The 1920s are known worldwide as the Roaring Twenties or Jazz Age. It is a period in between the great world wars when novel forms of commercially driven entertainment emerged, such as the dance hall, recorded music and film, magazines and serial novels, and when radio broadcasting was introduced. Southeast Asia was no exception.

Southeast Asia’s Jazz Age tells a story of a vibrant cultural interaction and social transformation. Popular dance music, such as the Charleston, the foxtrot, tango, and, later, the rumba, the venues and its audiences evoked pleasure as much as debate and controversy. Modern popular dance music led people to question and reconstruct boundaries of race, class, national identity, gender, and the modern.

Southeast Asians experimented with music, innovating existing local genres, making the 1920s and 1930s a period of dynamic cultural change. Almost as a rule in the region, popular music was married to different forms of vernacular theatre. The two started to part company during the almost simultaneous expansion of the phonographic industry, radio broadcasting and the advent of sound film (the ‘talkies’) in the late 1920s.

This chapter focuses on three themes that highlight the relationship between popular music and society during Southeast Asia’s Jazz Age: the record industry, the rise of female stars and fandom, and the link between race, nationalism, and popular music. When Japan invaded the region in December 1941, and within a few months controlled large parts of the area, these dynamic developments in the realm of popular music were suspended for the next four years.
New markets

By the turn of the twentieth century, American, and European record companies had recognized the commercial prospects of recording local music in Southeast Asia for local markets. From Burma to Indonesia, local forms of theatre offered a testing ground for these first commercial recordings. In 1903, on the first phonographic recording expedition for the Gramophone Company in Asia, recording engineer Fred Gaisberg noted on a trip to Rangoon, Burma, and his encounter with local artists:

These bright people have an entertainment called a *zat*. The basis of the drama, which is interspersed with songs and ballet, is the age-old story of a prince and princess. [...] Poe Sein was the most popular actor [...]. His opera company travelled up and down the Irrawaddy River in their own barge and paddle-steamer, something like the show-boat troupes of the Mississippi.

Within a few years, many recording expeditions by different companies followed, documenting songs, scenes like comic dialogues taken from Southeast Asian forms of vernacular theatre, such as the Burmese *zat*, Malay opera and the Hispano-Filipino *zarzuela*. This symbiosis between vernacular theatre and the foreign gramophone industry formed the basis for the Southeast Asian entertainment industry to blossom in the 1920s.

The local appetite for recorded music gramophones cannot be understood without acknowledging the profound economic changes that occurred between the late nineteenth century and 1930. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the colonial economies opened up for private capital. As a result, the commercial agricultural sector expanded, and means of transportation and infrastructure improved alongside. Modern shipping and new railroad networks linked the rural hinterlands of peninsular Malaya, Indonesia, and the Philippines to the coastal trade entrepôts. Between 1900 and 1930, up to the Great
Depression, the colonial economies boomed. Trade volumes increased, particularly of commercial crops like sugar. Migrant (plantation) workers flowed from excess labour areas in China, India, and Java to the estates in Sumatra, mainland Malaya, and the Straits Settlements. The expanding colonial bureaucracies offered new employment opportunities for the native population. The urban-based commerce and service sector expanded as well. Western-style education became available for ‘natives’, although not at all levels and certainly not at a similar pace in all colonies. As a result of these developments, a Western-educated middle class of government officials, teachers, lawyers, journalists, petty traders, and small-scale industrialists emerged. This emerging middle class covered the political spectrum, from nationalists actively striving for emancipation and independence to people adhering to the colonial status quo. Despite racial divides, economic inequalities, and differences in political loyalties, this group shared a new consumer-oriented lifestyle that set them apart from members of the working class. Their excess income made it possible to subscribe to local newspapers and indulge in modern-style consumerism of fashion, music, dance, and to own new consumer items, such as the gramophone player and a radio set.

