Taking on the big boys:

rock music and oppositionality in Singapore

by

Dayaneetha De Silva

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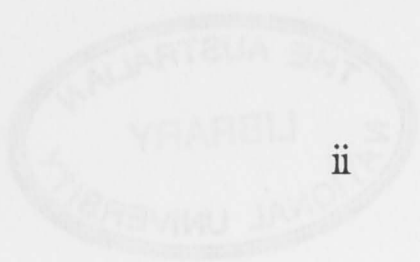The Australian National University

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I declare that the following thesis is my own work.

Dayaneetha De Silva

October 30, 1996

Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of cultural oppositionality and creativity in Singapore, in the form of a "politics of the possible" (Chambers 1996: 217). It analyses the emerging practices and beliefs which make up the alternative rock music scene in Singapore and argues that engaging in music production and consumption offers a way for the mainly male fans and musicians to collectively and individually negotiate aspects of cultural space and identity. In examining the medium of rock through participants' discourse of authenticity, place and identity, this thesis also uncovers an unusual aspect of the nascent Singapore music scene: the crucial and creative role of the rock media, in particular the alternative pop culture and rock magazine, Before I Get Old.

Abstract

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Glossary

One of the central problems in discussing popular music is the imprecision and/or rapid changes in meaning of musical terminology, of which the distinction between *rock* and *pop* remains a prime example (Taylor 1985: xiv). The definitions provided here have been compiled from a variety of academic and journalistic sources, and are intended as an introduction and guide to the terms as they are used in this thesis. One aim of this thesis is to investigate translations or transformation in meaning when a foreign musical practice or style is adopted by local musicians.

Alternative   The adjective *alternative* to describe music or a particular 'scene' and is synonymous with independent. Ideological and stylistic positions taken by alternative musicians are always relative to contemporaneous practices in mainstream popular music: it has been said that "the alternative scene...has always defined itself as pop's other" (Reynolds 1989: 246). See *Indie* and *Scene*.

Cover   An abbreviation of 'cover version', a song recorded or performed by someone other than the original musician/s (Taylor 1985: 482).

Demo   Abbreviation of demonstration. An amateur recording, usually made in cassette form, in the hope of attracting the attention of a professional recording company.

Fanzines   These are underground publications which are erratically and crudely produced by music fans in deliberate reaction to glossy, mainstream music publications such as *Rolling Stone*. They generally circulate within small circles of fans of a single rock music genre.

Hardcore   See *Metal* and *Punk*. Although the term hardcore as applied to rock music originated from the American punk scene, hardcore in Singapore is used to distinguish thrash metal music and other related genres from the more musically eclectic indie and 'Malay rock' music. It carries the connotation of real/authentic music.

Indie   Abbreviation for independent music which is produced by small record companies not under the oligopoly of the five major transnational music companies: EMI Music, the BMG Music Group, Polygram, Sony Music Entertainment and Warner Music International (Negus 1992: 1; 156–8). It further signifies a whole range of rock practices and attitudes which will be one of the major themes of this thesis. Although indie is usually synonymous with *alternative*, in Singapore, the alternative scene has tended to become polarised between those who identify themselves as either *indie* or *hardcore* musicians because of differences in musical and performance styles.

Jam   *Jamming* comes from the practice and vocabulary of jazz, and has been adopted by rock musicians to describe extended, impromptu playing involving two or more musicians. It is one of the basic social rock rites, and one where the socialisation and education of rock musicians takes place. Hence a *jam session*, such

as those which take place after hours at several recording studios in Singapore.

Kiasu   A widely-used but complex Singaporean colloquialism (derived from the Hokkien) meaning coward, or greedy, self-interested person. *Kiasuism* encompasses a whole range of antisocial mannerisms and characteristics ascribed to the *kiasu*, who has become something of a perverse national symbol, "Mr. Kiasu", in the creation of one cartoonist.

Mainstream   As used by those in the alternative music scene, *mainstream* is a negative discursive construct which connotes Western pop music and the transnational music industry.

Metal   *Metal* encompasses a range of the loudest, most aggressive range of hardcore rock music styles including *thrash metal* or *grindcore*, and *death metal*. These styles have developed from a fusion of elements from heavy metal and punk music. The result—derived from punk's atonal and confrontationist style—sounds even more violent and frenetic. The sepulchral imagery of the music and style of metal is reflected in neo-Gothic and horror comic-book style band names such as Megadeth [sic], Anthrax, Napalm Death, Suicidal Tendencies, Morbid Angel, imitated by local bands. *Metal* has a worldwide following, including a substantial following for overseas and local or cross-border bands in Singapore–Malaysia–Indonesia (Emka 1992; *BigO*, Oct. 1990: 22–7; Sasongko and Katjasungkana 1991).

Pop	Pop or pop music as used here refers to light popular music which is generally produced by the major music companies for commercial or chart success. In contrast, rock music is defined as occupying the more serious end of the popular music spectrum (Taylor 1985: 490). In practice, *pop* and *rock* are relative terms, used in contradistinction to each other, with changes in their usage over time.
Punk	The punk rock movement with its strong avantgarde connotations, embodied a revolution in popular music, art, fashion and journalism for a short period from 1976, and is regarded by followers to have brought back a certain integrity to the rock music scene in America, Britain and elsewhere. The archetypal punk band is the anarchic British group, the Sex Pistols. *Hardcore* is sometimes used as a synonym for the punk ethos and style (Taylor 1985; Savage 1991).
Rock	Rock, an abbreviation from the Black American sexually allusive term rock 'n' roll, is used here to signify contemporary popular music which is comparatively more serious and less commercially-driven than mainstream pop music. See *Pop*. Rock generally signifies all popular Western music since the 1950s, subsuming the terms rock and folk, particularly in discussions where the stated or implied other is classical or traditional music.
Scene	As used in *music scene* or *alternative scene*, this indicates the existence of a cultural terrain comprising a loose affiliation of fans, musicians and journalists in which a range of musical practices co-exist (see Straw 1991: 373).

Straight-edge   Straight-edge rockers proclaim adherence to a puritanical lifestyle (vegetarianism, non-violence, non-smoking, sexual propriety) with the violent musical style of thrash metal. The style has been described by a fan as "furious, braincrushing guitar chords set to lyrics advocating a positive lifestyle, perhaps their way of instilling hope in a world which is seemingly decaying" (Zulkifli Othman, *BigO*, April 1993: 28). Straight-edge rock has one of the biggest followings in the indie scene in Singapore, and has been propagated as well as redefined locally under the *de facto* leadership of Suhaimi Subandie of Stompin' Ground.

Introduction

The bands possess a spirit that is not common in this nation where dreams are given up for practical reasons. Patrick Ch'ng[1]

In the latter half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, a growing number of young, mostly male, Singaporeans became involved with what was being termed, by journalists and participants, as the alternative rock music scene.[2] Signs of this musical subculture were proliferating: there were concerts featuring new local bands and aspiring rock musicians; programs focusing on local singers on Eight Miles High, a Redifussion program hosted by a local punk rock musician; a spate of articles examining the local rock phenomenon in the entertainment pages of the daily newspaper *New Straits Times*; and the underground pop culture magazine-cum-music fanzine *Before I Get Old (BigO)* was becoming an established, alternative magazine and increasing its circulation. Other opinionated fanzines produced by fervent young rock fans were mushrooming, and homemade recordings were passed around on the musical network which was taking shape. More bands were formed, and certain professional recording studios became

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[1] "10 Best Unsigned Indie Bands", *BigO*, January 1992: 25. Ch'ng, himself an important figure in the alternative music scene, was writing an introduction to a personal selection of new local bands. See further chapter 2.

[2] Lim (1992) cites a figure of up to 200 active bands, although this figure probably includes professional bands. Statistics on the number of amateur bands in Singapore at any given moment are inherently problematic, and can only give an impressionistic view of the size and range of musical activity, partly because many of the bands do not last, or members leave and form new bands. In "Calling all bands", (*BigO*, November 1991: 20-21), 38 bands are listed in an initial directory of new bands, playing a range of music from blues to rap, although the largest proportion categorised themselves as 'punk/hardcore' bands.

venues for regular jam sessions for musicians and would-be musicians and their fans (Bachtiar 1993).

There was a new level of intensity and self-consciousness attached to these activities by participants. The scene comprised a range of rock music styles, from hardcore thrash metal to ballads. Much of the increased public attention paid to this new music scene seemed to trace back to a number of individuals who were involved as musicians, rock fans and organisers in creating and advocating a musical community. Although a disproportionate number of those in the nascent rock music scene came from the Malay community, there were musicians from a wide range of ethnic, social and educational backgrounds (in a tiny country where ethnicity and educational differences are constantly being redefined and emphasised by state policies). Most of those involved were teenage males, but many prominent musicians and journalists in the scene were in their twenties and thirties.

The holding of the first alternative rock concerts in Singapore in the late 1980s and early 1990s marked a watershed in local popular music. Live rock music had been hitherto largely confined to rock bands playing cover versions of 'classic' rock hits at Malay weddings, or semi-professional bands performing cover versions of pop songs in pubs or nightclubs. The range of music which could be bought or listened to since the 1970s was limited by censorship and by the conservatism or indifference of the local media. By and large, rock musical experiences were obtained by listening to recorded music, by watching video clips or Music Television (MTV)—and for those who could obtain them—by reading overseas pop culture and rock magazines such as the *Rolling Stone, New Musical Express* and *Musician*. Since the mid-1980s there have been, however, greater opportunities to view other bands, to jam in studios, to watch, listen, mingle and exchange demonstration cassettes of each other's music. For these musicians and rock fans, the experience of music was becoming less of a fantasy, where the music they enjoyed was always being made in the United Kingdom or

in America, and more part of their own lives. In the words of one journalist, 'This has partially fulfilled our dream for a Singapore scene that would once again pay to hear its musicians to write and perform their own songs. We did have that in the Sixties."[3]

There is an earlier history of local engagement with Western, English-language popular music in Singapore and neighbouring Malaysia[4], but because the background to this study is the nexus between the individual and the state of Singapore, the time reference is the abrupt birth of the nation–state of Singapore in 1963 via its expulsion from Malaysia. The date of Singapore's independent existence is also the historical marker used by older fans and musicians who interpret contemporary developments in the alternative scene in the light of their experience and nostalgic recollections of the heyday of Singapore rock in the 1960s.[5]

The initial decades of the Peoples' Action Party (PAP) rule were characterised by a steadily increasing authoritarianism, marked by heavy censorship and control of the mass media, *alongside* the increased access of individual citizens to Western popular cultural products and state-of-the-art entertainment technologies fuelled by the promotion of English as the primary language. While there has often been a concordance of interests between the PAP's maintenance of control and its development of a successful capitalist economy, many aspects of local and imported culture remain a sticking point in the PAP's relationship with the populace.

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[3] Philip Cheah, "But Seriously folks", *BigO*, September 1990: 3.
[4] As a major seaport and commercial centre of British Malaya, Singapore had always been a recipient of new English language cultural imports which were followed by resident expatriates as well as, but not exclusively, by the English-speaking elite and bureaucracy. As a more cosmopolitan, urbanised centre than any centre on the Peninsula, it was also "the centre for Malay popular culture and intellectual life well into the 1960s" (Lockard 1991: 22). The presence of concentrations of young male soldiers at various times (British bases in Malaysia and Singapore; American troops on R&R from Vietnam) all contributed to the spreading of rock 'n' roll music and pop cultural paraphernalia in the 1960s and early 1970s. Lockard (1991) contains a brief historical survey of rock in Singapore and Malaysia.
[5] Interviews, Menon 1993; Yeo 1992.

The popularity of local rock bands in the late 1960s and early 1970s signified a disturbing degree of cultural autonomy amongst the younger generation. Rock culture and music was construed by government spokespeople as a potential source of anarchy, and thus a threat to the fabric of the new nation. Rock music was a major element of what was labelled 'yellow culture'[6]: a mix of decadent 'Western' culture: rebellious behaviour, drug abuse, 'un-Eastern' sexual mores, and other imported evils (Chua and Kuo 1991: 19). Local rock and pop musicians were highly visible symbols of 'yellow culture', as were the unkempt, long-haired young Western travellers then passing through Singapore in droves, discovering the East and themselves (Hanna 1973). The language and reasoning of this anti-Western pop culture stance was itself, ironically, imported along with the music from conservative Western circles.[7]

The systematic harassment of rock musicians, policing of venues and banning of songs which accompanied this rhetoric pulled the plug from the local rock scene, at a height of its popularity in the early 1970s. However, rock fans in Singapore were not simply suffering from an unusually severe case of conflated generational and cultural misunderstanding: there was an inherently darker side to these moves against popular culture, apart from a silencing of celebratory and carnivalesque[8] aspects of social life in Singapore: the construction of the new state, and the restructuring of its people, under the control of a single political party, the PAP.

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[6] The term 'yellow culture' is a literal translation of a Mandarin phrase for pornography, *huang se*, although the Singapore usage conforms closer to the phrase 'spiritual pollution', encompassing bad influences from the West, from rock 'n' roll to political ideologies (Chen Jie, personal communication).

[7] Elvis Presley's gyrating hips (a defining moment in rock culture, even if he merely adapted existing black American music and dance styles) was the first gesture which elicited negative responses in conservative America. Early studies of rock and roll were usually connected to the idea of deviance (See Markson 1990).

[8] One of these qualifiedly carnivalesque facets of Singapore life was the popular transvestite nightlife along Bugis Street, which was destroyed with the transvestites being scattered or 'rehabilitated'. Bugis street has been recently literally re-created as a wholesome tourist attraction, without the sleaze and overt touting. John Docker, in his discussion of the Russian literary critic Bakhtin's ideas, explains that Carnival—the exuberant populist celebration before Lent in Catholic cultures—is a liminal time when the masses mock authority, which they do not, ultimately, subvert (Docker 1994).

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The PAP's version of a New Order included the general consolidation of the hegemony of a one-party state: the destruction of any real or imagined sources or conduits of dissent, including the press, trade unions, and activist student organisations on the two tertiary campuses. Existing ethnic or Chinese clan and dialect organisations, business communities, educational institutions, cultural practices and mass media all became targets of persecution or restructuring in the interests of creating an ordered populace (Tremewan 1994; Wilkinson 1988; Chua and Kuo 1991). In addition, approximately 85 per cent of the population was physically relocated from old neighbourhoods, kampungs (villages) and communities into Housing Development Board (HDB) estates. This massive rehousing policy has been the PAP's most successful and most strategically deployed argument for staying in power, giving a stake in political stability for home-owners as well as allowing for a more thorough penetration of government or semi-government/ para political agencies (such as Residents' Associations) into people's lives (Chua 1995; Chan 1989: 81; Tremewan 1994: 45–73) .

In their pursuit of modernisation, political autonomy and economic success, the technocratic rulers of Singapore made it clear that only certain elements of Western culture, such as the English language, were allowed, just as they made clear that only certain bits of 'Chinese', 'Indian', 'Malay' or 'Other' cultures were permissible or desirable.[9] Rock music fell clearly into the undesired basket of possible outcomes of the implicit Westernisation of Singapore's economy and

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[9] In recent times, Singapore has become increasingly dependent on immigration or short-term workers at all levels of its economy in what one study terms the country's "reserve army of labour" (Tremewan 1994: 113). The government has a clear preference for those from 'traditional sources' (Chinese Malaysians) and 'East Asians' from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and South Korea as residents. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew expressed one of his reasons: "If you get people from, say, Thailand or the Philippines, then you've got a completely different culture. They're a jolly people: they sing, they dance, they like fiestas—particularly the Filipinos—it's unsettling on the local population." (Lee Kuan Yew, 1984, quoted in Wilkinson 1988: 174). However, it appears that temporary "jolly people"—maids, labourers and constructions workers (Sri Lankans, Isaan from Northeast Thailand, Javanese, Tamils, Burmese, Filipinos...) are a crucial part of the working class, with minimal wages and almost no rights. The manipulation of race by the Singapore government is discussed in Tremewan (1994: 125–6; 132–5; 138–44), in the context of the author's thorough, but rather one-dimensional narrative of the creation of a submissive population.

culture. Local rock musicians were also generally victims of the creation of this successful Singapore, which had no place for the overt sexuality and rebelliousness central to rock's language, music and style. On a more practical level, it became difficult to form or maintain bands in the face of stringent licensing of entertainers and public performances or gatherings, radio and television censorship, a demanding educational system, the breaking up of communities, and the strict guidelines governing the use of housing board estate public spaces.

Thus, it could be argued that while pop fans and nightclub patrons had to suffer various indignities from time to time[10], it was arguably those who took rock music seriously—as a form of Western culture which could bring both entertainment and meaning to their lives—who were most affected. Mainstream Western pop music continued to be available and still constitutes the middle ground of taste.[11] This brief historical background is not a mere digression in describing the current alternative rock scene. Many key persons in the music scene and business in the 1990s are older rock fans in their early thirties, and thus products of this era, and some had stubbornly kept their idealistic notions of the artistic potential of rock music alive.[12]

There are, as well, two present-day elements which provide a background for the alternative music scene. First, the recent success and resurgence of independent bands and small recording companies overseas, has once again brought the discourse of authenticity ('real music') into currency in the global music scene.[13] Secondly, the subculture of alternative musicians in Singapore has

[10] In the early 1970s, nightclub owners had to post a S$1,000 good behaviour bond for imported performers, which included no socialising with the audience, no drug use, and no long hair or use of wigs to create the illusion of long hair for males (Hanna 1973).
[11] Wells and Lee 1995; interview, Menon 1993; interview,Yeo 1992.
[12] Some of these are Suresh Menon; Philip Cheah; Michael Cheah; Eric Yeo, managing director of Polygram Singapore; members of the Black Sun, the rock band with some of the oldest rock musicians in Singapore; Kevin Matthews, practising lawyer and rock singer, and Chris Ho, punk musician and cable radio (Redifussion) disc jockey. All are in their late 30s or early 40s.
[13] One manifestation of this in the rock scene is the popularity of 'unplugged' recordings or performances, that is, music without the technological mediation of synthesisers and computerised equipment which have come to dominate musical performance in recent times.

also surfaced at a moment in that nation–state's brief history when, to paraphrase the title of a recent volume (Rodan 1993a), there has been a changing of the old political guard, and the PAP has added "culture" to its political and economic agenda. There was certainly a sense of movement in the political and cultural realms of Singapore in the early 1990s, but also much continuing anxiety and uncertainty over the pace and extent of these changes.[14]

The alternative music scene in Singapore encompasses a range of musical genres, with the only shared beliefs being a commitment to producing one's own music as well as being a consumer. The indie musicians, in wrestling with their ideas about what is valid and true in their emerging musical culture, argue amongst themselves about music-related beliefs and categories, and interrogate some of the myths of Singapore identity, whether *kiasuism* or the dominant discourse of ethnicity. Fandom, band formation and musicianship also offer a way of negotiating identity as well as transnational and local culture. In this sense, this thesis is also an investigation into what Iain Chambers terms "a politics of the possible" (1986: 217).

Within the limits of their world, rock fans in Singapore project and represent a world view which can neither be reduced to the blind borrowing of foreign cultural forms, nor to a non-traditional response to the problem of being citizens of arguably one of the most relentlessly interventionist of modern states. These rock fans lie uncomfortably between compliance and resistance, between their sense of ease as consumers and connoisseurs and their need to inscribe themselves into, and perhaps create, an imagined musical community (to borrow Ben Anderson's phrase) of rock musicians and fans locally and globally.

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[14] For a popular, ironic view of these changes, see the cartoons in Nonis (1991), *Hello Chok Tong, Goodbye Kuan Yew*. A more serious document is the current Prime Minister's "Nation of Excellence" speech (Goh 1987). The views of professional Singapore intellectuals—academics working in the peak tertiary institutions, at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the National University of Singapore—are particularly well-represented in two recent volumes, Ban et al. (1992) and Da Cunha (1994). More overtly critical accounts of recent political changes in particular tend to be published outside the country, see for instance, Wong, Loong (1991); Birch, Brown, Clammer, and Rodan, in Rodan (1993a); and Wong, K.K. (1991).

Aims

The object of this thesis is to investigate the discourse of the alternative music and media scene in Singapore and to present this discourse as creative and oppositional in the social, economic and political context of Singapore. The approach used here draws on the literature of cultural studies as much as a relatively smaller number of popular music studies, and uses a variety of academic and non-academic sources. I examine the dominant ideas and debates circulating within a group of alternative rock musicians and journalists at a particular moment in contemporary Singapore (1990 to 1993) through their comments, writings, and to a lesser extent, their lyrics and musical practices. My focus on the discourse of rock, rather than on the music itself, is a choice based partly on the diversity of musical styles within the small scene and partly reflects an interest in examining the construction of the music scene by a number of key individuals. In addition, there were also unexpected constraints on gathering material on live performance during my fieldwork period because of a government ban on slamdancing and a mandatory deposit of S$2,000 for concerts, which had the effect of an immediate decrease in public rock performances in late 1992 and early 1993.[15]

This study traces how key elements of rock music culture (individualism, fun/hedonism, creativity, populism/egalitarianism) provide signposts for lifestyles and values which oppose the dominant values and lifestyle (nationalism, hierarchy, submission, materialism) of the hegemonic state Singapore rock musicians live in. The subjective discourse of rock music is discussed throughout in counterpoint to participants' understanding of the state constructions of social and cultural life. Thus, this study addresses a dual audience: scholars of contemporary popular music and popular culture, as well as scholars of contemporary Singapore. In particular this study attempts to confront the

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[15] The two concerts described in chapter 1 were attended in an initial, exploratory visit in early 1992.

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problem of the absence of flesh-and-blood Singaporeans in much scholarship, an absence which possibly reflects the successful discursive strategies of a state whose citizens have been characterised as "digits" (in the infamous words of former Prime Minister, and still *de facto* leader, of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew).[16]

Another reason for the lack of 'presence' of real people is the academic privileging of 'objectivity' (and in Singapore, an intellectual tradition of quantitative research and structuralism) over subjective explorations of less tangible aspects of culture such as alternative publications or ephemeral performances. These and other forms of transient utterances, one could argue, would be valid texts for analysis in Singapore's case, where neither mainstream journalists and intelligentsia nor the public in general are at liberty to express consistently oppositional views without fear of censure, silencing or even dismissal (Birch 1993a; Gook 1981; Haas 1989; Chan 1991; George 1992 and Wong, K.K. 1991).

Thesis outline

The first chapter begins with a description of two rock concerts, and presents an initial case for the subversive function of rock in relation to Singapore society as it has been constructed by the PAP/state. This chapter also provides a brief genealogy of the web of control and censorship over private and public life by the PAP/state in the fields of education, the media and popular culture. Since the mid-1980s, there have been changes in government policy toward a more 'cultured' society and participatory politics, largely to stem (and reverse) the flow of dissatisfied middle-class Singaporeans from migrating. However, the tensions between this apparent thaw and the reality of massive state regulation are reflected in paradoxes of identity among individuals, and expressed in

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[16] A good example of this is Alan Well and Lee Chun Wah's "Music Culture in Singapore: record companies, retailers, and performers" in a volume about popular culture in Asia (Lent 1995). This is an impersonal, 'objective' study of popular music culture which focuses on ethnic and business statistical information, which hardly acknowledges the essential unreliability of data obtained through music industry sources (see Negus 1992: 156–8, "A note on record industry stastistics"). The authors conclude that "Singapore is the home of 'duty-free' music. Reputedly an international production center in the heyday of piracy in the early 1980s...it is now primarily only a consumer of Western and Asian music." (Wells and Lee 1995: 40).

widespread anxiety and doubt. Two dominant tropes for discussing local identity seem to be emerging: the first, the negative *kiasu* or the 'ugly Singaporean' (Chan 1994); and the other the cosmopolitan, bi or multi-lingual 'hybrid' Singaporean (Ang and Stretton 1995).

The second chapter presents the alternative musical community through the verbal or written representations of musicians and fans, concentrating on tensions between the various emerging factions in the music scene over issues such as authenticity and commercialism, as well as the building up of a community. The musicians' comments about various aspects of the rock scene, and attitudes towards Singapore's music culture in general are also presented. It is argued that the openness with which the politics of the nascent alternative music scene are conducted is unusual in Singapore, where public debates are usually opened or constructed by the government and a compliant mass media.

