

**REVEALING THE HEART:
THE POPULAR MUSIC INDUSTRY IN YANGON, BURMA**

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**REVEALING THE HEART: THE POPULAR MUSIC INDUSTRY IN
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This dissertation is an ethnography of the Burmese popular music scene, which is centered in Yangon, Burma. The author attended concerts, rehearsals, recording sessions and music classes to develop the data discussed in the dissertation. She conducted seventy-seven individual interviews with members of the industry, including singers, instrument players, composers, studio owners, producers, managers, radio station employees and censors. In Chapter 1, she describes a typical recording session and then explains how the people there typify the larger Burmese pop music scene in terms of their gender, religion, career path, and their relationships to their fans, each other, and their government. She argues that musicians' frequent contributions to humanitarian causes are relevant to the ongoing debate about the development of civil society in Burma today. In Chapter 2, she describes a typical live show. She analyzes the kind of music that Burmese pop musicians create and describes their theories about music, showing that, for them, preserving the Anglo-American pop tradition is usually more important than creating innovative musical works. In Chapter 3, she explains the Burmese approach to learning and rehearsing music, showing that musicians' beliefs about talent mediate their rehearsal practices. Chapter 4 explains that, in Burma, musical recordings are distributed both via legal channels and by pirates, who pose – according to industry members – a tremendous threat to the industry. The author outlines the music distribution network using sociologist Richard A. Peterson's production perspective as a framework for the analysis. She argues that one of Peterson's most important contributions to the scholarship on cultural

industries should be re-examined in light of the Burmese case. Chapter 5 offers a detailed look at the relationship between Burmese pop musicians and the government censors. The author shows that musicians use a variety of strategies to assert agency in the midst of the constraints imposed by the censorship system. She argues that scholar James Scott's ideas about power relationships, developed in studies of rural farmers, apply also to famous and influential musicians in Burma.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Heather MacLachlan was born in Winnipeg, Canada in 1972. She earned a B.Mus/B.Ed degree from the University of Manitoba in 1993. Prior to commencing graduate work at Cornell University, she worked for a decade as a public school music educator in French Immersion schools in Manitoba. In August of 2009, she took up the position of Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Dayton in Dayton, OH.

This dissertation is dedicated to the many Yangon dwellers that graciously granted me interviews, invited me into their homes, and shared their hearts with me

Most of them remain unnamed here, because of the danger they still face in present-day Burma

They lived out one of the highest ideals of their society:

They “warmly welcomed” me, the visitor

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INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF POPULAR MUSIC IN BURMA

In 1755 King Alaungpaya, the founder of the last great Burmese monarchical dynasty, arrived at the small fishing village of Dagon. At the end of a long campaign to conquer and unify much of what we now know as Burma, he decided to found his new capital. He renamed the location Yan-gon, meaning “the end of strife.” Standing in modern-day Yangon (also known as Rangoon), it is easy to imagine what Alaungpaya must have seen. Undoubtedly he raised his eyes to the glorious sight of the Shwedagon Pagoda, where devout Buddhists have venerated a shrine containing eight hairs from the head of Gautama Buddha for more than a millennium. He must have seen small family homes made of bamboo, and women carrying their produce to market in baskets balanced on their heads. He would have given alms to saffron-robed monks who wandered the streets at dawn, begging bowls in hand.



Figure 1.1: Workers' house next to a mansion they are building, Dhamma Zedi Lan, Yangon

It is easy to picture the scene as it looked two hundred and fifty years ago because, in each of these ways, Yangon has not changed. Nowadays the bamboo huts are interspersed with concrete and steel; there seems to be a new construction project

on every major thoroughfare. Cars race past the open-air markets, and monks wear eyeglasses and ride public buses. But glimpses of the older Yangon are everywhere in the contemporary city.

We can still see what Alaungpaya saw, and we can still hear what he heard. The musical tradition that developed and flourished in the courts of kings like Alaungpaya, known as the Maha Gita, continues to be a vibrant and important part of Burmese life in the twenty-first century. The Maha Gita is a body of song texts which were written down some centuries ago. The melodies that accompany these texts have been passed down orally. The songs are accompanied by a variety of distinctively Burmese musical instruments, like the *saung gauk* (harp) and the *pattala* (xylophone). The king's mighty instrumental ensemble, known as the *hsaing waing*, includes pitched drums and gongs and an aerophone with a particularly piercing sound, the *hnay*. (For more on this music, see Becker 1969, Garfias 1975 and 1985, Keeler 1998, Williamson 2000). Now, as then, singers and instrumentalists trained in the Maha Gita perform for Buddhist rituals and at weddings, and play an important part in public



Figure 1.2: Hsaing waing performing at a wedding in Yangon, January 2009

festivals. They appear frequently in government-sponsored television shows, and young people study the tunes and techniques at university (see Douglas 2001 and 2003 for how this tradition is evolving today).

From our historical vantage point, we can also hear Burmese musical sounds that Alaungpaya could not have ever imagined. His dynasty ended, slowly and painfully, as the British colonized Burma in waves of invasion during the nineteenth century. English cultural products, including musical instruments, came to Burma with the colonists, and the resourceful Burmese adopted them for their own use. Through the twentieth century, Burmese musicians developed uniquely Burmese ways of playing the piano and the violin. In addition, they combined their own melodies and singing style with Western instruments (like the slide guitar, and later, electronic keyboards and guitars) to create a new fusion music. This music is known as *kalabaw* or *mono*, after the single-track recording devices on which it was first recorded in mid-century. The moniker *mono* also serves to distinguish it from the third important genre of Burmese music, which is called *stereo* and which is the focus of this study.¹

Stereo (pronounced sah-tee-ree-oh) musicians are unabashed admirers of Anglo-American pop music, and *stereo* aims to fit squarely within the Western pop and rock tradition. Because of this, and in deference to my English-language readers, I will call it simply Burmese pop music. It is important to note that the entire industry which produces this music is located in Yangon. All pop music recordings are made in studios in Yangon, and everyone who wishes to make a career in pop music must live in Yangon. Because the recordings eventually make their way to large urban areas and even small villages across the country, the music is understood to be

¹ Note that the Myanmar Musicians Association, an important umbrella group for Burmese musicians which will be discussed at length in this dissertation, uses this three-part distinction to organize their members into sub-groups. Musicians belong to the traditional, Maha Gita group, or the *kalabaw* group, or the *stereo* group.

“Burmese” pop rather than a solely Yangon-based genre. But the fact remains that Yangon is the cradle of this music.²

It is impossible to determine which sounds are most often heard across Burma, but pop music now seems to be the dominant music on the airwaves in Yangon. Hundreds of people make their livings working in the Yangon-based industry. The performing stars (“famous musicians”) appear in tabloid-style journals weekly. It is clear that the Burmese popular music scene is increasingly important in Burmese life generally. In this dissertation I will discuss many of the salient aspects of that scene. Here, I provide a brief historical overview of its development to contextualize my later remarks.

Burmese pop got its start when young people began listening to, and then imitating, American rock and roll in the mid-sixties. The first few bands were cover bands, and they earned money performing live both for local audiences and for Westerners at embassies and the like. As musicians mastered the performance techniques and the repertoire, they began writing Burmese lyrics for the Western melodies they liked so much. This kind of composition, called *copy thachin*, remains important in Burma today. In 1967, U Htun Naung wrote what is now identified as Burma’s first *own tune* pop song, called “Mommy I Want a Girlfriend.” The melody, rhythm and harmony as well as the lyrics were all his own original creation. He recorded this song on recording equipment he kept in his dorm room at Rangoon University. By 1969, copies of this song were delighting fans all over Burma. And in 1971, when entrepreneur U Ba Thein opened the country’s first professional recording studio, *stereo* music (named after the dual-track tape recorder featured in the studio)

² Martin Cloonan (1999) calls for more studies of popular music at the national level, pointing out that most scholarship to date has focused on either local or global expressions of pop. This study aims to describe and discuss pop music in Burma as a national phenomenon. Of course the research was made easier by the fact that the entire national industry is located in one city.

took off (Oo 2006). Local musicians were then able to create professional-quality recordings of themselves and sell them to fans.

In 1973, Sai Htee Saing and his band The Wild Ones made history as the first to commit to performing nothing but *own tunes*. In 1976, the Yin Mar Music Store opened in downtown Yangon. This was the first store devoted entirely to stocking foreign-made recordings, and it served (and still serves) as a Mecca for young Burmese who want to learn how to play and sing popular music. Inspired by recordings acquired at Yin Mar, Sai Htee Saing's increasingly large number of peers created, performed and recorded *copy thachin* and *own tunes* through the 1980s and 1990s. During this era, the Burmese pop scene even produced a handful of all-female bands. Together, these pop music bands became the entertainment of choice for many parties, weddings and professional functions. And Burmese pop musicians continued to work in tourist venues, impressing foreigners with their note-perfect renditions of English hit songs.

By the close of the 1990s, live performances for large Burmese audiences had grown rare (in part because of the government's reluctance to allow large crowds to congregate). On January 27, 2001, Zaw Win Htut and a handful of other famous Burmese singers performed at the first "big show" of the new millennium. At this show, the Emperor Band accompanied a handful of different singers, each of whom contributed a few songs apiece. This concert, which serves as a convenient marker for the beginning of the contemporary era of Burmese pop music history, became the model for a new kind of marketing of pop music. Now virtually all live shows feature one band backing multiple soloists, and so-called group albums (which include a variety of songs performed by a variety of artists) are the best-selling kind of recordings in the country.

Burma's first call-in radio station, called Yangon City FM, began broadcasting on January 1, 2002.³ This station plays mostly pop music and is deeply important in the dissemination of Burmese pop to a wider audience in recent years. Consumers are now able to purchase VCD recordings of their favorite songs. VCDs – the most popular version of modern pop recordings – include audio, video of the performers, and lyrics scrolling across the screen. For this reason they are also known as “karaoke” CDs (and one of my friends laughingly calls them “three-in-one” (Y012908A).) In 2007, Myawaddy TV (a government-run television station) premiered a song contest modeled on American Idol. The show, called Melody World, was an immediate success and went on to a second season. In March of 2008, Mandalay FM (another call-in radio station modeled on Yangon City FM) started broadcasting in both Mandalay and Yangon. And in 2009, word has it that the first professional recording studio located in Taunggyi, Shan State, will be built (Y010709B).

