

## Tomorrow's Life

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# Life

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# Sonic youth

Three Jilin youngsters are making a big noise in China's beatbox scene, writes **Kristina Perez**

**D**ressed in typical hip hop gear - oversized sweatshirts, baggy pants, sneakers - the beatbox act would have looked at home on a Jay-Z music video. But the three mainland youngsters, who were in Hong Kong in June to perform at a music business conference, were an unlikely band of pioneers.

Calling themselves YB Box, Gui Jing, 23, Jing Xing, 19, and Jiang Linghu, 18, hail from Yanji, in northeastern Jilin province, where they have helped spawn beatbox fever among local ethnic Korean youngsters and turned the town into the mainland's beatbox capital. (About a third of the 2.2 million population of Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture, an icy delta region on the border with North Korea, are ethnic Koreans following a wave of migration in the 19th century.)

"We're just crazy about beatbox," Gui says. A computer science student at Changchun Normal University, he is YB Box's de facto leader, from whom the other two usually take their cues.

But there's more to their deference than age and experience (Jiang is studying art and design and Jing recently finished high school).

Gui is regarded as a beatboxing trailblazer on the mainland. He first came across beatbox - a form of vocal percussion usually associated with hip hop - on a YouTube video in 2003 and was so captivated he was determined to master the art. Aided by amplifiers and microphones, beatboxers use their mouths, lips, tongues and voices to simulate a range of sounds from drumbeats and rhythm sections to other musical instruments and turntable effects.

"I had never seen that kind of stuff before. I was amazed and wondered what the hell it was," Gui recalls. "I was dying to find out about beatbox on a Chinese site, but I couldn't find anything."

Undeterred, he eventually turned to HumanBeatBox.com, an English-language instructional website set up by beatboxers Mark Splinter and Gavin Tyte. Although HumanBeatBox provides videos teaching the basics of beat and vocal scratch and describes beatbox techniques using a standardised notation system, Gui says his lack of English made it hard going.

Nevertheless, switching constantly between a dictionary site and HumanBeatBox, he managed to teach himself both English and

beatboxing. "It took me almost two years," he says. Since then, Gui has taken on the role of a beatbox missionary on the mainland, producing his own instructional videos, first in Korean and then in Putonghua.

"I want more people to know what beatbox is, so I recorded four videos just introducing very basic skills," he says. These were posted on a site popular with youngsters in Yanbian and the craze spread like wildfire.

Gui's videos also caught the attention of Liu Feng, a filmmaker working for advertising agency Wieden + Kennedy in Shanghai. He was owed 10 days of leave and decided to fly to Yanji in February last year to witness the phenomenon. "Yanbian is famous for its noodles, but that was all I knew before I went," Liu says. "It was a very rushed [decision], but I was lucky because they were having the first beatboxing championship at the time."

He found about 200 young people packed into a lecture hall, where 30 contestants, including YB Box, were showing off their skills. Intrigued, Liu tracked the progress of Gui and his crew over the year in a documentary, discovering a subculture of teenagers using an imported street culture to express youthful concerns as well as their ethnic Korean and Chinese identities.

"In Yanbian, ethnic Koreans are very much in touch with South Korean culture. Nearly every family has a satellite TV which gets a signal from South Korea, so its culture has a significant impact on the people," Liu says. "In fact, the influence of Chinese culture is secondary in Yanbian. The concept of China for them is of nationality. They say, 'We are Korean Chinese.'"

Liu reckons what draws Yanbian youngsters to beatboxing is that, in contrast with a mainstream consumer culture that focuses on appearances, "beatbox comes from within the performer".



YB Box say they're not chasing commercial success, but they've already toured with British beatbox star Kila Kella and are the subject of a documentary (below) by filmmaker Liu Feng

An Ke, an ethnic Korean from Shenyang, says: "Maybe Korean-Chinese are more open to the outside world and picked up this culture faster, but Han Chinese have been relatively slower."

Another factor contributing to the popularity of beatboxing among young people in Yanbian is that the effects can be achieved without

expensive equipment or musical instruments and can be performed almost anywhere. Some also enjoy the sense of freedom beatboxing gives them, often turning the streets into community spaces through their performances.

Gui says they didn't feel very different from Han Chinese teenagers growing up in Yanbian, joking that the only exception is that "they can't speak Korean but we can". Nevertheless, their Korean identity is important to them. "I went to a Korean-language school and my parents taught me all about Korean culture," he says.

The YB Box trio met at a beatboxing concert in Yanji in 2005 and have since been practising together during vacations, experimenting with ways to blend their heritage with hip hop culture.

"Our traditional culture is Korean, so the songs are very slow. We love them but when we hear the beatbox or hip hop or rap, it's very different,"

For almost every beatboxer, what is most important is the rhythm. It makes you feel high

Gui Jing, YB Box

says Gui. "So sometimes we do covers with the melody in two loops - loop one is Korean traditional music and loop two is beatbox."

They rap about everything except politics. "It's boring. Girls we love, and beer and alcohol," Gui says.

