

# Independent music in Shanghai: a prologue

How does expatriate independent music develop in Shanghai? This is not only about the whole picture of the industry, but relates to the artists' and audience's life and feelings. Independent music artist Ivan Belcic has his own perspective.

上海的外籍独立乐队发展现况如何？音乐与演出者、观众们生活或情感都密不可分。“在上海，一旦合作的音乐人离开，乐队和情感上的空缺都难以弥补，尤其在当个人的音乐事业和生活坐标联系紧密的情况下。不过我们也能看到新的乐队在加入这个舞台。”



Ryan Woodland of Spill Your Guts, by Benoit Florençon

## Ivan Belcic

It's an odd time for independent music in Shanghai. Much of the old guard has left, as their lives take them away on the path to what hopefully are bigger and better things. Young spirits grow older, get married, and move on — a progression such as this comes as no surprise to anyone who's spent a few years abroad. You meet people, forge connections, solidify friendships, and see them tested as your peers move away. Sometimes you stay in touch, sometimes you hit "Like" when your faraway friend gets married.

Sometimes they fade from memory entirely.

When that friend is the type of person who's left a tangible mark on some facet of your landscape, it's hard not to notice their absence. A music scene is one such surface upon which these marks are made. And in one as nascent as Shanghai's, such hollows are both deeply felt and difficult to fill — especially when the person who leaves has so thoroughly bonded their own personal musical journey to that of the city around you.

The past 12 months have seen several such notable departures. We bade farewell to three of four members of Boys Climbing Ropes,

the band that in my opinion already served as the face of independent Shanghai rock when I moved here in 2008. Their first EP, *A Pleasure to Be Here*, was released that year, and they had rapidly cultivated a reputation based on their consistent, identifiable style, nuanced songwriting and frenetic live performances. This continued up to their farewell show in 2012, in which over the course of two days and nights, a full roster of Shanghai bands paid tribute by splicing BCR covers into their own sets. It was a deeply emotional weekend that left numerous musicians and fans in tears — such was the effect had by this band.

Also leaving is guitarist and vocalist Dan Shapiro of *The Fever Machine* and, before that, *The Rogue Transmission*. Obsessively

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proactive with planning and promoting shows, Dan leaves behind a legacy including the “Get In the Van” pub crawl and concert nights, his many “Fever Machine & Friends” shows which featured numerous touring as well as local bands, and the yearly Halloween Tribute concert at Yuyintang. Bands playing one of Dan's events could always count on him to provide a fridge full of beer and water as well as a fistful of cash for them to take home at the end of the night.

Similarly felt will be the absence of Toshi K, another organizer/performer whose 12-year career spanned countless bands and events. Along with Misuzu, a local guitarist and scene stalwart, and drummer Dave Hampson, he formed *The Beat Bandits*, a surf-rock power trio rooted by Toshi's rock-solid bass playing and crisp vocals. Toshi's career also includes garage-hardcore quartet *The Instigation*, rockabilly outfit *The Macaronians*, and various cameos in performance-art projects such as *The Duettes* and *The Illumin8tors*. Along with promoter and scene activist DJ B.O, Toshi and Misuzu formed the event series *Trash-A-Go-Go*. Together they were responsible for month after month of shows from international touring acts, sometimes even incurring financial losses in the process of bringing over the bands they loved.

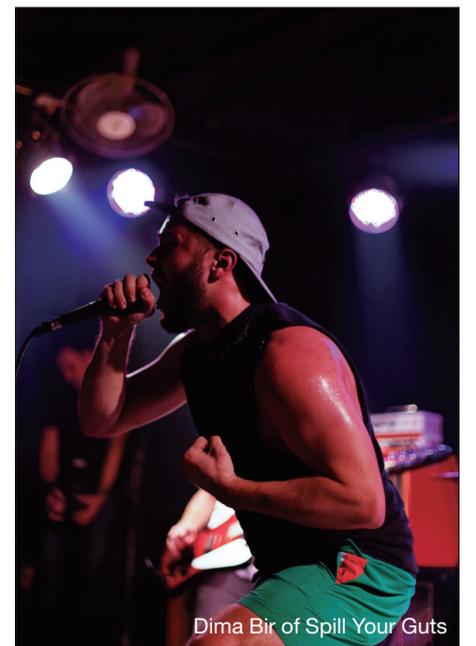
Prominent progressive foursome *Duck Fight Goose* finds themselves after two acclaimed releases without a drummer. Damen,

previously of indie-pop trio *Hard Queen*, recently said goodbye, taking with her an uncanny ability to play even the most difficult of rhythmic passages easily and always with a casual grin on her face. With her went Brad Ferguson, her husband and himself a longtime supporter of and mover in Shanghai music. Operating primarily behind the scenes, Brad served as manager of both *Duck Fight Goose* and *Boys Climbing Ropes* as well as several of the city's music venues throughout his years in Shanghai.

With all these goodbyes, it's all the more important that those who remain step up and ensure the momentum is not lost. Xiao Zhong of *Pairs* and *Hujiahuwei* — another of Toshi's ventures — has emerged at the forefront of today's group. He's taken *Pairs* across Australasia and through his relentless online activity has exposed many new listeners, both in Shanghai and elsewhere, to the city's unsigned music-makers.

New bands are doing their part in keeping Shanghai's stages occupied. Prominent amongst these new arrivals in recent months are hardcore-sludge thrashers *Spill Your Guts*, post-punkers *Naohai*, and pedal-to-the-metal rockers *Round Eye*, with all three drawing substantial crowds to even their first few performances. DJ B.O's collaboration with online platform *Shanghai247* has seen a rash of new music-related events — an air guitar competition, a monthly Chinese music listening night — with many taking place at metal-themed bar *Inferno*. Lastly, the *We Are Shanghai* series of compilation albums, with one released in each of the past two years, serves to collect and disseminate the various offerings created by all musicians in the city. This year's release is an especially genre-spanning one, with hip-hop, electronic and jazz artists all featured [author's note: I am affiliated with this project].

The scene is wide open. Any new band or artist could be, as Dennis Nichols of *Rainbow Danger Club* and *Death to Giants* (author's note: I am in this band) has said, the “game-changer” that blows things up to the next level. Pick up an instrument, find some likeminded friends, and get yourself on stage.



Dima Bir of Spill Your Guts

Ivan Belcic is a musician, writer and artist living in Shanghai since 2008. He's been active in the music scene since arrival and currently drums and sings in *Death to Giants*. He's also the co-founder of DIY clothing label *Twin Horizon*, and his work can be seen around town in the form of posters and album covers for his fellow musicians.