When Fred Gaisberg and the other American and European recording engineers that followed in his footsteps set foot on Southeast Asian soil, they knew little about local music and theatre. They had to rely on local intermediaries from the urban middle class, who could introduce them to performers and inform them about upcoming performances. In Thailand, colonial Indonesia, the Straits Settlements, and Malaya, these brokers were often locally based European department store owners or local Chinese shop owners, who were able to communicate in English or another European language. Some of them became local agents for the record companies, others subsidiaries recruiting and recording local musicians. The agents sold gramophone players and related equipment from discs to needles. For many an agent, the music industry was initially a
side-line. For instance, between 1905 and 1910, the sole agent for German record company Odeon in Singapore was the jeweller Levy Hermanos. Department store Robinson & Co, also operating from Singapore and the sole agent for the Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd., was probably responsible for selling the first batch of Malay music recorded by Fred Gaisberg in 1903. In 1906, German record company Beka embarked on a recording ‘expedition’ in Singapore and Batavia, gaining a foothold in Singapore in 1907 through department store Katz Bros. Ltd. In 1903, *peranakan* Chinese shop owner Tio Tek Hong, whose core retail business was hunting equipment, became sole agent for German record company Odeon in Batavia. One year later, he started releasing records under his own name as Odeon’s subsidiary, Tio Tek Hong Records. He was the first to do so in colonial Indonesia. Around 1903, with the aid of local merchant Kee Chiang & Sons in Bangkok, the British Gramophone Company Ltd. (His Master’s Voice, HMV) recorded and released what is believed to have been the first Siamese records. In 1908, a number of Filipino artists from the Hispano-Filipino *zarzuela* stage, including the famous singer-actress Maria Carpena, took part in a recording session in Manila for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Several of these recordings are songs taken from the Tagalog *zarzuela* play *Walang Sugat* (‘No wound’) written in 1902 by Filipino playwright Severino Reyes. Unlike other artists in surrounding colonies, Filipinos also travelled to the United States to record. One of these earliest known recordings is ‘La Sevillana’, performed by Banda De La Filipina for Victor’s rival in the recording business, Edison, and recorded in New York in 1909.

To feed the appetite for locally recorded homegrown music and theatre plays, the record companies published catalogues for potential clientele in Southeast Asia in the local vernacular, in Malay, Thai, and Hokkien. Local agents and subsidiaries of the foreign record companies also advertised in the newspapers for newly imported and locally recorded songs. Some also offered published song lyric albums and sheet music of local popular music. These printed sources reveal two things. First, that the record
companies perceived different markets in terms of musical taste and audiences, and second, that a stylistically hybrid popular music that crossed borders was in the making. For example, one rare, surviving Odeon gramophone record catalogue, probably published in 1912, indicates that this German company aimed at non-European audiences in colonial Indonesia, Malaya, and the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, and Malacca). The music styles that are represented in this catalogue are hybrid, but the genres are fixed according to the (alleged) tastes of different ethnic groups, including Chinese migrants and their ethnically mixed offspring. ‘Chinese music’ is listed separately in Chinese characters from the hybrid music produced and consumed by locally rooted Chinese communities (peranakan or baba). An example of the latter is gambang kromong, with origins in the peranakan Chinese community of Batavia (Jakarta). Another selection of songs classified under ‘Singapore Malaju records’ includes kroncong, a distinct style of string music with origins in Indonesia, and stambul, derived from a form of Malay opera also with roots in Indonesia. We also find dondang sayang, a distinct musical style popular among Malay-speaking peranakan Chinese on both sides of the Straits of Malacca. This ethnic genre classification seems to have been modelled after the ‘race records’ current in the American record industry, designed to cater for specific ethnic groups as niche markets.

In the early 1930s, and despite the global economic crisis, the gramophone industry continued to expand in Southeast Asia. A separation between vernacular theatre and a modern popular music industry catering for local audiences became more pronounced. For example, in 1934, record company His Master's Voice in Singapore secured the services of a young man of Minangkabau origin from West Sumatra, named Zubir Said. Thirty years later, he would be known as the composer of Singapore’s national anthem. As many of the popular musicians at that time, Said had first worked as a musician in theatres, where his music accompanied silent movies. His favourite instrument was the violin. Later, he joined an itinerant kroncong band that also
performed dondang sayang. Kroncong was a mix of Western and native music with origins in nineteenth-century Batavia. In the 1920s and 1930s, it grew into the most popular genre in the Malay world. In Singapore, Said became a member of a bangsawan (Malay opera) troupe that performed at the Happy Valley Park, one of the three big amusement parks in the city. In multi-ethnic
Singapore, Said was exposed to music that was entirely novel to him: Indian and Chinese music, and Dutch songs. When the Filipino band leader of the Malay opera troupe left, Said took his place. From there, he moved on from studio recording artist for HMV to recording supervisor and later to the position of talent scout. He personally assessed the vocal qualities of *kroncong* singers in Jakarta, Surabaya, Medan, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur and invited them to record for HMV in Jakarta and Singapore. One of these musical talents was a young man from Surabaya named Said Abdullah.

