

Pop Yeh Yeh

The 1960s brought with it an unprecedented enthusiasm and interest in entertainment in the realm of popular culture, specifically the Malay community. All of the histrionics experienced with Elvis Presley's 'shocking' behaviour of hip-grating antics, hordes of screaming fans elsewhere around the Euro-American popular culture traditions began to have their appearance in Singapore; in the form of antics of fans, the craze to form bands, the countless records produced and the abundant opportunities to perform live music. Pop Yeh Yeh according to Craig Lockard,¹ this terminology was derived from the Beatles song, *She Loves You* (Yeah Yeah Yeah). This was not confined to Singapore nor Southeast Asia. David Loseley notes the emergence of **yeye** in France around the same time.² Loseley's accounts are interesting because *contrary to what most accounts claim, the term yeye could not have derived from the Beatles' single 'She Loves You', since it was already in use before the song was released in August 1963. It is more likely to have originated in the common refrain 'woah, woah, yeah, yeah' used by a variety of pre-Beatles singers from the Everly Brothers to Helen Shapiro.*³ Here again, as in *yeye* in France, it would be instructive to know when Suzanna emerged. Burhanuddin's accounts place it at 1963,⁴ while Yusnor Ef has M. Osman's popularity with Suzanna around 1965.⁵ The former date validates Loseley's logic while the latter at 1965 is likely to be a Beatles influence; a problem here surfaces when a musical practice seems to have acquired a name after its presence is felt.

Configuration

The practice in the Malay community was based on the amplified sound of a grouping known as the kugiran, made up of three guitarists, lead, rhythm and bass) and a drummer. Some bands made use of an electric organ but the three guitars and drum were the acceptable norm. The music was of a lively tempo and encouraged stylised dancing. Influences came from the Shadows, Rolling Stones but especially the Beatles. Despite the Western influences, they were adapted by the Malay community who managed to infuse asli vocal and singing styles giving Pop Yeh Yeh a unique sound. The lyrics dealt with themes of love, an expression of love for the opposite sex (M.Osman's Suzanna, A. Ramli's Oh Fatimah and Fatimah M.Amin Teruna (My Guy) or failed relationships (a diamond Ring) and A. Halim's A story and a Lesson. Other songs came under social commentary, spirituality and religion but of a minority in an otherwise escapist nature.

According to practitioners, **Suzanna** in 1963 was the song that initiated the Yeh Yeh phenomenon. After the Shadows performed at the Happy World Stadium in 1961, most ensembles were of the three guitars and one drummer configuration⁶ (The Rolling Stones we are told, played at the old Singapore Badminton Hall in 1965). According to Joseph Pereira,⁷ most of the ensembles prior to the Shadows concert were duos and trios. According to Burhanudin bin Buang, the word **kugiran** itself was a compression of Kumpulan Gitar Rancak—a group of fast guitars. The Malay kugiran (bands) like the Rhythm Boys are said to have preceded their non-Malay contemporaries like the Quests, Straydogs, and Checkmates. The **Rhythm Boys** initially played Beatles and Rolling Stones covers but **Suzanna** marked the change towards what was to be identified as the Pop Yeh Yeh idiom. Ali Taib, bassist of the popular band the **Rhythm Boys** offered this in an oral interview:

*Although we played mainly Malay songs, there were still shows where we played a totally English repertoire. That way, we were able to get more shows. Other than that we functioned as backing bands for singers like S.Mariam and also some other singers from Malaysia and Indonesia.*⁸

