

Musical Practice of Rock

Burhanuddin bin Buang records one notable musical practice in the Malay community after Pop-Yeh Yeh. In a sense it is difficult to assess the impact of both across popularity of consumption and production except in hindsight. A fruitful area of research would be to examine record or cassette sales at shops, concert ticket sales, broadcast programmes, programmes flyers and any such material that would help examine these areas in greater depth.

For Burhanuddin, Mat Rock as a social phenomenon was as much a part of the landscape with fashion statements, the problem with drugs, long hair, anti-establishment sentiments. Music's role in the Mat Rock phenomenon is far more complex than the stereotype that generally attends its subscribers. Did the music cause such behaviour? Did the music accentuate behaviour? Was rock music an unfortunate accomplice in social behavioural patterns that may have had no more than a subscription to the music because it was different from other musics? Lyrics of the great rock songs of the period are entirely different in kind from the lyrics that mark the skill and biting wit of one like Bob Dylan and like-minded, like spirited artists.

Rebellious lyrics are now supplanted by sound worlds arrived at via distortion, wailing, crashing rhythms, amplification and by extension decibel levels approximate what many believe to be the closest definition of noise. Yet noise, as Eno observes, has special significance, even power, and nowhere else is this more keenly felt than in rock music:

Distortion and complexity are the sources of noise. Rock music is built on distortion: on the idea that things are enriched, not degraded by noise. To allow something to become noisy is to allow it to support multiple readings. It is a way of multiplying resonances. It is also a way of 'making the medium fail' – thus giving the impression that what you are doing is bursting out of the material: 'I'm too big for this medium'.¹

But the energy levels that emanated from these new groups, the cult following thereafter, the marked observable patterns of behaviour which were by comparison significantly deviant and a potential or real threat to social order, gave rise to new levels of panic and anxiety. The indulgent consumption of nicotine, alcohol and narcotic substances was said to be high in this group and its subscribers, bordering on cult followings, were the

youth in Singapore; the very youth on whom hopes were placed, socially, politically and economically, to lift post-independent Singapore out of the threatened existence of third-world status. While the anxiety felt by Dr. Goh Keng Swee in 1973 had its reverberations across Western popular culture of the Euro-American worlds of entertainment establishments, the Mat-Rockers seemed to revel in their situated ‘marginalia’ and were contented to remain accessible to and among themselves.²

Of the practitioners in the world of heavy metal and rock, Yusnor Ef recognises Ramli Sarip, who in Singapore garnered the label “Raja Rock” or the King of Rock and contributed one track **Ada Kerja Ada Gaji** in the Sweet Charity album **Batu**. Ramli began life on his own after a long period with Sweet Charity, also nicknamed the Deep Purple of Singapore. According to their contemporaries, their lead guitarist was able to sound like the famed Ritchie Blackmore of this hugely successful English rock band. Sweet Charity was also affectionately known as the magnificent seven; Ramli Sarip (lead vocals), Rahman Sarbani, Rosli Mohalim, Syed Hassan, Ahmad Jaafar, Wan Ahmad and Masrom Abdul Hamid.

Sweet Charity began life as a band playing rock covers at the Ocean Bar at Sembawang in 1968. They were spotted by Ken from Musicarama and were invited to play at the National Theatre. *1972/4...during that time it was called Rock Matinee...Saturday after work everyone will go to the National Theatre pay \$3...we were the second or third band...people kept shouting balek! balek!...I told the boys, don't worry, if we are good, definitely they will like us...so after the first song, they shouted balik balik, second song everybody went quiet, third song, they started to clap....and that's the beginning...whoever wants to play, played before Sweet Charity.....whoever plays after Sweet Charity...no one will be around...*³

Theirs was a sound that shocked the establishment. It was said that performance venues were packed whenever Sweet Charity was due to perform and tickets sold out long before the doors of the venue were open. Their albums were also to prove enduring. **Pelarian** (1980) hit sales of 20,000 units in the first week of its release. In all they released seven albums with hits such as Kamalia, Jangan Tunggu Lama-Lama, Apa-Apa Saja, Datang dan Pergi and Zakiah. Sweet Charity's impact served as catalyst for the formation of Search, Wings and Lefthanded. The group disbanded in 1985 but several sell-out concerts are the result of Sweet Charity reunion concerts, even if ever so briefly.

Ramli felt he had much more to offer even after Sweet Charity broke up. *I know that I don't have the mentality or attitude of working the same thing every night, wearing the same thing every night...and that's not me...and when I told Jimmy Wee (WEA—the MD for Singapore) that I wanted to record a solo album...Ramli Sarip....I was a bit nervous so when I recorded my first album that was the first time I produced my own, wrote my own material and did it all below 100 hours...I worked on a very very tight budget...I wanted the company to understand and feel that thing I believed in...we sold about 25 000 copies....during that time the counterfeit was about 1 in 10...despite that I managed to sell 25 000...the company was smiling but I told them that this was not even the beginning....I recorded the second album Bukan Kerana Nama...sold more than 50 000...the rest is history...for me there are four periods Sweet Charity—Rock and Roll; Ramli Sarip; Ramli Sarip—Malay Pop & Traditional; and today Ramli Sarip World music...WOMAD and my latest albums.⁴*

The fact that he managed a comparatively successful solo career and still does to this day, has earned him the reputation of something of a rock legend and that reputation seems to have transcended Singapore.

Mat Rockers

In the 1970s, heavy metal and rock music made its debut with the attendant hippie lifestyle and value systems. Long hair and the 'noise-like' music of Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Rainbow and Kiss marked a change from the music and lyrics of Cliff Richard and the Shadows. The anxiety of response was felt clearly at the highest levels of government. For instance, at the opening of the Japanese Seiwan Gardens in Jurong in 1973, Dr. Goh Keng Swee offered his views:

Let us not consider the subject of music as a trifling matter, of no import in the state of affairs. The ancients knew better. Both Plato and Confucius correctly recognised which music as an instrument of state policy could play in producing the desirable type of citizen. Neglect in Singapore on this subject has given rise to serious problems. I refer to the widespread popularity of the barbarous form of music produced by the steel guitar linked to an ear shattering system of sound amplification. Voice accompaniment takes the form of inane tasteless wailing. It is barbarous music of this kind that is mainly responsible for attracting the mindless young of Singapore to the cult of permissiveness of the western world. It is hardly a coincidence that the problem of drug-addiction has become serious

*where performers and audience foregather. I trust the Ministry of Home Affairs will take stern action against this menace.*⁵

What is most unfortunate here is when the Ministry of Home Affairs was called upon to take stern action by the Defence Minister, it was not made clear whether the menace was the **music** or the **drugs**. What was clear from the message was the correlation between music and type of citizen. In any case, both drugs and *barbarous music produced by the steel guitar linked to an ear shattering system of sound amplification* became targets in an effort to deal with the menace. For many trained musicians who had worked in respectable circumstances the emergence of Rock n'Roll, Carnaby Street, Pop (including psychedelic pop) and Rock/Heavy Metal had considerable impact on altering their perspectives, if not their livelihood. Rock and roll musicians had to adapt to playing opportunities at private parties, music festivals and concerts. During the 1970s, private sponsorships allowed for a number of rock-revival shows at the National Theatre with acts by Sweet Charity, Humble Origin, Unwanted, Fragile and Heritage; eventually not sustainable enough both in terms of finance and musicians. This environment was not helped by the interconnection of the music, musicians and drugs. Ho (1999) refers to the period as the **Great Concern about Drugs**. Clubs housing local bands began to close, TV stations refused to feature male performers with long hair, a prohibition of rock concerts and rock songs restricted from airplay and even the restriction or prohibition of rock music and musicians eventually reached the National Theatre. Therefore, the 1970s and 1980s saw local bands in English language having a hard time establishing themselves.

