words | **Dan Morey**
illustrations | **David Choe**

Anything Went

GOLDEN VOICES

You're drinking a whiskey and soda and waiting for the floorshow at Club Obi Wan. The place is crowded with swells dressed in the latest fashions–white dinner jackets for the guys, form-fitting satin gowns for the dolls. A champagne cork pops, a gong is struck, and the dragon's mouth at the rear of the stage begins to breathe smoke. From its mysterious depths emerges a vision in red sequin. It's Willy Scott, the famous American vocalist, and the orchestra bursts into the opening strains of Cole Porter's "Anything Goes." But something's very different; she's singing in Chinese.

Such is the image of 1930s Shanghai, thanks in no small part to *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and its Hollywood predecessors. Like most scenes filtered through the Hollywood lens, this one is somewhat distorted–though not by much, it turns out.

During the first part of the twentieth century, Shanghai was a designated treaty port, governed by a multinational council, where foreign trade and just about everything else was wide open. The city was flooded with European merchants, American soldiers, Sikh constables, white Russians exiled after the Bolshevik takeover, Japanese opportunists, missionaries of every ilk (you know, like Madonna in *Shanghai Surprise*), and, later, thousands of German Jews fleeing Hitler's holocaust. No passports or visas were required to enter the city; there was rampant gambling, opium peddling, prostitution, and gang warfare.

Despite the strong colonial presence, the overwhelming majority of Shanghai's population remained Chinese. After a while, the elite began to assimilate western tastes, turning Shanghai into China's most cosmopolitan city. They bought their children English lessons, lived in deluxe apartment houses, swilled Scotch at swanky nightclubs, and danced in the Hotel Majestic's grand ballroom.

In the midst of westernization, one sound rose above the din. Radios and Victrolas of Shanghai played the distinctive melodies of the city's popular music–a hybrid sound that seamlessly blended western jazz and big band with traditional Chinese folk. It was sophisticated stuff, capable of capturing the sweet syncopation of an English dance band, the brasher sound of American swing, or even the simple beauty of a vocalist accompanied by ancient Chinese instruments like the pipa. Cuban and South American rhythms were also in vogue, and it was common to hear wood blocks and maracas grooving away behind a Chinese singer. If Xavier Cugat had grown up in Shanghai, he would have sounded something like this.

What Willy Scott does with "Anything Goes" is a sort of jazzed-up, less Chinese version of Shanghai pop. Gong Li's songs in *Shanghai Triad* are truer to the sound, but if you want to hear the real thing, you have to check out the original Shanghai stars, like Yao Lee (whose translated song "Rose, Rose, I Love You" became a hit in the U.S. for Frankie Laine) and, especially, Zhou Xuan.

Zhou Xuan was known as "The Golden Voice," and one listen will tell you why. Her voice is so beautiful and haunting that you don't need to understand a word of Chinese to be moved by it. Though many of her songs are heartbreaking, they're pretty mild compared to the tragedy of her real life.

When Zhou was eight, her father, a half-mad opium fiend, tried to sell her to a Shanghai brothel, but she lit out with a troupe of traveling entertainers instead. The runaway singer couldn't have started much lower on the showbiz ladder, yet she clawed her way to the top only to be brought down by a series of disastrous love affairs with abusive men. Eventually, she suffered a nervous breakdown and committed suicide in a mental institution at the age of 38. But no one who ever saw or heard Zhou Xuan ever forgot her; more than 60 years later, there are Chinese grandparents who remember seeing her sing "The Song of the Four Seasons" in the film *Street Angels*.

Like many Chinese movies of the '30s, *Street Angels* depicts the desperate lives of the city's underclass. To the blue-collar audiences, Zhou Xuan was a voice of hope in an otherwise dreary existence, and she, along with her fellow singer-stars (all Shanghai films featured signature songs), remained an inspiration throughout the city's worst years. Even during the Japanese occupation, there was music to lend comfort.

All of this changed in 1949, when the Communist "liberation" finally succeeded in China. One of the first cultural initiatives of Mao Zedong's regime was to ban western music, including the Shanghai pop that was so influenced by it. Mao labeled the old music as imperialist and degenerate, and anyone caught playing it was singled out for public censure.

