

Music



Gluestick Fest
Clockwise from top:
Phum Virhurit;
Mean Gurls Club; JB;
Kero Kero Bonito

Behind The Music

If you've noticed an uptick in indie shows and festivals in Hong Kong recently, you're not wrong. Meet the promoters who are making it all happen. By Carla Thomas

WHEN EMBATTLED MUSIC club Hidden Agenda ceased operations in 2017 after a raid that landed the club's co-founder and headline act both behind bars, Hong Kong's indie scene suffered in tandem. The loss of the physical venue was blessedly short-lived as it was reborn into This Town Needs a year later in a new location in Yau Tong. But its initial closure was symbolic of the music scene's struggles. It was reflective of the community's uphill battle to grow against the onerous burdens of rents, business licenses and work visas.

An old story by now, Hong Kong remains an unusually hostile environment for live music events to flourish in, leaving a cavernous mid-range gap for showgoers. But this past year has seen a surge in individuals willing to step up and be the change they want to see in the local music scene.

Elton Yau, 26, and Nicholas Cheung, 27, are two of the more successful event promoters to emerge in the last year. They've introduced acts unusual for a Hong Kong audience, like LA-based neo-soul outfit Moonchild and indie songstress Snail Mail. And this past May, the duo launched its most ambitious event to date with Gluestick Fest, a one-year anniversary celebration that brought together eight local and international acts, headlined by the buzzworthy British Jpop trio Kero Kero Bonito.

It was a feat for the pair, who have painstakingly put their money where their mouths are (the two have bootstrapped most events using their savings), to curate what they believe is missing from the local music scene.

"My biggest passion is rap music, and no rappers were coming through at all, except for A\$AP Rocky at Clockenflap, or Higher Brothers here and there," says Cheung, a Hong Kong native who grew up in Vancouver, a city where he had regular exposure to American rappers and hip-hop artists. "Being big rap fans, that was initially our plan, to bring a lot of these trendy rappers from the US over. And I guess that's how Gluestick started."

Their passion project came full circle last January, when American rapper Denzel Curry, known for his experimental hip-hop and rabid cult following, performed to a packed out crowd at This Town Needs.

"The Denzel show was definitely one of our highlights," says Yau, on the sold-out show. "We started off wanting to do rap, and that was our first ever rap-only show. So for us that was a really big moment."

It was confirmation for the pair that Hong Kong audiences were after something more than just big names and sexy production – it was about building a community.

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They're not the only ones to spot the trend. Club Kowloon, which has hosted monthly techno-themed parties since April 2018 exclusively at Kowloon venues, started as a means to bring together like-minded enthusiasts for what founder Espen Cook describes as "sophisticated underground" parties. "We started Club Kowloon because it was hard to get on the scene. Even after being here for many years, nobody would have us play, and the scene was not inclusive – and still is not," says Cook, an artist and DJ from Norway. "The goal of Club Kowloon is to build and develop the Hong Kong underground scene. Hong Kong needs to recognise its own magic, and that's what we're trying to do – be an eye-opener."

The list goes on, with fellow local promoters FuFu Creative capitalising on their well-loved club nights by launching Shi Fu Miz Festival, which rallied thousands of revelers for two days of dance and electronic music featuring international acts like Awesome Tapes From Africa and Levon Vincent. Neocity Records, a Hong Kong-based record label that brought in city pop darlings like Portland-based producer Yung Bae and Korean act Night Tempo, is another notable mention doing its part to broaden the city's indie offerings. And Facebook fan page Zenegeist considerably widened its scope earlier this March, when it organised the gig for Ohio new age rockers Cloud Nothings at Mom Livehouse.

Taken together, the city is rife with ambitious young promoters right now. They're

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passionate, driven to build connections between people through music and are capable of greasing the wheels to realise such events. However, Hidden Agenda's 2017 closure had raised doubts about the future of Hong Kong's indie music scene, its reincarnation into This Town Needs and the slew of new festivals and events that followed have proven rumours of its demise to be greatly exaggerated.



Going underground
(above) Club Kowloon;
Shi Fu Miz Festival