

National Day Songs: Songs that bring a nation together

By Stephanie Ho, written on 12 February 2014

The Singapore government has commissioned national songs since the 1980s. The early songs were strongly nationalistic and resembled advertisement jingles. Since then, national songs have taken on a pop sensibility and became a showcase for local musical talent. These songs play a major role in the annual National Day Parade.

Singapore songs and community singing became a government concern in the 1980s. In 1980, Lee Khoo Choy, then a Senior Minister of State, was appointed to chair the National Folk Songs Committee and stage a “quiet campaign” to popularise singing. Group singing was seen as an important way for Singaporeans to develop a sense of belonging and solidarity. In addition, Lee said, “This is one way of building a nation, and it is a very necessary way. We want to encourage this habit of singing”.¹

Even as Singaporeans were encouraged to sing, there was the question of what they should sing. Besides the National Anthem and folk songs of the various communities, there were few songs that Singaporeans could sing together at communal and national events. In response, the Ministry of Culture organised a number of committees to compile suitable Singapore songs. Despite these efforts Dr Bernard Tan, who sat on several of these committees, recalled that it was hard to get songs that “fitted the bill” or which were the quality they wanted.²

Songs of the 1980s

To make up for the lack of Singapore songs, the government began to commission the composition of suitable songs. One of the first national songs was *Stand up for Singapore* composed in 1984. The song was part of a larger campaign conceived by the McCann-Erickson advertising agency for Singapore’s celebrations of 25 years of self-government.³ At the time, songs were often used to promote government campaigns such as Total Defence and Saving Energy.⁴

Canadian Hugh Harrison, a former jazz pianist who worked for the McCann-Erickson advertising agency, composed *Stand up for Singapore*. Harrison remembered getting the brief on a Friday and spending a weekend conceptualising an appropriate theme before writing the music. He said, “I sat down at the piano and laid down a demo version. I can only think that the words must have flowed quite naturally from the theme and the music flowed from the words”.⁵

Song sheets for *Stand up for Singapore* were distributed to all school children (Primary 4 and above) to help them learn the song.⁶ In September, an orchestral version of the song was arranged and played by the New York Philharmonic to a

¹ Tan, S. L. (1980, August 9). Let Singapore sing. *Straits Times*, p. 1.

² Interview in documentary, *O Singapura – Songs to inspire a nation*, directed and produced by Cheong Yew Meng. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iL-Hp8BiL0>

³ Theng, A. J. (2013, July 27). Favourite NDP songs composed by Canadian ad-man. *The New Paper*.

⁴ Tan, S. (1984, May 31). Unveiled – song for Singapore. *Straits Times*, p. 12.

⁵ Theng, A. J. (2013, July 27). Favourite NDP songs composed by Canadian ad-man. *The New Paper*.

⁶ Pupils get song sheet for 25th year joy. (1984, August 6). *Straits Times*, p. 13.

crowd of 27,000 at the National Stadium.⁷ In 1985, a version of the song was recorded by local celebrity singers for an album produced by the Singapore Police.⁸

With the success of *Stand up for Singapore*, Harrison was asked to compose two other songs, *Count on me, Singapore* (1986) and *We are Singapore* (1987).⁹ The latter used quotes from a 1966 speech by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who had said, “This is my country, this is my flag; this is my President, this is my future. I am going to protect it”. The song also incorporated the National Pledge set to music.¹⁰

These songs gradually became regarded as national songs and played an important part in the National Day parade. In 1985 *Stand up for Singapore* was sung as part of the finale where 2,000 balloons were released.¹¹ Subsequently, new national songs were incorporated into the parade and sung during the finale.

The national songs, however, did have their detractors. A 1987 *Straits Times* article reported that some young people were frustrated at being “fed” the song, and others felt the lyrics were “too repetitive and sentimental”.¹² Musician Jeremy Monteiro said, “Some people criticised some of these earlier songs as being too chest-thumping...But there is a time for everything, including chest-thumping and feeling patriotic, and the National Day period is probably the right time to feel and express the pride we have in Singapore and in being Singaporeans”.¹³

Songs of the 1990s

In 1990, Monteiro composed his own national song – *One people, one nation, one Singapore* – with lyrics by another advertising man, Jim Aitchison.¹⁴ After that, no new national songs were introduced for several years.

It was only in 1998 that *Home*, written and composed by Dick Lee, was introduced. Lee said when he was writing the song, he was feeling homesick having lived outside of Singapore for seven years. The song was sung by local pop singer Kit Chan and quickly became popular.

The song hit an emotional chord as Monteiro said, “...if you were a Singaporean who was overseas and you heard *Home*, it would make you miss home. Make you want to come home and visit Singapore. And I think that’s the magic of *Home*”.¹⁵ More than a decade after its release, *Home* was voted favourite National Day song in a 2013 online poll.¹⁶

After *Home*, a new song was commissioned for every subsequent National Day. These songs were now written by local composers and tended to be pop ballads

⁷ Ee, B. L. (1984, September 26). SSO to play Stand up for Singapore. *Singapore Monitor*.

