

2 Jeans, Rock, and Electric Guitars, 1950s-mid-1960s

The Second World War led to a virtual standstill of the recording industry in Southeast Asia. In the late forties, the industry resumed business as usual. For example, in Singapore in May 1947, eighteen months after the Japanese capitulation, Pathé (known locally in Malay as '*Chap Ayam*' or 'the chicken brand'), a subsidiary of the Anglo-American owned Columbia Graphophone Company, issued new record catalogues. Rival record company His Master's Voice, a subsidiary of the Anglo-American The Gramophone Company Ltd., followed suit. The two companies advertised for popular hybrid Malay and Chinese song repertoires typical of the pre-war period. No sign of musical innovation or a restructuring of the industry could be yet observed.

The following decades, the 1950s to 1960s, saw a succession of new developments in Southeast Asian popular music. This chapter addresses three salient trends in the relationship between popular music and society in this era: the emergence of youth culture, official moral indignation, and the beginnings of a local music industry.

Evidence on Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, points to a shift in the relationship between popular music and society in the mid-1950s. This was a global phenomenon. For Southeast Asia, the 1950s and 1960s were turbulent decades marked by decolonization, nation-building, and political and economic instability. Many formerly colonized peoples felt disillusioned about democracy and the new leadership, were disenchanted with the failure to end the uneven distribution of wealth and unequal access to education, and felt frustrated about continuing economic dependency on the former colonial powers. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, central governments met with regional rebellions and resistance from communist movements. The unfolding of the Cold War aggravated political tension and armed conflict within and

between countries. To combat communism within and beyond its borders, the Philippines allied with its former colonizer the USA in 1950. Thailand's military regime followed in 1952. South Vietnam entered an anti-communist alliance with the Americans. In return, these U.S. allies received financial and military support. In the mid-1950s, Indonesian-American relations deteriorated. By 1957, as the Partai Komunis Indonesia turned into the biggest communist party in Southeast Asia, and President Sukarno's initial non-alignment policy began to move in the direction of China, the CIA covertly supported anti-communist forces in Indonesia. A similar scenario unfolded in Cambodia under Norodom Sihanouk, who was unable to maintain his position of non-alignment and was overthrown by a military regime that itself came to be challenged by a communist movement known as the Khmer Rouge.

In spite of a growing interest in the impact of the Cold War on politics, society, and culture in the region, the 1950s and early 1960s remain among the least studied periods in the cultural history of twentieth-century Southeast Asia. Contemporary newspapers, 78 rpm shellac records from the 1950s and early 1960s, youth magazines, vinyl records, record catalogues, and record sleeves form a largely unearthed body of historical sources. Apart from sketchy references to Singapore amusement parks in the 1950s, we know little of the venues where music was performed, how people danced, and where they hung out. Music lovers and dance fans, musicians, business entrepreneurs, recording engineers, and producers of a newly emerging youth culture remain largely mute. What we do know is that, in this period, rock and roll music hit Southeast Asian coasts, a musical style that captivated singers, musicians, and a group of new fans.

Youth culture

A fascinating development that became visible around and particularly after the mid-1950s is a music-related youth culture across Southeast Asia. Of course, the consumption-oriented

Illustration 8 Brilliantine was an indispensable product for men in the 1950s. It kept the hair well-groomed and gave it the shine.



Indonesian magazine *Waktu*, 1956
KITLV collection

modern girl had appeared in the 1930s; teenagers had already discovered 'the talkies', and they danced to modern music in amusement parks in Singapore, in dance halls across the Philippines and at fairs in Java. In the mid-1950s, however, youngsters became far more visible and outspoken as fans and consumers of and contributors to a popular culture in which music was an important social and cultural marker. Of the new music styles introduced in the region, rock and roll and Latin American and Caribbean music, like the cha-cha and calypso, proved the most suitable to articulate new music and lifestyle.

Teenagers in Southeast Asia, as in the USA, Europe, and elsewhere, were seeking new identities and new ways of expression. Aided by the foreign film industry and visual images of distinctly

American clothing, rock and roll was more than music. It presented a lifestyle including tight trousers (the iconic blue jeans), typical hairdo, and other attributes like motor bikes. Movies like *Rock Around the Clock* (1956), *Rock Rock Rock* (1956), and *Don't Knock the Rock* (1957), the first two featuring American rock and roll artist Bill Haley and his band, were screened in all the major cities' theatres. In Singapore, Jakarta, and Bandung these movies were box office records. The musical package of youth culture that comprised film, the sound of amplified guitars, jukeboxes, clothing – lifestyle, in short – offered youngsters distraction, a new identity, and a new sense of community.

