4 Doing it Digital, 1990s-2000s

Relatively affordable means for producing and distributing music have, over the last two decades, facilitated the spread of novel popular musical genres in Southeast Asia. But at their foundation lay reactive sentiments prompted by contemporary political and social issues. Experiments with ethnic pop, fusion, and world music remained popular in Southeast Asia in most of the 1990s, albeit in diverse guises. In Malaysia, ethnic music, often in tandem with nationalist policies, mostly came to stand for a revival of ‘indigenous’ (read ‘Malay’) genres such as dondang sayang, zapin, and joget. Its most popular advocates were Malaysian pop singers Noraniza Idris and Siti Nurhaliza. Both singers are reputed performers of irama Malaysia, a fusion between the more traditional styles just mentioned and an Anglo-American pop idiom. In Indonesia, regional pop songs have, similarly, remained a popular format to express ethnic sentiment, with, in particular, pop Jawa and pop Minang doing reasonably well in terms of commercial success. Online radio explains why such music genres are now also popularly consumed by Javanese or Minangkabau migrant communities abroad, in Europe, the United States and as far as Latin America. In line with postmodern preferences for mash-up, collage, and the local appropriation of globally circulating trends, fusion and especially world music have also gained some currency in the Southeast Asian pop industries. A good example of the latter is the 1993 song ‘Denpasar Moon’, which achieved great commercial success in Indonesia and across most of Southeast Asia. Based on a generic Western pop style with a prominent back beat and largely played on electronic instruments, the song incorporates sounds and musical patterns derived from various Indonesian/Asian genres, including dangdut percussion, gamelan gong-chime sounds, and melodic scales that evoke associations with Sundanese musical instruments, such as the degung or kacapi suling. The fact that the song was created by an Englishman
and interpreted by a Filipina living in Indonesia underlines the trans-national origins and appeal of the song.

**Musical revolutions: Finally indie-pendent?**

At the turn of the twenty-first century, there are more post-nationalist musical histories to be told. By far the biggest challenge to the musical status quo – read: an industry that either prefers global pop genres or national renderings such as *pop Indonesia*, rock and, increasingly again, jazz – has been a thriving trans-national youth and counterculture. Especially in Indonesia, where technological innovations of the late 1980s, together with the changing political climate since the late 1990s, resulted in a music scene its practitioners commonly refer to as the ‘alternative’ or ‘independent’ music movement, popularly nicknamed ‘indie’. Indie is a collective designation for various groups, genres, and scenes that prioritize a do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude and therefore prefer small independent or even internet-only labels (‘netlabels’). They occasionally promote a rebellious image, but not necessarily so. Although some of the bands, genres, and labels involved in the indie scene clearly predate the political changes that followed in the wake of Suharto’s fall in 1998, most of these alternative voices have only become public with the loosening of restrictions on media and public life in general after this date. Particularly local and campus radio have been instrumental in highlighting underground bands by playing demo tapes and organizing events. The popularity of online streaming radio in the early 2000s resulted in yet wider audiences. Better-known radio stations like Jakarta-based Radio Prambors, stations that habitually ran their own indie charts, picked up indie acts. With local indie musicians going digital, they soon went international. Streaming radio and social media disseminated music that no company dared to release, now with an audience that potentially reached beyond national borders.
Rather than just a musical genre, indie reflects the approach of some Western pop traditions that articulate a DIY ethos combined with the cultivation of a rebellious image. As a consequence, indie music so far has comprised a wide range of styles and genres, oscillating between ska, techno, ethnic (for example, the Palembang-based modern folk group Semakbelukar), experimental, and metal music. Southeast Asian youth have typically indigenized much of these musical cultures and provided them with new meanings and new audiences. The hardcore metal band Puppen was one of the early pioneers of Indonesia’s independent music scene for the ten years following its formation in Bandung in 1992. Puppen initially built a following with live performances at schools, universities, and at a venue located at the Saparua Street, a hot spot of the 1990s Bandung indie scene. Today, Bandung and Jakarta are still reputed as the home of a large number of punk bands. Some of these groups and associated movements are anti-capitalist oriented (for example, the Riotic Collective and, more recently, Balai Kota DIY Collective, both from Bandung). In Kuala Lumpur, the Ricecooker Shop specializes in metal and punk music. Self-produced Malaysian fanzines, such as the Aedes magazine, similarly pioneered a punk spirit from the early 1990s onwards, although the scene never became as big as in neighbouring Indonesia. Yet, it is not punk or metal, but the sound of independent Brit Pop that became dominant, with bands such as Indonesian Sheila on 7 and Cokelat among its early 2000s epigones (see box “Two Indonesian indie songs”). These bands found inspiration in particular in Brit Pop from the 1990s, which became widely available to Southeast Asian musicians and music lovers around that time thanks to pirated MP3 CDs and file sharing sites.

