

# THE COFFEE TRUCK PLAYLIST

## 胖卡咖啡館，獻給不需要這世界的你

*Shuttling through the margins of the city, the proprietor of a coffee truck trades coffee for stories while curating a musical playlist to soothe his customers' souls. Weaving together eighteen interconnected stories, author Wales Xie packs this musically-inspired collection with healing moments and hard-earned wisdom.*

The short stories of *The Coffee Truck Playlist* share a common stage: a van converted into a coffee truck. Chang, the owner of this mobile café, is always on the move, providing the solace of coffee and good music to the weary at heart. There's no need to pay with cash. Chang will accept just about anything in exchange: a story in need of telling, or a small object endowed with special meaning, like a seashell with a heartbreaking provenance.

The coffee truck is the lynchpin of the book, linking eighteen stories which might appear independent at first glance. Most of the characters who populate these stories carry the weight of regret: a young person preparing to retake college entrance exams after a lackluster first attempt, a worker laid-off after only just starting their career, the owner of a failing record store, and various people disappointed in love. They come to the coffee truck to trade their stories for a cup of java, but the telling offers them opportunity to reevaluate their setbacks.

Meanwhile, Chang is busy playing a soundtrack of classic songs that not only echoes the content of the stories, but also plays a role in healing his caffeinated clientele. As the customers talk, Chang selects a song that mirrors their state, giving them a sense of being deeply heard, sending them back into the world ready for reconciliation. The songs should be considered an essential component of the reading experience. Readers who listen to each track will be rewarded with a



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rich nostalgic ambience, and the opportunity to further savor the hard-won life experiences related in each story.

With its breezy warmth and tender touch, *The Coffee Truck Playlist* is a shelter from life's storms, a mobile sanctuary for the dispirited, a place where good music and honest stories illuminate fractured lives, seeping in through the cracks to make them whole again.

## Wales Xie 瓦力

Hailing from Kaohsiung, in southern Taiwan, Wales Xie has been called "Taiwan's best writer who tells stories through music". Though he can't read music, he shares his deep knowledge and appreciation of the medium through his Facebook page, *Wales' Record Store*, and through his books *Take a Sad Song and Make It Better* and *The Night Someone Knocked on Mozart's Door*. His musical interests span everything from classical to jazz and pop.

# THE COFFEE TRUCK PLAYLIST

By Wales Xie

Translated by Jun Liu

## Preface

Truth be told, I came to fried oysters embarrassingly late in the game.

You know that one peculiar friend who orders oyster omelet at the night market but never touches a single oyster? Guilty as charged. Their briny essence has never agreed with me, so during our shared o-a-tsian sessions, I'd discreetly nudge all the oysters toward my companions while quietly claiming the crispy egg canvas for myself.

Once in Taipei, evening caught me wandering through the labyrinthine streets. The restaurant I sought had apparently evaporated – no matter how carefully I studied the maps, it remained tantalizingly out of reach. That's when I spotted an old timber-framed house tucked away down a forgotten lane. Amber light spilled from its windows, washing the narrow alley in a warmth that seemed to whisper directly to my soul. I abandoned all prudence and skipped the Google reviews entirely. If it proved disappointing, so be it. Sometimes the most beautiful accidents are worth the risk of disappointment.

The old house specialized in made-to-order Japanese fare at prices that were refreshingly gentle on the wallet. I settled on a donburi that arrived with a petite portion of pickled vegetables and a bowl of miso soup, the flavors were delicate and satisfying. Though there was no music, the atmosphere was still quietly lovely.

The menu featured fried oysters with a tempting note about daily limited quantities. Despite my usual oyster aversion, I felt an inexplicable pull, like this was precisely what I was meant to discover here. When the dish arrived, it was absolutely divine. No wonder they only made ten portions a day.

Beneath that golden, crackling shell lay a heart that was impossibly soft and rich. How wonderfully bewildering that here I was, deep in the doldrums of middle age, and yet a simple dish could still stir something so unexpectedly profound within me.

I remember reading a story about a protagonist who'd never had any use for classical music. Caught in a sudden downpour, he found himself huddled beneath the awning of a used bookshop. "This should blow over soon enough," he mused to himself, when strains of Debussy's "Clair de Lune" came floating from within.

Those brief moments became a corridor stretching back through the years, the music guiding him home to his younger self. When the rain cleared, he walked away with an entire world tucked inside his chest. Years down the line, when life grew heavy and seemed almost too much

to bear, he would recall that encounter – Debussy’s timeless melody woven into the rhythm of raindrops.

Maybe fried oysters and Debussy operate on the same wavelength – ordinary moments harboring quiet, enduring acts of grace. May you be my oyster and I your Debussy, so that even in life’s most modest offerings, we might still find reasons to clutch joy close to our hearts.

