

Music in Singapore: From the 1920s to the 2000s

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Music development in Singapore essentially began with migration patterns and colonial influences. There is much that is unique to the country, lying between the main strands of Western, Chinese, Malay and Indian music.

Snatches of music floating through the air, music of many origins. The high notes and clashing cymbals of Chinese opera in Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew; the quiet notes of the *erhu*'s strings, plucked by a street musician; the rousing sounds and horns that herald a traditional Chinese funeral; the gentle swaying rhythms of the Malay *keroncong* music and the upbeat tempo of *dondang sayang*; the sinuous vocal manoeuvres of a *raga* singer; the plaintive lament of a Tamil love song; a snatch of Beethoven or Bach, a military march or a popular English tune, all on a balmy Sunday evening.

This was the incredible diversity that was, and is, Singapore. No surprise, given the multi-layered texture of music in Singapore. First, there was the traditional Malay music of the island's earliest inhabitants. This was followed by Portuguese influences, from an early colonial occupation. With Sir Stamford Raffles came the first English music, and shortly after that, came Chinese and Indian music, with the immigrants from those countries.

During the colonial era when ethnic groups were allocated specific living areas, the music of each community was enjoyed only within its own space, supported and patronised by its very own community. Most of the musical performances were conducted at an amateur level, except for Chinese opera performers and military band musicians who made a living from their musical performances.

In time, and in step with political and social changes, however, all these would change.

There are many starting points to any historical account, and our chosen one is 1920, when Singapore had just celebrated the centenary of its founding in 1819. The 1920s were a fortuitous and dramatic period in Singapore's history, when its economy boomed to unprecedented levels as it plunged into the international demand for tin and rubber, before being hit by the Great Depression of the early 1920s.

Western Music in Singapore: The Early Days

Western classical music and its various forms came to Singapore with the British in the early 19th century. Throughout the early colonial days, there was little organised musical activity,

although the children of wealthy local residents were often sent for music lessons. It was a time when Western classical music was still considered a pursuit of the rich and educated.

There were occasional recitals performed by artistes who were passing through Singapore on their way to Australia or elsewhere in Asia, and these were held in various venues including

the country's first major public concert venue, the Victoria Memorial Hall, which was opened in 1905.

1920s and 1930s: The Start of Appreciation

Among the earliest live performances of Western music in Singapore were those by the Chia Keng Tai Orchestra which, in 1922, was the first group of non-Europeans to play Western classical music, and to hold *soirees* on Thursday evenings.

Then there were the free public performances in the mid-1920s by the military band of the Singapore Police Force. The 30-odd musicians of the military band came from the Punjabi and Sikh regiments in India. They were sent to Singapore for the specific purpose of forming a band, so as to meet the shortage of trained musicians within the force at the time.

This fledgling band performed weekly free concerts at the Botanic Gardens and at a bandstand on Bras Basah Road, helping to create an audience that appreciated Western forms of music – military marches, popular British melodies – and with that, the beginning of an understanding of music that was quite foreign to the ethnic forms.

Apart from these concerts, churches were the only other venue to enjoy Western music for free. The opportunities to perform, albeit not in concert halls but in worship services and masses, led to a large pool of professional musicians gravitating towards Singapore, falling more or less neatly into different churches based on their ethnicity.

For instance, Goans were very much part of St Joseph's Church, while the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes with its predominantly Indian parish, drew musicians from Pondicherry. Wesley Methodist Church had its American musician missionaries, and the Sacred Heart Church with its predominantly Chinese congregation, drew two Chinese families of amateur musicians from Indonesia, the Cheongs and the Chees. The Good Shepherd Cathedral had an English-style choir complete with a British choir master and organist, while choir masters, choral singers and organists of European and Eurasian descents led the way at St Andrew's Cathedral.

This community of musicians influenced what people heard in the churches, and therefore their tastes. The music was so popular that the churches drew crowds of non-worshippers, especially on feast days when services were grander and more elaborate, with music to match. The

churches, therefore, played a major, though unintended role, in the music education and appreciation of pre-independent Singapore.

There were other factors contributing to the development of Western music in Singapore. As fame about the growing port spread overseas, travellers began to arrive. Hotels which had opened earlier – between 1857 and 1906 – including The Raffles, Sea View Hotel, Hotel de L'Europe, and Adelphi, were drawing these travellers in, and these guests needed to be

entertained. Word spread and musicians began to find their way to these establishments. The musicians most associated with these hotels were from Goa, the Philippines and Europe.

One Filipino musician of note was Marcello R. Anciano, who chose not to perform but to start a music school. When he set up the Far Eastern Music School in 1928 on Short Street with 15 students, it was the first ever such school in this part of the world.