But even indie, with its promise of the ‘alternative’, holds contradictions, as some examples of Indonesian indie acts prove. Bandung rock band Cokelat, widely seen as pioneering the indie sound during Indonesia’s political reforms of the late 1990s, surprised both fans and the larger audience in 2006 by recording an album of nationalist evergreens, including their own hit single
‘Bendera’ (‘Flag’). The song would later become an unofficial anthem for the Indonesian UNIFIL Peace Corps in Lebanon. This case shows that an alternative culture may question the state, but seldom the nation. And while happily promoting the idea of
being alternative, indie music, as all other music genres, comes
with questions of good versus bad taste and its own innate class
contradictions. The Kangen Band from Lampung in South Suma-
tra surprised many observers with the nationwide success of their
2007 debut single ‘Tentang Aku, Kau Dan Dia’ (‘About Me, You, and
the Other’). Several musicians on the national music scene, who
(with the exception of dangdut performers) cultivate an urban and
middle-class lifestyle, voiced harsh criticism of the band’s limited
musical skills and, especially, its low-brow audience.

While, in past decades, Indonesia has seen a revival of regional
cultures, the appeal of music from what is seen as ‘peripheral
areas’ has generally been limited to local audiences, and mostly
to the lower socio-economic classes. For a group like the Kangen
Band, whose members openly acknowledge and embrace their
provincial image, to enjoy nationwide commercial success as well
as a certain degree of mainstream recognition had previously been
unheard of. Some voices in the press have framed the story of the
Kangen Band in terms of the growing assertiveness of the lower
social classes claiming their place in the national public space.

However, having started as an alternative movement to counter
the hegemony of big labels and big capital, many of the indie bands
of the first hour have now made it big themselves. Indonesian
band Effek Rumah Kaca being a case in point, but also successful
Malaysian acts such as Hujan and Bunkface have recently earned
mainstream recognition. This leads some, including anthropolo-
gist Brent Luvaas, to argue that Indonesia’s indie scene, emerging
at a moment of massive market reform, ‘has always been as much a
mode of entrepreneurship as a bastion of free expression’. Central
to his argument is the distro, referring to the global punk phenom-
emon of small, autonomous retail spaces that sell locally produced
music and clothing. Some of them even offer their own record and
fashion label. Distro cater to a young, urban, and aspiring middle
class that wishes to combine a rebellious image with affordable
good looks. The efforts of the members of the indie movement in
Indonesia to redefine themselves through music and fashion are
inseparable from the efforts of the island nation to re-brand itself
as a creative economy, Luvaas argues. Similar things can be said of neighbouring Malaysia and Singapore, although in absence of a true political reform, the indie movement has never really gained political momentum as it did in Indonesia.

Today, indie music comes with its own (online) magazines, charts, and awards. The Indonesian ICEMA awards, for instance, ‘celebrate twenty years of independent music movement’. Digitally enabled platforms, such as social network sites (MySpace was initially big in most of Southeast Asia), blogs specializing in music, and especially file sharing sites such as SoundCloud (see box on ‘SoundCloud communities’) have yielded a youth culture that is at once very local and truly trans-national. Musical acts from various Southeast Asian nations appear on par in online magazines such as indieJakarta.com and the Malaysian the WKND blog, and at regional outdoor festivals such as Good Vibes (Malaysia, since 2013). Digital communication and affordable intra-Asian air traffic have turned the region into a new and promising playground for Southeast Asian musicians and their audiences. Festivals have been increasingly profiting from these developments.

**Pop, politics, and piety**

But indie should not be seen as the sole revolution in recording industries. Cheap grassroots technology offered new affordances to hitherto neglected genres and communities in the 1970s and 1980s, and now digital technologies only amplified these successes. Existing popular music genres developed further and saw their audiences grow even bigger. The spectacular story of contemporary nasyid forms an illustrative example of this.

