



The October 2006 issue of *Toro* magazine featured db's account of his travels to China in support of his upcoming book *Around the World in 80 Gigs* in an article titled "Dave Bidini sells rock'n'roll to China one fist-pump chant at a time." The version provided below is his unedited text, prior to publication.

Rheos rock'n'roll in China

The situation in which I found myself with Al was not the first time I'd been struck with the backing-band blues. In the Rheostatics, we never had a problem playing each other's songs, but whenever another musical principle was introduced, it always seemed to sour the alchemy.

Our first experience as a back-up band came when our friend, West Coast promoter Jay Scott, suggested that we twin forces with a fellow named Carmaig deForest, a ukulele-playing folk/pop singer from California. The concept was exciting to us -- perhaps this would take us down new musical roads, provide a gateway to the USA -- until we realized that Carmaig was a ukulele-playing folk/pop singer from California. Alas, finding common ground between our burgeoning Etobicoke progpunk and Carmaig's ironic pop proved to be a trial. During rehearsal, we attacked every song like Rod Stewart attacking a crate of Chivas, but no matter how hard we tried infusing his music with polyriffs and counter-melodies in an effort to create lasting works of grandeur and beauty, it all sounded wrong to Carmaig. He wanted no epic splash, no basslines doubled on the tripleneck; all he wanted was a solid pub band who could coax his songs to the end. Of course, this begat a kind of inter-band outrage, starting with questions about why Carmaig hadn't taken to our brilliant, post-rock treatments and ending with doubts about whether he might know a good arrangement if it space-junked him in the head.

Because we were kids, we had no seasoned way of articulating our feelings. Instead, as Carmaig left rehearsal one day, I shouted "This is fucking impossible!" or something like that, at the top of my lungs. Tim said, "He probably heard you, you know," which only made me feel worse about the fact that, despite our mangled sound and painful rehearsals, we were scheduled to start a cross-Canada tour with him in a matter of days.

Luckily, we did a tune-up concert at the Silver Dollar Tavern. We sabotaged the show, making fun of Carmaig while his back was turned and flinging ourselves across the stage like a bunch of apes trying to exhibit a dominant physical quality. Even worse for Carmaig was the fact that we got a chance to play a full set afterwards, setting the house on fire with the pure freedom of being able to play our own material, however we wanted. The next day, 24 hours before we were



supposed to leave, Carmaig called us to the Bagel restaurant on College street and told us that he was “going to drop a bomb.” He didn’t think the band was working out. We told him we were shocked, but that it was ok.

A few years later, a similar deal was brokered for us to back-up Jane Sibbery, the internationally-regarded New Wave/New Age singer. Unlike Carmaig, our depth of appreciation for The Sib’s music was such that we’d covered one of her songs, “One More Colour,” on “Introducing Happiness.” Like Carmaig, however, Ms. Sibbery proved to be an intractable force when it came to the adaptation of her music.

We started daytime rehearsals at the Gas Station studios in Toronto while working on music for a film by night. At first, the sessions were a breeze. I still have recordings of them that reveal big, meaty grooves and wild guitars married to Jane’s perfect, fragile singing. But then, things went awry. The Sib, who’d just released her noted album “Bound by the Beauty,” started to deconstruct all that we’d done, uncertain that all of the layers we’d provided were serving her music (at which point, I thought: here we go again). It was her prerogative, I suppose, but we found it hard to support her musical anxiety, mostly because we thought it was all sounding really good. It was also difficult to relate to whatever she was hearing in her head, which-- because she’d spent the entire year recording by herself, in the isolation of her home-- were lots of simple, electronically-programmable parts. Martin was asked to unplug his effects. Dave Clark -- a master of dexterous playing -- was told to -- drum as if he were a beatbox, and I was told, kindly, to keep my foot off the fuzzbox (how Tim got off the hook, I’ll never know). Instead of being outraged, I think we were mostly disappointed. The outrage would come later.

In attempt to breathe some life into our dying sessions, one of us suggested that we cover a song. Since Jane is quiet at the best of times-- after a few days, she only spoke when telling us what not to play -- it was difficult to tell whether she thought this was a good or bad idea. Nonetheless, we adjourned to the studio’s listening room, pouring over CDs to find the right song. In some instances, not more than a bar of a song would pass before Jane would say, “No. I don’t like it,” or “No, not this one.” We must have listened to thirty, forty songs. Finally, I reached for a song that I consider to be the greatest confection in the history of pop music -- “Everyday People” by Sly and the Family Stone -- convinced that I’d found a winner.