Then came the craze for amusement parks such as the trio named New World, Gay World and Great World. These parks, which opened in the 1920s and 1930s, offered different kinds of entertainment to patrons, from boxing matches to Malay opera (*bangsawan*) performances, night clubs, and cinema halls to tea dances. At the latter, men could dance with a partner for 20 cents a dance, with a choice between traditional Malay dances such as *ronggeng* and *joget*, or Western cha-cha. Live music was played at these dances, as well as at the night clubs.

All these performance opportunities meant that bands could perform more often and build different audiences. Amateur bands were also invited to provide entertainment between dances, leading to the birth of small Singapore bands, the best of which went on to achieve a kind of local and regional stardom, thanks to radio.

In the late '20s and early '30s, when wireless broadcasting began from Cathay Building in Orchard Road, people in Singapore could listen, for the first time, to music played off 78 rpm vinyls for two hours every evening. Long-playing records had not yet been invented.

Radio broadcasting progressed from playing vinyls to airing “live” orchestral music by its own in-house orchestra, to carrying live music playing in the hotels which had their own resident orchestras and bands. The British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation became the starting point of what would be Singapore’s own orchestra.

As Singapore’s success as a port grew, so did the influx of Western influences. Pop culture, consumer products, movies – they all impacted on local tastes and lifestyles, with movies perhaps wielding the greatest influence. Cinemas had begun to appear in the 1920s, and by the mid-1930s, there were more than 10, with Capitol cinema being the largest and grandest.

Often described as 'the great leveller', cinemas continued to multiply well into the late '30s.

Apart from opening up new worlds to people from all walks of life, a less obvious phenomenon was taking place. During the era of silent movies, live music needed to be played in the orchestral pit located in front of the screen. The genre of live, improvisational music to provide 'effects' to a movie – usually created by a piano and a violin – was born. Some of Singapore's earliest music pioneers in the country's main languages – including Ahmad Daud, William E. Meyer, and B.A. Bacsafrá – were among those musicians. Sadly, this genre all but died with the advent of 'talkies'.

Then in the late 1930s, something happened which was to make a significant difference to the teaching of Western music in Singapore thus far. Never dreaming that World War II would involve Asia, many Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, Polish, and German-Jew musicians fled from their homelands seeking refuge from Hitler's onslaught.

Those refugees came to Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Vietnam, seeking work as musicians in hotels and nightclubs. Some brought instruments, which they sold to music shops, and some became music teachers to supplement their incomes. Because they had been trained in some of Europe's foremost conservatories, they raised the standards achieved by their students.

1940s and 1950s: The War and Post-War Years

Musical activities did not come to a halt during World War II and the Japanese Occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945, in fact, the music climate took on a new direction.

With Japanese troops in Singapore needing to be entertained, cafes and restaurants began to emerge, with amateur musicians providing the entertainment. Under these circumstances, some were able to become professionals and make a living from their music, among them a number of musicians who had studied at the Far Eastern Music School.

Japan's Syonan Kokkaido Orchestra performed at its headquarters in Victoria Theatre, as well as at Cathay Cinema and the Japanese military camps. Prisoners and the public got to watch these performances as well. The Japanese administration also introduced music programmes in schools where hundreds of children could enjoy singing, even though they did not understand the lyrics. These school songs were also broadcast over the radio.

With the end of the Occupation in 1945, the Syonan Hokkaido Orchestra was dissolved and its members absorbed into the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) Symphony Orchestra under the British Military Administration. ENSA was tasked to provide entertainment

to British and Allied troops around the world, and in post-war Singapore, thousands of troops and POWs (prisoners-of-wars) from various countries were awaiting passage home. The orchestra, led by Scottish conductor Erik Chisholm, became the first *de facto* “Singapore Symphony Orchestra”, but it lasted only a year. It played classical and popular music hall music, including West End and Paris-inspired comedy and dance music.

Its public performances on Sunday evenings were so popular that it began performing three times a week.

For the first time, music lovers could listen to a full symphony orchestra performing complete works which until now, had only been heard on 78 rpm vinyls. This marked a golden era of symphonic music in Singapore, which lasted until 1946. The orchestra was by then populated by trained musicians from Britain, as well as Eastern European, Jewish, Eurasians and Goan musicians. Also active at that time were the Singapore Musical Society led by Gordon van

Hien, the Singapore Chamber Ensemble under Paul Abisheganaden, and many choral societies.

Singaporeans who had trained in music overseas, such as violinist Goh Soon Tioe and pianists Victor Doggett and Lucien Wang, were also active at this time, playing in these ensembles and teaching students who would go on to make their mark in Singapore’s classical music scene. Among their students were Choo Hoey, who went on to lead the Singapore Symphony Orchestra when it was formed in 1979; Lee Pan Hon, who became an international violin maestro; acclaimed pianist Seow Yit Kin; and violinist and co-leader of the SSO, Lynette Seah.