_Nasyid_ is the generic label for all songs with Islamic content and the implicit aim to convey a moral message and spiritual advice. This religious musical style was especially popular in the period 1995-2005, when it took Muslim audiences throughout Southeast Asia. Today, _nasyid_ continues to be produced and consumed in cities and towns with a large student population and strong Muslim
activist tradition. The genre attracted a mass audience because its songs addressed questions on how to be a modern Muslim youth in Southeast Asia, reconciling piety with a consumerist lifestyle ranging from Muslimah day spas, Islamic lifestyle glossies and teen lit, halal food processing, but also modern Muslim entertainment such as Malaysia’s Imam Muda (‘The Young Imam’) reality soap. Also, nasyid expressed political aspirations of Islamist movements in both Indonesia and Malaysia.

In the late 1970s, inspired by the success of El-Suraya from Medan, all-female ensembles such as Singapore-based Al-Mizan and Hidayah had brought nasyid within reach of the recording industry. Most of today’s better-known nasyid ensembles trace their origins to the Malaysian missionary movement Al-Arqam. In the mid-1980s, Arqam organized cultural happenings, poetry recitals, and concerts with Islamic music in hotels and other public places in an attempt to posit an alternative to Western popular culture. Southeast Asian nasyid started out as mostly unison singing by choirs of young men, of lyrics set in the Malay language. The songs were rich in Arab-like vocal ornamentations. Arqam groups such as Nadamurni (1988-1994) and the Zikr (1992-1995), soon started experimenting with harmonized vocals and the addition of percussion and a modern Western drum kit, but all of their music was still acoustic. It was the intensity of vocals and, in particular, the directness of the lyrics that apparently struck a chord with listeners. Two main themes can be discerned in the lyrics. The first one is nostalgia: references to childhood experience, parental love, village harmony, and life in the countryside. The second theme pertains to the need to defend one’s integrity and religious values towards the outside world.

With an official state-imposed ban on all of Al-Arqam’s activities in Malaysia in 1994 and the movement being disbanded, former Arqam members started new nasyid acts such as Rabbani and Hijjaz. However, it was especially the group Raihan that turned nasyid music into a modern and fashionable genre that was taken up by the entertainment industry. Its 1996 album Puji-Pujian (‘Verses of Praise’) is still the best-selling Malaysian
pop album of all times. Groups such as Raihan were ambassadors of Malay and Muslim culture both in their own country and abroad. They introduced new elements into nasyid, such as Latin and African percussion and even gospel-like choirs. Sometimes, such musical experiments stirred controversies both within and outside orthodox Muslim circles. To some, this was too much pop added to what they considered as an ancient spiritual genre; others feared a religious invasion of an otherwise secular music industry. Remarkably, nasyid singers do not consider nasyid to be just a musical genre, but primarily a spiritual practice: practise what you preach or sing. Without clear musical definition, the genre thus easily continues to renew itself; the latest generation is experimenting with crossovers into rhythm & blues, hip-hop and even rock music.

Popular among Islamist activists at Indonesian and Malaysian campuses, nasyid gained momentum when the dictator Suharto stepped down and more room was created for Islamic expressions. Many Indonesian nasyid groups, like SNada and Izzatul Islam, have used their music to support the Justice Party (PKS, later ‘Prosperous Justice Party’), a politically fundamentalist Islamic group popular among student activists. However, only from the late 1990s onwards, and fuelled by the successes of the Arqam groups, did student ensembles in both countries start recording their own nasyid songs. The ensembles were increasingly modelled on globally popular boy bands, such as the Backstreet Boys or Boyzone, while the lyrics explicitly addressed a teenage audience. The casual sound and look of Malaysian and Indonesian nasyid ensembles such as Inteam, Mestica, and again SNada, have been taken up elsewhere and have set a trend for global Muslim celebrities, such as Maheer Zain, Zain Bhikha, and Sami Yusuf, who today enjoy a large and dedicated following, especially in Southeast Asia.