The music (much of which was patriotic) that had inspired the populace during the long, hard years of World War II was now blacklisted. From an American perspective, it would've been like Harry Truman banning Glenn Miller records–unthinkable. And so, ironically, the working classes were robbed of the music they loved by the same Communist Party members who claimed to represent their best interests.

Also ironic was the fact that Chairman Mao's third wife, Jiang Qing (a.k.a. Madame Mao), had herself been an actress and singer of Shanghai pop. Under the stage name Lan Pin (Blue Apple), she acted in a series of unsuccessful films in the early '30s. Her biggest role came later, in a 1937 picture called *Bachelor*. It's hard to believe that the cute girl singing a comedic song about bachelorhood on the soundtrack is the same woman who would later lead the brutal purges of the Cultural Revolution as a member of the politburo and the Gang of Four.

By the end of her political career (which ended in life imprisonment and eventual suicide), she'd managed not only to blacklist the Shanghai pop she once sang, but also to completely ban all but five of the beloved

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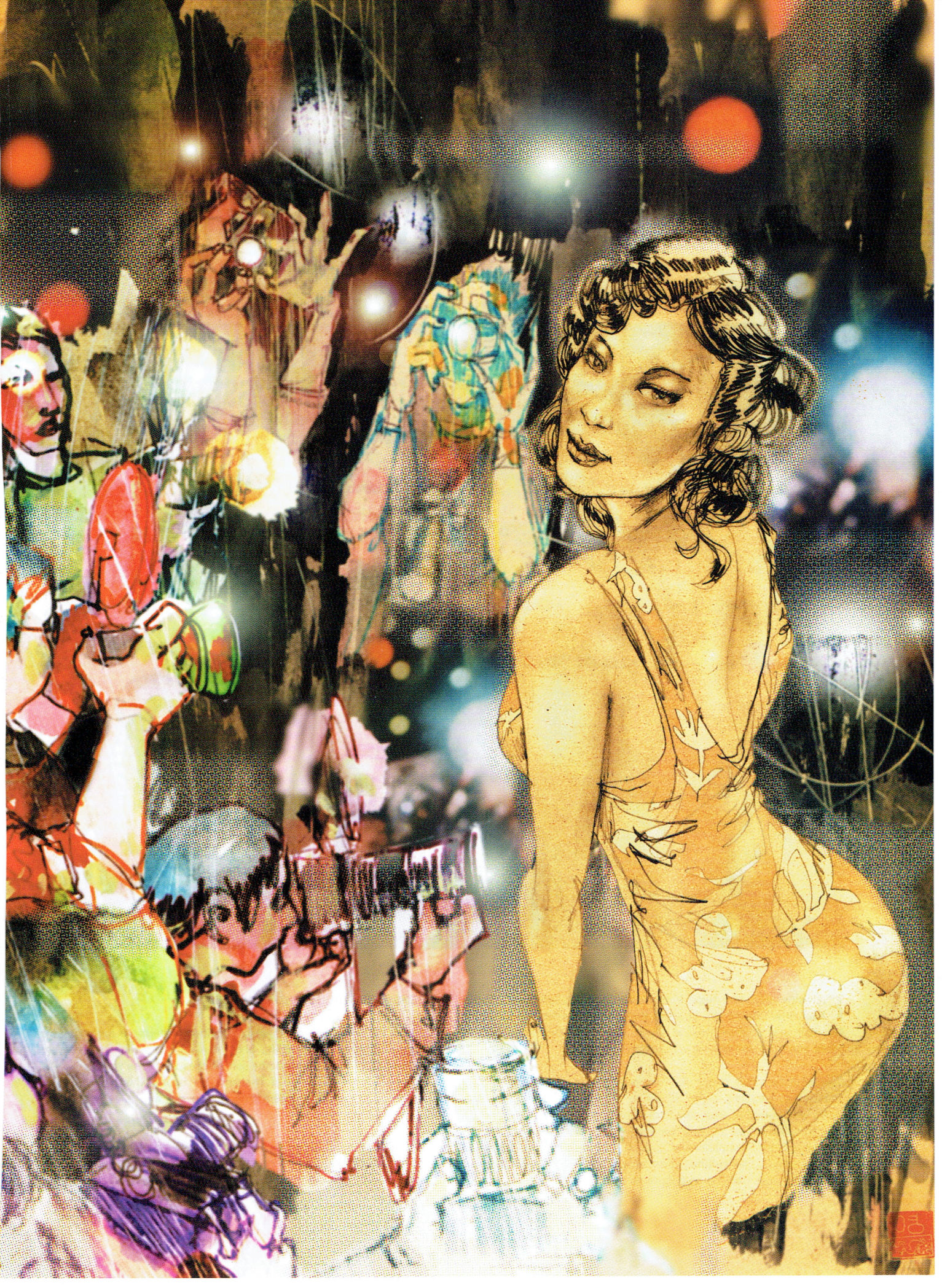