The mid-1950s saw a flourishing of the choral and orchestral music scene. Among the ensembles formed were the Singapore Chamber Ensemble, the Singapore Musical Society, the Singapore Junior Symphony Orchestra, the Combined Schools Choir and the Musica Viva Players.

The Sounds of Nationhood

In 1958, the Singapore Chamber Ensemble played *Majulah Singapura* for the first time in Victoria Theatre. Penned by composer Zubir Said, the song had originally been the theme song for the City Council of Singapore, the pre-independence administrative council. It was so well-received that it was subsequently selected as the national anthem in 1959, when Singapore achieved self-governance from the British.

With self-government in 1959, and a pressing need to get Singaporeans integrated as 'one people' instead of a melting pot of many separate races, many cultural initiatives were taken. One of the most significant was a series of free public concerts called *Aneka Ragam Ra’ayat*. It was based on the vision of S. Rajaratnam, then Minister of Culture, who said: “...the cultural integration of our people is best brought about by conscious voluntary effort...talents... should be directed toward experimenting with a new type of concert in which the varied cultural elements will actually mingle in the same art form.”

These were held at various venues including the Botanic Gardens, the steps of City Hall and Hong Lim Green. For the first time, audiences could enjoy Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western music in one show. These concerts drew crowds of more than 50,000 each time.

The new Head of State, Yusof Bin Ishak, was inaugurated to the strains of *Majulah Singapura* at the Padang on December 3, 1959. Whether anyone was conscious of it or not, these were seminal moments in the history of Singapore's music.

The 1960s: Initiative and Imitation

The sweeping political changes and upheaval of the 1960s formed the backdrop to, arguably, a most definitive era in Singapore's music history.

Having achieved self-government from the British after 140 years of colonial rule, Singapore

was to merge with Malaya for a brief period before gaining Independence on August 9, 1965. In 1961, Radio Malaya introduced a new daily six-hour service called *Suara Singapura* (Voices of Singapore), a cultural programme presented in many languages, to foster inter-cultural understanding among the people in Singapore and Malaya. This was followed by multi-lingual programmes on Television Singapura when broadcasting began in 1963.

The National Theatre opened in 1963. It was to be a physical emblem of Singapore's independence, where the people's hopes and aspirations would find expression in music and song. Built with public funds, the theatre was fittingly dubbed 'the People's Theatre'. To mark its opening, the South East Asia Cultural Festival ran for eight days and featured performances of music and dance by artistes from 16 enthusiastic Asian countries. Singapore alone featured more than 1,000 participants, including a 100-strong festival orchestra, a 150-member Chinese, Malay and Indian orchestra, and a 600-strong choir.

In that same year, Singapore merged with Malaya, which was renamed Malaysia. But after two years, the neighbours separated, and Singapore became an independent nation on August 9, 1965. The newly independent Singapore had a large task at hand – to sustain herself and develop a nation of her own. Against this backdrop, and the pervasive influences of “psychedelia” from the West, the Cultural Revolution in China, and inter-community cross-fertilisation, Western music in Singapore thrived.

In the late 1950s to early 1960s, classical composer Leong Yoon Pin founded the Metro Philharmonic Society, which catered mainly to the Chinese-educated population with its repertoire of orchestral and choral works by composers from Singapore, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. It was balanced with works by European composers. This marked the introduction of choral music to Singapore, followed by the formation of the Singapore Youth Choir (SYC) Ensemble Group in 1964, which continues to earn accolades internationally.

Economic success and independence led to yet more new, amateur groups emerging, among them the Singapore Youth Orchestra, Singapore Youth Choir, National Theatre Symphonic Band and the Chamber Players. The Singapore Philharmonic Orchestra, led by Yoshinao Osawa, laid the groundwork for the formation of Singapore's first professional orchestra, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

Copycats of Western Acts

From the 1950s, popular music too was emerging as a separate strand in the tapestry of music in Singapore, spurred on by the rock-n-roll fever created by artistes such as Bill Haley and the Comets, and others. Soon there were “copycat” artistes and bands in Singapore which modelled themselves on their heroes. Among them were Wilson David, considered the Elvis Presley of Singapore, brothers Siva and James Choy, arguably the best imitators of the Beatles, Rahim Hamid who sounded like Nat King Cole and Patricia Pestana, who sang like Connie Francis.

