

Musical practice of Hip-Hop

With reference to the 1990s, it is almost surprising that rap in hip-hop is absent in local narrative in Singapore. Lee Tong Soon does not record its existence in his overview of musics in Singapore¹ while Craig Lockard cites **4U2C** and **KRU** as the Malaysian representatives, while suggesting that in Singapore, it is dominated by material in English or Singlish. Accordingly, Lockard suggests that the rap lyrics are written largely tongue in cheek and tend to take a dig at Singaporean life and living. MC Siva Choy and the Kopi Kat Klan were identified as the two in the rapping community in the 1990s in Singapore.² One presumes the presence via CD or sound recording. Herein lies an unusual situation much akin to Xinyao practitioners. Briefly, Xinyao practitioners found out about Taiwan college songs before they discovered a little later the shiyue was already in practice locally.

The parallel here is the way in which Sheikh Haikel and Ashidiq emerged on Asia Bagus as **Construction Sight**, taking the limelight as arguably the first local rappers in Singapore. According to Music and Movement, Haikel's agents, *Haikel first caught the media's eye as a singer for Construction Sight, a duo group which went on to win the 1991 Grand Championship in Asia Bagus! A regional talent show...Haikel has performed in several large-scale events such as representing Singapore in the Asian music Festival in Tokyo (1997), Asia Bagus Championship Best of the Best in Tokyo (1997) and Earth Fest (1997). Haikel's Witulah recently hit the No.1 spot on Malaysian charts.*³

Their entry into rap is a little less mysterious. In an interview with Paul Zach, Haikel declared, *Rap has always been my No.1 thing...my mother intro-ed me to it way back when I was in Primary 3 at St. Stephen's Primary School.*⁴ Sheikh Haikel remembers how his mother, Sharifa, accidentally bought a Run DMC recording thinking it was Gladys Knight and the Pips without Gladys.⁵

Haikel didn't need much encouragement as he was by that time a break-dance enthusiast and supporter. **Run DMC** gave him two things it seems, the first was the ability to re-create rap with very little effort and with admirable proficiency. Secondly, and more importantly, it gave him what he wanted in identifying with a personal voice through sound:

*I like the ideology of having music and being able to talk over the music and get the message across...because when I listened to them speaking about "My Adidas"...These artists are singing their song and doing their thing....getting their message across and I liked it this way...but what really slapped me in the face was **Beat Street** Afrika Bambatta performed in that one....the last*

song...the story of Beat Street was about one of the best graffiti artists who died....and Beat Street was one of the first raps I memorised...

Beat Street, the king of the Beat ***Listen***

Rockin that beat from across the Street ***uh huh***

Beat Street is a lesson too because ***uh huh***

They can't let the streets beat you

(this was rapped during the interview)

They had a count (rhythmic pulse) to it...that was the first rap I memorised and I felt...this is ME...all my cousins were saying to me...how do you do that? I was taken aback...you can't do this? Just listen and you'll be able to...⁶

Much of the foundations led the way assuredly to the formation of Construction Sight with Ashidiq Ghazali.⁷ The programme **Asia Bagus** was probably the most important event in Haikel's pathway. The mother of one of their Far East friends worked as a translator on Asia Bagus. Haikel was at the SBC reception waiting to meet Najib Ali when they were spotted by K. Hosugi from Pony Canyon Records. Hosugi knew the friend's mother and wanted to know if Haikel could rap and sing and when it was discovered he could, *the reception [area at SBC] was [where] my audition [happened]...he asked me to rap and I rapped Tequila...he asked me to sing and I sang End of the Road by Boyz to Men...and he said "come down to Pony Canyon"...Haikel wanted Ashidiq in on the act and so auditioned further when they met K. Hosugi. They were assured of a recording contract win or lose but they had to join Asia Bagus. Haikel related how they won the first round and second place in the second round and they were still going to Japan....the winning song for round one was **Tequila**, and the winning song for the second round was Construction Sight: **Criss Cross—Jump**:*

*After we won the second round, we appeared on **Live on Five** hosted by Leslie Pillay. What is the name of your group? Suddenly we remembered one of our bus rides back home from Our Lady of Lourdes [school]...if we ever became famous what we would we call ourselves? We were passing through Pasir Ris, which at the time was a construction site and they decided to call themselves **Construction Sight...construction** as in to build, **sight** as in to see us go up...that's how we got our name...after the second round...we did a lot of shows...appeared in commercials...we were hot...why...because there was nobody else in Singapore...when we were doing shows or performances back then we were paid \$1000 per song...today, I get \$300 to do a song...[then] they enjoyed seeing two young boys perform...today there is no money in this scene because we are actually performing to people who enjoy the music...kids who haven't got money to buy your album...do you know that [back then] Ashidiq and I got paid \$30 000 each to do commercials...for a two day shoot? The money was there and there was nobody else...not much else in Asia...there was an upcoming group in Korea who called themselves **Soh Tay G and Boys**...and*