As these examples show, the current era is one of dramatic expansion. However, it is also marked by deep uncertainty. Many of the full-time professionals who work in the Burmese pop music scene worry that their industry is in grave danger. Piracy is rampant, and it is driving profits down so far that some careers have already been lost, and others are struggling. In this dissertation, I will discuss this issue, along with many others that are salient to the present situation. For now, it will suffice to make one important point: As this history shows, Burmese pop music cannot be dismissed as just another instance of cultural imperialism.

Cultural imperialism is notoriously difficult to define. In his book of the same title, John Tomlinson spends nine pages explaining why he cannot provide a short and

³ Note that the studio (located in the Yangon City Development Committee building in downtown Yangon) was constructed in 2001. Building was completed in November, but broadcasts did not begin until New Year's Day because this date was perceived to be “lucky” (Y121708A).

coherent definition of the term (2002:3-11).⁴ Pop music scholar Keith Negus argues that whatever else we might say about it, cultural imperialism must be understood as the dominance of certain ownership structures, media technologies and cultural products in a given market (1996:172, also 178). Following Negus, I will argue that the Burmese case cannot be dismissed as a straightforward imposition of American cultural values and products on a vulnerable foreign population. Quite the opposite in fact: Burmese musicians, until very recently, have gone to great efforts to acquire Western-made recordings, instruments and recording equipment. These products were not (legally) available in the early days of *stereo*, and even now must be smuggled into the country in defiance of international sanctions. The Big Six (now the Big Four) oligarchic recording companies never have had a corporate presence in Burma.

Again history provides an explanation: During the colonialist era, which lasted until 1947, British overlords promoted all things English to their subject population. They managed to convince at least some Burmese people that the English education system, the English language and the British way of life were markedly superior to the Burmese analogs. Even today, it is possible to meet self-confident Burmese people who believe that their own society is somehow lacking in comparison to the West (and I met some of them during my research). So we must acknowledge that Burmese people are living with the legacy of an explicit cultural and military imperialism that predisposes some of them to valorize, among other things, Anglo-American pop music. However, they are also living with an equally strong counter-message.

In 1962, after a short-lived era of independence and parliamentary democracy in Burma, a group of generals overthrew the elected government and installed their leader, General Ne Win, as the supreme ruler of the country. Ne Win established the

⁴ But note that later he offers this rough-and-ready explanation: “the domination of one national culture by another” (2002:68).

Burma Socialist Programme Party (the BSPP) as the only legal political party and launched the Burmese Way to Socialism, the ideology that shaped the country for most of the next three decades.⁵ One of the most important features of this policy was the extreme isolation it imposed on Burma. In the interests of creating a self-sufficient socialist economy, the new military government severely restricted trade with other countries and access to foreign goods. Within months, almost all foreigners were expelled from the country, and tourist visits limited to seven days.⁶ At the same time, the junta promoted its own narrow vision of “Burmese culture,” modeled on Ne Win’s understanding of the former kings of Burma. The BSPP rejected most forms of Western culture as “decadent,” and Ne Win reserved a special hatred for American rock and pop music (Zaw 2004:41).

It was during the early part of the BSPP era that young Burmese grew their hair long, built their own electric guitars, and listened to clandestinely-obtained recordings of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Since pop music was not allowed on government radio - only *mono* was acceptable – they had to circulate their music via friends and family. They relied on the few of their peers who were allowed to travel abroad (mostly to Eastern European socialist countries) to obtain recordings and musical instruction books. They cultivated friendships with the few Western diplomats they could access in order to obtain precious foreign-made instruments and recording equipment. And their music making moved into the open in 1973 when the BSPP co-opted their new stereo style in order to promote a government referendum (Zaw 2004:43.) Since that time, the Burmese regime has tolerated and even used pop music for its own purposes.

⁵ For an English-language version of the government document that originally outlined the Burmese Way to Socialism, see http://burmalibrary.org/docs/The_Burmese_Way_to_Socialism.htm

⁶ See Iyer 1988 for a hilarious yet telling account of life in Burma under Ne Win.

The BSPP was succeeded in 1988 by the current government, first known as the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and now as the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council). The current government, like the former, is a military dictatorship which has repeatedly shown its willingness to murder citizens who speak in opposition to it.⁷ Although the SPDC is not as isolationist as was the BSPP, and in fact is working hard to increase tourism in Burma, it remains suspicious of any force which might draw the loyalty of its citizens (like, for example, rock stars on stage in front of thousands of screaming fans, or monks marching in the streets). It continues to censor pop music rigorously, and it makes no bones about banning or even jailing entertainers who might be promoting any kind of philosophy that would threaten their dominance (say, free and fair elections).

Therefore, it cannot be said that Burmese pop music is nothing more than the outworking of either Western cultural imperialism or local military totalitarianism. While both of these historical forces have deeply affected the development of pop music, neither can claim to be its *raison d'être*. How then can we account for the phenomenon of popular music in Burma? I asked the creators of that music this question.

Burmese pop musicians insist that there is a straightforward explanation. They say that their music, or more precisely their musical activities, come “from the heart.” When they use this expression, in English or in Burmese, they mean the same that English-speakers do when they use it: they mean that their decisions are based on their emotions, and that their musical efforts are the logical outcome of their own personal feelings. Singers say that their singing comes from their hearts (e.g.

⁷ Notoriously, the BSPP massacred university students demonstrating for democratic rights in 1962 and 1974, and citizens at large who marched for democracy in 1988. The SPDC has jailed thousands of opposition leaders, including the elected head of state, Aung San Suu Kyi. This government has publicly murdered pro-democracy supporters (at the Depayin Massacre of 2003) and distinguished itself by killing Buddhist monks during the short-lived Saffron Revolution of September 2007.

Y020508A), audio engineers say that their editing decisions come from their hearts (e.g. Y012908A) and even producers say that music producing is a reflection of what is in their hearts (Y122708B). Interestingly, composers say that emotion is so important to the process of composing that it makes a significant difference in the amount of time it takes to compose a song. If Burmese pop music composers feel very deeply, they say that they can compose a song in a matter of hours – otherwise, it may take weeks or months (e.g. Y011308A).

Albin Zak writes that American pop musicians make exactly the same claim (2001:192). When asked, they constantly aver that “there are no rules” because all of their artistic decisions are based on intuition or emotion. Yet the fact remains that their industry has developed conventional practices that guide musicians, whether they are aware of this or not. The same is true in Burma: the work and lives of pop musicians there are marked by norms and patterns. My goal in this dissertation is to delineate these norms and patterns without implying that the real people involved in them are ever entirely predictable. Thus my title: I aim here to “reveal the heart” of the Burmese pop music industry, as I learned about it through observation, participation and conversation.

This dissertation is an ethnography. In order to develop the research on which it is based, I spent nearly six months living in Yangon, interacting with people in the center and on the fringes of the pop music industry on a nearly daily basis. I attended concerts and rehearsals, music classes, recording sessions and religious services. I purchased music and I even contributed in a small way to the production of music (by playing the keyboards for one track on one recording). But my main research method was the interview. I conducted 77 interviews, most of them lasting approximately two hours, with people from across the industry. I interviewed some of the highest-paid, most recognizable performers in the country, as well as young people struggling to

break in to the music business. In addition, I interviewed composers, producers, audio engineers, concert promoters, radio station management and others whose work is more tangential to the industry (like music teachers). I depend on these interviews for many of the assertions I make in this dissertation. And I have tried to include my interviewees' first-person statements at every juncture. I did so because I believe, along with Robert Walser, that "ultimately, musical analysis can be considered credible only if it helps explain the significance of musical activities in particular social contexts" (1993:31).

The particular social context of Burmese pop music has, until now, not been explored in depth, either by scholars of popular music or by contributors to Burma Studies. By writing this ethnography, I hope in some small way to contribute to both of those disciplines. Pop music studies have focused largely on data culled from trade journals and personal observations. Because it has usually not included the perspective of pop musicians themselves, it has remained somewhat "mysterious" (Pruett 2008). Therefore, major scholars in this field have issued calls for more ethnographic work (see Cohen 1993, Stokes 2003 and Walser 2003). Research on Burma, on the other hand, has focused largely on political histories (e.g. Lieberman 1984, Lintner 1990). Recent important contributions to the field continue this focus, with scholars examining in depth the pressing question Burma's political future in light of its past (e.g. Callahan 2003 and 2007, Jordt 2007, Smith 1999, Steinberg 2001, Taylor 2009, Thant-Myint 2001). Two ethnographies which treat this theme have been published recently (Fink 2001 and Skidmore 2004), but on the whole, most of the outstanding work in Burma Studies does not privilege the voices of Burmese people themselves.⁸

⁸ There is a burgeoning English-language literature about Burma, aimed at a general audience, written by 1) visitors to the country and 2) exiles now living in the West. The best of each category are, in my

In Chapter 1, I describe some of the creators of Burmese pop music. I outline the typical arc of a career in the Burmese pop industry. I note that, while these musicians have much in common with pop musicians elsewhere in the world, they also operate within a particularly Burmese context. For example, though many of them are famous, they are not rich and famous – at least by their own accounts. And because of the nature of their industry, they usually function autonomously, with no obligation to listen to a musical director when working in studio, for example. Their relative degree of autonomy and financial security account in large part for the satisfaction they find in their work. However, it is also crucially important to them to be seen as independent of the government. Their generous and consistent support of what we might call “good causes” helps to underline this facet of their identity, both to themselves and to their fans.

In Chapter 2, I describe the music that these musicians create. I discuss the relevance of the terms *own tune* and *copy thachin*, and explain the rationale for *copy thachin* from the musicians’ perspective. More generally, this chapter looks at the issues of innovation and of imitating the Western model. I analyze three examples of fusion music created by Burmese pop musicians, but I also investigate why it is that so many of them spend so much time focusing on imitation rather than innovation.

In Chapter 3, I describe the learning and rehearsal culture created by these musicians. I show that they are primarily self-taught, and that their stated reason for doing so (lack of access to formal education) is probably not as relevant as is their expectations for themselves. I discuss their ideas about talent, showing that these beliefs affect their perceptions about rehearsing, for example. Furthermore, these

opinion: 1) Marshall 2002, Larkin 2004, Rabinowitz 2001, Tucker 2000 and 2) Myint-Thant 2006, Phan 2009, Koo Thwe 2002.

beliefs intersect with their religious beliefs, so the current learning and rehearsal culture will likely resist significant change.

In Chapter 4, I turn from the creators of music to the distribution side of the industry. Using sociologist Richard A. Peterson's "production perspective," I examine six facets of the distribution of pop music in Yangon. I argue that piracy is an important part of this mechanism. Furthermore, I argue that looming changes in the law may have a tremendous effect on Burmese pop music in the near future.