The third chapter focuses on the manifold roles of the magazine *Before I Get Old (BigO)*, and argues that it has been the key element in the Singapore alternative scene. The chapter discusses the evolution of this fanzine into a magazine, and its role in the conscious construction of the independent music scene. The chapter also discusses *BigO* as a qualitatively significant journalistic presence in Singapore's mass media, providing examples of material which transgress and push the boundaries of media 'codes' in Singapore.

The fourth chapter examines the relationship between the independent scene and the music industry and mainstream mass media in Singapore. It also looks at ways in which 'globalisation' in the context of rock music is a continuous dialectic between local and outside forces. In this way, the alternative rock scene constitutes a third position between the government and mass media's attempts to define local as saleable, Asian-inflected pop (while in reality allowing for an uncritical and massive inflow of Anglo-American pop) and the mainstream music industry's cultivation of Singapore as an affluent, but uncritical, pop market.

Method, materials and a personal note

The academic study of popular music is a burgeoning, if not unified, area of research, as reflected in existence of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, formed in the mid-1980s to promote and legitimise popular music scholarship. Popular music scholarship is often seen to have begun with Theodore Adorno's deconstruction of popular music culture of the early twentieth century (Adorno 1941). Adorno distinguished *popular* music from what he termed *serious* music, arguing that popular music is a "pseudo-individualistic" form of mass culture wholly subservient to the music industry. His critique of mass culture, wherein 'popular' indicates a less authentic, lower form of culture, has had a great impact on subsequent academic discussions of popular culture at every level, perhaps because it does embody one continual pole of opinion in the debate. Ironically, rock fans also use similar elitist arguments in their dismissal of mainstream pop music.

Subsequently, the rise of pop music in the 1960s was viewed by researchers as rich material for the sociological study of youth, especially in the sociology of deviance (Cohen 1972; Markson 1990). Hence, the field of popular culture studies developed initially in Britain was "specifically designed to rescue the possibilities of mass materials from the derogatory attitude of the mass culture critique" (Miller 1991: 173). The academic tendency to read rock music and culture as deviant was replaced (via the emerging and ideologically engaged field of cultural studies) by populist subcultural analyses. The seminal and most debated work on popular music as resistance is Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: the meaning of style*, which semiotically analysed the style of punk rock and reggae musicians and fans in Britain in the mid-1970s, and argued for the internal coherence of the movement: "punk subculture signified chaos at every level, but this was possible only because the style itself was so thoroughly ordered" (Hebdige 1990: 56).[17]

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[17] This was first published in 1979.

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Popular music-related scholarship has shifted focus several times, sometimes responding to changes in popular music and technology, and at other times reflecting shifts in academic trends in the West.[18] There is no single approach. The subject matter and foci of popular music studies spans the gamut of popular culture—from analysing the role of technology and the workings of the transnational music industry to ethnographic studies of fans and musicology. Many analyses are subjective and even interventionist in the scenes they describe, and academic discourse such as Hebdige's tends to end up being re-circulated and 're-signified' through pop culture magazines such as *The Face*, eventually surfacing in mainstream media (McRobbie 1989). Unlike most other academic fields, the study of popular music is remarkable for the number of academics who have been themselves involved either as fans, musicians, music journalists or even worked in the music industry (McRobbie 1989, introduction; Fornäs et al. 1995). It is a singularly engaged and contentious field of study, partly due to this continuous tension between art and practice or theory, and also because some of the best analyses of popular culture appear within the pages of pop culture magazines, but written within a different discursive field to that of academia.[19] There is, in addition, a certain resistance among rock musicians and fans to being studied and represented.

A study of Swedish rock groups contends that this resistance stems from an inherent suspicion of authority among rock fans, against which research "appears as a form of power, an instrument of integration which threatens the very grounds of rock culture—rowdiness, sensuality, immediacy" (Fornäs et al. 1995: 2). Rock fans link study with an attempt to normalise them. A rock scene is thus a

[18] Popular culture and music in the geographically related countries of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have hardly been researched; subjective, politically inflected accounts of popular culture based on extensive local knowledge and lengthy fieldwork such as Murray's (1991) are even rarer.
[19] One of the most influential and prolific contemporary academic analysts of popular music is the sociologist Simon Frith, who also contributes articles on popular culture to various magazines and newspapers (for a partial list of his output, see Frith 1978; 1987; 1988; 1989; 1991; 1992). Frith and Goodwin [1990] contains the best extant selection of rock and pop analyses). Savage (1991) wrote his analysis and history of the Sex Pistols and punk rock based partly on his experience as a punk fan and journalist.

relatively new, slippery subject for academic scrutiny: it encompasses a wide range of cultural material (recordings, video clips, fanzines, magazines) and practices (learning to play instruments, performance and jamming); and it changes shape over time. But this is part of the challenge of conducting such a study, in the words of Richard Middleton:

> Popular music...can only be properly viewed within the context of the whole musical field, within which it is an active tendency; and this field, together with its internal relationships, is never still—it is always in movement (Middleton 1990: 7).

The varied sources drawn on for this thesis include local fanzines and the magazine *BigO* and formal (recorded) and informal interviews[20] conducted with some of the most active members of Singapore's alternative music scene. There was also ongoing observation of the scene, particularly at the *BigO* house-cum-office which operates as a node as well as a contact point between musicians, journalists and music industry personnel.[21] The formal interviews were conducted with: three prominent musicians who played in their own bands as well as in others, all of whom were actively recording music by other bands in the indie scene; a rock fan and freelance writer who had started his own fanzine and organised recordings; the publisher of *BigO*; the managing director of the local branch of a multinational recording company; the chief programmer of Perfect 10, the pop music channel of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation.[22]

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[20] Important informal discussions which helped to clarify the research area were conducted with Nazir Husain, journalist and organiser of cultural events through his one-man operation, Rage productions; Chris Ho, punk rock musician and disc jockey for Redifussion; Suhaimi Subandie, leader of Stompin' Ground and *de facto* leader of the straight-edge scene; Philip Cheah, music journalist, professional film critic and founding editor of *BigO*, and Joseph E.E. Peters, Assistant Director of the Centre for Musical Activities at the National University of Singapore who was writing a history of Singapore pop music.

[21] Although a family of three adults and two young children reside here, the life of this house is clearly dominated by *BigO*'s activities and the passions of the magazine's initiators—apart from the one-room office, almost all the remaining space throughout the house is taken up by an ever-expanding library of books and magazines, an archive of rock recordings, video and laser discs and pop culture paraphernalia. Thus, the house, with its collections, itself acts as a source of suggestion or inspiration for the musicians, writers and pop culture fans who drop in and are often found in the tiny 'lounge' watching videos or listening to new music.

[22] The process of obtaining information was not always one-directional: an attempt at interviewing disc jockey and rock musician Chris Ho, possibly the most self-consciously

There was mostly bemusement—and occasional cynicism—among the musicians and media in particular about my interest in them as academic subjects and my getting them to talk about their ideas instead of letting their music speak for itself. There were also advantages to being an outsider, one whose work was not going to be recirculated inside Singapore but end up in some obscure corner of foreign academia.

My representations of all those I use in this thesis is somewhat matched by their constructions of what was going on in the music scene: individuals often asked me how the research was going on, and who else I had on my list, why I was asking them something, what someone else had said (and sometimes asking me not to repeat a particular comment to others). Often an interviewee would recommend other people who would either support or contradict their views.

Finally, by way of self-disclosure, this work stems partly from the experience of five years (1979–84) as a Malaysian student at two central institutions of thought control: the National University of Singapore and the Institute of Education. My engagement with the Singapore music scene until 1991 was limited to two illustrations and two concert reviews (from Australia) in 1985–86 for *BigO*, which was then a fanzine.[23]

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Ordering the people: "what makes Singapore different"

No Smoking
No Eating
No Drinking
No Spitting
No Parking
No Waiting
No Turning
No Horning
No Speeding
No Overtaking
No Boating
No Bathing
No Swimming
No Fishing
No Trespassing
No Phototaking
No Plucking
No Pitching
No Dumping
No Q-jumping
No Littering
No Gum chewing
No Nothing
...
"Tentatively entitled: Yes", Art Fazil.[1]

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[1] Self-titled album by Art Fazil, Ponycanyon entertainment (Singapore), 1993.

Two rock concerts and a ban

It is a Saturday afternoon in the lively Katong shopping area on Singapore's east coast. After-work and school crowds are streaming onto the streets in cars, buses and on foot, grazing at myriad restaurants, coffee shops, food stalls and shopping centres. Out of the crowds, inside the darkened hall of a cinema is a different rhythm: here several hundred people are watching and listening to a rock concert featuring four new local bands, (Artists Without Licence [AWOL], Stompin' Ground, Fish on Friday and Shades) all winners of a band competition held two or three months earlier.[2] These amateur bands play a range of rock music, from rock 'n' roll to hardcore punk for this knowledgeable, if somewhat sedate, audience. There is a hum of expectancy, excitement and good humour as the bands troop onto the stage in turn, adjust their instruments, and proceed with the well-established choreography of the four-piece rock spectacle: a little guitar-waving and strutting here, some leaping there. None of the musicians is too outlandishly dressed; the majority of fans are short-haired and neat in t-shirts and jeans, a rather harmonious spectrum of multiracial, mainly male, Singapore youth who would not look out of place at a National Day rally. Cheers and whistles of recognition greet well-loved tunes played with considerable panache and skill, such as the Irish group U2's hit song "I still haven't found what I'm looking for", while the bands' original compositions are received largely in silence. Some members and supporters of the hardcore punk group Stompin' Ground rise from their front row seats and slamdance in response to some energetic chords, hurling themselves bodily against each other. No one else joins in, and they soon return to their seats, crestfallen, reinforcing the image of a rather boisterous version of an end-of-year school concert. Backstage—in this instance, the area around the cinema doors and projection room—musicians mingle with organisers, united by a certain anxiety about the success of the

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[2] This was the New School Rock II concert at the Sin Kim Kok Theatre in East Coast Road on February 29, 1992, organised by the local magazine *Before I Get Old* (*BigO*).

16

event, as well as an elation that it is taking place at all, a sense of the rediscovery or rebirth of a moribund passion. The concert is beginning to lose momentum when the Shades launch into an original composition satirising materialism, Singapore-style: "The first C's career, makin' 50K a year/ Second C's condo, don't want no HDB/ Third C's car, we don't take the bus/ Fourth C's credit! /Fifth C's Cash!"[3] to an instant wave of applause.

Another concert takes place the following weekend: this is a more musically focused event, a hardcore punk and death metal concert with an anarchic edge to both the music and performance.[4] The bands (the aforementioned Stompin' Ground, as well as Silent Sorrow, Swirling Madness, Poetic Justice, Four Sides, Leviathan, Intense Decibel, Blood Angel and Kim) play visceral, atonal music in violent bursts, with the characteristic intensity and unintelligible lyrics of death metal and other offshoots of heavy metal and punk rock music. This is the minimalist music which had conquered the heads (and deafened the ears) of a new generation of disaffected youth around the world, including those in large and small towns in nearby Malaysia and Indonesia.

Those present are largely male teenagers, with a preponderance of Malays. Musicians and fans alike appear deceptively uniform, with their short hair, neat black t-shirts and jeans, with the exception of a few musicians who sport the requisite head of long, flowing, hair to 'headbang' with.[5] Some of the songs are

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[3] These lyrics were reprinted in Lim 1992. 'Condos' are resort-style luxurious apartment complexes which are a status symbol for Singapore's *nouveaux riches*; HDB (Housing Development Board) is the local abbreviation for the government built flats which a majority (over 80 per cent) of the population live in; and lastly, cars in Singapore are, despite an array of offical disincentives and an excellent public transport system, popular but 'extravagant consumer items' (Chua 1995: 96).

[4] The oddly titled (perhaps to make it sound more acceptable to the officials of the Ministry for Technology and the Arts who issue the permits necessary for any performance) 'Youth Awareness' Hardcore Concert was held on March 7, 1992, at the Substation, a venue for innovative theatre, local art exhibitions, seminars and other cultural events.

[5] Headbanging refers to the action of vigorously nodding and flailing one's hair in response to music, a practice originally associated with British heavy metal fans in the seventies and eighties, but now common at alternative concerts everywhere. Hair length for males in Singapore—the subject of a long-running campaign in the 1960s and 1970s—is still a matter for government and institutional intervention with the majority of the male population having to conform to similar short-hair requirements. Amongst young men, a crew cut is usually a mark of compulsory National Service, while a long mop of hair is considered rather *passe* and is largely found amongst Malays and itinerant workers, particularly from 'across the

cover versions, others, original, or even improvised compositions. With a couple of hundred musicians and fans crammed into a small, open-air space whose 'stage' is merely the area in front, the boundary between performers and audience virtually dissolves when the swirl of slamdancing bodies, limbs awkwardly flailing, swoops in one direction, then another, sometimes threatening to erupt into violence. The atmosphere is electric, bringing to mind the ecstatic blurring between music, musician and audience which was a recurring theme in one rock journalist's descriptions of punk concerts during the mid-1980s in America (Arnold 1993). This concert certainly seemed to be as close to embodying an order-less world as one could find in Singapore.[6] Outside, at a discreet distance, is a stationary police car; the music spills out onto the shoppers and tourists trawling for bargains in the main shopping district of Singapore.

The two concerts described here took place in February and March 1992 respectively, and were represented by informants as evidence of a new phase of confidence in their musicianship, and in the fledgling musical community of rock fans and musicians.[7] One musician who was interviewed for this study remarked how the hardcore concert in March had "brought a lot of people into the music"[8] and was a significant step in the development of an alternative music culture. However, the very exuberance and occasional rowdiness of these and other concerts drew the attention of the print media, and then 'the authorities' (as the government is often referred to).

Slamdance or slowdance?

In September 1992, the English language tabloid *New Paper* published photographs of rock fans hurtling from stage into crowd (stagediving and

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causeway'. Male hairstyles in rock music are subject to fashion cycles: long hippy hairstyles are sported by old style 'rockers' or metal fans, while the local hardcore musicians who are followers of the puritanical 'straight edge' hardcore music scene in America take pride in their short cropped hair and clean living. (See further, chap. 3)

[6] This point is also made by Redmund Law, bandmember of Daze, who commented on the absence of a formal division between the performers and the audience in describing a concert held earlier at the same venue (*BigO* 1990, November. Redmund Law, Ablazed [sic] at the Substation: 34–5)

[7] See Appendix 1 for a list of major rock concerts and events.

[8] Interview, Zulkifli Othman, January 1993.

slamdancing) at the concert of a foreign hardcore band (the Rollins band). The sensationalist reports implied that these rock fans were being mindlessly violent and antisocial, tapping into a well-established trope in public discourse and government policy regarding rock music's potential for deviance and criminality.

In addition to censorship of popular music, holding a concert involves obtaining an entertainment licence from the Criminal Investigations Department. Applications require listing the concert program, the name of every musician, and all song titles. The lyrics of original compositions have to be submitted for vetting as well. Hardcore musicians or metal fans frequently complain of harassment from the police—dressing in black jeans and t-shirts was excuse enough for the police to stop them check their identity cards (compulsory in Singapore), or march them to the nearest police station for an on-the-spot urine test for drugs. The police were usually in attendance at concerts.[9] Following the *New Paper*'s report, and subsequent public 'debate', the government issued a total ban on slamdancing in late 1992. Concerts could be still held with police permission and a S$2,000 good behaviour bond. Although this rapid stimulus–response followed a predictable pattern in pop culture wary Singapore, one could equally argue that the relative leniency with which rock concerts had been treated since the late 1980s was surprising, given the persecution of skateboarders' the "McDonalds kids" and other youth-generated symbolic attempts to have fun, and perhaps proof of the announced intention to relax control over culture by the state.

The effect of the slamdancing band on the fledging rock community was immediate, and continues. "What" asked one musician "do they [the authorities] want us to do? Slow dance to high energy gigs?" (Adrian Song, letter published in *BigO*, January 1993: 12). Another musician directed his criticisms at the newspaper rather than directly at the government: "The New Paper is thriving on our new era of liberalism, now they can have all these scantily-clad women

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[9] This was not always a problem—sometimes these were young National Servicemen.

and garbage headlines. But it's because of them that there's this clampdown...I have talked to some of the guys and we are pretty angry about it. The ban is bad for the scene and what the press did by blowing up the issue is horrible..."(Kevin Matthews, The Watchmen, *BigO*, January 1993: 13). Nervous organisers or those in charge of performance spaces used potential violence as an excuse to cancel some concerts, as in the case of one organised as part of the coursework for Mass Communication students at the Ngee Ann Polytechnic: "the authorities were also afraid of slamdancing and did not like the idea of outsiders coming into the campus, fearing of [sic] vandals or a fight breaking out." (report in *BigO*, April 1993: 13).

Some observers cautioned the rowdy fans who had brought this unwelcome attention to the scene, fearing a return to outright censorship: *BigO*'s publisher wrote: "We could just as easily slip back to the '70s. Remember how rock concerts were banned from the National Theatre."[10] Others tried to point out that these fans needed listening to, not suppression: *BigO* editor Stephen Tan, reflecting on the rap music and the disempowerment of blacks which had given rise to the Los Angeles riots in 1992, commented that many of the hardcore fans who participated in slamdancing were marginalised young Malays:

> '...who is not to say that the sublimated violence in slamming is not symptomatic of anything else? The only way of truly dissipating deepfelt frustrations is by talking things over and ensuring that real solutions are offered for actual problems. In the case of the Singapore young, more channels of feedback between young and old, a more tolerant attitude from everyone and a chance to air one's feelings are steps in the right direction.' (*BigO*, June 1992: 6)[11]

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[10] Michael Cheah, "One bad apple", *BigO*, November 1992: 15. Most slamdancers would not remember, since they would have been born in the early to mid-1970s.
[11] This issue includes a special report discussing moderate and militant black American musicians in the context of the breakdown of race relations during the rioting.

The sense of novelty attending these and earlier concerts in the 1990s resulted from the fact that locally produced rock and pop music has been rare in Singapore since the 1970s, when as previously described, the music scene fell victim to the purging of anything deemed morally or culturally unwholesome or connected with drug-taking. The idea of a hiatus of rock music culture is particularly marked in the recollections of older Singapore rock and pop fans who now occupy influential positions in the music media and industry.[12] However, while the rock performance/concert is the most flamboyant, visible and reified site of interactions between musicians and fans in a rock culture, it is only a part of the consumption and circulation of the symbolic material and practices which make up that culture. Much of the activity which goes into creating a rock music based culture takes place at other sites where music can be consumed or listened to. Musical consumption takes place in specialist music shops, at home or in HDB void decks[13] or local community centres, in the production and consumption of fanzines and magazines; inside the head of someone using a Sony Walkman: in short, in a variety of public and private spaces. In Singapore, where public and private spaces and lives are subject to a high degree of regulation by the state, these activities take on a different colouring to similar ones in rock's homelands in working and middle-class areas and suburbs of America or the United Kingdom.

If we describe the culture of rock music as an example of disorder in the context of the hegemonic state discourse of order in Singapore, what was the connection between the noisy, disordered music and musicians inside and the ordered people outside? Or to carry the idea of a hypothetical divide further, what happens to each rock fan on stepping out of the theatre into the streets? Are there aspects of being a rock fan or musician which are incompatible with

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[12] See, for instance, excerpts from interviews in *BigO*, April 1994: 32–6. The publisher and editors of this magazine are themselves from this earlier generation.

[13] The void deck is the ground-level, open, public space which forms the base of a Housing Development Board (HDB) block of flats. The use of this space, apart from as a thoroughfare and casual meeting area, is subject to HDB regulations as well as the approval of formal, para-political Residents' Committees.

being a 'Singaporean', in a country where the boundaries between public and private spheres is blurred? What happens when you grew up listening to the omnipotent ex-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew *and* worshipped the likes of the late Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the world's most famous alternative rock band?[14] Perhaps the key to that question lies in the fact that the former is an act of fate; the latter, an act of choice.

Culture and control in Singapore

The hegemonic framework

Singapore has been a productive site for case studies on social control in a neo-capitalist, or neo-Marxist, state (depending on one's preferred emphasis): there are ample analyses of the first two decades of the successful consolidation of PAP hegemony.[15] Since the trauma of its unlikely and unsought birth as a nation,[16] Singapore and its people have undergone profound social, physical and economic transformation. State efforts to construct a monolithic national culture and identity from scratch—from "an absence" (Chua and Kuo 1991: 2)—have deliberately or unintentionally destroyed pre-existing social networks, identifications and value systems.[17] This radical restructuring of Singapore society has been, and continues to be, legitimised and effected through para-political institutions, the educational system, the legal system, and the media as well as

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[14] The American alternative band *Nirvana* was a proverbial 'overnight sensation', a band with a small local following which rose from anonymity to world renown without the machinations of any of the five major transnational music corporations. Their music and anti-heroic stance made them icons of the independent music scene in the early 1990s, and the recent suicide of the group's lead singer, Kurt Cobain, seems only to have increased Nirvana's status as instantaneous mythmakers to a new generation. See *BigO* March, 1992. Patrick Ch'ng, "Thank heaven for Nirvana": 40–44 and Nazir Husain, "Hanging loose with Nirvana": 44–5; Arnold (1993) eulogises Nirvana and other bands in the indie scene.

[15] Some analyses of direct and indirect control in Singapore are Benjamin 1988; Birch 1993a; Brown 1993; Chan 1991; Gook 1981; Hill and Lian 1995; Quah and Quah 1989; Tremewan 1994; Wilkinson 1988; Wong Kok Keong 1991 and Wong 1991. Some of the apparatus of control was inherited, retained or adapted from British colonial laws and bureaucracy, especially those from the period of the so-called 'Emergency', when the British were at war with the Malayan Communist Party, whose members derived from resistance fighters against the Japanese occupation forces during the Second World War (Tremewan 1994).

[16] On the reluctance of its leaders at the time of separation from Malaysia: see for instance Yong Mun Cheong in Ban Kah Choon et al., 1992: 32–4, who argues that the well-documented anxiety about the unfeasibility of the new state is behind the PAP's crisis mentality.

[17] A clear description, based on a 25-year case study of a village community turned into housing estate, is found in Chua 1995: 79–100.

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more blatant sites of indoctrination such as the period of compulsory national service for males. The chief instrument for disseminating the government's "crisis-ridden loyalty discourse" (Birch 1993a) is the mass media, which is at the heart of the contradiction between the state's commitment to an open economy and to become an international 'hub city' and its desire to resist cultural practices, ideology and influences which it deems undesirable.

Thus a lack of political, social and cultural freedom has shadowed Singapore's much vaunted economic success. Outspoken critics of the PAP's policies have been publicly vilified and even humiliated via the government-controlled media; intellectuals are co-opted by the state; young people in secondary and tertiary institutions (a high proportion of the current population) are inculcated with the values of submission to family, school and nation; and everyone is required to submit to petty laws and public surveillance. All this in the name of material progress and the imperatives of nation-building and vigilance against enemies of the state.[18] Wong Kok Keong uses Gramscian analysis to explain how the crisis mentality and rhetoric of the Singapore government has been normalised through force or repression as well as consent-building (Wong, K.K. 1991: 109).[19] Thus new and existing institutions are used to perform what Gramsci described as an "educative and formative role…whose aim is always that of creating new and higher types of civilization." (Wong K.K. 1991: 110–11).

The hegemony of the PAP has had to be continually maintained, especially since the mid-1980s, when the election of the first opposition member of

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[18] "What makes Singapore different from most is that it admits to what it is doing and legitimates it within a postcolonial discourse of nation-building" (Birch 1993a: 74).

[19] Perhaps there is room for an anecdote here. During my fieldwork, there was a by-election held in the constituency where I was staying with friends who lived in an HDB flat. The Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, was one of the candidates, and several opposition candidates were fielded, including a lecturer who subsequently lost his tenure in suspicious circumstances at the National University of Singapore. It was the final night of the campaigning, which included a speech by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. There was a large, animated but peaceful, crowd milling around in and under the towers of HDB flats, nothing which warranted overt police presence, but there were armoured riot-police buses parked outside the block of flats I was in. Were the riot police there to remind voters of unpleasant possibilities if they did not vote the incumbent in?