Nasyid music is the most visible and popular musical expression of Islam to be taken up by the entertainment industry to date, but it is by no means the only one. A short-lived fad of pop religi (‘Islamic Pop’), including groups such as Unggu and Wali, was
similarly successful in addressing the aspirations of a young, urban Muslim middle class, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. Soundtracks to popular Islamic films such as the ‘Verses of Love’ (Ayat Ayat Cinta, 2008) or ‘Women with a Turban’ (Perempuan Berkalung Sorban, 2009), are yet another means for Islam to gain public visibility. With the pressure of globalization felt by many Southeast Asians and a nation state that does not always seem to have lived up to its early promise of (a convincing) modernity for all citizens, urban audiences region-wide increasingly tried to find other ways to anchor shifting identities. Today, the worldwide ummah, ironically very much a shifting entity itself, still seems to offer a safe haven away from global complexities and national turbulence. At the same time, the concept of a global Islamic community is successful as it stresses a cultural difference from what many see as global trends imposed by the West.

Asia around the corner

The influence of nearby East Asian popular culture has always been felt in Southeast Asia, not least because of the presence of considerably sized communities of overseas Chinese in the region. Whereas Chinese entrepreneurs, artists, and producers have stood at the base of the early recording industry in Southeast Asia, Chinese-language music has not always fared equally well in each of the Southeast Asian countries. For decades, Chinese-language songs flooded a considerable part of the Malaysian and Singaporean market. Especially popular singers such as Yao Surong gained quite a following all over Southeast Asia. In light of Surong’s trans-national popularity, it is interesting to note that in the early 1970s her songs were banned in her native Taiwan for being overly sentimental and spreading an ‘unhealthy moral’. While her Mandopop (Mandarin-language songs, mostly produced in Taiwan, but consumed throughout the whole of Asia) was also readily available in Indonesia, Chinese-language songs were at least publicly absent for most of the later New Order era, except
for some accidental Cantopop songs or ‘nightclub songs’. The latter were sung in Cantonese and released on cassette with compilations of soundtracks to popular Hong Kong movies. Whereas more recently the tide seems to have changed and public expression of the Indonesian-Chinese minority is possible in present-day Indonesia, it has not, as yet, stirred a Chinese musical renaissance.

In contrast, Japanese – and later Korean – pop music fared much better in Southeast Asia. Its popularity started with the airing of Japanese TV dramas, the consumption of Japanese computer animation (anime) and comic books (manga) by a teen generation, and, to a lesser extent, in the early 1990s, the consumption of so-called J-Pop, a term referring to a wide range of modern Japanese popular music genres. In an era when Southeast Asian politicians tried to promote Asian values and Japan was economically thriving, especially the newly emerging and aspiring middle classes of Indonesia and Malaysia were impressed by what seemed to be an Asian version of all things modern. It was now ‘cool to be Asian’. According to some, it was the cultural proximity to Japanese culture that facilitated the easy adaptation and local appropriation of the J-Pop aesthetics. But there were also fears that this Japan-mania would lead to cultural colonization.

The much-watched multilingual musical variety television show Asia Bagus (‘Beautiful Asia’), produced in Singapore largely with Japanese money and featuring performers from all over Asia, was similarly linked to emerging notions of Asia as a cultural entity. It is an illustration of how flow of capital, performers, and media products cross-hatched East and Southeast Asia. The show, which was broadcast from 1992 until 2000, produced now-famous Southeast Asian singers such as Malaysia’s Amy Mastura and Indonesian glamour lady Krisdayanti. MTV Asia, one of the first all-music channels that started in the early 2000s and regularly played video clips from various Southeast Asian countries, including a weekly all-Indonesian chart (Ampuh List), was yet another effort to mark (Southeast) Asian music as one node in the global cultural market.
Although Japanese drama is no longer regularly broadcast on Southeast Asian television, J-Pop still attracts a steady following. Among Indonesian youngsters it is still fashionable to don their hair in typical ‘Japanese style’ as advertised by saloons, and Japanese-flavoured events are still commonly found in some of the larger cities. Big festivals such as Jak-Japan Matsuri and Japan Pop Culture have been organized by the Japanese Embassy in Jakarta, in cooperation with Indonesia’s Tourism and Creative Economy Ministry, and starred homegrown acts such as J-Rock and JKT48 (see box on ‘JKT48’).