*we performed with them in Hara Juku...Me and Ashidiq went to Japan like 11-13 times and we were young punks man...and then came about a group from Malaysia called 4U2C...and then KRU and then NIKU. Every time I do Asia Bagus...**Too Phat** introduce me by saying hip-hop happened because of him [Haikel]...Construction Sight...when we were rapping they were still in school....⁸ The duo released seven singles having won the 1991 Asia Bagus! Grand Championship. *We were the only ones doing rap in Asia at that time.*⁹*

If Pony Canyon were responsible for the recording contract, why was there nothing available by Construction Sight? *Construction Sight never released anything in Singapore...I know we had 7 singles...it was only released in Japan....why...because in those days...Ashidiq and I had the word **fuck** in the songs...and those couldn't be sold in Singapore....*¹⁰

Ashidiq quit to further his studies at Temasek Polytechnic and found himself later as an art director at Oglivy & Mather. More recently, Ashidiq has appeared on Lush 99.5 FM performing under a group known as *Shaolin Satellite*.¹¹ Haikel went on into acting and released **For Sure**, with the hit single **Witulah**, which was at no.5 on the Perfect 10 Charts in 2002.¹² **For Sure** was an album containing seven Songs in English but also contains **Jangan Tinggalkan Daku** which is based on a P.Ramlee Classic. If rap is very much about the present and future, what was the reason for the choice of P. Ramlee?

I love P. Ramlee, and it came from a movie that I love very much...Ibu Mertua ku...I loved the story so much, and I had a chance to do a song so I chose to do a Malay song...and I told my producer to give it new beats but everything else in it was original...and they only charged me 50 cents for the rights to use the song...I did it because I just wanted to make myself happy...some of the Mak Ciks love it when they tune in to the Malay station...on RIA...I get comments like "Anak, Terima Kasih Nak...Mak Cik ingat...Mak Cik dulu muda muda...."¹³ (Thank you child, Auntie remembers/reminisces about the time when she was much younger)

Two other prominent groups have since emerged. Urban Xchange had in 2001 the distinction of being the only Singapore band to be signed by Universal, the world's largest music label. Urban Xchange comprises Terence Leong, who writes, produces and raps, guitarist and band leader Syed Munir Alsagoff, 27, deejay Firdaus Bahri, 21, and singers Trisno Ishak, 22, Vanessa Fernandez, 19, Humaa Rathor, 24, Michaela Therese, 20, and female rapper Kimberly Olsen, 18. The members are not full-time with the band, and are either studying or working. The group's climb to fame has been quick. It was put together by Leong in one day for an anonymous audition. This turned out to be an audition to find the face of Coca Cola's *Life Tastes Good* advertising campaign in

Singapore. Urban Xchange succeeded and even before the commercial was aired, the group was signed by Universal Music Singapore. Its first album, **How Did We Get Here?**, was released last month and won praise from listeners and critics. One of the songs, **I Wanna Be Just Like Jackie Chan**, was on the soundtrack of Chan's Rush Hour 2 while an MTV accompanied their next single, **Stupid**. They were also featured in America's Billboard Magazine in its August special issue on Asian music.¹⁴ More recently, three boys who call themselves Triple Noize and one of their hits was a rap in Malay, **Mak Minah**. Triple Noize at this point were one of the groups identified with the Speak Good English Movement alongside Dick Lee.¹⁵

Discussion

In coming to terms with rap, Frith suggests its consideration as a song in the form of a narration with a narrative strategy:

*The song is an argument, drawing on rap's conventional use as a form of conversation – between performer and media. And this is the context in which power is defined as a way with words. Rap as a necessarily mass mediated form, a commodity, is in effect releasing all the forces of contemporary communications technology onto language, onto the clichés of corporate and political power (appropriated directly, via sampling), onto the vitality of the slang and fragmented, reactive, ugly, utopian language of the streets...significant less for its logical unfolding than for its investment of keywords with force...at once a threat and a promise, according to who's listening...the most significant political effect of a pop song is...on how people speak. And this becomes a particularly interesting (and complex) effect in a rap, which foregrounds the problematic relationship between sung and spoken language...rhythm and rhyme are material ways of organising and shaping feeling and desire; they offer listeners new ways of performing (and thus changing) everyday life.*¹⁶

