

ARCHIVING THE SINGAPOREAN SOUND: UNDERGROUND MUSIC
SUBCULTURES, HERITAGE AND CULTURAL MEMORY

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Abstract

What is the Singaporean sound? This has been an ongoing question of national identity—or a 4-decade-long conversation—between musicians, academics, government officials, journalists, culture magazines, and Singaporeans young and old. Within the firm boundaries of a modern soft-authoritarian city-state, a multi-subcultural underground music scene defiantly reared its head and has continued to develop since the 1980s. This critical research paper investigates the act of archiving the elusive Singaporean sound as a curatorial process that (re)interprets Singapore music subcultures as heritage. By conducting in-depth interviews, this paper aims to examine three do-it-yourself (DIY) archives at different stages of development to uncover what it means to “heritagise” music subculture through archiving, the creative and ethical curatorial and custodial processes needed to build and maintain these archives, and what function exhibition-making plays in preserving these archives in terms of (re)interpreting music heritage and cultural memory. The archives examined as part of this research belong to pioneering bands and figures from the experimental, hardcore and punk scenes from Singapore, including [REDACTED]

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Archiving the Singaporean Sound: Underground Music Subcultures, Heritage and Cultural Memory

Introduction

In the past decade, there has been increasing academic interest in approaching music and sound as objects of memory and thus, contemporary representations of history and cultural heritage (Bennett & Janssen, 2016; Tan, 2021). Notably, the rise in scholarly investigation into music heritage mirrors the proliferation of popular music museums internationally, including newly opened institutions such as Frankfurt's Museum of Modern Electronic Music and the Indian Music Experience Museum (Baker, Istvandy & Nowak, 2020). Cortez (2016) comments that the heritagisation of music, shifting from "contemporary" to "heritage", is a knotty process. The focus is not on whether contemporary music constitutes heritage, but on what music must do to qualify.

Kong (1999) opines that the concern over heritage represents cultural quests for identity and the social pursuit of community and stability. In Singapore's multicultural context, Kong (1999) suggests that the initial national interest in popular music, an ordinary and everyday aspect of heritage, may stem from the government's anxiety to anchor Singaporeans, especially youth, with a shared identity and cultural heritage that transcends class, ethnic and language differences. Locally, there has been rising academic interest in documenting, analysing and archiving the "rowdier" underground music subcultures and fostering scholarly connections within them, such as punk, hardcore and metal (e.g., Williams & Liew, 2017; Liew & Williams, 2020; Chittick, 2023a; Skadiang, 2021).

These developments acknowledge that alternative music subcultures are part of urban heritage and hold a place in their audiences' collective cultural memory. This paper will

specifically investigate archiving as a curatorial process that (re)interprets Singaporean music subcultures, that were once labelled as “rebellious”, “deviant” and “harmful to youth”, as cultural heritage. Through examining do-it-yourself (DIY) or community-formed archives, this research seeks to answer: what does it *mean* to archive Singaporean music subcultures? What does it mean to decide what qualifies as heritage and whose memories deserve preservation?

Firstly, why archives?

The formation, organisation and maintenance of archives are inherently a curatorial process that mediates what is significant for preservation and what is not. Archives preserve and taxonomise memory, requiring archivists to decide what from the past should be saved and speculate about what will be important to protect for future generations (Georgia, 2009). Tan (2021) argues that archives on sound “advent a politics of aurality—of hearing and of being heard.” The act of archiving music subcultures raises questions such as: Who decides what should be heard? What should be silenced? What should be foregrounded and what should be placed in the background? Who determines heritage? What is considered authentic? When and how should these objects/sounds/artefacts be seen and heard?

Generally speaking, government efforts to archive Singaporean music have been few and unsustained. In 2014, the National Library launched MusicSG, Singapore’s first public digital music archive which collected locally composed and published music from the 1950s to 2010s (Loh, 2014). The multilingual and multicultural archive boasted over 13,000 music resources including tracks, scores, lyrics, biographies and videos. The collection had over 20 genres of music consisting of national campaign songs, local musics, *xinyao* (Singaporean Mandarin ballads), rock, pop, and classical music. Unfortunately, MusicSG is no longer accessible. In 2016, the National Heritage Board launched an online digital archive of

heritage collections called Roots (Roots, no date - a). Within its collection of over 100,000 artefacts, it has managed to archive a few artefacts from Singapore's past underground music scene, such as our first independent rock magazine, BigO, and an invitation to a local indie pop and alternative rock show called Freak Scene (i.e., Roots, no date - b.; Roots, no date - c). The National Archives of Singapore has also published oral history interviews with Paddy Chng, the frontman of a pioneering indie rock band, the Oddfellows, and an occasional writer for BigO, that detailed the history behind BigO and the underground music scene at the time (e.g., Chng, 2010a; Chng, 2010b).