More recent is the surge of Korean pop (K-Pop) culture, the tremendous popularity of which is partly explained by its initial association with the previous Japan Cool. In what is generally dubbed the second ‘Korean wave’ or Hallyu, it is no longer Korean television dramas such as the famed Winter Sonata (2002), Princess Hours (2003), and Full House (2004), but Korean boy and girl ‘idol bands’ that, since the early 2010s, have gathered a large following in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. K-Pop combines modern global genres such as electro-dance, urban, and hip-hop with slick and well-timed choreographies of groups consisting of six or more members. Target audiences are trend-conscious and fashionable teens all over Asia. Digital platforms such as YouTube and digitally distributed albums facilitate the creation of a global audience. But K-pop successes also inspire Southeast Asian artists to copy and adapt this musical style. So far, this has resulted in homegrown K-pop acts like Indonesian Cherrybelle, S.O.S., and the boy band S4. The latter two are products of Galaxy Superstar, an Indonesian televised talent show that trained the candidates in South Korea and offered the finalists a recording contract.

K-Pop and J-Pop primarily became a hype in the region because they offered a young generation, eager to carve out an identity of its own, Asian alternatives for a Western modern identity. However, it should be noted that most such popular cultural expressions were part of a well-orchestrated effort by both the state and the private sector to promote national creative
and tourist industries abroad. This resulted in a tendency among Southeast Asian authorities to emulate these East Asian successes and use local pop expressions to promote what may be the next craze of Asian Cool, Indopop.

Doing it Digital: Three apparent paradoxes

Well into the twenty-first century, one can discern a number of paradoxical processes in the field of Southeast Asian music that make it difficult to predict how popular music will develop in the near future.

First, with the ongoing digitization, consuming music has gradually become an ephemeral practice. The sale of CDs has dropped to an all-time low as music lovers increasingly consume their music through YouTube. Music is owned and/or stored in increasingly smaller formats, on USB or MP3 devices, in mobiles phones, or on shared hard drives in internet cafes. That is, if users still bother to collect music at all, since the possibility of streaming and platforms such as Spotify provides listeners with an almost infinite choice of music to listen to at the time and place of their choosing. Internet radio or net labels add to this mix. There is more music available than ever before, but the sound quality is increasingly poor. And the more music we are able to listen to, the less it seems to stick.

One can speculate whether this new, fleeting nature of music in general is in some way linked to the fact that, since the 2000s, popular music has been commoditized in more ways than just the auditory. Merchandise and live gigs are as old as the industry itself, but nowadays artists cannot afford to do albums without also considering other, mostly visual, formats. Music TV is one of them, and the growing prestige of the annual contest for Indonesian popular music videos (Video Music Indonesia) from 1999 onwards is illustrative of this trend. Karaoke discs, video CDs with accompanying richly illustrated booklets, and YouTube channels are other examples.
Second, the immateriality of today’s musical practice seems to have prompted the urge to salvage what increasingly is no longer there, with the help of the digital techniques that are now at hand. This ‘archive fever’ has led some Southeast Asian music collectors to put online whole collections of digitized old vinyl records or 78s, complete with scanned sleeves and additional comments, among the latter (re)written biographies of their favourite stars. Such initiatives make rare music collections available for other like-minded music aficionados. A whole new generation of Southeast Asia pop music lovers is introduced to previous musics, be it punk, industrial music, or 1970s disco. Salient is their rekindled interest in what can be considered their own ‘auditory heritage’, the music their parents listened to thirty or forty years ago. The renewed interest in older musical genres has led many artists to appropriate and reinterpret these sounds of the past. Jakarta-based art collective White Shoes and the Couples Company is one of the groups that musically reference popular music from older times. This indie pop band, started by students at Jakarta’s Institute for the Arts, released its self-titled debut album in 2005. Both their music and accompanying visuals blend contemporary indie aesthetics with retro influences, particularly 1960s and 1970s film music and 1930s jazz and swing. In neighbouring Singapore, famed singer Dick Lee similarly reinterpreted his own sound heritage two decades earlier, proving the retro sentiment to be of all times. Yet, digital means just make musical inspirations more freely and easily accessible. With the rise of the collector and amateur discographer – copyright issues keep him from going professional – a novel sort of connoisseur and tastemaker has appeared.

