

tionaries, but that's usually because of their musical accomplishments," says Bill Shoemaker, a jazz critic and journalist who has followed Ho's career. "Fred is a revolutionary who uses jazz as his medium." Since 1981, when he moved from Boston to New York City to pursue music full time, Ho (who changed his name from Houn) has produced a wide range of works, from haunting, melodious, experimental and/or fierce jazz compositions, such as *The Black Nation Suite*, to works in collaboration with Latino/a poets and singers, to operas like the martial-arts extravaganza *Voice of the Dragon*, which toured the country in 2003 sponsored by Columbia Artists Management Inc. Among his wilder creations is *Night Vision: A First to Third World Vampyre Opera*, which "tracks a 2,000-year-old female vampyre who rises to pop music stardom, hyped by a diabolical technogenius, the spin doctor."

Perhaps Ho's most personal work, composed in the wake of his emotional split with the IWK, is his *Monkey Trilogy*. Based on the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, the opera tells the story of a monkey (the rebellious "androgynous trickster"), a pig, a monk, and an ogre who defy the gods and travel for 17

years from China to India to retrieve Buddhist scriptures. In Ho's version, the four are successful but so enrage the gods in the process that the latter colonize Monkey's once idyllic homeland. Monkey, also a creature of great integrity, decides to return home and fight for liberation. "Monkey starts out as a soul dissident," Ho explains, "but finds others who are not

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happy with the situation—and that begins the long road of organizing."

Some music reviewers have taken issue with his heavy-handedness, especially the "agitprop" in *Warrior Sisters*. "But Fred is not an ideologue who produces stilted art," Shoemaker asserts. "His music has all the prerequisites of swing, of heat, of excitement—especially in the improvising he does." And Ho appreciates the value of popular entertainment (as in: for and of the people). Shoemaker saw a Sunday matinee of Ho's *Voice of the Dragon* in Fairfax, Virginia, and reports that the "long, narrative piece with a lot of really fast-flying martial arts" attracted "tons of kids

who had come in on the martial-arts hook and they just completely dug it. Fred understands that. And with *The Monkey Trilogy* opera, he shows that he's also hip to that kind of comic book, imaginary, science-fiction sphere that can be brought to bear allegorically for his agenda."

Ho has also picked up on a powerful, political aspect of jazz—the empower-

ment of the individual. "Max Roach's *Freedom Now* suite is a proclamation for individual rights within the U.S., but the piece also works to universalize that struggle," correlating the experience of American blacks with those in South Africa living under apartheid, Shoemaker explains. "Fred does the same thing. *Yes Means Yes and No Means No* is about individual women's rights to their bodies, but it expands that into a more universal context to support an anti-patriarchal stance."

When asked, Ho reels off a quirky mix of inspirations for his work: Hong Kong action movies, "Times Square erotica," Iraqi Bedouin desert songs, Chinese and Korean folk music, and the TV soundtracks from *Mission Impossible* and *Dark Shadows*. He is a *Star Trek* aficionado who as a teenager sometimes styled himself after Mr. Spock. Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, and Sun Ra, a jazz innovator and cosmic philosopher, also figure heavily in his music—Ho paid tribute to the last in his opera *Mr. Mystery: The Return of Sun Ra to Save the Planet Earth*, set to premiere in May in Philadelphia. "Because I am self-trained, I am actually a product, in a strange way, of popular culture," he says. "I've always believed that music and the performing arts are connected to the very basic struggles, loves, hopes, and desires of regular people. The best music is both soulful and raw, and sophisticated and daring."

Few self-proclaimed "guerrilla entrepreneurs" are as accomplished. Ho earns a moderate living making music because he has only himself to support and because he is a well-organized businessman who competes in the open market for arts funding, frequently winning awards, com-

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