
Remembering when Chinatown rocked and rolled

Gala pays tribute to boomer garage bands of the 1960s and '70s

- Annie Nakao, Chronicle Staff Writer

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It was 1966, and 13-year-old Jeffrey Chan took in the eyepopping scene onstage.

"Chinese American guys playing Beatles songs!" recalls Chan, with a mixture of nostalgia and incredulity. "Wow, I thought these guys are cool."

"It broke us out of the stereotype -- that we weren't waiters, bus boys or guys who worked in laundries," says Chan, now 51. "Not that there's anything wrong with that. But that's how people viewed us until we started playing music."

The Soundcasters was one of dozens of Chinatown garage bands in the 1960s and '70s that were part of a citywide blossoming of Asian American soul groups whose music touched a generation of youth searching for identity.

This little-known piece of San Francisco's musical and cultural legacy came alive again recently when the Chinese Historical Society of America honored the Chinatown bands at its annual fund-raising gala, held in Burlingame last weekend.

Perhaps heavier in the waist and lighter of hair, some 650 attendees applauded the equally weathered band members, who played as the crowd boogied for hours to the soul music of their youth.

"It really evokes a lot of memories," says Carey Huang, 52, who played trumpet with the Intrigues and still goes to gigs with a new incarnation of the band, renamed Intrigue. For an awakening young Asian America, this music inspired a sense of community and played a vital role in galvanizing Asian Americans to protest the Vietnam War and fight for civil rights.

It was also an integral coming of age experience that few who lived through it have ever

forgotten. And for Baby Boomers growing up in Chinatown and its environs, the mere mention of band names like the Persuasions, Eclipse, Enchanters, Illusions, Soundcasters, Jest Jammin' and Majestic Sounds recall evenings spent waiting to get into Victory Hall, California Hall and Mr. D's.

Oh, they were dressed to the T's - guys in shirts with 4-inch collars or "hi-boys" so heavily starched that they scraped necks raw.

"You would wear your hair in a pompadour to appear taller, add rhinestone cuff links, alpaca sweaters and shiny black pointed shoes with pimp socks," wrote former band member Tim Leong, 51, in an account of those times for the historical society. All you needed was a splash of Jade East cologne to complete the ensemble."

The girls weren't to be outdone, rattling their hair into monumental bee-hives to match their dates' do's.

"Her hair was so high she looked 5-foot-11," Chan recalled of one girl. "The next day at school, she was only 4 feet!"

Jazz singer Cookie Wong, believed to be the first Chinese American female vocalist in a dance band of that era, recalls the short skirts, eye-liner and frosted lipstick.

Wong, whose mother, Pearl, ran Jazz at Pearl's in North Beach for years, was 18 when she started singing in several groups, including the Sentinels and Jest Jammin'.

"I was very studious, but I liked music," she says. "So I just hung around with the guys. But my mother never worried. She knew a lot of their parents. They weren't bad boys -- they didn't even smoke!"

Practice was difficult in Chinatown, where residents lived cheek-by-jowl. Bands frequently got thrown out in the middle of sessions because neighbors complained about the noise.

Still, the bands thrived, expanding from Chinatown to an expanded Asian dance circuit that took them from UC Berkeley's Pauley Ballroom to San Jose State.

"Our parents were supportive but they couldn't drive us," Chan says. "We were 16-year-olds driving to Sacramento on our own."

Some band members were even younger.

Huang was 13 when he snuck out of the house to play trumpet at a couple of dances.

Whatever the venue, they mostly played soul -- R & B, Motown, the Philly sound. The Beatles were an exception.

"You should have seen us -- a bunch of Chinese guys up there, playing James Brown," Chan says. "I guess we got into soul music because a lot of us grew up near the projects -- North Beach, Fillmore, Japantown -- and that was our circle. They listened to soul music and so did we. Plus, it was the time of civil rights and the Third World Movement. That united us with black music."

That bond, as well as the penchant for dancing, wasn't new in Chinatown. In the 1930s and 1940s, two Chinatown bands packed them in every weekend at the Chinese YMCA and the Chinese American Citizens Alliance hall with the Big Band sounds of Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey. The Cathayans and the Chinatown Knights enthralled young Chinese Americans, who swung the night away.

"The city was alive with music at the time, and so was Chinatown," recalls Philip Choy, 78, a board member of the historical society.

Both the Cathayans and the Knights traced their beginnings to 1911, when all of its members belonged to the Cathay Marching Band, renown for leading funeral processions with drum rolls and playing the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee." Outside Chinatown, however, the marching band was knocking 'em out in parades and pageants.

A dozen of these surviving elders were honored at the gala, and a current exhibition at the historical society tells the story of the Cathay Club, where many of them played.

Choy says the recognition is well-deserved, given their boldness for the times.

"In the late 1920s, early 1930s, they were living in a very bigoted world, " he explains. "The community itself was pretty much isolated from society at large. So this second generation was trying to break way from old world traditions and at the same time, break new world stereotypes."

Indeed, the name Chinatown Knights was chosen to challenge the emasculated image of Chinese males portrayed in the media, Choy says.

With the coming of World War II, some band members, like Andy Wong, of the Knights, went into the nightclub business, helping spark the popularity of Chinese American night clubs like the famed Forbidden City.

Chan, whose dad played trumpet with the Cathay Club, still sings and plays the keyboard

with Intrigue. Today, his 24-year-old daughter plays more instruments than he does.

One band, Jest Jammin,' never disbanded and still plays.

"We jest jam for the community and we've never quit," said community activist Rev. Norman Fong.

Most garage band members, however, stopped playing to go to school, get married, have kids and get real jobs.

Chan has spent 24 years with PG&E. Huang works for the city Department of Parking and Traffic. Leong, a former broadcast journalist, now heads the new Bay Area-based Asian and Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund.

But they still feel the pull of music.

"You have that same connection with the music of our youth," Chan says. "It still works."

And there's pride in having been part of a special time.

"I can't believe that the civil rights movement and struggle over Asian American studies did not have an impact on the minds of those who started to play music," Leong says. "It was an opportunity to showcase Chinese Americans, to show that they could perform like anyone else. That they had soul."

"Leaders of the Band: A History of the Cathay Club, 1911-2004," is a rotating exhibition at the Chinese Historical Society of America Museum through Feb. 20. 965 Clay Street, San Francisco.

Call (415) 391-1188 or visit <http://www.chsa.org/>.

E-mail Annie Nakao at anakao@sfgate.com.

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