Parliament, and adverse reactions to some of their policies, a serious brain drain resulting from substantial numbers of highly educated Singaporeans migrating to escape from the confines of government intervention, and the ageing of the original leadership has given rise to an outward relaxation of some controls. There remains a high level of public acceptance of "unnecessary political paternalism" (Haas 1989: 48), although the state has moved to accomodate and even foster a greater range of cultural activities.

A brief genealogy of Singapore culture

Given the scale (not to mention the rapidity) of change within the country as well as globally, it is perhaps inevitable that state attitudes towards culture have also altered. Culture and cultural policy—apart from the mass media—have received scant attention in the scholarly literature on Singapore. Popular Singapore attitudes to culture of all kinds, and at all levels, have yet to be thoroughly researched.

Koh Tai Ann's essay on "Culture and the Arts" in Singapore (in Sandhu and Wheatley 1989: 710–48) is one of the few attempts to look at culture in Singapore in its political context, as well as to map the changes. Basing her discussion on that of Raymond Williams in *Keywords*, she traces the dominant usages of the word culture itself in Singapore, from the 1960s, when it meant "a (our) way of life" to the 1970s, when it was linked with cultural development, to the 1980s, when culture began to be addressed as something to be valued intrinsically, as well as economically. The official line on this last phase was to promote creativity, cultivate a gracious society, and "make living in Singapore more fun."[20] Each of these phases has been dependent on the overall political aims of the time, and the need to sift out undesirable cultural practices, both local and imported.

One of the PAP's moves to win back votes from a disenchanted middle-class, and to prevent them from migrating in droves is a superficial loosening of state control over the censorship of cultural products. There is now a wider range

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[20] Koh quoting Goh Chok Tong (Koh 1989: 711).

of music allowed to be broadcast over television and radio, with censorship directed at non-Mandarin language Chinese cultural products (particularly popular Cantonese music and film from Hong Kong) rather than solely at decadent Western lyrics; a wider range of movies' and the official promotion of Singapore as a cultural centre for Southeast Asia. Compared to the neglect of only a few years ago, the 1990s seems a good place for local artists, with government sponsorship for creative projects of all kinds, largely through the Economic Development Board, with money set aside for training, individual scholarships, the promotion of the Singapore Arts and Film Festivals—the cultivation of the arts for economic and political gains above social ones.[21]

Both 'high' and 'low' culture appear to be gaining recognition: the Singapore Arts Festival (which has sometimes had avant garde local and foreign productions) now incorporates the already established Singapore Film festival (which grew out of individual initiatives of local cinephiles), as well as a Fringe Festival, at which local bands are invited to play. Pop music is encouraged, with police organising concerts (while they monitor the lyrics or performances which are 'too sexy'). The reality is that the fringe of avant garde or creative persons in Singapore still have to wage constant battles against the ignorance of the media, the incorporation of the state, and the apathy of the general public: the most successful production in Singapore are famous foreign productions or artists who charge the highest fees.

As an example of the dichotomies between what are seen as 'good' and 'bad' Western cultural products, we can look at the contrast between the media coverage of two concerts held in late 1992—the concert of the renowned tenor, Luciano Pavarotti, and that of an influential and admired American alternative rock singer Henry Rollins. The first was a media event which featured a front

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[21] Some of the proposals are: A$571 million for new/expanded cultural infrastructure (the Economic Development Board, Ministry for Information and the Arts); using cultural events as an additional lucrative attraction for tourists, after shopping and sightseeing; a National Arts Council; and a biennial Festival of Asian Performance Arts (Krishnan 1994).

page photograph in the *New Straits Times* the next day of who was there, and a smaller item on the concert itself, which was actually critical of the standard of the tenor's performance. What was significant about the photograph, and accompanying listings and quotes, was the presence of the Prime Minister and other leading politicians. In the context of Singapore, this could only (was meant to) be read as a didactic example without irony, in the government controlled newspaper. On the other hand the Rollins concert was accompanied (in the afternoon tabloid paper) by dramatic shots of slamdancing and caused the furore already described. An examination of film classification and censorship reveals other discrepancies and contradictions (Birch 1993a: 47–53).

In addition, this loosening up exists alongside much of the same extensive as well as petty controls over housing, education, the media in general, and private life. The state remains intent on policing its cultural borders, even when this is becoming increasingly difficult. This remains the contradiction in the economic and cultural spheres of life in Singapore, as Wong, K.K. says, "the main source of contention between the PAP state and global capital is culture, itself" (1991: 97). Moving from a position where culture, in the sense of a body of encoded and received practices, was not necessary for economic development, the government has now targeted culture as quite the reverse. It is thought that cultural activities help to sustain the élite whom Singapore needs to retain or attract from overseas, but many people are still unhappy:

> *So who can dream of being an artist in Singapore? It is because people have given up hope of pursuing non-conventional alternatives in Singapore that they have stopped dreaming* (Chan 1994: 75).

The new policies on culture are based on the idea that culture is something extrinsic to peoples' lives, something which requires economic wealth and can be added on or subtracted (Birch 1993a: 54). The dominant discourse of order in Singapore, which construes the individual as a compliant subject of the state, and has created a culturally confused society, one in which debates about a Singapore

identity and culture periodically rage back and forth between academia and the government, as well as the small artistic community. The terms of this legitimising discourse, wherein personal desires for autonomy or expression, glossed as 'Western style individualism', are portrayed as intrinsically hostile to the health (survival) of the nation. These debates often arise in response to state directives on culture, or pronouncements through a compliant mass media. Several commentators have said that no real oppositional culture has been allowed to develop. Koh Tai Ann puts its more bluntly:

> Potential alternative centres of cultural influence have not been allowed
> to develop because of this successful merging of society into state (Koh
> 1989: 720).

The combination of pervasive state control and the ideology of competitiveness and compliance has given birth to a unique national character, represented by the figure of the *kiasu*, the Ugly Singaporean. All kinds of national and personal failings are blamed on *kiasuism*, including the propensity to grab every advantage but give little away. Thus the failure to come up with meaningful cultural expressions is blamed on this trait (Chan 1994), while Sylvia Toh Paik Choo (a Singapore humorist and journalist) insists that: "the Kiasu Singaporean 'is definitely an 80s phenomenon'" (in reminiscence about Singapore in the 1960s, and the uncongenial early 1970s). In reply, Philip Cheah, an editor of *BigO*, writes that (with local bands paying for their own recordings), "rock 'n' roll seems to be the one place where kiasu-ism doesn't fit" (*BigO*, Oct. 1991: 16). A local cartoonist has given this Singapore Everyman a face with his popular cartoon character, Mr. Kiasu, whose mottos expressed in Singlish (Singapore English) are "everything also must grab, everything also want extra".[22] Mr. Kiasu is the new anti-hero, who arouses love-hate feelings as he reflects the intense, alienating and sterile competitiveness of Singapore society.

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[22] Quoted in *BigO*, November 1991: 30; and *BigO*, October 1993: 67–8.

Culture and the mass media

The contradictions between the government's control of the media and the flood of cultural products, Western or otherwise, seemed to become even more untenable by the mid-1980s; even on the controlled media (as well as from Malaysia's American-oriented TV 3, receivable in Singapore) there were mass media images of largely suburban American youth broadcast nightly which contrasted sharply with the circumscribed lives of local youth, who, nonetheless were highly receptive: a common language and the increasing ability to purchase trendy consumer items provided theoretical and emotional affinities and links between an idealised (imaginary) Western adolescent lifestyle and their own. Or to put it differently, most aspects of Singapore's culture cannot be adequately understood without considering its global links (Wong, K.K. 1991: 47).

How do Singaporeans negotiate their knowledge of, and passion for, Western forms of popular culture with their powerlessness-as-citizens of a state which continues to try to exercise, the 'Singapore Rennaissance' notwithstanding, censorship over much of the liveliest aspects of contemporary Western culture? A very important corollary to this is one beyond the scope of this thesis: the cultural products in other languages, from Malay language pop to Cantonese serials, none of which are officially promoted, and which equally contain the seeds of extra-national identification. Since political negotiations about culture and society are still curtailed, what kind of negotiations between people, and between state and citizen, were taking place in Singapore? The contradictions in government policy are in part a reflection that negotiations are taking place at different levels, even if the directives on culture remain top-down to a large extent, with the government still attempting to contain and control the impact and nature of information and cultural products into the country.[23]

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[23] Although to examine the extent to which recent government policy on culture has been in response to individual or collective negotiation would be an interesting area of research.

The government continues to have problems with this influx of global popular culture, seeing social and sexual menace to the public order in the most tangential of symbolic references, and continues to legislate against and act as a gatekeeper to this material. It has also kept up a series of campaigns to strengthen the moral vigour of the people by stage-managing a debate on 'Asian' and 'shared' values (as opposed to 'Western' values), while the education system and the national service remain powerful (though not unproblematic) conduits for the ideologies and intentions of the state. That these decadent Western values (individualism) are actually the stereotypical ones associated with the rock counterculture (and concentrated in negative images of rock 'n' roll) are an important point for us here.[24] At various times, too, 'Chinese' or other supposedly ethnically-specific values and chauvinism have been identified as harmful to the state. Having actually been the cause of much loss of 'traditional' community, family structures, and the break down of cultural identity, the government has recently held several campaigns for the 'revitalisation' of Asian values, including introducing policies which will reinforce the 'traditional' family institution (keep granny at home to cut welfare costs), the strengthening of the teaching of mother tongues as second languages (which are assigned to pupils), and the renewed effort to teach moral education in schools.

The inscriptions of Asian values on the individuals, therefore, dovetails with the prevailing ideological discourse that has a very developed vocabulary of responsibility and *a correspondingly weak set of terms for individual rights.*[25] The use of 'Asian' ties in neatly and strategically with the imperatives of Singapore business as a result of the economic success of 'East Asia' and Japan, and the ascendancy of China as a potentially endless market. The state-based discourse is

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[24] See also Wong, K.K. (1991: 247), where he argues that the scapegoating of Western values for alienation amongst Singapore youth and young adults avoids the materialist' and thus any *political* explanation.
[25] Chua and Kuo, 1991, 26–7, my emphasis.

reproduced in the media, and steamrolls over the infinite complexities and discordance within the term Asian.[26]

Cultural policy in Singapore underlines a form of state schizophrenia which remains unresolved. At the same time as the re-introduction of Asian values, the government has promoted the idea of Singaporeans as 'global citizens', cosmopolitan citizens who will be able to move in and out of the country lightly. The contemporary reality for a Singaporean has also been described as "creatively hybrid" as embodied in the widespread use of the (officially banned) "informal, impure, and thoroughly heteroglossic Singlish" (Ang and Stretton 1995: 85; 6).[27] However, the use of Singlish in pop music and culture is not without its critics:

> On the new album, I wanted to make a political statement in music. I also wanted to show that you could write a Singaporean song without saying 'like dat' [referring to a popular song, "Why You So Like Dat?" by group of local comedians], without resorting to colloquialism or Singlish, and yet make it still relevant to Singapore (Kevin Matthews, of The Watchmen, quoted in *BigO*, March 1992: 25)

Educational policies

The control of its most important economic resource—'human capital'—has long been amongst the PAP's top priorities. Students are under a lot of pressure to perform well in a system which categorises them according to scholastic ability from competitive kindergarten-level schools upwards in a series of examinations (the first of these at the age of nine determines which educational 'stream' the child enters), and hence their usefulness to society. This sorting out of children into their potential economic usefulness becomes more acute as they proceed through the system. As in many other countries, the socialisation process is in

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[26] The genealogy of the discourse of 'Asian' values with Singapore are analysed in Ang and Stretton (1995).
[27] Hybridity is also evocative of Singapore's eugenicist policies, bio-technological research, and the 'Singapore' orchid. See Chee and Chan (1984), *Designer Genes*, for a collection of responses to eugenicist policies and rhetoric in Singapore and Malaysia.

tandem with the the compulsory education system, and the very school one goes to marks one's place in the hierarchy of Singapore. The difference is the degree of competitiveness throughout the island-nation, which means that even primary school entrance (to the few favoured schools) is a matter for heightened anxiety and lobbying on the part of parents. In a tiny country which is so hierarchically structured, school allegiances and achievements take on proportionately greater importance. Singapore has an annually broadcast and highly fought-over pecking order of schools, with the result that individual identity is often strongly marked by school attendance and record: 'successful' students tend to come from 'successful' schools. Many of the younger musicians in the indie scene considered themselves to be 'outsiders' of the educational system, and were not from elite schools, or were even from what are preceived as third-rate institutions. As elsewhere where school attendance is compulsory, the educational system absorbs the lives of all young Singaporeans, and heavy work loads leave little time to develop non-school, or non-sanctioned, talents or interests.[28]

The sociologist Chua Beng Huat describes education in Singapore as "an issue that has refused to settle down since the late 1970s" (Chua 1995). The contentiousness of educational policies is in part due to the high level of public participation and interest in what is possibly the most important factor in achieving lifelong success (or at least, wealth), in Singapore. It is also due to the use of the education system as a pipeline for rapidly changing policies of the state: Singapore's education system is perhaps its most effective "ideological state apparatus", to use a phrase of Louis Althusser's, inculcating by degrees the necessary values to fit in with the overall logic of the state.

Since those who affirm and propagate these forms of indoctrination tend of course to occupy powerful positions in the government and media and educational institutions, it is their voices and words which predominate. The young writer and rock fan, Claire Tham satirises the attitudes of the young elite,

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[28] See for example, Birch 1993a: 35–7.

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represented by the student leader who is trying to convince the female protagonist of the value of submission. This has the opposite effect on the female protagonist, to whom the indoctrination is all too familiar, and all too transparent:

> Like Patriotism, National fervour, College spirit, a trio that rang in her mind with the clangour of rusty metal. Government leaders who gave interviews, ministry officials who came to college to give talks would say, Now think about this. Be glad thou art not in Jamaica where the natives sleep all day in the sun of a sluggish economy. Be glad thou art not living in New York, where the homicide figures are higher than maggot reproduction rates, or in China where they have no water-closets. Comparison was a pretty listless and smug way of inspiring thrills in the national breast.[29]

The quote from Tham's fictional rebellious University student presents another equally recognisable feature of life in Singapore: the ubiquitous yoking of local (school, college, community centre) loyalties (socialist-style) with national chauvinism. This lead story from *Fascist Rock* juxtaposes a sinister, sophisticated student leader, who is in charge of the induction of new University students into the culture of compliance which dominates the National University of Singapore, with a rock music-loving student who refuses to participate in the compulsory indoctrination sessions. Intellectuals are meant to legitimise government policy and those who function outside the institutional framework are ostracised or ignored if critical of the PAP (Quah and Quah 1989: 110), students are meant to be inside the system.

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[29] Tham 1990: 60-61. The college here refers to one of the exclusive University residential colleges. Student rebels are not a social cliché, or embodiments of a rite of passage in the conservative atmosphere of the University of Singapore as they were/are in the West. This is not because of a 'natural' tendency for compliance—aside from other factors, there have been strict rules governing meetings and behaviour on campus since the crackdowns on student leaders and academics in the 1970s.

But even the élite who ostensibly win the educational race are not free of the state. Over 40 per cent of graduates, including the top scholars sent to institutions overseas, are bonded to work, or employed by the state, and "the combination of the stress on deference (which has been promoted as an 'Asian value') and material prosperity has produced a depoliticised culture which is not conducive to the spread of ideas of individual or group liberty against the state" (Brown 1993: 19). Despite the recent moves, the humanities and the arts in general have been undervalued in the educational system, and independent thought is not encouraged. Rather the emphasis is on the ability to ingest requisite reams of knowledge and represent them accurately in the gruelling public examinations which schooling in Singapore entails. Passing and doing well in the major examinations (rehearsed by school-based examinations at regular intervals through the year) means that children and young adults have little free time. What free time they have is generally spent in more classes (Mandarin, ballet, music lessons, mastering the abacus), as they become victims of their parents' desire to produce the perfect students who appear in the media. As for University sudents, one observer notes that "Students in tertiary education are given such a heavy work load to ensure they keep out of politics" (Gook 1981: 253).

The recent privatisation of some sections of the education system in this small country has only widened the gap between the intellectually élite students and the average student, between the chosen and those left behind. The socialisation process of Singapore's education system leaves its young with little sense of individuality—perhaps herein lies one of the appeals of being in a band.

> "From the womb till I'm in my grave/ They try to make me into what they want me to be.../ Not what I want to be" (Art Fazil, "Mama I can't breathe")[30]

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[30] Self-titled album by Art Fazil, Ponycanyon Entertainment (Singapore), 1993.

2

Musicians' discourse: the struggle to be heard

> *I identify with the struggle to be heard which is part of rock music. My band*
> *wants to represent what life is like in Singapore, not some manufactured*
> *bullshit* (Patrick Ch'ng, Oddfellows).[1]

The Singapore independent rock scene is made up of a growing number of music
fans who choose to make rock music a central focus of their lives, many of whom
are, or aspire to be, in a band. In the rock world, one begins by listening, then
learning to imitate one's heroes or heroines, as with any other art form.
Becoming a musician does not involve formal institutions, but informal learning,
with older or more skilled musicians teaching newer or younger ones as well as
learning from each other. Anyone could be transformed by this process, with the
distance between 'ordinariness' and rock divinity bridged by a commitment to
rock, as described in a semi-autobiographical first novel, written and self-
published by Kelvin Tan, the drummer of the Oddfellows:

> What fascinated me was their commitment. The amount of time and
> energy they put into their music.
>
> When those guys took to the stage, they were like four little demi-
> gods. Four ordinary mediocre school-kids were transformed into
> professors. Men with a vision to be true to their instincts...The four of

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[1] Passages in italics are transcriptions from interviews; indented passages in plain text are
from printed sources; the names of bands where provided, are in plain text.

them were outsiders. They were always on the fringe, living the rock myth. They were so young, but they seemed so old (Tan 1992: 39).

Unlike Kelvin Tan's fictional rock musicians, many of the Singapore indie musicians and fans seemed to both emulate and criticise various aspects of rock mythology: the romantic artist, the underdog/outsider, and the goal of personal transformation, perhaps fame, through music. Neither did they fit neatly into the current body of music scholarship, where the resistance of popular music culture genres is related to the homogeneity and cohesiveness of distinct subcultures. Two of the most important features of the Singapore alternative music scene were its diversity and the openness with which debates were carried out. Although most of the musicians and fans were male, and many hardcore fans were in their late teens, there were wide variations in age, educational and ethnic backgrounds, personal circumstances and occupations.[2] This heterogeneity is unusual in the literature of rock scenes elsewhere (as represented in academic discourse, with the notable exception of Cohen 1994) and also unusual in terms of the complex and divisive heirarchies and politics of class, race, and age which have resulted from the PAP's educational and other social policies (Tremewan 1994). Furthermore, the discussions and arguments about music, performance styles, and directions were uncharacteristic in a country where education stifles individual expression and public debates are to a large extent stage-managed (Birch 1993b: 73–83).

The coincidence of men and rock music, on the other hand, is not one which is peculiar to Singapore. Rock has been criticised as a cultural form which is dominated by men in its production and consumption. Local and foreign rock

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[2] In the three years of *BigO* surveyed, there was only one feature about local women in rock which addressed the issue of sexism in the scene, although there were frequent interviews and reviews of established foreign female artists (*BigO*, September 1993, Philip Cheah, 'Babes in Boyland'; Lina Adam, 'Curse Female' and Sandi Tan, 'The desire to desire'). Local bands with female musicians such as *Psycho Sonique, Sally Fields* and *Breed* were only formed after the period of fieldwork conducted for this study, and there are indications, such as in the classified sections of recent (1994) issues of *BigO*, that more are being formed.

media and industry personnel tend to be predominantly male.[3] Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie argue that involvement in the culture of rock music helps to construct particular areas of adolescent male sexuality, confirming "traditional definitions of what constitutes masculinity and femininity" (Frith and McRobbie 1990: 387), while pop is seen as a female cultural enclave (no less influential in providing role models, as in the case of pop singer Madonna). The dearth of female rock musicians and fans in Singapore could be a reflection of this essential 'masculinity' of the social processes and spaces in any rock scene, or they could indicate local patterns of gender relations. There were exceptions to the predominance of men in the Singapore rock scene: a sprinkling of young women attended rock concerts; a few local women began to form all-female bands in late 1993 (possibly gaining confidence from the example of women in the 'Riot Grrrl' scene developing overseas); and there were also a handful of women who were involved as organisers or music reviewers.[4] However, issues of gender and sexuality in the local rock scene as a whole are complex[5], and deserve a separate study. In this thesis I have chosen to focus on the male indie rock musicians and alternative media personnel in Singapore, who at least up to 1993, dominated the scene. This chapter discusses various concerns amongst the rock musicians as they grappled with the contradictions and challenges of carving out an 'alternative' musical space within Singapore.

The first section of this chapter focuses on representations of the Singapore rock scene gathered during discussions and interviews conducted in late 1992 and early 1993 with four active participants in the indie music scene: Patrick Ch'ng,

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[3] My interviews with the rock media in Jakarta revealed the same gender bias (again, with some exceptions); Negus' illuminating study of the British rock industry suggests that the lack of women rock journalists there reflects the "general marginalisation of women in the music industry" rather than gender-specific differences in the way women and men respond to rock music (Negus 1992: 118–19).

[4] One woman (Yit Teh) organised a hardcore concert and subsequently started a fanzine. Another erudite female rock fan, Claire Tham, chose a different mode of expression. Rock music features as a *leitmotiv* and subject in some of her short stories, *Fascist Rock: stories of rebellion* (Tham 1990). As a recent contributor to *BigO*, she has written critical issues on popular culture, including feminism in rock music, censorship and the avantgarde.

Martyn See, Zulkifli Othman and Suhaimi Subandie. All had similar fundamental conceptions of what constituted a rock culture: fun, hard work, learning, creativity, good music, but apart from perhaps Zulkifli and Suhaimi, they had little else in common. They were chosen for their different positions in the scene—Patrick and the Oddfellows were the best known indie band, achieving a measure of success in a relatively short time; Martyn was a critic as well as fan; Zulkifli was a newcomer to the scene who had plunged into different projects (a rock band, recording, writing); and Suhaimi was possibly the most respected musician, and a leader of the hardcore scene. They were also positioned differently with respect to *BigO*: Patrick had become closely linked to *BigO*, while Martyn and Zulkifli were contributors to the magazine; they were involved as well in organising *BigO* events. However, Martyn and Zulkifli maintained an independent, and often critical stance toward the magazine. The oldest, Suhaimi, was not involved with *BigO*, although as the acknowledged leader of the straight-edge scene and a much emulated musician, he appeared as the subject of several interviews.[6] Questions were asked about musical involvement and perspectives. Were these fans and musicians linked not only by a mutual enjoyment of rock music, but also by similar ideas about its role in their lives? The interviewees were encouraged to discuss their self-perceptions as music fans, musicians and media people in the context of Singapore. Most of those I spoke to formally and informally cast themselves as going against the grain of Singapore society to some degree, but it is difficult to know whether such a perception preceded their serious involvement in rock music, or whether they had come to see themselves differently under the influence of independent music's discourse of oppositionality to anything 'mainstream'.

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[6] The section on Suhaimi Subandi is based on an informal interview with him at one of the main gathering places for hardcore musicians (the TNT music studio), as well as interviews published in *BigO*. I also met, talked to, and observed other hardcore musicians, some of whom were there to record a new album.

Musicians speak

This following section, except for that on Suhaimi Subandie, is based on transcripts of interviews, with a brief introductory paragraph and editing for continuity. Passages in italics are direct quotes from interviews, while other quotes are from written sources. My comments are in smaller print. The intention was to distinguish between direct verbal quotes, my reporting, my comments, and other textual quotes.

Patrick Ch'ng

Patrick is in his early twenties, and is a member of the only indie group, the Oddfellows, to have had a local hit. He is an energetic participant in the alternative scene at several levels. Although he has a tertiary-level qualification, he made the unusual decision (in the Singapore context) to dedicate himself to becoming a full-time rock musician and holds no permanent job.[7]

Patrick has been playing music for years: a passion for rock music, as well as his reading of *BigO* since 1985 inspired him to form a band. In 1987, he and a friend issued a demo entitled Rough Acts, a satire of a local pop album entitled Class Acts. At about the same time, Patrick began writing concert and record reviews for *BigO*, selecting some of his favourite local and foreign groups in order to bring others' attention to them.