Snapshots of this new youth culture can be traced in contemporary newspapers reporting, often in a paternalistic and reactionary mood, on youths. Teenagers dressed in blue jeans often hang around collectively in distinct localities: specific residential neighbourhoods, schools, or around newly emerging shopping centres, the precursors of the modern malls. In Singapore, the Shaw brothers film company sponsored rock and roll musical performances and dance contests. The amusement parks did the same, always ready to catch up with the newest and commercially promising fads, from bathing suit contests to rock and roll dance competitions.

Rock and roll transcended the local. In 1956, the Happy World amusement park in Singapore hosted *Rock-Around-The-World*, a ten-night show featuring American, Filipino, and Hawaiian 'rollers'. The first rock and roll dance contest of the Far East was held in Bangkok's Lumpini Hall in April 1957. The winning couple were Suzy Lye and Thoo Thean Soon, age 16 and 19, respectively, *peranakan* Chinese from Ipoh, Federation of Malaya. Under the eyes of the king of Siam, who was among the spectators, they had to compete with contenders from Singapore, Penang, and Thailand. The couple declined an offer to perform in nightclubs in Thailand, as they were still attending school and had no intention to become professionals.

Evidence from Indonesia, Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand suggests that teenage music fans originated from

Illustration 9 New American dances were tried on the dance floor at social gatherings such as at this Bandung high school party, c. 1957.



By courtesy of Marije Plomp

urban middle-class to upper-class environments. They could afford to buy gramophone records, a radio set, some electric guitars, and travel to distant places for dancing contests. In short, they had the financial means to engage in both the consumption and production of popular music. For example, the aforementioned dance contest winners Suzy Lye and Thoo Thean Soon originated from locally rooted Chinese business families and attended Anglo-Chinese schools. The founder of the Philippine rock and roll band RJ and the Riots, Ramon Jacinto, came from an affluent family. His father was a leading Southeast Asian steel industrialist and among Metro Manila's wealthy businessmen. An accessible way of listening and dancing to recorded music was the jukebox. In the Philippines, this device was found in bars, restaurants, and other public places. By paying only ten *centavos*, people could select a song and listen to it.

Articles and news items in the print press make clear that rock and roll youth culture represented a form of resistance against increasing authoritarian, parental or/and official, control. One aspect of the new emerging youth culture, gang formation, was of particular interest, not only to the print press, but to the authorities as well. In Southeast Asia's major cities, youth gangs proliferated; gang members engaged in petty crime and violence in schools, shopping areas or specific urban neighbourhoods. Gangs not necessarily identified with rock and roll. But, in many cases, gang members were found sporting the new look of blue jeans, making it almost equivalent to juvenile delinquents' fashion, at least in the official eye.

Moral indignation

The association of youth fan culture with criminality was part of the moral anxiety with modern youth culture in a broader sense, which swept the region from the mid-1950s onwards. Officials and reactionary citizens across the region questioned the blessings of Westernization and modernity. This situation resembled and refuelled old debates since the 1930s on the role of popular music culture in national culture and in nation-building. Between 1956 and 1957, discontent developed within Thai, Malaysian, Singaporean, and Indonesian government circles about what was seen as the excrescences of rock and roll: juvenile delinquency, improper relations between the sexes outside marriage, offensive clothing and indecent hair dress. Politically innocent rock and roll youth culture became politically charged and socially ostracized.

In Singapore, the famous, but by then veteran, composer Zubir Said, publicly condemned foreign popular music as being detrimental to the Malay language and culture. His position is rather ironic as he himself was rooted in the pre-war hybrid world of modern popular Malay music that had absorbed many foreign musical influences from jazz to rumba. Moreover, Said had since the early 1930s worked as talent scout and musical

director for the Singapore office of the recording company HMV. Closely collaborating with HMV he had been pioneering local popular music, and had actively contributed to producing a new hybrid popular culture that in the 1950s had become accepted as part of Malay culture. Zubir Said by no means stood alone. A Malay cultural organization appealed to the Singapore and Malay Federation governments to ban all rock and roll movies, songs, and dances in order to protect Malay culture from demise.

