

**Voice of an Age: Those Sixties Sound-Alike**by **Choy, Siva**, written in 2002

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*Musician, comedian, and writer Siva Choy describes the uniquely Singaporean slice of the '50s and '60s, complete with competing Elvis Presleys, unauthorised "titles", and the quest to be the best copy!*

I grew up in the music environment of the '50s in which the greatest compliment you could earn was that you sounded exactly like someone else.

So the local neighbourhood (in my case, Pasir Panjang) was full of Elvis Presleys, Paul Ankas, Pat Boones, Frank Sinatras, Johnny Rays, and Nat King Coles, each with his own following.

Competition was friendly, so if there were two Pat Boones, one would be the Pat Boone of Pasir Panjang (5<sup>th</sup> Mile) and the other, the Pat Boone of Pasir Panjang (6<sup>th</sup> Mile). Generally, the Pat Boone types attracted docile followers, but the Elvis Presley types tended to attract local gangsters so that arguments over who did the most convincing version of *Jailhouse Rock* often ended in coffeshop brawls.

By the early 60s, sounding exactly like someone else had become a nationwide pastime. Contests were held to decide once and for all who Singapore's authorised Elvis was (or Cliff Richard. Or Whoever). As a nervous, trembling 12-year-old still in school uniform vying for the Paul Anka title, I squeaked my way into the semi-finals of the Paul Anka contest where I was ousted by the already legendary Wilson David, who later was to win the official title of Singapore's Elvis Presley as well as Singapore's Cliff Richard.

My brother James and I started off as a group called The Cyclones. (The trend at one time was for gale force names like Johnny & the Hurricanes, The Tornadoes, and The Thunderbirds.) We did Everly Brothers' numbers, and since we were brothers, we got tagged with the "Everly Brothers of Singapore" title (unauthorised). This annoyed some Everly Brothers in Katong and Newton but was eventually resolved when one of the Newton Everlies went solo and one of the Katong Everlies finally sang alongside us. By the time we were all in the same band, we had given up the Everlies and upgraded to The Beatles.

Till I heard The Beatles, the gutsiest rock I had known had been the type delivered by Elvis and the Everlies. You could pull off a cool Everly Brothers jive in the key of A and if you were daring, an Elvis rocker in the higher key of C. In that context, The Beatles' idea of cool would have been C, normal would have been E, and really rocking would have been G.

When I started figuring out the chords for The Beatles' *From Me to You*, James looked at me in disbelief and said "Are you sure you got the chords right? I mean, our voices can make it, but it'll take some shouting."

He had good reason to be doubtful of my chord transcription. The cassette tape recorder had not been invented, record players were rare in most homes, records were beyond the budget of schoolboys, and our only source of music was the radio. Learning to play a song meant having the radio on permanently and rushing for guitar, pen and paper whenever your song came on. Which was not very often because most radio deejays then (unlike their hip counterparts in Rediffusion) had stone-age tastes in pop.

So shout and scream we did, and for the first time, our neighbours discovered there was talent next door.

Until The Beatles came along, you could apply to join a band purely as a singer like Elvis or Cliff, or as a non-singing musician. After The Beatles, you needed to be able to sing and play an instrument, and if you could not afford four microphones, you were in serious trouble.

By this time, James and I had teamed up with a formidable rhythm n' blues band called The Checkmates, and we were churning out carbon copy Beatles hits as fast as The Beatles wrote them. The old Badminton Hall in Geylang, with its hideous acoustics and about 9,000 seating capacity (possibly illegal) was where dozens of bogus Beatles bands like ours served surrogate Beatlemania to fans who had no hope of seeing the real thing.

The nearest we got to that was when The Beatles stopped over in transit on their way to Hong Kong. Some 5,000 fans turned up at the old Paya Lebar Airport. The Beatles were asleep in the plane but someone woke Paul McCartney who obligingly appeared at the door and waved to his screaming fans. That little concession got fans so excited that they broke down the security gates and rushed out onto the tarmac. They never made it to the gangway. The security officers managed to prevent that. But they demonstrated, for what it was worth, that Beatlemania was alive and well in Singapore.

What was it about the early Beatles that fuelled such an emotional, often hysterical, response from teenage fans, especially women? Apart from their music, I think their youth, unpretentiousness, humour and boy-next-door personality contributed greatly to their success. I remained a Beatles fan well into adulthood because their musical directions changed as they changed and matured, and became richer with time, in contrast to the music of many other musical icons who became irrelevant with the march of time.

Perhaps the greatest thing about The Beatles influence was that you were expected to write your own music, arrange it and call the shots in the recording studio, and not depend on a reservoir of songwriters, producers, professional studio musicians, recording engineers, and PR prompters to show your stuff. It was not a coincidence that a very high proportion of music recorded by the Singapore bands of the mid-60s featured original compositions and that many made it to the local charts. One local band called The Swallows even recorded an original rhythm n' blues composition in Malay that entered the West German Top Ten!

Unfortunately, just as musicians were trying to move from imitation to originality, a new phenomenon emerged dedicated to pure imitation – the music pirates. Thousands of look-alike albums flooded the markets, and whatever little royalties local musicians had been looking forward to, vanished. At least one recording artiste I know took a taxi from Katong to the city to collect his annual royalties, only to discover that it could not even cover his taxi fare.

His only consolation was that one of the music tracks appeared on the same pirated album as The Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and that his children might be impressed some day.

Today, the music that gets me off is the blues, simply because it is all about improvisation. Like jazz, it is about the only music I know where five musicians who have never met before can get together and play a song in which they can express their individual talent and emotion to the fullest, and yet sound like one and totally involve the audience. And I owe my passion for the blues to The Beatles. They were great admirers of legendary rhythm n’ blues artistes like Chuck Berry, whose style and energy is reflected in a lot of The Beatles’ early work.

Today, when I am not jamming with blues musicians or working on my own songs in my home studio in Perth, I do what I started out doing in the 60s when I was a “bootleg” Beatle – I play for people who will never hear Elvis, Abba, Queen, or The Beatles, and trot out a bit of everything from Elvis to Shania Twain. And I never use that clichéd catcall: “Are you having a good time?”

I know they are.