In Chapter 5, I take on the exercise of state power in Burma, as manifest in the censorship system. I look at controllers of music (censors) and delineate the relationship that exists between them and their putative subjects, the musicians. I analyze the situation using James Scott's paradigm of public transcript vs. hidden transcript. I discover that musicians use four different strategies when dealing with censorship, and that these strategies largely accord with Scott's "weapons of the weak." I point out that this case shows that one of these strategies, avoidance, is more politically productive than is usually imagined.

CHAPTER 1

CREATORS OF BURMESE POP MUSIC: WHO ARE THEY?

Gita Studio is located in a nine-story building on one of Yangon's major thoroughfares.⁹ The building is only a few years old and boasts an elevator that works virtually every day, thanks to the enormous, noisy generator that squats in front of the entrance. The owner of the building, who built it as an investment, now lives in Singapore. The rumor is that he is laundering money for the military junta, and that the building is a respectable front for his seamier activities (Y013108A). What is certain is that the building is located in the heart of one of the city's Sgaw Karen neighborhoods, and that it serves as a focal point for professional Sgaw Karen musicians living in the area. They gather in the ground-floor café to eat and talk, they record their series in Gita Studio upstairs, and they even have their music videos edited at the movie editing business located on the eighth floor.

The building also contains apartments (flats), and some of these are occupied by members of this musical community. The audio engineer who works full-time in Gita Studio lives there, for example, as does one the country's most famous "pretty boys" (a handsome young model and actor who recently launched a singing career). Though his star is on the rise, he continues to live with his parents in a modest apartment near the top of the building. Like most young adults in Burma, he respects the idea of a family home and expresses no desire to reside by himself, though he could well afford to do so. His apartment, like so many others that I visited while living in Yangon, is a small space where multiple generations live together seemingly in harmony.

The recording itself, which occupies an entire floor of the building, is an active but not frenzied space. Though the heavy doors to the various rooms are clearly

⁹ Name changed to protect confidentiality.

marked with “Do not open while recording is in session” signs, people merrily disregard the instruction, wandering in and out frequently. Clearly, they know each other well. Morale seems high; people greet each other happily and settle into their work quickly. The industrious atmosphere I sense may have something to do with how people working in this studio (and indeed, in other studios where I observed recording sessions) conceive of a working day: one day of recording time, about ten hours worth, is called *duty*.¹⁰ One duty typically costs 20 000 to 30 000 kyat at the well-equipped studios like Gita Studio, although customers frequently pay a flat fee of around 600 000 kyat to record an entire series. (Another studio owner quoted prices to me in typical Yangon style: One *duty* costs 30 000 kyat, and 5000 more if the customers ask the owners to fire up the generator (Y010709A)). Artists who come here to record their work - or to have their work recorded or mixed - are paying large amounts, by local standards, for the use of the studio. After repeatedly attending recording sessions here and elsewhere, I decided that customers are getting good value for their money. The musicians work efficiently – that is, they do their *duty* diligently. In addition, the studio contains world-class digital recording equipment and the air-conditioning runs constantly in order to protect that equipment.

Recording sessions follow an unvarying pattern (Y011108A). To begin, the singer who wants to record an album composes, or pays someone else to compose, a *demo* (pronounced “dee-moh.”) The demo cassette usually consists of the sung melodies and the harmonic accompaniments played on guitar or keyboard. The singer supplies this demo to the *arranger*, the person who arranges the music, or makes a plan for how the song will be recorded. The arranger then supplies this arrangement to the players who will record the series. In the studio, the recording engineer records

¹⁰ The musicians use this English word, both written and spoken. In fact virtually all of the technical vocabulary employed by professional musicians consists of English words.

first the *body*, that is, the drum part by itself. Secondly, he records the *multiple*, or the guitar and keyboard parts. Thirdly, he records the *vocals* – at this point, the singer is able to sing the melody over the full accompaniment created during the first two steps. Finally, the *harmony* is recorded; these are voice parts sung in harmony with the melody. The finished tracks are sent across the hall to the audio engineer, who employs the very latest computer technology to mix the tracks and create a polished, finished product.

This dry-bones description of the recording process was given to me by a well-known professional musician. To put flesh on it, I decided to spend a day observing him at work in Gita Studio. On February 12, 2008, I arrived early, greeted a few acquaintances who were breakfasting in the café, and headed up to the studio. A number of musicians were gathered to record a song which had been requested – or more accurately, demanded – by the government. The generals would soon conduct a ceremony to open a new bridge. This ceremony would be broadcast on Myanmar TV, and the powers that be wanted a song to accompany the video. The Myanmar government, in this case, was the *producer*, that is, the person or entity who funded the recording.

The *arranger*, a Sgaw Karen Christian who is a successful guitarist and who owns another, smaller recording studio in the same neighborhood, arrived early in the morning with the demo tape in hand. He listened to the tape and wrote down the chord progressions almost simultaneously. His notated score, with neatly printed eight-measure lines of chords, was complete after he has played the cassette through twice. (As per the conventions of Burma's C Rule notation – more about this in Chapter 2 - he wrote the chord progressions in C major, although the song was actually in A major.) "It's easy," he said – the song contained only three chords (I, IV, and V) organized in conventional patterns. He pointed out that this is the usual way of

things: the government likes simple songs. Government songs can be challenging to record though, because the person in charge will often demand that the song include “cultural sounds.” This was the case that day, and so, his notation arrangement included a pause (or rest), where the sound of a traditional Burmese drum (called a *bohn*) would be inserted. After writing out his arrangement he proceeded to record a rhythm guitar part, simply strumming the chords on the beat, four per measure for the length of the song.

Just before 11:00 am, the drummer arrived. This young man was also a Karen Christian, and happened to be the son of the founder of one of Burma’s greatest rock bands. He and the arranger, who was also functioning as the guitarist for this recording, ran through the various sections of the song. Although they were seated in two different rooms, they were able to speak to each other through the sound system, and I could hear what I came to think of Burmese “rock talk”: all of the technical vocabulary pertaining to the music is in English, and these words are embedded in Burmese sentences. An English-only speaker would likely be able to discern what was going on, as the two men talked to each other about the “verse”, the “chorus”, the “fadeout”, and so on. After the drummer and guitarist played through the entire song once, they spent ten minutes experimenting with the sound of the drums; the guitarist wanted to be sure that the sound was “*hla deh*” (pretty). Just as the men got set to record, the electricity went out. Although the studio was in darkness for only a few seconds, when the power returned, the recording engineer had to plug and unplug numerous wires, delaying the whole procedure. Everyone remained good-humored, though; this is a daily occurrence and they have all learned to cope with it. Finally, the drummer recorded his part, playing along with the guitar track. He played the same pattern throughout the song, with no tempo changes and few fills. As soon as he completed the task - that is, as soon as he had played the piece once - he was off. He

had to play at a wedding. Like so many studio musicians in Yangon, his professional life includes live performances at private functions as well as recording work. Conveniently for him, most weddings in Yangon happen during business hours.

The arranger/guitarist did not bother to listen to the recorded tracks, but proceeded immediately to the bass guitar part. Like a number of other professional guitarists I met in Yangon, he is equally adept on bass guitar and electric guitar. His approach was straightforward: he played the root of the chord on the first beat of each measure, and then another chordal note (the root, third or fifth), creating this rhythm for each set of four beats:



At the chorus he varied this slightly; the rhythm became:



At a few points, the guitarist encountered difficulty – unsurprisingly since he had not rehearsed this part – and therefore he had to stop and restart. It was fascinating to see how he and the recording engineer worked very closely together. The engineer seemed to be able to anticipate the guitarist’s need to restart, stopping the recording one second (or less) after the guitarist stopped. They seldom spoke to each other, and then only in short phrases. Very little time was lost: they seemed almost to read each others’ minds. The bass guitar part was not recorded in one take, exactly, but it was completed quickly, with a minimum of discussion.

Without listening to the finished product, the guitarist proceeded directly to the next task at hand: recording another rhythm guitar part, this one an octave higher than the first. Again without taking time to listen to the sound of the tracks he had just recorded, he moved on to the lead (electric) guitar part. Here he played little more imaginatively, creating short melodic motives to fill in two or three-beat sections when

the singer would pause for breath. In two hours, the arranger supervised and/or personally recorded five tracks.

The composer arrived around 1:00 pm and recorded the sung melody over the drum and guitar tracks. His purpose in doing so was simply to provide a vocal guide – the featured singer would record the melody the following day. A modest man, he seemed happy to hear how his song was developing so far. He offered no criticisms or suggestions to the arranger, who was clearly in charge here. The arranger/guitarist made all of the artistic decisions – or so it seemed until the keyboard player arrived.

The keyboardist worked in the same way that the guitarist did; that is, he recorded his part without rehearsing it first, performing the notation at sight. He too had a formulaic approach to the work, playing required triads in the same rhythm in most measures:



He added a few complementary rhythms, and employed some passing tones and neighbor tones to vary the pitches. He also requested, a few times, that the recording be stopped so that he could re-record something that he was not happy with. I noticed that he never played a wrong note (in the sense that he never played a note that did not belong in the chord progression). His requests to re-record stemmed from his own judgment about his playing. If it was not adequately *hla deh*, he simply redid it. Generally, his changes resulted in a more complex (and to me, more interesting) keyboard part; he crafted the sound as he went along. Like the guitarist (who was now working the recording console, the engineer having disappeared), the keyboard player did not listen back. Rather, he listened while he played and made corrections as he went, feeling no need to go back over the track once it was complete. And although the guitarist was present throughout, he gave no verbal directions to the keyboard player – despite holding the title of “arranger” for the project.

When the work wrapped up for the day, the *body* and the *multiple* were complete. The next day the singers would record the *vocal* and the *harmony* – and play the *bohn* for a few beats to satisfy the government’s requirement for cultural authenticity.

GENDER AND RELIGIOUS NORMS

The creators of music who worked together at Gita Studio on February 12, 2008 constituted a representative sample of Yangon pop musicians. The people there embodied the realities of the larger pop scene in a number of ways. Specifically, this small group demonstrated the tendencies the larger community with regard to gender, religion, and career path.