I remember listening to Sly as a 7 year old driving around Florida on a family vacation. It was if everyone in America was stepping to Sly’s low, confident, yet deliciously exultant groove. The song’s elevated beauty (and genius) can be found in Larry Graham’s single-note bass line -- discovering the simplicity of this part while listening to late-night radio was, for me, as profound as cracking a language code, or understanding a scientific principle -- and the way the band passes each verse from one singer to the next defines the essence of what it is to play in a band. “Everyday People” is a musical celebration of what happens when a lot of people share in a common creation, as opposed to focusing it inwards on a single voice or instrument, all the while remaining focused itself.

Of course, Jane hated it. “No, don’t like this one,” she said, shaking her head, and that was that. We struggled to patch together 7 or 8 songs -- Jane would pad the set by playing “My Mother,” a solo piano opus -- for a performance at the Hillside Festival in Guelph, Ontario. 3,000 people came to see us, crowding a long field on the far side of a lake on a soft summer night. Before we were about to go on, I stared through the stage entrance at the beautiful darkening sky and said: “Boy, the crowd looks really beautiful from here.” At that point, Jane, in a dumb-guy, Brooklynish kind of accent, parroted my words: “Boy, the crowd looks really beautiful from here.” I turned back and stared at her, disbelieving my ears. And then we walked on stage.

We survived until the third song. It had become apparent, from the beginning of the set, that while my bandmates and I had been familiar with Jane’s music, she had very little idea about ours. As the show started, we did our best to get into the performance, flying around the stage in an attempt to compensate -- and probably over-compensate -- for our lack of excitement with the song’s arrangements. This only served to startle Jane and throw her off form. She’d never been on

stage with an energetic, physical band before, and, as a result, she held tight to her microphone, keeping away from our stabbing headstocks.

It was around the time of our third song that I stepped on my percussion egg. I crushed it, causing sand to spill out of its split sides. I didn't even know this until I reached for it a few songs later, and found it destroyed. Needing to find something equally percussive, I grabbed a jangle-stick -- a drumstick with tambourine bells attached to the rod -- and proceeded to keep time. I can't remember which song we were starting, but I was doing fine until I decided to flourish the jangle-stick over my head, at which point about 100 people standing directly in front of the stage laughed. Because the beginning of the song was so hushed, the laughter rippled over the crowd, found the back of the field, then rippled back towards the stage. Jane stopped singing, stepped back from her microphone, and announced to the crowd: "I feel like I'm on some kind of stupid game show."

To this day, I don't know why what I'd done was so funny to so many, but it was probably a case of my body language unconsciously reaching for something to break the obvious tension that was spilling off the stage. After the show, a friend told me that it was pretty clear to everyone that there was zero chemistry between us, and that the audience was also looking for something to break the ice. My stick twirl had, apparently, done the trick. After Jane made her "game show" remark, there was a moment of deep silence before drummer Dave Clark announced:

"Sister, you're part of the greatest game show of your life, let's go!"

How we ever finished the set, I'll never know.

After two days distanced from our argument-- and after coming to terms with the fact that Jay and I could still rock out together without having to retract our positions on the World's Greatest Ever drummer -- a few things became clear. The first was that it was probably unreasonable to believe that Al and I might continue traipsing along in our global musical wonderland without falling victim -- at least once -- to the emotional duress of rock and roll travel. In the end, our fireworks probably satisfied those among you who found it unlikely that our journey -- and this document -- could proceed without any confrontation (you're welcome, by the way), and after working through a protracted post-argument argument in my hotel room in our next city -- Suzhou-- we realized that we knew how to fix things, and did. Adjustments were made to our set -- Al would open by playing a few solo songs (whether this was part of his greater design to write a book about being on the road with me, I didn't ask) -- and we resolved to put our worries behind us and push the fun through the shit.

Besides, Ÿ it was hard to stay darkly concerned over the state of one's rock and roll chi while staring out from the stage in Suzhuo to see a young girl sitting in the front row holding the spindle of a kite, which she used to play her paper serpent like a skittish dirigible high above the band. At first, Suzhou's appearance didn't lend itself as the kind of city that might balm our emotional wounds -- it was essentially a city-suburb of Shanghai about 40 minutes outside of town -- but as we bussed with Andy from the hotel to the gig, he explained that we would be among the first Western bands ever to play the city. (Jordan Cook and Stradio had gigged the day before). Really, if making SinoRock history wasn't enough to divert our concerns, nothing would be.