Between 1957 and 1959, the authorities of the Malay Federation, Singapore, and Indonesia looked to each other as how to handle what was perceived as a common cultural threat known as rock and roll. In February 1957, Indonesia's national radio station, Radio Republik Indonesia, banned rock and roll and 'similar music' from all its stations, in tandem with President Sukarno's anti-Western rhetoric and cultural nationalism. Islamic political party Masyumi independently opposed to rock and roll film screenings. The Jakarta municipal authorities banned rock and roll dancing from public spaces. By the early 1960s, resistance to and even rejection of American pop culture by political elites was the rule rather than the exception in most of Southeast Asia. This included even those countries, such as Thailand and South Vietnam, that allied with the U.S. and actively supported their patron to combat communism domestically and regionally. In various degrees, the governments of Burma, Malaya, Singapore, and Thailand took what proved to be token measures to curb the allegedly debasing influence of blue jeans and rock and roll. Opposition morphed into government action censoring movies, halting rock and roll music broadcasts, prohibiting musical performances, bands, and sometimes types of clothing. In Saigon, for instance, blue jeans were banned for youngsters.

Local industry

Another feature of the 1950s is the development of a music industry owned and managed by locals who catered to a local

audience. Although the histories of these record companies, the people behind them, and their economic, cultural, and social significance remain conspicuously sketchy, we can see that what was an infant industry in the 1950s expanded and professionalized in the late 1960s. The face of the region's recording industry changed significantly, marking economic and cultural 'decolonization' of the music industry. In the early 1950s, entrepreneurial-minded and music-loving locals in Burma, the Philippines, and Indonesia, established recording companies and studios, followed by pressing plants. These ventures were no longer owned and managed by one of the major foreign companies that had monopolized the industry before and shortly after the Second World War. Local entrepreneurs had moved in. The exception was Singapore; the Lion's Gate city remained a stronghold for international companies within the region.

The local record companies, and later also radio stations, shared with the foreign companies a 'discovery' of 'youth' as a new market. Yet in contrast to the foreign-owned record companies, the newly established local record companies had to deal with national markets and the social-political issue of nation-state building. In some cases, as for example in Indonesia, an ambiguous relationship between commerce, cultural nationalism and nation-building developed as a result as the examples of the record companies Irama and Lokananta illustrate.

Lacking the technical skills and recording equipment, some of these early local companies continued to rely on assistance from the foreign companies. For instance, the Indonesian record company Irama, established in 1951, hired an experienced foreign recording engineer and relied for its production process on the Dutch company Philips. As for music, Irama continued the pre-war pattern of promoting both 'national music styles' such as *kroncong* and Melayu, and, to a lesser extent, Western songs (*lagu Barat*). It rarely produced jazzy music. Religious and Indo-Arab music, like *qasidah*, and, from the late 1950s, the new genre of rock and roll, are conspicuously lacking in Irama's

repertoire, indicating a conservative policy along mild nationalist lines. The company actively promoted modern renditions of regional or ethnic music (*lagu-lagu daerah*). This repertoire included folk music in popular Western music style arrangements performed with modern amplified instruments. The Jakarta-based Irama studio provided its talented crew to work music for theatre, cinema, and broadcasting for national radio. Its position as recording company was only challenged from 1957 onwards with the establishment of the state-owned record company Lokananta in Surakarta, Central Java. This company also focused heavily on recording regional music, promoting Indonesian cultural diversity. Indonesia's mounting economic and political crisis, starting around 1957, is likely to have sealed Irama's fate somewhere in the 1960s.

Beat goes local

What was set into motion in the second half of the 1950s, spilled seamlessly into the 1960s: moral concerns about youth culture and music as debasing morality and patriotism. In 1960, the Singapore authorities banned rock and roll by censoring private radio broadcasting and movies. The military regime in Burma rejected Western-style compositions. Here, the popular music industry deteriorated after the authorities imposed an import and export stop, followed by radio broadcasting censorship in the late 1960s. In Indonesia, further steps were taken to protect national culture in 1963, when a Presidential Decision forbade any public airing of rock and roll. In 1964, police operations were undertaken in the provincial city of West Java, Bandung, with the aim of publicly burning Elvis Presley records and 'disciplining' young men with shaggy, Beatles-style haircuts. At the same time, the rules of these prohibitions were neither clear-cut, nor consistently applied. Sometimes, musicians performing the forbidden styles appeared as guest stars at state-sponsored live events, or as contestants in the national public radio song contest.