Nonetheless, a comprehensive collection of Singaporean music subculture artefacts has yet to exist in national institutions, despite the underground music scene having a demonstrable cultural history (Liew & Williams, 2020). Setiawan (2014) writes that a similar lack of serious, concrete efforts to preserve Indonesian-made music, beyond traditional music, has led to a lack of understanding of Indonesian music history among Indonesians. Singaporeans also need to catch up in an awareness of our underground music history. In true DIY nature, there have been community-led, ground-up efforts to archive Singaporean music subcultures. With a lack of scholarly investigation into archiving Singaporean music subcultures, this research paper seeks to address this gap.

Defining music subcultures, heritage and cultural memory

Before proceeding further, it is important to clarify key terms in this paper. "Music subcultures" or "the underground music scene" will act as generic terms referring to music genres that were not popular enough to be "accepted" by mainstream audiences and/or whose members wanted to define themselves as somewhat separate from mainstream culture (Kruse, 1993).

While heritage is a complex term to define, in this paper it will refer to historical knowledge that is perceived to belong to a people by those people in question, combining personal memory, collective cultural memory and history (Kong, 1999). Cultural memory is a shared construction or sense of the past, important for forming a sense of belonging and identity despite differing pasts (O'Reilly et al., 2017; van der Hoeven, 2014; Bennett, 2009; Schofield & Rellensmann, 2015; Kong, 1999).

Inventing the Singaporean sound: Our national context

Since Singapore's independence from British colonial rule in 1959 and later, its separation from Malaysia in 1965, Western and local musicians and genres were closely scrutinised in terms of their risk to citizens, including punk music from the UK (Williams & Kiew, 2017). Western music was associated with individualism, indulgence and insolence in postcolonial discourse. The official view was that popular English music brought with it negative values and hedonistic practices that were particularly harmful to Singaporean youth (Kong, 1999; Straits Times, 1977). This was in contrast with the state's preference for a "collectivist ethos involving diligence, hierarchy and harmony" (Williams & Kiew, 2017). In the 1970s, this led to a mix of reactive and proactive measures to crack down on youth cultures (Chittick, 2023a; Williams & Kiew, 2017). Singaporean punk documentary, *Scene Unseen* (2021), recalls this period when live music venues were shut down, men were forced to shear off long hair through a nationwide campaign called "Operation Snip Snip", and any music deemed inappropriate was banned (Chittick, 2023a). During this time, local groups disbanded and there was a growing hunger for variety beyond state-sanctioned music (Chittick, 2023a).

The development of the underground music scene kicked off when Zircon Lounge, a new wave band was formed in 1982 (Chittick, 2023a). In 1986, Singapore's first punk band,

Opposition Party was formed (Opposition Party, no date). Two years after, hardcore punk band, Stompin' Ground arrived at the scene (Singh, 2022). In 1990, theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun established The Substation, a performance venue that became a critical space for different art forms. Despite a national ban on slam dancing (or moshing) in 1993, there was a flourishing DIY and collaborative culture and new subcultural identities were formed (Chittick, 2023a). Our underground music subcultures that continue to endure in Singapore today—punk, hardcore, metal, experimental, etc.—share this history of defiantly creating spaces to be seen and heard amidst a tightly regulated sociopolitical landscape (Williams & Kiew, 2017; Moore, 2016; Liew & Fu, 2006).

The present study

As the decades pass, it is all the more important to investigate how Singapore's music subculture history and legacies are being preserved. In my research paper, I propose to present and discuss case study analyses of three DIY archives at different stages of organisation and formation: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Importantly, these three archives are selected for this research as they have been exhibited in different ways and at varying scales and locations. With a lack of research and publicly funded efforts to archive the Singaporean sound, it would be invaluable to investigate the curatorial decisions behind how these ground-up DIY archives are formed, organised, managed, preserved and exhibited.