Then came the decade known in the West as the Swinging Sixties – so called because of the decade's “philosophy” of embracing life, free love and independence. This was a defining moment which saw bands like The Beatles and the Rolling Stones at their peak, events like

Woodstock '69 making history, and movements like the hippie culture defying everything society demanded, expressed in a musical explosion all over the world. The spread of music from the UK – “the British Invasion” – created a demand for live, local English pop music in Singapore. Finally, two defining concerts propelled Western music well and truly in the direction of pop, and the formation of many bands.

The first was a concert in 1960 by the Blue Diamonds, a Dutch doo-wop duo famous for their version of the song, *Ramona*, which sold over 250,000 copies in the Netherlands – the first record to ever do so. The second concert was by Cliff Richard and The Shadows in November 1961 at the Singapore Badminton Hall. It showcased an instrumental band playing electric guitars, hitherto the domain of professional nightclub musicians. Also revolutionary was the sight of a band dressed in coordinated outfits, performing slick and highly coordinated moves.

Local bands were inspired, with perhaps the most successful being the The Stompers, one of Singapore's first electric bands, who played alongside The Shadows, and The Quests, which modelled themselves closely after the same British band. The latter four-man band went from winning the TALENTIME competition in 1963 to performing overseas.

'British Invasion', American GIs and the Blues

In the early 1960s when television was in its infancy and radio was dominated by international acts, the success of a band depended very much on securing live gigs. Such opportunities were found in the hotel lounges, country clubs, dance halls and the British military camps.

In the mid-'60s, during the Vietnam War, American GIs swarmed Singapore's shores, offering new direction and opportunities to local bands. Many landed gigs at clubs popular with the GIs such as Serene House, Shelford Club, and the legendary Golden Venus, where almost every

popular Singapore band had performed in the 1960s.

Towards the end of the '60s, blues became the genre of choice by an increasing number of foreign bands such as Straydogs, The Doors and The Kinks, which created a vibrant, varied and competitive local music scene.

Local bands were also featured on television programmes such as Pop Inn, which began showing concerts and talent shows in 1964. Film companies Shaw Brothers and Cathay Organisation also featured these bands in variety shows in their theatres.

All this activity on the popular music front attracted international record labels such as Philips and EMI, and local independent labels such as Eagle Records, Panda Records, HiFi Records and Cosdel Records (later RCA).

The Crescendos were signed on by Philips in 1963, the first local band to be signed to an international label. The following year, EMI signed on the Quests, which went on to become the most popular local band of the 1960s, and the first to record original music. Not only did their song, *Shanty*, become the first song by a local band to top the local charts and remain there for 12 weeks, it also displaced The Beatles' *I Should Have Known Better*, a signature track which had once occupied the No.1 spot.

The 1970s – A Classic Journey

The 1970s was a decade of highs and lows – fortuitous times in the classical music and choral music scene, and dark times illuminated by some light in the popular music scene.

Classical Fusion

The 1970s saw the beginnings of Western classical music infused with Asian influences. Among the composers associated with this trend were Phoon Yew Tien, Bernard Tan, and the late Tsao Chieh, who went on to compose full works that reflected their identities as musicians of Asian ethnicity using Western compositional techniques and elements.

Classical music in Singapore made history in 1971 when an ensemble of 70 musicians became the country's first orchestra to perform overseas. Made up of mainly 15- and 16-year-olds – and one eight-year-old member – they performed at the Youth Orchestra Festival in Lausanne, Switzerland on March 14, 1971. This was a rousing start to the string of achievements in the classical genre over the decade.

In 1974, the Singapore Youth Choir (SYC) Ensemble Singers, then known as Singapore Youth Choir, became the first Singaporean choir to win at the prestigious Llangollen Eisteddfod, an international music event.

September 15, 1977 saw the inaugural performance of the short-lived Singapore Philharmonic Orchestra led by Yoshinao Osawa at the Singapore Conference Hall. But its formation was to lay the groundwork for the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), which came shortly later.

Envisioned in 1973 by then Minister for Defence Dr Goh Keng Swee, the Singapore Symphonia Company was set up in 1978 with support from the government. A year later, in 1979, the SSO debuted with a rousing rendition of *Majulah Singapura*; the event heralded Singapore's first professional orchestra, which quickly established itself as one of Asia's finest orchestras. Another point of pride for the SSO was the fact that many in its ranks were Singaporean musicians who had trained overseas on scholarships, including members of the T'ang Quartet, Singapore's only professional chamber group, and conductors Lim Yau, Lim Soon Lee and Chan Sze Law.

The late Dr Goh was also behind the creation of the SAF Music & Drama Company (SAF MDC) in 1973. Formed to boost the morale of troops and spread national education messages, SAF MDC would go on to become an established arts company, collaborating with other events and organisations in Singapore. Many of Singapore's most popular performing artistes, including Dick Lee, Najip Ali and Gurmit Singh, were part of the SAF MDC in their early years.