In their attempts to assert a distinct national cultural identity that was refined in modernity, yet rooted in indigenous traditions the Singaporean and Malaysian nation states followed a path of repressive policies similar to that in neighbouring Indonesia. To the older generation of conservative political leaders, law makers, local artists and government officials the 'beat music' youth culture of the 1960s represented everything the post-colonial Singaporean and Malaysian nation-building project was against. As a cultural counter to 'Westernization' expressed in forms of popular culture such as pop music, gramophone records, radio broadcasts, and cinema, Malaysian popular singer P. Ramlee, among others, romanticized Malay rural life in his songs and movies. But by the mid-1960s, Ramlee engaged in a musically and commercially rear-guard action. Attempting to compete with the new popular rock and beat music he condemned, he paradoxically appropriated modern Western-style dance music in the form of the twist. In 1965, he released 'Twist Malaysia', a patriotic song dedicated to the independent Malay nation and its people.

In contrast to the repressive policies of other countries in the region, Cambodia followed a different trajectory. By no means less authoritarian than other regimes in the region, Norodom Sihanouk, in power from 1955 to 1970, allowed space for rock, pop, and other Western music to develop. By the 1960s, Cambodian musicians had fruitfully mixed Western rock and cha-cha with local music, and produced a hybrid sound and music industry of their own. The Khmer Rouge, in power from 1975 to 1979, cracked down on what they saw as Western decadence and urban perversity, including the local popular music industry. Apart from the deliberate destruction of vinyl records and cassettes, a generation of pop stars that had emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, including many female stars, were literally wiped out by the new regime.

In most of the countries, however, official suppression was of limited effect. Musicians operated relatively autonomously from government interference. This is testified in one striking feature of popular music in the early 1960s that continues to be popular to this very day: cover bands. These bands consisted

of fans-turned-amateur-musicians imitating rock and roll and British beat music. Bands emerged that, in turn, amassed their own local fans and followers. Adaptation of this new culture of dress, music, and dance by youngsters should not be understood as simple mimicry or as proof of successful Anglo-American cultural imperialism. Already during the Jazz Age, Southeast Asians practised what has been and still is universally inherent to processes of musical production: adaptation, imitation, and innovation. One of the tested steps away from the original was to replace foreign lyrics with the local vernacular. Some of these music lovers would go beyond imitation. They transformed the sources of origin into distinctively new styles by incorporating local folk melodies, lyrics in the vernacular, local tunings and rhythms, and by using local instruments.

In Singapore, Ramlee's attempt to catch up with the times failed; a wave of cover beat bands, inspired by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, had taken over. These new bands developed a genre known as '*Pop Yeh Yeh*' after the Beatles' song line 'She loves you yeh, yeh, yeh'. Another parallel development was the emergence of Malay bands known as 'lively guitar bands' (*kugiran*). The musicians were inspired by beat music, but created their own original compositions with Malay lyrics. In Burma, a cover band tradition matured into a respected popular music genre known as *copy tachin*. In Thailand, the genre known as 'Wong Shadow' emerged and moved away from its original source of inspiration, the British guitar band the Shadows. In Thailand, as well as in Cambodia, the Shadows' distinct amplified tremolo guitar sound rather than the smooth vocal style of their lead singer Cliff Richard appealed to the youth (see box 3 on the tremolo guitar). The sound of Wong Shadow was hybrid and rhythmic, and its instrumentation likewise eclectic. We find Latin-style rhythms, such as the cha-cha and rumba, performed on Latin percussive instruments and Western drum kits, with Thai percussive ornamentations, including gongs and drums, indicating this was music for modern dancing. Most songs followed Western guitar chord progressions. In some cases, Thai rhythmic styles formed

the song's basis. There are instrumental pieces, some with horn sections inspired by African-American soul and funk. Apart from the tremolo guitar, the Hammond organ often also played a significant melodic role.

Some of the cover bands made it as professionals. Others, for example in Thailand, went through the process from covering songs to creating original songs, performing, recording on gramophone, and playing in radio studios. This period in Thai history is generally regarded as the formative years of modern popular music in Thailand. Peasants flocked to the cities to seek economic and political security in the wake of pressures on land and political instability in rural areas. New genres such as *pleeng luk thung* ('Thai country music') emerged, in which Western dance rhythms and instrumentation were fused with ethnic, particularly Isan, folk melodies and singing styles. To be accepted by the audience as a legitimate *luk thung* singer, a rural background was crucial. In their songs, these artists addressed the hardships of urban life, poverty, and discrimination in contrast to peaceful village life. The irony was that in terms of record labels, recording studios, and radio broadcast stations Bangkok was the centre of this creative industry. It was in this city that *pleeng luk thung* production thrived (see chapter 3 for similar paradoxes). In the Philippines, a similar development of mimicry took place, but, unlike the Thai case, no new genre developed that was stylistically different from the original source of Anglo-American rock and roll. For example, RJ and the Riots, founded in 1960 in Manila, idolized the American band The Ventures, and modelled their own band on its instrumental rock and roll.