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Peking Operas. If art didn't fall in line with Communist propaganda, it was banned. By 1966 the Red Guards were destroying paintings, burning books, vandalizing historic buildings, and executing intellectual counterrevolutionaries.

Naturally, Jiang Qing took steps to cover up her own past as a popular entertainer, disposing of her films and records, and even some of the show folk she'd worked with–or so it's said. Luckily, a few of her songs have survived outside of China in places like Singapore and Malaysia, where collectors have preserved them.

One such preservationist, Lee Leng Kok, founder of the Singapore record label Ancient Sound Restore, became addicted to the old Shanghai music as a teenager and has since amassed a huge collection of 78s. When EMI finally got around to re-issuing some of the old tunes on CD in the early nineties, Lee compared them to his original records. Not surprisingly, the EMI CDs sounded more than a bit inferior. In fact, they stunk.

Lee has taken it upon himself to rectify the situation. "Preserving our pre-1949 Chinese oldies heritage" became his personal mission–a mission with a definite deadline, as he explained in an interview with Pro Audio Asia: "It is important that the job is done as well as possible today because, as the original discs deteriorate, it will become more and more difficult to do so in the future. Eventually, nobody will be alive from the Shanghai era to ensure that the re-masters accurately reflect the original sound."

He teamed up with other collectors, bought a CEDAR sound restoration system, and began making his own CDs. There wasn't any money in it, but he did get radio play and interviews and phone calls from newspapers. Before he knew it, a small-scale media blitz was on. You could call it Oldies Fever, but it was more than just octogenarian nostalgia. To most people the songs were brand new. Thanks to Mao this music had been virtually unheard for half a century, and hearing it now was like a revelation.

Pretty soon fans started forming oldies clubs all over the place–including Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. One of the clubs invited Lee to join in the fun. He agreed and went a step further, contacting many of the surviving singers of the era, including the legendary Yao Lee, who was delighted to hear of his work. When he organized a charity dinner to be attended by a number of the old singers, nearly 1,200 people showed up to see the stars of yesteryear, proving that not even Mao can keep a good song down.

The highlight of Lee's *Famous Songs from Shanghai in the '30s and '40s* series of CDs may be the second cut of the first volume, which is one of the scarce Lan Pin (Madame Mao) tunes from *Bachelor*. It's a hell of a fun song. If you can forget about all those murderous purges ("I was Chairman Mao's dog," she said at her trial. "What he said to bite, I bit."), it's hard not to like her.

Lee Leng Kok is not the only one focused on saving this classic music. In Kuala Lumpur, the seven-piece Dama Orchestra is going about it in a different way–by playing the old songs themselves. Their concerts are a time warp, with musicians and dancers in period costume, looking like pinstriped gangsters and shady femme fatales–a Shanghai version of the Squirrel Nut Zippers, but with better taste and more talent.

Oh, and there's one other guy with a current interest in the oldies: Wong Kar-Wai, who'll soon be shooting a Zhou Xuan biopic. Mainland actress Dong Jie (*Happy Times*) is set to play the young singer and Maggie Cheung (who else?) the older. Wong Kar-Wai has used some Shanghai oldies in his movies before–that's Zhou Xuan singing the lullaby-like "Hua Yang De Nian Hua" in *In The Mood for Love*–and he has a particular sensitivity when it comes to filming troubled, lovesick women. This could well be the perfect pre-war Shanghai flick.

And we certainly could use it. The Shanghai of the 1930s and '40s may be long gone, buried beneath the rubble of the Cultural Revolution and today's glass skyscrapers, but one can still remember. Listening to the music of Zhou Xuan will take you back instantly.