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**Waltham pop-punk act Damone makes some noise in China
By Katie Benner, Globe Correspondent //** 12/13/2002

**BEIJING** - The Beijing punk scene has been making international news for the past few years, and anyone here can tell you that the city's youth enjoy a good show. So when Damone frontwoman Noelle LeBlanc swan dived from a 12-foot tower of speakers halfway through the band's Friday night show in Beijing last week, it was no surprise that the crowd lost control and hailed her their new queen of rock.

''[Noelle] is a very different woman,'' said Ai Qing Guo, a 22-year-old from Lanzhou who works in the city. ''I had her sign my hand, because she is not afraid to fly off a speaker and play guitar like a man. And I think more women should be like her.''

The past year has marked a meteoric rise for Damone, the Waltham-based band fronted by 16-year-old singer-guitarist LeBlanc. In a matter of months, the four-person outfit has gotten almost everything a fledgling pop-punk outfit could wish for: glowing reviews, a record contract with RCA, a much-anticipated debut album to be released in February, a Boston Music Awards nomination for best new rock band.

Now, add a tour of China to that list. ''[Beijing] has been the best audience we've ever received,'' LeBlanc said. ''This is a huge venue, and a lot of people showed up, and they're obviously more into American bands than a lot of Americans are because it's so different. It's awesome coming here and being able to experience this.''

The recent whirlwind has brought with it big changes, especially for LeBlanc, who was a student at Waltham High School. ''I don't go to high school anymore,'' she said. ''I barely get to see any of my friends. But it's still fun and worth it.''

And the opportunity to play for audiences halfway around the world is quite a perk, one that erases some of the confusion that comes with rapid success. Being tailed by a documentary filmmaker, courtesy of RCA, doesn't hurt, either.

''My parents are completely supportive [about the trip to China],'' LeBlanc said. ''They said, `I love you, have a good time.' I was unsure how people here would react to us. But we would be playing shows, and that's all I want to do. After a second of hesitation [about the trip], I said, `Hell yeah.'''

From behind a wall of long hair, Damone plays loud, driving pop-punk rock a la the Muffs and the Pixies, with guitar solos that bring back memories of '70s hard rock 'n' roll. Thanks to Adam Lewis, president of Boston-based Planetary Group, the band recently took the People's Republic of China by storm via a three-day tour of Nanjing, Beijing, and Shanghai, wrapping it up tour Saturday with a show at the Ark in Shanghai. Including Damone, Lewis has brought six bands to China since his music-promotion company started the program in May.

Judging by the Beijing crowd and reports of an outstanding show in Nanjing, the band has crossed language and culture barriers and moved Chinese audiences. When band members stormed the stage to a driving beat laid down by drummer Dustin Hengst, the front-of-the-house crowd kicked and shoved toward the stage. When the band doused the audience in beer, they screamed for more.

''There were a few moments that had me worried,'' said Sarah Bai, 27, a Chicago resident living in Beijing for a year. ''People were rushing the stage, grabbing the musicians and turning into a mob. But things were OK in the end. It shows how much the Chinese kids were into the music. They just felt comfortable with [Damone] even though they were a foreign band and they didn't understand the lyrics. They wanted to be close to them. They felt like the band was as receptive to them as they were to the band.''

Though there aren't any Chinese bands playing music similar to Damone's, the genre is not new among China's urban youth. ''The bands and the people [in Nanjing] know more about American music than most Americans,'' said Hengst. ''Black Element [Damone's opening act in Nanjing] really surprised me because of their musical influences: Operation Ivy, the Stooges, the New York Dolls; they knew all these late-'70s punk-rock bands. And tonight's band Wild Strawberries had a Mazzy Star influence.'' In a nod to Chinese youth culture's fascination and abiding love for Kurt Cobain, Damone played Nirvana covers, which were hits in Nanjing and Beijing. ''Music is the international language,'' LeBlanc said. ''Even though we can't speak the language, we connect through the music.''

The band said it has been a great confidence booster to play and be well received away from home. Damone has generated a huge following in the Boston area but has not toured much outside of New England. Says Hengst of the shows in China: ''Our friends weren't there, there was no one we knew, no one had heard of us, and there were no other US bands. It was the ultimate litmus test. If people liked us without those things and responded positively, then we're really doing well. And they did.''

As for their impressions of China, all four band members said they wanted to return to see more of the country and further explore China's burgeoning music scene. ''I feel constantly humbled here,'' said bassist Vazquez. ''You realize how much you have and how much you don't have. To see people here not cynical when they have nothing, versus people in the US who always have a problem and have everything, is a very humbling thing. It sharpens your perspective.''
 **This story ran on page E12 of the Boston Globe on 12/13/2002.**