HONG KONG
Where Anarchists & Blackbirds Sing About Freedom
by Norman Nawrocki

Hong Kong, a steamy, enchanting, green pearl of an island with an amazingly efficient public transit system is also the ultimate temple to last gasp, fast buck, crass consumerism.

Mega-towering, teetering, multi-national corporate headquarters ablaze with over-sized neon logos that are sometimes lost in the clouds, dominate the skyline, but can’t quite obliterate the dreamy and defiant mountains behind them.

Below, in the pedestrian and car jammed streets, omnipresent 7-Eleven convenience stores push porn and beer, while the mon- eyed class shop in ultra-chic designer boutique malls, buy jewel-encrusted Vespas, intricate mammoth ivory carvings, or order giant, endangered species lobster for dinner.

But if you’re local and homeless, an accommodating Kowloon slumlord just across on the mainland will rent you a five-foot long metal cage to sleep in overnight.

On a recent two week Hong Kong tour where I played live music shows and gave a Creative Resistance workshop, I was fortunate to meet artists, activists, anarchists, and others who resist the temptations to buy, buy, buy, but still put in 12 hour work days, six days a week, eat on the run, and survive the frenetic pressure-cooker lifestyle that defines daily existence.

Activists in Hong Kong have overloaded agendas fighting for social housing for the un-housed, for minimum wages for migrant worker Filipina domestics (imagine a 400 square foot high rise condo inhabited by a middle class couple and their status-defining live-in maid who sleeps on a padded bench), for solutions to the suffocating pollution drifting in from mainland factories, and seemingly stubborn, public indifference.

At first, they said, activists were having a tough time reminding locals of the recent 20th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing when thousands of people were killed by Chinese troops. As elsewhere, Hong Kong citizens are obviously more concerned about surviving the current economic meltdown then fighting for anyone’s rights.

On the mainland, past the border, discussing the student-led Tiananmen democratic movement and crackdown is still a political taboo, and anyone who tries suffers police repression. At a University of Hong Kong forum, students debated whether it was in fact a massacre. But to everyone’s surprise, the day of the actual anniversary, the public responded to a call for a candle light vigil 150,000 strong.

Activists are calling 2009 a “sensitive year,” since it also marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Everyone agrees that since the transfer of power in Hong Kong from British rule in 1997, China is tightening its authoritarian vice-grip on existing political freedoms, yet indefatigable, unbending local anarchists, like Lenny Guo, still raise the black flag high.

A veteran Hong Kong anarcho singer/songwriter (from the legendary band Blackbird), journalist, documentary filmmaker, and organizer of the annual Freedom Music & Arts Fair, Lenny spoke to me about anarchism in Hong Kong today.

In 1995, Lenny had invited our Montreal band, Rhythm Activism, to contribute a track to a Blackbird compilation CD, called Uniracial Subversion. After years of correspondence, I finally met him in person on this visit and experienced his phenomenal talent live on stage.

Lenny calls himself an “artist,” a term he coined, he says, “to identify those who use art to direct activism. I also call myself a dysfunctional musician, anti-linguistical poet, an impromptu organizer, and a true-life liver.”

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As Lenny Guo recently published a fascinating, 200-page bilingual English/Chinese book about his band called "Singing in the Dead of the Night," containing interviews, song lyrics, sheet music and a sample CD of the band's music. His label, Broken Wing Music, also released a beautifully packaged, retrospective bagset, "Body of Work, 1984-2004." This is a complete set of seven Blackbird music CDs with bilingual liner notes in English and Chinese. Order the book and CD set as one package, for 400 Hong Kong Dollars, international airmail postage included. Email: bb@blackbird.hk.

Web sites are freedomfair.artivist.org and blackbird.hk

FE note: At least 60 people remain jailed in China since the June 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre commemorations, and this year, Lenny said, "The 20th anniversary, was even more vibrant."

This year's Freedom Fair featured a forum by a Taiwanese activist writer and a band that focused on agricultural issues who presented their perspective on the mainland. The major coalition group commemorating those killed, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of the Patriotic and Democratic Movements in China, held a 10,000 person mass rally and march on May 31, and a candle light vigil June 4 that drew 150,000 people.

Numerous other groups organized diverse actions like artistic happenings in the cultural centre podium, democracy kite flying actions, and a new generation of young people, post 1980s, born after the massacre, organized a show of their creative work.

As Lenny said, "It is comforting to see the old are not departing and the young are joining in. But I still think that more should be done to foster real change for mainland China. For example, let's move our actions inland! People have reservations about this because of security concerns. But I am planning a tour in the southern regions with a collection of songs about civil society later this year.

"I've hated shouting outdoors. I'd like to come inside."