to live in MOMA, or have a chateau of their own?

CY: We provide essential shelter for the people of this city, and the purpose of our music is to provide the same: warmth, protection and connection. Our clients live, work, sleep, make money, and raise families in our buildings. They need us and we need them.

CH: We depend on one another. Chinese people are very smart. We invented gunpowder and safety pins. Our fans not only appreciate the music but they understand us. I hope they aspire to become like us one day, maybe in ten years, after we finish making all our money.

tbj: When do you find time to make music?

CY: It's just part of what we do. Everyday there is time for business and time for music. Sometimes these times coincide and we make music in the conference room. Contractor Weng sings in the middle of signing contracts when she's particularly inspired.

tbj: Tell us about this new album *Music for Buying Art*.

CW: We wanted our new work to capture this moment in time, to show what moves us and excites us. Contractor Yao has been secretly going to auctions, but recently she's been bringing us too. The first time I went I was blown away. This is big. The thrill of an auction is just beyond words. I can't really express it. You'll just have to listen to the album. I think it captures it well.

CY: The music is an expression of what we see and feel in the artwork. I think these young artists are onto something.

tbj: Do your employees come to your performances?

CY: We call them "meetings," and yes, some of them are mandatory.

CH: We update everyone on the status of projects. We share ideas and methods for success. We give people the opportunity to participate and give them a sense that they can have a say in what's going on. Of course, they

can't really influence anything, but we like to give them the impression that they can.

CW: The Q&A sessions can get very heated. We've had people show up with fake tickets. At first I thought it was funny, but things got physical. Now we have hologram-imprinted e-tickets, and a well-trained security team. We've also had people come and publicly demand back pay. Of course this is a very important issue. Performing live is rewarding but hard. It's a love-hate thing.

tbj: By the way, nice suits!

CW: You want one? We'll get you one. We often barter services for suits. A lot of guys on the site wear our suits. This suit reflects our lifestyle and worldview. You have to live in Beijing to appreciate what we do for this city. We're redefining fashion in the megalopolis. We're sexing it up! I own 20 suits. I don't wear anything else. Casual clothes make me feel like I'm wearing underwear in public.

tbj: Any plans for tours abroad?

CH: Why go out? The world will come to us. The world is already coming to us. We do go abroad for work fairly often, but it's just like anywhere: airports, hotels, conference rooms, business centers, saunas, casinos ... They all start to look alike after a while.

tbj: What do you hope to achieve with your band that you can't achieve as building contractors?

CY: Whether it is an office building or a song, the band is a way for us to experience our lives in a heightened and more conceptual way. It's art, but also hard work.

CW: We want to be role models. The public has a very distorted image of us. They seem to think we take people's money and stuff, but it's not that simple - far too one-dimensional. It's all intertwined and connected. You can't do anything without directly affecting your community, and in this globalized age our community is the entire world.

tbj: Where can our readers find out more about what you do?

CW: On our website: www.thecontractors.cn. We are open to other cyberspace partnerships. We could envision a joint venture with Baidu or Google. Hey, do they wear suits at Baidu? ■

The Contractors' *Music for Buying Art* is like a rich and gooey dish of stewed abalone and sea cucumber with an intense sauce of unidentified sonic bits evenly coating an aurally-baked bed of crispy lettuce. In this world, building contractors-turned-pop stars spin urban beats with "Chinese characteristics" while giving slick power point presentations. Some tracks are successful at capturing the transition from business women to music mavens, while others are wacky tests of the elasticity of song structure. Careless aural stumbling through the album will allow the listener to discover familiar slices of the city buried in the musical mix. The first listen through *Black Audi* is a sweep around Beijing in its unofficial mascot car of the same name, but deeper study uncovers construction, domestic "conversations" and slurred *erguotou* toasts that meld into an edgily psychedelic sonic meander. It bears the markings of the group's hallmark electronica with one haunting sound tumbling into the next, and makes for a delightfully fuzzy mess that attacks your senses like a strong case of halitosis off a modern city's exhale.

The single *Elevator Lady* is a sappy serenade, sung in Chinglish, to the ubiquitous lift attendant. The Contractors were able to convince well-known crooner Ding Wei to contribute his smooth vocals to the track. With a nod to Belle and Sebastian's smiling sadism, Ding's mildly operatic voice plays out the innocent obsession to its logical end. While the recording doesn't make full use of Ding's vocal range, his obvious restraint adds gravity to the recording. Download the ring tone version from their website at www.thecontractors.cn. Wei Weng