Kugirans did instrumental backing for singers and it was common to play with more than one singer. Between 1964 and 1971, Singapore was the centre of the Pop Yeh Yeh phenomenon and made household names of the likes of **M. Osman and the Clans, Impian Batik, The Mood, The Zarak, The Young Lovers, The Hooks, A. Ramli and the Rhythm Boys, Jefrydin and the Siglap Five, Kassim Selamat and the Swallows, Ahmad Jais, J. Kamisah and Fatimah M. Amin.** Singapore was also known as the centre of the **Pop Yeh Yeh** industry because it housed the recording facilities and technological infrastructure; most of the recording companies that produced Pop Yeh Yeh were based here.⁹ Singapore was also identified as the centre for Malay popular entertainment. Two film producing companies based in Singapore were the Malay Film Productions, owned by the Shaw Brothers and Cathay Keris, which was owned by Loke Wan Tho.¹⁰ Cathay Keris had as their musician and film composer Zubir Said who was to have written the national anthem Majallah Singapura. According to one practitioner at the time, although the traumatic process of Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia, *the Pop Yeh Yeh scene was not affected...Singapore bands still performed regularly in Malaysia and vice versa...The media in Singapore gave equal exposure for both Malaysian and Singaporean artistes.*¹¹

From Burhanudin's account, most of Singapore's Pop Yeh Yeh musicians lived in settings called kampongs in the east side of Singapore in areas like Geylang, Siglap, Jalan Eunos and Kaki Bukit. Geylang Serai was the meeting point for Pop

Yeh Yeh bands. *Geylang Serai was the place to see singers and musicians hanging out. It was a nice atmosphere. Many members of Pop Yeh Yeh bands also lived nearby so the place was a rather convenient place to go.*¹² The kampung was more: *There was more sense of unity and togetherness in the kampung. Although there were different bands, they would invite each other to perform if they had relatives who were holding weddings. There were no jealousies or enmities [sic]. Nobody would make noise (complain) if we were rehearsing too loudly.*¹³

Pop Yeh Yeh recordings came in the form of EP (Extended Playing) records, usually containing 4 songs. Ali Taib explained how they were documented in an EP: *The Bands played and the recording engineer recorded their performance. After that the record company people brought it to the plant to make more copies of the recording. It is like in the factory, there's allocation of work. True, before Pop Yeh Yeh the process may have been the same. But during that era, it was more intense due to the huge demand. In those days, we didn't have multi-track recording. Pop Yeh Yeh music is very up-tempo and fast, so we were prone to make mistakes, if we made a mistake, we had to start all over again.* An artiste or band might not consider it unusual to record 4-5 EPs in a year.

Lucrative sales were more meaningful to the record companies than the bands. Yusnor Ef in an interview explained:

*In those days, there was a lack of transparency with regards to royalties. There was no proper accounting on how much the bands or artistes earned. The record sales were good. The support was tremendous unlike today. But the bands also did not bother so much about this issue. They were happy getting booked for shows. That's where the money was.*¹⁴

Ali Taib went on to explain:

*Honestly, I wasn't thinking about getting popular or rich at that time. I think we were more concerned with seeing how far our talents could bring us. To play in a band with friends and relatives who had similar interests was something more valuable than rewards. Of course now, we do feel that we should be more mindful about things such as royalties and copyright. We could have been rich now.*¹⁵

Levels of Commitment

Not all Pop Yeh Yeh musicians were career-musicians. One student band was known as the **Caliphs** and even a Chinese (language) teacher called Evey Lyn made a Pop Yeh Yeh album.¹⁶ A radio programme called *Penyanyi Pujaan Minggu Ini PPMI* (This Week's most Popular Singer) played an important role in popularizing Pop Yeh Yeh (Yusnor Ef's article in Berita Harian 8 July 2000—Pop Yeh Yeh Menguasai Muzik Melayu). There was a Pesta Pop (Pop Party) which