To be a rocker in Singapore during the 1970s must have been considerably difficult. Rapper Sheikh Haikel recalls, *Left Handed are Singaporean, M. Nasir, Rusty Blade....all the famous rock groups in Malaysia are Singaporean and but they had to leave...*⁶ Craig Lockard documents the fate of M. Nasir who went on in Malaysia to guide a Malay Rock Group Kembara and produced six top selling albums between 1982 and 1985. One of Nasir's songs with the group Kembara, Bus number 13, recounts the destruction of Malay neighbourhoods in Singapore...presumably the ones along bus journey.⁷ Another interesting group was Rusty Blade who, like Sweet Charity, graced the National Theatre as late as 1975 but found a more empathetic market in Malaysia.

Shirlene Noordin's⁸ exploration of the practices of the Mat Rockers identifies a group or sub-group seen to gather at the void decks of HDB housing blocks, strumming a seemingly tuneless song on an old guitar, or even a riff, or even doing nothing. Their appearance marked their distinctiveness; sporting long hair, unkempt looks and bedraggled in the tight jeans and T-shirts. Even the cigarettes they smoked (an Indonesian brand called **Gudang Garam**) marked them out. Their choice of music was almost inevitably rock and heavy metal. Given the 'unforgettable' image, Noordin informs us the Mat Rocker was regarded a deviant, anti-establishment figure contrasted against other conformist citizens who advocate puritan moral value systems, appropriate work ethics and struggle to emerge victorious in the rat race and paper chase and eventually the wealth owned by a few.

It is argued that was around the 1970s marked the period the Mat Rocker subculture emerged. Participants were likely to be displaced Malay youth from working class backgrounds and large family units and an apparent lack of vigilance in parental control. Poor job prospects, low or almost no educational qualifications, and perhaps a sense of displacement from their familiar homes; here Burhannudin bin Buang reminds us of a massive Urban Housing programme coincides with resettlement and relocation of many of these families and the inevitable socio-cultural re-negotiation in a very different setting of a confines of a flat.⁹ The composition of a Malay community as 15% of the local population in Singapore is the second largest after the Chinese 78%, but renders them a minority from a demographic perspective. Moreover, when a value system of hard work, thrift and wealth accumulation in the dominant Chinese culture is juxtaposed with a lifestyle with preferences in earning livelihoods in agriculture and more rural areas away from the economic hub, unfortunate comparisons portrayed the Malay youth as backward, lazy, un-enterprising and pleasure-seeking. This does not of course hide the fact that not too long in Singapore's history, only those who pursued an English stream education were likely to benefit in changing economic circumstances. This lack of an English education exacerbated an already difficult situation. Since the 1970s, Malay youth were exempted from National Service, which made employers even more reluctant to employ such 'unprepared' youth. Noordin argues that in the face of such telling displacement, heavy metal and rock became the centrifugal force for youth of the Malay community. Heavy metal's association, either as fact or fiction, with satanic worship, the encounter with considerable amplification, read as noise and disorder within a rugged Singapore society only served to

further alienate these youth via discrimination and stereotyping. Noordin refers to work by Will Straw (1983) where such music placed *emphasis on technological effect and instrumental virtuosity...the cult of a lead guitarist, the immediate gratification of self and self-esteem with performing extended solo-playing and in effect, a disregard for the temporal limits of the pop-song.*

The discourse developed puts forward the argument that heavy metal and rock were the sites of respite and refuge for these Malay youth. A sense of identity was further fostered by dress code, which, in the 1970s were blue jeans with alterations; cutting off piece of the jeans at the knee, sewing on corduroy into these cut sections, flared bottoms (fully in keeping with the style). In the later decade of the 1980s, skin-tight jeans were adorned with embroidered patches of heavy metal symbols. Hair was always kept long, sometimes past the waist, symbolically defiant against the government policy on long hair. These youth could be found in numbers and the void decks of the HDB flats were popular venues. Since the lack of money was a real problem, hanging around with activities from idle chatter to guitar sessions/ lessons were the only viable ones. Talk centred around music, fashion and friends, as well as dissemination of news of other Mat Rock gangs. Prominent Malay musicians began their journey to fame at these humble beginnings. If there was money, there was a local hotspot for live metal and rock music performances. Rainbow, located at the Ming Arcade was a hotspot. It was also a site for “Battle of the Bands” competitions and drew an audience seen to be predominantly from the Malay community. When the Rainbow closed down in the mid-1980s, **Dreams Disco** at Amara Hotel became the next site. Before long the frequent fights resulted in the location eventually closing down. A last known site was identified at the Hot Line Pub in Cuscaden Road, while anecdotal evidence suggests one along Tanjong Pagar.

During Noordin’s field study, the only prominent Mat Rock gang among the few was **Hell’s Angels**. In general however, the social group of a Mat Rocker was considered loose. There was no leader and each was respected for their individual skill or knowledge. Senior members were usually the musical experts and mentors for the junior members. There were the usual deviants, especially if there was someone who claimed to know other gang members and had ‘inside knowledge’ of them. This was considered cool. On other occasions respect was gained for being known as a ladies man.

Language was generally Malay with borrowed words from the Hokkien dialect and English as well as mispronounced words or given a new lease of life in their language. Relax would become *relak*. For instance, when one is told to take things easy, its *relaklah brudder* (relax brother) OR *relak one koner* (relax in a corner). A compliment comes as “*gereklah lu*”...meaning you’ve got style or you’re cool. Compression of words formed one other part of their unique vocabulary. *Apa macam* (how are you?) would become *amacam?*¹⁰

The Mat Rocker image and lifestyle articulated through heavy metal, social mannerisms and material culture is not only deviant from a ‘national culture of conformity’ but also from their parent culture. In short, they were identified as a deviant Malay group. By subscribing to a western cultural influence, indulgence in pre-marital sex, alcoholic beverages and drugs, their un-Malay, un-Muslim lifestyles became values frowned upon by many Malay elders. Noordin sees it as a ‘generationally specific articulation of an alternative value system.’ From her personal interviews with the Mat Rockers, there is acknowledgement of the inadequacy of coping with their marginality in Singapore society despite the common currency of long hair, attire, the gear and ‘hanging out with the boys’. As in a male-dominated social unit, the presence of females is occasional as girl-friends or fiancées of the members.¹¹

In the 1990s, the Mat Rockers, according to Noordin, somehow began to lose their cohesiveness as a marginalised group. A number of reasons were speculated:

- Commercial successes have made heavy metal groups and musicians even more accessible if not aesthetically and commercially fashionable. The sense of being cohesive as a marginalised group of hardcore heavy metal supporters has diminished significantly for the Mat Rockers since the 1970s.
- Since the 1970s, the Malay community as a whole has experienced a very different process of negotiating the demands of a capitalist culture which has always characterised Singapore, of which a large percentage are the Chinese community. The indulgence in nothingness was considered a value system for the Mat Rocker. However, from the 1980s and 1990s, more Malays have gained access, on their merit, to tertiary education and securing professional careers. This has arguably created less of a need to appear cohesive as

