

Book Reviews

Peter Keppy, *Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age. Filipinos, Indonesians and Popular Culture, 1920-1936* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019). 288 p. ISBN 9789813250512.

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This book lives up to its tantalizing title and much more. It is a ground-breaking, extensively researched, and in-depth study that presents an intriguing and complex narrative around popular music and culture in two island regions of Southeast Asia during a dynamic era of cultural, social, and political flux. The Philippines and the, then, Netherlands East Indies were still colonies, but both had a growing, educated, cosmopolitan-oriented urban middle class with a developing nationalist consciousness and emerging desire for independence. They were also becoming strongly influenced by American popular culture and the forces of modernity. Within this milieu, Peter Keppy strongly demonstrates the intriguingly important cultural, social and, to some extent, political place of a new hybrid popular culture centered around multi-artform vernacular theater that drew mass audiences.

This period of dynamic change in popular entertainment in Southeast Asia, while attracting growing interest from scholars, has so far been dealt with patchily in the literature by treating, for example, the recording industry or specific musical genres like *kroncong*. Earlier decades have been covered more substantially in such studies as Tan's and Cohen's respective accounts of turn-of-the-century theatrical genres, *bangsawan* and *komedi stamboel*, or Irving's major history of music in early modern Manila. *Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age* is the first major study focusing on the 1920s and, to a lesser extent, the 1930s. However, it does not just fill a gap in our understanding of cultural developments during this period but represents a major achievement in other ways. These include the depth and breadth of its mostly primary source-based historical research, undertaken across multiple languages; its presentation of parallel but mutually informative histories in two culturally and politically distinct regions of Southeast Asia; the

centering of its narrative around two major artists and ‘cultural brokers’; and the theoretical concepts that it deploys to understand the cultural, social, and political phenomena that it describes, among other things.

The theoretical ideas that inform the book are unpacked in the first chapter, specifically, concepts of pop cosmopolitanism and popular modernity, which ‘challenge ... ideas about elites being the architects and guardians of cosmopolitanism ... and of modernity’ (p. 7), and of participatory pop, whereby consumers are seen as active rather than simply passive participants. These concepts are rarely returned to but nevertheless provide a useful frame for understanding its subject matter from a cultural perspective.

Thereafter, the book falls into two halves. Chapters 2-6 cover the Philippines and are centered around the figure of musician/composer Luis Borromeo, an intriguing figure from a wealthy Hispanicized land-owning family of Chinese-*mestizo* ancestry in Cebu. Beginning with his early contact and participation in American popular culture on the American stage from 1915, successive chapters take Borromeo back to Manila and its flourishing dance hall and jazz cabaret environment, as well as his creation of what became his immensely popular *vod-a-vil* (vaudeville). These chapters also lay out the broader sociocultural context for these developments, including Borromeo’s literary and other collaborators, in addition to the elite audience he tried to attract.

The second section of the book deals with a similar period in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), especially Java. It focuses primarily around a ‘Malay opera’ singer/dancer/actress and star, Miss Riboet, whose innovations transformed this new popular, vernacular hybrid genre from its *komedi stamboel* origins to one that, through the subject matter of the plays and Riboet’s ‘topical singing’ (*dongengan*), introduced issues such as the tension between modernity and tradition, giving Malay opera productions a strong social relevance. As in the Philippines section, the ‘Indonesia’ chapters consider how this new socially engaged vernacular genre intersected with other cultural forces of journalism, literary activity, racial politics, and nationalism. Importantly, Keppy also covers the crossover from live theater into the new era of sound film, which inherited many elements of Malay opera, including its actors and writers.

Particular aspects of the book deserve highlighting. Centering the narrative on two highly influential artists throws important light in this period of cultural change on the agency of significant artistic innova-

tors who have been ignored in the nationalist-centered cultural histories of these countries. Another key aspect in relation to the NEI is the role of *peranakan* Chinese as participant actors, managers, writers, and commentator/journalists alongside ethnic 'Indonesians' and Eurasians in popular theater developments, highlighting the multi-ethnic creative input as well as audiences that were central to these developments. Somewhat similarly, in the Philippines resident Americans were influential as venue managers, among other roles. Hybridity and eclecticism characterized not just the content of NEI and Philippine vernacular theater forms – whether juxtaposing Javanese dance and *kroncong* with American ragtime and charleston, or tango, ragtime, Italian opera, and orientalist representations of indigenous Philippine genres – but also its producers and audiences, characterized by Keppy as 'in-between people' with an 'in-between culture' (p. 15). From a musical perspective, the phenomenon of 'jazz with a Filipino tinge' and discussion about the transnational circulation of Filipino musicians (as well as theater companies) points to the value of the book within current New Jazz Studies debates about the ownership of jazz and the legitimacy of the 'jazz diaspora' (Johnson 2020).

One less convincing concept is the idea of fandom as applied to the group of socially and politically motivated supporters of Malay opera whose connection to it was far from the identity construction processes that this term implies. Still, the occasional stretched argument is more than made up for by the incredible depth of archival research and very detailed referencing in this book, which included examination of over 100 newspapers and periodicals. This window into cultural forces and on-the-ground developments through primary sources extends to analysis of the contemporary discourse surrounding these genres via the very illuminating commentary of various journalists and other participants. Some musical discussion offering insight into the scores and recordings that were also consulted would have further enhanced this study.

As a scholar with interests in both Jazz Age and Indonesian music, I found this book profoundly fascinating and insightful. I expect that most readers are also likely to have familiarity with either Indonesian or Philippine music, culture, and/or history. However, the chapters about the lesser-known cultural, social, and political world will no doubt be a revelation, providing a broader Southeast Asian frame for the very detailed, culturally specific 'tales' that are the centerpiece of the book.

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