featured Pop Yeh Yeh artistes and bands. Performing venues included the now demolished National Theatre and the Fraser & Neave Hall at River Valley Road. Given the absence of public entertainment licenses (the Public entertainment license was introduced in 1969)¹⁷, bands could easily play at parties, tea dances and weddings. Bands could charge between \$100-\$200 per performance and the Rhythms Boys even played at a PAP Anniversary dinner in 1966 as well as a road opening ceremony at Jalan Eunos. Another avenue for Pop Yeh Yeh was film. Music has been an important part of the Malay film in Singapore and Malaysia. The legendary P. Ramlee, in a film Tiga Abdul (the Three Abduls), in 1964, included a Pop Yeh Yeh tune called **Bunyi Guita** (Sound of a Guitar). Omar Rojik's **Agogo 67** was another film to feature Pop Yeh Yeh so to the late 1960s and early 1970s Mat Sentul films and later P. Ramlee films at Kuala Lumpur's Merdeka Studios. From what was gleaned from personal accounts, singers A. Ramli and Jefrydin were mobbed by their fans who wanted, more than autographs, their jackets, shirts, among other memorabilia Ariff Taib, drummer for The Rhythm Boys remembers:

*It was crazy but we enjoyed every moment of it. The crazy antics of the fans made us even more fired-up to perform.*¹⁸

Consumption

Consumers of the Pop Yeh Yeh phenomenon were largely Malay youth, adults and children. The music arrived via radio, weddings, and of course, the records. Given the open setting of the kampong, anyone who was not from the Malay community would have at least had some form of contact with the practice. Pop Yeh Yeh stood at the threshold of fashion. The men often imitated the Beatles coat and tie look while young women were clad in bright-coloured blouses, tight pants and mini skirts. Lambretta and Vespa scooters were also part of the ensemble, such that Pop Yeh Yeh bands played at promotional concerts, with the objective to sell scooters.

The practice somehow diminished in significance—Craig Lockard suggested the late 1960s and early 1970s. Practitioners sensed that the change from guitar-based rock n roll to ensembles employing the saxophone and trumpet. There was a decline in performance opportunities and record companies looked to promote music to suit changing musical styles. In the wake of the fading Pop Yeh Yeh came the music of Jimi Hendrix, Santana, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin to name a few.

Revival

Pop Yeh Yeh is still fondly remembered. 1985 saw a Pop Yeh Yeh revival in Kuala Lumpur and even in the mid-1990s. A number of artistes like M. Osman, Salim I, Jefrydin and J Kamisah re-recorded their hits. The heavy metal group XPDC even reinterpreted Pop Yeh Yeh hits *Agogo Metal*, *Rock Yeh Yeh* and *Metal Yeh Yeh*.¹⁹ Burhanudin offers his views accounting for Pop Yeh Yeh's decline. These include:

- ◆ Change in musical economics and fashion; the Carnaby Street fashion which brought along the black tie & jacket and coloured blouse...was to give way to flared trouser bottoms, flamboyant and well exposed chest and hair-lines for males and the advent of the Woodstock wardrobe fashion...the flamboyance was also apparent in the musical styles, greater amplification and distortion....
- ◆ Influences from the Western world of pop which glorified drug-consumption, flower power and permissiveness which amounted to stricter regulation of music being marketed in Singapore, radio-airplay, public performances....S. Rajaratnam, the then Minister of Culture exhorted the people to *'be a society of moralistic, disciplined and hardworking people'*.²⁰
- ◆ A decline in the importance of Singapore as a center of Malay popular culture. Malay was the national language prior to 1965 but since the establishing of an independent Singapore with concomitant policies of multi-culturalism, multi-lingualism, have resulted in the promotion of four official languages in Singapore; Chinese, Tamil, Malay and English.
- ◆ Changes in work ethics
- ◆ A fight against 'yellow culture'- the label which had been applied by the Chinese conversant community during the 1950s against "Western music" – which according to them promoted permissive behaviour and unhealthy attitudes.
- ◆ A greater awareness of Islam, the Malay community and socio-economic conditions in the Singapore, particularly with the formalisation of MUIS and other related Muslim organisations that worked to regain a sense of Muslim value systems with the community which included Arab, Indian-Muslim and Indonesian with Malay. Burhanudin refers to songs like **Irama Desa Seberang** which laments the loss of the kampong and the green fields to the concrete jungle coming up—the advent of HDB and high-rise flat dwelling. Singapore's industrialization programme began in 1961-in a bid to create more opportunities. This process of resettlement of kampong-style housing to high-rise flats coincided with the daunting task of the Housing and Development Board to provide affordable housing for all Singaporeans. Statistically, 9% of Singaporeans lived in HDB flats in 1960; a far cry from about 85% today.

