



China Crisis



Ten years after their London debut, The Killers are playing their first show in China.

But where they go from here is anyone's guess

Ronnie Vannucci is backstage in the Mercedes-Benz Arena in Pudong, Shanghai. Grinning manically, he doesn't look like a man worn down by a 15-month tour. Nor does he look like he's feeling the pressure of playing his first ever gigs in the world's most populous country – and one known for keeping a close eye on western artists who perform there. Instead, Vannucci is making jokes about the group's recent trip to The Great Wall Of China, two days after Justin Bieber was pictured forcing flunkies to carry him up the steep parts. "It was a ball-buster," he says. "We didn't have bodyguards to carry us..."

The drummer has the right to feel some altitude sickness. Having headlined Wembley Stadium in June, The Killers confirmed their ability to play rock's biggest venues. Now, with the tour in support of 2012 album 'Battle Born' drawing to a close, and singles collection 'Direct Hits' on the way, you have to wonder what they feel they have yet to achieve. "I just want to stay on the ride," the drummer shrugs. The same can't be said of bassist Mark Stoermer, who ducked out of the band's Asian dates, replaced by session man Jake Blanton. There was talk of injury, but the guitarist tweeted that he was absent for "personal" reasons. "His back is totally fucked," Vannucci states. "And... I've spoken with him about it, I don't know how much he wants in the open... I don't want to blow the top on it. But look, being part of this machine is physical and mentally exhausting."

"I'M GOING TO PUT MY HEART AND SOUL INTO MY SOLO RECORD"
Brandon Flowers

Would Vannucci consider carrying on without Stoermer long-term? "If he ever goes down that road, that's his decision," Vannucci says. "I'd hope we'd keep on truckin'. But at the same time, it isn't the same band..."

Another man sick of touring is guitarist Dave Keuning, who doesn't want to be here. Not in China, not in this interview room, not on the road. "I'm sick of this," he sighs. "I'm done. The end is in sight. Some people might go (adopts sarcastic squeaky voice) 'Why are you complaining?' But you haven't done what I've done, so you can't relate. We've just... toured a shitload." The Chinese government's policy of vetting lyrics and blocking internet LOLs hasn't exactly lightened Keuning's trip. "'Change Your Mind' was on our setlists but we forgot to submit the lyrics, so we're not allowed to play that," he explains. "And even... cats playing. I was trying to watch a

cat playing on YouTube and I couldn't because the site is banned here."

To his credit, Keuning does say he felt it was vital to complete the Asia dates, in part due to his guilt over never having gigged in China before. A planned tour was scrapped three years ago when Brandon Flowers' mother passed away. But it's to Flowers' and Vannucci's credit that their first Shanghai show is a success. Taking place in the middle of a national holiday, and with tickets costing between £28 and £128, the arena is only around one-third full. Flowers beams throughout nonetheless, flinging his jacket away after an opening 'Mr Brightside' and 'Spaceman'. Vannucci's powerhouse drumming thunders through the floorboards. Chinese crowds are more reserved than their western counterparts, but there's some spirited participation in the call-and-response part of

"THEY'RE THE LOST DOGS"

The two new tracks on The Killers' best-of

Shot At The Night

Brandon: "It's a perfect fit for Anthony [Gonzalez, of M83, who produced it]. I was in the middle of touring when we recorded it and I think my voice sounds great, and that's something to take into consideration. If you haven't been keeping the chords lubed up it's not the best, so it's made me think about my time off and how I'll practise."

Just Another Girl

Ronnie: "These two were the lost dogs out of our new songs. This one came from a collaboration between Stuart [Price, producer] and Brandon. It's The Killers but I don't feel like everybody put their prints on it. We're all playing on it, but we had to do things in stages. I cut those drums in Cincinnati then Stuart processed them. It's not what would happen normally."

behind, he replies with a laugh: "I hear different stories all the time. He's tired... something physical, something mental. I can't force him to come here. But it's fine, we're getting through." Flowers says he wants his next solo album out in early 2015, before the next Killers record. "Whatever's happening now [with Stoermer] is going to be fine by the time we make another record," he reassures. "I'm just going to put my heart and soul into my solo record."

Outside the venue, local fans are taking in the fact that they finally got to see their heroes live. With visa hurdles and the high cost of travel to Asia, there's seldom more than one big indie-rock gig from a western band in Shanghai every couple of months. "I got 'Hot Fuss' when I was in high school in 2005," says Yang Shaofang, a 26-year-old engineer. "I was crushed when they cancelled their show here. But I loved the gig tonight." The fans will do well to savour the evening. The Killers might be about to close their most successful chapter yet, but it's clear that they need to sort a few things out before they can think about writing the next one.

■ JAMIE FULLERTON



Brandon Flowers greets the Shanghai crowd and (above) on the Great Wall Of China

TORY MUNDKOWSKY, DAN KENDALL

► Check out our 10 Years Of The Killers gallery on NME.COM

THE MINI INTERVIEW

Honor Titus

Cerebral Ballzy

You're headlining the Monster NME Radar Tour in November. Excited?
 "Super psyched. Last time we played the UK it was so raucous."

Support is The Amazing Snakeheads. What should they know about touring with you?
 "They can't drink our rider or take our drugs and they have to kiss our asses."

What's it like being on tour with you guys?
 "Crazy shit happens. The Horrors were the most fun people we've toured with – it was extremely debauched."

How's the new record coming along?
 "We've pretty much finished. It's more melodic and it's got a lot more versatility. It's definitely still punk."

And you've been writing poetry too?
 "Yeah, I'm working on a book of short stories and poetry. It's all like, New York stories."

Speaking of New York, how is it out there with the government shutdown?
 "The news hypes these things up, but to the average guy everything's working as usual." ■ LISA WRIGHT

► Cerebral Ballzy headline the Monster NME Radar Tour, November 15–27 nationwide. For full details and tickets, visit NME.COM/tickets