But digital technologies have also facilitated wannabe singers and musicians with affordable means to produce and distribute their own music. A good example is the song ‘Keong Racun’ (‘Poisonous Snail’), originally performed by an Indonesian dangdut singer named Lisa. But the song only got noticed by a larger audience when two teenage girls from Bandung, Sinta and Jojo, decided to do a coquettish and lip-synced version of the song and put it on YouTube. In no time, the clip went viral turning the girls, not Lisa,
into instant celebrities. At the same time, the clip triggered a flood of user responses and other remixed versions of the song. Ironically, it was the vocalist of another renowned Bandung band, ST12, who later bought the rights to the song. He had the song re-recorded with vocals of another duo, but with Sinta and Jojo re-appearing in the video to lip-sync the song. This case shows that the music industry quickly responds to and incorporates such new grassroots initiatives, and that the much-hyped ‘user-generated content’ is typically something that may feed an increasingly neo-liberal industry, leaving much of the production work now to consumers.

In an era where the practice of not only user-generated content, but also ‘prosumers’ and ‘selfies’ travels extraordinary well, Southeast Asian pop industries also seem to have embraced the potential of what media scholar Chris Rojek calls ‘celetoids’: a shift of focus from elites to a celebration of the ordinary. Today, everyone wants to be a star, or, if not, at least to be among the stars, and modern-day idols are typically those easily within reach (see also box on ‘JKT48’). The trend of retouching photographic materials that gained momentum with the availability of sophisticated yet affordable digital techniques now offers fans of JKT48 the chance to have their images inserted into pictures with their favourite members of the group. But also in other ways ordinary Southeast Asians are creating their own moments of celebrity. Young, mostly female fans, for instance, are depicting themselves having explicit relationships with their K-Pop or other idols in online fan fiction. Tribute bands and cover dance, in which young Thai, Filipino, or Indonesian fans mimic the dance choreographies of their idols, are ways of narrowing the gap between artist and fan.

The global format of televised talent shows is probably the best example of this ‘celebration of the ordinary’, one that actually has a surprisingly long tradition throughout Southeast Asia. For decades, talent shows have been a fruitful way of monitoring new trends, talent, and upcoming audiences. Singapore in the 1960s knew its Talenteime contests and entertainers that were deemed to be the be-all and end-all of Singapore. There was, for instance, the island nation’s own Cliff Richard, who rendered the artist’s songs
in Malay. Today’s televised talent shows are different than those of the fifties and sixties, as they shift from celebrating celebrity to celebrating the ordinary. They come with the promise of no matter how fat, queer, ugly, young, or old, any ordinary person can, against all odds, become a celebrity in his or her own right. In the process, popular culture has, more than ever, become an arena in which to comment on and transgress societal values. As a consequence, Islamists, gays, ethnic minorities and whatever other ‘likely unlikely’ candidates have made it to the finals in idols shows such as Suara Indonesia or Malaysian Akademi Fantasia.

A third and final paradox is found in the fact that cheap digital means and a widespread DIY mentality have facilitated the emergence of local musical scenes and communities with an often very pronounced local taste. At the same time, this makes it possible for these local communities to become connected with yet larger communities beyond the nation or even the Southeast Asian region. Examples of such so-called glocal – a combination of global and local – contexts have been mentioned earlier in this chapter: pan-Asian entertainment or pop Islam. Yet another example is the almost global reach of Indonesian netlabels such as Yes No Wave Music, Ear Alert, or Stone Age Records. They not only promote local musics, but also other music that is shared between friends and family through SoundCloud and other social media related accounts (see box on ‘SoundCloud’).

The Malay Muslim girl-next-door: A deeper conversation with Yuna

If there is one particular artist whose career so far illustrates tendencies discussed above, it is the young Malaysian singer-songwriter Yuna.

Yuna, born as Yunalis Mat Zara’ai, belongs to a new generation of artists who have succeeded in reaching a global audience by using the possibilities offered by inexpensive digital home recording and the internet, in particular social media such as
MySpace. But her career is also to be understood against the background of the Klang Valley singer-songwriter scene in Malaysia, which gathered pace in the late 1990s and 2000s. This scene can be traced to an earlier cohort of performers including Dr. Wan Zawawi, Kit Lee, and Markizah (or the duo Passion), who all performed original material written in both English and Malay, and who mostly recorded and disseminated their music through self-funded limited releases. This singer-songwriter scene further matured during the late 1990s and 2000s, with events like the Songwriter’s Round, Acoustic Jam, and the Unclogged series, which took place at local bars, halls, and cafes in Kuala Lumpur. In 2005, the annual Malaysian singer-songwriter showcase KL Sing Song was launched. Organized by a trio of singer-songwriters, Kugan, Tan, and Azmyl Yunor, at the International College of Music (ICOM), KL Sing Song offered a stage to performers whose music was hardly ever broadcast by the mainstream media.

