

Tanya Chua: Singer-songwriter

Written by Jaime Koh on 30 December 2013

Tanya Chua is a critically acclaimed Singapore singer-songwriter who emerged on the singing scene in the late 1990s. Bilingual in English and Mandarin, Chua gained much critical success mainly in Taiwan for not just her singing, but also for her songwriting abilities. She is the only Singaporean singer to win the Best Female Artiste thrice in Taiwan's Golden Melody Awards.

An accidental musician

Born on 28 January 1975 in Singapore, Tanya Chua started her singing career performing in cafes and pubs such as the Westin Stamford Café, Dada, Fabrices', Top Ten, Off Quay Bar and Europe.¹ At the time, Chua was still a student at the Singapore Polytechnic, pursuing a Business Administration diploma.^{2 3} She was then spotted by artiste management company, Music and Movement, who signed her on as a singer.⁴

Chua had not intended to be a professional musician but fell into music by accident. She started singing when she was asked by one of her friends to replace the female singer in his band. In an interview, Chua said, "I never thought that I would ever be a singer neither did I have a 'wild passion' for music then, all I knew was that I didn't want to be in a desk-bound job".⁵

Chua had also not intended to be a songwriter. Her songwriting was sparked by her frustration at her inability to communicate her ideas through the music she was given. Being a novice in the industry, Chua felt snubbed by the veterans. "So I went and got myself a guitar and some chord books and tried to learn a few of them. After some futile attempts on the guitar, I thought I might as well try to write a song with the very limited chords that I knew. I didn't look back since," said Chua.⁶

Releasing albums

In 1997, Chua released her first album, *Bored*. The English album was well received and given substantial airplay on local radio. She attracted the attention of PolyGram Music Taiwan (part of the Universal Music group) and was signed on as a singer. Chua then released two albums under the label in 1999: an English album, *Luck* and her self-titled Mandarin album.⁷ *Tanya* topped charts in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore.⁸

¹ COMPASS. (1998, June). 1st Singaporean to win Asia Song Festival. Retrieved from <http://web.archive.org/web/20010629071617/http://www.compass.org.sg/news/june/1a.html>

² Yap, R. (2003, September 16). Chua goes hip-hop in cover version. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³ Lim, R. (1998, January 13). Tanya – music saved my life. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁴ Yap, R. (2003, September 16). Chua goes hip-hop in cover version. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁵ COMPASS. (1998, June). 1st Singaporean to win Asia Song Festival. Retrieved from <http://web.archive.org/web/20010629071617/http://www.compass.org.sg/news/june/1a.html>

⁶ COMPASS. (1998, June). 1st Singaporean to win Asia Song Festival. Retrieved from <http://web.archive.org/web/20010629071617/http://www.compass.org.sg/news/june/1a.html>

⁷ About Tanya Chua. Tangy Music International website. Retrieved from <http://www.tangymusicgroup.com/aboutTanya.html>

⁸ Tanya's Mandarin album a hit in HK and Taiwan. (1999, March 25). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

Chua entered the Asia Song Festival 1998 with her unpublished composition, *Hear Me*, which won in the *Unpublished Category* in the annual songwriting competition.⁹ Chua was the first Singaporean to win at this competition.¹⁰ Following her win, Chua flew to Los Angeles, United States, for a 6-month Diploma course in Electric Guitar at the Los Angeles Musicians' Institute.¹¹

A rocky road

Chua's career had a stellar start but the path was far from smooth sailing. Although her first two English albums received critical success and launched her career in Taiwan, Chua's subsequent albums did not do as well. In 2002, she was reportedly dropped by Universal Music because her albums *Remember* and *I Do Believe* did not meet their sales target in Taiwan.¹² Chua has denied talk that lukewarm sales was the reason for her switching to Warner Music. She said she switched music labels because her contract with Universal was up and that her management then, Music and Movement, was looking for a new direction for the singer.¹³

Although she was quickly signed with Warner Music, Chua began to lose faith in her abilities. She was facing pressure from her record company to sing karaoke friendly tunes.¹⁴ "I felt I had lost direction in my music," Chua said. "I wasn't doing music that was me. I was singing a lot of love ballads, because that was what sold in the pop world. And all my hit singles were being written by somebody else."¹⁵