Suzhou is one of those 1, 000 year old Chinese cities that looks as if it had been devoured by Bramalea. Driving to the afternoon show, we passed miles of retail shopping promenades and hectares of cement-- and hectares more being poured -- before arriving at a sprawling suburban pitch -- the Suzhou Industrial Park -- where a roofless chipboard stage covered in red carpet and a great black backdrop promising "The Top Six Bands in All of North America (Canada)" had been planted. After hucking our guitars on stage, I tested the floorboards by jumping in the air, and

nearly plummeted through the wood. This was followed by hammering sounds underneath the stage, which lasted the entire afternoon.

The promoters had supplied us -- and every other band scheduled to play that week; we'd split as a group to go on separate mini-tours -- with three 20-watt guitar amps, only one of which worked. As penance for taking the World's Greatest Ever drummer's name in vain, Jay was forced to use a white bucket chair as a drum stool, and the kit itself creaked worse than Kenny Rogers' facelift. During sound check-- which more or less consisted of Steve Clarkson trying to figure out if there was more to the p.a. than a few cables plugged into a handful of outputs (there wasn't; since rock shows were new to China, the p.a. had been rented from a local dance group, who used the speakers to broadcast generic grooves) -- I watched as a representative from the local sound crew ran a thick, fifty-foot cable from the sound rig to a power box on the sidewalk, hoping to tap some extra juice for the show. Once he'd done that -- or not done that; from his unflappable expression, it was hard to know if he'd succeeded -- he walked to the entrance of the park where, along with some local policemen, he helped blow up an inflatable red dragon archway.

After testing the sound system, we headed off to another in a series of lavish banquets. There, we met the local promoters, who were as typical of North American promoters as we were of Van Halen. Mousey and bespectacled, they wore plaid shirts and loafers and looked more suited to run a hardware store or chair a Chamber of Commerce meeting than promote a rock show. It was actually quite refreshing to be part of a rock and roll milieu where nobody had a pony-tail, wore a satin jacket with BRAM TCHAIKOVSKY 78 sewn across the back, or had ever had a sweaty part of themselves pierced. Knowing what I do about the beginnings of rock and roll -- and having experienced a nascent scene, first hand, in late 70s, New Wave Toronto -- music in Suzhou was a bit of a time-trip in that the realm of rock and roll was still everyone's domain, and nobody had figured out that hanging around with somebody's uncle would get you booted out of Cool Camp. One of the first people in Toronto to book the Rheos was a Greek bartender who sold real estate named Jimmy Scopes. Jimmy didn't really know music, but he knew that kids drank beer, and that was good enough for him to carry out the responsibilities of booking the room Monday to Sunday. The men in Suzhou possessed the same unassuming normalcy, and because these were their first experiences promoting rock and roll, it fell upon us to show them that Canadian musicians weren't boozing jerks who wore their hot and sour soup bowls like hats and enjoyed China one chicken ranch at a time. Because the future of Suzhuan rock shows was on the line, we wanted to make a strong, good impression, provided we could get through the day without falling through the stage to our death.

The crowd in Suzhou was seated in rows with the same kind of white bucket chairs that Jay had spent the better part of the afternoon swearing at. With each chair nearly arranged on the green common, the setting was more like a high school convocation than a rock show. There was also a gaggle of concertgoers huddled under a shaded glen, which stifled the torrid sun and the day's plus-30 degree temperature. Sitting next to the girl with the kite was a young boy twirling a pet turtle on his finger (it appeared that the animal was for play, not lunch), giving Al and I yet another reason to forget that we'd almost Gallagher Brothered each other the night before. Rising above the backdrop behind the stage were two green-sheathed apartment towers going up across the street, their facades prettied by a row of fat red lantern balloons tethered to the back of the stage trailing MUSIC WEEK tails. The p.a. system's CD player -- which, Steve groused, had been as much of a concern to the local sound crew as the rest of the rig -- played Canto-Pop hits strung together by the voice of a male narrator, which sounded as if it had been recorded on an old answering machine. In between songs, the narrator said things like: "I must go now, or else I will be late for my flight. Just remember to set your alarm clock, so you get up in time." I'm not sure whether the narrator went on to mention "worker productivity" or "allegiance to the people's state" because, just as I was about to seek further translation, Al climbed the stage and slashed out a few acoustic numbers, getting himself where he had to be to rock out with the band.