Said Abdullah Bamazham, of Indonesian-Arab descent, fused local styles such as *kroncong* with foreign styles such as syncopated jazz, rumba, Hawaiian music, tango and Arab *gambus* (lute). Through his gramophone recordings for HMV and, later, Canary, his fame spread beyond Java, into Sumatra and Singapore. In addition to his musical talent and popularity, Abdullah is worth mentioning here for two more reasons. First, he used his songs to address pressing social issues. In ‘Semangat Baroe’ (‘New Spirit’), for instance, he describes the anxiety with modern life. In another song, Abdullah’s interpretation of the tango, the issue of widespread unemployment, the outcome of the Economic Depression, is raised.

Abdullah is probably the first popular music artist in colonial Indonesia who publicly expressed his sympathy with Indonesian nationalism in commercially recorded songs. For example, his song ‘Berani Kerna Benar’ (‘Courageous because I’m right’) released by HMV in late 1936, was prohibited by the Dutch authorities in 1937 for its subversive content. No copies of this banned recorded song are known to have survived. In 1936, Abdullah claimed to have recorded around 150 songs. Among these recordings were several duets with female stars who had carved out a recording career for themselves.

In the mid-1930s, we see another novel development in the realm of popular music in the Malay world: HMV recorded local interpretations of Arabic-Islamic music and Islamic religious instruction performed by local Islamic religious experts and
orchestras from the local Arab-Indo community. The Arab genres recorded included *qasidah*, *masri*, and *nasyid*, next to European marches with Arabic lyrics. These records mark the beginning of an early Southeast Asian Islamic popular music. Similar developments would reoccur in the 1980s, with a revival of Islamic pop music in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia (see Chapters 3 and 4).

**The rise of female stars and fandom**

The marriage between the commercial recording industry and modern local vernacular theatre gave birth to two closely related novel social phenomena: female stardom and fandom. In the
1920s, singer-actresses started to appear in public, not only in theatres, but also on gramophone records and in the print press, and, in the 1930s, on the radio and the film screen. We are best informed about developments in the Malay world and the Philippines. In colonial Indonesia and Malaya, a brand-new stock of ‘Misses’ appeared, ‘Miss’ being a modern and cosmopolitan designation of the new female star. These women were young Eurasian, *peranakan* Chinese, and native Indonesian singer-actresses, many with a background in Malay opera. In the 1920s Philippines, Filipina vaudevillians were a novelty. Vaudeville was an eclectic form of theatre offering music, dance, short plays (from condensed Italian operas to vernacular comedies), acrobatics or even sports exhibitions. Some of the vaudevillians were musically educated and experienced artists of the Hispano-Filipino *zarzuela* stage who moved seamlessly from one stage to another; others were teenagers without any prior stage experience or musical training.

In colonial Indonesia and Malaya, a pioneering example of this new female stardom was Miss Riboet, a Malay opera star of humble Javanese origins who launched her career in 1925. Riboet’s assets were her versatility in dancing and singing. Her topical singing (*dongengan*) in the Malay verse tradition of *pantun* and *syair* became her trademark drawing mass audiences. She would improvise in verse, sardonically commenting on daily social affairs. This novelty was highly appreciated by a socially diverse audience of *peranakan* Chinese, Eurasians, and native Indonesians, many of them belonging to the middle class. Between 1927 and 1932, Miss Riboet recorded on gramophone for German record company Beka. Her song repertoire reveals a broad range of sources: *kroncong*, Arabic, and Turkish genres, *peranakan* Chinese music, Javanese and Dutch folk songs, and Malay songs current in Sumatra and the Straits Settlements. Gramophone records and film were among Riboet’s main sources of inspiration for her dancing, singing, and acting style. To keep up with the fad of the times and modernity, her band was advertised as a jazz band. Between 1925 and 1941, Riboet
staged around 350 different light opera plays in what must have been a dazzlingly, yet difficult to estimate, great number of performances spanning almost two decades. She performed in the main cities of the Netherlands East Indies, in the Federated Malay States, the Straits Settlements, Borneo, and even Manila.