Dark Days, Bright Stars

On the popular music front, things were rocky. This was the era of bell-bottomed jeans, sideburns, long hair, Benson & Hedges cigarettes. These Western trends became just as rampant in Singapore as they were in the rest of the world. The music sounds of this decade were dominated by the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin, and in Singapore, local bands were playing cover versions of hits by these acts, with the occasional original composition thrown in. Each week, bands such as Heritage, Pest Infested, Flybaits and Sweet Charity performed to 3,000-strong audiences at the National Theatre.

On the nightlife circuit, there was no shortage of places to enjoy music in the early '70s. Among the most fondly remembered are the Lost Horizon disco at Shangri-La hotel and Spot Spot at the Hilton, Boiler Room at Mandarin Hotel and Talk of the Town in High Street. Barbarella Disco, which occupied what was more recently Devil's Bar along Orchard Road, was also a hotspot for younger music fans.

Then the period often described as the 'dark age' of music began, set in motion by a confluence of different factors.

Citing a "dull nightlife scene", Singapore was dropped as the rest and recreation (R&R) centre of choice for US troops in Vietnam. When the Vietnam War ended around that time, the British forces pulled out of Singapore. Without these Western audiences, which had to a large extent, led the direction of the local English music scene, some of the vibrancy of the '60s live music scene was lost.

Adding to this was the introduction of new laws and regulations. In 1969, in what was hailed as an attempt to improve standards of cleanliness and hygiene, civil servants were not allowed to sport "The Beatles" haircuts. The '70s arrived with more rules: songs that had a "drug flavour" were banned, including hits such as *Yellow Submarine* and *Happiness is a Warm Gun* by The Beatles; the government's stand on haircuts extended to long hair, and those who sported it had

to accept being served last; people who looked like “hippies” and those with long hair – including heavy metal rock stars Led Zeppelin – were barred from entering Singapore; six discos were closed down in 1973 because of drug-related activity, while dress codes were imposed and psychedelic lighting banned in other discos; a 40% tax on live music led many nightclubs and other music venues to stop hiring live bands altogether.

In spite of all these events, some local stars still managed to emerge. Ramli Sarip, still remembered and recognised for his long hair that matched his rocker image, was an iconic founding member of Sweet Charity, a rock-n-roll group who consistently scored with Singapore’s music-loving public from the time it was formed in 1969. For most of the '70s, Sweet Charity maintained its relevance.

Another star to emerge was Ray Anthony, who formed the blues-rock trio Fried Ice, and has been hailed by many as Singapore’s only incarnation of Jimi Hendrix, with his exceptional guitar skills and practice of playing a right-handed guitar upside down.

Then there was the band that dared to make a complete break from what was in demand. The music of Straydogs was solely blues and R&B – none of the mainstream material that audiences had grown accustomed to.

And there was a young jazz pianist who started playing at Club 392 on Orchard Road. His name was Jeremy Monteiro and it would, over the coming decades, become synonymous with jazz music in Singapore, and indeed, would set the bar for jazz music higher than it had ever been.

The 1980s – Transit before Take-off

In what could be considered Singapore’s most transitional stage in music, the 1980s witnessed the simultaneous growth of choral groups, musicals, national songs and fanzines, and an independent and alternative music scene.

Perhaps the single biggest event of the decade was the closing of the National Theatre in 1984. The era of this iconic performance venue that had seen the earliest packed houses and screaming fans came to a end.

Classical Gets Vocal

To add greater dimension to the year-old Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), singers were selected from churches, schools and societies to form the Singapore Symphony Chorus (SSC). Performing symphonic choral works, the SSC debuted on June 13 and 14 with Brahms’ *A German Requiem*. Conducted by SSO’s Music Director Choo Hoey, SSC quickly established itself with an impressive list of classical works performed.

In the spirit of national pride and the 25th anniversary of self-governance in 1984, a song entitled *Stand Up for Singapore* was introduced to the public. Commissioned as part of the Jubilee celebrations, the song was performed by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the SSO,

and was chosen as the first official National Day song the following year. *Count on Me, Singapore* and *We are Singapore*, followed in 1986 and 1987 respectively, beginning a tradition and a new music genre that endures till today.

East Meets West

This decade also saw a number of “firsts” in the local band scene. Zircon Lounge, Singapore's first New Wave band, released its first LP in 1983. Its album, *Regal Vigor*, featured guest artistes Jacinta, Anita Sarawak and Dick Lee, and expanded the boundaries of what music fans in Singapore had been accustomed to.