The ever-shifting tableaux at Pan Car Cafe are painted with moments just like these – tiny, yet achingly tender.

“A chance encounter meant to be.” Should you find yourself wandering past this humble van, drawn by the rich aroma of Chang’s brewing coffee and the nostalgic melodies from his old tape player, there’s no need to wait for an invitation or wonder if you belong. Simply come in and become part of the story.

If a soul stirs to certain notes, it’s because somewhere deep within, it has always been dancing to that tune.

## **Born to Run**

My friend Chang opened a mobile cafe – a venture he threw himself into after a decade spent as both social activist and university professor, when he finally decided to walk away from it all.

His plan was simple: sell the imported camper van, raid his nest egg, and invest it all in a food truck – what locals affectionately call a “pan car” for its bread-loaf shape – along with all the precision coffee equipment he’d need.

But the equipment list wasn’t complete yet. Chang knew about my obsession with hi-fi systems and record collecting, so he roped me into sourcing audio equipment for the pan car. My instinct was to install a proper vinyl rig, but all that road vibration would send the stylus skipping like crazy. We compromised on a cassette player – hardly the gold standard for sound reproduction, but perfectly suited for a cafe on wheels.

What set this roving cafe apart from the pack? Take your pick of any beans on offer, and the price list was deceptively short – either you paid or you didn’t. If you thought his pour-over was worth it, go ahead and pay him a hundred NTD.

But the unpaid route was the true soul of his venture: good old-fashioned trading. Find the coffee to your liking? Then anything you had on you was fair game for an exchange.

His debut on a Hualien beach created quite a sensation. With the sea breeze rolling in, he cranked up Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run”\* to full volume. As The Boss belted out – *Baby, we were born to run... the highways jammed with broken heroes* – the song seemed to perfectly embody the pan car’s ethos: always on the road.

Springsteen’s fiery American rock had a way of luring folks out of the ocean breeze and straight to the mobile cafe. According to Chang, almost everyone simply coughed up the NT\$100 for his fresh brew. Very few worked up the courage to inquire about that mysterious notice chalked on his board: “For non-payment options, please consult the proprietor.”

“Too many con artists out there nowadays,” Chang said with a grin. “People have learned there’s no free lunch, and certainly no free coffee.” Plus, the specialty coffee crowd keeps growing. They tasted his hand-crafted cup, immediately recognized the genuine skill behind it, spotted that NT\$100 price tag, and reached straight for their cash. Swift and straightforward – nothing like the teasing, elusive nature of the ocean wind.

Yet his whole venture was designed to avoid cash transactions. What Chang was really after was uncovering the true value of a cup of coffee. The barter system, he hoped, would unveil what people actually considered worth exchanging. When the plan couldn’t gain traction, Chang grew discouraged.

One afternoon, the faint cry of a baby came drifting from afar, gradually building in volume. It wasn’t until the wailing had completely overpowered his cassette player that Chang finally looked up, and found the child’s mother standing right in front of his pan car.

“Sorry to trouble you,” she began, “my baby’s hungry and needs milk badly. I realize this is a specialty coffee place and you likely don’t make lattes, but all the other food vendors here sell things that need chewing. My little one hasn’t cut any teeth yet, milk is really all he can manage.”

The situation clicked for Chang right away. While he didn’t serve lattes, he made sure to keep a couple bottles of milk in his bar fridge. This was partly for his own nutritional needs, and partly because Lucky, the pan car’s feline mascot, would occasionally turn on the charm hoping for a taste, even though Chang knew full well that milk and cats don’t mix well.

Chang didn’t wait for the mother to finish explaining. He simply poured a cup of fresh milk for the little one.

Amazed and grateful, the woman went to pay, only to discover she’d left her wallet in the car. It was parked far down the beach, and she worried that dragging her hungry baby there and back would be more than he could bear.

The mother, clearly flustered and embarrassed, inquired about the no-payment alternative.

Chang practically lit up. “Ha! You’re actually the first person to ask,” he said with a grin. “It couldn’t be simpler, just trade me whatever you’ve got on you.”

“Truly anything? What about this?” She gestured toward a shell clutched in her child’s tiny fist.

“Of course,” Chang said earnestly. “That’s exactly the idea – you determine the value of this milk for yourself. Whatever you choose to offer, I’ll accept without question. Just remember, once you give it, it’s a done deal.”

The baby finished his milk with pure satisfaction written across his face, eyes drifting shut as he settled into peaceful slumber.

The moment his mother gently pried the shell from his chubby fingers, the baby erupted, every muscle tensing as he writhed and unleashed an earth-shattering howl.

