The Re-Tros perform live in New York (left)

Band members Ma Hui, Hua Dong and Liu Min take a stroll in New York

Swapping notes

A project by New York music promoter Damon Dash aims to bridge the divide between Western and Eastern acts, writes **Ben Sin**

The air is thick with hip hop beats inside a three-storey building in the Tribeca district of New York City – not surprising considering this is the office of music mogul Damon Dash. The sleek warehouse known as DD172 – an amalgam of Dash's initials and the street address – features all-white decor with an art gallery and a ping-pong table on the first floor, a graffiti wall, office space and music studio on the second floor, and a private bedroom on the top floor.

Mainland musicians Hua Dong, Liu Min and Ma Hui are sitting in Dash's private room, nodding their heads to the pounding bass seeping up from the floor below. The trio are collectively known as Re-Tros – which stands for Rebuilding the Right of Statues – a Beijing-based post-rock band. They've played throughout Asia in their seven years of existence, including gigs at the Fringe Club in Hong Kong, and are in New York to take part in the BluRoc Asia project.

It's the latest brainchild of Dash, who co-founded Roc-A-Fella Records with rapper Jay-Z.

"The idea of [BluRoc Asia] is to narrow the divide between Western and Eastern acts," says the project's local representative, Shelly Pecot. "We wanted to bring Damon's New York-based acts to perform with Asian artists in Asia, and vice versa."

The idea emerged last year when Pecot, a 45-year-old mother of two who had been neighbours with Dash in Manhattan, relocated to Hong Kong with her family. "When he heard I was moving here, he suggested we look into organising shows," she says.

On the day we meet, the Re-Tros are set to hold a jam session in the studio with Dash's crew of remixers and videographers. Two nights earlier, they played a show in the same building. The experience has been eye-opening for the Chinese band.

"I think that was the first time we played in front of a crowd that wasn't mostly Chinese, and are into hip hop rather than guitar sounds," says 33-year-old Hua, the band's guitarist and lead singer.

Pecot had begun contacting music promoters and organisers after settling in Hong Kong, including Justin Sweeting, a champion of local indie music and the mover behind concert organisers The People's Party.

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>
> Damon Dash (below), music promoter

"I told Justin I wanted to bring some of Damon's acts over and was wondering if he had any slots open at his shows," Pecot says. "He was super helpful and gave us a spot at a show he was organising in Wan Chai."

In May, Dash flew in not only to watch his performer – a blond singer by the name of McKenzie Eddy – open the show, but also to check out the scene in Asia.

"He loved it so much he didn't want to leave," Pecot says. "That was essentially the first BluRoc Asia moment."

After the Wan Chai gig, Dash went up to Beijing, where he spotted Re-Tros.

"Damon approached us after the show and asked if we wanted to play in New York," recalls Liu, the petite 27-year-old bassist. "We said yes, and then he took care of our visas and accommodation; we wouldn't be here without him."

For most of their New York trip, Re-Tros seemed an odd fit around Dash's crew – a group of twenty-something city slickers, outgoing and outspoken. The mainland trio seems introverted by comparison.

But once in the studio, the ice breaks. Ma works on a drum roll with Jonah Schwartz, a heavily tattooed filmmaker assigned to make a documentary about BluRoc Asia. Liu chats up a hulking black man as he sets up her equipment.

"This is the first time we've been around such a diverse crowd," Hua says. "Music breaks barriers and connects all of us."

Five minutes into the session, Dash enters the studio. Wearing thick black-rimmed glasses and skinny jeans, he looks more like an indie rocker than the hip hop stalwart seen pouring Cristal down the bodies of bikini-clad women in the infamous Jay-Z music video *Big Pimpin'*.

"What I'm trying to do is find like-minded people," Dash says. "People who are forward-thinking, and share a common passion for music – regardless if it's hip hop, jazz, rock, gospel, whatever."

Dash says the old model of music is dying and BluRock Asia, which fits under the umbrella label DD172, is the model of the future.

"The vision is to go multimedia. It can't just be about releasing albums any more; it's about live shows, making videos, documentaries, art, social media," he says. "The internet gives us freedom to express and share our art. We no longer have to kiss ass to get on radio or television. We record our own stuff, and put it on the Web for people to see."

On his Hong Kong trip last May, Dash met local rap pioneer MC Yan at his farmhouse in the New Territories and the two bonded over their passion for music – and marijuana. "Damon and Yan had a long discussion over whether Bruce Lee smoked pot," Pecot recalls.

Describing Yan as a visionary, Dash says they hope to work together next year.

"What you see here, this is just the beginning," he says, motioning towards the Re-Tros in mid-song.

It's one thing to make music for artistic fulfilment; paying the bills is another issue.

Dash (who's had well-publicised financial troubles in recent years after two of his New York properties were foreclosed) and Pecot recognise the need to make BluRoc Asia pay.

"The plan right now is to get exposure for Damon's guys in Asia and to do the same for the Asian artists in the States," Pecot says.

A series of free shows are scheduled for Thailand in late December, featuring Eddy and several of Dash's rappers alongside New York Afro-punk outfit The London Souls, and DJ Wordy from the mainland. And Yan's collaboration with Dash next year will also rope in local rockers DP.

Pecot concedes it may be a while before the brand sees significant financial returns.

"Most music promoters in Hong Kong don't make much from their shows," she says. "It's mostly out of passion – that's why I respect them so much – and I think we're putting passion first, too."

For 39-year-old Dash, BluRoc may represent a rebirth of sorts since he left Roc-A-Fella records after a falling out with Jay-Z five years ago.

"I think the stuff I did with Jay-Z and Kanye [West] before, it was about ego – who had more girls, who had more cash, who had more power – I don't think that's the right message for me now," he says.

"That's why my first priority with BluRoc is to express our love of music and to have artistic freedom."