

Southeast Asia

Steve Ferzacca, *Sonic City: Making Rock Music and Urban Life in Singapore*

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The book-length and periodical literature on popular music and the contexts in which it arises and functions in Southeast Asia has been growing considerably since the 1990s, with various publications on both local and global-influenced fusions, such as Indonesian *dangdut* and Thai *luktung*, as well as adaptations of Western genres like rock, metal, punk, rap, and mainstream pop. Popular musics, like popular cultures generally, have played important roles in most Southeast Asian societies for decades and often reflect social and political developments and structures. They are also forms of communication that carry ideas about history, politics, community, class, gender, race, identity, and other issues. Given these landscapes for musical creation and dissemination, many studies employ a broadly interdisciplinary approach to their subject matter.

This interesting, innovative, unconventional, and well-written study by Steve Ferzacca, an anthropologist, ethnomusicologist, guitarist, and songwriter, focuses on several blues rock musicians and their bands in Singapore. His interdisciplinary approach also integrates political, social, and cultural contexts that shape musical and urban life in the city-state. Ferzacca's analysis was influenced especially by Steven Feld's notion of acoustamology (a way of knowing the world through sounds) and Bruno Latour's concept of networks, assemblages, and the social. But the narrative does not get bogged down in jargon and debates on theory. Ferzacca's methodology depends chiefly on interviews and participant observation or experience in which he becomes an essential part in the story by joining his subjects' current band as a guitarist over the six years of his research from 2011–2017.

Ferzacca considers his project an ethnography of urban life in cosmopolitan yet also restrictive Singapore. But he concentrates on one small subsection of urban society, the predominantly Anglophone, ethnic Chinese, male rockers and their fans who love an older (1960s–1980s) style of Anglo-American-influenced English-language blues rock. Their social and musical milieu is quite different from, for example, K-Pop enthusiasts, local rappers, or the mosh pits, stage diving, and slam-dancing of the often hipper,

younger, and more disaffected Singaporeans who patronized edgier cultural venues like the Substation (which closed in 2021).

To help understand Singapore's rock culture, the author relates some experiences and insights from his previous project studying a neighborhood and its local kroncong musicians in Yogyakarta (Java). In Singapore, Ferzacca encountered, hung out with, and soon performed with several local musicians who had been the core of the Straydogs, one of the most popular blues rock bands from 1966 to 1978. He joined with their latest incarnation, Blues 77, in the music stores, shopping center basements, clubs, and bars where they congregated, consumed alcohol, rehearsed, jammed, and played to live audiences, as well as on their touring gigs in Saigon (Vietnam) and Melaka (Malaysia). Their sound can be sampled in YouTube videos of some of their songs helpfully noted in the book endnotes.

The book begins with an "Overture" that introduces the general themes, Ferzacca's Java experience, the band's members and history, and the exuberant 1960s–1970s rock music scene that shaped them. Six brief chapters flesh out the narrative and analysis. Chapter 1 introduces Singapore as a crossroads global city or "pluriverse [heterogenous] community" (26). Chapter 2 explores Katong, the close-knit, middle-class, Westernized, mostly English-educated Chinese and Eurasian neighborhood that produced the Straydogs. Chapter 3 discusses urban life and the performance venues. Chapter 4 examines the sonic circuits of Saigon and Melaka. The debates over national heritage are discussed in chapter 5, while chapter 6 presents the conclusions.

The reader learns much about the band's two core members, the bassist and leader Lim Kiang and drummer James Tan (both local-born, English-educated Chinese in their sixties and part-time musicians), their backgrounds, attitudes, recreations, audiences (friends, families, and fans), and the male bonding, overt masculinity, and alcohol use of their mostly male rock community within the broader context of Singapore's fluctuating cultural policies. These policies include the semi-authoritarian state's attacks on what they considered "yellow culture" (7) and "noise pollution" (5) that the nation's leaders and many conservative citizens have long viewed as subversive youth trends threatening Singapore's conservative culture, stability, and national heritage.

However, the well-managed society that the political and cultural elites extoll and aim to preserve is not immune to change, including Western influences like guitar shops, that fosters what Ferzacca considers a creative worlding. He conceives of Singapore as a "sonic city" (xv) where making rock music and urban life become ways of knowing and participating in the world. But Western-oriented, somewhat rebellious rockers and their fans are entangled in fluctuating relations between the vernacular heritage community of interest they created and, on the other side, the state-sponsored national heritage conservation projects. This dichotomy animates work, play, and meaning in the contemporary music scene—a community of belonging that becomes increasingly cosmopolitan but also very Singaporean and made within the constraints of local urban life.

Sonic City is an enjoyable read and should appeal to specialists and non-specialists alike, including undergraduate students. Like Ferzacca, the reader gets drawn into the blues rock community and gains a good sense of the people involved, and their lives in music as well as in Singapore society. Some readers may be disappointed that the book offers relatively sparse insights about the broader music scene in Singapore or of how the blues rock community fits into a diverse local music landscape that includes, among others,

local, Anglo-American, East Asian, Chinese, Malay, and Indian pop genres. Ferzacca's friendships with Kiang, James, and others suggest, he argues, that the content and livelihood of something large, like globalization, are embodied in human relationships, that people affectively and instrumentally make their worlds. The author closes with an apt song he wrote for Blues 77 that recaptures the project and his bandmates: "Met up with some boys down in Singapore / Playing our guitars like never before / Rockin' in the basement till our spirits soar / It's not over yet, it's not over till we say so" (141).

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