A year later, he decided to start his own underground recording label, named Tim after an album by a foreign indie band (Replacements) that he admired. For several years, Patrick worked with other indie musicians to produce homemade cassettes. These demos were then sold by word-of-mouth, advertising in *BigO*, and through shops (such as Skoob books and DaDa records) with supportive owners. In 1991, Tim records produced the Oddfellows' album

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[7] This interview, and the one with Zulkifli Othman, was conducted in *BigO* editor Stephen Tan's HDB flat. Patrick had become a friend of Stephen's, who had been a guitarist in the Oddfellows) and was at home there. Zulkifli, on the other hand, had never been there, was both curious about the flat's archives of records and comics, and nervously joked about being interviewed in a "BigO" setting.

entitled Teenage Head (which contains "So Happy", the most commercially successful indie song in Singapore in the early 1990s) and the Tim label was legally registered.

Patrick's experiences as a small-scale independent music producer were intermeshed with his life as a budding rock musician.

As well as spending much of his time practising and writing songs with his own band, he often played for fun with other bands, including in the Padres, an *ad hoc* band made up of musicians from other bands. On a more serious level, he described the constant struggle to compose good songs as well as maintain and improve the standards of musicianship within his band.

There was, said Patrick, a physical problem of finding performance spaces in Singapore. Singapore needed an equivalent to the alternative rock venues in America and elsewhere, but Patrick pessimistically argued that there would never be such a "beast" given that [alternative] rock venues were not geared to money-making.[8]

One of the main obstacles for the indie musicians is the difficulty of finding spaces to gather, practice and perform in a densely-populated country where there is very little unallocated public space. Musicians and concert organisers found a variety of performance spaces (the Substation, the amphitheatre at the World Trade Centre, an old cinema, a community centre, a skating rink, school halls), but few of these had the intimate atmosphere and continued exposure necessary to foster young singers and bands. Ironically, local musicians were considered a risk while concerts by big names in the pop and the entertainment industry such as Michael Jackson who could draw large audiences who paid extravagant ticket prices were becoming a regular occurence in Singapore.

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[8] Alternative concerts are meant to be participatory to a large extent, and are held in cheap or free venues. In many countries where rock music flourishes, new bands can test themselves as supporting performers for older bands in venues such as University student-run halls, or pubs whose owners and patrons specifically support untested singers and bands. In Singapore, as pointed out earlier, the crackdown on rock musicians, fans and venues (as well the coincidental withdrawal of British troops who patronised rock and blues venues alongside locals) in the 1970s means that these networks were effectively destroyed and replaced by mainstream nightclubs.

The result was that there was a great deal of interruption to musical activity, which posed a problem for developing a professionalism among bandmembers and in the scene in general.

Given the frustrations of not having a suitable and established venue for indie music, Patrick and others in his band decided to try using the mainstream nightclub circuit in Singapore.[9] The Oddfellows had negotiated a contract to play at the Europa (a nightclub) in the city, but had found the experience an unsettling one because the audience's expectations were at odds with their own. Bands did not play often enough to garner a fan base, and the pubs were not suitable venues, because the regular patrons at these clubs expected to entertained by smooth-sounding music, and favourite hits from the past.[10] The audience had treated the Oddfellows as wallpaper:

> the patrons were not there to listen to untried songs, or grungy renderings of their favourite pop songs…music should have some tension, a performance should have an element of uncertainty, an edge to it—will the singer hit the note?

He realised, however, that

> most Singaporeans want slick, 'beautiful' music which contain no spontaneity or risk. Singapore doesn't have the culture for rock music—Asia doesn't have the culture for rock music. If Dylan was a Singaporean, he would never have made it.[11]

Patrick ended with bitter lament about prevailing attitudes to rock music.

> Singaporean society was superficial and his enemies were yuppies.

Martyn See

Martyn is also in his early twenties, and finding his feet as a freelance writer and music critic.

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[9] The mainstream musicians who work in the club scene are the only ones interviewed in Wells and Lee 1995 (see especially pp. 36–40).
[10] Patrick Ch'ng, Interview, 1992.
[11] Patrick Ch'ng, Interview, 1992.

He coordinated, wrote in, and distributed the *Reckoning* fanzine while at junior college (the two years before University or other tertiary education in Singapore). The *BigO* editors read the fanzine and invited Martyn to contribute. He began to write for *BigO*, and wished to continue writing regularly; however, he found that the lack of continuous activity in the music scene meant that he could only contribute occasionally. Although not a musician himself, he is very involved as a rock fan, writer, and manager or facilitator who helps bands organise themselves for recording, spending much of his time with music lovers.[12]

Martyn used the interview to voice his current disillusionment and frustration at various aspects of the indie scene.

He compared the attitudes of some indie musicians who were waiting for "handouts", with others who had shown great initiative in advertising their music. He had recently helped the hardcore metal band Anaesthesia produce and promote their first album on compact disc format, and commented that, if Anaesthesia had worked to put together the necessary S$4,000 to finance their own recording, so could other bands. He stressed that most local bands needed to *"work harder at becoming viable bands"*.

When the new wave of Singapore music began with the "No Surrender" concert in 1987, there seemed to be exciting possibilities. But, he argued, there was no longer a clear underground music scene, partly because underground bands had *"crossed into the mainstream, just as they had in the West, and partly because the definitions of alternative music itself were shifting"*. The combination of these factors meant that there was a greater awareness of all kinds of Western pop in Singapore. He illustrated what he saw as a shift in position of the meaning of alternative by saying that

[12] This interview was conducted in Martyn's bed/sitting room, where his prominent music collection was a clear focus, in the tiny family HDB flat.

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Chris Ho's (redifussion) program [Eight Miles High] no longer seemed radical because of the wider selection of music in record shops. People tended to know about newer music than Chris seemed able to get hold of, he was no longer at the cutting edge; he had not been really influential, but was important for those who were already fans.

Chris Ho, who now calls himself X Ho, was credited by some as introducing alternative music and good rock and pop generally to listeners who received the cable radio station (Rediffusion) he broadcast his program on. He is also a rock musician and critic who cultivates a deliberately hip, body-conscious, punk, sexually enigmatic personal style not common among the ranks of music fans/critics/musicians in Singapore, who generally dress anonymously in t-shirts and jeans. He sometimes wrote articles in *BigO*, and although his radio audience was quite small, it was seen as the only mainstream media outlet for local indie music. In a weekly section called Weird Scenes in the Goldmine, Chris focused exclusively on the indie scene, conducting live interviews (usually in tandem with Philip Cheah of *BigO*) with indie musicians. Both Martyn and Zulkifli had found reason to criticise him.

However, Martyn contradicted himself somewhat by then emphasising that a great conservatism still ruled the musical choices made by the majority of Singaporeans

*we buy what the West buys, there is no real culture or community of rock fans here. Patrick was a start with Tim records, Dick Lee (Singapore's major pop star) did satires, but how far could that go? **We don't have a culture of listening to rock. English is not entrenched, we don't dream in it.** [my emphasis].*

Martyn's critical and often contradictory stance (he himself was an expressive writer in English, for instance), and his love–hate relationship with the Singapore indie musicians were further emphasised in his subsequent comments about the musicians.

The musicians, he said, tended to be "anti-establishment" by which he meant impatient and irresponsible in their dealings with the media and other

people who could help them, such as the administrators of the liberal cultural space, the Substation.

> *Their punk 'up yours' attitude didn't get them very far. The bands were not socially or politically concerned anyway, but mainly concerned with adolescent angst.*

Like many others in the scene, Martyn expressed his views in the pages of *BigO*. His biggest fear was that Singapore rockers would overstep some boundary, and bring the wrath of the authorities on them, as had happened in the 1970s.

> Ours is an establishment-based infrastructure and therefore any anti-establishment challenges can hasten the suicide of Singapore rock 'n' roll. From organising a concert to getting your song played on radio, we need to realise that in order for the music to amass a larger audience, we need to work with the establishment, not against it. (Martyn See, *BigO*, March 1992: 7)

Martyn lucidly contrasted the situation facing American indie bands with the struggling Singapore bands and expounded a pragmatic course of action:

> So while I, like many others, would like to see any angry, young artistes [sic] developing an intelligent conscience in making Singapore rock music a reality, for now it would do us a world of good if we realise who our friends are (Martyn See, *BigO*, March 1992: 7).[13]

Martyn had recently completed his stint in the army—the mandatory National Service which all males undergo.

The experience of undiluted authoritarianism had intensified his need for listening to music and his passion for it.[14] He pointed out that being in the army

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[13] See further Martyn's comments on the 1991 Singapore General Elections (*BigO*, October 1991: 6–9), 'What one young writer thinks' in chapter 3.

[14] It is tempting to speculate whether, given his rhetoric, being in the Army for a year and a half had also sharpened his awareness of the powers of the state to take away musicians' right to perform if ever it chose to do so.

tended to break up bands because it was difficult for band members from the same cohort to get leave at the same time.

Before launching into some rather personal attacks on other members of the music scene, Martyn seemed at the height of cynicism about the future of the indie scene—"*I don't know which scene you are writing about*".

Zulkifli Othman

Zulkifli is in his late teens, in the interval between finishing secondary school and beginning his period of National Service.

His parents had introduced him to Western popular music, from the Beatles to Henry Mancini, although he was now a dedicated hardcore fan. Seeing exciting local bands at a concert had been a musical turning point for him: he decided to put his passion into practice and start his own band. His most important role model and mentor in the hardcore scene was Suhaimi Subandie, of the prominent hardcore group Stompin' Ground, who happened to be a neighbour and family friend. Zulkifli had tagged along with Suhaimi, watched, and gradually joined the night-time gatherings of hardcore musicians at venues such as the TNT recording studio (owned by a hardcore fan affectionately called "Ah Boy" by many in the hardcore scene). Learning from and observing others in the hardcore scene gave him the impetus to record a compilation of the best local hardcore bands, in the album he was producing with Suhaimi entitled "Lion City Hardcore".

Zulkifli confidently included his band Soulfire in this hardcore album.

Soulfire was what he termed a *coalition* rather than a band, the concept of a band being too rigid for him. His band felt that it was pioneering certain types of music within the scene, because his (musical) influences went outside the narrow musical focus of the hardcore scene.

The desire to be different and to continue to try to evolve was uppermost.

If we could be different we would be satisfied. I am not interested in being in a hardcore band for the sake of it—I'm against the '3 guys, a few chords, mix-in-the-blender type of music'.

Like Martyn, Zulkifli was cynical about musicians who talked about overthrowing 'the system':

"*...it was hopeless, and irresponsible to talk about revolution.*" He was fatalistic about his place in Singapore society, and criticised musicians who could not see events in a holistic way. The music was meant to instil positiveness, to channel or vent anger, a way of screaming through listening or doing. But for him, the rebellion stopped there, with the cathartic effect of music.

Zulkifli felt that local indie musicians "were generally not into the 'sex, drugs and rock and roll' thing", although he was critical of what he termed "some destructive overblown egos around, a bad crowd (not bad musicians)," such as Nunsex's Azmi conspicuous sporting of a nipple ring (see illustration : 58 "Comics Hell") and the Rocket Scientists' Adrian (who had been known to throw tantrums on stage).

He commented about the sexual hypocrisy of Singaporean society in general as shown in the continual censorship debate. He drew links between policing, perversion and moral hypocrisy (an anecdote about policemen who watched a woman being raped before going to her aid). Singapore, he said, was the only country where rock concerts were treated almost as criminal activities, and where the Ministry for Information and the Arts was run by a General: Zulkifli wondered what the government meant by calls to be more culturally motivated when there was such a lid placed on so many activities "they think anything spontaneous is threatening!"

Zulkifli had an ambivalent relationship with *BigO*—on the one hand, the editors of the magazine had recognised his passion for music and his writing ability and given him the opportunity to preach the gospel of hardcore-ism, after

he had accused *BigO* of biased coverage of hardcore bands. This initial foray into the *BigO* network was a long letter criticising and challenging the magazine's stance (which he said bordered on exploitation) towards hardcore bands such as Stompin' Ground (*BigO*, March 1992: 6). He also brought attention to a perhaps unconscious form of racism, that of labelling any predominantly Malay bands as 'Mat Rock' band. Patrick Ch'ng responded to Zulkifli's accusations in the subsequent issue of the magazine (*BigO*, April 1992: 5–6). Patrick attacked Zulkifli's partisan stance, and ended by saying "As for the tedious categorisations of 'indie', 'alternative' and 'underground', it makes little sense in dividing. Just enjoy the music and stop having an elitist attitude." (*BigO*, April 1992: 6).

BigO kept publishing the views of both musicians on the local music scene.

Suhaimi Subandie

Suhaimi Subandie is the leader of Stompin' Ground and is in his late twenties. His personal circumstances diverge from those of the others presented here—he is married, and has one child.[15] In stark contrast to his impressively wild guitar-playing on stage, Suhaimi is a softly-spoken serious devotee of hardcore music, displaying a religious conviction about the value of the straight-edge philosophy which he believes in and propagates among the generally much younger enthusiasts of hardcore.

Suhaimi works as a building technician, which leaves him (he says) free to devote himself after hours to music. He talked about his mission of improving his immediate world through music, and by example, and the importance of being true to one's ideals as well as to the music. Straight-edge really offers a positive path for musicians, he said.

Straight-edge philosophy had evolved almost as cult within the American underground music scene as a reaction against the hedonistic lifestyle of rock

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[15] His circumstances were not unusual in the indie scene where several of the better known musicians were married and had children, including Kevin Matthews, and the Black Sun band members.

musicians: its proponents are against sexual promiscuity, drugs, and alcohol but firmly embrace rock 'n' roll in its most frenetic incarnation. They love the music, but dislike what they see as a corruption of its spirit. Many of its Singapore adherents are non-smoking vegetarians who work for various social causes: a rock 'n' roll version of the alternative lifestyle or the "new puritanism". However, these tenets have a different meaning in the social context of Singapore, where much of what is 'given' in the rock lifestyle is forbidden. For Suhaimi, rock music has a didactic edge, a means to thoughtful living—a point not easily appreciated by many younger fans, who like the violence and anarchy associated with hardcore music:

> Our gigs are an expression. Not plain fun. We know who are in it for the music or just for the ride. (Suhaimi quoted in *BigO*, Oct 1992: iii)

Some comments about ethnicity in the music scene

Both Suhaimi and Martyn had made the only open (and unelicited) comments I came across about ethnicity in the local scene. Ethnically-based differentiation in the rock scene is a thorny, but hidden one, as it is in the wider community: interactions and friendships were based on mutual musical tastes rather than social categories. If an underlying racism existed in the scene, so did the rhetoric of tolerance and egalitarianism. The reality, too, pointed to a fundamental tolerance or the irrelevance of examining rock from an ethnic point of view— many bands were ethnically mixed, possibly more so than in general social situations in Singapore. Indeed, the "ethnic composition" in the scene was a sort of utopian exaggeration of multicultural Singapore, with a greater proportion of minority 'Malays', 'Indians' and 'Eurasians/ Others' and a smaller proportion of 'Chinese' than is the case in the general population.[16] The sticking point here was perhaps the proportionally greater presence of Malays in the rock scene—a

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[16] Unlike, for instance, the carefully managed image of Singapore Airline's "Singapore Girl", however, the multiethnic nature of the music scene resulted from self selection based on mutual interests or talents. I do not problematise the ethnic categories used by the Singapore government (and the related issues in Malaysia), and written in every identity card, here— this is a complex subject in its own right.

presence which some insiders/ observers felt they had to explain or link to other social issues.

Martyn See had said that some problems within the alternative network stemmed from its numerical dominance by the Malays, who, even when talented, often lacked the drive required to persevere and make a success of their bands. Martyn, a Chinese, was not simply branding Malay musicians with traditional stereotypes: he also remarked that as a community, the Malays seemed to be more interesting, lively and had more fun than other Singaporeans. Many of his friends and music contacts were ethnically Malay musicians, and he worried about the potential for his statement to be taken out of context. Like the others, Martyn was in a sense working out his ideas as he spoke to me (an outsider). The awareness for potential racism in a scene which advertised its progressive qualities indeed made everyone wary about even commenting on race in the local scene; after all, it was music, rather than class or ethnicity, which was meant to form the basis of social groups within the indie scene. Hence it is perhaps Malay musicians (such as Suhaimi) who could afford to be most openly critical of the musical practices amongst some of the Malays without being deemed a racist.

> *We are in two different worlds. We are not against Mat rock bands' music but we are against their quest for fame and fortune. Music is meant to be played, enjoyed and felt and not for gaining materialistic goals. Very obviously, the Mat Rock scene is going the wrong way.*

Could Suhaimi's hip blend of social commitment, straight-edge evangelism and wild fun be read as a resolution of the "havoc to dakwah" spectrum[17] which faces young Malays in Singapore, where a complex overlay of ethnic, historical and institutional factors contrive to narrow their life choices? To 'havoc' or be 'havoc' is Singapore slang for being out-of-control, wild; 'dakwah' the shorthand for Muslim fundamentalism which is increasingly (and with the regional spread

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[17] This is a phrase of Vivienne Wee's, personal communication, 1992; Vivienne Wee is an anthropologist whose work as an academic and consultant has largely centred around urban Malay culture and subcultures in Indonesia and Singapore.

of radical Islam) a way for ordinary or intellectual Malays to regain power and respect in competitive, meritocratic Singapore, where they are inscribed, often with ill-disguised racist rhetoric, as 'underachievers'.[18]

There are other levels at which this issue can be looked at. The sensitivity of the issue of ethnicity within the rock scene posed a conundrum for the discourse of authenticity wherein the construction of the Singapore indie scene as a reincarnation of the earlier lively 1960s and 1970s music scene plainly ignored, or rather devalued, the existence of 'Malay rock bands' or cover bands. The indie musicians and journalists did not feel that the countless Malay Rock bands which continued, and continue, to perform cover versions of rock music (songs by Santana, Rolling Stones, Beatles, Deep Purple, for instance) at Malay weddings or other events were real rockers. At some level, the denigration of these 'Malay rockers' is based on a musical hierarchy which denies any links between this musical subculture and today's indie or hardcore bands.[19]

Malay rock bands stem from a fairly unbroken tradition of mostly ethnically Malay rock bands continuing on from the 1970s, and which generally play covers of songs by overseas bands.[20] The market for recordings of the professional 'Malay rockers' is a mainstream one which encompasses Malaysia and Singapore, and was estimated in 1991 to be worth R$80–100 million (*BigO*, Nov. 1991: 29), although local artists are better supported in Malaysia than in Singapore. The culture of Malay rock bands is an example of how problematic the Western rock discourse of authenticity is when applied to local rock. The 'Malay rockers' represent, on the one hand, 'inauthenticity' because of their perceived lack of musical originality and their pursuit of the 'star-maker machinery'; on the other, they generally come from marginalised economic and social backgrounds in

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[18] See Tremewan 1994: 141–44 for a discussion of state-based racist rhetoric towards the Malays.
[19] I did not pursue the links between this older established rock "community" and the alternative scene. It appears that fans for death metal bands often come over from, or were nurtured, in a Malay Rock environment.
[20] To complicate these terms further (but perhaps demonstrate the irrelevance of ethnicity in this case), the style of musicianship represented by so-called Malay Rock bands is often played by ethnically mixed bands, with Malay, Chinese, Eurasian and Indian members.

Singapore and Malaysia, and their fans are likewise largely from working class or socially and economically alienated sections of Malaysian and Singaporean society. Their long hair and 'bikie'-style clothes often make fans and musicians a target for harrassment by local police and censorship in both countries.

The uses of 'authenticity'

The opposition between 'authenticity' and 'commercialism', as represented in the territorial debates over the terms 'indie' or 'hardcore' versus the 'mainstream', is perhaps the most central tension in rock music, not only in Singapore.[21] In the Singapore scene it manifests itself in rock fans articulating their positionality, arguing, dissenting or claiming ground.

> ...I know that there is a VERY strong death-metal scene in Singapore which is ignored by everyone except the police. Get it in the open the open, break down tension and the growing punk-hype... (P Anno Leprae O [an ex-Singapore resident], letter, *BigO*, July 1993: 6).

'Commercialism' was the ultimate insult from one indie musician toward another, or toward the media. Thus Kevin Matthews, a practising lawyer, and musician with the band The Watchmen wrote: "More and more bands are taking the easy way out by performing guaranteed crowd-pleasers rather than take the risk with their own material...whatever happened to artistic integrity?" (*BigO*, January 1993: 13). The magazine *BigO* is periodically accused by its readers of 'selling out' whenever it broadens its musical scope or changes its style. A letter from "Suedehead Fahmy" in the December 1993 issue explaining why he would not renew his subscription (p. 14) was typical: "I admit that I can't stand the sight of pop stars gracing the contents of BigO. Hey! Even Wacko Jacko [Michael Jackson] made it to the cover of the October issue". *BigO*s detractors and

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[21] It is this tension which is the source of the initial response (by those outside Singapore) to the idea of the existence of alternative music in Singapore. As put by the editors of a recent international directory of music: "the hyper commercial and internationally minded society of Singapore is not one in which roots-rock would be expected to flourish, and indeed the Singapore pop scene is almost totally derivative of Western music" (Sweeney 1991: 170).

supporters, as well as various music factions appear in turn, or together in the letters pages: an example was in the June 1991 issue, when three letters argued against an earlier letter-writer who had been critical of indie bands. One letter defended the magazine, saying

> This magazine is the champion for local, original and exciting music. This is not The Straits Times. This is not The New Paper. If you want to read about your favourite lounge [nightclub] act, get the papers![22]

The discursive use of authenticity here, as signified by 'indie' or 'alternative', refers to the ethos which informs the practice and products of both musicians and companies, and by extension, the consumers and fans of this music. It is partly a reaction to the way in which Western popular music since the 1950s (and in reality earlier) has been inextricably linked with recording and music technologies and the workings of large multinational and now, global, music companies. The discourse of authenticity is an invocation of the rock pantheon or 'canon', as well as a chance to come up with something new—what it offers is unalloyed idealism: a musical and cultural club anyone can join, and once in, the faithful (and chosen) are the virtuous ones. The religious parallels are by no means incidental. However, while cynics point out that indie music, in the inclusive sense as used by musicians in the current Singapore rock scene as well as elsewhere, is about "a stylised 'authenticity', an elaborately constructed virginity" (Reynolds 1989: 252), other readings of popular music culture, such as Negus' (1992) illuminating study of the transnational music industry and Shepherd's (1993) investigation into meaning and value in Canadian rock music, argue (as do many Singapore musicians) that it is the *opposition* between authenticity and commercialism which is 'bankrupt' (Shepherd 1993: 179). Both point out that technology and commerce have coexisted and mediated the production of virtually all forms of Western music in the twentieth century.

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[22] "I Am An Adult", in Headroom, *BigO*, June 1991: 12.

The common thread through these four interviews, as well as others, was the depth of feeling which informed their judgments and observations about themselves and others in the scene as well as Singapore in general. They were individuals for whom music was not "aural wallpaper" (Stokes 1994b), but a way of creating and projecting identity through having fun. All four were struggling to interpret the rock ideal in their own way, and were contemptuous of those who were not as wholehearted. Like the young Liverpudlian groups studied by Sara Cohen, Patrick, Zulkifli, and Suhaimi and others "saw themselves...as romantic artists, doing something personal and new, setting their work against the commercial formulas of the charts (holding such music, indeed, in a positively Adornoesque contempt)", while Martyn wrestled with rock music's place in the 'real' world, where compromises had to be made, and hard work to be done to achieve success.[23]

A central rock myth is based on the notion that it is possible to distinguish the real from the fake in rock music, hence the articulation of the opposition between indie and mainstream, authenticity and commercialism, originality and imitation, passion and pretence, different and conventional. The myth of authenticity is productive not only because it is endlessly recreated and recirculated, but because it allows for the establishing of hierarchies of tastes within the rock world (Thornton 1995; Negus 1992; Frith 1992).

