

A woman with dark hair, wearing a red plaid shirt, is playing a white hollow-body electric guitar. A red rose is pinned to the pickguard. She is looking upwards and to the left. The background is a dark green wall. A cymbal stand is visible on the left side of the frame.

# Popular Music in Southeast Asia

## Banal Beats, Muted Histories

Bart Barendregt,  
Peter Keppy, and  
Henk Schulte Nordholt

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Press

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AUP

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# Introduction

Not bound by national borders, popular music has been flowing across the world for over a century. It has been consumed and produced by many, including Southeast Asians. This book offers a concise history of popular music and its social meaning in Southeast Asia. It focuses on the Malay world; that is, present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, with an occasional sidestep to other parts of the region, such as the Philippines and Thailand. The period stretches from popular music's beginnings in the 'Jazz Age' of the 1920s and 1930s, to the first decade of the twenty-first century, with phenomena such as modern Muslim boy bands and digital music sharing.

Popular music matters. Besides offering people leisure, it also has deeper social meaning, and this deserves to be studied. The main thread of this book is how locally produced popular music came into being as a token of modern life, and as a terrain where people, performers, and audiences enjoyed as well as reflected on both the blessings and downsides of modern life in the twentieth century.

Each generation has its stock of cultural heroes and favourite popular tunes. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s the Javanese singer-actress Miss Riboet was one of the most popular performers in island and peninsular Southeast Asia and the first trans-local female celebrity in the Malay world. Her fame reached from Penang to Manila. She performed and recorded on gramophone an eclectic song repertoire from Javanese folk tunes to Arabic songs. In more recent times, the popular boy band Raihan attracted large crowds in Malaysia and Indonesia during the first decade of this century. Guided by beliefs on Islamic piety, moral purity, and facilitated by the latest in recording technologies, and admired by the rising orthodox middle classes and Muslim activists alike, Raihan merged Western popular music with Malay and Arabic music styles.



Miss Riboet and Raihan may be separated in time by more than fifty years, they have in common to have married the old with the new and to have connected local traditions with foreign cultural forms. In doing so, they transformed music into something that people conceived as novel and modern, yet at the same time as sufficiently recognizable. Moreover, their songs contained moral lessons, albeit based on different convictions, aimed at educating listeners in order to improve the human condition and to achieve a just society. While Riboet took a secular position, for Raihan religion was clearly a starting point. It is this mix of popular music's novelty *and* social relevance that appealed to large groups of people.

### **Muted sounds, obscured histories**

We must bear in mind that, in spite of its long and persistent presence, popular music is ill-defined. The term 'popular' originally designated the notion of 'belonging to the people', but has been used pejoratively to mean 'low' or vulgar culture. Such qualifications indicate that the cultural and social meaning of the popular is questioned and even contested. A more neutral meaning is that of 'widely appreciated', and 'away from a top-down perspective', referring to people's own views. The term is also associated with the spread of mass media. Yet, such taken-for-granted connotations and generalizations tell us little about what popular music contained or meant to people in specific times and places. Popular music has been treated as trivial and banal. Its performers are often muted, and music-loving publics ignored. To gain an understanding of the meaning of popular music, it needs to be contextualized. *Popular Music in Southeast Asia* situates popular music in the specific socio-historical settings of Southeast Asia's cosmopolitan urban centres.

We can search historical textbooks in vain for mention of popular stars like Miss Riboet and Raihan, their careers, their songs as well as their audiences. Their social and cultural significance

has largely escaped academic attention. This is no doubt due to deeply ingrained elitist preconceptions of pop music as vulgar and meaningless entertainment for the masses, not worthy of study. Moreover, readings of the past that emphasized the nation and national cultural identity have subdued if not obscured the cross-border practices of innovative actors and their audiences. Hybrid popular music tends to blur or even challenge national identities, rather than enhance or consolidate them. Hence, popular culture habitually becomes the subject of discussion and confusion or, in the case of nationalist historiography, might even evoke opposition or even historical amnesia.

