

Indie music in Singapore: From fringe to mainstream

Written by Stephanie Ho on 10 February 2014

Indie music or independent music encompasses a wide range of musical genres including rock, pop, metal and folk. Indie music is associated with alternative, non-mainstream productions and forms of distribution. In Singapore, Indie bands became popular in the 1990s and continue to be an important part of the local music scene today.

Indie or independent music refers to music produced by individuals, bands or small recording companies independent of the major labels. It is usually associated with alternative, non-mainstream music although the term encompasses a broad spectrum of musical genres. The term “Indie music” became widely used in Britain in the 1980s to describe music of the post-punk ethos.¹

Indie musicians tend to adopt a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach towards music and make fewer concessions to market expectations.² Patrick Chng of Indie band, The Oddfellows, said, “We’re less formulaic. And we have more ‘attitude’”.³ This ‘attitude’ is often more important than musical or lyrical ability. BigO editor Philip Cheah said, “The lyrical content and the music in Indie tend to be more freewheeling and less concerned with structure. It’s all about breaking rules. If you’re looking for perfect diction, forget it! The musical statement comes first”.⁴

Early days

The beginnings of a local Indie music scene came about in the 1980s when non-mainstream music was introduced to Singapore through music reviewers and critics such as Chris Ho (later known as X’Ho) and Singapore Monitor journalists Michael and Philip Cheah.

Ho was one of the pioneer movers of Indie music in Singapore. He introduced “exciting and dangerous new sounds” to the Singapore audience through segments – Eight Miles High and Weird Scenes in the Goldmine – in his Rediffusion programme.⁵ In addition Ho was also a musician who pushed the boundaries. Released in 1983, Ho’s debut album *Regal Vigour* as part of the band Zircon Lounge embodied the Indie spirit of non-conformity and passion. In an interview on the album, Ho said, “Everyone wants to play safe. No one wants to do anything about music because the feeling is – ‘Ah, it’s too difficult’. This is what *Regal Vigor* means to us – not playing safe.”⁶

In 1985, Singapore’s first independent rock ‘n’ roll magazine BigO was formed. Initially planned as a fanzine for music enthusiasts to interact and discuss rock music, BigO eventually became not only a supporter but also a catalyst for emerging Indie

¹ Shuker, R. (2012). *Popular music culture: the key concepts*. London: Routledge, p. 184.

² Ho, C. (1991, December 6). Stand and deliver. *Straits Times*.

³ Lim, S. (1992, February 14). Notes from the underground. *Straits Times*.

⁴ Lim, S. (1992, February 14). Notes from the underground. *Straits Times*.

⁵ Tham, L. *Let us rock, Singapore*. Retrieved from <http://gashaus.com/component/content/article/57-scenes/109-let-us-rock-singapore.html>

⁶ Cheah, P. (1983, November 7). *Regal vigour*. *Singapore Monitor*.

musicians and bands.⁷ In 1986, it invited unsigned musicians and bands to send in their demo tapes and subsequently released a cassette, *Not on the radio* (1986), of the best singers and groups they found. Among those featured were Chris Ho, Razor's Edge and Corporate Toil.⁸ These events spurred more young people to form bands and develop their own music.

The 1990s

In the 1990s, BigO continued to be a big supporter of local Indie music. In 1991, it released a compilation CD of original music by local bands under the *New School Rock* series. This CD featured The Oddfellows, Corporate Toil and Opposition Party and helped needed publicity. In subsequent CDs, BigO helped launch other Indie bands such as A.W.O.L., The Padres and Stompin' Ground.⁹

Soon, interest in Indie music took an upturn. The Oddfellows' debut album, *Teenage Head*, released in 1991 moved 2,000 copies – a record for a local English recording. In addition one of the band's singles, *So happy*, became a number one hit on the local radio charts. The relative success of the band paved the way for other Indie bands to release their own music. That year, 15 other albums were released on independent labels. *The Straits Times* estimated that there were around 200 local bands writing their own music at that time.¹⁰ In 1993, Multitrack 3, a programme on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) even featured Singapore Indie groups, The Padres, CU1359, ESP and The Oddfellows.¹¹