- ◆ Burhanudin cites sociologist Peter Chen who saw Singapore in the 1960s going through the simultaneous processes of modernization and industrialization. This is a different set of circumstances where industrialisation began first and modernization later. Given this twin-track change meant aspects of modernization such as urban resettlement technological developments and mass communications. Bedlington explained the reception of this process of being resettled out of the kampong into a HDB flat:

Many Malays feel sadly out of place in the anonymous concrete corridors of the housing estates. Their new flats are too small to accommodate the ritual and ceremony integral to their culture...they cannot rear chickens and ducks as in their [kampong] houses and the smell of pork being cooked next door in a Chinese flat is an affront to their nostrils.²¹ It would be true to expect the same for other communities.²²

The entry of women in the workforce changed the perception of women being confined to affairs of the household. Statistics show that females in the Singapore workforce numbered 12, 534 in 1970 while in 1958 it was 3, 910. Given the emancipation of women and the proliferation of female singers and dancers in the ensemble, often groups like **Young Lovers Dancers**, **Les Malinja** and **Saadiyah** dancers accompanied the singers or bands on stage, doing the twist or the a-go-go dances.

Yusnor Ef explained:

In terms of quantity, there was more female participation in Malay Music in the 1960s compared to during the 1950s. It is because on a larger societal level, women were getting more and more involved in the sphere of public life like working in the factory.

However, Burhanudin admits, the main reason for the decline of Pop Yeh Yeh was the arrival of rock and the post-Woodstock culture, one that was to grip Singapore in ways that had been very different from other musical practices.

Discussion

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, young Malays were more attracted to the Beatles, Venture, Cliff and the Shadows, the Rolling Stones and other pop idols. A movement that appeared in the 1960s that had already been simmering with **Bill**

Haley and the Comets and **Cliff Richard and the Shadows**, hit fever pitch in Singapore, especially with the **Cliff Richard and the Shadows** who gave a performance at the Happy World Stadium in 1961. Subsequently, most ensembles were to convert to the three guitars and one drummer configuration.²³

It would be foolish to assume Pop Yeh Yeh's coruscating appearance in the 1960s without sufficient infrastructure. Its appearance seems very much to have been fuelled by an already thriving Malay film industry which had absorbed and incorporated many elements of Western popular culture – one of the most outstanding was the music. For instance, Looseley points to an earlier presence of vocal sounds associated with the Beatles in the music of the Everly Brothers and Helen Shapiro and Elvis Presley. There also needs to be consideration of a support system. Singapore was very much a British colonial city; the proliferation of musics of Western popular culture would have been difficult to deny. The fact that many of these practitioners enjoyed prominence in the public sphere via live performances also affirmed them sensuously. Given the fledgling industry of gramophones and records and the television, live performances afforded anyone spectator of Pop Yeh Yeh, opportunities that might have been denied them from a technological or financial perspective. A practice such as Pop Yeh Yeh validated musicianship from an aural and oral perspective without recourse to certification or schooling. The infusion of technology was another crucial element. Given a substantial interest in the 'tools of the trade', amplification of sounds, usually reserved for the cinemas and public address systems were now part of each band's arsenal of musical resources.

