

BRITNEY GOES TO GROUND

Chris Canty finds Hanoi has a funny flip side

IS pop music dead? Well, if I am to believe the sight a few metres in front of me, Britney Spears is dead. Although not a fan of hers, only her school dress, I'm sure she's alive because I saw her pimples and protruding tummy in one of those "stars without make-up" pieces of hard-hitting journalism a few weeks ago. Nonetheless, her face is planted on a tombstone in the northern Vietnamese city of Hanoi.

I am in the middle of Hang Bac Street, also known as Tombstone Street, wondering why Britney's life has flashed before my eyes. If she is indeed dead, is it because some crazy fan took her lyrics "hit me baby one more time" a little too seriously? I bend down and ask the elderly man squatting next to her what the heck is going on.

It "promotes my business", he says, and right on cue three US tourists move me to the side and take a photo. "Some tourists like to take them home," he explains, and I picture myself arriving at Sydney airport, the expired Britney in tow.

The tourists are replaced by a young Vietnamese couple window-shopping for tombstones. They look at Britney and compliment the shop owner on his engraving skills. He grins at me, knowing that if Britney stays dead, he will continue to make a good living and says Britney is so popular in Vietnam children ask their parents to buy her tombstone to take home.

A few minutes later, on my way to see the great Hoan Kiem Lake, amid a cacophony of horns (Hanoi has two million registered scooters and perhaps 13 million unregistered ones), I hear the unmistakable sound of Celine Dion. She is singing that song from *Titanic*. For some reason Hanoi has a fascination with the film; it still appears in the new releases bucket of many pirate DVD stores and is the name of the most popular nightclub in town.

Although I think the place is a, ahem, dive, it hasn't stopped rival nightclubs

inventing cocktails such as the Iceberg. As the song grows louder, I imagine a small child with a ghetto-blaster on his shoulder, mouthing the Canadian diva's words, probably unaware she peaked at the Eurovision song contest many years before. Instead, a portable weighing machine comes around the corner blasting the tune, perhaps hoping the song will attract fat people.

To the amusement of nearby children, I use the machine, not because I want to know how many spring rolls I've eaten in Vietnam but out of pity for the machine's operator, for no one on earth should have to work with Celine

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every day. As she belts out that "my heart will go on", I wonder for how much longer, as I see how much weight I've put on in Vietnam.

Celine is swallowed by horns as the machine continues down the street, only to be pushed aside moments later by Ricky Martin's *She Bangs* screaming from an approaching popcorn cart. I wonder if the song refers to the corn popping, but doubt that's what Ricky had in mind when penning the lyrics.

Despite the results from the weighing machine, I crave some lunch and head through alleyways until I come across something more shocking than Britney, Ricky or Celine put together

(which, come to think of it, would make a great tombstone). The restaurant in front of me looks like any other, being small and cramped with men sitting on chairs that have been stolen from kindergartens. Yet above them, in full view, are the great golden arches.

There is no better drunk food than the 3am chicken nuggets from McDonald's, then, next morning, waking with a hangover and 17 semi-sucked barbecue sauce sachets. Despite the negative attention McDonald's has received through the years, it has continued to expand. But, in communist Vietnam?

I walk inside and suspect something is not quite right when I fail to see a menu above the cash register, or a cash register for that matter. A laminated piece of paper is handed to me by a smiling young girl, but there are no Quarter Pounders or Big Macs. Instead, she points to "spaghetti with grind [sic] feet sauce" and smiles. I ask her if they serve hamburgers and fries and she points to "bread with beef steak" and "French fried [sic] with butter".

Three minutes later, the (very) fast food arrives: no two all-beef patties, lettuce, cheese, onion and pickles served on a sesame seed bun. There is special sauce, however, living up to its name by hiding the taste of the beef and the half-fried potatoes. I ask the waitress if the place is affiliated with the US-owned burger chain. Momentarily her smile fades (which is not allowed in a real McDonald's), then she firmly denies any involvement, insisting the sign is of her father's name.

Wondering if indeed McDonald is a common Vietnamese name, I walk outside and notice that next to the golden arches is the owner's name, Hanh. I head back to my hotel; after spending the afternoon with Britney, Celine, Ricky and Ronald McDonald, I determine to explore Hanoi's more traditional attractions tomorrow. I dream, that night, of monks doing the macarena.

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