

## **7 April 2015 - 30 Years Ago Today: After Wham!, A Look Back at a Dozen Major Acts that Played Beijing**

Steven Schwankert

<https://www.thebeijinger.com/blog/2015/04/07/30-years-after-wham-look-back-10-major-acts-played-beijing>

April 7 marks the 30th anniversary of the first time a major western concert was held in China – a visit from the pop act Wham! (George Michael and the other guy), who played to a crowd of 15,000 at the Workers Gymnasium.

According to the group's former manager, Simon Napier-Bell, it took 18 months to get the show off the ground, and that it was a bit of a consolation prize for the duo now making it bigger in the US earlier. "Jazz (Summers, the group's co-manager) came up with the idea of perhaps we could make you the first ever group to play in China. George [Michael] just liked the idea – he said, 'yes – fix that.'"

Biography has a nice recollection of the event here in which we learn that Napier-Bell engineered the pioneering concert by sabotaging the attempts of Freddie Mercury-led Queen to become the first major gay pop culture icon rock and roll act to play China.

If you'd like to see how far Beijing has come since those heady mid-90s, check out this hour-long documentary of the concert on Youtube here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IJZkarC5tM>

Since that time, China has gone back-and-forth multiple times on their willingness to let foreign bands to play. Sometimes it seems the floodgates are opening, other times it seems waves of conservatism take over. The pendulum is swinging again this month as May's usually crowded calendar of outdoor concerts have been largely called off.

Truth be told, Beijing has had it worse off than Shanghai, which over the years has managed to host major acts that have skipped Beijing (Rolling Stones, Metallica, Eric Clapton), with the omissions chalked up to Beijing's reluctance to issue local permits, stingy capital consumers, or poorly-run city venues.

On this 30th anniversary of that go-go show, we look at a dozen big Western bands that have managed to pull off gigs Beijing.

**Roxette – Workers Gymnasium, February 19, 1995**

We don't add this because it was particularly memorable or we're big fans of Roxette, but because they were the next in line after Wham! to perform in Beijing. This was the first in a line of many foreign acts that were asked to tone down their lyrics for their local shows, in this case the Swedish pop act were forbidden from singing "making love to you" (they changed it to "making up to you"). See kids, things are a bit better these days.

**Bjork – Workers Gymnasium, February 13, 1996**

Many people remember when Iceland's most famous native Bjork played in Shanghai in March, 2008, and, er, said some things maybe she shouldn't have said, but less remembered is her February 13, 1996 gig at the Workers Gymnasium. Although fans seemed to enjoy the show, fewer than 1,000 people showed up to see it.

**Deep Purple – Workers Gymnasium, March 31, 2004**

Ian Gillan, a.k.a. the voice of Deep Purple, sounded as good as he did back in the band's "Smoke on the Water" days. Most notable about this show was an opening, five-song set by China's godfather of rock, Cui Jian. It may have been the poor sound quality, but Cui and his band were simply awful, and in the first time a major Chinese rock act shared the stage with a major Western rock act, Cui was blown off the stage.

**Norah Jones – Workers Gymnasium, March 7, 2005**

With nine Grammy Awards under her belt, the world's most boring pop artist came to Beijing, quite a shock for a local audience unaccustomed to seeing artists at their peak. And she's where, now?

**Black-Eyed Peas – Capital Gymnasium, July 18, 2006**

The first of a couple of performances by the Fergie and will.i.am and those other two guys in the musical collective took place at the seldom-used Capital Gymnasium.

Nine Inch Nails – Chaoyang Park, September 9, 2007

Even we had to look this one up to be sure. Yep, Nine Inch Nails, in Chaoyang Park. Things really were different back then before the Olympics.

Kanye West – Workers Gymnasium, November 1, 2008

Although the gig was an easy walk to and from Sanlitun, most fans were disappointed at the shortness of Mr. Kardashian's concert, despite featuring a 16-song setlist.

Beyonce – MasterCard Center, October 23, 2009

Still one of the best remembered shows in recent Beijing history, Beyonce came through her "I Am ..." world tour. Fans can continue hoping for the long-hoped for Beyonce/Jay-Z Beijing show.

Bob Dylan – Workers Gymnasium, April 6, 2011

The guy who helped create the protest song plays in Beijing. What then, is the grounds for excluding anyone else from playing? Fans attend to say they saw Dylan play live, as he is unintelligible and uninteractive.

Avril Lavigne – MasterCard Center, February 14, 2012

Now one of the few artists who regularly visits Beijing, Avril's first stop was in 2008, but her Valentine's Day concert in 2012 was a more more successful gig, and her pop-punk wowed her die-hard Beijing fans.