First, every person who contributed to the recording that day was male. Generally, the Yangon pop music scene is male-dominated, and a sharp gender divide exists. Women are quite visible in Burmese pop music, to be sure, because they principally work as singers, and thus are inevitably front and center during live shows and on album covers. They also, less frequently, work as composers and as producers – but usually only when they compose for themselves or when they self-produce their *series*.¹¹ They never work as arrangers or recording engineers, and they virtually never play instruments. Throughout the course of this research, I met only two woman instrumentalists.¹²

The life story of the first of these women, who played bass guitar in an all-girls band during the 1980s, goes some way toward explaining this phenomenon. When she was a child, her parents paid for lessons in classical Burmese dance and singing (*Maha Gita myo* or “Maha Gita type”) (Y010709A). At age 19, she developed an interest in rock guitar, and her father paid for her to have lessons with a professional

¹¹ “Series” is the word used for “album.”

¹² And I asked many industry members for names of women instrumentalists, producers, recordings engineers, etc., but none of them (including the two women profiled here) could name any.

(male) guitarist. She says that both she and her father were “unusual,” she because she wanted to play guitar and he because he supported her in this goal. Her teacher eventually helped her to earn a spot in one of Yangon’s successful all-girl bands, and, together with this band, she spent a few years performing for weddings, Thingyan festivals, and the like. One year, she recalls with a smile, her band was named “Best Band of the Year” by the Burma Broadcasting Service’s Local Talent program. She says that she never thought of herself and her peers as “professionals” because their income was so small compared to that of their male counterparts. Of course, the all-girl band was restricted in the amount of money it could earn, because it was “not culturally acceptable” for them to travel, by themselves, to other cities to perform. Her band was always dependent on male bands for concretizing opportunities. Eventually, she says, her band broke up when the members split up to pursue more financially viable careers.

The second, and final, woman instrumentalist I met is currently working full-time in the Yangon pop music industry as a percussionist. She is a remarkably self-confident person. “If I can get an instrument, I can play it!” she says happily, explaining how she has come to be a proficient performer on a variety of drums from around the world. This self-confidence no doubt accounts for her professional success. During our interview she emphasized also that she has received tremendous support from two men: her employer at a music shop, who first encouraged her to purchase and play a drum, and her husband, who is himself a professional musician and who performs with her regularly. Together with her husband she performs nightly at one of Yangon’s most expensive tourist hotels. And she recently made a splash with the larger public when she appeared on a best-selling VCD with Iron Cross, Burma’s most popular rock band.

These two women are singular figures in their industry. The Yangon pop music scene is hardly unique in this respect. Women are largely under-represented in rock music the world over, and they play instruments much less frequently than men do (Bayton 1997:37). When I asked Burmese industry members about the gender divide amongst them, they had no quick answers for it. They assured me that there is no rule barring women from playing instruments, working a recording console, or anything else (Y010709A). (And when I looked doubtful at this response, male informants sometimes invited me to play with them, proving that they were not rigid sexists.) The general feeling was that, somehow, it just happens that women only choose to become involved as singers.

No doubt this is true on some level; expectations regarding appropriate gender roles are powerful in every human society, all the more so when they are not questioned. In the Burmese case, musicians have modeled themselves on British and American superstar pop groups – which are themselves male-dominated, and in which women are only visible as lead singers (if they are present at all). And I think there is another, more locally-grounded reason for this phenomenon.

In Burma there are a number of long and living traditions of groups of musical instruments playing together. The most famous and most common is the *hsaing waing*, a classical orchestra of membranophones (principally the drum circle), idiophones (gongs, xylophone) and an aerophone (the oboe-like *hnay*). The *hsaing waing* (and variations of it) developed in the courts of the Burmese kings. Today it performs for traditional puppet theatre, Buddhist rituals, and cultural shows. Although both men and women sing the lyrically-phrased melodies of Burmese classical music, generally, only men play the accompanying instruments. There are major exceptions to this rule, of course. Women do sometimes play certain instruments, particularly the *saung gauk*, or Burmese harp, and less often the *pattala* (wooden xylophone) and the *sandaya*

(Burmese piano). They also frequently play the *si neh wa* pattern, which establishes the meter in Burmese classical music, on a wooden clapper and a pair of finger cymbals. But, they generally only play these instruments to accompany themselves when they sing, and then only in small chamber ensembles which perform indoors. Women do not play in the large *hsaing waing* ensemble which most often performs outdoors and accompanies other performers.

In *tain-yin-tha* communities (ethnic minority groups, or “the national races,” as the government usually translates it) the same is true. Men and women sing and dance, but only men play musical instruments. In fact, in some cases there are explicit rules forbidding women from playing instruments. One Pwo Karen woman, a member of a traditional *don* dance troupe, told me that women are not allowed to play instruments because “The *nats* (spirits) would not like this, and it would bring suffering [on the group]” (Y020608B). Other Sgaw Karen people, both men and women, and all of them Christians, affirmed the same kind of prohibition against women playing, or even touching, certain traditional musical instruments. One female seminary professor showed me a number of instruments in the school’s library collection, but would not play the drum (*tabluh*) nor the bronze drum/gong (*glo*), not even to demonstrate the sound for me – out of respect for this age-old rule (Y020808A). Among the Sgaw Karen, their Christian faith includes a continuing belief that some traditional instruments are living creatures and that the instruments themselves are gendered. They therefore continue to restrict the playing of especially the *glo* and the *gweh* (buffalo horn) to men, even as they include these instruments in Christian services.

I suggest therefore that women are under-represented in Burmese pop music for a multiplicity of reasons. They are participating in an art form which is, around the world, dominated by men, and therefore they have few role models for themselves beyond women-as-singers. They are, like women in most societies, generally less

economically powerful than men, and therefore may not have the financial resources to purchase expensive digital equipment and set up recording studios, for example. And they are the inheritors of a custom that has, for some centuries now, has exercised a taboo on women participating in instrument playing. This custom, though, is changing. In recent years, the University of Culture has trained many female students to play the whole range of Burmese instruments, with the result that the annual national Sokayeti Competition has recently featured classes for all-female *hsaing waing* groups (personal communication, Gavin Douglas., email received 05/26/08). And a 2004 documentary movie about Karen refugees on the Thai-Burma border features a scene in which a group of women play instruments to accompany their sisters who are performing a *don* dance.¹³ It is therefore entirely possible that the Yangon pop scene, too, will soon see a loosening of the current seemingly-rigid boundaries surrounding women performers.

This discussion of gender necessarily implicates religion. And in Burma, religion often implies ethnicity, because religion tends to map fairly neatly onto ethnicity. Most Chin, Kachin and Sgaw Karen people are Christians, most Indian people are Muslims and Hindus and most Burman people are Buddhists. In the case of the people working at Gita Studio, the drummer, the arranger, the pianist and the audio engineer were all Sgaw Karen Baptists, while others were Burman Buddhists. As I noted earlier, this particular studio is located in a Sgaw Karen neighborhood, and therefore it is to be expected that members of that community would appear there. However, this microcosm of the Yangon pop music scene is actually a fairly accurate reflection of the larger community.

¹³ See Don't Fence Me In: Major Mary and the Karen Refugees From Burma, directed by Ruth Gumnit.

Exact population statistics are impossible to come by¹⁴, but it is possible to say with certainty – and indeed, many of my informants did say this – that Christian *tain-yin-tha* musicians are largely over-represented among creators of music. One of my Burman Buddhist friends summed it up rather ruefully: “Everyone thinks I’m Christian because I sing,” he said (Y121508A). This was not always the case. When Burmese rock and roll got started in the early 1960’s, most of the participants – especially those who were stage performers, and therefore known to the public – were Burman Buddhists.

Today, a significant number, perhaps half, of the best-known singers in the country are ethnic minority Christians, mostly from the Karen, Chin and Kachin ethnic groups. (Examples include Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, currently the highest-paid performer in Burma, Rebecca Win, Song Thin Par, Lay Lay Wah, Mee Mee Kay, Kabya Bwe Mhu and Hackett.) In addition, a large number of others work as composers and instrumentalists; some of the best-known include Chit San Maung (the Iron Cross lead guitarist), Saw Boy and Saw Kuh Hser. The percussionist mentioned above is an Anglo-Burmese Christian, and Joyce Win, who has recorded dozens of albums beginning in the 1970’s, is a Burman Christian. In light of the fact that Christians constitute only four or five percent of the total population of Burma, this is startling.¹⁵ (The pantheon of famous singers also includes two Muslims: U Chit Kaung and Bo Phyu.)

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Although the Buddhist, Christian and Muslim musicians working in the Burmese pop music industry come from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, their working lives generally conform to a pattern. These musicians tended to have

¹⁴ The last national census performed in Burma occurred in 1983, and the last internationally-accepted census dates back to 1932.

¹⁵ See the US State Dept. statistics at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35910.htm>

followed the same path, that is, they highlighted the same kinds of events as important to their development as professional musicians. First, they usually had supportive parents. Many of my informants talked about the emotional support their parents gave them, in the form of verbal encouragement and prayer for their future musical success. In addition, parents who could afford it paid for instruments and formal lessons (usually on piano or guitar). Furthermore, some parents modeled musical success for their children, giving them living examples of possible musical careers. One famous singer vividly recalls her mother and two aunts who formed a singing trio and performed at venues around Yangon (Y122607B). Another trio of siblings, all of whom are now successful performers, pointed to the example of their father, the founder of one of Burma's most enduringly popular rock bands (Y010108A). Another woman I interviewed, who has had a long career as a singer, is now encouraging her son and daughter who are pursuing careers as a punk rocker and a pop singer, respectively (Y061307).

One professional guitarist's life story exemplifies this point. This man, now in his fifties, repeatedly emphasized that his parents' encouragement was a central component of his career as a professional pop musician (Y012408A). His father, in fact, required all of the children in the family to take lessons and learn to read Western notation. This man had suffered discouragement as a boy, when he was a member of a Boy Scout troupe and was deemed competent to play only the triangle in the troupe's band. He therefore insisted that all of his children learn to play the piano, paying for lessons and supervising practice sessions. Two of the children have since become professional musicians; the guitarist's sister is a pianist and choir leader at a seminary. The guitarist says that his mother, too, provided an important model to her children. She was a pianist who took initiative to capture music she heard on the radio in the days before cassette technology. He describes her listening to the radio and rushing to

write down songs she heard there, getting the words and pitches on paper after only one hearing. Furthermore, she prayed for him, particularly before he went on stage, asking God to sing with her son and thereby guarantee a successful performance.