"I think for almost every beatboxer, what is most important is the rhythm. It makes you feel high."

He insists YB Box are just enjoying themselves rather than seeking fame and fortune. "There is no goal, just play... just for fun."

But the YB Box crew didn't fail to seize the opportunity when they were invited to support British beatbox star Kila Kella on his tour of the mainland last summer. While the boys' parents fretted about how the trio would fare in China's big cities, Liu filmed their excitement at taking their first plane ride and their awe at meeting a star.

The documentary ends on a triumphant note, with Yanbian's second beatboxing contest - held

this year at a club instead of in a run-down classroom.

Gui and Liu say there are now about 300 beatboxers in Yanbian, including many girls.

Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the older folks in Yanbian take a dim view of youngsters shattering the quiet with noise from their speakers, microphones and dancing.

"They don't like it. There is a big generation gap. They can't understand what [beatboxing] is. All they want you to do is study and earn money, buy a house, buy a car," says Gui. "Traditional parents can't accept [urban youth] culture."

But thanks partly due to Liu's documentary and the Kila Kella tour last summer, the YB Box crew are finding a better understanding and a grudging acceptance of beatboxing by their parents.

Jiang says his mother has also found a use for his beatboxing skills: to help rock his six-month-old sister to sleep.

## People

Photos: AP, Reuters, EPA

### No pretty boys for Stallone film

Don't look for any pretty boys in Sylvester Stallone's next action film. Or for too much blood, either.

The actor said he is writing the script for *The Expendables*, in which he will star with Jason Statham and Jet Li. He will also direct the movie, which will start shooting early next year in Costa Rica and Louisiana.

They will play rag-tag mercenaries on an undercover mission to depose a Latin American dictator. Stallone (right) hopes to land Forest Whitaker for the role of a devious CIA agent involved in the operation.

"Whereas the *Oceans 11* films were an ensemble for good-looking guys, this is an ensemble for ugly, tough guys," he told buyers at the



American Film Market in Santa Monica during the weekend.

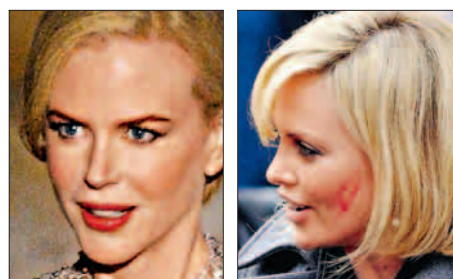
The film will aim for a teen-friendly PG-13 rating ("It won't be a blood fest," he said), and he jokingly thanked the producers "for giving me the US\$35 to make this movie". *Reuters*

### Kidman, Theron to play famed couple

Nicole Kidman as the world's first post-op transsexual, married to Charlize Theron?

The Australian actress will star in and produce *The Danish Girl*, based on the true story of Danish artists Einar and Greta Wegener. Their marriage took a sharp turn after Einar (Kidman, near right) stood in for a female model that Greta (Theron, far right) was set to paint.

When their portraits became wildly popular in 1920s Copenhagen, Greta encouraged her husband to adopt a female guise. What began as a harmless game led Einar to a metamorphosis and



landmark 1931 operation that shocked the world and threatened their love.

Anand Tucker (*Shopgirl*) is set to direct the feature, adapted by writer Lucinda Coxon (*Wild Target*) from David Ebershoff's 2000 best-seller. *Reuters*

### Singer Makeba dies after show

South African singer Miriam Makeba has died at the age of 76, after being taken ill in Italy.

She had just taken part in a concert near the southern town of Caserta, BBC reported.

The concert was on behalf of Roberto Saviano, the author of an expose of the Camorra mafia whose life has since been threatened.

Makeba appeared on Paul Simon's Graceland tour in 1987 and in 1992 had a leading role in the film *Sarafina!* She is said to have died of a heart attack. Makeba was born in Johannesburg in 1932 and was a leading symbol in the struggle against apartheid.

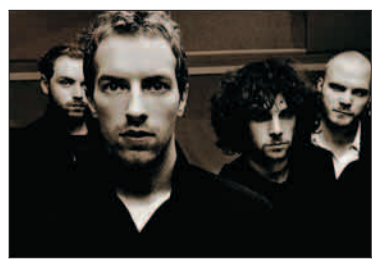
### Coldplay named top-selling music act

Coldplay have been crowned the world's top-selling act of 2008 at the World Music Awards in Monaco.

Their latest album, *Viva La Vida or Death and All His Friends*, released mid-year, topped charts in the US, Britain, Japan, Germany, France and elsewhere.

Sales apparently benefited from a marketing strategy that included giving away the first single free over the internet for a week and staging a series of free concerts before an international tour.

The band (right) was also named the awards' rock act of the year, although they were not present to accept the honour. Beyonce and Kid Rock were among the performers in attendance on the night.



The women's pop award went to Leona Lewis and the men's pop category was won by Kid Rock, who released the album *Rock 'N' Roll Jesus* late last year.

Amy Winehouse was named female pop/rock act of the year and Kid Rock took the pop/rock male award. *Reuters*