Dick Lee meanwhile was having a busy decade. Apart from his contribution to Zircon Lounge's debut album, he released in 1984 *Life in the Lion City*, strongly bearing his signature style of fusing Western and Asian elements. But it was in 1989 that his most acclaimed album yet, was introduced. *The Mad Chinaman*, a moniker that he is still known by, went platinum in three months and won awards in Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan, signalling the fans' appreciation of local music and an original sound, and their widespread support of home-grown talent.

A natural extension of all this localisation of Western music genres was yet another first: the Singapore-made musical. When it launched in 1988, *Beauty World* was one of the first two musicals to hit the stage. With music written and composed by Lee, it was a story about the adventures of a small-town girl in a big city, set against the backdrop of a cabaret named *Beauty World*. To date, it has been staged no fewer than three times, due to its enduring popularity, and has toured internationally.

In the same year, *Makan Place*, produced by theatre company, Act 3, made its debut. It

featured catchy songs and a colourful cast of characters earned positive reviews. Together with *Beauty World*, they marked the starting point for the genre of the Singapore musical.

A DIY Genre

Singapore's first hardcore punk band was formed in late 1986. Opposition Party, sometimes described as a bunch of angry social misfits, was influenced by early UK punk and went on to perform in festivals and gigs around Asia and Europe. Opposition Party was not alone for long, as the underground punk scene expanded and continued into the early '90s.

While the market for local music was growing, breaking into it was often tough. This growing do-it-yourself genre provided aspiring musicians with platforms to be heard, while giving youth greater access to local music.

The local music industry was aided by the 1985 launch of magazine *BigO*, arguably Asia's best rock magazine. An acronym for Before I Get Old, it was founded by brothers Michael and Philip Cheah and featured articles on local bands, concert reviews and interviews while promoting, creating and encouraging the recording, releases and sales of Singapore-made albums.

The magazine, now online, regularly releases compilations featuring songs from local bands to keep their readers up-to-date with the who's who of the local music scene. *BigO* and The Substation joined forces with the local bands and musicians to create an independent and alternative music scene that would eventually dominate the '90s and beyond.

On the World Stage

The year was 1988, and jazz pianist Jeremy Monteiro played on the main stage of the Montreux Jazz Festival with his group Monteiro, Young & Holt, together with bassist Eldee Young, drummer Isaac Redd Holt, saxophonist John Stubblefield and guitarist O'Donel Levy. In a performance that would generate world acclaim for this Singapore artiste, the band received a three-minute standing ovation in a concert that was televised in many countries. *Swing* magazine of Switzerland called him “one of the best exponents of jazz piano” and Claude Nobbs, legendary founder of the Montreux Festival, described the concert as “an unforgettable concert of the first 22 years of Montreux.”

The 1990s: Marching to Its Own Beat

This decade arrived amidst a time of change, development and opportunities. Singapore was becoming increasingly affluent and technologically advanced, while the music industry was becoming more independent internationally, with a new generation of musicians quickly making its way to the front lines and holding their own alongside the more established musicians. The decade also saw great steps forward in local musicals, orchestras and musical groups that made up a well-rounded, holistic Western music scene in Singapore.

From Page to Stage

Three years after Dick Lee caused a stir with his highly successful musical, *Beauty World* in 1988, he added to his repertoire a second musical, *Fried Rice Paradise*, followed by *Nagraland* in 1992, and *Kampong Amber* in 1994, based on the book by Singapore writer

Catherine Lim. More books by local writers were presented on stage under his musical direction – *Mortal Sins* in 1995 and *Sing to the Dawn* in 1996.

One of the most celebrated musicals to date, *Chang & Eng*, was based on a book by Ming Wong, with music and lyrics by the late Ken Low. It has been restaged numerous times since its debut in 1997. The musical made its way to Beijing the same year, followed by an Asian tour in 2002.

Meanwhile, the SAF MDC wrote a new page with the formation of its Musical Group, which included the Chamber Ensemble, and a Chinese Orchestra and Choir. The SSO also broke new ground when they performed at *Salle Playel* in Paris in 1994 and was hailed as one of the top 20 orchestras in the world.

The decade also saw an increase of patriotic National Day songs written as it celebrated 25 years of independence, including the timeless favourite *One People, One Nation, One Singapore*, composed by jazz pianist Jeremy Monteiro. The song won him the silver medal at the

International Radio Festival in New York.

On the jazz scene, little was happening on a large-scale, with much of the action to be seen in pubs and clubs which chose to promote jazz music. In 1993, the Thomson Jazz Club was formed, to spread the love of this genre to a wider audience. Formed at the Thomson Community Centre, the club boasted a performing line-up of three big bands and one jazz ensemble, which went on to perform at jazz and festivals overseas and in Singapore.

