



**Name in English:** Esther Wong  
**Name in Chinese:** Not known  
**Name in Pinyin:** Not available  
**Gender:** Female  
**Birth Year:** 1917-2005  
**Birth Place:** Shanghai, China

### **“Godmother of Punk”**

**Profession(s):** Restaurant Owner, Music Promoter

**Education:** Educated in Shanghai

**Contribution (s):** Esther Wong was one of the most unlikely and influential music promoters of the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the bands that later became famous in rock music, punk rock, and the New Wave music genres had their first few bookings at Madame Wong’s Restaurant and later at Madame Wong’s West.

She was born into a wealthy family and privileged enough to travel around the world with her importer father. The family suffered under the Japanese occupation during WWII when they were held under house arrest. Ever resilient, Wong opened and ran one of the most exclusive high fashion houses in Shanghai after the war. She fled to the United States when the communists took over China in 1949 and worked as a clerk and a trainer of clerks for a shipping company for two decades before founding her namesake restaurant.

In 1970, she opened Madame Wong’s in Los Angeles Chinatown with her first husband, George Wong. She booked Polynesian lounge acts that started attracting fewer and fewer customers over the years. By 1978, she’d decided to take a risk for a month and start booking rock groups to see if that would improve business. This was music that she didn’t think she’d ever like but eventually said, “Now I can turn it on, and it doesn't bother me.” Immediately customers jumped from about a dozen each night to hundreds. It soon became obvious that the restaurant couldn’t handle the number of bands that wanted to play or the many customers that wanted to hear them. Madame Wong’s West opened in Santa Monica that same year.

In a 1980 interview with the Los Angeles Times she described how she chose the groups by listening to their audition tapes but she gave up listening in her car because, “I got a very bad temper. When there's a bad tape, I throw it outside the window. One day I almost hit the Highway Patrol car that was right next to me.” Esther Wong was called, “The Dragon Lady” by Casey Kasem, the famous radio and TV disk jockey. It was a title that she openly relished. Even famously anarchic punk rock bands like “The Ramones” were terrified by her legendary temper. She once dragged two band members off the stage during their set and refused to let the band play again until they’d cleaned off the

graffiti they'd left on the restroom walls. She was just as ferocious in enforcing a "21 and over" age policy for her club and would often sniff out and drag marijuana users out by the ears. Nevertheless, she was dubbed "The Godmother of Punk" for the equally fierce and somewhat motherly attention she extended to a lot of the young beginning music acts she featured. These groups included Blondie, The Knack, The Police, The Motels, The Go-Go's, Oingo Boingo, Guns N' Roses, X, Black Flag, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, as well as The Ramones. She not only took the risk of giving these unknown beginners a venue to play at that nobody else would but would also split the admission fee in half with each band. It was more money than any other club or promoter offered anywhere else. A popular band that drew in customers could make a lot of money playing for Esther Wong. Her early and continuing support was deemed so critical for "The Motels" that Capitol Records awarded Wong two gold records for the bands bestselling achievements. This unlikely Chinese American woman in her 60s with an ear for rock music had created a venue where record executives were sure to find their next hit bands.

Madame Wong's closed in 1985 and Madame Wong's West closed in 1991 as musical tastes changed. Nevertheless, these venues and their fierce proprietor are still remembered in the history of rock music and by the many hit bands that were nurtured under her supervision. After Esther Wong's death in 2005, her daughter, Melinda Braun, described her to the Associated Press, "She would always take any problem or situation head-on, she was not afraid of anyone."

#### **External Links:**

<http://www.laweekly.com/2005-09-01/columns/farewell-madame-wong>

<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/aug/17/local/me-wong17>

<http://www.asianweek.com/2005/08/26/the-death-of-the-%E2%80%98godmother-of-punk%E2%80%99/>

[http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2005-08-17-wong-obit\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2005-08-17-wong-obit_x.htm)