She also faced many problems during the production of her album, *Amphibian*. She had broken up with her collaborator and producer, Eric Ng, and there were personnel changes in the record company. To make matters worse, the company cut back on the album's promotional activities as it was not confident of the album.¹⁶

To add to her troubles, between July 2008 and 2009, Chua was involved in a legal tussle with her management company, Music & Movement, over the rights to her compositions. Chua had ended her contract with Music & Movement in October 2006, citing difference in vision.¹⁷ In July 2008, Chua took Music & Movement to court in July 2008, seeking to have the rights of the songs she composed while under Music & Movement's management reverted to her as a result of a breached clause in their contract.¹⁸ The breach of contract related to the ambiguities in the payment of royalties of Chua's songs. Although the High Court had initially rejected her claims,¹⁹

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¹¹ COMPASS. (1998, June). 1st Singaporean to win Asia Song Festival. Retrieved from <http://web.archive.org/web/20010629071617/http://www.compass.org.sg/news/june/1a.html>

¹² Lin, W. J. (2011, March 11). Comeback kid. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹³ Tan, J. (2003, July 24). The changing tunes. *TODAY*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

¹⁴ Chan, B (2012, July 11). Tanya's time. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁵ Teo, W. (2006, July 6). Touch climb for gold. *The New Paper*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁶ Teo, W. (2006, July 6). Touch climb for gold. *The New Paper*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁷ Lee, S.Y. (2007, July 17). My mum, my manager. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁸ Lum, S. (2008, October 10). Singer fails in legal bid for song rights. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁹ Lum, S. (2008, October 10). Singer fails in legal bid for song rights. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

the Court of Appeal ruled in her favour in 2009.²⁰

Critical success

Just as Chua was contemplating quitting the music industry, she bagged the Best Female Artiste award at the Golden Melody Awards,²¹ Taiwan's equivalent of the Grammy awards. Chua saw the win as a sign to keep going. Of the win, Chua said, "It was the universe telling me 'Stop there, girl, you've got a long way to go. Here's a little dessert for you'."²²

In 2006, Chua moved to Taiwan to focus on her music.²³ Her move marked the ascendancy of her singing career. In 2008, Chua's "little dessert" turned into a buffet when she scooped 21 awards at that year's Golden Melody Awards. Among them were Best Mandarin Female Singer and Best Album Producer.²⁴

A graduation and beyond

Tanya's first ticketed solo concert took place in 2008, eleven years after the release of her first album. Chua described the concert as akin to "a graduation ceremony".²⁵ Three years later, in 2011, Chua held her first major ticketed concert in Singapore, *Tanya & The Cities Tour*.²⁶ At her 2012 Singapore gig, Chua said, "It's like coming home to my parents with a report card kind of feeling."²⁷ While it was welcome, critics felt that the concert was too mellow and that Chua should have sang more of her original hits, rather than cover versions. Furthermore, the concert was marred by technical glitches.²⁸

In recent years, Chua ventured beyond singing and songwriting into music production, publishing and management. In 2006, Chua established her own music production companies, *Tian Ya Music Productions* (based in Taiwan) and *Tangy Music International* (in Singapore).²⁹ Besides singing her own songs, Chua has also written for other singers, including A Mei, Stefanie Sun and Faye Wong. She also produced an album for Chinese singer, Na Ying.^{30 31}

Still a Singaporean

Chua's composition, *Where I Belong*, was chosen as the National Day theme song in 2001. Chua was among the songwriters invited to pen songs for National Day. Professing that she never thought she could write a song for the country, Chua took it as a challenge. Chua said of the experience, "Coming up with the words was the tough part, but Singapore is the place where I feel most comfortable in, so it all just

²⁰ Thomas, S. (2009, November 12). Tanya wins songs' rights. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²¹ Chan, B. (2012, July 11). Tanya's time. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²² Chan, B. (2012, July 11). Tanya's time. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²³ Taipei pad for Tanya. (2006, November 11). *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁴ Chan, R. (2008, December 31). Tanya's big highs – and a low. *MyPaper*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁵ Just the tickets as Tanya graduates. (2008, March 8). *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁶ Chan, B. (2012, July 11). Tanya's time. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁷ Chan, B. (2012, December 10). Just say so-so concert. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁸ Chan, B. (2012, December 10). Just say so-so concert. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁹ Tanya Chua Artiste Management website, retrieved from <http://www.tangymusicgroup.com>