A more fundamental division was that between those who believed that the aim of serious rock musicians was to be popular and those who believed in the purity of independent music making. This meant that they were continually torn between 'authentic' and 'commercial' choices, and that they constructed popularity as being recognised by their peers, rather than the record companies, setting themselves up for some confusing real-life situations.

Patrick Ch'ng's response (as quoted earlier) to Zulkifli Othman's letter showed that some musicians were tired of categories, especially when these

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[23] Sara Cohen, as quoted in Frith 1992: 174.

categories were used to fragment the fragile local indie scene. On one hand, indie musicians in Singapore felt that they were good enough to be promoted as Singaporean musicians, and that the record companies were biased against local indie music. (The record companies and their spokespeople had a different perspective.) On the other, the local indie musicians and fans were drawn to their knowledge of the self-made characteristic of the foreign indie bands which they hero-worshipped from a distance. Frustrations about their apparent lack of success tended to be focused on others in the scene, rather than on conditions in Singapore, giving rise to a rift in the scene in 1992. To add to the dilemmas of those who took the oppositional stance of their music dogmatically, the commercial success of alternative music overseas had meant that it was no longer an 'underground' form, as Martyn remarks in the previous section.

From hope to despair: the indie–hardcore rift

> Suddenly rock 'n' roll in Singapore was not such a lonely passion anymore. Whether you are an industrial, thrash or rap fan, one doesn't have to look really hard to find some common 'freaks' of a feather...And there are even gigs featuring local indie bands...Just as the scene has never been more impetuous [sic], it is also as precarious and fragile as it can ever get. (*BigO*, September 1992: 42)

The coalescence of the alternative music scene around particular individuals (musicians, journalists, hangers-on, would-be punk rockers) occured between 1989 and the early 1990s. By the middle of 1992, a necessary 'stable' musical infrastructure—such as suitable regular performance spaces and a supportive and responsive network of fans and bands—had not emerged. The three most frequently cited problems facing the indie scene were the indifference of record company representatives and mainstream media; a substantial increase in organising concerts because of the slamdancing ban and mandatory deposit; and internecine bickering between musical factions in the scene. The first two

problems are discussed elsewhere (the record companies in chapter four, and the slamdancing band and mandatory deposit issue in chapter one). The last was seen as a failure in creating a viable subculture, and was perhaps the most troubling.

What were the origins of the hostility between indie and hardcore fans? Was it perhaps an inevitable stage in the development of a scene, where more participants meant a corresponding widening of musical tastes and styles, and thus more likelihood of incompatibility and friction?

Approximately half of the alternative musicians were those who operated under the loose category of indie musicians or simply rock musicians, and at the other end were the more clearly indentifiable hardcore fans and musicians. The indie musicians tended to be eclectic and many were interested in the lyrical possibilities of rock music; the hardcore musicians played to a different aesthetic: loud and aggressive, experimenting with the musical possibilities of high-decibel sound, harsh lyrics and industrial/mechanical rhythms. In addition there were bands who were played or composed experimental electronic or dance music who did not fit into either category. The initial common ground (based on a loathing of 'chart pop') between these musicians seems to be disappearing as bands become surer of their musical styles, and as fans become more discriminating. For a time, it had been a widespread practice for musicians of different musical persuasions to help each other learn how to play instruments, encourage each other, share studios and spaces where they could practise, and even play in each other's bands. In the absence of a range of local role models (except for lounge bands and Malay rock bands) these communal practices were part of an ongoing process of band formation and the exploration of a wider musical and social terrain.

A further source of division was that one section of the musicians and fans saw slamdancing, stagediving and other aggressively physical responses as part of their musical enjoyment, both before and after the ban. Now, where before bands with differing music styles performing at the same concert had been

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commonplace, partisan behaviour had begun to emerge. Hardcore fans would catcall and disrupt indie bands, and indie fans would jeer, become restless or walk away when hardcore bands played. In September 1992, various musicians/writers conducted extensive interviews regarding the rift within the alternative scene's ranks with band members, fanzine writers and fans (*BigO*, Sept. 1992: 42–5). The comments they elicited indicated the diversity of opinions in the alternative scene, pointing to the problematic nature of the term itself. Hardcore musicians offered explanations:

> If the hardcore or thrash fans seem more loyal to their music, it is because they know that such aggressive music requires more skill. And there's a feeling that indie music doesn't require that much skill (Gaston Lim, hardcore musician, Lycanthropy, quoted in *BigO*, Sept. 1992: 43).

> It is a separated audience…They are wild at heart. They want to release their energy at these concerts and are bored by slow songs. But I am optimistic about the scene…new fans are listening to more music now (Imran Idris, hardcore musician, Martyrdom, quoted in *BigO*, Sept. 1993: 45).

Indie musicians felt aggrieved and outnumbered:

> When we were jeered at the Substation last year, we felt that it was that part of the audience who didn't know us yet…There's just more fans now and more bands (Francis Frightful, indie/ punk musician, Opposition Party, quoted in *BigO*, Sept. 1993: 43).

Other musicians and fans saw that petty rivalry, elitism and a naive idea of perfect harmony amongst rock muscians all contributed to the divisions:

> …I think a lot of bands have grudges against one another…I'm getting quite fed-up with the death metal fans because they are not broadminded (Suhaimi Subandie, Stompin' Ground).

The elitism among the fans is annoying. Indie fans don't like hardcore and hardcore fans don't like indie bands such as the Oddfellows...But we need to have the unity because the scene is not as large as the US where you can afford to have small groups (Yit Teh, concert organiser and founder of *Unity* fanzine, quoted in *BigO*, Sept.: 44)).

In the case of Singapore, some believe in the fabricated image of whatever scene be it New York hardcore or Britain as some Indieville Heaven...it can actually be more exciting here (Ben Harrison, expatriate British student and indie musician in Singapore, Electric Penguin, quoted in *BigO*, Sept.: 44).

A satirical view of the territorial arguments between indie and hardcore fans, containing references to recognisable characters in the indie scene is presented by two members of the indie scene in "Comics Hell" see illustration : 60, in *BigO*, (July 1993: 66–70). The protagonists are rock fans who meet at a comics shop. One passage says, after the two characters have been arguing about their favourite music styles in abusive terms: "Industrial is the new wave of the future. It says so in Spin and BigO." The other character shouts (grabbing the first one): "I hate anyone who quotes BigO! I hate BigO! They've gone mainstream! Sold out! Wimps!". Towards the end of the story a group called "Bad Breath" chants "Death, death, death", the fans slamdance, and a pig-faced policeman says "Come in...slamdancing has broken out in Substation! Send Troops!"

COMICS HELL

#01-4

I JUST LOVE THE NEW DANZIG ALBUM!

NEW JULY TITLES
1) CYBER
2) SPEW
3) OLD BL
4) F-ME
5) FAT

YEAH, BUT MEGADETH'S LATEST IS EVEN BETTER— IT BLOWS METALLICA AWAY!

BOTH DANZIG AND MEGADETH ARE CRAP!

METAL IS SUCH OLD HAT— YOU GUYS SHOULD BE LISTENING TO GODFLESH, NINE... ...INCH NAILS, MINISTRY—NOT CRAP LIKE GUNS 'N ROSES!

AAHH! CYBERPUNK IS FOR SISSIES! EVERYTHING'S DONE BY SYNTHESIZERS— WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?!

YEAH, NINE INCH NAILS ARE JUST HEAVIER DEPECHE MODE! UGH! GET REAL, MAN! DEATH METAL IS WHERE IT'S AT!

HEY, HAVE YOU GUYS BEEN LIVING ON THE MOON? INDUSTRIAL IS THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE. IT SAYS SO IN SPIN AND BIGO.

I HATE ANYONE WHO QUOTES BIGO! I HATE BIGO! THEY'VE GONE MAINSTREAM! SOLD OUT! WIMPS! YOU'RE A DINOSAUR, MAN! SMELLING YOUR OWN ASSHOLE! SHITHEAD!

AH, YOU BAD BOYS AH, GET OUT OF MY SHOP OR I WILL CALL POLICE!

OUCH! OW!!!

ER...RAM...I DON'T THINK THIS IS SUCH A GOOD IDEA, NOW.

C'MON, JIMI. DON'T BE A COWARD.

BUT...IT HURTS, MAN! REAL PAIN!

HEY, YOU WANTED TO BE COOL, RIGHT—PIERCED NIPPLES ARE IN, MAN! MINE LOOK GREAT!

YEAH, SURE. AZMI IS TOTALLY RAD BUT...

NO BUTS JIMI. YOU KNOW THE SUBSTATION GIG IS ONLY TWO DAYS AWAY. GET HIP, MAN!

AW...OKAY RAM...LET'S DO IT.

OUCH! OW! OW!

STOMPING GROUND

Continuing debates are a running theme in letters in *BigO*'s "Headroom", as well as in the various fanzines which have sprung up to voice individual perspectives about music genres. Ultimately, there is nothing unusual about differences within a local scene which is as musically diverse (representing many different genres of rock music) as that in Singapore: several recent studies (Cohen 1994; Straw 1991; Thornton 1994) have pointed out that the myth of musical subculture suppresses the fact of dissension within musical communities. Straw points out that the crucial process in the politics of popular music is "the making and remaking of alliances between communities" (1991: 370). What is unusual is the freedom with which individual musicians and fans in Singapore participate in the politics of the music scene, creating it as they go along.

Collectivising Lion city

> The community is a small one and its has no place for prima donnas [sic] yet. Let us all, the listeners, the media, the record companies, and the bands themselves, do what we can to nurture a vibrant scene (Patrick Ch'ng, *BigO*, January 1992: 25).

The alternative music scene in Singapore seemed to have begun in hope and fragmented into bickering: however, the openness and good-humoured nature of their disagreements are a rarity in Singapore (where debates are 'opened' by government intervention, others silent or silenced).

Amidst the voices of intolerance and the general frustration caused by the slamdancing ban were many reasoned, tolerant and creative ones. Lion City Hardcore recording project was a filip to the scene, and in August 1993, some of those involved formed the Lion City Collective, which included the fanzines *Melt*, *True Til Tomorrow?*, and *Three Minutes Hate* as well as *BigO*, and the independent labels, Rage productions and Reconstrux records. The Collective's opening statement (by Teh Yit Arn, and published in *BigO*, Sept 1993: 15) said that it was formed to "increased the flow of information in the independent scene, to get

more organised" and "banish apathy" in the Singapore underground into action and included such items as "we oppose fascism, sexism, racism, homophobia and bigotry".

3

Creating a scene: *BigO* and the reification of rock culture

It could be argued that cultural practices do not 'exist' in the public sphere until they are noticed; and, as a corollary, in modern, 'Westernised', urban spaces, being noticed almost invariably involves the actions or participation of some form of mass media. The mass media's advertising of new or marginal cultural practices and products is the glue which 'fixes' these practices onto the shifting maps of contemporary culture, enabling consumers, viewers or recipients of the information to incorporate them in their everyday lives. It could further be argued that the popular music industry is a form of mass media, encompassing the marketing of recorded music for mass consumption through the media of radio, television, and print journalism. The music media is often inseparable from the music industry, as in the case of a disc jockey advertising a new song because of industry sponsorship rather than personal taste: the media promotes what the industry produces.

In this reading of the global pop music industry, it is the music brokers in the industry itself, rather than the musicians, who control new musical products and practices. If this were always the case, the alternative rock music in the West could be cynically read as yet another strategy of the global pop music industry's periodic need to provide a variety of new products for its consumers, while the

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appearance of an alternative scene in Singapore would be simply another feature of increasing sophistication and differentiation in global pop industry marketing.

However, this is far too simplistic a model of the complex workings of the global pop music industry in relation to varying local markets, and does not explain how or why rock fans in Singapore had begun making 'alternative music' before the worldwide success of overseas indie bands, when little of this music was available in Singapore. Some of the Singapore bands may have formed anyway, but not come even as far as they have now without the 'alternative' umbrella. Although mimesis is as fundamental to the development of rock music as it is to any other cultural form, there are two points to keep in mind. First, the unexpected international success of independent music in America and elsewhere,[1] can be read as a rebellion against the pop music industry's perceived hegemony over musical practices, production and tastes, as much as a sign of the general disaffection of a new generation. Secondly, it was also evidence that multinational entertainment conglomerates could be challenged by small or local music producers and by 'garage bands' whose rough-hewn music represents the antithesis of complex reworkings of sound engineered in modern recording studios.

In Singapore, an alternative music scene was even more unlikely, given the prevailing ethos and musical tastes, direct and indirect censorship of, or within, the mass media, and musical intermediaries, all of which in concert tend to screen out radical or unusual sounds and products. The mushrooming of the indie bands in Singapore is not a consequence of marketing strategies of the music industry (who have largely ignored these bands), but due to the individual enthusiasm of rock fans and evangelical music journalists who actively promoted the idea of a viable local independent music scene through their magazine *BigO*.

This chapter presents and examines the discourse of *BigO* through articles, editorials, music and concert reviews, features and illustrations from the

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[1] To the point where it is, today, a decade later, considered 'mainstream'.

magazine between 1990 and 1993. The contents of the magazine are treated here as a collective body of work by the editors and other rock fans and musicians who contributed articles, columns, letters, illustrations, reviews and photographs. As a monthly publication, *BigO* has both influenced and reflected the development of the independent music scene at various stages.

The initial section examines the history, scope and claims of *BigO* with respect to the practice and production of music, as well as the mass media in Singapore. The subsequent sections present several aspects of the magazine: its role as information gatherer and disseminator, which combines with its role as a promoter of rock music and its discourse; its role in organising and mediating the Singapore independent music scene; its eclecticism and democratic spirit; and finally, its oppositionality in the form of transgressing or the pushing of boundaries.

A short history of *BigO*

BigO can be said to have begun with the failure of the English language newspaper, *Singapore Monitor* in 1984. The *Monitor* was a short-lived experimental rival to the *New Straits Times*, one which did not survive the course of the government's consolidation of virtually all the print media in Singapore into the Singapore Press Holdings (Birch 1993a: 15–19; Wong K.K. 1991: 212–13). Two journalists who had been writing articles about film and music in the *Monitor*, Michael Cheah and his brother Philip, together with other similarly obsessed popular culture fans, Stephen Tan, Chris Ho, Gerrie Lim and Lim Teck Lin, decided to to start their own publication, *BigO*. "*BigO* has a dream...When the *Singapore Monitor* closed down in 1985, my brother Michael and I felt that the ideas we had for writing about rock 'n' roll and popular culture in general hadn't been fully tested."[2]

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[2] Philip Cheah, *BigO*, September 1990: 3.

Apart from creating a vehicle for expressing their own interests, they wanted to nurture other young writers who did not fit in Singapore's "mainstream press because of their strong, individualistic streaks...As in the classic rock 'n' roll tradition, we have a fierce belief in young people. We believe that young people possess a culture that is dynamic and intellectually valid."[3] The name of the new publication paid tribute to two very different influences from the Western world of rock 'n' roll: it is a quote from the line "Hope I die before I get old", written by Pete Townshend of the British group The Who, in their rock anthem, My Generation.[4] "BigO" was also the nickname of the American singer Roy Orbison.

The decision to start a new publication in Singapore—as may be gathered from the discussion of censorship and the media in chapter one—even, or especially, an alternative one, is not one to be taken lightly in Singapore, where print media licences are renewed yearly, subject to compliance with media laws (Birch 1993a). From 1985 to 1990, this group of rock enthusiasts produced BigO on a shoestring budget in a two-bedroom HDB flat. At first, with a print run of 200 copies, the fanzine was photocopied. In 1986, the fanzine was printed, still in a monochrome format. In 1990, the fanzine metamorphosed into a magazine when the one of its founders (Michael Cheah) left his job and used his savings to become the publisher and editor-in-chief of BigO. Within a year, the magazine was being printed in a more conventional magazine format, with coloured covers and illustrations. BigO established a permanent office in one bedroom of a three-bedroom semi-detached house. In its hundredth issue[5], BigO claimed that it was "Singapore's only international magazine", distributed in more than "50 cities

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[3] Philip Cheah, BigO, September 1990: 3. The emphasis on nurturing may be explained somewhat by the editors' academic backgrounds and training before becoming journalists (two of them—Philip Cheah and Stephen Tan—had social work degrees, one doing sociology at honours level, and had worked as counsellors; one (Michael Cheah) had started an earlier alternative publication on social issues, which had had its licence revoked).
[4] In 1993, this act of homage was reciprocated by the warm recognition given to BigO by Pete Townshend, the lead singer of the Who, who had coined the phrase, in an interview with a BigO journalist now based in Los Angeles (Gerrie Lim, BigO, September 1993: 28).
[5] Philip Cheah, BigO, April 1994 : 18, "BigO—Singapore's only indie international mag."

worldwide from New Orleans to Glasgow, from Hongkong to Taiwan", largely through two American-owned chains of music shops.[6]

BigO's readership has grown, but remains at a fairly constant level (with 600 subscribers and 7,000 or so copies sold monthly). Over the years, it has shed its strictly underground/alternative format and status to become a conduit for eclectic cultural products—foreign and local, from classical music to film—and a broad spectrum of opinions on issues ranging from the status of pop culture to politics in Singapore. Although *BigO* has left behind the deliberate raw appearance of its fanzine days, it remains a rock music-oriented magazine, and its slicker appearance is leavened with the idiosyncracies and irreverence characteristic of rock fanzines: provocative opinions and images, humour, the casual use of expletives, and the hero worshipping or dethroning of rock idols (Taylor 1985).

Writing rock myths

> *Ever since I began listening to Elvis, Dylan and the Beatles, I never got over the sense of freedom and potential for possibilities (we call it alternatives today) that rock gave me. I guess that for anyone living anywhere in the world, that same excitement exists. But rock has also been a source for honesty in the face of hypocrisy. Which is why the rock community continually battles within its ranks, challenging those who have got too successful and complacent to remember their roots* (Michael Cheah).[7]

Rock 'n' roll is popular the world over for a very simple reason. It is the voice of young people and they can hear in it the passion they feel (Philip Cheah: *BigO*, Sept. 1990: 3).

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[6] Since 1995, *BigO* has also published an electronic version of each issue on the Internet.
[7] Interview, 1992. As in the previous chapter, italics indicate direct transcripts from interviews, while indented passages in plain text are quoted printed material.

A key to understanding *BigO* and the independent rock scene in Singapore is the premise, explicitly stated above by *BigO*'s publisher and an editor, that rock music is the voice of "freedom" and "excitement" for "anyone living anywhere in the world". Furthermore, this essential quality of "honesty" is the basis of the democracy of the "rock community", which "continually battles" against complacent musicians who forget their [musical] "roots". The editors of *BigO* see themselves as cultivating a rock community of knowledgeable pop culture fans, and their enthusiasm for this often displays a missionary-like zealousness, as when one of them (Stephen Tan) speaks of *"the difficulty of converting young people, that is 15 year old Singaporeans, to rock."*[8]

The journalists with *BigO* situate themselves stylistically as fans of an Anglo-American lineage of New Journalism (epitomised by the writings of Tom Wolfe) and punk era interventionist rock journalism.[9] The editors' influences were a mix of 'high' and 'low' culture, and their personal and office shelves contained the modern American (from Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg onwards) and British literature, crime and horror fiction, film criticism, adult comix, Japanese manga (comics), music magazines, references and books, and academic literature on pop music of pop and rock culture.[10] However, as local journalists, *BigO*'s emulation of freewheeling journalism is not uncritical.[11] Indeed, it is their wish to recreate the conditions where Singapore journalists can be taken seriously in a local as well as an international context. Being taken seriously involves differentiating

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[8] Stephen Tan, interview.

[9] The pop music scholar Philip Hayward observes in a review of punk-era journalist Jon Savage's book, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, that "the success of the British New Wave was in significant part premised on actively interventionist journalism". The rock journalists were instrumental in creating the almost instantaneous mythologisation of Punk which "grabbed a share of the pop market and an even greater slice of the 'popular imaginary' of British youth culture", spreading the notoriety of Punk bands such as the Sex Pistols worldwide (Hayward 1992b: 85).

[10] I found a number of books I had been reading on pop culture for this thesis on their shelves—the editors said that they dipped into them from time to time to get ideas, neatly illustrating the way journalists have become informed by theoretical writing on the sociology of youth and pop culture, which in turns feeds into musicians' discourse (McRobbie 1989; Negus 1992).

[11] Michael Cheah detailed the cynical manipulation of the British media by Malcolm McLaren in promoting the Sex Pistols in *BigO*, July 1993: 61.

themselves (and working apart) from the mass media in Singapore and the ongoing task of legitimising rock and pop culture as being valid subjects for analyses, along with consumption and pleasure. The editors had to transmit this perspective explicitly: the interests and agendas of the older, more knowledgeable, editorial writers in the magazine do not necessarily correspond with those of their younger readers.

> *One of BigO's problems was [that] younger writers didn't have a vast experience or historical knowledge of music, while older ones tend to have highly specialised tastes—blues, jazz, etc. **One of our ongoing tasks is to establish the seriousness of music as a cultural or art form which needed study.***[12]

In its avowed mission to take pop culture seriously, *BigO* promotes knowledge of local and foreign rock history. The acquisition of this knowledge is central to the concept of an alternative rock culture, one that is critically engaged with the consumption of rock and popular music:

> Part of the implicit work of alternative-rock culture over the past decade has been the construction of a relatively stable rock canon of earlier music form—1960s trash psychedelia, early 1970s metal, the dissident rock tradition of the Velvet Underground and other—which serves as a collective reference point (Straw 1991: 374).

What is significant, the author argues, is

> ...the cultivation of connoisseurship in rock culture—tracking down old albums, learning genealogical links between bands, and so on—has traditionally been one rite of passage through which the masculinism of rock-music culture has been perpetuated (Straw 1991: 374).

This cultivation of connoisseurism is the crux of the idea of 'alternativeness': most people acquire their tastes and knowledge of music in an *ad hoc* and casual fashion through listening to the radio and responding to advertisements or

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[12] Michael Cheah, interview, my emphasis.

presentations on television, in shops and magazines or through friends. Rock fans and musicians, on the other hand, acquire their knowledge, tastes, music collections (and often their friends) more purposefully by learning about past and present music through listening to other fan's collections and reading specialist magazines (such as *BigO*) and consulting an ever-expanding body of rock reference books which range from rock encyclopaedias (arranged chronologically or by genre), histories, directories, surveys, biographies and collected essays (see Taylor 1985: 1–48). The rock fan's means for interpreting their musical world "rests on a substantial body of knowledge and an active sense of choice—musicians and audiences alike have a clear understanding of genre rules and histories, can hear and place sounds in terms of influence and source" (Frith 1992, 174–5).

The acquisition of rock knowledge requires access to this material—in Singapore this means actively seeking out and ordering recordings, books, videos and magazines, often through informal channels such as outside contacts or travel: *BigO*'s personal advertisement pages are peppered with requests for particular recordings, and for people who like particular artists or genres either to discuss music with or form a band. The magazine as a whole is devoted to the enterprise of enlarging the local community of rock fans and connoisseurs through the reviews, advertising, musical selections, alternative hit charts and music articles which comprise the bulk of its contents. It also propagates the language of rock discourse in articles such as "Almost everything you wanted to know about rock slang but were too hung up to ask" (*BigO*, August 1992: 2631).

An important part of knowing about rock music is learning its history— *BigO* has consistently 'used' history and represented it, to increase awareness of rock music and its value, and influence its readers. Frequent references to the good old days of Singapore pop (the 1960s to early 1970s) before the crackdown on 'yellow culture'; frequent articles on the medium's earlier practitioners, local and foreign.

For a period, the history of Singapore's blues-based bands, and the history of the blues was presented through articles and interviews edited by Joe Pereira, in what was effectively a separate fanzine within *BigO* entitled the Blues Network. The history written by *BigO* incorporates important rock music events into the personal histories of Singapore rock fans and is presented in the form of a chronology of the development of particular genres, embodied in particular artists, songs, and episodes. Among other things, the construction or 'invention' of a tradition of local rock history allows younger rock fans to partake of a parallel, pleasure-centred hidden aspect of national history to that imbibed at school (the short and seamless history of successful Singapore), while older fans can validate their past and present pleasurable consumption of rock music in an otherwise hostile social and political environment.