- a marginalised group since economically, the Malay community has grown in affluence and opportunities are available.
- The inevitable confrontation with government policies. For instance, all males above the age of 18 have to undergo compulsory National Service for a period of 2½ years. If nothing else, a short haircut is one obligatory code of conformity. Those who have completed their full-time service are required to participate in reservist training at regular intervals. The haircut becomes the first step in being made to conform. The setting up of the Vigilante Corp in the 1970s and part of the 1980s and later the Singapore Civil Defence Force only found a way to match their abilities.
 - More self-help groups from within the Malay community have helped redress the marginalisation. Malay/Muslim associations like Mendaki, AMP (Association of Malay Professionals) were tasked to assist and support members of the Malay/Muslim community.
 - The perception by the community, including law enforcement and other governmental agencies, that heavy metal has somehow lost its strong anti-establishment connotations and has become more accessible, less socially unacceptable, and in some cases, quite lucrative. The Metallica concert in Singapore in 1993, received uncharacteristic publicity in the main English newspaper (although credit was given to the Police for ensuring good order with no violent clashes characterising crowd behaviour at rock concerts in other parts of the world). From 1995, the National Youth Council developed a site around the Orchard shopping zone (near the Somerset MRT) called it the Youth Park and has since provided a venue for youth who wish to express themselves musically. On many occasions, the Youth Park has been a venue for heavy metal genres, besides rap, hip-hop and other youth musical fashions. In 2003 Payment On Death (P.O.D) performed at the Youth Park—a seemingly perfect combination of Hip-Hop, heavy metal and Christianity (members of POD claim to be regular Sunday churchgoers). Other venues for Heavy Metal include the Youth Park, Bishan Skate Park as well a number of Community Clubs.¹²

Mat Rock; An Alternative reading in two in-depth accounts

Not all of Mat Rock fits comfortably into the trap of the deviant and unsavoury subculture. Ramli Sarip, earning the title Raja Rock (The King of Rock) remained unmoved by the tumult and moral and drug panic of the 1970s. As P. Ramlee had his name inscribed permanently in Malay folklore in the mid-twentieth century, Ramli Sarip earned his hard-won respect first through the group Sweet Charity, described by Lockard as *loud longhaired music*.¹³ *Musically although I am not the director I was spokesman and the mastermind...All of us were the same age...I started with Sweet Charity in 1968, 1969, playing at weddings...beach party, dances, we'd sell our own tickets...we'd hire a hall...from there we got a contract in a club, Ocean Bar in Sembawang...where lots of bars were each playing Country n' Western, Soul, Pop...we were into Rock and Roll...our audience were sailors...they were six foot, big size, tattoos...but that was where we were taught and we learned...they recommended us Doobie Brothers, Steely Dan, Jimi Hendrix, Black Sabbath...sometimes they became friends among us and they send us all these latest albums...we just wanted to play music and I knew the strength of the band...I liked the style of the hippie but not the culture...I played rock and roll but did not smoke, drink nor take drugs because of my religion, beliefs and my culture...but the local media associated me with yellow culture...the music I played, like sports (I play soccer, sepak takraw, hockey, baseball, long and short distance running), is to me all about energy...rock suits my style, my approach with the band...so we just played...we had no chance to play in clubs with long term contracts like three or six months because we were blacklisted...some promoters or agents said that Sweet Charity...everywhere they play...they are going to have trouble because of the fans...the crowd who are really hardcore and get into fights sometimes...but we were not like that...*¹⁴

Their faith and fate, added to the fact that Sweet Charity remained in Singapore despite the guilty by association press, eventually saw their acceptance not only within the community at large (they already had a die-hard following). In 1979, they were signed on by WEA and they made sales history for themselves while WEA cashed in on their latest acquisition....*Before we became recording artists...we were already a household name...but this is I think part of the mentality of the people at the time...that's history...With Sweet Charity, basically we were into Rock & Roll, Rock, Heavy Metal, sometimes blues and folk but we did play couple of disco...We were a good live band we could make a crowd stand, dance move and sing...the band had the charisma and style that suited us...suited the environment...We didn't have a chance to write our own material until a*

later time...1979...We had the style and we were considered to have these ingredients to be able to play a Deep Purple song...but I smile when people say “I heard you are Singapore’s Deep Purple”...I’ve seen ups and downs...they banned the album Rentak because of my long hair...long hair was a big problem in Malaysia...Rentak hidup and duet album with Katijah in Zaman....¹⁵

Rock as Enemy of the State; Another view by Ramli Sarip:

Every song I write and compose is for the future...I did campaigns...sometimes I approached them, sometimes they approached me because of my songs which are related to the theme that they want...In Sweet Charity we used to play for an organisation called Bustanol Arifin—they organised events, helped us sell tickets, dance parties, beach parties, Mosque Building Fund, Ramakrishna Mission...we did a couple of things at the National Theatre, Mendaki, Annor Building Fund at Woodlands, the National Anti-Drugs, Anti-smoking campaign...I even went to the Prisons...I am against drugs because I know the problems associated with them...so in my album cover, I even had the sign...Hapuskan Dadah..I don’t have to tell people but I have to tell you this because some of them are not...I don’t wish to have them have impressions about me or say things about me...but I just feel we have a part to play...it is not easy for an artist to put Hapuskan Dadah on the front cover...What the hell?!?!...the same message is in the song...that should be enough...but I wanted it as a statement...since then, I’ve been doing lots of community work...¹⁶

Rock and Metal Communities

The myriad followers of Mat Rock culture is in itself an interesting phenomenon. Burhanidin bin Buang¹⁷ was right in the middle of the movement when he was in school:

During my early secondary school days, the Mat Rock culture was very strong...if you were into anything other than heavy rock music...you would be an outcast...you would be accused of being different...but the choice of rock was not because I wanted to escape this outcast tag but more of a new love for a new kind of music...at the time after the demise of Sweet Charity, there was a mainstreamisation of Malay rock bands...like Search, Left-handed, from Singapore, Rusty Blade, Helter Skelter and all that...and that actually added volumes to the impact made...my first band was formed in 1987 with my classmates...I can’t even remember the name of the band...there was about 5 of us...at that age it wasn’t about composing...they formed a band because the handsome guys were looking to impress

girls...and that's it...I became the lead guitarist...that went on for three years...and developed a liking for heavier stuff...for instance it was Yngwie Malmsteen at Secondary Three...we started listening to Metallica...they were not as big until 1991 because there were not as much melody in their songs as Dio or Iron Maiden...it was very aggressive music...when I started listening to Creeping Death...and they said why not play Creeping death...we got the energy and rawness out of it...when I was in Secondary Four...I started separating myself from the rest of the boys and I wanted to play Metallica and Heroine Archer...I wanted to form a real metal band and I wanted to be the lead vocalist and lead guitarist...at that time I couldn't find one like that because such a vocalist was hard to get and I had to persuade good vocalists to come...

