

# Dance of Life

## *Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia*

By Craig A. Lockard

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390 PAGES

As the title implies, Craig A. Lockard has written a book that is far more than a traditional ethno-musicology. Originating in the author's own 1960s American experience that combined political awareness and action with contemporary popular music, this text seeks to interpret modern political trends and developments in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia, and Singapore through an examination of contemporary popular music culture. The work is prefaced by an introductory chapter that defines the scope of the study and contextualizes the importance of popular music in Southeast Asia and the Third World in general. Then, his analysis of the popular music of each country is expanded within the context of its historical background in relation to the relevant political and social life of the country.

Lockard's insightful analysis is supported by forty-two pages of footnotes, many of which make multiple references, and a sixty-page bibliography. There is no doubt that this is a thoroughly researched and solid academic work. Yet even more impressive than the traditional academic scholarship Lockard

uses to support his study is the time and effort that he devoted to its preparation. This is not a hastily produced volume. Lockard has been a frequent visitor/researcher in Southeast Asia since first conducting research in Sarawak in the mid-1960s, and he has been following the contemporary music and political scene ever since. As well, he has traveled to and lived in other countries in the region so his expertise is not limited to just one country.

Central to Lockard's exploration are the social-political as well as artistic roles played by select star performers and the occasional musical group. This biographical approach gives the book a degree of freshness and vigor that a more strictly academic and theoretical study would never achieve. Very often, too, the evolution of styles or genres of popular music are intimately linked with certain performers which makes this approach an obvious choice. A good example is the evolution of Indonesian popular music from traditional *gamelon* to *kroncong* through pop Indonesia to *dangdut*. In his analysis Lockard uses frequent references to various performers who were instrumental in the development of each musical form. Especially for *dangdut*, an examination of the artist Rhoma Irama's musicality and political growth allows Lockard to link his musical analysis to larger issues of politics, class relations and Islamic revivalism in 1980s Indonesia. Rhoma Irama can then be contrasted with the emergence in the following decade of Iwan Fals whose ambivalent relationship with the military government was emblematic of Indonesian society in the latter years of the Suharto regime.

In a similar manner Lockard briefly discusses Mike Hanopol and his Juan de la Cruz Band to illustrate the profound impact of

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## BOOK REVIEWS

1970s Pinoy Rock which retained American forms of traditional rock music while shifting to Tagalog rather than English lyrics and focusing on clear Filipino themes. The nationalistic coming of age statement by the Juan de la Cruz Band's *Ang Himig Natin* (Our Music) and the Pinoy styles of music that began to emerge then become the foundation for Lockard's detailed look at Philippine radicalism that merged Pinoy with politics in the person of Freddie Aguilar. By the 1980s, Aguilar was committed to the country's political opposition, and his rendition of *Bayan Ko* (My Country), long a nationalist political anthem, provided additional fuel to the fires of courage that emboldened hundreds of thousands of ordinary Filipinos to take to the streets in 1986 to support Corazon Aquino and overthrow the hated regime of Ferdinand Marcos.

Although the linkage of music to fundamental social and political changes is most clearly seen in the Indonesian and Philippine chapters, Lockard's deft analysis in his chapter on Thailand and in the combined chapter for Malaysia and Singapore develops similar themes. In the case of Thailand, it was the musical form of American-style folk singing as adopted by the group Caravan that held sway from the mid-1960s to the early 70s, after which another group, Carabao, dominated the 1980s with a more electrified sound. These groups used their music to critique the inequalities and injustices


that marked Thai society and to challenge the country's military ruling group.

Lockard notes that in the 1970s Malaysian popular music lost its edge of social criticism with the death of P. Ramlee and came under increasing pressure for puritanical conformity by Islamic fundamentalists. Within this context the imported Indonesian *dangdut* music of Rhoma Irama became a popular outlet until the 1980s when the government's exclusive Malay language policy had the ironic effect of integrating young Chinese and Indian youths into the national Malay culture. This linguistic and social development increased the social commentary and diversity of Malaysia's popular music of the 1980s, as represented by the groups Kembara and the Blues Gang and individual artist Kit Lee.

Lockard's study showing traditional music styles that are impacted by musical forms from the United States while still retaining their cultural integrity demonstrates that Southeast Asia's characteristic pattern of syncretic adoption of external influences remains alive and well. By locating Southeast Asian popular music within its contemporary context, Lockard can then discuss recent social tensions and changes as these societies react to larger forces in the postcolonial world. He notes, for example, that Southeast Asian protest music is less confrontational than music elsewhere and contains "elements of signification" that the audience can interpret in a "critical manner" (p. 263). The point here is that popular music which springs from the local context and is enriched by external influences can make subtle social messages and thereby present commentary to subvert authority and raise consciousness.

The publication of Lockard's *Dance of Life* is especially welcome for instructors searching for supplementary texts for courses on Southeast Asia. This examination of contemporary music's social and political impact will attract students and allow them an innovative means to access otherwise exotic cultures and peoples. Despite the book's overall strength, Lockard's opening theoretical chapter, "Popular Culture and Music in the Modern World," might be better utilized in courses on world music, popular culture or communications than for a class on Southeast Asia per se. As well, readers looking for individual chapter analyses of popular music in Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam will be disappointed, and the author's cursory comments for these countries as presented in the first chapter are skimpier than his discussion of Caribbean and African music. Still, this is a wonderful book that makes the postcolonial histories of Lockard's five Southeast Asian nations come alive, and it is well worth considering for course adoption. ■

**PAUL A. RODELL** is a member of the Department of History at Georgia Southern University where he teaches courses on Southeast and East Asia. He specializes in the Philippines and in 1999 was co-director of a faculty development seminar to that country and Vietnam. He is also the Executive Director of the Association of Third World Studies.



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