Of course, this man's experience was not universal. Some musicians recounted that they had serious conflict with their parents over the issue of pop music. For example, one man remembers that his father told him, "You're stupid," when he said that he wanted to study Western music in Singapore (Y121808A). Another man, now a successful composer, recalls that his father was so enraged at the sound of his young son's guitar playing that he smashed the guitar (Y122208A). Another guitarist says that this kind of tension persisted even after he left home (Y121608A). When he was a university student he lied to his parents about the amount of time he was spending practicing his guitar and hanging out in recording studios, letting them think that he was devoted to his studies in zoology. Later, he financed the purchase of a new electric guitar by selling a gold necklace his grandmother had given him – and he lied about that too. It was years before he was able to be completely open with his parents, because they disapproved so strongly of his desire to pursue a career in the Yangon pop music industry. However, all of these men, as well as others, said that their parents' "scolding" stopped after they became financially successful, and that their parents are now proud of them (Y122708A).

Secondly, Yangon pop musicians typically have a small amount of formal musical training (if any), and no institutional musical training. Those who did have lessons during their youth typically studied an instrument (usually piano or guitar) with someone in their own community, that is someone who lived close by and was a member of the same ethnic and religious group. The lessons usually lasted a few years, at most, and musicians tend to remember them as being the occasion for learning theoretical concepts about music, such as how chords are constructed, and

how to read notation. Musicians hold their teachers in great respect, as do most people in Burma. A teacher, of any subject, is usually a deeply respected and loved person.¹⁶ (The title of “teacher” in Burma has roughly the same resonance that the title of “doctor” does in North America.) During each interview of a musician who had taken formal music lessons, the interviewee insisted that I write down the name of the teacher, often checking over my shoulder to be sure that I had spelled the name correctly. Clearly, this is important information.

These teachers, however, were not employees of larger institutions, like schools, which provide musical training. In fact, very few of the successful pop musicians that I met during the course of this research had any kind of institutional training. This is partly because such institutions have not, historically, existed in the country. A number of my informants pointed this out with great regret, saying things like, “We have no music school in Burma.”¹⁷ Of course, institutions which formally train people to become rock stars are a recent innovation in the West also. And it is debatable whether their graduates are making successful careers in pop music as performers (although many are, no doubt, working full time in sound production, marketing, and other off-stage domains of the American pop industry).

I contend that the reason for this is not so much that these institutions have not yet had a chance to prove their mettle, but rather that they fail to provide the kind of training that seems to be critical to the development of successful pop performers. In Chapter 3 I discuss musical learning amongst Yangon pop musicians in much greater detail. Here, I will simply state that schools, by their very nature, tend to put students in groups and to encourage them to learn a standard curriculum at a pace determined

¹⁶ In Theravada Buddhism, the majority religion in Burma, children are taught to venerate (bow to) five institutions: the Buddha, the dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha), the sangha (the organization of monks), their parents and their teachers.

¹⁷ And see Min 2002 for similar comments.

by a teacher. While this method has immense value, particularly for imparting the kinds of data that music theorists, for example, need to know, ultimately it is not the method that successful pop musicians gravitate towards, neither in Burma nor in the West. Rather, they tend to teach themselves, using the resources available to them in their youth.

This, then, is the second step on the path towards full-time professional work as a musician – self-teaching. The Yangon-area pop musicians that I interviewed for this project were all largely self-taught. Their self-teaching seems to go hand in hand with their high degree of self-motivation. Typically these musicians developed a deep desire to become musicians early in their teen years. They then took steps to educate themselves, working independently to master the craft. One composer shared that around this time in his life, he practiced the piano eight hours per day, with no guidance from a teacher, out of sheer love for the work and desire to improve (Y122807A). Another professional musician shared that he learned how to play rhythm guitar, beginning at age thirteen, on his own at home. After high school, he went to Thailand to pursue a musical career, initially playing folk songs in coffee shops. Later, he learned picking technique from a Yamaha Music school book that he purchased (Y012408A).

One way that future pop musicians demonstrate their self-motivation is by taking initiative to acquire an instrument. The composer mentioned above, who practiced eight hours a day as a teenager, did so on a church piano since his family could not afford one for their home (122807A). One well-known arranger decided at age seven to learn to play the guitar. He went to an uncle's home to borrow the guitar there, only to discover that it had only two strings. He subsequently borrowed a neighbor's guitar for practice purposes, and taught himself to read notes by reading books (Y011108A). A drummer explained that his first instrument was his kitchen

table, where he practiced rhythm patterns until he could afford to buy his own drums (Y012908B).¹⁸

The third step on the path typically traversed by Burmese pop musicians is playing in Yangon-area venues which cater to foreign audiences. Virtually all of the now-successful recording artists in the Burmese pop scene got their start performing Top 40 hits, in English, for business and diplomatic travelers. For example, one veteran of the industry explained that he began his career with a band composed of himself and his cousins that earned money and a good reputation playing at many foreign embassies (Y020508A). A now-widely traveled singer shared that she got her start singing at the Dolphin Restaurant, an upscale eatery owned by a family friend (Y122607B). Currently, the most consistent work for up-and-coming Burmese pop musicians is found in hotels and restaurants that cater to foreigners. Many interviewees mentioned that they had regular gigs at downtown hotels prior to making their first recordings.

In fact, playing at such venues is often the culmination of a professional career in pop music in Yangon. Quite a number of people who make a full-time living as singers and instrumentalists work five or six nights a week at hotels, and focus their energies on this kind of live performance rather than trying to break into the recording industry (Y010908B). For example, the self-taught guitarist who went to Thailand, mentioned above, has spent the past eight years performing nightly at a long-stay condominium complex in central Yangon. He likes the work and is grateful to be able to earn enough to support his wife and daughter while working far fewer hours than the average Yangon resident (Y012408A).

¹⁸ A quick sketch of Elvis Presley's early life reveals the same rough outline: Formative musical experiences in church, parents who scraped together enough money for a guitar, and a teen who taught himself to play by listening to records. See Pleasants 2004.

Others – perhaps most – of the professional pop musicians in Yangon pursue recording opportunities while continuing to play regular or semi-regular live shows. Many of these live shows occur in hotels, which provide the best indoor performance venues in the city. Like the drummer we met at the beginning of this chapter, virtually all of the performers active in the Yangon pop scene (even those at the pinnacle of popularity), combine time spent performing live with time spent in the studio. Many of the live performances are at private parties (weddings, reunions, birthdays, etc.). In fact, it is these kinds of small functions (as opposed to the “big shows” or stage concerts for which the public buys tickets) that pay the rent. Most musicians will receive 50 000 kyat per night when playing at a small function – as opposed to 25 000 kyat per song when playing for a studio recording (Y020508). Because Yangon’s upper middle class is growing, partly due to Chinese immigration, and because members of this class often hire bands rather than DJ’s to provide music for their family functions, professional musicians can be assured of a steady income from performance opportunities.

The path typically followed by Burmese pop musicians is, in some ways, analogous to the path followed by Burmese pop music itself. The history of the genre traces a similar arc to that of the many individual histories of musicians themselves. Burmese stereo music got started in the early 1960’s, when young Burmese people became enamored of electrified, or amplified music (Y020708). At that time, aspiring teenagers were supported in their quest by a parent-like institution – the Burma Broadcasting Service. The BBS, which had been established by the British colonial regime, was maintained after independence in largely the same format.¹⁹ Importantly, it required that all programming be in English. Young rock bands were given the

¹⁹ The BBS was the progenitor of today’s national, government-run broadcaster, Myanmar Radio and Television.

chance to play for a national audience – and even earn an honorarium - during the BBS’s amateur talent hour. Their repertoire fit the bill because it consisted entirely of “English songs” (or cover songs, that is, local live performances of songs heard on recordings). One veteran remembers performing Beatles, Cliff Richard and Elvis songs as a teenager for the BBS: “We could play five songs in forty-five minutes, and we got forty-five kyat to cover our transportation costs,” he recalls (Y020508A). He points out that the BBS was extremely helpful to young pop musicians because it had close ties to the VOA (Voice of America). Because of this connection, his band and others like them had access to the American-produced records that they wanted to cover. He estimates that his band got about ninety percent of their records from the BBS.

Secondly, the Burmese pop music industry is marked by an important degree of independence, and therefore of necessity, self-development. After the military coup d’etat in 1962, Burma became increasingly isolated. During the following three decades, Burmese people had very little access to, for example, musical recordings made in New York and Los Angeles. Furthermore, there was virtually no opportunity for Burmese musicians to study with Western rockers, or even to attend their performances, because Westerners were largely forbidden to enter Burma and Burmese people, for the most part, could not leave.

Some contact did occur, of course. Significant numbers of Burmese men, for example, worked as sailors on commercial vessels during this period.²⁰ These men traveled the world, picking up goods in their various ports of call. One up-and-coming

²⁰ I have only anecdotal evidence for this. While doing my research, I met at least a dozen men who were working or had previously worked as sailors, and they affirmed that international shipping companies are a significant source of employment in Yangon. The director of the Myanmar Overseas Seafarers Association says that there are around 146 shipping companies in Yangon, see Curtis 2003. Also, the Myanmar Maritime University was established in 2004, with the goal of providing career preparation to professional sailors. The Ministry of Transport’s website claims that more than 1700 students are studying at the university (see <http://www.mot.gov.mm/mmu/history.html>)

singer in Yangon recalls that in 1983 he found a Bob Marley cassette in a downtown market, and was immediately interested in the sounds (Y011008A). At that time, he was working as a sailor, and was lucky enough, on his next assignment, to be on board with a number of Caribbean shipmates. These shipmates explained to him who Marley was and helped him collect more reggae recordings. Another older member of the industry says that, in 1982, after years of playing drums with his bands the Dream Makers and the Playboys, he finally met someone who showed him basic drum rudiments – an American diplomat who had previously worked as a jazz drummer (Y020508A). However, these cases seem to be the exception rather than the norm. For the most part, Burmese pop music developed inside Burma, having very little contact with the source of that music beyond a few of the most widely-disseminated records.

Thirdly, Burmese pop music is marked by a high degree of performing of Western hits, rather than of locally-created songs. I discuss this in much more detail in Chapter 2, but for now, I simply point out that the Yangon industry, as a whole, has developed in the same way that many individual musicians have. Burmese pop music began with performances that consisted of one hundred percent cover songs and *copy* songs. During the 1960's, the musicians performed the repertoire that they used as models when they learned the genre, the hits from the United States and the United Kingdom. About a decade later, *own tune* (or original) compositions began to appear. But even today, the repertoire contains a large percentage of *copy* songs. Just as many professional musicians in Yangon still spend much of their time performing for Western and East Asian audiences, so the music that they have developed still strongly prioritizes pop hits from America (and now China).