Burhanuddin offers his own lived experience of the Mat Rock Culture:

During the Heydays of the Mat Rock culture...not many were into the music...more were into the hanging out thing...part of looking cool and all that...it was no surprise that more than ten years after I left school, none of the guys who were contemporary and senior profess to be Mat Rock anymore...I went through the thrash metal phase but they totally gave up...it dawned on me the reason they were into Mat Rock was not for the love of music...I did not hang out as much...the focal point of the underground scene in 1990/1991 was Forum Galleria and Plaza Singapura...but I was never part of that hanging-out thing...because I was brought up in a strict manner...I do not attend parties...[or have] overnight sessions with friends...

However, that did not deter his musical pathway:

In 1990, my serious metal band was called Metal Trax...we were doing Metallica and Heroine covers.....but to me it was a watershed year, I came upon Death Angel, Exodus and Sodom...by the end of the 1990s Metal Trax was playing songs from these bands...in 1991 first to Violator and Fractured Skull...by this time I was into Death Metal and Grindcore...and the same time, I discovered I had a knack for writing songs...although many of the riffs were derivative of bands we were playing and liked...I retained guitarist/vocalist and band configurations like Sepultura and Metallica...we put up our first demo tape...totally raw...we didn't have the luxury of recording cheaply in a good reliable studio...it was done using a tape recorder...and taping of the jamming session...but it made us feel good...as we were putting our own stuff out...the thing that set me apart from the contemporary bands and underground bands then...my rebelliousness was

in the music. However bad the music was perceived by a lot of people, it was for me a positive outlet...with Fractured Skull, we did two rehearsal demos...in 1993, we disbanded after difficulties...there was this big grunge scene with Nirvana...I was not into that...its good music but it had become so mainstream it was becoming trendy and adopted by people who were not even part of the subculture...so in late 1993, after Fractured skull...the band which made me what I am is Manifest...way before Urban Karma...with Manifest...there was this conscious effort not to play Death Metal, generic trash metal, just wanted to be bands like Pantera...Sepultura got this tribal metal who were doing Chaos AD at the time, plus Helmet and we used this as inspiration to do our music...do just what we want...in 1994...a big influence was Machine Head from the US...they came out of the thrash metal scene in San Francisco...they adopted this new sound...aggressive...has this mainstream appeal...when I was in pre-university, I did a lot of the music without my parents knowledge...I dropped out of Polytechnic and got the second life in pre-university doing A-levels....they didn't support me so I had to do these things secretly...during my NS....got my A-level...got into NUS in 1997...but my music life took a serious blow...I had an industrial accident while serving NS in the Navy...multiple fractures in my left hand....they had metal plates in my fingers for six months.....Manifest were planning to record in a real studio then...but we eventually recorded in September till December 1996...that was a monumental step for myself and Manifest...we sold 300 copies of that humble effort...made a name for ourselves in the underground music scene...actually we were really outcasts...we didn't fit into metal...not even hardcore...caught in-between...but we felt if people liked us, they liked us...we didn't have to template ourselves...to backtrack...

The independent spirit...one of the main factors that led to the DIY spirit was that the Malay Music industry in Singapore was crumbling...by the mid-90s the only band in Singapore to be signed on recording label was Teachers Pet...they were the last Mat Rock band to be significant...it happened to a number of the underground bands in the late 80s and early 90s...they may not have realised it...but I guess my love for music and being in a band has always been there...putting up a demo tape...was a monumental thing....especially after the accident...in 1997, an significant thing for the band happened with important live gigs...people who had never seen the band were impressed by Manifest...most metal bands don't have a lot of showmanship...we changed all that...we incorporated a lot of hardcore showmanship in our performances...that actually set us apart for

good and bad...by the end of 1997 we got an offer from a Malaysian independent label to distribute our first Manifest demo in cassette format-- Strange Culture Records...but in 1998 there was quite a lot of unravelling...although the distribution was generally quite good...we received a lot of letters from those who bought the cassette...we were told that the label was a much hated label...they liked to rip people off...back in Singapore 1998...I got my first taste of backlash against the band...some prominence especially in underground circles inflated us and our image beyond reality...hate campaigns...it amazes me to realise how much energy has been expended to run this hate campaign on us...when I was putting Manifest on, there were bands that were overrated...but we strived to do better...rather than use hate campaigns against 'rival' bands...To be honest...I don't know...but they accused me of being sexist...its juvenile...but that generated a certain amount of bad publicity...again in 1997, although Manifest hadn't yet released a song called Budaya...people remembered Manifest because of this song although I can remember feeling more for other songs we wrote...actually the uniqueness in Budaya, we incorporated a kind of Dikir Barat singing...into the songs...a lot of Malay and Javanese melodies...towards the centre and end but laced with heavy riffs all the way...song kind of like attracted non-metal fans and those not belonging to the subculture to Manifest...when Manifest were part of Mixed Metal Assault...in 1998, that actually cemented public prominence for Manifest for good and bad...we had the same line-up from 1993-1998...when I changed my lead guitarist...from 1998 things started going wrong...I was accused of being dictatorial or bossy...perfectionist...but that came out of the passion I had for being in the band...this is a very expensive hobby...why waste it away?...I wanted the best not to boast but simply to excel...push the limits and boundaries...another milestone for me in 1998 was getting the Warna Mendaki scholarship got me a job in the broadcasting line...in radio...in early 1999, Budaya became a radio hit...and it was new because...people were wondering what this is....now its quite common to hear heavy stuff on Malay radio....but at the time...without sounding arrogant...this was the first song that invaded a rather safe Malay music airwave...they hadn't had that since Adnan Maswan...that song amazed people...although I'm with Urban Karma, people still talk about Budaya...Although, I feel the song was being promoted...RIA, in 1999, had this 13-episode Kegaran 99...there was on air 13 different bands jamming on air and Manifest was one of them...although I felt the song was aired because they wanted this on.....its nothing wrong...good promotion...but it had negative feedback because I was accused of mainstreamising

metal...now when I am on duty, two or three requests for Budaya...I have to be careful...even though my boss tells me its OK because the public want it...by 1999, I was the only original Manifest member remaining...we were planning to release our second album...but it didn't happen because I found out that the other members did not share the same vision as myself...and they didn't want to struggle against the hardship that their day-time jobs dictated...so I called it quits with Manifest in August 1999...and at the time, if there were a music formula that would make Manifest more accessible and still heavy...it would be the same formula that made Machine Head famous with Burning Red...the album didn't go well with their fans...actually watered down in relation to their first two albums...for me personally it was a good album...I always have high dreams...I always tell myself to be content with selling the minimum...the Mixed Metal Assault sold about 1000 albums...but the thing is what I forgot was that in 1998/9 the number of people who had handphones was not as high as now...there was no such thing as downloading of ringtones...at the same time there wasn't as many houses with CD burners...there wasn't a culture of sharing music files yet...so after Manifest, there was Urban Karma...it would be my next journey...my next solo project but with the structure of a band...and I guess the best part was when we wrote songs that we didn't care to be part of the discourse of metal or hard core...just wrote songs that...if I felt it was good then do it...One thing I don't want to add at the time was the percussion aspect...now I wish I had...we started recording in 2000...it took quite a long time...because I was in my honours year and had to get down to serious business and at the same time, having a band made me a more fun person...compared to the rest who were getting bogged down by the coursework and thesis...choosing a thesis topic on music was a great help...we put out the CD in 2001...it was called Disenchanted, Alienated and Anomic...the CD comprised of Urban Karma and five other bands...I guess by that time, it was a different me when we released Urban Karma...because our target was 1000 copies rather than let the sales emerge...if people want to buy they will buy...this change in attitude created a lot of pressure...I feel a lot of pressure...however bitter you are, you have to face the reality at the end of the day...it's a changed world...already...we had this experimental song...we wrote in a mixture and jaipong and bit of pop and nu-metal...a parody of love-relationships called Monkey Love...or Cinta Monyet Cinta Duit...it was a dig at a lot of the sappy Malay ballads...so called rock ballads...I guess people remember Manifest because of Budaya and Urban Karma because of Monkey Love...although I would prefer they not identify Urban Karma with Monkey Love...Paul Zach said it