Thus, local rock history links the present alternative rock scene with an earlier 'generation' with articles about now defunct bands and interviews with musicians such as Jimmy Appadurai-Chua of the 1960s Singapore band, the Straydogs, which disbanded at the height of its popularity because of a government ban on one of their most successful songs (*BigO*, July 1993: 9). Although the 'local history' theme runs through various issues of the magazine, its clearest articulation of this was in the 'instant archive' in *BigO*, (April 1994: 32–40; 42–48; 51; 52–3), which encompassed a selection of 100 significant Singapore albums since the 1960s, with photographs of albums and concerts interviews of the rock scene. The creation of this rock-based narrative requires periodically presenting recognisable figures, as in the full page photographs of "Local heroes" (*BigO*, Sept. 1990: 5–7; 10–11; 14–15; 18–19; 22) and, in the same issue "Glory Days" (36–7) of which a part of this is *BigO*'s own history, in reprinted articles from its fanzine days (38–43). In the same vein, "Next Wave of Local Rock" (*BigO*, February 1992: 26–34; 77) presents local (rock) heroes in the making.

All of this material is presented with aspects of contemporary, past and recycled Anglo-American rock music culture and often stresses the links forged

with overseas music critics, and interviews or articles on famous musicians. As an example, the June 1991 issue of the magazine contained a selection of rock heroes: an extensive review of Bruce Springsteen's live albums (pp. 44–48; 67); bootleg Bob Dylan recordings now reissued by Sony music (p. 56); Alex Chilton (p. 68): "Alex Chilton chose to be himself, one of rock's great unknowns yet the man became one of the key influences on the American underground scene in the '80s..."; and Jimi Hendrix (pp. 70–71). Sometimes the 'heroes' of the local scene are compared to famous overseas artists, such as when the disc jockey/musician and critic Chris Ho was compared to the late American *avant garde* musician Frank Zappa because both confronted the boundaries of censorship. Chris Ho's shows were deemed "too sexy" by the authorities, who carefully watched his every move on stage (in a concert described and photographed by *BigO*, Septemeber 1990: 26–7); he pointed out (as did all my informants) that the authorities were hypocritical—at the same Festival of Arts, a Japanese Butoh (theatre) group had showed a lot more flesh than his dancers.

From the late 1960s onwards, the local rock fans' experience of *reading* about rock and building up of rock culture knowledge was just as important as listening (to recordings) in their taste formation. Even now, American, and British, magazines are read to keep in touch with what is happening elsewhere, but there is an increasing 'talking back' to foreign rock fans and bands, via meetings, sales of *BigO* overseas and networking in the music world. This networking also occurs on an individual basis and through other fanzines, especially within the hardcore scene, where there are contacts made directly with, for example, thrash metal fans in Indonesia or in Europe.

Turning fans into writers

Given its limited circulation, the magazine is still produced on a low budget, with (for Singapore) low salaries for the two permanent editorial positions, and occasional payment given to photographers, stringers or writers. Most of the contributors are not paid. Their reward is a chance to have their work published

and the pop journalists' fringe benefits such as free records or other material, free concert tickets and the chance to speak to or meet favourite musicians as well as a chance to acquire some journalistic skills in an egalitarian environment. Although their influences were foreign (primarily American and English) the editors were clear in wanting *BigO* to be a vehicle for promoting local opinions and writing on pop music and culture in Singapore. The emphasis on 'local opinions' also meant that they were adamantly against hiring non-Singaporean expatriates only in the country for a brief time:

> *The local angle was important: so much, if not almost all, information and criticism about the arts and music in Singapore was uncritical and simply taken off news services, this was also the main reason the mag has never courted expatriates for staff—unless they have been in Singapore long enough to have some engagement with it.*[13]

As a result, *BigO* periodically advertises for contributors:

> "We're looking for you...The world's environment is failing...The Middle East is a hotbed of unresolved conflicts. What do we desperately need now? A little bit of fun...*BigO* is all about doing something wonderful with our lives before we get old. We are looking for young writers, photographers and artists who aren't too sure they want to commit the rest of their lives in the rat race." (*BigO*, October 1990)

> "We're looking for you to talk about the passion—
> 'Four years in *BigO* taught me how to work like a schizoid, an experience not to be missed.' (Lim Cheng Tju, writer)
> 'Since I joined the team, I've learned news gathering skills and enjoyed organising gigs. *BigO* is to be blamed.' (Nazir Husain, writer)

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[13] Michael Cheah, interview.

"*BigO* has allowed me to come into contact with real-life musicians instead of glossy TV-type pop stars...I hope to give rock photography a validity in Singapore.' (Koh Huang How, photographer)" (*BigO*, July 1991)

The writings of rock journalists, who have been described as "professional rock fans" with an obsession for music (Simon Frith, quoted in Negus 1993: 118), are said to play an important part in articulating an artist's identity by the reviewing process. Material for reviewing is provided by the industry to the magazine; it is also requested by the editors or contributors. Other recordings, especially rare indie ones, are obtained through friends or other informal contacts. Album and concert reviews form a large part of the training of the music journalists in *BigO*, with music matched to the tastes or interests of writers or musicians. Not all the music reviewed is new—sometimes albums are selected to provide a background to a local band or promote listening to an individual writer's favoured band or music genre.

While the reviewing of imported music is a haphazard affair dependent on variable supply, interests and expertise of reviewers, *BigO*'s reviews of local bands underline a concerted effort to promote local bands, with reviews, profiles of musicians, celebratory photographs. Sometimes it is the magazine itself which has organised concerts and produced recordings.

Pulling the scene together

Establishing a team of writers, disseminating information on pop culture, and cultivating a sophisticated pop culture audience could not hide the missing ingredient: a critical mass of serious rock musicians or bands and established performance and practice spaces in Singapore. Having created a magazine that was dedicated to finding and advertising local talent, *BigO*'s editors and writers had to ensure that the nascent local music scene did not fizzle out. Although this was not a top-down approach—*BigO* writers, including one of the three main

editors, Stephen Tan, were either musicians and/or interested in the process of recording music or writing about it—there was some uneasiness about the way the discourse of the music scene was being created. Patrick Ch'ng (speaking as a musician who had been helped by the magazine's editors and its activist policies, as well as a *BigO* contributor who became heavily involved in promoting the scene as well),

> *BigO [was put] in the position of trying to create a scene to report on, hyping what was there.*[14]

Left to themselves, the few bands and various small circles of muscians would probably hardly know of each other's existence because they were ignored by the mass media and music industry personnel. *BigO* proceeded to act on every possible front. The magazine's role in creating the scene has often been explicitly acknowledged by its editors:

> ...things are looking up now only when you cast a thought back seven years ago when this magazine was first conceived to report on the local scene. What was called the alternative scene then had to be scraped from the bottom of the musical barrel. We supported bands that others couldn't care less [about]. When the juices ran dry, we did what most music magazines...never needed to—we attempted to create a scene. We called up radio stations, sponsored recordings and organised concerts (BigO, Sept. 1992: 42).

This involved encouraging and helping individuals to create bands, sometimes directly, as in "Calling all Bens" (*BigO*, Sept. 1990) is an advertisement for musicians who are with or without a band. The magazine acts as the medium for publicising the lives, formation, music and concerts of the bands as they

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[14] Patrick Ch'ng, interview. Creating a scene was part of the punk ethos, on which the new wave of alternative music was based. The editor of an American punk fanzine echoes *BigO*'s periodic dilemma when he describes the beginnings of a Los Angeles punk scene in Savage's book: "'Slash started as a bluff...We were pretending there was an LA scene when there was no scene whatsoever. The magazine was it...suddenly there were more bands than we knew what to do with." (Savage 1991: 437).

develop, alternately congratulating, cajoling or haranguing the local musicians. In "Waiting for the world", (*BigO*, November 1991: 8), editor Philip Cheah points out that local musicians need to work harder to support each other and build up conditions for their music to gain wider acceptance in Singapore. Often the failings of the rock musicians are discussed in the context of the pervasive attitude of kiasuism, which means the 'what can I get out of this' mentality, a fearful attitude which avoids risk-taking.[15]

> *The kiasu attitude meant that there would be no development of a fringe of creative people. The founders of BigO saw themselves not as artists but channels of creativity, facilitators who would also provide a challenge and place for those who wanted to take the plunge...*[16]

Most directly, many writers and musicians associated with *BigO* actually organised a large proportion of the early alternative concerts in Singapore, beginning with the first one in 1987, and many subsequent important ones (the New School Rock band contests and recordings). They also acted as go-betweens with the music companies in Singapore, advertising the bands to the media through personal approaches and in articles in the magazine such as the "10 Best Unsigned bands" (*BigO*, January 1992: 26–35). *BigOs*' editors and music critics also worked with Chris Ho to broadcast the Weird Scenes in the Goldmine weekly series on local rock and other initiatives such as Radio Heart's broadcasting of 18 continuous hours of local Singapore music (see Appendix 1 for a full list).

A democratic space

BigO represents an alternative media which is potentially more answerable to its select local music constituency and foreign fans than most forms of media in Singapore: an unhappy reader will simply stop buying the magazine. *BigO*'s editors, while pursuing their own ideas about journalism and the music scene (not necessarily in agreement with each other), also provide a democratic space

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[15] Michael Cheah, Interview, 1992.
[16] Michael Cheah, Interview, 1992.

for the airing of diverse views on a wide range of subjects, including cartoons and letters criticising *BigO* editors or writers, as well as occasionally mocking themselves for taking rock music seriously. The range of subjects covered is much greater than appears in many foreign music magazines, from national failings to the sinister aspects of being in the army.

> After decades of psychological bombardment, we still come across people who refuse to give up their seats to the elderly, drivers who tailgate fellow motorists, and so on...when you consider that the prevalent notion among the populace is that being kiasu is an asset and not a personality flaw, somehow the word "ugly" comes to mind. And, is this state of affairs not the natural by-product of a nation's relentless drive to be No. 1? (Kevin Matthews, *BigO*, February 1993: 22)

In an article in the fanzine *Reckoning*, the writer (a *BigO* editor) criticises the attitude of Singaporeans, specifically musicians, who are moved by tragedies overseas but unaware or unwilling to speak out about local problems.[17] He cites the example of the large number of retrenchments in Singapore, and asks

> While we are spending our money buying records which donate its proceeds to Ethiopia, the UK and South Africa, why aren't we organising similar benefit concerts for our own retrenched workers?...If there was any severe indictment of the creative dullness of the Singapore music scene, then this is it...It's frightening to think that where music is concerned, we've to take our cue from what is happening overseas. But the present inertia suggests a deeper problem. The music scene here has not only been de-politicised but it has been robbed of its individuality.[18]

The magazine frequently publishes critical letters. These are often from readers who feel that the magazine does not deliver its promise to maintain a

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[17] Philip Cheah, "The Face of a National Inertia", *Reckoning*, n.d.
[18] Philip Cheah, "The Face of a National Inertia", *Reckoning*, n.d.

strictly independent profile, or are from one side of the indie/hardcore divide: "I've always got the feeling that there are a lot of old farts in your magazine. Why are there so many reviews on those hard rock bands?...I also feel that your mag is more like a guide for collectible records and discs than a review mag..."[19]

Transgressions: politics, sex and lies...

Michael Cheah tended to underplay transgressive elements in *BigO* as well as the political leanings of its writers. He wryly observed that by the time they wanted to be *BigO* writers (in their late teens or early twenties), none of them had any anti-government thoughts in their minds. On the face of things, Michael and the magazine were apolitical:

> *The political situation was never very important—firstly, the mag had never had any real problems with the authorities—it was too small, and more trouble than it was worth to ban it for a few four-letter words.*

However, two subjects over which the Singapore censorship board has been touchy about continually surface in the magazine—sex and socio-political issues. The magazine's sexual content (leaving aside sexual expression within the various rock music genres) tends to be interspersed throughout reviews, in the sexist language, and in some of the images and language used, particularly in the comics section. Its political and social content is more elusive, tucked into articles (such as a special reference to the one-second mention of Singapore's political detainee Chia Thye Poh in the video of Irish 'supergroup' U2's concert in *BigO*, July 1993: 61).

Transgressing boundaries in *BigO* usually takes the form of tackling local social issues such as freedom of speech within a rock/pop culture framework. As ex-newspaper journalists, the editors (Michael and Philip Cheah and Stephen Tan) have a working knowledge of the limits to expression in Singapore. Attacks or queries on government policies are presented within the discourse of rock and

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[19] "More Indies" in "HeadRoom", *BigO* January1992: 8.

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pop culture. A prime example of this is media censorship. In the June 1991 issue, *BigO* sported a daringly sensationalist cover showing nine album covers banned in the United States (see illustration : 81). These covers are reproduced in greater detail, along with a few others in the accompanying feature article by Philip Cheah, "At the cutting edge: the music censorship issue" (*BigO*, June 1991: 34–41). This article presents cases where rock musicians and media have been censored for various reasons, at different times, in the United States, including a section on lines from rock songs which have been rewritten, mostly to change sexual or drug-related references or obscenities. Although all the examples are taken from the 'home' of rock, and contain examples of censorship which are just as humorous as the SBC's banning of the 1960s song "Puff, the Magic Dragon", the argument put forth here is a serious one (one which is emphasised in the same issue's editorial "Who's to blame?" by the same writer) on the eve of Singapore's relaxation of laws on censorship of film.[20] As a way of overcoming the false image of pop culture as corruption, Philip Cheah argues for increased knowledge: the introduction of sex education in schools; the use of the music media to spread positive values, citing the Stop the Violence Movement in America (this issue contains an anti-smoking advertisement by the Ministry of Health); the setting up of an appeals committee against music censored by MITA comprising of music writers, musicians and disc jockeys; and running talks on the history and appreciation of pop music at community centres (Cheah, *BigO*, June 1991: 37).

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[20] Philip Cheah is one of Singapore's foremost film critics, and in his role as a buyer of film for the Singapore International Film Festival, has been one of a group of local cinephiles who have worked for many years toward a more tolerant approach to film censorship by arguing the value of film as an art form.

BigO

JUNE, 1991 No. 66 $3.80   MCI (P) 84/9/90   HEAR NO EVIL
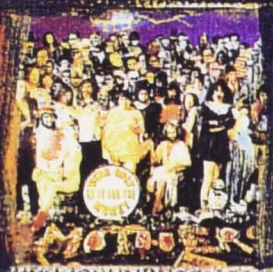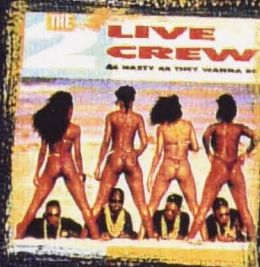
BANNED IN THE USA.

The issue of censorship and freedom to express ideas in general continues to surface in the magazine. Examples include: book reviews (one "essential buy of the month" by Claire Tham is of Edward de Grazia's exploration of censorship and the arts, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: the law of obscenity and the assault on genius* (*BigO*, June 1993: 80, 76); a brief article on SBC's relaxation of music censorship (*BigO*, August 1992: 13); a guest editorial by Martyn See, discussing the possible outcome of the Censorship Review committee (*BigO*, May 1992: 7). Martyn points out the hypocrisy of Singaporeans who do not wish to contest censorship laws, but instead buy banned movies on video from Johor Baru. What ties all this together is a concern about equating rock music with evil influence, one which concerns musicians everywhere. In "To cut or not to cut: a hairy episode" (*BigO*, July 1992: 14), writer Nazir Husain interviews Malaysian rockers affected by the censorship of long-haired musicians, who proffer that the ban is both ridiculous and hypocritical. One of the musicians interviewed points out that traditional Malay heroes sported long hair.

The banning of an entire album by the foreign group Guns 'n' Roses led to four letters on the subject being printed in *BigO*, November 1991. All the writers were against censorship, pointing out various inconsistencies within what was allowed. It was Martyn See, again, who wrote one of the most scathing criticisms of Singapore's censorship practices over sensationalist tabloid coverage of two performance artists. One (Shannon Tham) was protesting such journalistic practices and the other (Josef Ng), a recent incident involving police brutality towards homosexuals:

> We want our youth to develop a global outlook yet we censure aspects of popular culture deemed damaging to "Asian values"...we gazette publications, denying ourselves the exercise to form our own judgements. We nary bat an eyelid when a crotch-grabbing, alleged child molester [Michael Jackson] made $1 million tourist dollars for us

in the name of entertainment yet we choose to silence our own artists when they stand up to make a point...(*BigO*, January 1994: 16).

Another reason for avoiding serious political issues was a perceived lack of interest by readers: in 1987, *BigO* had produced a special issue entitled "Vietnam: the rock and roll war", which also included a feature on the English musician, Billy Bragg, founder of the Red Wedge movement (a left-wing coalition of musicians who campaigned for Labour in Britain). The *BigO* editors recalled that this was their "thinnest issue (only 28 pages)." Comments on local politics is generally confined to cartoons or references to popular culture such as censorship. In 1991, however, the magazine focused on the national elections, with articles by Martyn See and Nazir Husain.

Martyn See examined the PAP's strategy during the election campaign, discussing the indifference to politics of most younger Singaporeans, who voted because it was compulsory. He suggests that many new voters cast blank votes or, possibly worried about the serial number on their vote cards, cast votes for the government. It was the older generation who turned up to hear popular Opposition voices who held rallies while the PAP held more intimate sessions indoors. The Opposition rallies had a carnival atmosphere, while the PAP's strategy to attract young voters was a interesting one for a party which had decided not to hold rallies: they organised a giant street party (named Orchard Road Swing Singapore)

> Who will the Government consult in the future [referring to the PAP's new moves toward a consultative style of government] if the young of today are only mildly conscious of or apathetic to local politics? (*BigO*, October 1991: 9).

Nazir Husain wrote a more offbeat, diary-style report of the nine days of electioneering, focusing on Opposition rallies. He, too, talked about the apolitical young, who were so easily won over by the PAP's street party, where the

partygoers were addressed by the Prime Minister without any reference to politics:

> The underlying impression was that the ruling party had found the perfect way to reach young voters without any political hard sell whatsoever (October 1991: 10).

The comic strips and pages of the magazine contain some of its most original, daring and humourous material, most of it by local comic artists. Social themes predominate, including AIDs, abortion, alienation, violence and male sexuality. This is certainly not the stuff of everyday public discourse in Singapore, with the possible exception of late-night talk-back radio, on the NTUC's Radio Heart.[21]

The creator of the commercially successful cartoon character, Mr. Kiasu, Johnny Lau presents a darker creation, MITA (Ministry of Arts and Technology). In this series, the artist satirises the government's efforts to 'clean up' Singapore English usage, with a Terminator-style vigilante named MITA massacring offenders who use corrupt English (*BigO*, September 1992: "MITA 3: the mouth"). In *BigO*, October 1992, the MITA comic continues: "irregardless of race, religion, he will terminate the ones with bad language. based on justice and equality to build a grammar perfect society so as to achieve happiness, prosperity, progress through proper English" while he attacks various users of Singlish (see illustration : 85).

The running series entitled "Debaser" lampoons all sorts of sacred cows: the Singapop scene (epitomised by the local Singlish pop-comedy hit album entitled *Why U So Like Dat?*), Perfect 10, the local English-language avant garde theatre scene Singapore, for their pretentious use of Singlish (*BigO*, September 1993: 69–74), but also *BigO* and the indie scene itself (see chapter 2).

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[21] See Ng (1992), "Radio heart therapy".

Quite a few of these cartoons, including "Condom Boy" (a small, cute, used, talking condom) over the years has been original artwork by comic artist and independent short-film director, Eric Khoo.[22] *BigO*'s various initiatives on sex education or discussion have been largely directed at their chief audience of young men, and indeed confirm the overtly masculine world of *BigO*'s readers and writers. But where Singapore's mainstream media coverage of sexual matters is usually rather staid (as in the *New Straits Times*), or tends to outright sleaze (like the *New Paper*),[23] *BigO* artists tend to favour a more direct, uninhibited approach (which ties in with the sexually-inflected concert reviews, music and comics).[24]

Some examples of these are the October 1990 issue, which carries the "Stop Aids" full page posters by several artists (pp. 6–7; 10–11; 14–15; 20) with messages and images varying from the straight ("Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, if he'd used condoms, he'd still be with us") to the kinky ("Even a plastic barbie doll demands rubber"). The next year, "Unprotected sex: lust or life" (October 1992: 30–35), provided more detail about AIDs, including statistics on HIV in Asia, with cartoon-style full page illustrations which contain fairly explicit text about sexual situations, including gay sex and the dangers of unprotected sex. *BigO* has also published a series of anti-abortion cartoons (in a country where abortion is legal and often used as a method of birth control) by Michael Ng.[25]

Finally, *BigO* occasionally engages with other more dangerous taboos—in this case, the army, which is a hidden, but central, male rite of passage in what is

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[22] Khoo, a close associate of some *BigO* editors, has had his films shown in various international Film Festivals, as well as winning awards. Unlike most of those in the indie scene, Khoo's independence derives from family wealth (they own one of Singapore's most famous hotel, the Goodwood).

[23] This is not a steady state of affairs—the restructuring of censorship in Singapore in recent years has given rise to increased public consumption of soft pornographic novels and films. For a discussion of this, see Heng and Devan (1994), "Being obsessed with things sexual in the arts".

[24] For instance, the original local comics published in *BigO* often sport stereotypically voluptuous women, although it has also published articles and excerpts from feminist comic artists overseas.

[25] One example of this is a four page story with text and graphics "Nice Guy: Doctor abortion, part 5" *BigO*, January 1993: 14–18.

effectively a highly militarised state[26]. One cartoon, "Riot", ostensibly about media coverage of Bosnia, by Mike B.L. Tan" (*BigO*, July 1993: 71–2), a pro-democracy rally is violently suppressed by the army. The end of the comic has a news reporter saying "As you can see behind me, the hoodlums, anarchists, looters and other criminal types involved in today's disturbance are being led away by the courageous members of Arvey's [the fictional country] finest. There's therefore no truth at all to rumours of a riot. Our great leader...has issued a statement promising righteous retribution upon criminal parasites of the nation."

Lim Cheng Tju (a *BigO* writer and the comics editor), delivers an angry view of his experience in the National Service:

> Anger begets anger and fear begets fear. I know. I have been away. One year, one month and 19 days inside the army has taught me nothing but anger. Pure, unrelentless [sic] anger. Nothing about human dignity (they took away that), respect or discipline. That's the shit that they promise you on TV. Only anger and how much hate human beings can have for one another. You lose yourself everyday there (*BigO*, July 1992: 8).

Fanzine culture: the next generation of pop culture commentators

While *BigO* has moved away from its fanzine roots, there is an ever-increasing crop of ephemeral fanzines catering to particular music tastes. As well as as the older, now defunct, fanzines begun in the mid-1980s, such as *Pale Shelter* and the *Reckoning*, for a while a Blues fanzine which included many interviews with local 1960s blues musicans, some of whom had emigrated after the bans in the 1970s, Blues Network, was published inside *BigO*. *Vintage* (rockabilly, a cross of rock music and hillbilly music); *Mega Z* (a variety of music); *Melt* (hardcore); *Evil Rotting* (death metal) *Living Corpse*; *Vengeance*; *XabstinenceX*; *Three Minutes Hate*;

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[26] For a government point of view on the need for national conscription and Total Defence, see Seah Chee Meow, "National Security" in Sandhu and Wheatley (1989): 949–62.

Lion city Unity; True til'tomorrow?; Flammable Sheet. some of these were inspired by *BigO*, and always advertised in the magazine, but most of them were started in reaction to *BigO*'s wider coverage in pop culture. All of these are underground, unregistered publications, many of which are virtually one-person operations which were distributed by friends and by mail from home addresses, and all vary wildly in their regularity and distribution. These fanzines are also made up of people who want to spread the word, have their say and some become involved in promoting and recording music.

None of them see themselves anything other than Singaporean.

> More than anything else the pop music you listen to now has been shaped by an infinitesmal number of ghost characters—the small band, the small record label, the one-off hit single, the small-time producer, and yes, the small music paper. The one you are holding right now....[With *Pale Shelter*, we are witnessing the growth of a throbbing Singapore music underground—independent and opinionated about the direction pop music should take in Singapore. After *Before I get Old* and *The Reckoning*, *Pale Shelter* is the third pop fanzine to be established for the alternative pop audience in Singapore].[27]

The Alternative Consumer?