Simon Frith's discussions of songs as texts inform us of the ways:

*Songs can be used to explore the relationships of different languages – different ways of speaking – and in pop terms this has often meant challenging linguistic hierarchies, subverting the way words are used to dominate.*¹⁷ Roland Barthes suggestion of song texts as being able to *provide a framework for permissive language behaviour*¹⁸...is now seen by Frith as a crucial component of rap, a song form which is word rich in its obsession with the empowering and disempowering effects of language.¹⁹

In suggesting this, Frith quotes Henri Lefebvre:

Language endows a thing with value, but in the process it devalues itself. Simultaneously it makes everyday life, is everyday life, eludes it, disguises and

*conceals it, hiding it behind the ornaments of rhetoric and make-believe, so that, in the course of everyday life, language and linguistic relations become denials of everyday life.*²⁰

Frith believes that rap exemplifies a musical use of spoken language rather than being a lyrical form, tracing its origins to:

*Long established rituals of insult in which language is subjected to rules of rhyme and meter, is treated with the skill with words that is a necessary aspect of oral culture...If, in rap, rhythm is more significant than harmony and melody, it is rhythm dependent on language, on the ways words rhyme and syllables count.*²¹

In this context of insults becoming more elaborately rhymed, more metaphocially surreal, more personalised, Ulf Hannerz notes:

*Words were increasingly chosen...for their sound (for their sound in a particular voice, according to a specific rhythm of contempt) rather than for their meaning.*²²

Rather than take insult rituals through anthropological discourse, Frith believes its most obvious function, and more pragmatic point, was to develop:

*Participants' verbal skills – skills not just in verbal invention or virtuosity, but also in what one might call verbal discipline, the ability to follow rules of rhyme and meter...related to other verbal skills that are part of African-American linguistic culture...*²³

There are two levels to contend with in coming to terms with the musical practice of rap. The first is to apprehend strategies of highly stylised **sound**; onomatopoeia, spoken and sounded rhythms, rhymes, pitch modulations, vocal-timbral characteristics in spoken language, either emulated from African-American ways of speaking or adaptations. Added to the fact that this is fundamental an aural and oral experience reliant on creative and instrumentally facile strategies of virtuosity, I suggest the skill of rapping is a skill in improvisation. In consideration of mental and performance preparation, I refer to improvisation in much the same way as Paul Berliner does *reworking precomposed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation*²⁴ as opposed to “making something out of nothing” as is so often a definition in English dictionaries.

The second is to understand rap as a linguistic source of performance convention – or Roger D.Abrahams's preferred term, speaking behaviour in African-American or African-Caribbean communities, in contradistinction to European and Euro-American cultures, where:

*There is not a clear distinction between “dramatic-type performance” and “other types of interrational behaviour”. Rather workday talk and conversation are constantly framed as performance, as the language used becomes formalised...as the street itself becomes the site of a “constant self-dramatisation”, “an entertainment of each by the other”.*²⁵

An important corollary of this is the levels of verbal as well as bodily engagement in such performance:

*To stylise is to call attention to formal and formulaic features of both what one says and how in what situation one is saying it...*²⁶ to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak it is not only knowing *who is speaking* but acknowledging *who is listening*.

Abrahams further notes:

*Black slang systematically describes performance as a collective process – “doing your own thing” means taking your own part in a group drama; to “dig it” means not to understand, to get beneath, but to get involved, to get into. And it is this everyday experience of vernacular performance which has made African-American culture so important as a source of popular performing expertise, of popular performing style.*²⁷

The third is to take cognisance of rap’s propensity, in Adam Krims’s argument of *the deep perversity of the economic process I was describing, by which poverty itself becomes a source of surplus value (specifically, relative surplus value) for a certain commodity, namely rap music.*²⁸ Krims’ argument centres around issues of rap and its authentic representation in circumstances of poverty but he argues that this is precisely what is amplified and emphasised in music, particularly hip-hop videos. Therefore:

*It is this deployment of poverty as a use value for the production of new capital – especially though not only, record company profits, which are in turn profits of large entertainment conglomerates – that bring us to the new mutation of surplus value...commodity fetish.*²⁹