Elton John – MasterCard Center, November 25, 2012

Opening appropriately with "The Bitch is Back" on his 40th anniversary tour, Sir Elton did his hits from front to back. Probably his last visit to Beijing after first coming in 1984 with the soccer team he then owned, Watford FC, after making some remarks from the stage that some people didn't like.

The Killers – MasterCard Center, October 1, 2013

After canceling a 2010 date, unlike most bands that pre-cancel their Beijing shows, The Killers actually did reschedule.

By no means is this a complete list ... what's the best gig you've ever seen in Beijing? Let us know in the comments below.

Missing:

Missing from the list is The Eagles, who played at Wukesong Stadium in 2010. Kent Niepert attended that one and the crowd certainly wasn't quiet. They sang along with many of The Eagles famous tunes.

## 26 December 2016 - George Michael in China: how singer made it over the bamboo curtain with more of a whisper than a wham

<http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/2057286/george-michael-china-how-singer-made-it-over>

Secret police, banquets for 140 officials and 'the hardest performance of Michael's life': how Wham! became the first Western band to perform in China



Despite the buzz worldwide in 1985 about Wham! being the first Western band to perform in China as the country began to open up after the Cultural Revolution, the hour-long concert was not an especially good one.

"It was the hardest performance I've ever given in my life," said George Michael, then 21, a few hours after the **April 7 1985** show, according to a *Chicago Tribune* article written at the time.

"I couldn't believe how quiet the crowd were at first."

To make matters worse, the audience of 15,000 at Workers' Stadium in Beijing mistook the cameras and lights of film crews intending to record their reactions for those of the government's secret police, so they sat rigidly in their seats, recalled the group's manager, Simon Napier-Bell, in an interview with the BBC in 2005.

Michael and fellow band member Andrew Ridgeley had adapted their performances for China, removing sexual scenes in the music videos accompanying their songs and reducing the volume of their music by half to avoid scaring audiences.

Gilbert van Kerckhove, an electronics engineer from Belgium who since 1980 had been working and living in Beijing, remembered arriving for the concert at 7.45pm sharp.

"Police were everywhere and we had to sit down and couldn't stand up," said Van Kerckhove, who was 36 that year. "It was like the band were playing to prison inmates. It was really surreal."

Van Kerckhove recalled many tickets to the concert were given out for free to government officials and Westerners through the Foreign Enterprise Service Corporation.

Each ticket was sold for about five yuan.

"We couldn't believe it that a group like that would be coming to Beijing," he said.



It took 18 months of negotiations between Napier-Bell and the Chinese authorities to settle on the 10-day trip, after the music manager persuaded the government it needed to show it was opening up to secure foreign investment, according to the Briton. Napier-Bell flew to Beijing to make his pitch to officials and ended up taking 143 to lunch three times each, he said.

To prevent rival rock band Queen from becoming the first to play in China, Napier-Bell even came up with a little sabotage. He presented two brochures to the Chinese officials, one depicting Wham! fans as pleasant, middle-class youngsters and the other showing Queen lead singer Freddie Mercury as overtly flamboyant. The officials eventually chose Wham!



Van Kerckhove said he was “overemotional” during the concert and would have screamed if not suppressed by the police.

Wham!, on the other hand, performed in a professional way despite the quiet audience. “They were very spontaneous,” Van Kerckhove said. “They were very relaxed.”

Four days later, they performed in Guangzhou. The tickets were much more expensive there, at around 16 yuan, against an average weekly wage of 20 yuan at the time.

The crowd in the southern economic boomtown were more lively than their northern counterparts despite warnings from the government, and many in the audience got up and danced, according to a biography of Michael written by Rob Jovanovic. At the end of the show Michael returned to sing *Careless Whisper* in a white suit.



During the trip, Wham! also stopped by Hong Kong and held two concerts at the Coliseum in Hung Hom. It was reported the band were late for both shows and the gigs left much to be desired.

But that did not stop the group becoming a hit in the city.

By around 5.30pm on Monday, there were only four Wham! CDs left at HMV in Causeway Bay. Staffer Matthew Poon, 28, said he had seen many fans of Michael coming in to buy the band's albums. Poon's personal favourite was *Last Christmas*, he said.

"I think ... [Michael] broke some boundaries between Western and Chinese culture, which is pretty impressive," he said.

=====

## **Wham!**

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wham!>

Wham! were an English pop duo formed in Bushey in 1981. The duo consisted of George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley. They became one of the most commercially successful pop acts of the 1980s, selling more than 30 million certified records worldwide from 1982 to 1986. The singles from the album—"Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go", "Everything She Wants" and "Careless Whisper"—all topped the US Billboard Hot 100. In 1985, Wham! made a highly publicised 10-day visit to China, the first by a Western pop group. The event was seen as a major watershed moment in increasing friendly bilateral relations between China and the West. Michael died from heart and liver disease at his home in Goring-on-Thames, Oxfordshire on Christmas Day 2016. He was 53.