was an intriguing song when he reviewed the CD...2001 was a good year for Urban Karma in the same way it was a good year for Manifest in 1997 because we played in a lot of shows and performed on TV...2000 was good because the live performance at Youth Park wasn't exactly good and there were a lot of skin heads looking for trouble...and I was shown the finger right in front of me...gigs that succeeded after the Youth Park were quite amazing...we played twice...Pasir Gudang and KL...people were amazed at the things we were doing, they said we were unique...in 2001, we played in the Clash of the Titans gig in KL to a crowd of 1000...it was fun and exciting...I brought two guitars because they had different tunings, in the end the amplifier didn't work and didn't manage to play the guitars at all...but it was good...2001 was the best year for Urban Karma...2002 started off on a bad note...we intended to have this gig to sell off stocks of our CDs, T-shirts and other things...the guy who was doing the selling of our stuff (a friend of ours who did volunteer work for us) had an idea of launching a fan club...on hindsight that was a bad thing...it left a bad taste...to make matters worse, we had our gig on the same day as POD had their free gig at Youth park...but we didn't know about this thing until two weeks to the date...we held our show at show at Marine Parade CC...once you book you cannot back out or change...we had to make it a go...by then...although the artistic and music factors were the dominant...we were thinking of business...at the time we thought why put money into something that we were going to lose...it was quite extravagant...but management guy put his money into it as well...the crowd numbers weren't good...POD had 5000 at their Youth Park gig.....although I dropped metal out of Urban Karma by calling it an ethnorock band because the term rock is better...not because I am ashamed to be a Metal head but this accusation of selling out...I didn't want to attract pointless debate...again not many people were into Urban Karma...and we had a fan club called Urbanase...I felt a bit insecure about the whole thing and didn't want a big failure...my mistake was to post in on Audioreload form (website)...people were saying all sorts of shitty things about the band...I guess that actually started hatred towards Urban karma...I was always advised by this management guy not to do things like that...but again I can't let people get away with slants like "hey they're just a bunch of monkeys" or Mats...I couldn't sit and watch all this said about us...this music is my baby and I won't let anyone talk bad about my baby...I have had to learn to grow out of that phase...can't exactly stop them...but the best part of 2002 was to be able to be part of this big Mat Rock—Tribute to Rockers...in which we played and with Rusty Blade...and I always told myself that if I died after this, I would die a happy

man...because these were the bands I followed and was their die-hard fan...and they had a big influence on me...that saved 2002 but again until now...there are a lot of things said about us on the internet...we did the second CD on 2003...cost-cutting move...we didn't go to mix studio...we recorded drums and bass in a real recording studio...recorded guitars using computers...sounded alright...we had this gig...so we planned on launching Rock on...we organised this gig...we used a lot of the mistakes we made in Urbanise...we sublet the gig to production house called Flipside productions house...to do the gig we ended up having to pay them \$8000...so its like...again it was not without any problems...5 July 2003, there was a Music Against Drugs gig...I know the guys who were doing the gig but again there was this war against the group (evident in the website guapunya.com)...this time I was restrained...there were a lot of ghostwriters...but in the end there were more on our side than theirs...again it didn't simmer down after the show...what was more important was that the album we put out was called Intifada Musika...Intifada was used to denote our struggle...in the music scene...having to tolerate accusations but not responding through violence...but the term was used to attract attention...nothing in the whole album was about the Palestinian struggle...we had a song called Bachalah...in the most easy listening and palatable song of the album...in a way it was like Monkey Love but not talking about trivial things...the importance of reading and acquiring knowledge...despite being a presenter and producer, despite having the airwaves at my disposal, I must say this song did catch on although people did not go crazy over it...maybe the Malay community probably got the impression rock music and religion don't mix...I feel Intifada Musika has the potential to go across genres but...again Metal guys found fault with it and the Mainstream people didn't like it because they didn't get what we were trying to say...we were neither here nor there...although we had a good gig...suffice to say that the same management guy....disappeared with some of the money and some people at the RC still owed us some hundreds of dollars...I wanted to release the CD before I got married...one day after my show...I cut my dreadlocks...I wanted to have a new beginning and prepare myself for my wedding...the battleground was more difficult in 2003 because of mp3 file sharing...kids preferred to buy ring tones rather than CDs...Rock On wasn't successful on volume but was successful because we were really aggressive on promotion...so we thought if we were aggressive on promotion on a monthly basis...things would actually move...we were brought down to earth...because at that moment, it dawned on me that this thing of promotion could not work anymore...so I feel that CDs cannot sell

*for \$10 anymore...put them in CD stores they collect dust...With Manifest it was me who did the management and finance...with Urban Karma, I put people in charge of things and I didn't see the results...it dawned on me that I could not do it the way I had with Urban Karma and we would have to leave this form of mentality...so it was not the end...2004...so far we played three shows...New Year gig **Rock of Ages** at Thomson CC...again quite a bad show...not many people turned up...because it was one day after the New Year's Eve events...we had to work the next day...our set was close to 11pm and by the time we played it was totally empty...we sold only about 10 CDs at a reduced price...then we had this show on 15 February at Mendaki Band at Youth Park...I embraced this philosophy...new kids who just release something and don't get anything in return...I released the CDs at \$5 and sold about 20 CDs...it made me happy seeing things move again...*

With all the lessons learnt, I am spending my time thinking about what I am going to do next...being a married man...this dream of becoming the Singapore band that is known regional at an international level...will not happen...I am thirty this year fighting a lost cause of trying to be like Sweet Charity...that has this fame and sells a lot of CDs in Malaysia and Singapore...I have given up that dream...whatever desire to play music now...must be more of having a social function...because I find that as a married person, having a serious hobby would actually cement myself and keep myself focussed on maintaining a monogamous relationship...loyal...not to have extramarital affairs...playing in a band now serves that function for me...instead of trying to be that band that succeeded internationally...I must say for all the bands who made an impact outside Singapore, power to them...I wish them all the best in whatever they want to do...for me it is sufficient for me to be as I am...because I am fighting a lost cause...in the recent years of confusion, I discovered that I learnt a lot about guitar playing about amplification and recording...hopefully when I grow older...the world always evolves and changes...maybe when we sign a non-protectionism pact among ASEAN countries...maybe one day I may be contributing to the success of Singapore bands...in a different way like being an engineer or owning a label...at this moment...suffice for me to maintain this expensive hobby and social function...¹⁸