The Kuala Lumpur singers and songwriters, ranging from award-winning performers such as Yuna to upcoming youngsters and seasoned street buskers, emphasize the use of original compositions and minimal instrumental accompaniment. In contrast to the more visible, but politically less engaged Malaysian indie rock scene, the singer-songwriter scene has accommodated political communication and satire, hence providing an alternate cultural space notably supported by alternative online media, non-governmental organizations, and non-commercial venues throughout the Malaysian Klang Valley.

It was against this background and during her law studies at the Technological University Mara that Yuna first took up the acoustic guitar playing her self-composed songs in bars and at festivals. Early interviews focus on Yuna as both the girl-next-door and a devout girl who sees no problem in wearing a hijab (‘headscarf’) on stage as a symbol of her Muslim identity. It is this image of an ordinary yet ‘hijabista’ celebrity that Yuna continues to cultivate.

That said, Yuna may have been confined to playing at such local venues had she not resorted to promoting her own music through social media. While participation in the talent show
One in a Million in 2006 did not bring the success that she had hoped for, it is through her own MySpace music channel that, around the same time, her career first took off. Starting with a cover of Indonesian band Peterpan, she soon started adding her own songs and produced the mini-album *Yuna EP*, only available through email order. However, in 2008, Yuna's mini-album was also up for an official release on CD, and one of the album's tracks, ‘Deeper Conversation’, an acoustic ballad featuring a strong melody and subtle guitar playing, even earned her a national award for ‘Best Local English Song’. Like her KL singer-songwriter peers, Yuna writes both in Malay and English and her songs fit in seamlessly with the global musical and textual sensibilities of the indie/alternative pop genre. Klang Valley and a MySpace account gained her national fame, and she opened her own shop – ‘Iamjetfuel’ – in Subang Jaya. But the rest of the world also seemed willing to embrace this Malay Muslim girl-next-door. Eventually, it was US indie pop record label Fader that offered her a contract. In 2012, her first US single was released, ‘Living your Life’, a track produced by well-known R&B and urban artist Pharrell Williams. Three full ‘international’ albums quickly followed suit and today Yuna divides her time between doing gigs in LA and running her newly opened online store *Novemberculture.com* from the same Kuala Lumpur suburb where she started her career, still selling *hijabs* (‘modern and modest’), jumpsuits, and skirts, but also her much favoured Tiny Forrest Terrariums.

Yuna is still a fervent user of social media, cherishing the contact with her followers, or ‘Yunalisers’ as she affectionately calls them, and feeding them with Islamic wisdoms such as, ‘It is forbidden for you to eat with your plates full, while your neighbour starves.’ In spite of her newly gained fame as one of the internationally most famous Malaysian singers ever, she keeps much of her profile intact. Internationally, she is considered as ‘one of those lucky MySpace songwriters who made it’, while Al Jazeera dubbed her a ‘Muslim star’. At home, she is an ambassador of Malaysia, finding pride in producing a 100 per cent Malaysian-made music clip and contributing the song ‘KL Kita’ (‘Our Kuala Lumpur’) to a film anthology on
the lives and hopes of the inhabitants of the Malaysian capital. In the person of Yuna, then, we find the present state of Southeast Asian pop, no longer confined to language or locality, but with a distinct character of its own and the world as its playground.