The analyses of these archives will be done through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the respective bands and custodians of the archives. In the following sections, the methodology and archives will be described in further detail.

Research questions

This paper seeks to answer the larger question: What does it mean to archive Singaporean music subcultures?

Specifically, through my analysis, I would like to know:

- 1) How were these archives on music subcultures formed?
- 2) What processes of creative and ethical custodianship would these archives require?
- 3) How does exhibition-making function to preserve these archives in terms of (re)interpreting music heritage and collective memory?

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews

To allow balance in flexibility and structure in the interviewing process, online semi-structured interviews (30 minutes to an hour) will be conducted with the custodian/curators of the three DIY archives. The interviews will broadly aim to understand (1) how and why the archives were formed, (2) what are the decision-making processes behind what is included or excluded in the archives, (3) how are the archives organised, (4) what are the plans for these archives in terms of access and care, (5) what were the goals behind exhibiting the archival material and (6) the creative and custodial processes behind exhibition-making with these archives.

Before conducting the interviews, the respective bands and custodians of the archives will be contacted via email and a consent procedure will be initiated, in line with UAL's code

of practice on research ethics. Upon receiving the interviewees' consent, they will be sent a list of the interview questions for their reference and preparation. The interviews will be conducted online and video and audio recorded. Subsequently, they will be transcribed and included in the final research paper as an appendix. To extend the documentation of the research beyond this paper, I plan to produce a publicly accessible podcast that will publish these interviews in separate episodes, forming an oral history archive about archives. The interviews will be published only with the consent of the interviewees and the production of the podcast episodes will continually involve their input until publication. Nonetheless, it is important to clarify that the scope of the research paper will focus solely on the case study archives and the examination of the interviews.

<Section on case archives has been removed>

Methodological challenges

Through my research, there are several methodological challenges that I anticipate. Crucially, as the interviews are conducted retrospectively, there may be limitations in what the interviewees will be able to recall about their archival processes and the conception of their past exhibitions. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] If anything, these challenges speak to the value and timeliness of investigating these DIY band archives of pioneering bands that were historically significant to the development of Singapore's underground music scene. The final methodological

challenge is a personal one. As an academic researcher, I am acutely aware of my status as an “outsider” of the archives' subcultures. Thus, my research requires a sensitive approach. Not only can I expect that there would be limits to what the interviewees would be willing to disclose, but I would also have to continually and mindfully avoid the impulse to perform normalised/traditional role identities rooted in the scholarly production of research reports and viewing the archives or interviewees as mere ethnographic subjects to be studied (Williams & Liew, 2017). Instead, I should aim to be an example of how academics can utilise their cultural and social capital in the service of alternative music subcultures, seeking to gain a genuine understanding from the ground up.

Discussion

In my future investigations, it is important to consider the nature of DIY archives. Are they formed differently from official archives and if so, in what ways? Long and colleagues (2017) suggest that there are differences in the affective motivations of archivists who oversee official archives and DIY archives of popular music culture. They akin official archivists to professional historians while DIY archivists as consumers of heritage and public history experience, and each serves a variety of interests and impulses. In my research that focuses solely on DIY archives of music subcultures that active participants of the subcultures themselves curate, how does their personal affective attachment to the material affect the way their archives are formed? What unique narratives and meanings do they derive from their archives? Subsequently, what does it say about the past that they preserve through their archives?

Additionally, with each case study archive having been exhibited in some form, it would be imperative to consider where and how they were exhibited [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Can the exhibition of these archives still serve to preserve them, and if so, how? In exhibition-making, how do you avoid co-opting, commodifying and performing music subcultures that were once thought of as deviant and sources of juvenile delinquent behaviour?

Finally, in the production of the oral history archive podcast, it would be critical for me to know how I can best serve the communities and bands that the archives belong to. Further probing into answering these questions surrounding DIY archives, exhibition-making and its ethics would be crucial in informing how I craft my interview questions and analyse the interview responses.

Conclusion

Through my case study analyses of [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], I hope to begin to scratch the surface of what it means to archive Singaporean underground music subcultures and how these archives mediate our definition of heritage and cultural memory. With the increasing “heritagisation” of Singaporean music, there is a timely need to examine the current curatorial processes behind archiving our subcultures whose communities persevered in forming—perhaps not *the*—but *a* Singaporean sound.

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