Discussion

To what extent was the Mat Rock phenomenon a social collective first with rock music as their calling card? What marked Burhan's preferred direction was his love for rock music and then rock group dynamics. For those in it like the MacDonalds Kids and Far East kids, the Mat Rock had their own contested sites. *Kids were into the tea-dance things...I wasn't into that because I was into the music...the tea-dance thing was also about getting girls and all that...this was in the mid-1980s...they were playing a bit of rock but mostly the sort of 80s sound...like Madonna...semi-disco...one at Queensway Shopping Centre and another at Amara Hotel...and if you were to look at factors leading to them...if you are a Malay growing up in the 1980s, the main youth culture to subscribe to is Mat Rock...Rock seems synonymous with Melayu...but now we have technology and with the internet people make a variety of choices...back in the 1980s, this tea-dances were the first process of diversifying the Malay tastes for different activities...although it wasn't only for Malays, participants were mainly from the Malay community...plus all that Swing Singapore...that actually marked events which coincided with the decline of Mat Rock as a big youth culture and introduced the DIY thing in a big way...*¹⁹

Given that until the advent of technology and prior to its devastating effect cultures were still being formed by physical proximity, Mat Rock culture would have engendered a unitary existence for musicians, motorcycle enthusiasts and the posers; who could altogether claim subscription to a community that was almost all Malay. There was a variation of participants from being entranced, to a nodding acquaintance with Mat Rock culture, who subscribed to the culture and everything in it despite the different factions. The impact of technology would likely to have precipitated musicians, fans and a group of people looking for something to happen, are identified with the Malay community and subscribe to something else.

Burhanuddin felt very strongly about the impact of traditional culture on Mat Rock culture: *Concurrent with Mat Rock culture...a slow evolution of Malay youth forming Dikir Barat groups...these Dikir Barat groups had first been formed as part of school groups...Malay LDDS but soon formed outside the school...eventually it became something that the Malay community and leaders subscribed to...this contributed towards eroding Mat Rock Culture. Also there was the DIY thing [Indie-scene] and Mat Rock culture was seen as something bad...people in the DIY scene [Indie-scene] told you Mat Rockers are lazy people, they are just into it for the glamour and the drugs...not articulate as we are...there was this sense at the time when I was*

younger when people who were Mat Rock were thought to subscribe to Rock...so they set out to do something and set themselves apart and that eroded the Mat Rock culture even more...even among the Mat Rockers, I remember even when I was in secondary school...a classmate who was into English rock songs actually told those of use who listened to Malay Rock songs...“you’re not cool”...you’re not heavy enough...you don’t listen to this...you listen to that kind of crap...I guess the seed was already in place...forces of dissension and rejection from within the Mat Rock community were actually stronger than the external forces acting upon it and demanding it to be changed or dissipating it...

I stuck to the music...Why? Through my journey as a musician, rock music gives me that sense of empowerment...empowerment of the underdogs...when you’re an underdog, you’re not the flavour of the month...it is sweeter to achieve it as an underdog...there are a lot of positive lyrics in the music...when I was a teenager...the music [was] one I subscribed to best...during my University days, I found a lot of lyrics in Machine Head, Sepultura and Slayer actually had a lot in common with [issues in] sociology...and if love songs are like love movies...these songs are like your news on TV...a documentary...there is an intellectual capacity in that kind of music... in such a band you write your own songs, your own lyrics...the way a metal/rock album is produced is different...the producer is usually the engineer...they don’t tell the band how to write the song...they are usually part of the band’s vision to achieve what the band’s vision is...there is a lot of intellectual content and process involved the music...now having the advantage of a university education makes this music far more worthwhile because its something valuable its worth researching and worth looking into...seeing this music in the context of other things...until now it’s the music...not the hanging out...its not the other things...

When the DIY guys saw us step out of the Mat Rock scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they said this kind of music could not be written in Malay...the Malay language didn’t have the capacity to be brutal as English [anyway] all the bands write [their songs in] English. I wanted to write metal songs in Malay. Budaya was the only Manifest song written in Malay...I proved to a lot of my peers that this can actually be written in Malay...although I have to admit this type of music is best expressed in English....²⁰

Discussion

One of the most striking details to emerge is the perception of deviation as deviation. Shirleen Nordin's study of the Mat Rockers begins with the notion of Mat Rockers as a deviant social group, reinforcing the perception of deviation against the framework of conformity. The descriptions of social and musical behaviour conform almost inevitably towards a form of stereotyping; a group or sub-group seen to gather at the void decks of HDB housing blocks, strumming a seemingly tuneless song on an old guitar, or even a riff, or even doing nothing. Their appearance marked their distinctiveness; sporting long hair, unkempt looks and bedraggled in the tight jeans and T-shirts. Even the cigarettes they smoke (an Indonesian brand **Gudang Garam**) mark them out. Their choice of music was almost inevitably rock and heavy metal. In the light of this 'unforgettable' image, the Mat Rocker is construed as a negative thesis contrasted against other conformist citizens who advocate puritan moral value systems, appropriate work ethics and struggle to emerge victorious in the rat race and paper chase and eventually the wealth owned by a few.²¹

As in all postcolonial discourse, we are informed of the ways in which marginalia is not only identified but also categorised. Gayatri Spivak informs us of the consequences of explaining other practices. The possibility of explanation carries the presupposition of an explainable (even if not fully) universe and explaining (even if imperfect) subject. These presuppositions assure our being. Explaining, we exclude the possibility of the radically heterogeneous.²² Therefore, in terms of our explanation of a self...the choice of...labels to give myself a shape produces...a common cause...this cause is an espousal of and attention to marginality—a suspicion that what is at the centre often hides a repression.²³ If for instance, Western art music practice is valorised as the centre, anything that does not satisfy the same criteria of value potentially marginalises this practice because of a unilateral imputing of a cultural benchmark. Spivak's concerns, that "certain practices of...arts in the broadest sense are said to inhabit the private sector. But the assertion, that institutions of...art, as well as the criticism of art, belong to the public"²⁴, applied to this context, raises the potential problem of privileging one group over another. By using terms of reference outside of a musical practice, but essentially found within this musical practice, judgments of value are brought to bear on musical practices. Howard Becker devotes an entire book to the sociology of deviance.²⁵

None of these descriptions or even field studies approaches an understanding of “deviance” as an existence with its own logic and praxis. In this respect, Paul Willis’s work has provided quite startling ways of viewing and coming to terms with marginal or marginalised groups.

In one of his more well-known works *Learning to Labour*, a term he develops called penetrations to *identify the ways in which counter-school culture saw through the meritocracy and individualism in schooling, allowing and helping to form realistic lived assessments of the real collective future of generalised manual labour as it confronted such as “the lads”*. Penetrations can be imagined as a means of a culture ‘thinking’ for its members.²⁶

Here Willis uses his fieldwork to suggest that cultures are rich grounds for more detailed observations for further scholarship either in studies in musical practices. This is because *the participants in this culture engage in the practice sensuously, in the greater power and viability of their own practices and in a more secure, bodily and psychic sense of themselves in relation to their circumstances and conditions of existence*. There is a powerful argument to be developed to explore the value of a practice being translated in cognitive terms. At the sensuous level, the practice of heavy metal and rock invites us to re-assess material/structural situations from the point of view of the viability of playing with different options.

Willis’ own study of “the lads” indicated that it was not the fact that they resisted school or exhortations to become socially, culturally and economically relevant to the mainstream discourse but rather their very creative use of the very components of this mainstream culture to give it new meaning in their social settings and value systems. The very things that Noordin describes, the long hair, the Indonesian ‘kretek’ – Gudang Garam, the skin-tight jeans and arresting T-shirt designs helped in Willis’ argument *to make, project and believe in versions of their own worldliness and superiority. They penetrate the shells of fetishized commodities to find new social use values*.