All the previously mentioned sections of *BigO* revolve around the bulk of its contents, which presents symbolic popular culture material for informed consumption, although it is difficult to argue that the magazine presents a particular lifestyle, since there is often such a diversity of material, and often dissenting views (as when two quite different reviews of the same album or concert are published, along with letters in other issues commenting one way or another on articles). Although *BigO*'s base was alternative rock music and popular culture, its reviews range from regular columns on cinema, blues, jazz,

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[27] *Pale Shelter*, April 86: 1.

classical music, toy collecting, comic art, coverage of avant garde artists in Singapore and state-of-the-art music technology. A common thread through these is that individuality is defined by what one collects, purchases or listens to. Sometimes the commercial content is inseparable from the editorial content, as in an EMI advertisement for alternative rock (*BigO*, December 1993: 21)[28] and a long-running series of advertisements for 'original' Levis jeans worn by various local musicians, two examples of multinational corporations using the magazine's own discourse of alternativeness (and indeed, these advertisements are coordinated by *BigO* writers) for mutual advantage. While this ties in with the general consumerism of Singapore culture, it differs in the emphasis on buying for content, rather than for style—what one recent study has called the accumulation of "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1994). Subcultural capital (an idea which the author extrapolates from Pierre Boudieu's concept of cultural capital), equates to "hipness" and "confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder", and it can be embodied in the form of, for instance, record collections (Thornton 1994: 11).

One illustration of this is *BigO*'s article on collecting bootlegs.[29] Bootlegs are the "surreptitiously made or acquired recordings [of live performances], unofficially produced and sold without the agreement of the artist or recording company" (Taylor 1985: 480). On the one hand, such recordings violated musicians' control over their own music products, and cost them and record companies substantial losses in revenue. On the other, and over a period of time, many of the famous bootlegged releases of famous musicians such as Bob Dylan, acquired mythic status for the purity of their musicianship, unmediated by technology, forcing companies to release 'live' albums. The popularity of bootlegs indicated the reification of live music within a framework where all performance was being mediated by studio, constituting a musical black market.

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[28] But the same issue of the magazine contains a piece of raw indie stye writing by the writer of the hardcore fanzine, Three Minutes Hate ("The year in punk review", *BigO*, December 1993: 31).
[29] Michael Cheah, "These boots are made for playing", *BigO*, October 1991: 36–43.

As the article points out, the bootleg industry operates as a parallel one to the official record companies. One of the ironies of the continuing operation of bootleggers is that the 1960s rock fans throughout the world are ageing (like many in Singapore), but relatively wealthy and conservative in their tastes—they are thus able to collect every recording of a particular musician or band, in often expensively packaged re-issued recordings, including erstwhile bootlegs made legally available.

The article begins with equating bootleggers with rock music's 'rebel' quality, although it later questions the ethics of those involved. This is a message which subverts the entire rock music industry, and which the magazine upholds. It ends with a list of of the best bootlegs to collect (a not uncommon feature of fan magazines). The same issue also contained an article explaining and reviewing the expensive, new portable recording technology, which is of a professional standard, the Digital Audio Tape player which among other things, could be used to make unauthorised (bootleg) recordings of live concerts.

Conclusion

Although *BigO* champions the alternative music scene, the magazine's subtext is that of personal liberation through informed consumption and through active involvement or the exercise of critical judgement to enable greater pleasure to be derived from the practice and consumption of music. *BigO* also differs in the way it is written largely by stringers and outsiders (often unpaid) who are musicians, and as discussed, ideas and perspectives which differ are often given prominent space. Also, unlike consumer style guides, *BigO* allows for argument, retraction, polemic, disagreements. In addition, imported music is valued not only of itself but, recontextualised by local fans and imitators for a local audience.

What *BigO* represents is, within the confines of the periodical format, is perhaps a strategic belief in a value-free global market of ideas and musical influences, where dedicated fandom and connoisseurship are rewarded by

recognition and admission to the centre (or the mythical past) of rock 'n' roll, the level where original passion can be endlessly recycled but also used productively in the present by "anyone living anywhere in the world".

BigO can be seen to be 'mediators' rather than 'gatekeepers' who have ultimate authority over information.[30] In this model, the influence of the media is the product of interrelationships between ownership and the interests of capital, the 'reading' and transformatory receptions of the audience, and the internal workings of a particular form of mass media. The special position of *BigO* lies in its use of fans and musicians themselves to cover the alternative music scene, and there are always elements of the magazine which do not strictly conform to editorial intent, and are critical or at variance with the views of the editors. This in itself is a not common practice in Singapore, with its hierarchical (status-based) approach to work and cultural practices[31], and certainly not common in a country where journalists do not have the freedom to write about issues which are deemed 'sensitive': sometimes 'sensitivity' can be a matter of personal clashes of opinion rather than government policy.

The deliberately 'open' editorial practices of the magazine, the limited size of the rock music scene, and indeed of Singapore, makes *BigO* practically indivisible from the music and musicians it represents, most of whom have appeared in or contributed to the magazine. In short, the magazine provides a way for fans and musicians to read, learn, listen and construct a way of living with, to paraphrase Frith, both the authoritarianism of Singapore and the capitalism of the music industry.

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[30] This terminology is used in Negus's study of the music business (Negus 1992).
[31] See for instance, Chua and Kuo 1991.

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No longer an American phenomenon...

...pop culture is no longer an American phenomenon. Its appeal and values are now universal. For example, elements of rock 'n' roll have given birth to a host of distinct Asian music, be it Japanese, Thai, Taiwanese, Malay or Canto pop. All of which may be Western-inspired but each retaining its own language and character (Martyn See, "The times, they're a-changing", *BigO*, May 1992: 7).

In the previous chapters, the productive, creative and oppositional use of rock music's mythology and practice by overlapping subsets of independent fans, musicians and media have been examined in the context of Singapore. This chapter will focus on the independent music scene's external links with its constructed other, 'the mainstream', as embodied by Singapore mass music media and industry. In the discourse of 'globalisation', I argue that the independent music scene attempts to occupy a third position between the music media's essentialising construction or promotion of the carefully local-inflected 'Singapop', and the uncritical consumption of Western pop culture, in this case, pop music.[1] This 'third position' consists of resisting mass media and state-

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[1] The idea of third position and audience/ participants' agency in popular culture is no longer a novel one. See, for example, Siriyuvasak 1991 discussion of Thai popular culture.

constructed discourses and categories of local and multicultural through a range of articulations of what it means to be a rock fan, musician or critic.

A central feature of contemporary music consumption is the way music crosses national boundaries, a fact which alarms some and excites others, depending where they situate themselves in relation to this flow.

> Music industry technology has found its way, in a very short time, into every corner of the earth. Both software and hardware can be found in even the remotest village in every country, irrespective of social or economic system. No other technology has penetrated society so quickly—what is more governments seem to be aware that their traditional cultural heritage could be threatened, but are not sure what to do, or cannot act because of other priorities...A transnational form of nationless culture develops (Wallis and Malm 1990: 161).

The cultural imperialist model, and the panic about transnational culture is giving way to one which allows for plural and shifting centres of power, for "a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order" (Appadurai 1990: 6) which can no longer see the Anglo–American world as one which exports its culture and ideologies to the rest of the world, with devastating effects on local culture. To some extent the catchcry of American cultural imperialism has been replaced with the term globalisation, although perhaps the only metaphor for the search for a model to describe global cultural flows in the early 1990s would be the folktale of the men who attempt to describe an elephant, each convinced that the part they are holding, and describing, constitutes the entire beast. More pertinently, those 'controlling' the mammoth are no longer from 'the West', and the world music industry has been subsumed into global entertainment oligopolies. Yet, as Negus (1992) points out, the growth of music companies has also been accompanied by greater possibilities for "horizontal linkages" between what were once seen as peripheral regions, as well as local input as new, and more specialised markets emerge.

In reference to popular music, globalisation "has often been seen as tantamount to *Americanisation*"(Hayward 1992a: 2), but it is coming to be read as no longer unidirectional (there have been globally successful bands and musicians from Ireland and Iceland, for example). As two of the editors of *BigO* pointed out, 'imperialism' is not necessarily a negative thing—all art has to start from somewhere and imitation is good if it leads to the next stage, creation.[2]

In the Singapore context, globalisation was not as big a threat as a cultural cringe mentality which meant that local artists were not supported.

BigO editor Philip Cheah commenting on the advent of MTV in Singapore:

> Instead of worrying whether Western pop culture will overwhelm the East, pop pundits should look forward to world pop. In other areas of the arts, the shift is already happening. Film for instance...Certain Western film festivals even take pride in their Asian programmes.
>
> So why not Asian pop? Cui Jian's ideas are probably more urgent than anything Bruce Springsteen has to say currently (even though Cui Jian was influenced by Springsteen in the beginning).
>
> Asian artists who are serious about the world market should seriously consider singing in English. Cosmopolitan countries such as Singapore, for instance, will make the transition easily (*BigO*, February 1992: 6).

The same processes which have allowed for the domination of part of world's airwaves by recorded popular Anglo-American music has also enabled music in other language markets to spread and flourish, such as Canto-pop (Cantonese pop music, produced in Hong Kong) in Southeast Asia. And nations such as Singapore still attempt to control what is transmitted over their airwaves—in this regard, it should be noted that the Singapore government has for some years banned cultural products such as videos and cassettes in Cantonese, in their campaign to replace the use of other Chinese dialects (the

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[2] Michael and Philip Cheah, in a round table interview conducted with all three editors, 18 December 1992.

actual languages spoken by members of the various Chinese communities) with Mandarin (the language being strategically used to construct an essentially Chinese character of Chinese Singaporean, of 'Confucian' Asia, of 'cultural ballast' against English, the language of the huge potential market of mainland China and the rival China of Taiwan). Ranged against the diffuse discourse of globalisation—which is also a word denoting a marketing strategy in the music and related entertainment industries—is the idea of music as having local valency.

Again, this tends to feed into the discourse of authenticity in popular music, and constitutes a central problem for rock fans and musicians in places like Singapore where the search for a 'local sound' sets them up squarely against the state constructions of identity and place. "Music is frequently thought of as having a culture-specific sound. Sounds are identified in geo-cultural terms: the Liverpool sound, the Chicago sound...the essence of a geo-cultural identity is thought, somehow to be manifest from within music's sounds" (Shepherd 1993: 171). Shepherd makes the point that this construction of music as being culturally specific in a place like English Canada is a problem because identity there "is not easily or transparently recognisable" (Shepherd: 174), while in a Swedish study, rock musicians used English, "rock's original language" and provider of a number of ready-made clichés" (Fornäs 1995: 217).

The experience of music begins with pleasurable fantasy and imaginative projection which in some cases translates into the desire to play and make music.[3] Music can be an "insistent evocation of place" and be used "to locate...[oneself] in quite idiosyncratic and plural ways" via a private collection of recordings or of "constructing trajectories rather than boundaries across space" (Stokes 1994b: 3–4). "Constructing trajectories" implies conscious efforts to go against existing boundaries, as is clearly the case with punk-inspired indie music in the 1980s. The consumption of music transcends geographical space and political boundaries.

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[3] These points were repeatedly made to me by those I interviewed and talked to about how their interest in rock music began.

Frith (1987: 149) notes that "what pop can do is put into play a sense of identity that may or may not fit the way we are placed by other social forces" while Stokes (1994b: 24) argues further that a "sense of identity can be put into play through music by performing to it, dancing to it, listening to it or even thinking about it". Both of these interpretations argue against strictly culturally-specific or national analyses of rock or pop music.

Localising the global

The existence of the alternative music scene in Singapore is also an example of the localisation of a global form of popular culture. Western popular music, as well as many of the countless local permutations of the form, is linked by virtue of music technologies and political economy of recording and distribution, to what has been termed a "global cultural economy" (Appadurai 1990: 6).

As an example, while many of the rock musicians on a 1993 recording of various new Singapore bands (entitled Bonus, and released by the Japanese music company Pony Canyon)—ranging in genre from rap to self-consciously syncretic (and synthetic) local version of 'world music'—sing with a decidedly "rock-American intonation", this is not merely reflective of an Anglo-American bias on the part of the diverse group of local musicians featured. The English language lyrics and imported styles are nuanced by local references which only those familiar with Singapore can fully appreciate. This recording, although destined for promotion by Pony Canyon in Japan in particular, is fully grounded in what is evolving as a local culture which does not owe everything to state constructions of culture.

The song 'Queen of the Construction Site'[4] depicts a Singapore other than the tidy, ordered, metropolis with its compliant citizens busy at work. It evokes the 'untidiness' which is the reverse image of this order, in the ubiquitous construction sites of Singapore. The lyrics contain references to transvestism and

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[4] By Chris Ho, Wee Teck, The Supple Sisters, Paranakan Paddy and the A.P. Kat, in the album *Bonus : the blue album*, Ponycanyon Entertainment, Singapore, 1993.

the demolished and re-constructed Bugis Street, as a celebration and subversion of official Singaporean culture, as much as they gently mock the making of the Singaporean man. However, among the releases of albums by small, independent labels (Mouse Records, Red, Wax, Revival, Tim, and Black Sun Productions, to name a few), there is no single 'national' voice, unlike the carefully constructed and marketed music of Singapore pop artists recorded by the major labels.

One of the many contradictions in the discourse of Singapore rock musicians was that being commercially recorded remained the ultimate mark of success[5]; as elsewhere, home recordings, demos and underground labels were often viewed as a first step toward attracting the attention of the major music companies. It has been estimated that "70 per cent of the recorded popular music sold in the world has been produced, manufactured and distributed by five major companies: EMI Music, Sony Music Entertainment, Warner Music International and the BMG Music Group" (Negus 1992: 2), which are in turned owned by even larger multimedia corporations. Given its economic status as a powerhouse in the region, it is not surprising, perhaps, that these companies, as well as other smaller ones, have offices in Singapore. As a result, Singapore has many sophisticated recording studios for hire, some of which have been mentioned as being hospitable to indie or hardcore artists.

Singapore epitomises the lucrative new markets of Southeast Asia created by the rising numbers of young and well-off at a recessionary time in America and Europe.[6] The keywords used in the music business are "domestic (or national) repertoire" and "Asian identity" (Ebert and White 1992). Given their focus on marketing recorded music to 'Asia', ...these companies do not really see Singapore as a separate entity, given the small size of its domestic market, but

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[5] Patrick Ch'ng, '10 Best Unsigned Bands' *BigO*, January 1992: 24–5.
[6] See for example the hyperbole-laced article in *Billboard*, a magazine of the music industry: "Eight Key Nations Form a Bridge to Growth: a youth explosion and rapid economic gains create a new wave of opportunity" (Ebert and White 1992: 2–20).

part of the triple market, or launching pad for Singapore–Indonesia–Malaysia: in this instance, it can be seen that Singapore is a sort of marginal cultural category, simply a market sector, whose consumers are deemed sophisticated. The major exception to this rule, at least theoretically, has been the Japanese company Pony Canyon, whose managing director has deliberately been cultivating, recording and promoting local musicians, particularly for the Japanese market (*BigO*, November 1991: 35). As a result, there has been an increasing awareness of home-grown talent as well as a deliberate strategy to capitalise on the new mood for cultural products which reflect 'Singapore'.

The relationship between the independent musicians and media and the record companies is a cordial one, if not very fruitful: BMG released The Oddfellows first album, Teenage Head, which was a local hit. The companies regard the indie scene as a potential source of new talent, tested by independent releases: "These small indie labels, working with shoestring budgets, are a conduit to exposing talented new artists…They are doing what the majors have obviously failed to do" (Leo 1992: 16).

In this climate—the increased presence and activities of recording companies (and their identification with specific rock artists) in Singapore, the substantial number of local recordings being issued and the consequent visibility of a number of local and regional pop artists—the indie scene has made recording one focus of their concerns. One response to the lack of interest by multinationals in recording 'raw' indie bands has been home recording, and the beginnings of alternative recording operations, set up by the fans or musicians themselves. Patrick Chngs' Tim label has probably been the most significant of these, and emblematic of the camaraderie and support within the indie scene, which exists alongside the friction and tensions. At the same time, there has been continuous lobbying by the *BigO* editors in particular to recognise and 'authenticate' indie bands by offering them contracts as part of their efforts to foster a real community of rock musicians as well as challenge the foreign domination of

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musical tastes: it was an apt time, with the success and coming to prominence of indie bands from America and elsewhere. The proliferation of small independent recording labels in Singapore was an indication of how the music scene there both resists and creates spaces for itself as well as working within existing structures.

These structures for disseminating music and musical culture were controlled by a combination of state and commercial interests. On the one hand, the Ministry for Technology and the Arts and its broadcasters are vested with the power to censor cultural products; on the other, commercial firms based in Singapore and elsewhere were keen to sell music to the proportionally large and relatively wealthy youth market for English language pop in particular.

The remainder of this chapter examines the positions of two influential members of the mainstream music scene, a producer of the largest pop music radio program, and the local managing director of one of the 'big 5' music multinational companies. Both of them were music fans who did not really like alternative music, and were generally critical of the indie musicians. In Suresh Menon's case, there was little place for local rock music in the computer selected program formulae used in Perfect 10, while Eric was speaking from the competitive, 'real' world of the recording industry, which "has come to favour certain types of music, particular working practices, and quite specific way of acquiring, marketing and promoting recording artists" (Negus 1992: vii).

Voices from the mainstream[7]

Suresh Menon

Suresh, in his late thirties, is the producer and a presenter of SBC's Perfect 10, the highest-rating pop music station in Singapore, set up to compete with the unexpected popularity of the Indonesian Zoo Station which had been

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[7] Rewritten from recorded interviews with Suresh Menon and Eric Yeo. Italicised passages are direct quotes.

broadcasting to a Singapore audience from the neighbouring island of Batam (Birch 1993a: 30).

Perfect 10 is often criticised by those in the alternative scene for not taking risks with local music, and as the pop station which most defines pop tastes of Singaporeans. Despite being part of the mainstream media, it has been described as being "saturated with consumption values and western symbols and lifestyles" (Wong K.K. 1991: 256). Suresh took little responsibility for the selection of music played:

> *Perfect 10 has a target audience of 15–29 year olds. We do not play alternative music, but United Kingdom and American hit songs. We try to gauge what is popular in Singapore using market research, and 'various indicators'. A computer scheduling system is used to program the songs, according to a playlist: the choice does not reflect my personal tastes. There is a 'local' category in the computer system (Selecta—developed in America). The general rule for any song which is proposed out of this system is that if is radio friendly, we will play it. The computer system gives consistency to the station—a station identity, in effect.*

But even middle-of-the-road musical tastes in Singapore were not totally dictated by what sold well overseas. Sometimes a song which was not on the charts became highly popular and requested in Singapore: he gave an example of a song which was not popular at all in Western pop charts, but it was a typically saccharine love song which sold extremely well in Singapore, forcing the record company to bring it in.[8]

Dee Jays have to play what the superiors (the team) decide. Suresh was part of a committee deciding on songs which should be censored. *MITA—if they don't ban, we will play.* There was greater freedom than before. He decided that the program could not ban songs when they were available from other sources—

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[8] See also Wells and Lee 1995.

television or in the shops. An informal system of self-censorship still applies. Singapore pop culture, he thought, was quite progressive, citing the fact that the local multilingual Radio Heart was very popular and played a range of music, while alternative or independent music has a rather large following. His reading of the local indie scene was that the bands' positions arose from not being signed to a large label: their music was often very local, very safe, and mainstream—the band AWOL "was like early [1960s Ameican band] Buffalo Springfield, very retro".[9]

(He compared the current situation with Singapore in the sixties).

> *You could probably have a regular half-hour program, in the 1960s, with some 30-odd bands, constantly churning out music. Then the music died. The British forces (stationed in Singapore) left, a contributing factor. A local band, the Quests sold more records than Cliff Richard at one point. American pop music took over. There was a clampdown on discos, and rock was called yellow culture.*
>
> *People are wealthier now—money to buy equipment, press records/cassettes, sell them to friends. Studios are available, and quite cheap. This is a way to evolve, a way of coming up with a culture—not simply the Wah Lau gang, music with bits of Singlish thrown in.*

He criticised the band Opposition Party's Francis Frightful and other musicians, who he said struck rock poses without caring what they sounded like. Edgar's Fault was an example of a good band, while he found the Oddfellows production very bad.

The Singapore press was not in touch with what's really happening culturally, and tends to rely on information from computerised wire services. The *press suffers from a lack of curiosity, a fear of losing face.*

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[9] This was what the band was considered to be within the indie scene itself.

He summed up by saying that, despite his misgivings, rock in Singapore was a viable form. There was a lot of idealism amongst younger Singaporeans—some number of people go through the phase of the anger and passion for rock music, *then you grow out of that phase.*

Eric Yeo

Eric is in his 40s, the managing director for Polygram (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore).

Eric described the Singapore music business as dominated by the Mandarin pop and Western music. The market for English language pop in Singapore was basically 80 per cent American Billboard chart pop, 20 per cent technopop, or "UK" bands; many people listened to the BBC (as many people listened to ZOO and watched TV3). Cantonese pop is given no airtime because dialects were officially banned, or discouraged.

He had a different explanation for the demise of a rock fan base in the 1970s, when bands such as Quest and the Thunderbirds outsold international stars such as Cliff Richard; partly because these bands were much better, more talented, they had places to perform, including gigs at the British bases stationed in Singapore.

> *In my time listening to the radio was a more significant form of engagement with popular culture and rebellion; requesting a song for a girl on a radio request program was exciting. Times have changed. Music no longer signalled such possibilities, partly because a much greater range of entertainment was available now (video, electronic games, etc.) Music recording was much simpler then, there was not a great gap between the sound quality of a foreign, famous group and a talented, local, one. Music has become a package, the whole package has to be sold. There can be no return to a simpler time.*

He pointed out, apropos the question about simpler technologies, that it was not feasible to record new artists because of the economies of scale—you

would not want to spend S$50,000 to sell only perhaps 2,000 items. *local bands needed to cultivate their local bases, it was ridiculous trying to make it overseas.*

Eric made a distinction between artists and stars, implying that the latter mentality prevailed in Singapore. An old-style rock fan, Eric has little time for hardcore music and musicians, the 'play loud' crowd—rock was about energy, he said, not decibels. He questioned the idea of Singapore having unique artists, saying that in the final analysis, no one cared about the nationality of an artist. He saw that record companies had a role in cultivating talent, but stressed the need for more professionalism and dedication on the part of the artists. *'Local' is not important, 'unique' is.*[10]

The last word

On the Lion City Hardcore, the first independently produced CD by a group of fans and musicians, the imagery is overwhelmingly doom-leaden, addressed at a nebulous 'you'. There is no hint of satire, or black humour. The music is meant to operate at a different, more visceral (auditory, visual) and participatory level. Perhaps, too, one has to be wary of analysing lyrics in the context where lyrics have to be vetted by the police—in addition, it is seriously difficult to decipher the words of hardcore songs, where various techniques of deliberate 'noise' and electronic blurring of voices are used.

However, the fact that they choose to print their lyrics on the covers of albums indicates that they do want them to be taken seriously. These are very much statements addressed to each other, and not to the unconverted general public. It is perhaps an indication of the musicians addressing their imagined (transnational) audience of fans that words are addressed to unknown 'yous' and often seem to have no referentiality to their real Singaporean existence altogether. One example of this is the song 'Skin' on the album Lion City Hardcore:

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[10] Eric Yeo's emphasis.

I don't understand why/why you built this barrier between us/ Why can't we stick together and work as one?/ Does my colour of skin degrade you,/or is it just your pride?/ Why do you have this fuckin' idea/ that blacks can't live with whites? (United Blood 1992).

