

# 'Oldest jazz band' a constant in fast-modernizing Shanghai

Li Minsheng is one of the junior members of the "Old Jazz Band" at Shanghai's ornate Fairmont Peace Hotel. He's 76. Frequently described as the oldest jazz band on the planet and once recognized as such by Guinness World Records, its six wizened members range from a relatively youthful 63 to a scarcely believable 97-year-old trumpeter. They are an institution in Shanghai and a rare constant in a city and country that are modernizing at breakneck speed.



Members of the "Old Jazz Band" perform at Shanghai's ornate Fairmont Peace Hotel in Shanghai. — AFP photos

"I have been performing jazz for at least 40 years," Li, an alto saxophonist with a soft face and gentle air, told AFP. "I got this saxophone in the 1960s and have played it ever since." Born during the tumult and war following Japan's late-1930s invasion, Li-like other Chinese his age-has witnessed remarkable change. "I started playing jazz and performing after the opening-up," said Li, referring to the economic reforms launched in the late 1970s by Deng Xiaoping that propelled China from a basket case to the world's second-largest economy today.

"We were not able to play before the opening-up due to the political situation then," Li said, moments before going on stage once more in a red bow tie, crisp white shirt, pristine white blazer and black trousers. That meant practicing at home in secret. "Back then I would play at home a little bit and enjoy it by myself. I



Music notes of a member of the "Old Jazz Band" are kept open during his performance at Shanghai's ornate Fairmont Peace Hotel in Shanghai.



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didn't play outside." Jazz is more readily associated with New Orleans or New York than Shanghai, but the Chinese city has its own proud heritage in that regard that flickers on. And the Peace Hotel, completed in 1929 and a prime example of Art Deco architecture on Shanghai's historic riverside Bund area, is in many ways central to it.

The bar where the "Old Jazz Band" now plays 365 nights of the year was originally an English-style pub and it retains that flavour with its bar stools, dark-wooden fittings and slightly musty feel. During Shanghai's hard-partying 1930s heyday the bar became so well known for its jazz—which arrived in the city around that time with American musicians hired to play at nightclubs—that it became simply known as "The Jazz Bar". Then came war, the 1949 Communist takeover, and the political turmoil of

the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, when virulent campaigns against anything foreign made playing or even listening to jazz a dangerous hobby.

### 'Long way to go'

Emerging from all that, the "Old Jazz Band", which attempts to revive the bar's 1930s air, has been a fixture at the hotel since 1980. Former US presidents Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan are among the dignitaries who have dropped in for an evening of jazz—Clinton, who plays the sax, even joined in. The band, which has an average age of 82, plays what it calls "soft jazz" and with a Shanghaiese flavour.

"Jazz has come to China bit by bit," said Li, who has been in the band for more than 30 years and was put forward by his fellow members to speak for them. "After China's opening-up, the influx of Western jazz had a huge impact on the jazz scene here. By watching their performances, we were able to learn from them and improve our music. "But of course, compared to the top jazz scenes in the world, we still have a long way to go." And the million-dollar question: when does Li plan to close the lid on his saxophone case for the last time?

"Generally speaking, playing the sax has an age limit," he said, smiling. But as long as he remains enthusiastic and people keep filling the bar to listen, he plans to carry on. "Interacting with the audience is the greatest thing for me. Without anyone to listen, we'd have no reason to perform." — AFP



Members of the "Old Jazz Band" perform at Shanghai's ornate Fairmont Peace Hotel in Shanghai.



72-years-old Yao, a member of "Old Jazz Band" performs at Shanghai's ornate Fairmont Peace Hotel in Shanghai.



This image released by Open Road Films shows a scene from "Home Again." — AP

## Witherspoon can't save bland, gooey 'Home Again'

It's a crime to waste Reese Witherspoon. You know what's worse? To waste Reese Witherspoon AND Candice Bergen. That lovely bit of casting alone - Witherspoon and Bergen as daughter and mom - should have been enough to lift "Home Again," a debut from writer-director Hallie Meyers-Shyer, into at least the ranks of fairly entertaining, harmless guilty-pleasure rom-coms. Instead, one is left marveling at how disappointingly inept it feels, from plot developments so obvious you see them coming 40 minutes ahead, to the gooey, lingering close-ups of characters laughing happily. What are they laughing about? Maybe there were lots of great private jokes flying around the set, because there aren't a lot of great ones in the script - save a few choice barbs from Bergen, and a very well-timed "Hamilton" joke.

Witherspoon is Alice, a recently separated mother of two who's returned to Los Angeles from New York, escaping a difficult marriage to a scruffily charming music mogul (Michael Sheen.) Luckily, she can move right into her childhood home - her huge, beautiful childhood home, with linens so soft they're a topic of conversation, and a sizable guest house. Which is where the three guys come in. That would be Harry (Pico Alexander), his brother Teddy (Nat Wolff) and friend George (Jon Rudnitsky). They're budding 20-something filmmakers trying to get their movie produced, and they're a bit down on their luck.

Of course, this movie's version of being down on one's luck is a little different than in the rest of the world. It's not just that these guys somehow waltz into high-level meetings with agents and producers. It's that everyone here looks like they've grown up in a Ralph Lauren catalog. Now, plenty of movies have been made about well-off people without real-world problems. It's not a crime. But takeout from Nobu? That may be pushing it. Anyway, we digress. Alice, we learn, is the daughter of a late, well-known filmmaker. Mom Lilian (Bergen) was an actress. Dad didn't always treat her well, but Lilian has a great explanation for why she's not fussed: "He's gone now, so I won."

### 'But I fixed your cabinet'

Would that Alice had her mother's sang-froid. We begin on her 40th birthday, and she's weeping into the mirror. Then she goes out and celebrates at a bar, where she and her tipsy friends meet Harry, Teddy and George. Drinking leads to dancing, to more drinks at Alice's home, to an aborted sexual encounter between Alice and Harry - aborted because Harry's throwing up. You'd think Alice would wake up, do the laundry (which she does), and realize Harry isn't much of a catch. But soon all three guys have moved into the guest bungalow - their own Ralph Lauren frat house. And Alice starts sleeping with Harry - once he fixes her kitchen cabinet. "We shouldn't do this," she says, as they kiss. "But I fixed your cabinet," he says. Guys at home: that line may not always work for you.

The problem isn't even the unlikeliness that Harry would even know his way around a toolbox. It's that Harry is just so boring. We all want Alice to have fun; it's not his age that grates. It's his emptiness. And then ex-husband Austen shows up. That's Austen-with-an-E, not Austin-with-an-I. And he says, "Let's fix this" (the marriage, not the cabinet). Alice has to make a decision. Meanwhile, there's a very important school play. And this is what we mean by obvious developments, because in any rom-com with a school play, you can bet that someone isn't going to make it in time, and there are going to be shots of empty seats and anxious young faces. And yes, this is what happens. We won't tell you how it turns out. We CAN divulge that there will be more lingering close-ups of people laughing. Again, what are they laughing about? If you can figure it out, let us know. "Home Again," an Open Road release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America "for some thematic and sexual material." Running time: 97 minutes. Two stars out of four. MPAA definition of PG-13: Parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13. — AP