CELEBRITY, BURMESE-STYLE

The musicians who form the core of my study, that is, people who work full-time as professional pop musicians and by so doing, support (or help to support) their families, are usually called, by themselves and others, “famous musicians.” Of course, there are lots of people in Yangon who are hoping to break into the industry, or who have achieved only marginal success as of yet, and cannot be considered famous. Here I discuss what it does, and does not, mean to be a famous pop musician in Yangon.

Burmese people who speak English often use the word “famous,” and they use it to mean “well-known by many people,” as American English speakers do. In Burmese, the equivalent word is “*nammeh gyi deh*,” or, “big name” – again, rather like the American understanding of the concept.²¹ However, in Yangon, the category of “famous” includes many people who are not stage performers or members of the government. Look, for example, how the word is used on this 2001 posting on the www.nagani.com website, where you can find out “What’s happening around good ol’ Yangon.” Evidently pop singers can be famous – but so too can others:

Silver Oak is a trendy bar opened by two hairstylists/beauticians Ko Ko and Nyi Nyi. It is located on Bo Aung Gyaw Street (lower block). Their beauty salon is next to the bar. Ko Ko and Nyi Nyi, who circulate in the entertainment industry, have their close singer friends and new music groups entertain at their bar. On June 22nd, they had Graham and audiences went gaga over his performance. Graham sings for many television commercials and is also a famous singer. One famous beautician hired a photographer to take pictures of this night with Graham.

(<http://www.nagani.com/news/intown/>)

²¹ See Than and Tun 2005. This is a *Myanmar Times* article in which “famous singers” are also described as “in the spotlight”, “big names”, “well-known”, “big rock figures” and “successful.” The *Myanmar Times* is a Yangon-based, English-language private newspaper.

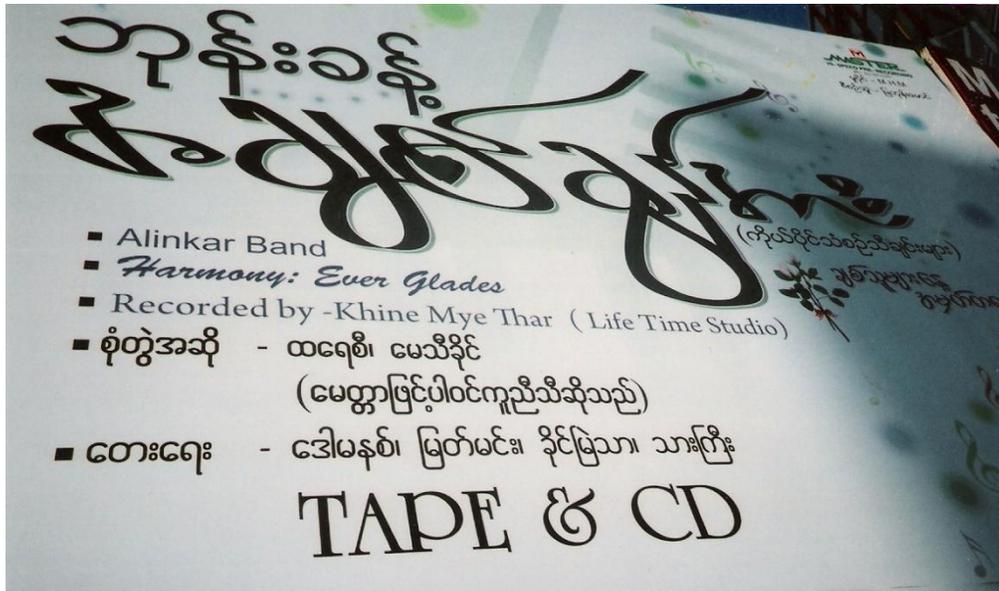


Figure 2.1: Billboard advertising a new *series*

The popular music industry contributes to this phenomenon in the way it advertises new *series*. On the cover of most CDs, the musicians are prominently listed using the English or Burmese titles *composer, singer, guitars, drums* and *harmony*. So too is the name of the studio, and often the names of the audio engineer and the photographer who created the cover art. These CD covers are then used for billboard advertising, blown up to thousands of times their original size and displayed at major intersections. It is therefore literally true that, in Yangon, one can become a big-name video editor, for example.

One man whose name appears frequently on such billboards is Pee Paw, or White-Hair Pee Paw, as he is often known. Pee Paw is an impresario, the go-to guy for anyone who wants to organize a live show inside (and increasingly, outside) of Yangon. He is “the most famous stage show organizer in Burma;” he was described to me this way by a number of people inside and outside the pop music industry. Like other famous music industry members that I met, he claims this status for himself without braggadocio. “Everyone knows me as ‘the best’” he says calmly.

As the interview continued, it became clear that Pee Paw has worked hard, and continues to work very hard, to achieve that status. The son of a movie-making family, he was the personal manager of Zaw Win Htut, one of Burma's best-selling rock stars, for six years before launching into the live show business. Live shows (that is, concerts on stage in front of audiences) had almost disappeared from the Burmese music scene when Pee Paw decided to organize one. Realizing that many fans of Zaw Win Htut had never actually seen him perform, Pee Paw put together a live show in 2001. Since that time, he has organized 135 live shows. His company now employs 22 people. He claims, with justification, that his work resurrecting the live show tradition has fundamentally changed the nature of the pop music industry in Yangon in the twenty-first century. He is therefore comfortable asserting that he is famous; he can claim this status for himself with good reason. He evinces no embarrassment in acknowledging what is, to him and to others in his culture, a simple fact.

From the musicians' perspective, fame is much to be desired. A number of already-successful members of the industry identified this as one of their goals. "I want to be the most famous audio engineer in Burma," said one man, reminding me that fame is not limited to stage performers (Y012908A). Interestingly, most members of the pop music community talk about fame as something to be used strategically, rather than as an end in itself. Pee Paw, for example, says that his big name is a kind of quality assurance for fans: "People know, if it's a Pee Paw show, it's a good show," he points out. One guitarist who, like a number of his fellow evangelical Christians, works as a professional musician in Yangon, says that his fame helps him to spread the gospel. Speaking about the crusade-style shows at which he often performs, the man asserts "I'm famous, that's what makes people come [to hear the preaching]" (Y010908B). And other Karen Christian musicians talked about using their fame to uplift the Karen people, to be shining examples of Karen-ness and

thereby improve the reputation of Karen people amongst the Burman majority and ultimately, in the world. One Karen singer who has already achieved some recognition with his first *series* says, “I want my name to be known all over the country,” pointing out that by doing so, he will be in a position to help his fellow Karen, and other ethnic minority highland peoples, who are materially impoverished and suffer from a sense of inferiority (Y011308A). A studio owner articulated the same kind of goal, saying that he wants to take advantage of his fame in order to promote a nationalist agenda, that is, to convey the strength and beauty of the Karen people (Y011108A). He references other musicians who have accomplished this for their own ethnic groups, including the *luk thung* singers from Isan who have rehabilitated that province’s reputation in Thailand, and African-American blues musicians who garnered unprecedented respect for their community and its art forms in the United States and the United Kingdom (Miller 2005).

Being famous means being well-known to the general public in Burma. Industry insiders also emphasized the importance of being known within the industry, saying that being widely-known inside the Yangon music scene is crucial to their work. One young performer, for example, says that she is always working to achieve more recognition from her fellow musicians so that she can build her career. “It is important that people know me; after they get to know me they will call me [to perform]” she says (Y012908B). U Hla Myint Swe, the director of City FM radio station, says that being known by musicians is central to his and his radio station’s success. He argues that City FM has prospered because many popular musicians support it by appearing on its programs. And they appear on these programs because he invites them to do so: “Everybody knows me,” he says, arguing that he is able to gain the co-operation of artists because he is known by them.

For all that fame can be a useful tool, it can also be a liability. In Burma, having a big name means that one's name is known to all, including the government. Famous people are therefore more likely to be scrutinized by the regime – a possibility that is an ever-present concern to musicians. Author Phil Zabriskie, who profiled Zaw Win Htut for TIME magazine in 2002, focused on this negative aspect of fame for Burmese musicians. After describing how the singer had to submit to interrogations about his lyrics, he concluded “For Burmese artists and performers, fame is less about feast and more about frustration.” One composer that I met confirmed this, saying that the best approach is to cultivate only the second of the two types of fame (Y010909A). He values being well-known in the industry, but says that being well-known to the general public can be more trouble than it is worth. “If you're famous with the public, then you get more pressure from the government,” he claims.

In addition, people who are under government surveillance are less likely to be granted permission to leave the country, so their freedom is restricted in a very tangible way. During interviews, two well-known singers and a composer identified surveillance by the government as one of their biggest concerns (Y010108A, Y122607B, Y020708B). Many other interviewees requested that I not write down other complaints that they voiced, fearing that a government representative might someday read this dissertation. For the same reason, some performers requested that I not mention their song titles, since identifying song titles is tantamount to identifying performers, at least when the performers are famous. Fame in Burma, then, can be a double-edged sword.

The most significant difference between the American and Burmese notions of fame is that, in Burma, fame is not linked with wealth. Americans talk about celebrities who are “rich and famous.” But in Burma, no such assumption is made

(Y010408). It is quite possible to be famous without being rich.²² Most of the famous musicians that I met while conducting this research were not particularly rich. They tended to live in rather larger apartments than my non-famous friends, and they tended to own cars and employ house servants, but they did not occupy the top rung of the income ladder. They were able to travel outside the country (but rarely) and they were able to educate their children. They did not, however, live in the upscale suburban neighborhoods around the city where mansions sell for seventy or eighty thousand USD, and they, at times, experienced a lack of money as a constraint on their careers, saying that they would be able to do more if only they had more money.

In fact, being a rock and roll musician has not historically been viewed as a road to financial success in Burma. One of the country's most successful musicians states flatly, "By doing music you can never be a rich man" (Y020508A). He is now, arguably, a rich man, but he assures me that he did not earn his wealth principally from his music career. He was lucky enough to be born into a rich family, and then emigrated to Australia during the 1980's. Currently, he owns a business which is a joint venture with the Myanmar Government Ministry Number One. The business is profiting handsomely by selling multi-vitamin injections to the millions of Burmese who cherish local medicines. Some of this man's peers say that, while they have earned significant income over the course of their careers in music, they always held other jobs (such as dentist (Y020708A) or English teacher (Y020508B)) to supplement their musical earnings. Younger musicians whose careers have begun more recently do not work in alternative careers; they tend to focus exclusively on their music-making as a way of earning money. However, a number of them are married to spouses who work in other fields which provide regular paycheques. The arranger we

²² See Mon 2005. The subject of the article is described, without contradiction, as simultaneously being famous and not being able to afford a motorcycle.

met at Gita Studio is married to a fashion designer (Y011108A). One of his colleagues is married to woman who works for the United Nations; he emphasized during our interview that she is the main breadwinner for their family (Y011008A). One young female singer is married to another famous singer, and together they earn enough for the Jeep which she drove to our interview (Y010108A). They do not, however, earn enough to help her sister-in-law leave the country, who talked wistfully about her unsuccessful attempts to find a sponsor in the United Kingdom.