Conclusion

> It is because they *lack* power that the young account for their lives in terms of play, focus their politics on leisure (Simon Frith).[1]

How oppositional can rock music be? While there has been an insistence in this thesis of locating the practice and production of Singapore's alternative rock musicians within the social, cultural and political landscape of that nation, it could equally be argued that young Singaporeans who embrace, emulate and extend popular Western cultural practices with such passion are behaving not as 'Singaporeans' but, predictably, as members of the new global cultural economy. Indeed the musical terrain inhabited by the musicians and fans has a strong *imagined* quality to it, owing to its closed-system of references: musicians in Singapore making music in homage and reference to overseas bands they like; arguing about musical practices with each other; seeking links and confirmation of musicianship from overseas bands and media. The entire scene could then be read as a creative, but limited, escape from the reality of life in Singapore.

The first objection to this would be that these musicians are deeply rooted, or at least temporarily unwilling or unable to physically remove themselves from the island as well as divorce themselves from all else 'Singaporean'. Ultimately, the meaning and social significance of the Singapore musical scene has to be located within a Singapore context, where possible translations of intent from the original have occurred. These 'translations' do not only occur when cultural

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[1] Quoted in Wicke 1987: 11.

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products cross distinctively diverse linguistic and political frontiers such as from English-speaking Seattle, United States of America to English/other speaking Singapore, they also occur when they cross from one metropolitan centre to another.[2]

Second, the music scene constitutes both a rupture and departure from processes of everyday life in Singapore—standing against the paradigms of continued/ ensured gratification, security, guidance, certainty, tidiness and order. The musicians are leaping into a breach, influencing each other, exploring cultural items not readily available on the local media; they are not part of the youthful élite in Singapore. The energy, dedication and organisation necessary for the continuation of an independent music scene (and other alternative cultural sites) goes against standard, mechanistic readings of Singapore society, and by implication 'the Singapore character'. Becoming a rock musician, as illustrated in a few examples in this thesis, is a process which requires learning to operate and organise, having initiative, which is the opposite of the *kiasu's* 'fear of failure'. The wild leaping, diving and body contact involved in slamdancing could perhaps be viewed in the face of the passivity and quiescence demanded physically of youth in Singapore, particularly men, who have to undergo compulsory military training.

In the case of rock musicians, given a history of state censorship and intervention in popular culture (with bans ranging from pop songs and juke boxes to breakdancing), it is little wonder that most of them dress unobtrusively and neatly—grunge dressing has never really become fashionable, even if the music has been influential. The musicians who drew attention to themselves, and the fans who went out of control, drew a lot of

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[2] In a discussion of another 'culturally peripheral' nation, Australia the authors point out how even the very same music can be received and interpreted differently: "what may have functioned as sub-cultural 'noise' in Manchester or New York was often already reconstituted as mainstream 'signal' by the time it was imported into Australia..." (Murphie and Scheer 1992: 172–3).

resentment and criticism, not only for overstepping some unspoken margins, but for potentially bringing police attention and government censure.

The theme song for this thesis may well be the relatively ancient and much quoted Bob Dylan song, *"The times, they are a' changin'"*. The transience inherent to popular music, the rapid adoption and spread of new technologies within Singapore, as well as new directions in culture and politics there, allows for only hesitant conclusions. The material and context of this thesis have altered in a few years. To take just a few examples, the presence of transnational music retailers such as Tower Records, and the growing proportion of Singaporeans who travel out of Singapore, many to 'the West' for either work, study or leisure, eats away at censorship and cultural parameters set up by the state, or by local retailers.

I would argue that greater exposure to the 'actual West' (Singaporeans travelling or living in 'the West'), which generally involves consumption (listening to or buying) of new cultural products, has taken away some of the exclusiveness and individualism hitherto surrounding music connoisseurship and collecting practices: obscure or very new recordings of indie bands can now be obtained with comparative ease either within Singapore, or through the services of large music stores, although those who collect and listen to indie music are in the minority.

The mass media, radio in particular, has begun to pay much more attention to locally-produced rock and pop, as well as a wide range of music in response to 'global' changes in music tastes as well as lobbying from the alternative scene. The policies of the government towards culture of all kinds, as described earlier, is in a period of transition, although the hegemony of the PAP, and the elite they have created, remains. As for my informants, what they have written or said about themselves, or Singapore, or rock music , will certainly have changed at the time of the writing of this thesis. For some, the involvement in music was a phase, while for others it will remain important, and continue to influence their

subsequent life choices. Some have already left, in the rather large (and not always temporary) migration of youth for study abroad, generally in the United States, Great Britain, Australia and Europe. Many of the aspiring bands and musicians mentioned have released records, and the male dominance of the scene is being challenged by young female musicians.

But while the PAP is still exercising and reinscribing its hegemony over, and with the collusion of a majority of, the people of Singapore, what is the value of slight oppositional gestures? There are at least two ways to look at this. One is that, to paraphrase the author of a comparative study of the origin, diffusion and defusion of musical codes in former Communist countries (Cushman 1991), oppositional codes, such as those which form the basis of rock ideology, may simply provide an aesthetic outlet for coping with the quandaries of modernity. The second, is that rock music can be in reality more dangerous than it appears, in ways not appreciated by the government of Singapore: rock music brings with it an essentially irreverent, and periodically questioning view of the world, and hierarchies, giving fans and musicians access to a musical and linguistic vocabulary denied them in most aspects of their education as citizens, and which they appear to be deploying and developing in fanzines, songs, debates and *BigO*: this may not be the kind of 'fun' the government has been talking about.

Appendix 1 : significant events in Singapore's independent music scene 1990–93 [1]

1990

Jan.	The Singapore Broadcasting Corporation launches a new radio program called Perfect 10.
Sept.	The unregistered independent label, Tim records, releases recorded versions of the **Oddfellows'** "Phoney accent/Riding in your car" and "A love tale" and "The Grunge" by **E-Thing and The Prehistoriks**.
June	**IGTA** performs in Changi Prison as part of the 1990 Singapore Arts Festival.
Sept. 1.	World Trade Centre: "Yamaha band explosion".
Sept. 30.	The Substation holds the first indie rock concert.
Sept. 30.	Celebrities Pub: "Hottest band in town" contest.
Nov. 30.	The Substation: hardcore concert.
Nov.	A joint skateboarding event-cum-hardcore concert.

1991

March	New School Rock I album released on compact disc by *BigO*.
April 14	The Substation: New School Rock I concert.
June 2	The Substation: thrash concert.
June 29	Concert of bands from the New School Rock contest.
June	**Stompin' Ground** release their album Grey on cassette.
n.d.	**Ordinary People** release their recording Happy. Dad. Me.
n.d.	Red Records is formed, and release the **Twang Bar Kings'** first album Witchdoctor.

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[1] Date, venue, event or recording with bands indicated in bold; n.d. indicates that no precise date was available.

	Tim records is registered.
July	The Commitments/ New School Rock band contest.
	BigO and Tim records release the **Oddfellows'** album Teenage Head. A song from the album, entitled "So Happy" tops three radio charts in Singapore.
July	**Breaking Glass** issues independently produced album, Experience.
Aug. 25	"Village Live" indie concert.
Aug.	The **Watchmen** release a demonstration cassette, "Who Watches the Watchmen".
Sept.	The Hong Kong-based Star TV (first pan-Asian satellite TV service) begins broadcasting.
Sept. 29.	Marina Village: "Village Live" hardcore concert.
Nov. 16	Singapore Conference Hall: "The Commitments/New School Rock" contest for indie and hardcore bands.
	Nunsex releases their Beatnik demonstration cassette.
	The fanzine *Mega* Z releases Made-in-Singapore.
Dec.	Noisebox label (from the Noisebox studio) releases Esa's "Ain't Ready for Mondays".
Dec.	Tim Records release **Daze** mini-album.
	More independent record labels start up: Route 88 and Revival Music.
	Red Records issues compilation of indie band demos, Gang Bang.
1992	
Feb.	**Daze's** "Sexy Little Boy" is voted Perfect 10's 'no. 1 single'.
Feb. 2	New School Rock II album released by *BigO*.

Feb. 29	Sin Kim Kok Theatre. New School Rock II Concert. **Stompin' Ground, AWOL, Fish on Friday, Shades.**
	The **Watchmen** release their demonstration cassette, "This savage garden".
March 7	The Substation: "Youth awareness" (hardcore) concert.
April 4	Sin Kim Kok Theatre: Indie concert.
April 15–26.	Avantgarde theatre company Theatreworks' 'Theatre-Carnival-on-the-Hill' with indie and hardcore bands performing.
May 7.	The re-formed British 1970s punk band **Buzzcocks** perform, with **Stompin' Ground** and **The Oddfellows**.
June 13	Public seminar: "Singapore rock: the brave new frontier" with participants from the mainstream media, industry as well as indie artistes.
June 20.	The 1992 Singapore Arts Festival includes a rock concert: "Rock the new frontier" in its Fringe program.
June 25	The Substation: hardcore concert organised by TNT studios.
June 27	"Harvest concert" (indie/hardcore).
July	**DNA** release their album "Just Play It".
Aug.	The Singapore Broadcasting Corporation stops generating its own list of censored songs (in addition to that issued by the Ministry of Information and the Arts).
Aug.	The Redifussion show "Weird scenes inside the goldmine" broadcasts a series of "unplugged" performances by indie and hardcore bands.
Aug.	Release of demo by industrial rock band, **Convent Garden**.
Aug. 8	Also August 15, 23; World Trade Centre concerts:
Sept	Concert by American indie artist and band, Henry Rollins.

Sept?	Ban on slamdancing. Mandatory S$2,000 deposit for each concert, forfeited if slamdancing takes place.
Sept.	12, 19; World Trade Centre concerts.
Sept.	Tim records release the **Oddfellows'**"Carnival".
	Mouse Records releases "Made in Singapore 2" (death metal, hardcore, and industrial rock.)
	BigO releases Electroplasm, a compilation of local industrial bands.
Sept. 3	World Trade Centre concert: promotion of The **Pagans'** release, "Hideaway".
Oct 10; 17	World Trade Centre concerts.
Nov 7; 14.	World Trade Centre concerts.
Dec 19; 26.	World Trade Centre concerts.

1993

Jan	*BigO* releases New School Rock III compact disc, various artistes & bands.
Feb.	Self-titled album by metal group, **Anesthesia**.
April	Release of "Lion City hardcore" compact disc by Reconstrux Records and *BigO*.
April	Release of **Humpback Oak**'s "Red, hot and skin".
April	Prometheus Sound Arts recording releases **Band of Slaves'** album, "45".
May 28	Tim records release **Pagan's** album "Stereo kinetic spiral dreams".
June 27	Harvest concert. The 1993 Singapore Arts Festival includes a concert: "Artists without Licence".
July	Odyssey Music releases The **Watchmen's** album "Democracy".

July 25	SLF Auditorium. World Vision 30 Hour Famine concert organised by *BigO* and Rage Productions.
Aug. 8	East Coast Park. National Day Carnival. Indie/hardcore concert.
Aug. 7.	The Lion City Collective is formed to facilitate activities and to "stimulate Singapore underground music ".
Aug. 9	NTUC's Radio Heart broadcasts 18 hours of locally made music, non-stop, together with *BigO* editors.
Oct.	Release of **Ordinary People**'s album, "It's a weird existence".
Dec. 29	Village Live: **Daze**, **AWOL**.
Dec. 31	Substation New Year concert: "Before the sun rises".

Appendix 2. *Before I Get Old*: cover stories and major feature articles 1990–93.

NOTE: The first issue cited includes a fuller description of its contents as an example of the mixture of articles found in the magazine. (L) indicates local groups or musicians.

1990

Sept.: 57   Chris Ho fights for his right to party/ Local Radio's future/Local heroes

Cover
The black-and-white cover of this 90-page issue features the disc jockey and musician Chris Ho in a kung fu pose with the caption "Chris Ho fights for his right to party."

Headroom (the readers' letters section)
One lengthy letter was published, from an American comics artist whose work was featured in *BigO*: "Believe it or not, comic books like mine are pretty hard to find in most of the US and Canada, and several shop owners have been arrested for selling comics like WIERDO in the last five years. So I'm amazed that you could find these comics over there at all!!" (p.2).

But seriously folks (editorial). The editorial presents a case for the relevance of rock to young people, and a nostalgic recollection of how *BigO* started.

Cool as Ice. Listings of alternative charts for indie music, comics and dance music.

The Buzz. Local and foreign news related to the independent music scene, including a tongue-in-cheek Jimi Hendrix column, where the legendary guitarist provides advice from beyond the grave.

Frankie Says. An article about artistic licence versus censorship, which is accompanied by a cartoon by Eric Khoo, of someone dressed in a suit and tie drinking out a toilet bowl from a straw, captioned 'Welcome to the '90s'.

"Get off your butt and get started". An anonymous article which critically discusses the need for musicians from new local bands to take the initiative in seeking out performance opportunities for themselves.

Major articles
Local Heroes. This marked *BigO*'s fifth anniversary, marked by nine full pages of photographs of "local heroes", comprising local indie musicians and others in the Arts (the band IGTA, disc jockey Chris Ho, punk musician Francis Frightful, comic artist/filmmaker Eric Khoo, drummer Abdul Nizam, musician Patrick Ch'ng, musician Joe Ng, food writer/journalist Violet Oon, performance artist Tang Da Wu, and prefaced with these words, "These are not ordinary people. They

represent individualism. They are *BigO* people. People who want to live before they get old".

Chris Ho fights for his right to party. The cover story includes an interview with, and profile of, Chris Ho, along with reports and interviews of the alternative music scene by Chris Ho himself from a holiday in Los Angeles, with provocative/cheeky photographs (the American punk rock band, Red Hot Chilli Peppers posing comically in their underwear).

Making new waves. This article focuses on the restructuring of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation to provide more variety on the radio (as a result to the challenge by an Indonesian station). It includes interviews with the head of programming for all the channels, and various disc jockeys.

Glory Days. This is a "retrospective" of the indie scene, with two pages of photographs from earlier concerts, and six pages reprinting past editorials from *BigO*, with a commentary.

Reviews. Finally, the issue contains several pages of album reviews and concert. This includes an eclectic three-page section on classical music; a section on new hi-fidelity music equipment; a Retro section (an article on Neil Young); a Blues section; cinema and video reviews (including a news item on the censorship of a Wayne Wang movie).

Comics. The comics section reviews several overseas comics, and contains a two-page coloured comic "Education 1990" by Eric Khoo, of a sexually perverse female school teacher.

Our Favourite Shop. This contains a variety of brief personal advertisements for, among other things, selling/buying indie music, local demos, "musicians wanted", a guitar.

Oct.: 58	Thrash metal: music for the alienated (L)
Nov.: 59	IGTA (L)

1991

March: 63	Eric Khoo (L)
June: 66	Banned in the USA (censorship of rock in the USA). See illustration.
July: 67	Making music (L)
Oct.: 70	Bootlegs: A consumer guide to rare recordings
Nov.: 71	Rock to riches: Malay rockers who made it (L)
Dec.: 72	Albums of the year (Mixed)

1992

Jan.: 73	Guns 'n' Roses/ Best local unsigned bands (L)
Feb.: 74	Box sets you must buy/ New School Rock II: the next wave of Singapore rock (L)
March: 75	Nirvana/ Kurt Cobain
April: 76	Cyberpunk
May: 77	Bored in the Badlands
June: 78	Ride: a new wave of British invasion
July: 79	The Black Sun (L)
Aug.: 80	Ultimate guide to rock terms
Sept.: 81	Electroplasm: the digital underground (L)
Oct.: 82	Peter Bagge (cartoonist) cover
Nov.:83	Reissues/ Best buys of 1992

1993

Jan.: 85	Band of the year: Sonic Youth
Feb.: 86	Big Ugly Mouth (Henry Rollins on slamdancing ban)
March: 87	*BigO*'s guide to year's best music laser discs
April: 88	Lion City hardcore (L)
June: 90	Maria McKee
July: 91	The Pagans (L)
Sept.:93	Before he got old/ Local riot grrrls/ the Watchmen (L)
Oct.:94	Phil Collins

1994

Jan.: 97	Fugazi live in Singapore
Feb.: 98	Liz Phair: Talkin' bout her generation
March: 99	Sting bringing on the night in Singapore
April: 100	Depeche Mode Live/ 100 anniversary issue

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See, Martyn. Founder of *the Reckoning* fanzine and freelance journalist. 7 January 1993.

Othman, Zulkifli. Musician, writer and organiser of Lion City Hardcore recording project. 18 January 1993.

Menon, Suresh. Disc jockey and programming head of Singapore Broadcasting Corporation's Perfect 10. 25 January 1993.

Tan, Stephen. Editor, *BigO*. 3 January 1993.

Yeo, Eric. Managing Director, Polygram Records (Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia). 18 December 1992.

Before I Get Old 1990–93

The following is a list of the main articles, concert reviews, cartoons and interviews from *BigO* cited in this thesis. The list is organised by year, and then month, and subsequently in the page order in which they appear. Articles and sections with no authors were unaccredited by the magazine. References without inverted commas are regular sections of the magazine. Letters printed in the magazine are cited with the letter writer's name, if provided, and issue.

1990

September

Letter, Peter Bagge, USA: 2.

Philip Cheah, "But seriously folks: 3.

David Joseph and Daniel Zheng, "Local heroes": 6–8; 10–11; 14–15; 18– 19; 22.

Philip Cheah, "Oddfellows start work on first album": 8.

——, "A decade of decadence?": 20.

A. N. Onn, "Get off your butt and get started": 21.

Philip Cheah, "Chris Ho fights for this right to party": 26–7.

Philip Cheah and Lyn Tan, "Making new waves: SBC Radio serves up some
    new ideas": 32–5.

October

Philip Cheah, "By all means necessary": 4.

Various illustrators, "Stop AIDs": 6–7; 10–11; 13–14; 20.

A.N. Onn, "Latex sex": 21.

Philip Cheah, Nazir Hussain and Martyn See, "Thrash metal: music for the
    alienated": 22–7.

Joe Ng, "Believing in a freaky style": 28–9.

November

Letter, K.L. Ho: 2.

Philip Cheah, "Fanzine culture": 5.

Eric Khoo, Michael Ng, Dicky Lim and Nicholas Why, "Stop Saddam": 7–9; 12–13.

Joe C. Pereira, "Don't call us bandboys!": 26–31.

Redmund Law, "Ablazed at the Substation": 34–5.

1991

March

Sudhir Menon, "Choice of being BBC or Perfect 10": 16.

C. T. Lim, "Vacancy for a hero": 17.

Stephen Tan, "Attitude with a beat": 17.

Sandi Tan and Jasmine Ng, "Winds of change: the Singapore Film Festival and glasnost movies": 74–7.

Valerie Tan, "The thing about 'Shared Values'": 96.

June

Letter, "I am an adult": 12.

Philip Cheah, "At the cutting edge: the music censorship issue": 34–41.

"The dream lives on: Dylan's bootleg series a must for fans": 56–8.

Philip Cheah, "The stuff of legends": 68.

Joseph C. Pereira, "Jamming with Jimi: the man who lived to play…with anyone and everyone": 70–71.

July

Jacque Chong and Martyn See, "Hardcore special: thrash concert": 4–9.

Philip Cheah, "More exposure not less": 12.

——, "Making music": 38–43.

October

Martyn See,"What one young writer thinks": 6–9.

Philip Cheah, "That gonzo in Singapore: 16.

Nazir Husain, "Days of being wild": 10–12.

Michael Cheah and Philip Cheah. "These boots are made for playing": 36–43.

Neo Kim Seng, "Altered states: a gathering of alternative artists from
 Malaysia": 104–5.

November

Philip Cheah, "Waiting for the world": 8.

Michael Cheah, "Revenge of the English language": 9, 93.

Adrian Ho, "Beatniks in Singapore: convincing demo album from Nunsex": 19.

"Calling all bands": 20–21.

Nazir Husain, Azman Siraj and Zulkifli Shamsudin, "Rock to riches: making it
 in the Malay rock scene": 26–32; 74–5.

Nazir Husain, Interview with Jimmy Wee, managing director of Pony Canyon,
 "Wake up Singapore": 34–5.

Anthony Tan, Concert review, "At the Village": 49.

Christopher S.J. Ong. (Comic and book review), "Johnny saves the day": 80.

December

Martyn See, (Concert review) "Young and ready": 92–3.

1992

January

Letter, "More Indies": 8.

Philip Cheah, "Made in Singapore": 9.

Patrick Chng, "10 Best unsigned bands": 24–5.

Anthony Tan, "Don"t let us be misunderstood": 42–3.

Christopher Ong, "Hope and fear: the stuff of dreams": 80.

February

Letter, "New School Rock ruckus", Woo Marn Huong: 4.

Philip Cheah, "The language of rock 'n' roll": 6.

Nazir Husain, Harold Seah and Cyril Ng, "The next wave of local rock: making a success of New School Rock II": 26–34; 77.

March

Letter, Zulkifli Othman: 6.

Martyn See, "Smells like Teen Spirit": 7.

Christopher Ong, "Kevin Matthews: talking about the state he's in": 24–5.

Lim Cheng Tju, "New School Rock II: the next wave of local rock continues": 30–33.

Henry Minjoot, Stephen Tan, Philip Cheah and Michael Cheah, "Out of reach": 34–7; 57.

Patrick Chng, Interview with Kurt Cobain, "Thank heaven for Nirvana": 40–44.

Nazir Husain, "Hanging loose with Nirvana": 44–5.

April

Letter, Hussein Mohd. Noor, "Not enough hardcore": 4.

Letters page, Patrick Ch'ng, (editorial reply): 4.

Martyn See, "The honest voice of rock": 7.

May

Letter, Silent Mass, "Local Musings": 5.

Letter, Stephen J.: 6.

Letter, Kevin Matthews: 6.

Martyn See, "The times, they're a-changing": 7.

June

StephenTan, "The decline of Western civilsation [sic]: part III—the rap years": 6.

July

Letter, P. Anno Leprae O: 6.

Lim Cheng Tju, "Letter from the front line": 8.

"To cut or not to cut: a hairy episode": 14.

August

Christopher S. J. Ong, "Carry On": 12.

Philip Cheah, "SBC Radio to relax restricting songs: 13.

Ang Choon Kiat, Lee Kok Yong, Vince Teo, Philip Cheah and Adrian Ho,

"(Almost) everything you wanted to know about rock slang but were

too hung up to ask": 26–31.

Philip Cheah, (concert review), "World Trade Centre rock venue grows": 48.

Zulkifli Othman, (concert review), "Moshing Momentum": 49.

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Eric Khoo (cartoon), "The Secret origin of the strangest tool of all time! Is he

child or condom or is he both?": 69–70; 72–3.

September

Nazir Husain, Christopher Ong, Martyn See, Anthony Tan and Philip Cheah,

"Us and Them: ripping apart the indie music scene": 40–45.

October

Zulkifli Othman, "Positive hardcore": ii–iii.

Claire Tham, "The day the music died...": 13.

"New Singapore Indie Label Releases": 21.

Nazir Husain, Eric Khoo and Philip Cheah, "Unprotected sex: lust or life?": 30–

35.

Johnny Lau, Comic, MITA. 94–7.

November

Michael Cheah, "One bad apple" : 15.

Yit Teh, "Unity Songs": 38–9.

Johnny Lau, "MITA 3: the mouth": 96.

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1993

January

Letter, Adrian Song: 12.

Kevin Matthews, "Keeping the faith": 13.

"Nice Guy (Doctor Abortion: part 3)": 15–18.

February

Letters on "The great indie debate": 20

Jason Tan: 20.

The Silent Mass: 21.

Dennis Yiu: 21.

Stephen Tan, Interview, Henry Rollins, "Big Ugly Mouth": 44–7.

March

Ray Kee, "Spicing up the R(A) Rating": 9; 74.

April

Patrick Ch'ng, "A muted howl": 13.

Zulkifli Othman, Yit Teh and Joe Kidd, "Lion city hardcore: together at last":
    26–31.

June

Claire Tham, "Seduction of the innocent?": 80; 76.

July

C.T. Lim and Lee Kok Yong, Interview, "The Pagans": 44–7.

John Lent, "The view from the outside": 63–5.

"Comics Hell": 66–70.

"Riot": 71–2.

September

Michael Cheah, "Let's get pretentious: the art of growing old and relevant in
    rock": 12–13.

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Teh Yit Arn, "Lion city collective opening its doors: is this the next shot in the
    arm the local music scene is waiting for?": 15.

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    37–8.

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October

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December

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