Reports from the Stradio/Jordan Cook camp were that the Suzhuo crowd had been quietly bewildered. In fact, Stradio's soundperson told us: "After every one of Jordan's songs: crickets." But Jordan Cook wasn't the only one. A few days earlier, the Shuffle Demons' drummer, Stitch Winston, started a drum solo, only to watch from behind his kit as an elder from the crowd mounted the stage and began making a speech, which is probably the appropriate response to a drum solo (Stitch, to his credit, responded in kind, drumming along to the rhythm of the speaker's voice). But from the point of view of the Suzhuoian -- or anyone else who's never seen this sort of thing before -- rock and roll performed in the bucolic outdoors must have seemed pretty pointless and absurd. Chinese parks, after all, had been used, traditionally, for dragon boat races, soccer matches, and box-kite derbies, so, really, the idea of gathering in a lush field on a beautiful summer's day to sit in a stiff-backed chair under the blazing sun and get your senses razored and cap blown off by loud, weedling blues rock seemed like the kind of cultural torture that only misguided Westerners could have invented. If I hadn't been raised on this sort of entertainment myself, I might have wondered why I'd been drawn to it, and, for a moment, I feared that our purpose was to dissuade Chinese audiences from ever falling for Western pop. But as I readied myself to join Al on stage, Andy came up beside me, grabbed my arm and exhorted-- "Dave, get the crowd excited! It will be good; they will like it better. Have you learned the Beatles yet?"-- blowing holes in my theory. It was obvious that having the show come off well was as important to him as it was to us.

In Moscow, we'd drafted Yulia as our patter-translator at the Chinese Pilot. From the stage, she explained the 80 Gigs concept and a few of the songs' subject matter to the Russian crowd. Because there was an even greater divide between band and crowd in Suzhuo-- in Pudong, I'd noticed a few Western faces, but here, there were none -- I asked Andy if he'd do the same for us. Unlike Yulia -- who was nervous in her capacity as emcee -- Andy, god bless him, proved to be a baked ham, commanding and shouting excitedly at the crowd using a hand-held microphone. He was the perfect ice breaker, and after an introduction which ended with a two syllable word common to people the world over -- "Whoo-Hoo!"-- the show took off. Even though Andy's showmanship suggested the moral quandary of whether Western style crowd-goosing might lead to the kind of bad habits and stadium clichés that would make even Neil Diamond groan, there was no turning back. I realized that if the Chinese were going to learn these things, they might as well learn them right, so I arrowed my hands at my chest and dove in, leading the audience in a series of fist-punching, Bic-flicking choral chants where, in a time before the Rheos-Not-Rheos, I would have choked on such obvious tactics.

Inauspiciously, my first efforts to involve the crowd proved ineffective. Whenever I went to clap my hands over my head on the 2 and 4, the audience, instead, broke into full applause. But after getting Al and Dwayne to clap along with me, the penny dropped, and from that point on, I was able to Freddie Mercury my way to glory. My first task was to teach the Suzhuoians how to "ONETWOTHREEFOUR!" at the beginning of a song. Coming back at me, the chant sounded like what a drunk person shouts when he's awakened in the middle of the night, but it was the perfect outburst, in a birth-of-Chinese-rock-and-roll kind of way. This lingual trade-off was reciprocated later in the set during "Legal Age Life at Variety Store," in which Andy had the crowd count to 12 in Chinese, with yours truly repeating -- and mangling -- the numbers in English. Everyone loved it, because everyone loves hearing a stranger batter their mother tongue. I hung in there until numbers 7 and 8, but then I started making stuff up, shouting out "Yao Ming!" and "Tsing Tao!" and "Sigisoara!", which is the name of a small, medieval town in Transylvania, but never mind. At one point in the middle of another song, Andy relayed to the crowd what he'd learned during his visit to Canada's east coast, describing the cultural and geographical nature of St. John's, Newfoundland as a way of introducing Dwayne, or rather, Dwayne's solo in "Power Ballad to Ozzy Osbourne." For the first time, the crowd in Suzhou lowered their kites, settled their turtles, looked up to the stage, waited for Andy to finish, then laughed uproariously as Dwayne leaned into his shredderiffic solo. When I asked Andy what he'd

told them, he said that he'd talked about how, in the Newfie springtime, hungry polar bears come down from the hills and terrorize people. I filed away the knowledge that nothing gets a Chinese crowd going like the story of a good old Canadian bear-mauling, and watched as Dwayne soloed across 4, 8, then 16 bars, feeding the glow of the crowd's smiling lantern faces.