The publication *Dance of Life* (1998) by American historian Craig A. Lockard stands out as one of the few attempts to seriously consider Southeast Asian popular music as a political, social, and cultural force in its own right. Lockard's project was geared heavily towards popular music as a channel of political protest for Southeast Asian artists under post-colonial authoritarian regimes. *Popular Music in Southeast Asia* expands on his pioneering work while taking on the dynamic interplay between audiences, artists, and the culture industry. Its focus is on the lure of modernity in post-colonial as well as colonial settings.

The elusive phenomenon of modernity can be understood as a set of ideas about or even desire for the new, progress, individual choice, innovation, and social and cultural change. Modernity tells us how people thought about and dealt with life in a changing urban environment. Due to its innovative, hybrid, and cross-border nature, popular music, par excellence, has solicited discussions in Southeast Asia about what pertains to modern life.

## Living the modern life

Southeast Asia's centuries-long history of trade, labour migration, and cross-cultural encounters in cities such as Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila yielded highly diversified

urban populations and hybrid cultures. For centuries, commercial trading networks linked the region to China, India, the Middle East, and, during the heydays of colonialism, to Europe and America. Locally rooted migrant communities – Chinese, Arab, Tamil – emerged and mixed with the native population. It is therefore no surprise that these surroundings formed the breeding ground for a hybrid popular culture, including popular music and related modern lifestyles of which the outlines dawned in the early twentieth century. Increased capitalist penetration of and far-reaching colonial intervention into local Southeast Asian societies are rooted in the late nineteenth century. It was in the twentieth century, however, that the side effects of these external interventions surfaced more visibly. This is attested to, for example, in the emergence of a multi-ethnic urban and Western-educated ‘middle class’. Its members earned their money from white-collar professions in the colonial administration, in the expanding commercial agricultural sector, and in the service sector. No less attracted to modernity than the working classes, these relatively affluent people simply had more money to spend. Moreover, they appeared more inclined towards a Western-oriented lifestyle that helped them to distinguish themselves from the working class as well as from the native aristocratic elites. With the introduction of new, cheaper media technologies in the second half of the twentieth century, like the transistor radio and the audio cassette player, the face of mass consumption altered dramatically. Media technologies became available to larger sections of the less well-to-do sections of society, also outside the cosmopolitan urban centres. These technological changes were of great significance for the development of the culture industries and for the dissemination of popular music in the twentieth century. Needless to say, the development of digital recording technologies and the internet at the end of the millennium had a similar effect.

Rather than seeing consumers of popular music purely in terms of middle- and working-class spectatorship, it is more appropriate to speak of socially differentiated publics in terms

of generation, gender, peasants to urbanites, ethnic, and religious groups. The intriguing aspect of popular music is that particular genres often appeal to sections of these different groups in society simultaneously. Without suggesting that it has necessarily been a uniting or socially harmonizing force, popular music does cross social groups and, at the same time, it allows people to rally around it, forming new identities. One explanation for this capacity or appeal lies in the fact that the new-fangled music styles formed part of a larger package called 'lifestyle'. How such life styles come into being is a complex process of cultural interaction between producers and consumers. Popular music performers, the culture industry, and print media each in their turn and often working in tandem, provide audiences models fashionable styles, from hairdressing to clothing, codes of conduct, and vernacular languages. The culture industry might manipulate artists and consumers; the industry cannot exert absolute power over consumers. Music lovers are not passive consumers. They have their own preferences and ways of consuming, and identity is not a thing. Identities are imagined and given content and meaning by people who often are not involved in the culture industry and may even rebel against it. In short, popular music offers new means for self-expression and a sense of community, fan groups being the best visible example.