**Box 4.1  JKT48**  
The idol group JKT48 was founded in 2011 as an Indonesian franchise of the Japanese idol group AKB48, and the first of several such international ‘sister groups’ abroad. JKT48 is closely styled after the girl-next-door and ‘cute’ (*kawaii*, Japanese) appeal of its Japanese sister, and, similarly, promotes the ideal of idols that can be easily approached by their fans. JKT48 provides daily entertainment in its own Jakarta-based theatre situated at the fX Sudirman shopping mall, targeting an audience of teenagers and young single men. The group is very much a fan-driven effort. The group’s official website (both in Japanese and Indonesian) claims that it was launched ‘in the spirit of creating a platform through which Indonesian women could realize their ambitions. Together with our fans we would like to create an all-Indonesian idol.’ As with AKB48, JKT48 consists of distinct teams. Fans rank the more than 70 members, and the number one team will record the next single, with the most popular girl (also by vote) on this occasion taking centre stage. So far, JKT48 has recorded two albums. The first album mostly contains Indonesian renderings of songs by ABK48 and sister groups; a second mini-album, *Gingham Check* released mid-2014, made it to the number two position in Indonesia’s iTunes Charts. JKT48’s first feature movie, *VIVA JKT48*, telling the fictional story of the band’s members reclaiming their own theatre, was released around that time as well. Despite much of the grassroots rhetoric of a fan-driven sensation, the JKT48 craze seems to be carefully orchestrated by Japanese and Indonesian authorities aiming at a closer relationship between the two nations. JKT48 and other franchises are seen as part of the Japanese government’s ‘Cool Japan’ approach to promote Japanese culture around the world, an effort much supported by Japanese companies that widely regard Indonesian youth culture as a next
big market. JKT48 thus regularly appears in television advertisements for Japanese companies, among them Pocari, Sharp, and Yamaha. In Japan, the girls of JKT48 were made ambassadors for the Enjoy Jakarta tourism programme, which was part of an effort to attract more Japanese visitors to Indonesia’s capital.

Box 4.2 An Indonesian indie song
In 2000, the euphoria of the Indonesian political Reformasi (‘reformation’) was in full swing when the signature tune of the alternative rock band Sheila On 7 from Yogyakarta, ‘Sephia’, was released. Written by the band’s guitarist Eross Candra, the song came out at a time when media and the arts enjoyed an unprecedented degree of freedom. This may have emboldened Candra to write explicit lyrics (by Indonesian standards) about a love triangle, a subject that had previously been considered taboo in mainstream Indonesian culture. The song clearly struck a note with young people wishing to free themselves from traditional social constraints. The almost mystical aura surrounding the song was reinforced by an urban legend about a supernatural event involving a fan of the band who had recently committed suicide. Various journalists, bloggers, and literary critics have since offered interpretations of the song’s significance as a potent symbol of the mind-set of modern Indonesian youth.

Box 4.3 Karaoke discs
Video CDs held a similarly democratizing potential as the cassette tapes of the early 1970s, providing a cheap means to distribute music clips for those lacking broadband internet connection. Most VCDs contained karaoke music (‘empty orchestra’, Japanese). They offered the possibility to turn off the audio channel with the sound of the vocalist, and just hear the accompaniment and see the images and text. Thus, one could sing along with the accompaniment, like earlier karaoke cassette tapes. The latter invaded the Japanese domestic sphere in the 1980s, and, not long after, the craze hit the coasts of Indonesia. After its introduction on cassette tape in Southeast Asia, karaoke
continued to play a role in the promotion of the more expensive laser disc around 1995, and eventually the VCD from around 1997.

Box 4.4 SoundCloud communities
SoundCloud communities are an illustration of how social media are used today by a young generation of musicians not only to connect to a larger world, but also to re-introduce a certain sense of locality. SoundCloud is a social media site where musicians may upload their own recordings, up to 120 MB, without additional costs. It is possible to ‘like’ and promote other artists’ music by reposting the song and by making it visible in one’s own profile. This way, the song is shared with all users who follow that account and can spread fast through an increasingly larger network. Most Southeast Asian acts have their own SoundCloud accounts to share music with friends and family. But with the knowledge that scouts are constantly monitoring the accounts and some songs going viral, these aspiring artists also hope that, one day, it will help them to get offered a record deal.
Inspired by the example of European and American peers, a group of young amateur musicians from Yogyakarta launched the idea for a local SoundCloud community, SoundCloudYK, in November 2013. It enabled a local community, already well connected through social media, to meet each other face-to-face, while listening to each other’s music. Such offline meetings followed earlier initiatives where online collaboration led to joined ventures, such as ten covers of the same song or a one-hour live stream of local SoundCloud songs that were broadcast daily at campus radio. SoundCloud facilitates such initiatives through monthly SoundCloud Meetups, offline sessions that focus on anything from vocal training to ethnically inspired music. Three-monthly SoundCloud Shows are public events that bring together local acts and local music fans. Mostly staged at local cafes, these shows provide fledgling musicians with a venue. Next to the stage a projector beams incoming Twitter feeds, a clear illustration that these gatherings are rooted in the social media sphere. Anyone with a SoundCloud account can climb the stage!

Illustration 14  #SoundCloud Meetup YK in the Momento Café, Yogyakarta, 26 February 2014

Photo by Bart Barendregt