After this, there was no stopping us. I managed to get the crowd to wave their hands in the air like swaying sea anemone, which they did carefully, watching their arms move as if uncertain whether or not they were going too fast. Near the end of the set, the first sign that the audience was reaching out to us came in the form of a radio controlled fighter plane, which buzzed overhead as we played. Altogether, it was a delightful scene -- balloons, dragons, turtles, kites and planes -- at least until the Red Baron circled nearer and nearer until, by the last verse in "Horses," it was swooping to within a few feet of my head. I reared back as if being attacked from above, and saw Al tip his head back in laughter from the other side of the stage. The snakes slithered back into their caverns. We were having fun again.

At the end of the set, we climbed off stage and walked into the crowd, playing our last song. Immediately, people leaped from their chairs to be photographed with us. We easily accommodated the teenagers and children, but I made an example of one middle-aged punter by getting him to sing the bridge of the song -- "Bambamdiggydiggydam" from "The Ballad of Wendell Clark" -- before allowing his girlfriend to snap the shutter.

One of the things I noticed while walking through the crowd was that Suzhuo had provided the mainstream audience I'd never had at home. The irony wasn't lost on me that I'd had to come this far to play for a general public that, in Canada, had found the Rheos' musical tastes too strong. There were no signs of disaffection or angst or fringe poetics in the way the Suzhuoians behaved or dressed. Nobody looked like they'd ever heard of Charles Bukowski, had attended a comic book convention or studied German theatre. Of course, this was both a good and bad thing. While the audience was incapable of the kind of chronic arrogance we'd found at Kipsura in Helsinki, there wasn't much chance that any of them would leap out of their chair and reinvent the pogo, either. But even though the concertgoers had a linear sameness to them -- full-cheeked, middle-class, healthy-looking, conservative-- they behaved differently than a lot of mainstream audiences at home, who watch bands with a stoned-on-TV gaze. When the Suzhuoians participated in the show, they did so excitedly, not by rote, as if they'd done it three hundred times before.

Another feature that distinguished this Chinese rock event was the presence -- or lack thereof - - of concert security. Again, this might have partly been a case of traveler's romance, but the guards -- dressed in blue, wearing white gloves and white berets-- were as non-threatening as any security force I'd seen in my days as a concert rat. There were also a handful of policemen patrolling the backstage area, but they were about as hard-bitten and gun happy as Don Knotts.

One of the reasons we travel, of course, is to confirm or deny our ideas about the world, and, ever since the tragedy and disgrace of Tiananmen Square, Westerners have been quick to assume the worst regarding the role of the iron fist at public gatherings. But this was never an issue at any of our rock shows. Maybe it was because the authorities didn't care enough about rock and roll to think it worthy of policing. Then again, maybe there were Red Guardsmen waiting behind every telephone pole; I just couldn't see them. Still, compared to contemporary rock and roll shows in North America, there were far fewer bouncers or security personnel than at home. In fact, if you flipped identities -- hundreds of listeners sitting on numberless seats and strolling freely around the common at their leisure versus a tightly-policed concert bowl with designated rows and walkways where dancing and lingering are *verboten* -- you might wonder which was the police state, and which was Jerry Lee and Elvis's homeland.

Before coming to China, I went to see the hip-hop group Blackilicious, where two Brobdignagian strongmen spent the better part of the show picking on kids smoking cigarettes in the crowd. The audience in Suzhuo might have been as wild as meeting of the Rick Springfield Appreciation Society, but the show was bully-free and everyone smoked as much as they wanted.

After we clambered back for one last song, Andy grabbed the microphone and told the crowd to “rush the stage!” I was about to pull my friend aside and tell him that the classic stage-rush meant very little unless the crowd did it impulsively, but before I could, people had raced to filled the space in front of the chipboard stage. The police and security personnel, for their part, curiously studied the scene. At the end of the tune, people clamoured after us -- it was still mostly about the photo-op -- at which point I noticed one of the bigger security men push his way through the crowd. I feared that the afternoon was about to turn ugly, but instead, he elbowed and bulled his way forward to the front of the stage, where he waved a handful of yuan in the air and pointed to a stack of CDs at Al’s feet. Al reached down and gave him one, and the fellow’s eyes lit up as he paraded the CD through the crowd. Even the cops had dug the show. Maybe rock and roll was here to stay.