Going back to musical techniques, sampling techniques, performance techniques, where Krims observes an imbrication *in a dense combination of musical layers which pile up, defying aural representability for musically socialised Western listeners...what I call hip-hop sublime.*³⁰ Krims goes on further to discuss the implications of such layers in the music:

*its association with “reality rap” and descriptions of ghetto life suggests that the failure of representation itself becomes a figure in inner-city life...the music projects the ghetto not merely as an uncomfortable or dynamic place...it is projected as radically unrepresentable in itself, defeating both conceptual boundaries and unifying descriptions.*³¹ Krims admits though that these descriptions of musical layers with varying levels of consonance and dissonance

may be not be totally representative of other genres of rap. However, in pointing towards a ‘particular’ outcome of rapping strategies in hip-hop called ghetto rap or reality rap, Krims points us to the notion that it is significant that its practice is:

In some respects, subsumed by a market economy that values exactly this representation of ghetto life...which...brings us back to the notion of commodity fetish, which according to Marx, both results from and reinforces the more general tendency in capitalist societies to mystify social origins. The marketing of hip-hop paraphernalia is an obvious example of commodified authenticity...projecting “authentic” ghetto “essences”.³²

There are two consequences for Krims debate. The first, as we know, is the auxiliary equipment that comes with ghetto essence- clothing lines, accessories, etc.. But what Krims observes is also evident in the music:

*Rap fans debate, as do rap artists, what sounds and musical styles are ‘real’ and ‘represent’...suggesting that the musical styles themselves are commodified, in the properly Marxian sense of the word: the ‘layering’ procedures and the construction of the ‘beat’ are themselves considered to embody social conditions...mystifying dynamics of the commodity fetish.*³³

What lessons bode for us in local practice? First, the notion of poverty apropos the “ghetto essence” is not easily translatable into a Singaporean experience. The notion of “ghetto essence” as a state of being described as disenfranchisement, disengagement and failure of representation amidst urban devastation of a community is only viable as a metaphor. Construction Sight, Urban X’change, Triple Noize, among the many, are at best counter-examples of a ‘ghetto-essence’. The second point, related closely to the sentiments or angst in the face of disenfranchisement, which would be the sounds evident or easily identifiable with a person with “ghetto-essence”: in the lyrics, the sounds, the timbres, textures, the levels of consonance and dissonance, the emotional sublimation through the music, the authenticity of the ghetto-experience, the ‘sincerity’ of the rap and rapper in the delivery, the levels of competence in verbal invention, virtuosity in the rapper’s delivery. All of these factors emerge as a composite of these complexes in the rap track. The research done thus far has not come across a hip-hop group in Singapore rapping with the same angst levels as a gangsta rap group from the African-American community in urban inner-city USA. Socially, this does not explain the growing interest in rap as musical practice here in Singapore. Construction Sight were discovered on Asia Bagus, a Japanese programme with a pan-Asian agenda. Urban X’change came together through an advertisement for Coca Cola, while Triple Noize’s latest

claim to fame was to be representatives of the “Speak Good English Movement” in 2005, alongside local superstar Dick Lee; a highly ironic situation considering that rappers might not expend too much energy worrying about grammatical construction or proper use of English whose songs while Dick Lee’s claim to fame, through an earlier Japanese curatorial pan-Asian agenda – Dick Lee is to date the most successful Singaporean musician in Japan – was hugely mediated by the use of Singlish through the well-oiled strategies of diatonic and homophonic musical styles of Western popular culture.

Perhaps where it really counts in Singapore is its notion on the economic front. Karl Marx defined commodity fetish as the mistaking of an object for a social relation, or vice versa. Krims explains the process:

*The commodified image of the ghetto forms a libidinal object...leads...to a surplus value generated from the commodification of a lack of value...the music industry has found a way to refold some of the most abject results of world economic production, through a direct transformation...to multibillion-dollar wealth...this refolding...that constitutes hip-hop’s own mutation in the workings of surplus value...without...materially changing the living conditions at either end.*³⁴

Krims wry note does not escape notice:

*The ghetto produces a new use value...a safe, portable image for pleasurable consumption. Through representation, profit is produced that exceeds the value of the crumbling material structures and infrastructures and of course, the congealed value of the workers’ labours, be they rappers, DJs, sound technicians, or record company executives.*³⁵

This economic potential for rap during a period where good practitioners were a rarity, helped shape Haikel’s own pathway. The fact that Urban X’change were signed on by Universal Music even before the Coca Cola advertisement was aired. Perhaps what emerges from Krims discussion provides the clues:

