CHAPTER ONE

SONIC HISTORIES IN A SOUTHEAST ASIAN CONTEXT

Bart Barendregt

A History of the Popular

This is a compilation of papers written at various points over the last decade. Some of the chapters were first presented in 2003, as drafts at the workshop ‘Southeast Asian Pop Music in a Comparative Perspective’, organized by the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV). Another set of papers has been selected from contributions to a launch event in early 2011 hosted by NWO (The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) for the funded research project ‘Articulation of Modernity’. This project analyses the interplay between the production of popular music, shifting ideas of the modern and, in its aftermath, processes of social differentiation in twentieth-century Southeast Asia.¹ This event, a workshop held in Jakarta under the title And the Beat Goes On..., was a first venture into what has become the main tenet of our research programme: rewriting Southeast Asia’s twentieth century from the perspective of popular music makers, the entertainment industry and its ever changing audiences. Auditory history is also central to this volume. I want to thank all of those who have been involved in the above-mentioned meetings, and also those whose contributions did not ultimately find their way into this volume. This was certainly not due to a lack of insight or engagement with the issues, but rather the fact that they were addressing topics that differed from the main focus of this volume or had less emphasis on long-term transformations.

The study of the popular is vulnerable to a common pitfall; that is to say, more often than not such scholarship is obsessed with the contemporary, the now spectacular, the hip and the novel, at the cost of ignoring the very historical dimensions of such phenomena. Popular music studies

¹ Parts of this introductory chapter are inspired by the initial proposal written for this research project, which was co-authored with Peter Keppy and commented upon by Henk Schulte Nordholt and Patricia Spyer. I am grateful to all three for letting me make use of their thoughts.
have been no exception, with the majority adopting a synchronic approach and dealing with the present state of things (Hamm 2004). While targeting historical depth here, we realize that the essays presented in this volume provide a necessarily incomplete view of how popular music and associated lifestyles in insular Southeast Asia have developed over the past century. Our project is ambitious in scope; it attempts to cover a whole century of music, starting from the first Southeast Asian recordings made in 1902/1903, all the way through to the mid-2000s. At the same time, it tries to offer a glimpse of the current state of the entertainment industry in part of the region (more on the choice and demarcation of the region below). But then, this book promises only a start and the appearance of more historically oriented analyses of Southeast Asian popular music are anticipated in the coming years.

We situate Southeast Asian popular music here in specific socio-historical settings, hoping that a focus on popular culture and history may shed light on how some people in a particular part of the world have been witnessing the emergence of all things modern. We are obviously not the first to do so, although our very focus on the modern in relation to the popular and new social formations may be perceived as innovative.²

A historical approach to popular culture has been manifest ever since the ‘cultural turn’ in history,³ an interest which may be traced to early publications such as those of Hobsbawm (1959) on the Jazz Scene, its publics and the larger economy the music was part of. His and other works break with the ‘drum and trumpet’ history then current. They dismiss its sole focus on the political and the economic while neglecting culture, and leaving out ordinary people altogether. In its stead, a ‘history of below’ (cf. Samuel 1981) is advocated that prioritizes the local rather than the national, prefers the domestic over the public and the popular over the state. Clearly, an interest in popular culture and history also has its parallels, even forebears, in other disciplines such as sociology, art history, anthropology and literature studies, and may be said to have culminated in the early 1960s into the new field of ‘cultural studies’. Hogart, Thompson

---

² At this stage it is necessary to recognize the pioneering work of a number of historians working on the region itself, including the likes of William Frederick (1982) and especially Craig Lockard’s (1998) Dance of life. Like the present work, Lockard targets a comprehensive view of the region that, in fact, is even more inclusive than ours here. However, his work specifically addresses cultural politics and is, overall, more concerned with artists and producers than with audiences and consumers, or the wider industry they are both shaping and shaped by.

³ See Burke (2004) for an overview.