There were people who associated Malay opera and Filipino vaudeville with vulgar entertainment, loose morals, and cultural erosion. At the same time, a large group of mostly, but not exclusively, male spectators developed into devotees of vernacular theatre, its music and performers. Fandom was enhanced as female singers appeared on stage, on gramophone records, in the newspapers, in radio broadcasts and, eventually, also in film. As music travelled across national boundaries by gramophone record and radio broadcast, transnational fandom was created. A good example is Filipina singer Priscilla Aristonas, a teenager in the 1930s, who started working for Radio Manila. She received fan mail from the Straits Settlements, India, and Burma, written by males from all ethnic groups, who were delighted with her renderings of American jazz and other popular Anglo-Saxon songs.

In addition to radio, the other media technology that gave rise to female stardom and fandom was cinematography. With the transformation of silent film to ‘talkies’, cinema theatres mushroomed in urban Southeast Asia in the 1930s. Moreover, local business entrepreneurs took artistic as well as financial interest in the local film industry. Female stars of the theatrical stage and popular singers entered the local film studios that were established in the late 1920s and 1930s. Some of these artists would continue to straddle theatre and film. In the Philippines, vaudevillian Elisabeth Cooper, known as ‘Dimples’, entered the local cinematographic stage in 1926. Her being kissed on-screen by co-star Luis Tuason aroused controversy and enhanced her fandom in the Philippines. Indonesia’s first female film star, singer-actress Roekiyah, appeared in the locally produced blockbuster *Terang Boelan* (‘Full Moon’) in 1937. The film and its eponymous title song were a hit in colonial Indonesia, the
Straits Settlements, and mainland Malaya. Many decades later the popular film song proved the basis for a cultural heritage controversy between Malaysia and Indonesia over the origins of the Malaysian anthem *Negaraku*, its melody believed to have been inspired by the song *Terang Bulan*. This dispute reveals conflicting cultural nationalisms as well as tensions between popular and ‘serious’ music.

Fandom also expressed itself in active participation in modern popular culture. For example, in the Straits Settlements, *peranakan* Chinese established amateur musical and theatrical associations with modern cosmopolitan and Anglo-American-sounding names, such as the Moonlight Minstrels, Merrilads, and Penang Chinese Jazz Lads. The theatrical repertoire, however, consisted of Chinese plays, Malay opera pieces, and modern popular music for social dancing: *kroncong* and jazz. Proceeds from performances were often reserved for the purpose of charity. The groups performed at various social occasions: Chinese
religious festivals, and private celebrations from anniversaries to weddings organized by wealthy Chinese businessmen. The Sino-Malay print press greatly contributed to the cultivation of stardom and fandom by publishing the lyrics of popular kroncong and dondang sayang songs, and reporting on live performances and the hugely popular song contests.

**Jazz, race, and nationalism**

In the Netherlands East Indies, jazz was certainly perceived as something modern and cosmopolitan. But, unlike the Philippines, it was not seen as something exclusively or necessarily American. Due to the many professional Filipino artists who toured with vaudeville troops and itinerant Malay opera groups in the Netherlands East Indies and Malaya since the early twentieth century, jazz became strongly associated with Filipinos, rather than with (Afro-)Americans. Most Filipino professional musicians had a background in the cosmopolitan urban cultural environment in the Philippines itself. This urban culture was rooted as much in modern American popular entertainment as in a Hispano-Filipino theatrical culture of the late nineteenth century. In the Netherlands East Indies, ‘Manilla Jazz’ was a household term referring to either a jazz-type musical genre performed by Filipinos or simply a Filipino band. In both cases, the term enhanced the stereotype of Filipinos as ‘natural’ jazz musicians. Apparently, Europeans in the Netherlands East Indies loved to impersonate them at the popular masquerade balls.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, Filipinos had crossed colonial borders seeking a living in the urban harbour cities of Southeast Asia and coastal China. Music was one of their trades. In the Straits Settlements and in, for example, Medan, North Sumatra, Filipino funeral and municipal town bands built a sound reputation among the wealthy peranakan Chinese and European communities. Filipinos also specialized in jazz-staffed orchestras of international passenger lines, restaurants, theatre, and dance
Illustration 4  Two Europeans dressed Filipino-style representing ‘Manila Jazz’, Indonesia, c. 1920s