“But remember, once it’s decided, there’s no backing out. Whatever anyone offers, I’ll take it.” When Chang said those words, an unfamiliar coldness washed over me.

“So you actually took that shell? Despite the baby having a complete meltdown? You didn’t just put that poor mother in an impossible spot, you probably scared off every other customer within earshot.”

Chang spoke with absolute conviction – whatever someone decided to give, he would accept. This was the sole form of payment for his “no-payment” coffee.

“I took that shell – that vessel of tears – and felt its tremendous weight. Those poets who babble about ‘beautiful shells are priceless pearls,’ they don’t get it. What does ‘priceless’ mean? They haven’t the faintest idea. Coffee for a hundred dollars, that has a value. But a pearl forged from a child’s anguish? Now that’s wealth beyond measure. I know what you’re thinking – that I’m heartless. The rules are the rules.

“But beyond the rules, there’s still room for tenderness. I heated up another cup of milk for the little one. The tears dried up. And in his tranquil sleep, the sweetest smile you’ve ever seen.”

“So what did you make that poor mother trade for the second cup?” I asked with rising concern, the scene so vivid I could almost hear the baby stirring beside me, ready to burst into tears.

“Nothing,” Chang replied. “She never said she wanted another one. That cup was my gift.”

I let out a long breath of relief.

“But your coffee still needs paying for,” Chang said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “So what’ll it be, good sir – cash or barter?”

I hadn’t seen that curveball coming, and of course I’d left my wallet at home.

“How about I trade you a story?”

Chang took a slow drag from his cigarette and exhaled thoughtfully. “That works,” he said with quiet satisfaction. “Whatever you’re willing to part with, I’m happy to accept.”

I studied the figure before me – this Chang I’d known for years from our blues bar days, my fellow devotee through countless jazz sessions. He seemed both intimately familiar and utterly foreign at the same time.

He actually wanted payment for that coffee? Absolutely! Just like he’d said. In an age of endless scams, we’re all hard-wired to smell a rat if something sounds too good to be true.

Nothing in life comes free, and coffee certainly doesn’t either.

But Chang wasn’t running a con.

His coffee could be paid for with money, or without.

You could trade a seashell for it, swap a story, or offer up anything else in this world that felt like fair value to you.

The worth of things wasn’t his call to make, it was yours. You and your willingness to exchange determined what that cup of coffee was really worth. As long as your offer came from a genuine place, he’d take it without question.

At that moment, a woman made her way toward us. Alan Tam’s classic “A Friend Like Me”<sup>\*</sup> rose from the speakers.

“Wait, you’re selling coffee?” she said, clearly taken aback.

“There’s been chatter online about a pan car cruising around, playing old cassettes every day. I got curious. Word was it might show up somewhere around here, so I came to take a look. But I was way off. I thought you were some kind of performance artist, so I brought along some old tapes – figured you might want to share them with your audience. How embarrassing, I completely got it wrong. I had no idea this was an actual coffee business.”

“Actually, you’re spot on,” said Chang. “This mobile cafe is a purposeful social experiment, calling it performance art isn’t far off the mark. I do sell coffee, but that’s hardly the whole story. Please, have a seat and let me put on one of your tapes. I have a feeling you’ve got something to share. Come, settle in, the coffee’s on the house, and the music is worth its weight in gold.”

The lady with the blue IKEA bag stayed on her feet.

She averted her gaze, tears pooling in her eyes.

It was a long moment before she spoke. “These cassettes in here, they weigh so much. I’ve been wanting to get rid of them for ages. Thank you for such a kind invitation. Just hearing you say that has somehow made them feel lighter.”

With Alan Tam’s warm, nostalgic vocals filling the air, a tale of friendship was about to unfold.

\* Bruce Springsteen (“Born to Run”)

Bruce Springsteen, an American rock singer, songwriter, and guitarist, was born on September 23, 1949. His songs, which often reflect the struggles of the working and lower-middle classes, earned him the nickname “The Boss”. The song “Born to Run” was featured on his third studio album of the same name, released by Columbia Records on August 25, 1975. An anthem of hopeful defiance, the song suggests that even on life’s long highway filled with broken heroes, you can always find the courage to carry on as long as you keep striding forward.

\* “A Friend Like Me”

Released on Hong Kong singer Alan Tam’s fifth Mandarin album by PolyGram on September 25, 1989, the song celebrates the value of friendship, reminding us that no matter how big or lonely the world may be, a friend is always here for you.

## **A Friend Like Me**

The bulky IKEA bag appeared oddly disproportionate against the woman’s frail silhouette, yet its signature blue seemed to mirror her inner state perfectly.