³⁰ Alphonso, J. (2005, June 7). Star write, star bright. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³¹ Chua produces personal hero's album. (2010, September 11). *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from Factiva.

fell into place.”³²

Although Chua is now based in Taiwan, she is still seen as a daughter of Singapore. Drawing on her popularity overseas, the Singapore Tourism Board selected Chua to be its ambassador to China for two years in 2008.³³

Quote

*“If I’m popular, ‘Yay’. If I’m not popular, I’ll work harder. If you start thinking along the way of popularity, it would affect the kind of music you really want to do. It sidetracks you a lot because you start thinking of what the market wants instead of what you want.”*³⁴

Albums³⁵

- 1997 Bored (English, 1997)
- 1999 Tanya (Mandarin)
- 1999 Luck (English)
- 2000 纪念 (Mandarin)
- 2001 I Do Believe (Mandarin)
- 2001 默契 (Mandarin)
- 2001 Jupiter (English)
- 2002 Secret Lavender (English)
- 2003 陌生人 (Mandarin)
- 2005 双栖动物 (Mandarin)
- 2006 T Time (Mandarin)
- 2007 Goodbye & Hello (Mandarin)
- 2008 My Space (Mandarin)
- 2009 若你碰到他 (Mandarin)
- 2011 说到爱 (Mandarin)
- 2011 Just so so (English)

Concerts

- 2008 Goodbye & Hello Live (Hong Kong)
- 2011 Tanya & The Cities Tour (Singapore)
- 2012 – Singapore – Just so so³⁶

Selected Awards^{37 38 39 40}

- 1998 Best Music Composition for *Hear Me* (Asian Song Festival)

³² This is where I belong. (2001, August 10). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³³ Quek, T. (2008, September 10). STP picks Tanya to woo 1.2m tourists. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³⁴ Chan, B (2012, July 11). Tanya’s time. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³⁵ Tanya Chua Facebook profile. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/tanyachuaofficial/info>

³⁶ Chan, B. (2012, December 10). Just say so-so concert. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³⁷ Chan, B. (2012, June 28). Staying true to her voice. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³⁸ Chan, B (2012, July 11). Tanya’s time. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

³⁹ Chang, M. C. (2008, July 7). Double delight. *The New Paper*. Retrieved from Factiva.

⁴⁰ Tanya Chua Facebook profile. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/tanyachuaofficial/info>

- 1999 Best Local Music Composition for *Hao Wu Liao* (Singapore Hit Awards)
- 2001 Top Ten Best Album (Chinese Musician Association, Taiwan)
- 2001 Top Ten Best Artiste (Chinese Musician Association, Taiwan)
- 2003 Top Ten Album (Chinese Musician Association, Taiwan)
- 2004 Best Local Music Composition for *Night Blindness* (Singapore Hit Awards)
- 2004 Top Ten Song for *Abyss* (Singapore Hit Awards)
- 2005 Best Singer Songwriter (Singapore Hit Awards)
- 2005 Best Singer Songwriter (Global Chinese Music Chart)
- 2006 Best Female Vocalist (Golden Melody Awards, Taiwan)
- 2006 Best Female Singer (Hong Kong)
- 2006 Top Ten Song for *Beautiful Love* (Global Chinese Music Chart)
- 2007 Top Five Female Singer (China)
- 2008 Best Female Vocalist (Golden Melody Awards, Taiwan)
- 2008 Best Album Producer for *Goodbye & Hello* (Golden Melody Awards, Taiwan)
- 2010 Best Local Music Composition for *If you see him* (Singapore Hit Awards)
- 2010 Best Local Artiste (Singapore Hit Awards)
- 2010 Top Artiste (Singapore Hit Awards)
- 2012 Artistic Excellence Award at the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (Compass)⁴¹
- 2012 Best Female Vocalist (Golden Melody Awards, Taiwan)

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⁴¹ Tan, Y. K. (2012, July 10). Girl powered. *The New Paper*. Retrieved from Factiva.

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