



# Sounds nothing like

**H**ong Kong: exotic port of call, dangerous, romantic, glamorous.

Regardless of whether the global perception of the city has any basis in reality, it has maintained a hold on the popular imagination for centuries. However, the West's fascination with Hong Kong has often been reductive. As interest in the place has grown, the more Hong Kong – as it appears in music, literature, television, works of art and video games – becomes less like a city actually populated by human beings. Nowhere is this more clear than in the portrayal of Hong Kong in Western pop music.

Even the expected Western stereotypes of Hong Kong – conical hats, rickshaws and junk boats – are mostly absent here. Sometimes, the only real allusion to Hong Kong identity comes in the form of imitation Chinese language; in these instances, it seems Hong Kong is a popular song topic thanks more to the sounds of the words “Hong” and “Kong” than for its identity and reputation.

*Hong Kong* by Screamin’ Jay Hawkins is, unfortunately, typical of

the genre. The song features Hawkins in his trademark guttural yowl ranting in faux Chinese. It’s easy to dismiss the song, which was released in 1958, as a product of its time, but Hong Kong gets an almost identical treatment in 1980 from experimental lunatic Captain Beefheart in *Sheriff of Hong Kong*.

Hawkins and Beefheart are not your average pop stars: the first is famous for his often nonsensical novelty songs and the Captain is an undisputed genius who elevated spastic incoherence into an art form. But the question is not what the songs are trying to say, but why the artists were drawn to Hong Kong in the first place. It seems the answer is that it afforded them both the cover to make funny noises.

Giorgio Biancorosso, associate professor of music at the University of Hong Kong, sums up Western pop music’s use of Hong Kong: “I think the references are tokenistic and wilfully superficial – as if parading their ignorance of the actual place [and its music] and treating it as a mere cipher or metaphor for an unknown, if reassuringly Westernised, faraway

place,” he says. Even songs that deal with Hong Kong more literally, with actual words for example, still often only touch on the place tangentially.

*Countess from Hong Kong* by The Velvet Underground, for example, is a reference to the Charlie Chaplin movie of the same name, not to Hong Kong itself. Even *Hong Kong Garden* by Siouxsie and the Banshees, perhaps the most famous pop song which mentions Hong Kong, is not really about our city at all, but a Chinese restaurant.

The songs that seem to put the most effort into portraying Hong Kong as a real city are instrumental. Take Les Baxter’s *Hong Kong Cable Car* for example. Baxter is one of the originators of exotica music and although the entire intention of the piece is to present the city as the exotic other, it does at least portray Hong Kong as a destination with a real and unique identity.

The few Western songs that do deal with Hong Kong properly in their lyrics tend to use it as a location which people are trying to escape from. This seems a uniquely Western conception. In Nepalese popular music, for example, Hong

Kong is sometimes used as a romantic backdrop where two people, far away from home, fall in love.

Biancorosso sees an “intriguing parallel” in film. “When it actually shows up on the screen, Hong Kong is treated as a backdrop or set. Yet the presence of Hong Kong cinema is very strong internationally and this, in turn, has brought with it a consciousness of Hong Kong as a place.”

Perhaps if Hong Kong’s music was more popular internationally, and if the language barrier did not prevent foreign audiences from relating to its content, Western music could evolve an image of Hong Kong more in line with its residents’ actual experiences.

Just in time for tomorrow’s handover anniversary, we’ve put together a collection of songs featuring Hong Kong as seen through the eyes of Western musicians, as well as a few that show the city from the residents’ (both expat and local) perspective.

They make for a thought-provoking, often enjoyable and sometimes disturbing listen.

**Hong Kong Blues** by Hoagy Carmichael (1944): the oldest song in this list. American songwriter Carmichael sang *Hong Kong Blues* in the Hollywood adaptation of Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* onscreen with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. The song itself is a classic example of Hong Kong as a place where down-on-their-luck characters get trapped against their will. In this case, it is a “very unfortunate coloured man” who is arrested for “kicking old Buddha’s gong”, which is believed to be a reference to opium smoking. If you



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