Leading the Way

Like The Quests in the '60s and Dick Lee in the '80s who paved the way with original hits, The Oddfellows, formed in 1988, led the way in the '90s with the release of its debut album, *Teenage Heads*, in 1991. Its single, *So Happy*, was the first local song to reach No. 1 on Perfect 10 98.7FM, the favoured radio station of youth.

With an EP released in 1988, The Oddies, as they were affectionately known, had already won the respect and favour of the underground music scene in Singapore. Proving to be the final link between the 1980s and the following decade, its release of *Teenage Heads* sparked a heightened interest and following within the alternative and independent (indie) movement, which was to shape the music scene through the '90s.

Also leaving its footprint was a trio of songwriters who called itself KICK! Its first single, *Freedom (in Me)*, was released in 1992 and became a hit on the radio. *Jane* was subsequently released in 1993 and quickly gained popularity, eventually winning KICK! Best Song (Jane) and Best Group at the Radio Music Awards. The band went on to re-create the fan frenzies seen in the '60s, tapping into the Malaysian market where crowds of up to 60,000 would flock to see the trio.

Setting a contrasting scene to the underground '90s, an entrepreneur transformed an old warehouse into a mega club in 1991. Zouk entered the music scene with state-of-the-art lighting, sound and architecture, and has remained Singapore's biggest club ever since. It quickly earned an international reputation, and has grown into a place to be seen, with a continuous line-up of prominent artistes and DJs.

Recognition from Afar

As with The Oddfellows, which was the opening act for UK punk legend The Buzzcocks in May 1992, another band that had found favour with the UK scene was Concave Scream. True to the DIY spirit of punk, Concave Scream released its self-financed debut in 1995, earning rave reviews. Their second album outdid the first.

The Padres was another band whose talent was recognised early by UK DJ John Peel, who played its songs from *What's Your Story* EP (1994) on the John Peel Show on BBC. The band was also the music label Rock Records' first English signing, which led to the band breaking into the Chinese charts and Taiwan market. The Padres was also an influence on other bands

emerging at the time.

Padre frontman Joe Ng produced for punk/hardcore band Stoned Revivals its 1995 album, *Soul Detergent*. From this debut, *Teenage Queen* was selected for the soundtrack of *Mee Pok Man*, an acclaimed local film, which led to the band being signed on by what was Singapore's only homegrown label, Springroll. It went on to provide and write music for Singaporean movies *12 Storeys* and *Forever Fever*.

Reggae made headway in the late '90s with The Bushmen in 1997. Appealing to the younger crowd, the band was second runner-up in the Band Alert Contest organised by Yamaha and MTV in 1998. After releasing a mini-album in 2000 which featured five original compositions, The Bushmen went on to work with foreign bands such as Bananarama and Alphaville, taking their act from schools to bigger stages.

Alternative Path to Success

With support from fellow local indie musicians, homegrown fanzines such as *BigO*, and coverage from international publications, Singapore's music scene in the 1990s took a different turn from previous generations. While influenced very much by the UK scene, Singapore musicians still marched very much to their own alternative beat.

Had these local indie bands been more widely marketed to the masses, their music might have reached larger audiences, especially with approving nods from respected members of the influential UK music fraternity. However, had they been anything else but underground, these bands would unlikely have earned the respect and admiration of their fans, who still hold them in the highest regard to this day.

To celebrate the decade of the '90s, a compilation album *Rock the Garden* was released for the Substation's 10th anniversary in 2000, which paid tribute to founding members of the '90s local music scene, including The Oddfellows and Concave Scream.

The 1990s had been a defining decade that reset the foundations of local music, with accomplishments from alternative bands to orchestras, locally produced publications to musicals, in record time to greet the new millennium.

The 2000s – Breaking Barriers

While past decades encouraged the development of local music in the form of live gigs and recordings, the 2000s – or the Noughties – saw a burst of new talent, continued success of already established bands and groups of bored teenagers realising they had something to offer.

Like baby-boomers after the war, the 2000s followed the apprehensive but optimistic '80s and '90s, exploding with live bands on every corner of the island. You would be hard-pressed to find a bar, stage or platform without a band, performing anything from Top 40 hits, Classic '60s rock 'n' roll, or an impressive set of made-in-Singapore originals.

Under the Indie Influence

Having carved its name deep into Singapore's music scene, independent rock or “indie” raised an appreciation for local music, especially amongst the younger generation. A band that did just that was Electrico. Their debut album, *So Much More Inside*, made a name for itself when its debut single *I Want You* reached No.1 on both radio channels *Perfect Ten*, 98.7FM (now 987FM) and Power 98 charts. With three acclaimed albums, two major hits and numerous top 20s listings, Electrico is widely considered as the band which revived the local indie music scene.