KITLV collection
halls across Asia. They established private music schools, and, as early as 1904, Filipinos are mentioned in relation to Malay opera. In the 1920s, it was common for members of itinerant Hispano-Filipino vaudeville troupes to seek employment with Malay opera companies as dancers, singers, musicians, and as orchestra leaders. It is thus not surprising that, in 1931, Malay opera star Miss Riboet proudly announced the inclusion of a ‘Manila Cabaret’ in her show. In Singapore, musically literate Filipinos often directed the multi-ethnic orchestras of Malay opera companies. Peranakan Chinese theatre owners, Malay musicians, and actors held them in high esteem for their musical literacy, professionalism, and skills. This Filipino musical literacy can be largely explained by the musical training that was part of the Christian instruction that many Filipinos had received in their homeland since their childhood. This literacy is also witnessed in the corpus of largely unearthed music of Filipino composers, including popular genres, published on sheet in the 1910s into the 1930s. Prominent poets often wrote the lyrics, either in Spanish or one of the Filipino dialects, linking popular music with literature and the print press. This Filipino music in print appears to have no equivalent in other parts of Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, only a small group from the middle and upper classes had access to jazz and jazz-related styles through gramophone recordings and live performances of touring Hawaiian, Filipino, American, British, and Australian vaudeville artists. Artists presented their own interpretations of jazz or its precursor, the syncopated ragtime music, the basis of a number of modern dances such as the foxtrot. Hawaiian vaudeville troupes are a good example. In the late 1910s, the first Hawaiian dance and music troupe appeared on the Southeast Asian horizon. The Hawaiians moved within the parameters of vaudeville. Hawaiian music itself was a hybrid product of Austrian waltzes, military marches, Christian hymns, and native Hawaiian music that, in the 1910s, was developing under the influence of Afro-American syncopated music and, later, jazz. Ragtime was a musical style with origins in military march music and Afro-American
syncopated rhythms. In the 1910s, this was the style that lay at the basis of the modern dances like the one-step, two-step, foxtrot, and Charleston, and was one of the main sources of what, after 1917, came to be widely known as ‘jazz’. In 1919, ukulele and mandolin virtuoso, recording artist, and business entrepreneur Ernest Kaai from Honolulu was the first Hawaiian artist to tour Southeast Asia. He would return several times throughout the 1920s. The novel sounds created with the steel guitar and ukulele, the accompanying hula dances, Kaai’s interpretations of popular jazz songs, the lightning effects, costumes, and settings created a Hawaiian craze in Burma, Malaya, and Indonesia in the early twenties that would last way into the 1930s. Local ensembles would incorporate the Hawaiian guitar into their musical repertoires. In the Philippines, a local industry of handcrafted ukuleles developed.

In the 1910s and 1920s, Filipinos experimenting with and recording Afro-American and Hispano-Filipino music was the rule rather than an exception. One of those artists who engaged in this musical mixing and interpreting was Luis Borromeo, dubbed the Filipino ‘King of Jazz’. His active professional career took off on the American vaudeville stage and would span from 1915 to 1941. Throughout his vaudevillian career in the United States, Luis employed an on- and off-stage image. On-stage he appeared as a ‘yellow-face act’, an orientalist Chinese act. Off-stage, however, Borromeo took pride in being a Filipino and explicitly advocated Philippine independence. In 1921, he returned to the Philippines, toured the islands intensively performing and bringing provincial talent to Manila pioneering a novel localized vaudeville that would turn immensely popular in the 1920s.