Besides BigO, The Substation at Armenian Street played an important role in the growth of Indie music. Local musician Alvin Wong remembered, "It was one of the few venues that local bands could perform at in the 1990s. Our band had one of our earlier gigs there, and it was fun because kids who liked different genres of music would come together. Kids who liked punk music and kids who liked Indie music could be seen hanging out together at The Substation. It felt like a tightly knit community where people could make friends. There was a lot of positive vibes".¹²

Despite its rising popularity, local Indie music had a limited appeal. Stephen Tan, then Managing Director of record company BMG explained why few Indie bands were offered recording contracts. He said, "Look, you have to be realistic about the whole thing. What kind of returns can we get? Looking at the situation here, there is just no consumer base for local Indie music".¹³

From 2000

The situation would change in the new millennium when Indie music began to attract larger audiences. Since 2002, the Esplanade has hosted *Baybeats*, an annual three-day Indie music festival featuring both local and overseas musicians. In its inaugural year, the festival only attracted a crowd of around 9,000. In 2009, the festival attracted

⁷ Cheah, M. (1985, October 15- November 19). But seriously. *BigO*, Vol. 1, Iss. 1.

⁸ Sounds like nothing on the radio. (1986, July 4). *Straits Times*.

⁹ Toh, C. (2010, July 8). New school rock II. *TODAY (Singapore)*.

¹⁰ Lim, S. (1992, February 14). Notes from the underground. *Straits Times*.

¹¹ Nazir Keshvani. (1993, December 24). S'pore indie bands on BBC. *Straits Times*.

¹² Lee, J. (2010, December 10). Indie station. *Straits Times*.

¹³ Lim, S. (1992, April 17). Indie blues. *Straits Times*.

around 100,000 fans.¹⁴

Local bands clamored for a place in the line-up as the festival became the biggest platform for home-grown talent. Saiful Idris of The Great Spy Experiment said, “Being invited was a huge deal because Baybeats was to us the biggest stage a Singaporean band could play”. The festival also inspired a new generation of bands who are influenced by the acts they saw.¹⁵ The positive response to Baybeats also saw the emergence of other venues for Indie music.¹⁶

With a larger audience and visibility, Indie bands have been able to achieve a higher level of success. One of the most successful local bands has been *Electrico*, formed in 2003. The band’s debut album *So much more* sold a respectable 3,000 copies, and was the first home-grown band to be nominated for an MTV Asia Award. The band’s hit song *I want you* also received a Composer and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) award for Top local English Pop Song.¹⁷

One of the band’s biggest achievement was to compose and perform the theme song – *What do you see?* – for the 2009 National Day Parade.¹⁸ Although the stint catapulted *Electrico* into the mainstream, the band was also criticised by Indie fans for being a sell-out. Explaining their rationale for their involvement in the Parade, lead singer David Tan said, “Some people say we sold out by taking part in the National Day Parade, but bands have always criticised the Government for not supporting local English music and when they offered the biggest stage on which to perform, it would be hypocritical not to accept”.¹⁹

Improvements in technology have also enabled Indie musicians and bands to reach out more effectively to their audiences. In addition to releasing albums and performing at gigs, Indie bands can now stream their music on the Internet and release videos on YouTube. Indie band *The Great Spy Experiment* made history in 2013 when their album *Litmus* became No. 1 on the download charts of the Singapore version of iTunes. Universal Music marketing director Lim Teck Kheng said, “It shows that if a band has talent and spends time working on the ground, plays a lot of gigs, support from the fans will come”.²⁰

Quote

“Everyone who’s ever been in a band playing original music in Singapore will tell you they are not in it for the money because there’s little money in playing. They do it because they love it.” – Joe Ng, musician, formerly of The Padres.²¹

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¹⁷ Thomas, S. (2006, June 16). Home run. *Straits Times*.

¹⁸ Chow, J. (2009, July 3). Rock on with *Electrico* at NDP. *Straits Times*.

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