Once these components of a culture are re-defined in their own term, there is a way in which deviance is reinterpreted as difference as Willis points out: *There are other routes to demonstrating epistemological groundings for difference from below; difference on your own terms, classified by you, not as a term deviant from the norm, but as the claiming of your own*

*norm...opens up new avenues for meaning and activity showing practical grounds for autonomy and independence.*²⁷

What is made clear here is not the use of creative resources but the creative use of resources:

*Informal cultural practices are undertaken because of the pleasures and satisfactions they bring, including a fuller and more rounded sense of self, of “really being yourself” within your own knowable cultural world...finding better fits than the institutionally or ideologically offered ones...the immediate ‘own level’ success of cultural practices lies in...the relatedness, the energy, the excitement of a culture’s members as they find the most productive expressive relation to their conditions of existence, so finding individual and collective feelings of potency, subject senses of dignity and personhood, subjective feelings of authenticity.*²⁸

The social patterns of behaviour with music operate at a variety of levels. The argument that noise in rock music contributes to distortion has an alternative reading for subscribers to Mat Rock culture – *a way of multiplying resonances.*²⁹ However, there are multiple readings of rock music in site-specific settings which remind us to sensitise ourselves to the community in that contested site. For those who are unable to subscribe to this, the component parts and layers found in rock music act as ring-fences around the community, performing both centripetal and centrifugal forces depending on the levels of receptivity of apprehending the music in its totality. For the Mat Rock community, it may have been used to define a sense of collectivity. In a parallel instance, Philip Bohlman’s study of the role of chamber music in the lives of the Yekkes, German-speaking Jews in Israel, observes how the music, in this case absolute music, became as ethically binding:

*Viewed from a performative perspective, the absence of specific meaning within the text allows meaning to accrue only upon performance, thus empowering any group, even an ethnic community, to shape what it will from absolute music.*³⁰

The argument that follows on from here is that once a connection has been made between the community and the music of choice, a meaning has been constructed and sustained at the sensuous level. There is clearly a tension here that draws in three social groups with different motivations, yet the musicians, motorcycle-groupies and ‘posers’ who hang out – are identified with the Mat Rock Culture. That these participants are almost always

members of the Malay community in Singapore fulfils that communal cohesiveness, despite the less-than-convincing coherence.

Given that many of the musicians subscribed to groups well known in the international circuit of heavy metal and rock, one would have expected a subscription, similar to Willis' study of the biker community of selecting an authentic source for their agenda. For instance, mention of Deep Purple and Black Sabbath would have at the first instance suggested original members who turned their ensembles into icons. However, upon closer examination, many of the Mat Rockers refer to these groups in their subsequent phase – the second group of personnel who assumed places left behind by the founding members. What is curious here is a reshaping of form over content – it didn't matter who comprised these two groups in the third or fourth phase – what was important was that it was a group still called Deep Purple and Black Sabbath.

In Karl Mannheim's words:

*“Each idea acquires a new meaning when it is applied to a new life situation...this social change of function, then, is ... also a change of meaning.”*³¹

Here it is not the words but the sounds that are the subject of this transformation. I would suggest that by listening to Deep Purple or Black Sabbath, changes in band personnel notwithstanding, musicians, motorcyclists or 'passengers', validated their affiliations to the Mat Rock culture. Bohlman again reminds us that as a result of a 'mis-match' between form and content:

*A gap therefore forms between the content of the repertoire and style of performance situations. It is within the mutability allowed by style that differences in meaning and function of music arise, thereby transforming absolute music into a genre that can follow numerous historical paths...clearly this practice reflects different attitudes towards both the repertoire and the communities that lend the music its distinctive functions and form its different histories.*³²

For the musicians, there was sensitivity to the music, albeit a sensuous response, that made them feel connected to the music, then the Mat rock culture.

Similarly in Willis's study of the bikers bears out that their opinions about music:

*Were not crude, nor without differentiation.....their feelings about music were so deeply rooted, and so much a part of their...world that they didn't find it necessary to justify them. Their favourite records were simply enshrined within **the** tradition.³³ For this group of motor-bike boys, Music from the post rock n' roll period was accorded value, in so far as it legitimately embodied and kept alive and gave a style to central contemporary cultural values.³⁴ Elsewhere it was the way in which a sensitivity to sound bordered on what Willis believes to be onomatopoeia. There were frequent attempts to sing part of songs they particularly liked, or to simulate the sound of an instrument: particularly, for instance... noises of a guitar.³⁵*

To the charge that the Mat Rock community was a deviant Malay community, Willis explains what has been blindingly obvious as also in the case of the Bikers in his study:

Early rock n'roll was seized upon by the young in the mid 1950s in America and England as their very own music...because it so clearly was not their parents'...rich in highly appropriate social meanings. This double fit of the music – its prior social inmuement and its particular objective structure – the attachment to the music [explains] the linked expression of these things in movement, style, in physicality, in handling [one]self.³⁶

Much of these preliminary findings are still initial investigations and currently border at best at the speculative level with the oral interview and related documentary evidence. However, my main point still centres around a view of heavy metal and rock musicians as deviant species of the human race in Singapore – a view which is flawed since the deviation is understood by the way deviation is viewed by mainstream discourse found on economic or ethical discourse that seeks to discredit such a community. Such a discourse has as its base ignorance, intolerance and moral panic and socio-cultural anxiety. There is much here that holds potential in future scholarship that can best be dealt with via fieldwork research and in-depth studies of these groups, how music fits into their lifestyles, their preferences, their value-systems, attitudes and how they see their music, as indeed other component parts of their lived experiences. If this is done successfully we will come to a much clearer understanding of the presence and practice of heavy metal and rock in Singapore on their terms.

Vedic Metal – Indian metal groups

Indian heavy metal groups f/using English and Sanskrit as well but identifying their sound as a uniquely Indian sounds, albeit familiar soundscapes in heavy-metal, have emerged as a new phenomenon in the 1990s. Among the Singaporean bands I interviewed, members of the most prominent of them, Rudra, are mostly in their late twenties, residing at the north side of Singapore. Rudra have been featured in **Singapore Jam** segment a few times on the now discontinued NAC-run **Passion 99.5 FM**. They emerged as a new phenomenon in the 1990s as hitherto unheard of Indian heavy metal groups. What makes them interesting is that they are heavy metal groups who subscribe to a sense of Indian-ness in their identity.