In comparison with the large numbers of Yangon residents who live on the equivalent of one US dollar per day, professional musicians are doing extremely well.²³ And they are generally doing better than government workers, who earn such paltry salaries that they are often accused of demanding bribes to supplement their income.²⁴ Public school teachers, for example, have raised the art of augmenting their earnings to new heights. Many of them work after school hours as private tutors. Some, in order to guarantee themselves a pool of students who need tutoring, refuse to teach the entire curriculum during the school day. The phenomenon of teachers working as tutors has become an industry in Yangon, and it even has a name: *tuition*. All parents who can afford it send their children to *tuition* after school, mostly to

²³ In 2008, Burma's per-capita GDP is \$290 US, meaning that significant numbers of people throughout the country live on *less* than \$1 US per day (Turnell, 2008: 3). The government acknowledges that the \$1 US/day average is correct, although it denies that this is an unreasonable level of poverty. For example, in an article published in the government newspaper, "A Pensioner" argues that the cost of living for one day is about 97 cents (in other words, the average person lives at subsistence level) and that this is perfectly acceptable in global terms. The author asserts that talk of an economic crisis is just a cover for destructive forces who wish to delegitimize the ruling junta (see A Pensioner 2007).

²⁴ So often, in fact, that Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index, which ranks 180 countries in terms of their perceived level of corruption, particularly as it pertains to bribes demanded by officials, ranked Burma/Myanmar as second-worst in the world. (The index is available at http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2007) According to this report, Burma is perceived as more corrupt than Iraq, where military contractors operate with no oversight, and where billions of dollars paid by American taxpayers have gone missing (Scahill 2007).

ensure that their children will be able to pass the rigorous national exams (for which they are supposed to be prepared during regular classes).²⁵

The professional musicians I met in Yangon were, by and large, able to send their children to *tuition*. (When I met a musician with children, I asked about this, as a way of gauging family income. Burmese people, just like Americans, tend to be uncomfortable with a direct question like, “How much money do you make?”) These musicians, then, are more economically secure than white-collar workers like teachers. Rather than having to supplement their incomes, they are able to purchase the services of those who are earning a second income. Furthermore, they usually do their work in air-conditioned studios and hotels, meaning that their working lives are less physically demanding than those of most Burmese workers.

Of all of the musicians interviewed for this study, the musician who seemed to me to have the most luxurious lifestyle could be described as “upper middle class” in North American terms. This man drives a late-model minivan with all the extras, rents a penthouse apartment in a luxury building, and sends his three children to school in Singapore (Y122208A). However he, like virtually all of the others that I met, insisted that he does not “have a big [music] business” and that he was only able to purchase equipment for his new recording studio because he spent nearly a decade working in the IT industry in California. Like many of his peers, this man does not view himself as rich, although millions of Burmese people would beg to differ.

As an outsider, I found it somewhat difficult to assess industry members’ repeated claims that they are not rich. Of course, their incomes vary quite widely, and so it is probably impossible to make any kind of blanket statement about their

²⁵ In 2007, the national pass rate on the high school matriculation exam was only 27.17%, according to the government of Burma (Anonymous 2007b). For comments on all the issues discussed here (low salaries, tuition classes, exam pass rates), from a former lecturer in the education department at Yangon University, see Aye 2008.

economic status. However, one point is clear: Virtually all of the famous musicians (and audio engineers, and managers, and composers, etc.) that I met own cell phones. Ownership of *hand phones* (as they are called in Burma) marks this particular group of people as earning more, even much more, than the norm. According to United Nations statistics, in 2004 there were 92 007 mobile telephone subscribers in Burma.²⁶ At that point, cell phone users constituted a tiny elite (less than 0.25 percent of the population). Doubtless cell phone ownership has increased since then, but in 2009 a cell phone owner in Burma is still one of a privileged few.

Another significant difference between Burmese pop musicians and their American peers is that Burmese performers are not anti-establishment figures, neither in their public profiles nor in their private lives. During one of my trips to Burma, while I was conducting research for this dissertation, I amused myself in my guesthouse at night by reading back issues of *Rolling Stone* magazine. When I came upon the following purple passage, I was reminded once again of how important a rebellious attitude is in Western conceptions of popular music. In the “Special Troublemaker Foldout”, which contained a “Rebel Hall of Fame” to recognize the “Badasses and Bombthrowers” of American rock music, *Rolling Stone* wrote:

What makes a rock & roll rebel? It’s about sound. It’s about style. It’s about attitude and arrogance and ignoring all the codes of the day. It means keeping control over your own music, rather than tailoring it to please everybody else. It’s about challenging the rules, politically and sexually and creatively. There’s more to rock rebellion than just being an asshole, although sometimes that’s part of the job... We salute the musical visionaries who have stuck to their guns creatively, refusing to kiss ass... We salute the ill-mannered, the obnoxious, the unmanageable, the absurd. We raise a toast to the rock heathens who keep teaching us new ways to destroy our lives and poison our minds...²⁷

²⁶ See the UN Data website at <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=myanmar&d=CDB&f=srID%3a13100%3berID%3a104>

²⁷ I emailed the magazine asking them for exact citation for this text (since it was not indicated on the foldout) but received no reply.

The article goes on to celebrate musicians who defied the rules of the industry (like Eddie Vedder, who testified against Ticketmaster's monopoly before Congress) equally with those who behaved rudely, or even illegally, in public (like Avril Lavigne, who spit on a paparazzo, or Pete Doherty, who struggled with a career-destroying drug addiction and once burglarized a bandmate's apartment). After finishing this faintly repellent article, it struck me that such a thing could never be written about Burmese rock stars. And this is not just because of the extreme censorship of print media in Burma. Rather, it is because creators of Burmese pop music do not, for the most part, participate in these kinds of behaviors. Burmese pop musicians value their public respectability, as do their fans. To wit, here is an internet posting by "K.K" on Yangon Now.com. K. K. writes about another famous entertainer in Yangon and directly links his career success to his adherence to conventional respectability:

Yaza Ne Win, the most famous actor in Myanmar. He appears in films, ads and VCDs. His father was a famous actor. His sister is a famous singer. He suddenly becomes famous just after 40. He has a good name without any scandal with girls. Is it because of good teaching of his mother. Media says nothing ill about him. They said his goods, interesting action, has become the same. Everyone wants to use him in their movies...He becomes an important actor. His recent CD was sold well. (K.K)
(http://www.yangonow.com/eng/magazine/from_myanmar/200306.html)

Indeed, Burmese pop musicians have gone some distance to emphasize this point with their audiences. The Myanmar Musicians Association began sponsoring a soccer team in 2006 (to be discussed more fully below). The team, which includes a number of famous pop singers, plays exhibition matches around the country. The captain of this team, a starting-to-be famous singer, says that one of the main goals of the team is to demonstrate to the public at large that the singers are physically healthy people, "not a bunch of drug addicts" (Y011008A). Another musician, who exhibited the reserved demeanor common to many Burmese people during our interview,

became visibly emotional when I questioned him on this. He insists that most musicians in the Yangon pop industry – and he knows many of them – do not take drugs (Y010908B). Furthermore, he says, most of them are just people trying to make an honest living.

Other musicians agreed with this assessment. Although it is impossible to know for sure what their colleagues do in private, musicians say confidently that they do not show up for recording sessions or concerts visibly drunk or high (Y123008A). Furthermore, like most Burmese people, famous musicians are adherents of Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, and so they are reluctant to violate the precepts of their faith (Y010109A). In addition, they usually live with their extended families, and so do not want to participate in behavior that might bring trouble or shame to their loved ones. I did meet one musician (a Christian) who admitted to being a drug user, he said that he is “ninety percent clean now” and that he began to kick his habit when he got married three years ago (Y122908A).

Another pronounced contrast between famous Burmese pop musicians and their Western counterparts is that the Burmese are not celebrities, at least not in the



Figure 2.2: Advertisement featuring one of Burma's most famous singers, Lay Phyu

Hollywood sense. They are not stalked by paparazzi. They do not employ security teams or have entourages. Indeed, it proved to be very easy to contact them, even for a foreign researcher who began her study with no acquaintances inside the country. Furthermore, they do not employ agents or publicists. While their photos often appear in the glossy privately-owned newspapers that are sold on Yangon street corners, they do not seem to be the creatures of the media that American pop stars so often are. Although Lay Phyu and Zaw Paing (two famous male singers) have recently appeared in billboard advertisements for laptop computers and iced tea (respectively), no famous musicians have turned themselves into a brand in order to sell sneakers or perfume.

I interviewed a singer who was, in early 2009, the highest-paid performer in Burma. He earns approximately \$1500 USD for one live show (that is, for one evening's performance). This man exemplifies all of the trends I outline above. For

example, although he is earning a good living in pop music right now, he says he is actively looking into other business opportunities because he cannot count on his music income to sustain him and his family long-term (Y010109A). A devout Buddhist, he says that he does not want to participate in sexual profligacy and “selfishness” associated with rock stardom in the West. Rather, he says, he hopes his fans will think he is “decent.” He does not have an entourage, although his wife does act as his manager, helping him to coordinate his many activities. He does not have any paid bodyguards either, although he spends a lot of time with his brother and a



Figure 2.3: Lay Phyu selling Yum Yum noodles

small group of male friends who usually accompany him when he goes out in public. And when he does go out in public, he is never fearful, because autograph seekers and photojournalists are “always very respectful. They ask permission to take my picture.”

Other industry members share this singer’s perception that fans are usually respectful and even adoring. A manager at Yangon’s City FM radio station says that the reason the station has become so successful so quickly is that it is the first and only one in the country which provides listeners the opportunity to phone in and chat with famous singers (Y020108A). He claims that, during the bi-monthly Star Online show, when Yangon residents call the station and ask questions of the invited musical guest, callers are sometimes so overcome by emotion that they cannot speak.

