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Gimme Danger; Leehom Wang's Open Fire Concert Film

Abstract

This is a comparative film review of *Gimme Danger* (2016), directed by Jim Jarmusch, and *Leehom Wang's Open Fire Concert Film* (2016), directed by Homeboy Music, Inc.

Keywords

Gimme Danger, Iggy Pop, Leehom Wang, Martin Luther King, Colin Kaepernick

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Author Notes

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Gimme Danger

Directed by Jim Jarmusch

2016

USA

108 minutes

TIFF Docs



Leehom Wang's Open Fire Concert Film

Directed by Homeboy Music Inc.

2016

Taiwan

85 minutes

TIFF Special Presentations

Trailer: <https://youtu.be/VLZhzwEchU>

It would be difficult to find two performers more completely, fundamentally opposite to one another than Iggy Pop, frontman for proto-punk band the Stooges, and Leehom Wang, international Chinese-American pop superstar. The stark differences between these men are made very apparent in two documentaries that premiered at TIFF: *Gimme Danger*, Jim Jarmusch's love letter to Iggy and the Stooges; and *Leehom Wang's Open Fire Concert Film*, which focuses on Wang's unprecedented sold-out performance at Beijing's Bird Nest stadium in 2012. Among these differences:

- Iggy and the Stooges were commercial failures and disbanded in 1974 after less than seven years together; Wang has been spectacularly successful over a career lasting two decades and which is going stronger than ever;
- Wang's lyrics typically idealize and objectify the target of his affections ("You are the grace of an angel / You are my favorite concubine"); Pop's approach to relationships is more realistic and self-denigrating ("So messed up, I want you here / . . . I wanna be your dog");
- Pop was an intense drug user for decades; Wang appears to be the soul of temperance;
- Wang is avowedly Christian (and is shown in the film praying before each concert); Pop shows no interest in institutional religion.

There are also, however, some striking similarities between Pop and Wang:

- Both mention growing up with loving parents who were generally supportive but who specifically discouraged them from pursuing a career in music;
- Both began as drummers in a band, then moved to the front of the stage (Pop says in *Gimme Danger* that he did this because he was tired of looking at butts all the time);
- Both have constructed larger than life stage personas that are strikingly different from the quieter, more reflective, and sometimes depressed men they are when not performing;
- Both invented new names to go along with these stage personas ("Iggy Pop" for James Newell Osterberg, Jr., and "Music Man" for Leehom Wang);

- Both have acted for years in high profile movies (Pop's filmography includes *Sid and Nancy*, Martin Scorsese's *The Color of Money*, and two previous Jarmusch joints, *Dead Man* and *Coffee and Cigarettes*; Wang's breakthrough role was in Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution*, which he followed up with parts in the Jackie Chan vehicle *Big Soldier* and Michael Mann's *Blackhat*).

Beyond these parallels, the most obvious connection between Iggy Pop and Leehom Wang is that they are profoundly passionate about music. They discovered this passion in high school, and it has helped both men manage difficult experiences and form friendships, it has shaped their identities and clarified what matters to them in life. As noted, Pop appears non-religious while Wang is Christian. But it is music that arguably constitutes each performer's true "religion." Wang in fact explicitly refers to music as possessing a "magical power," as being "sacred."

In this regard both men self-identify as missionaries of a sort, as musical evangelists. In *Gimme Danger* Pop says that, after spending time with various blues artists of the 1960s, he wanted to create music that did for white Americans what these artists had done for black Americans. This music, for him, had an authenticity, a power, that showed people a way to be in the world that was much more than simply falling in line with mainstream middle class expectations. Performing for Pop was a way of explicitly confronting people, challenging and disrupting their assumptions about music in particular and life in general. This perspective is clearly embodied in the footage that Jarmusch has assembled for the film. The Stooges' songs are ragged, aggressive, shocking, while Pop himself is a whirlwind of violent motion: naked, screaming, and not infrequently bloody.

In *Open Fire*, Wang is similarly explicit about the goals that he wants to accomplish with music. As with Pop, these goals include the creation of a new kind of music to reach a new audience. Wang talks about fusing Chinese traditions with American pop in order to

link “East” and “West” through music. This music is the polar opposite of Iggy Pop’s: it is accessible, fun, melodic, and incredibly popular. It is about bringing people together, making them feel good, celebrating. And it does appear to be achieving the goal of bridging cultural divides, at least a little: near the end of the film, we are shown YouTube clips of non-Chinese people performing Wang’s songs in Mandarin.

These two visions of music in turn parallel two very different understandings of Jesus suggested by each film, and can be summed up in key lyrics. Pop snarls “gimme danger” and gets what he asks for, smashing his face on the floor during his first (!) stage dive, getting spit on by audiences, and at one performance being knocked out cold by a biker. Wang, on the other hand, ardently belts out “give me love,” and is repeatedly shown being adored by thousands and thousands of people. His perspective here implicitly reflects his view of Jesus himself as a beatific figure of compassion, support, and forgiveness. Not surprisingly, Iggy Pop sees things a little differently. In a 2003 interview with Erik Hedegaard in *Rolling Stone* he famously commented: “What did Christ really do? He hung out with hard-drinking fishermen. And when they asked him, ‘Why are you hanging out with prostitutes and fishermen?’ he said, ‘Because they need me.’ What a line, you know?” But society, in Pop’s view, is not prepared for such a radical departure from the norm. People would rather kill Jesus than sincerely engage his disruptive views about helping those who are marginalized, because what “society really wants is blood.”¹

This division over how Jesus is understood—as gentle or confrontational, non-threatening or revolutionary—is one that remains both deeply relevant and hotly debated. The day before *Gimme Danger* premiered at TIFF, American football college coach William “Dabo” Swinney responded to a question about NFL quarterback Colin

Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the American national anthem, which he has been doing for weeks as a protest against racial injustice in the United States. Swinney was critical of Kaepernick, arguing that the way to go about making the world a better place is not to protest or disrupt, but to follow Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as you'd love yourself." Linking his stance specifically to the issue that concerns Kaepernick, he continued: "I think the answer to our problems is exactly what they were for Martin Luther King when he changed the world. Love, peace, education, tolerance of others, Jesus."

As many have pointed out, Swinney has profoundly misunderstood Martin Luther King, who was *all about* protest and disruption. King's letter from Birmingham jail specifically addressed white pastors in this regard: "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."

It may seem an enormous stretch to link Leehom Wang and Iggy Pop to racial injustice in the United States, to Jesus and Kaepernick and Martin Luther King, Jr. But in these documentaries both men talk specifically, even if briefly, about racial segregation and violence. Pop grew up during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, spent a great deal of time with black musicians who were discriminated against, and decided in his own way to try to shake up the very "white moderates" that King critiques. For his part, Wang unhappily recalls being bullied as the only Chinese student in his school in Rochester. He came to believe that Jesus wants him, through music, to bring Chinese culture to the United States in the hope of preventing similar abuse in the future. He may be right; this could,

perhaps, be helpful. On the other hand, the prevailing popularity and influence of black music hasn't yet stopped injustice and violence against black Americans. Maybe it's Iggy Pop who is right after all; maybe, in the end, what society really does want is blood.

¹ Erik Hedegaard, "Iggy Pop's Trail of Destruction," *Rolling Stone*, December 11, 2003, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/iggy-pops-trail-of-destruction-20031211>.