## **Four eras**

This book is divided into four chapters, each representing pivotal historical junctures: the 1910s to 1940s; the 1950s to mid-1960s; the 1970s to 1990s; and finally, the late 1990s up to the first decade of the twenty-first century. In these four eras, technological innovation, human agency, the consumption of new music styles, and the rise of pioneering artists and new audiences converge within particular Southeast Asian urban localities. Artists and their audiences together redefined popular culture, surprising, pleasing, but also confusing and annoying

others. As they explored artistic, technological, entrepreneurial, and commercial possibilities, artists were put at the forefront of popular culture's production. Visible and audible through the production and consumption of popular music, they made modernity manifest in everyday social life.

Although some overlap of media technology use occurred, each of the four different periods is characterized by a concurrence of new music styles and specific technologies: the gramophone; radio, television, cinema, audio cassettes, CDs, and web-based technologies including YouTube or SoundCloud. And it should be emphasized that throughout the twentieth century, print media, especially newspapers, remained important sources for launching artists into stardom as well as discussing their work and the modern life styles they seemed to propagate.

This book departs from four interlocking sets of questions: (1) Who were the main artists and producers that generated new forms of popular music? What sort of urban environment facilitated the changes they were part of? (2) What was the music like? Which genres were moulded into new styles? What did the music express? (3) Which technologies, ranging from the gramophone to the internet, were appropriated, and how did these technologies facilitate the dissemination and marketing of new music styles? (4) Who were the audiences of new popular music in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender, generation, and class? How was the music received? Were particular lifestyles articulated to mark social distinction, and what does this reveal about the relationship between popular culture and society?

Following the chronology of the suggested periods, four chapters are here presented. Chapter 1, 'Oriental Foxtrots and Phonographic Noise, 1910s-1940s', deals with the Jazz Age. It explores the hybrid nature of a blossoming of popular music and its new (female) stars, adored and consumed by new urban, middle to upper classes in the Philippines and the Netherlands East Indies. Chapter 2, 'Jeans, Rock, and Electric Guitars, 1950s-mid-1960s', traces the emergence of rock and roll, the arrival of youth culture, rock and roll's supposedly subversive nature

and subsequent moral panics, but also the consolidation of a local music industry in what, by then, were post-independence Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Chapter 3, 'The Ethnic Modern, 1970s-1990s', analyses the rise of ethnic pop in connection with the spread of music cassettes against the backdrop of emerging regional identities, and rural urban migration, class consciousness, and an articulation of gender differences. Finally, Chapter 4, 'Doing it Digital, 1990s-2000s', observes the new opportunities and limitations of disseminating popular music through the web and other related digital social media. It deals with new sorts of emerging fandom, the construction of Asian and Muslim pop as trans-national categories, and points at the paradoxical and ephemeral nature of the new digital era.

*Popular Music in Southeast Asia* elaborates the complex ways innovations were embedded into continuities, or how new and old trends were linked. It argues, moreover, that, in order to understand the Southeast Asian world of popular music, it is necessary to shift from an exclusive focus on stardom towards a perspective that includes the everyday practices of the countless anonymous and, to a large extent, unrecorded performers and their publics.

## Research project Articulating Modernity

*Popular Music in Southeast Asia: Banal Beats, Muted Histories* is based on the research project 'Articulating Modernity: The Making of Popular Music in Twentieth-Century Southeast Asia and the Rise of New Audiences (2011-2014)'. This project involved the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in Leiden, the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam, and the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology of Leiden University. Funding was provided by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). *Articulating Modernity* was supervised by Henk Schulte Nordholt and coordinated by senior

researchers Bart Barendregt and Peter Keppy. PhD students Buni Yani, Lusvita Nuzuliyanti, and Nuraini Juliastuti, and four senior visiting fellows, Ariel Heryanto, Philip Yampolsky, Andrew Weintraub, and Tan Sooi Beng, also contributed to the project. Finally, special mention should be made of Emma Baulch, Dredge Byung'chu Käng, Azmyl Yusof, Brent Luvaas, James Mitchell, Fritz Schenker, and Jeremy Wallach who through their participation in the workshops organized under the project's aegis helped to shape this book.