In the late 1960s, the fashion of greased quiffs and tight pants made way for long hair and miniskirts. Popular music was also on the move again. New musical genres, bands, and their fans dawned in 1968, the year that marked the worldwide introduction of the audio cassette. This new and relatively inexpensive audio technology would open up new opportunities for local artists, musical genres, and business entrepreneurs that would manifest itself in a cassette revolution and cassette culture in the 1970s.

Box 2.1 Gangs

In 1957, the Indonesian authorities in the cities of Jakarta, Bandung, and Medan ordered youths, known by the generic name of 'cross boys', to report with the local military. These teenage boys were said to engage in 'wrongdoings', including wearing improper blue jeans and driving motorcycles on which they had written indecent texts. In some cases, as in Medan, youngsters engaged in illegal cinema ticket trade and violence. In face of policing by the local authorities and to avoid interference, youths in Jakarta claimed to represent and hold membership in officially registered football associations. A connection between gangs, juvenile delinquency, and wearing jeans was also found in Bangkok, Singapore, Penang, and Saigon. The adjacent provinces of Manila were notorious for gangs of teenagers, Cavite province being a hot spot. The Filipino gangs were of a different order compared to Indonesia's cross boys. They were often linked to violent political strife, resulting in kidnappings and killings. In the early 1960s, some youth gangs in Singapore, Penang, and the Federation of Malaya, believed to be connected to Chinese secret societies, gained a criminal reputation. In Penang, the police force issued pamphlets advising parents to prevent their children joining gangs. As an alternative for membership of a gang, the Singaporean authorities sponsored youth clubs that offered 'health-giving recreation'. In 1960 and 1961, the Singaporean and Penang authorities embarked on a crackdown on youth gangs-cum-juvenile delinquents and the secret societies by raiding hide outs.

Box 2.2 Blue Jeans

*Hidupan Barat jaman sekarang
lagi perempuan pada pakai celana
Model kuno jauh dibuang
Jika tidak ... aah ... ketinggalan jaman.*

The Western lifestyle of today
makes ladies wearing trousers as well
Old-fashioned models are thrown far away
If not ... aah ... you are outdated

*Celana Yankee aksi dansa dancing
Sradak-sruduk seperti babi cari ubi
Celana Yankee doyan bugi-wugi
Kosrat-kosret bah kucing mabuk terasi.*

Yankee trousers, doing the modern dance
Like a pig rooting about for cassava
Yankee trousers, enjoying the boogie-woogie
Like a cat intoxicated by shrimp paste.

'Tjelana Djengki'. Artists: Ati and B. Pessulima. Composer Henny Gatot. Irama, c. 1953.

Recordings artists of the first independent Indonesian record label, Irama, performed this song, which was stylistically cast in the recently arrived jazz bop style, a genre never popular beyond a tiny group of modern jazz fans. Released around 1953, before the advent of rock and roll, the song sardonically referred to the new fashion of jeans trousers, and its growing appeal among females. This song was still innocent compared to later moral anxieties with modernity and foreign cultural influence. In 1957, the extreme case of a young girl was recorded in Aceh, North Sumatra. She was flogged by two boys for wearing tight and 'indecent' *tjelana Djengki* ('Yankee trousers').

Box 2.3 Tremolo guitar

The guitar found its way to Southeast Asia in the footsteps of European traders and missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Following the introduction of the Hawaiian acoustic and electric lap steel guitar in the 1920s and 1930s, the next guitar that left its imprint on Southeast Asian popular music was the electric amplified tremolo guitar. Although the vibrato guitar system, generally known as 'tremolo', was already in existence in the 1930s, it came widely into vogue among American musicians in the 1950s. This was followed by British and Southeast Asian guitar adepts in the 1960s. A twanging sound effect is achieved by manipulating a lever

Illustration 10 Fashion-conscious Bandung youth sporting tight jeans, c. 1957



By courtesy of Marije Plomp

attached to the bridge at the tail of the electric amplified guitar. The penetrating tremolo sound is perfect for emphasizing repetitive melodic lines and for soloing. Although different guitar brands used alternate versions of the same principle, it was the American guitar company Fender that is probably best known for its tremolo models. The tremolo guitar and its sound gained worldwide popularity through bands like the Shadows and The Ventures, who, while doing their synchronized dance moves, used this guitar on stage producing a distinct electric amplified twang sound effect.

