

# Chris B

As live-music showcase The Underground hits the 100-gig milestone, its founder talks to **Patrick Brzeski** about her incredible journey.

## MY LIFE

**TUNING UP** I was born in Hong Kong. My mum's Chinese and my father was English, so I'm a product of colonial Hong Kong. I went to Quarry Bay and South Island schools. I was quite scandalous: once I dyed my hair and shocked everyone when I came in the next day. It was funny because it wasn't against school rules at the time – that's how innocent Hong Kong was – but they wrote it in the next day. I became a rebellious teenager and started getting tattoos. I discovered punk when I was teenager in the 1980s. I was like, 'Oh my god, what is this?' The Clash became my favourite band. I decided I would become a musician and that I wanted to sing. And then I found The Smiths, who were another major discovery, another moment of realising that with music you can think about and sing about whatever you like. I had learned guitar as a primary student, but picked it back up so I could write songs about what I was feeling. Music was a release and a way to escape. There was a big age difference between my mum and my dad. My dad liked The Platters and Shirley Bassey, and my mum was into Elvis and The Beatles. That was a good combination of influences for me: the great singers and songwriters of two eras. And then Madonna was a big influence. I wanted to be like her.

**OPENING CHORDS** I had some lost years in the UK. I was a teenager, about 17, and came [back] after a couple of years and moved to Lamma. What I didn't know then, but which I appreciated later, is the people I happened to meet up with were really, really great musicians. We started a band called The Adapters and pretty much played music every day. We were playing regularly around Lan Kwai Fong. There weren't many good bands back then, so we got to play a lot. We were all pretty young and I was the token good-looking female. A couple of people from that band are now dead – drug overdoses. The band split up and then I started an all-girl band called Sisters of Sharon. I got married around that time, too, in 1992. He was fresh out of England and he liked it here, so it worked out. I was in Sisters



of Sharon from 1991 to 2001. We released three albums and went to the [United] States. We saved up a whole year from playing gigs at the Fringe Club and The Wanch and went over in 1996. That was a big learning curve. We had a couple of music videos and one of them was banned because we had a guy wearing a leather thong and cape. You saw a bit of his cheek and that was too much for Hong Kong in 1995. We had 10 drummers over the years and, after we lost the last one, decided it was time to put it to rest. It was sad but liberating. I went on and played in a teenage band, even though I clearly wasn't a teenager. Then I joined a band called Thinking Out Loud, which is my current band. We're a rock band with a sax player, which is quite cool. Later, I started an all-girl band called Guitars & Panties. The idea was to see how much sex really does

sell. We did some promo shots with lots of cleavage and did our debut show at Underground II. We got to the venue and there were a few hundred people there, many of them holding the magazine spreads with the photos, saying, 'We're here to see this band.'

**BIRTH OF THE UNDERGROUND** I started The Underground in April 2004. What people don't realise is that we have changed the way people do shows in Hong Kong. In those days, a venue like The Fringe or The Wanch would hire you and you'd play two or three sets. You'd be the only band of the night. We came up with the idea of having three bands, but the venues didn't want to do it because they thought it would be too much trouble. But then a friend had a contact at Joe Bananas. Their band didn't start until

midnight, but they had a whole stage of equipment – so maybe we could play before midnight. The bar was up for it, and we thought why not bring a few other friends who were in bands in, too? So we got drunk and came up with The Underground. Then I decided to do a website, because I know some HTML, and we invited some friends who were writers to come review the bands, so they could get some feedback. And that was it. We did two nights and it was great fun, but then we started getting e-mails from other bands, asking if they could play, too. We were doing it once a month and entry was free. At one point a friend insisted we shouldn't be doing it for free and losing money. We spent a year arguing about this, because I really didn't want to charge – I didn't think that was what it was about and I was worried people wouldn't come. Eventually we bought in a charge of US\$40, but people kept coming and we started learning how to work with sponsors. It has grown and grown.

**TEAM WORK** Now I have a great team of people who really care about the music and are happy to pitch in. They are all musicians. We got an offer to get some help producing compilation CDs. Number five will be coming out soon. We've recorded 58 Hong Kong bands so far. Some bands I pick because they're really good, some of them are a bit young or strapped for cash, and we do it to give them a chance to record. Now you have to be A grade or B grade to play The Underground, but I still do showcases at The Wanch to help smaller bands play. We have a great website, a mailing list and beer sponsorship. It's my passion, it's fun. I wouldn't call it a full-fledged business, but we've gotten more and more professional. Eventually, we'd like to have a venue and do a festival. We've just done our 100th gig [on March 17] and the team and family have grown so much. I feel we've all come a long way together. You know that in moments of darkness, sometimes you think, 'What am I doing? This isn't worth it.' I'm very grateful that each time I've been in that place, something has popped up to say, 'It is worth it, keep going, this is meaningful.' It has helped me push through. It's amazing what a group of people wishing things were cooler and better can accomplish.