The Great Spy Experiment, hailed as Singapore's “indie darling”, remains in a class of its own, having done the country proud by becoming the first Singaporean band to perform at the South by South West festival (SXSW) in Austin, Texas and San Antonio Indie Fest in March 2007. The band also served New York City a dose of Singaporean Rock a month later for Singapore Day at Central Park.

Reaching New Audiences

ECO and GSE, as these two bands are also known, are among several others who have become regionally and internationally acclaimed, and contributing to the new media with their presence.

Making full use of social networking sites, bands such as Electrico made their albums available for downloading online; countless others utilised Facebook to connect with their fans both locally and overseas, and *Myspace* has proved to be a huge platform for many bands to introduce new recordings, update friends and fans on gigs, and get the word out about themselves to an unlimited base of music lovers globally.

Among the rock musicians, Singapore's most successful singer-songwriter stands out – Stefanie Sun. With more than 10 million albums sold during her career, Sun, who sings in both Chinese and English, has broken into the China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia market with phenomenal success. Using her talent to found a management and publishing company, Make Music, in 2003, Stefanie divides her time between discovering new talents and touring Asia, contributing to Singapore and Asia's music scene in more ways than one.

Choirs and Classical

2004 was also the 40th anniversary of the SiYC Ensemble Singapore (formerly the Singapore Youth Choir), marking its place as Singapore's longest surviving and active community choir. With a commitment to performing the music of its time and place, a substantial portion of its repertoire consists of works composed or arranged by Asian composers in the 20th and 21st centuries, while it regularly commissions and performs new works by Singaporean composers. For its 40th anniversary celebrations, almost half of its commissioned music comprised Singaporean works.

The following year – 2005 – saw the emergence of the Singapore Jazz Orchestra, an 18-piece large ensemble of professional and semi-professional jazz musicians. With a repertoire ranging from instrumental big band and vocal jazz standards to jazz bebop and original works, the SJO was envisioned to educate, raise awareness and promote the music genre called jazz. Jazz in Singapore had long suffered from lack of large venue concert opportunities because the jazz audience was traditionally small. This meant that it was to be found in pubs and clubs that promoted jazz, among them Saxophone, Somerset Bar, Jazz@Southbridge and Harry's.

In 2009, the SSO turned 30, with several major international tours and critically-acclaimed classical recordings under its belt. Comprising 93 full-time musicians, compared to its starting number of 41, a point of pride for the SSO is the fact that some 60 per cent of its musicians are Singaporean.

Where the Music Plays On

As much as talent is needed, so too are suitable venues for the growth of music and to draw in the audiences. One such venue is the outdoor garden at the Substation, the first independent arts centre in Singapore. Its intimate performance space, once called the Fat Frog Cafe, is now known as Timbre@Substation. Through the years, it has made an important and lasting contribution to local music.

Founded by Ublues Group in 2005, Timbre@Substation was the brainchild of two passionate individuals, Danny Loong and Edward Chia, who aimed to help raise the profile of the Singapore music scene by building a “new and fresh platform”. Ublues went on to open two more branches; all three Timbre outlets feature a line-up of local artistes – from solo acoustic singer-songwriters to five-piece rock bands – every night of the week.

The Esplanade, Singapore's greatest performing arts centre, was opened in 2002. The SAF MDC and the SSO featured in the opening of this \$600 million development that has become a part of Singapore and focal point for music, arts and dance, Also as part of the line-up was

Dick Lee's *Forbidden City*, a musical which was brought back in 2003, and again in 2006 for the International Monetary Fund meetings.

Not far from the madding crowd, the underground music scene continues to thrive in Singapore. Home Club – home of the Glamorous Underground – is quite literally home to alternative music junkies, proudly declaring itself as the only place in Singapore with a weekly indie night, where local DJs and bands entertain alongside acclaimed international acts.

Elsewhere, independent record stores and music-focused bars and cafes offering a variety of genres dot Arab Street, Haji Lane and Bali Lane –from the cosy Blu Jazz, featuring international and local bands both jazz and otherwise, to Black Hole, frequently headlined by hardcore bands.

First held in 2001, Baybeats is a local music festival held over three days showcasing some of the best local, regional and international acts in one place, for free. A highly anticipated annual event, it gives local bands a chance to perform alongside world-acclaimed ones, for which they audition each year to participate. During this festival, musicians also hold workshops and master classes for new bands and audiences.

Something for Everyone

The still-evolving music scene in Singapore provides a platform for bands of almost every genre as well as fans of other forms of music a place to enjoy live Western music. The leading local musicians of the past 10 years have been establishing themselves in the wider overseas market while maintaining their roots in Singapore, and while still facing an uphill battle with the mass media dominated by international musicians, they continue to play their hearts out on any given day of the week, or year.

Given how far the music industry has come thus far, it looks to be headed only upwards from here.

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