⁸ Some outstanding gems in star-studded salute. (1985, September 15). *Straits Times*, p. 7.

⁹ Foo, J. (1989, August 6). In search of the Singapore song. *Straits Times*.

¹⁰ Pledge to be sung as part of new national song. (1987, June 20). *Straits Times*, p. 15.

¹¹ Let’s start with a song. (1985, August 9). *Straits Times*, p. 14.

¹² Kids love S’pore songs, many adults had enough. (1987, August 8). *Straits Times*, p. 12.

¹³ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2013, July 28). Hitting the wrong note. *Straits Times*.

¹⁴ “One Nation” song gets new twist. (2001, July 21). *Straits Times*.

¹⁵ *O Singapura – Songs to inspire a nation*, directed and produced by Cheong Yew Meng. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IL-Hp8BiL0>

¹⁶ ‘Home’ voted the most popular NDP song. (2013, July 30). *Straits Times*.

featuring popular local artistes. The song, *Together*, was written for the 1999 National Day Parade by music producer Ken Lim and sung by rising starlet, Evelyn Tan and local group DreamzFM.¹⁷

Songs since 2000

National Day songs written since 2000 carried on in the pop vein featuring leading local singers such as Tanya Chua, Stephanie Sun, Corrine May, Taufik Batisah and even Indie band, Electrico. Iskandar Ismail who chaired the National Day Parade music committee (2000) said that national songs had to be upbeat and vibrant to appeal to a younger generation. He added, “We have to make it different to stay relevant to the young. In fact, if you played the songs in a disco, you would think it's a pop song”.¹⁸

These songs also become less overtly nationalistic. Some songs, such as Tanya Chua's *There's no place I'd rather be* and *Love at first light* sung by Olivia Ong and Natanya Tan, do not even mention the word “Singapore”.

Given the proliferation of national songs, Singaporeans have become more critical of them. The 2013 song, *One Singapore*, for example was heavily criticized for having “bad lyrics” and sounding like a nursery rhyme.¹⁹ Given the unhappiness with the new songs, some Singaporeans also began to question whether there was a need to have a new song every year.²⁰

The controversies over national songs have had some positive consequences. David Tan of Electrico said, “It would have been a shock to me if everyone reacted positively to it. But the controversy was good as it forced people to pay attention to the song. That's better than being ignored”.²¹

Dissatisfaction with the official song or its arrangement has also resulted some Singaporeans releasing their own versions of the National Day song. The *One Singapore* song, for example, inspired at least five cover versions in a range of styles including R&B, acoustic and punk.²²

There are also Singaporeans who compose their own “national” song. One such Singaporean is singer-songwriter Lorraine Tan who composed her own original “national” songs such as *Shine Singapore*. The song has garnered thousands of views online.²³ This trend was noted by Jeremy Monteiro who said, “It's a good thing that people are willing to spend their time and resources coming up with their own songs. It's a great way of expressing their patriotism”.²⁴

Quote

¹⁷ Teo, P. L. (1999, July 7). Eve's happy with just being No.5. *Straits Times*.

¹⁸ Siti Andriane. (2000, July 28). That's our New Age ND ditties. *Straits Times*.

¹⁹ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2013, July 28). Hitting the wrong note. *Straits Times*.

²⁰ Chew, H. M. (2013, July 19). Count on Singapore for National Day songs. *MyPaper*.

²¹ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2013, July 28). Hitting the wrong note. *Straits Times*.

²² StraitsTimes.com. (2013, July 23). *Musicians respond to NDP 2013 song One Singapore with their own covers*. Retrieved from <http://stcommunities.straitstimes.com/music/2013/07/23/musicians-respond-ndp-2013-song-one-singapore-their-own-covers>

²³ Tan, J. (2013, 22) National Day song sees covers. *MyPaper*.

²⁴ Singaporeans' songs. (2013, July 28). *Straits Times*.

“I believe a country that sings together, stays together.” – Jeremy Monteiro²⁵

List of National Day songs

- 1984 Stand up for Singapore
- 1986 Count on me, Singapore
- 1987 We are Singapore
- 1990 One people, one nation, one Singapore
- 1998 Home
- 1999 Together
- 2000 Shine on me
- 2001 Where I belong
- 2002 We will get there
- 2003 One united people
- 2004 Home (remixed)
- 2005 Reach out for the skies
- 2006 My island home
- 2007 There's no place I'd rather be/ Will you?
- 2008 Shine for Singapore
- 2009 What do you see?
- 2010 Song for Singapore
- 2011 In a heartbeat
- 2012 Love at first light
- 2013 One Singapore

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Pledge to be sung as part of new national song. (1987, June 20). *Straits Times*.

²⁵ *O Singapura – Songs to inspire a nation*, directed and produced by Cheong Yew Meng. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lL-Hp8BiL0>

- Pupils get song sheet for 25th year joy. (1984, August 6). *Straits Times*.
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