“Yu was a girl who loved spinning tales,” she began. “We’d just entered our final year when she transferred in from another kindergarten. One time I was bursting to pee and wanted to ask for permission to use the restroom, but Yu leaned over and whispered, the toilet was swarming with cockroaches. I was so terrified I didn’t dare raise my hand. Between the fear and a full bladder, I couldn’t hold it anymore and – whoosh – there I was, frozen in a puddle of my own

shame. The teacher was livid, demanding how a big kid like me still couldn't manage myself properly. Want to guess what I said?"

Chang and I exchanged looks of disbelief. "You must have told the teacher about the cockroaches, right?"

She sighed deeply. "If only it were that easy. Yes, I told the teacher about the bugs, but I didn't reveal my source. The teacher shook her head and said, 'Chien, accidents happen, but why are you making things up? I was just in the restroom myself, there are absolutely *no* cockroaches in there.'"

Only then did I learn that her name contained the character "chien", a deep shade of pink.

"The teacher took hold of my hand, she wanted to show me there were no roaches in the restroom. I planted my feet and wouldn't move an inch. Yu had painted such a visceral scene, I was literally petrified. But in my heart of hearts, I knew there were no cockroaches whatsoever. I just... I couldn't face the truth. Something inside me kept fighting against it.

"Yu was my friend. Nobody bothered with the new kid, but right from the start she chose to be close to me. Why would she want to trick me? If I went to the restroom and saw it was roach-free, that only meant that Yu was lying. I couldn't bear the thought of it. All I wanted was a real friend."

"So, if you had blamed Yu," I wondered aloud, "that would have destroyed your friendship?"

"I don't know. I wasn't really thinking. I just felt I couldn't say anything. I was scared that speaking up would ruin things forever. Childish, isn't it? I avoided that restroom for the rest of the day, barely surviving until the last bell. I raced straight home and finally let out all that burning pressure I'd been carrying around since morning."

"What about Yu?" I pressed. "Did she apologize? She said nothing, nothing at all?"

"Not a word. All that crying and trying to explain myself... I just remember the teacher looking so angry, and all the other kids pinching their noses and making these awful faces at me. Yu? She just disappeared. Well, not really disappeared, she was hiding somewhere, watching it all happen like it had nothing to do with her."

The woman whose name contained "chien" paused for a moment and thanked Chang for the drip coffee he'd just handed her.

"You must be curious how this connects to the tapes I've brought. Go ahead, pick one, any one, and let's listen. You'll find the answer on the tape itself."

She smiled wryly, as if struck by how much her words resembled that cliché: "Watch closely, you'll find the answer in the video."

I picked one at random. Oddly enough, these were home-recordings on blank cassettes, not the official releases from record labels as I'd assumed.

I asked Chang to put it on. Both boomboxes on the pan car were my handiwork, and I favored the SONY for its audio quality. Though it only packed a pair of three-inch full-range drivers, the sound came out far more organic.

Chang hit play. Crystal-clear piano notes bloomed through the air, weaving themselves into the coffee's aromatic afterglow.

Having spent a few years at the ivories myself, I immediately recognized Schubert's final three "Impromptus". The sound was genuinely lovely. Small speakers come with compromises – limited treble extension and flabby, weak bass response. But the midrange warmth was magical, creating the illusion of a singer standing there serenading you personally.

"I was infatuated with Yu," she continued. "You probably think it's absurd – could a child in her final year of kindergarten really understand her own heart? I didn't. What I did know was that even though she lied constantly and got me into trouble, being with her filled me with pure joy. Most transfer students face rejection from their classmates, but she rejected everyone else first. Among all those children, she selected me, yes, she chose me, as though I were the most wonderful person alive."

While she shared this memory, the blue melancholy of the IKEA bag seemed to dissolve, replaced by a soft blush of pink – the very color of her name.

"That piece you just heard is beautiful, isn't it? Each time I hear it, something almost magical stirs inside me. When we started primary school, Yu's mother hired a private piano teacher to come to their house. I would stand outside the door listening, my face radiant with delight. Her mother noticed how mesmerized I was and invited me in to observe the lessons. What blissful days those were."

"How did you come by these cassettes?" Chang asked.

"Yu was a fast learner. Less than a year in, she was already tackling Mozart, not the "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" variations, but "Piano Sonata No. 11". She couldn't handle the whole sonata yet, but the first movement alone could bring me to tears. People like to say Mozart is all light and cheer, but that's not the whole picture. If they'd just listen to those six minutes of andante, they'd see that within Mozart there are not only brilliant stars but also night and loneliness."

"So, I whiled away those long primary school summers in Yu's piano room. Half a year before sixth grade graduation, she broke the news that she'd soon have to stop playing. Her family was moving to America in six months, she said. Only later did I learn they'd simply moved north to Xizhi, where the factory her father worked at had opened a new branch."