On balance, though, not all views of Pop Yeh Yeh were enthusiastic. For instance, Malay film superstar, P. Ramlee, was one of the first to voice his reservations. When M. Osman's Suzanna appeared and emblazoned EP sales and radio airplay in 1963, Ramlee was quoted as saying *this kind of music placed importance only on the loudness of the music rather than the quality of the song itself...Poor quality pop songs and music will give rise to a future generation that is wild. Young people who sing as they please, play music as they please, dress themselves as they please will end up exposed to negative elements which will inevitably result in all ill discipline.*²⁴

Ramlee was to form a band called **Pancha Sitara** hoping to counteract the influence of the **Platters** and revitalise Malay music by adapting Western influences to suit what he believed to be local needs and expectations. **Pancha Sitara** was well received as were the songs **Bila Larut Malam** and **Mawar Ku** to name a few.

Ramlee was not alone in his reservations. Horace Wee and Sam Gan, practitioners with certified musical qualifications as well as a considerable wealth of playing experience in performing music for dance band and jazz ensembles, recalled their first experiences of amplified sound at the Happy World Stadium:

The big culture shock to the musicians of the day...who became established...was when the Beatles, the Shadows came...Cliff Richard and the Shadows, came to Singapore...and all of a sudden you have a bass guitar...a very loud amplified sound...not a smooth, well-rounded and refined sound...very raw...If you describe it now, it did sound very raw...when it first came on...it was in its infancy...the recording technician had not gotten in yet...in fact it wasn't even [mediated by] a recording technician...it was the players...the people who played it were from a different school...they weren't qualified musicians...they couldn't read...they just played...Half the time they couldn't even play the instrument...sometimes its good that way because that's how a new artform or practice evolves...when someone goes in blindly innocent...you don't now what's impossible...so that's why in those days it was loud...discordant...mainly because [in our view] they didn't tune their instruments properly...it became a big shock to the professional musicians [like us] of the previous twenty/thirty years....and of course it was greeted with great resentment...in the heydays of the big band scene, there were always [a gap between] the quality musicians who could read music and those who could not...this actually became the other way around...professional musicians looked at these pop-up stars...and said they only play three chords...hardly in tune (because they could hardly tune properly) and they couldn't even read a damn note...they [the professional musicians] were rather dismissive of them...and there was a lot of tension between both parties...the rock n' roll musicians looked at the professionals with disdain...old men...and the professionals looked at these people and said ...like a bunch of amateurs... [or] something really damning...²⁵

Many practitioners of Pop Yeh Yeh were also musicians working in the English-speaking equivalent of Western popular culture, as much as their Mandarin-conversant and Tamil-conversant counterparts. Somehow the music-making served at one level to enable practitioners to the point where *musical ability as a biological predisposition in every human being* would have become difficult to refute, if the level of support was considered. At another level, the levels of support also entailed cross-community exchanges, economic opportunities for those who recorded this practice, which gave rise to the possibilities of national and international careers in music for those who excelled in quality of songs and performance standards.

There is an ease with which Pop Yeh Yeh melded into technology, Vespas and Lambrettas and fashion, which has yet to be explored. If Cliff and the Shadows were sufficient encouragement, why was Pop Yeh Yeh a necessary phase since the practice of the English-version of rock n' roll was equally enthusiastic in its emulation in Singapore? Not yet discussed is the implication of the dissenting voices from the Malay community with regard to this infiltration. P. Ramlee may have been the most significant voice but his concerns were likely to have shared sentiments from less audible voices. This is an area, among many related issues of religion, culture, sites of contestation, technology, economics and politics, which bodes much potential in further scholarship.

REFERENCES

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- 6 Burhanudin bin Buang, *op.cit.*, Chapter two.
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- 10 Burhanudin bin Buang, *op.cit.*, Chapter two, footnote 14.
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- 12 Interview with Yusnor Ef, 30 Nov. 2000. Quoted in Burhanudin bin Buang, *op.cit.*, Chapter two, footnote 20.
- 13 Burhanudin bin Buang, *op.cit.*, chapter two, footnote 18, interview with The Rhythm Boys, 28 January 2001.
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- 15 *Ibid.*, footnote 21. Interview with Ali Taib 28 January 2001.
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