The ‘jazz’ produced by Borromeo was ragtime, and this was common practice among his compatriots. Sheet music published in this period reveals that many Filipino composers, some associated with classical music and Spanish theatre, experimented with modern dance music and Hispano-Filipino genres such as *kundiman*. They created ‘himno-one-step’, ‘Filipino foxtrot’, ‘tango-foxtrot’, and ‘Filipino tango-foxtrots’. For example, in 1918,
Benito Trapaga composed and published a ‘nuevo foxtrot’ titled ‘Hispano-Filipino’. By the mid-1920s, he had become an accomplished phonographic recording artist for Parlophone, a German company. In 1924, the production of local popular hybrid dance music gained momentum. That year, department store Becks at the Escolta, Manila's main shopping street, started advertising for new ‘Filipino Dance Records’. This included foxtrots, one-steps, and waltzes, all created by respected Filipino composers such as Francisco Santiago, Jose Estella, Juan Silos, and several others. These composers have been strongly associated with European classical music and music for zarzuela, and are generally credited for having revived an interest in Filipino native music, in particular the kundiman genre. Their contribution to Filipino popular dance music remains underrated, again illustrating the strained relationship between the popular and the serious.

A small but influential group of Filipino intellectuals and nationalists increasingly expressed their worries about the burgeoning popular culture that came in the wake of the American presence in the Philippines that had begun in 1898. Anxiety about the alien and about modernity peaked during the Great War when a moral panic swept the islands. The United States refused to grant the Philippines unconditional independence. In response, modern dance and music, jazz, and vaudeville, came under vehement attack from Filipino cultural purists, cultural nationalists, and moralists. This turned into a moral crusade against dance halls (see box 2) and in some provinces even led to legislation prohibiting Filipinas to bob their hair. Sections of the elite genuinely believed that Filipino cultural traditions, particular those that were the product of centuries of Spanish-Filipino cultural interaction, were under threat and required protection, preservation, and promotion. An early expression of this cultural nationalist ideal was the founding of the Philippine Conservatory of Music in 1916. Jazz was not part of the curriculum.

It is within this context of upper-class resistance to hybrid music with foreign cultural elements that the modern dance music of Filipino foxtrots and one-steps became muted in
Illustration 5 Modern jazz music was also regularly associated with noise, as evidenced by this advertisement for a medicine to combat headaches. Published in periodical *D’Orient*, Netherlands East Indies, 1936

Philippine historiography. Likewise, Luis Borromeo, as self-proclaimed Filipino King of Jazz, occupies an ambiguous position within Philippine musical culture and history. His name is remembered only in association with low-brow foreign music (jazz) and ‘vulgar’ vaudeville. For similar reasons Miss Riboet holds a comparable position in Indonesian cultural historiography.

The Japanese control over large parts of Southeast Asia from December 1941 into 1945 meant a break in the cultural hybridization and commercialization of music. Japanese cultural policies were largely anti-Western and the media was censored to serve Japanese war propaganda. Jazz became highly suspicious music due to its association with American popular culture. And, due to the breakdown of international commercial shipping, the vibrant local recording music industry and scene came to a virtual standstill.
Box 1.1 Phonographic noise
During the Jazz Age, the urban soundscape changed into a cacophony of sounds from street vendors, automobiles and also gramophones. Gramophone technology was introduced in Southeast Asia at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1910s, this new audio technology was very much a novelty to most Southeast

Illustration 6 Eurasian Malay opera actor, playwright, director, singer and popular recording artist, P.W.F. Cramer, accompanied by a Malay opera leading lady (sri panggung) from Betawi (present-day Jakarta), standing next to a phonograph equipped with a giant horn, c. 1912

Odeon record catalogue, c. 1912
By courtesy of Jaap Erkelens
Asians and restricted to the happy few. In Indonesia, itinerant ‘musicians’ carried small, portable gramophones around, playing Javanese and Malay songs for a small fee. By the 1920s, the gramophone had become a more widespread consumer item among the upper and upcoming middle class. Payment in instalments put the equipment within reach of more music fans. The gramophone was more than a medium to enjoy music, as expensive models were sold as pieces of furniture. A gramophone was reported among items of a Javanese dowry and many a native office clerk had this token of wealth, upward mobility, and modernity in his home.

