

## Martin Atkins: 20 years of rocking on

**MUSIC | Chicago musician, author and producer goes where his muses lead him -- even to China**

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BY **JIM DeROGATIS** Pop Music Critic

An inveterate self-promoter, Martin Atkins is, as usual, talking a mile a minute. But it's hard to resist being charmed by his rapid-fire banter, because as always, he has plenty of impressive accomplishments to tout.

Born in Coventry, England, but based in Chicago for much of the last two decades, the 49-year-old musician will perhaps always be best known for playing drums on one of the most influential albums of the post-punk era: "The Flowers of Romance" by Public Image, Ltd. (1981). After that, fans of avant-garde rock most often associate him with Ministry or Killing Joke -- he did time in both bands -- as well as with Pigface, his industrial-rock supergroup. (The long-running, ever-evolving combo has at various times benefitted from contributors as diverse as Jello Biafra, Black Francis, Flea, Penn Jillette, Trent Reznor and Shonen Knife.)

These days, Atkins also is a father of three with a fourth on the way. He's an instructor at Columbia College, teaching a class called "The Business of Touring." He's the author of an impressive self-published book, *Tour: Smart and Break the Band*, which just entered its third printing since September. He's a wildly adventurous talent scout justifiably proud of the recent compilation album "Look Directly Into the Sun," which introduced 18 bands from China to the United States.

And, oh yeah, he's also celebrating the 20th anniversary of his label, Invisible Records, based in a loft on the South Side for the last eight of those years.

"We've released 350 albums in 20 years," Atkins says from his office. "That feels really good. But I think if I was just sitting here and saying, 'Well, the label is 20 years old and I want to draw your attention to a release from 1989 that's our biggest release to date,' then it would just be sad. The fact that the label and I are still doing what we always did is what feels great to me."

### 'The power of music'

What Invisible has always done is to champion music that few if any other companies would touch. There's a reason for that: Artists such as the Damage Manual, Tub Ring, Chemlab and Atkins' own Pigface make sounds that are the polar opposite of easy listening: experimental music that can be as difficult to appreciate as a chorus of jackhammers. In comparison, most of the music on "Look Directly Into the Sun" is pure pop bliss.

"It all started when a band e-mailed me from China saying, 'It's amazing! You should come here!' " A year later, at the end of 2006, Atkins got off a plane in Beijing. "We had a great relationship with a club called D22, and they were very happy to show me the bands they liked. So I just started recording a bunch of them," including groups such as China MC Brothers, Tookoo, Queen Sea Big Shark and Carsick Cars, which he also captured on videotape for a documentary he plans to show at the South by Southwest Music Festival next month.

Though many Americans still think of students defying the tanks in Tiananmen Square in pursuit of democracy and Western freedoms, Atkins says that 19 years later the communist government doesn't view the burgeoning rock scene as a threat. "I know that in the small clubs, things are left alone. If you were to upset someone, I don't know the price you'd pay for that. But the bands playing venues under 1,000 capacity don't seem to have any problems at all."

Nevertheless, the practical difficulties of scarce equipment and few clubs make Chinese rock musicians all the more grateful to find an audience. "I found this scene of bands who were gleefully involved in music, and that inspired me. It was like going to Disneyland with my children: I enjoyed it because of the look on their faces. I certainly got that from watching these bands, seeing the scene, watching these guys exchange instruments with each other and looking at what this club has done. It was so nice to be reminded of the power of music -- not to sound like a sap."

### 'The stress, the sex, the drugs'

The lack of sappiness and bounty of straight-talking advice are the strengths of the other project that Atkins is proudest of at the moment. The book grew out of his classes at Columbia, and though it took three years to write, he says it's really the compendium of a life's worth of lesson learned the hard way.

"There are a lot of things that can really f--k a band up that people just don't think about. I met a guy two weeks ago who said, 'My band broke up.' I asked, 'What happened? In-fighting? Musical differences? Drugs?' He was like, 'No, tolls and the price of gas!' And that's hilarious, but it's true.

"Teaching was the impetus to write the book -- the straw that broke the camel's back. When I went to teach my first class, I looked at the text book they were using, and it was written in 1964! So I started to bring my own materials into class. I had a decent textbook pretty quickly, just based on the logistical stuff. But then it was like, 'Well, the touring musician also has to deal with the human stuff: the stress, the sex, the drugs. Those problems are as real as geography and gas mileage!'"

Weighing in at a hefty 564 pages, *Tour: Smart* includes contributions from a wide variety of experts, including Henry Rollins, Steve Albini, assorted Suicide Girls and Warped Tour founder Kevin Lyman, in addition to Atkins' own amusing but insightful perspectives on everything from booking a tour and maximizing each night's pay to staying hydrated onstage and "Tips for Safer (and Better) Sex on the Road."

What's next for the underground renaissance man? Pose that question and be prepared for another half-hour ramble -- though again, Atkins is likely to actually pull off most of his schemes, including a package tour of Chinese bands, a lecture series, opening his own "school of rock" and reconfiguring Invisible Records for the digital era.

"People ask if anybody will really need record labels in the future. Well, the reason that Invisible is still going in 2008 is that you wouldn't have heard these Chinese bands without it. Why do we still need it? I think my office now is what I have always wanted a label to be: We've got my book, the China documentary, the music from China, publishing, merchandising, different packaging ideas.

"I feel like Invisible is just starting to do what our original motto promised: 'Independence and strength through diversification,'" Atkins says. "I don't even know what I meant when I first painted that on the wall. But here we are 20 years later, and I feel like we're just getting started."

[jimdero@jimdero.com](mailto:jimdero@jimdero.com)

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