Such groups perform mostly at pubs and Tamil variety shows playing original compositions. *Sometimes one or two covers, preferably old Tamil movie songs just to stir up the crowd. For rehearsals we try to meet up weeks before a live performance or recording to go through the songs. But other than that we don't actually meet up very month.* They usually rehearse at home mostly, sometimes in jamming studios. Most of their supporters are normally about 18 to 26 years old and from what they have seen comprise Tamil and some Malay listeners. Only a few members actually listened to Tamil movie songs while the rest did not wish to listen to them despite the fact that the group comprised all Tamils. *We started about 6 years ago...we have always been interested in metal although traditional music does appeal we have utilised it in Rudra. I reckon traditional music defines the Hindu essence in us. It is about time the Indian community starts breaking away from the more widely listened to movie songs and makes stuff of their own...Originality is what sells and is appreciated.*³⁷

This much younger group of heavy metal musicians reject models of ‘music’ long part of their sonic environment when they were growing up – South Indian film practice. Given their preference, Heavy metal, engenders an unfortunate association of anti-establishment philosophy and attitude; which requires a little more explanation to the suggestions of rejection. As Kathiresan, bassist in a metal group Rudra, recalls:

I grew up listening to Tamil soundtrack songs as my dad was a singer... was part of Febra [one of the well-known Musical ensembles in Singapore playing music of South Indian film] during its formative years too...during festivals live...Those songs are still etched in my mind. I still love TM Sounderajan's songs and Kannadhasan's philosophical lyrics. In Primary

*school I jumped onto English music and my favourite then was Michael Jackson...in my late Secondary education I discovered rock music...in Tertiary education I discovered many difference expressions in rock music – from bluesy tunes to extreme Death Metal/Grindcore. But I not a metal fanatic as in a person who ONLY listens to metal. I do listen to Indian classical music [Carnatic], new age music and a little AR Rahman too.*³⁸

When asked about his preference for getting involved in the practice of heavy metal, he admits that it was in heavy metal that Kathiresan found his identity, rather than music of South Indian film, Kathi mused:

*What Rudra presents to the world is ethnic metal, although we prefer to call it Vedic Metal. We were all raised as Indian Hindus and that is our innate cultural (not just religious) identity...We have an ideology. I don't feel any tension being the way I am. I am perfectly fine as I am or at least that's how the way I feel right now.*³⁹

In a strange way, it is in heavy metal that have affirmed a creative endeavour in in Rudra as well as other metal groups like Aryans, Shatriya, Narasimha. Many of the band members respect creative work and have concentrated on writing their own material:

I consider a band which writes their own material much better/superior than any cover band, even if the former may not be as proficient as the latter. A simple comparison would be the rock band Nirvana & Yngwie Malmsteen. Nirvana sold 100 times more than Malmsteen. Febra, Genova were also playing soundtrack covers. So they are no different from other cover bands. But their existence back then was kind of justified when I realize that at that time recorded media weren't that popular. Not all of them had TVs. The only way to listen to their favourite songs would be to watch Febra etc... But now things have changed. I just need to slip in a CD to listen to my favourite track 10 times a day. So their existence now is definitely not justified unless they start playing originals. Just take a look at the our local Vasantham Central celebrities. They earn their fame by doing covers. I just can't believe that people become stars by imitating someone else. And worst of it all they take pride in it!! My questions are very simple: Why should I try to be someone else? Am I not good enough? Why can't I compose my own music? Actually I feel that among Singaporeans, we don't have the value for appreciating original local music. We are more concerned with 'Branding' than anything else. Like we have people who have notions that anything foreign is always better than local. This slavish mentality has stopped many from writing their own music because we lack listeners or a good consumer

*base. So the bands believe that they can please the crowd by playing familiar tunes rather than originals. My perspective of Indian local cover bands is that they are totally pathetic. They waste their time playing soundtrack hits or covers failing to utilize their innate talents. They...could have become great musicians or even legends. But they are just wasting their time away.*⁴⁰

Another group Narasimha comprises five musicians ranging from 17 to 30 playing guitars, bass and drums and percussion. For Narasimha, it was in experiencing heavy metal genres that gave them the inspiration to work in that performance mode but gained much greater confidence in creative work by coming into contact with Rudra:

To be frank, for an Indian in Singapore to start his own musical band or group is very rare...we are influenced largely by Indian movies and its soundtracks. Thus, in terms of musical entertainment, we depend on Indian movie-makers to give it to us. But, these Indian metal bands here are quite different, in the sense that they grew up listening to Indian film songs and at the same time listening to English heavy metal bands from Europe and America. However, these bands could only appeal to certain group of people, due to its music being of aggressive and intense nature. And because of this, it was very easy to spot individuals especially Indians who listen to heavy metal. And, this was how Narasimha was formed. As for myself, I grew up entirely listening to Tamil film songs. English songs were never appealing to me. And my class mate, Sree, who's one of the guitarists for Narasimha, listens to bands like Nirvana and Guns n' Roses, which are considered of the rock genre. The breakpoint came when I bumped into this guy who is into heavy metal. We were like teaching in a part time basis in the same tuition centre. I got to listen Rudra...comprising of Indians, to officially release a full length album. For a person like me who had only listened to sweet, soothing melodies, the music in Rudra really fascinated me. Loud and the heavy distorted sound of the guitars mixed with the aggressive drum beats with the touch of the Indian melody did fascinated me. We started listening to heavy metal bands from Europe and America...We started going down to gigs and got to know people down there. And from there, we got to know other Indians who are also in this scene. Every one of us had different bands influences, but still united in that one genre, heavy metal. Well, the birth of heavy metal among Indians down here could be caused by similar experiences like this. In Narasimha, the vision is one which is the Indian culture...we incorporate the Indian philosophy in our music. We never sing about love, because it's already

*common among the Indian film songs. What we want to give has to be different and has to have a meaningful message. Even in the music we compose, the Indian Carnatic or Hindustani style is inherent. It's like in our blood and it really turned out beautiful.*⁴¹

For another heavy metal group Shatriya:

*Well most of us are from the north side of Singapore, one member is from Johor Bahru. Only two of my members actually listened to Tamil movie songs. The rest of us do not wish to listen to it. We are all Tamils...so culture wise we are the same. About 6 years ago...we got together and started looking for the right members to make music. We have always been interested in metal. I reckon traditional music defines the Hindu essence in us...it does appeal to me and it has been utilised in Rudra...I reckon it is about time the Indian community starts breaking away from the more widely listened to movie songs and make stuff of their own. Originalty is what sells and is appreciated.*⁴²

Discussion

The presence of such a group or groups in Singapore does come across as a surprise. Many of these youth began in homes where the main discourse was music of South Indian film with notions of music that bore affiliation with Hinduism – music of the Carnatic tradition. From their interviews, it is evident that music of South Indian film is one they seem to have reacted most strongly – criticising it for its endless themes of love and love songs and formulaic strategies. What is not revealed is whether it is the formulaic strategies in the films that cause this reaction rather than the music itself. However, when they have performances at pubs, there is a tendency to play the ‘party’ line by adding songs from South Indian film; to please the crowd and persuade them to listen to more creative work.

The youth interviewed have a variety of educational backgrounds ranging from O and A levels to tertiary level diplomas. Many of them have full-time jobs and heavy metal is a ‘side-line’ which seems, according to their responses, sustains them in ways their full-time jobs do not. Evidently, it is the group Rudra that has become for the other groups, a role model. Musicians interviewed did not possess certified skills in instrumental facility – like ABRSM qualifications or local music school certification in pop and jazz studies.

In this respect, oral and aural transmission has remained the principle mode of learning and teaching among band members. Interviewees came across as articulate and familiar with the Euro-American heavy metal and rock tradition and in recent years a growing attraction towards heavy metal from Scandinavian countries. It is their emphasis on creative endeavour in music which is significant. Perhaps further scholarship will help shed more light on this little known practice.

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3 Interview with Ramli Sarip, 30 April 2004. There are no records of this Rock Matinee in the National Theatre Annual Report of 1972/3/4 to indicate this, although the sort of PA and sound support systems would only have arrived post 1977 with a \$235, 000 tender awarded to raise the sound systems to support rock and pop concerts.

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