In the 1920s, and increasingly so in the early 1930s, local newspapers in Southeast Asia started to report on ‘nuisance’, ‘noise’ or ‘gramophone nerves’. Electrically amplified models that were much louder than mechanically driven devices were the culprits. Music radiated in all directions, day and night, disturbing people’s night rest and Muslim prayer. In 1932, in the town of Cimahi, West Java, a man was fined for playing records after ten o’clock in the evening. In 1934, the Singaporean authorities designed special legislation to deal with the noise of gramophones, pianolas (mechanical self-playing pianos) and other noise-producing devices. In 1936, a Chinese woman was penalized for having played her gramophone ‘on the five-foot path’ at her house in Singapore.

**Box 1.2 Dance halls**

The first dance halls in Southeast Asia appeared in the Philippines as early as 1902 in Caloocan, Rizal province, north of Manila and were later also found in Malaya. These social dance institutions almost exclusively catered to Filipino patrons. In 1910, John Canson, an American of Italian migrant origins and veteran of the Philippine-American war, established the Santa Ana Road House in Makati, east of Manila. The Santa Ana cabaret, as it became to be known, would become one of the largest and sophisticated establishments in Southeast Asia and attracted both Filipinos and Americans. In the colonial Philippines, the Anglo-Saxon term dance hall was interchangeably used with the Castilian *salon de baile* and the
French term *cabaret*. The latter was used for dance halls that offered performances as well as dancing. Social dancing, however, was the dance hall’s core business. People danced to modern Afro-American dances, such as the one-step, foxtrot and also the Argentinian tango. The dance hall patrons, almost exclusively men, would choose one of the many female dancers employed by the hall and pay her a small fee in exchange for a fixed dancing time duration. This phenomenon was known as ‘taxi dancing’. In the Philippines, ‘taxi dancers’ were known as *bailerinas* and they held a low social status. In the late 1910s, the Manila municipal authorities engaged in a moral crusade, leading to monitoring of dance halls and the prohibition of prostitution.

In the 1930s, dance halls and taxi dancers also appeared in the Straits Settlements and Kuala Lumpur. The Great World Amusement Park in Singapore had an open-air cabaret, where one could dance to live music with a dancing partner. Chinese associations threw so-called tea parties, which were, in fact, occasions for taxi dancing. Many of the dancers, including those in the Philippines, were hard-working women who supported extended families with their earnings from social dancing. However, a lot of these women had to endure moral disapproval and social stigmatization because of the thin line that existed between dancing and prostitution.

**Box 1.3  The modern woman**

Popular music and social dancing came together in another new social phenomenon in the 1920s and 1930s: the modern woman. In the Philippines, several role models and stereotypes featured; from the despised but popular *bailerina*, flapper – the worldwide iconic modern girl of the Jazz Age, to the beauty queen. Flapper stood for the Americanized Filipina with bobbed hair, who smoked cigarettes and indulged in jazz dancing. Short stories in print, film stars, and advertisements for consumer items such as soap, shoes, and make-up, made the image of the flapper go global. Leading Malay opera singer-actresses took flapper and American actress Norma Talmadge, star of the silent movie, as a model for their own
Illustration 7  Indonesian popular singer Dinah in modern dress and hair fashion, c. 1938. She engaged successfully in *kroncong* singing competitions in Singapore from 1937 onwards, recorded for HMV in Singapore, and appeared on radio in the Netherlands East Indies in 1940.

Postcard, Singapore, c. 1938
By courtesy of Marije Plomp
dramatic acting. Consumerism and popular culture were explicitly linked for the first time in the late 1920s, after Malay opera stars appeared in advertisements promoting consumer items. In the Philippines, flappers created confusion about gender roles, as their lifestyle questioned femininity as well as masculinity. Flappers were associated with social deviance, including loose sexual behaviour, but were never placed in the same league of the bailerina, who, by definition, had a working-class background. What was at stake, here, was how to reconcile capitalist consumerism with that of Filipina motherhood and patriotism, a debate similar to that of the position of women in relation to nationalism in Indonesia and Burma. Public debates about modern women dominated by men gained currency from 1924 onwards. In the Philippines, the discussion dealt with aspects ranging from Christian morals, fashion, like hairstyle, and women’s legal right to vote. There was also a great deal of fascination and curiosity with stardom as manifested by new female vaudevillians. In contrast to flappers, bailerinas and vaudevillians, Filipino beauty queens represented the elitist male ideal of the modern, virtuous, and patriotic Filipina, the wife and caretaker, the embodiment of the Philippine nation.