*Consumers of rap music (a plurality of whom are white and middle class) are able to enjoy a closely controlled experience of social danger: the oft-remarked desire to consume the exotic may here be mixed with the enjoyment of violence so prevalent in American popular culture.*³⁶

It would be too simple an explanation to suggest that economic motivation in the Singaporean context was likely to create or construct a hip-hop community or create rappers. In the case of K. Hosugi and Universal Music, it is very likely that they were keen to promote what they could see as economic potential, practitioners of hip-hop culture and rappers who were not African-American or not unfortunate victims in ghettocentricity. It would have to take far more

scholarship to pursue this line of reasoning but for now, justifications were likely to come from the practitioners themselves.

Haikel's own pathway into rapping was fuelled by Afrika Bambaata. With Run DMC, he enjoyed the consumption of rap as much as he enjoyed learning how to rap by listening to recorded material and performing raps; on his own terms. Much of Construction Sight's initial journey indicated modes of teaching and learning via oral transmission. Memorising the rap was only part of the cultural negotiation. With Construction Sight, as he himself admits, the use of expletives were part of a process he was to eventually supplant with a performance style more personal.

Ghetto rap, reality rap, gangsta rap are familiar soundscapes which reverberations of anxiety in parents, whose children consume the music with the same fetish as the recording industry who see profitability disproportionately beneficial in relation to the investment. Consumption of utopia or exotica, notwithstanding, brings with it certain hazards:

*The hip-hop [scene] sounds like shoot you, kill you, lets sleep with that bitch culture...*³⁷

For Haikel at the outermost layer, one is unable to deny access to the violence and sex and drugs. However, beneath these immediate layers, there are elements of sound where if one listens long and hard enough, discovers techniques, musical styles and methods. This was what Haikel found what he was looking when he was attracted to rap, especially with the track **Beat Street** which he recalled so vividly:

*It [the **Beat Street** rap] had a count (rhythmic pulse) to it...that was the first rap I memorised and I felt...this is Me!*³⁸

Rap, through **Run DMC**, gave him two things it seems, the first was the ability to re-create rap with very little effort and with admirable proficiency. Secondly, and more importantly, it gave him what he wanted in identifying with a personal voice through sound:

*I like the ideology of having music and being able to talk over the music and get the message across.*³⁹

This description puts into sharp focus the nature of personal adaptation and appropriation. Almost paradoxically, music opens up human experience to the potentials and potentialities of life but does not necessarily prescribe, proscribe or even describe them. This point is made when practitioners reveal their

attraction for the **secondary process of music** of protest-songs as the **primary** motivation for appropriating musical structures to suit their literary texts.⁴⁰

Therefore in his practice, there was a process in selecting, at the most fundamental level, a method to use to serve his ends. *You know when my single Witulah came out, people were saying now there is American rapper out there who can realise our slang and understand and is using lah in his rap...then I tell them its me [the 'American' rapper]...and they said fantastic...they called the radio stations [presumably to request for the song] and that's how it became Number One...my album talks about me, how happy I am...this is my wife...who says you can't be in love with two women, I have a daughter...two girls in my life...there is another way of people spreading their songs...spreading what I have to say...who want to know more about my family...the roots I'm in or not...Its just a method...its what he is going through, he would like to rap about that...let him be...I live in Singapore.*⁴¹

Rap as a practice among Singaporean artists have capitalised on its potential for 'getting the message across'. One has only to gauge the success of the SARS-vivor rap when Singapore was hit by the SARS virus in 2003. The rap was performed by Gurmit Singh aka Phua Chu Kang, which was released on national television broadcast during the traumatic outbreak; seeking out the most effective method of reaching as wide as possible an audience to exhort them towards social responsibility. What was also significant was the synergistic combination of rap and Singlish, itself aphoristic and enigmatic and frowned upon, in its widespread popularity and consumption. As with the range of social forces and processes prevalent in local and global cultures, local hip-hop retains consonance with syncretic processes in contemporary cultures which use music albeit differently.

While at the international front, there has been a decided focus on the textual and socio-political implication of text in the most sought after fashions in **rap** in "telling it as it is" or the "consumption of utopia" added to its "fetishisation", especially by those marketing it, local practitioners have become attracted to the sonic dimensions as well as performative dimensions, vis-a vis the idiosyncratic dance movements here to express themselves. Is the Singaporean version practice of rap likely to reach international levels as entrepot trade? Only time will tell.

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