I saw this kind of reaction myself, in less extreme form, as I was researching this dissertation. A friend of mine, a well-educated woman who owns her own business and is widely respected in her community, agreed to help me contact one of Yangon's famous singers by phoning her on my behalf. She had obtained the singer's phone number from the singer's uncle, who was a good friend of hers. Still, the singer seemed to her to be a special person, inhabiting another plane. "I hardly dare to phone her and ask!" my friend said to me, before dialing (Y122707A). On another occasion, when a different friend arranged for me to meet with another famous guitarist, she and some family members tagged along, thrilled to have the opportunity to meet the man. (Although he was a colleague of their cousin's, somehow, they had never met him before and jumped at the chance.) As we pulled up to the meeting point, they spotted a Lexus. "That must be his car!" they exclaimed – and photographed it.

It is important to note that even the most famous Burmese pop musicians are, at this time, still only famous amongst Burmese people. Those musicians at the very height of popularity (like Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, R Zani, Iron Cross Band and others) have performed concerts outside of Burma in recent years – in countries including Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, England and the United States. However, in each of those cases, they performed for predominantly Burmese audiences, and the concerts were organized by Burmese diaspora organizations. Many of these famous performers' VCD recordings are now available on Youtube.com, most of them seemingly placed there by young Burmese now living abroad. Therefore, at this time, famous Burmese singers are not reaching foreign audiences in the way that their English-language models in the West have done.

Some musicians I interviewed identified this as a goal – but they spoke about it wistfully, rather than in the context of a concrete plan. One singer/composer, for example, said that she dreams of writing songs "for the whole world," but immediately

added that she thinks this is currently impossible, due to the political situation in Burma (Y010108A). Another said that he would like to write English words for his Burmese and Karen-language compositions, so that they could be understood by international audiences (Y010608A). But he intends to do this, he says, at some undefined time in the future. Both of these musicians are reaching around the planet via Youtube.com. However, they know that, like all of their colleagues in Yangon, they are still very much Burmese singers, famous with Burmese people and literally unknown to anyone else.

MUSICIANS AS AUTONOMOUS SOCIAL ACTORS

To understand these Burmese musicians as famous is important. However, knowing that a musician is regularly labeled that way does not complete our understanding of how that musician acts in relation to others in his own social sphere. Here, I discuss Burmese musicians' ability to perform multiple roles, their social status, and their understandings of themselves as social actors.

Burmese pop musicians are sometimes specialists, in the sense that they play only one role in the larger scene – but often they are generalists, or as I label them here, they are creators of music. An individual may be, and often is, a composer and a singer, or an instrument player and a producer, and so on. Amongst creators of music, divisions between various roles are not rigid. At Gita Studio, for example, the arranger of the song also played electric guitar and bass guitar. He is also the owner of his own recording studio, and as such, is comfortable operating a recording console. Therefore, when the recording engineer left Gita Studio during the afternoon, the arranger took over that role as well. The audio engineer, who spent most of the day editing a recording using sophisticated software, began his musical career at the age of sixteen, when he became the keyboard player for one of Burma's best-known early rock bands. He continues to work as a keyboardist, performing semi-regularly around

the country. These two men are typical of people working full-time in the Yangon pop scene. They demonstrate multiple skills, each of which reinforces the other.

Burmese instrumentalists also demonstrate versatility within the realm of music performance. That is, they do not usually specialize in playing one particular style of music (rock, country, pop, and the like). Rather, they make themselves available to accompany singers who, themselves, tend to specialize in one style or another. For the guitarist we met at Gita Studio, this is a point of professional pride. He says that he regularly watches Asian MTV to discover which new musical styles are becoming prominent internationally, in preparation for learning them himself (Y011108A). Singers confirm that the instrumentalists they work with are well-versed in a variety of popular styles. One veteran singer assures me that instrumentalists are very skilled and “know all the styles” (Y020508B). She says that before she sings a song, she simply informs the players of the tempo, the style (“like foxtrot, country rock, R and B...”), and the key of the song. “And they can do it right away!” she says brightly. Another singer, the former sailor mentioned earlier who specializes in reggae, says that before he made his first recording, working with a group of experienced professional instrumentalists, he had to teach them about the style. After listening to a few recordings, the players absorbed the fundamentals of the genre, and successfully created Burma’s first reggae album (Y011008A).

The kind of confidence that singers have in the instrumentalists they work with seems to pervade the pop music industry in Yangon. Creators of music are largely confident in one another’s abilities to do the job well, and this confidence reveals itself not so much in what they say about each other, but what they do not say to each other. Take, for example, the kinds of interactions that occurred (or did not occur) at Gita Studio: although the participants created a collegial atmosphere, by way of their friendly greetings and gentle joking with each other, it is hard to argue that they

worked as a team. The drummer, guitarist and keyboard player arrived one after another, and each recorded their parts with a minimum of input from others. Each of them relied on the notation developed by the guitarist – but that notation is a skeletal C Rule score, with only chord progressions, structural markings and some basic metric information. The score contained no melodic pitches, no rhythms, no dynamic variations and no other stylistic indicators.

So each instrumentalist improvised his part, and was expected to do so by the others. Each of them recorded their parts as they saw fit, telling the recording engineer when to stop and re-start the sound. The audio engineer, who worked by himself in a room across the hall, had a profound impact on the nature of the final sound product – and he too worked utterly independently. While I observed him, he spent a lot of time correcting out-of-tune singing on a vocal track he was editing, and used the most up-to-date computer software to isolate and manipulate the sounds of various instrumental tracks. He worked without reference to any opinion but his own. In short, all of these creators of music were largely autonomous, at least insofar as their own responsibilities extended. They created their own music and were not subject to any criticism or even much direction from anyone else.

When I pointed this out to the audio engineer, he smiled. He and the others were amused by my repeated questions (“Did you rehearse that before today?”, “How did you decide what to play?” and so on). He assured me that what I observed that day was representative; session musicians generally create their parts as they record them, and they do so independently. To him and many of the Gita Studio regulars, the explanation for this is obvious: “This is our gift from God” he said. The Christians amongst the Burmese pop musicians assert this frequently. They believe that musical

ability is a supernatural gift, and therefore, a musician does not need much or any direction from fellow human beings.²⁸

Having said that, the reality is that this way of operating is common to all of the recording studios I visited. All of the professional musicians I observed worked this way, evincing a great deal of trust in each other's musical choices. The Buddhists as well as those of no stated religious affiliation also functioned with a great deal of autonomy, using C Rule notation and improvising their parts. In Burmese pop music, there is no analog for the producer in a Western music studio. (The word *producer*, as it is used by Burmese pop musicians, means "person or institution that funds a recording project.") There is no person who listens to others, telling them to play it again, to make certain changes, to try this or that riff. We might point to the arranger as a kind of leader, but the reality is that, in many cases, the arranger arranges very little. He does create notation, as a guide to help the musicians, and he does have some say in who will be hired to play which instrument, but beyond that he does not dictate what should be played.

One of my Burmese musician friends, a man who is passionate about music and full of ideas about shaping sound, says that his dream is to one day become a Western-style music producer (i.e. a music director in a studio) (Y121608A). He acknowledges that this will be a challenge. Right now, there are no other music directors working in the Yangon industry, so there are no models for him to follow.²⁹ In addition, he says, Burmese musicians do not see the need for this. He imagines that

²⁸ And some of them lament this tendency. One composer told me that when a band is recording one of his songs, he will often offer suggestions about how it should be played (Y010909A). But, he says, some musicians really dislike being told what to do. Ultimately, "however they play it I just have to accept it," he says.

²⁹ Another man recalls that Saw Bwe Hmu, the founder of the Iron Cross band (now deceased) used to lie on the floor of the recording studio, listening to his band mates play and offering them suggestions (Y012908A). But, this man says, "he was the only one who ever did like that." Other people asserted that composers will, on occasion, act as musical directors (Y010909A and YY011009A) or that they themselves sometimes direct their colleagues (Y012908A and Y123008B). Since I never saw any of these people functioning in this way, I cannot comment about their interactions.

he will have to spend a long time proving the worth of his services and earning the trust of his peers. Right now, he says, he is concentrating on saving enough money so that he can work as a producer for free, volunteering his services to wary musicians who are used to working autonomously.

Interestingly, even the almighty junta exercises very little control over the creation of the music, as became evident on the day I visited Gita Studio. Although the musicians were recording a government song, there was no government representative present to comment on the proceedings. The composer had to create his lyrics according to the government's expressed wish for a song that would be appropriate for a bridge opening, but he was not required to include any particular words or phrases. The arranger did submit to the requirement that the song contain "Burmese sounds" – but barely. He allowed just one four-beat rest for a token solo on the *bohn*. The way the *bohn* was incorporated into the song, as a brief, one-time sound, smacked of tokenism.

A number of scholars have concerned themselves with musicians' status in the larger society they inhabit. Alan Merriam (1964) argued that this question is part of one of the six critical areas of enquiry for ethnomusicologists (p 46). After surveying the field research that had been completed up to that point, he asserted that musicians across cultures usually constitute a separate and socially marginal group (p. 141). According to Merriam, they often occupy a low social rank, while simultaneously retaining a high importance in society and permission to indulge in deviant behavior (p. 137).

By contrast, Jason Toynbee (2000) likens pop musicians in England to white-collar workers (p.35), saying that a pop musician is more like bureaucrat in an office than an artist in a garret. Toynbee's concern is to argue against the notion of pop musicians as inspired creators whose music wells up from some font of self-

expression. He sees popular musicians working with “hooks,” that is, conventional musical ideas whose meanings have been standardized, and combining these ideas in unique ways each time they compose a new song. He argues that although they do create something new, the “unit of creativity is a small one” (p 35). Popular musicians, in his view, are like white-collar professionals, who exercise agency within a very limited domain.

Toynbee’s analogy is provocative. Certainly it is possible to see the Burmese pop musicians who recorded the government song in this light. As I described above, each of the instrument players worked independently, exercising his own judgment about what to play, within the constraints of a three-minute pop song. And each implemented one basic musical idea, varying it more or less as he felt was appropriate. One could even argue that they wear uniforms. Whereas workers in government offices and NGOs wear a white-collar uniform in Yangon (a white, usually long-sleeved, button-down shirt with a dark green *longyi*), pop music industry workers wear casual Western clothing virtually one hundred percent of the time. Whether they are on stage or in the studio, they are almost always sporting blue jeans and t-shirts. I never once saw a musician wearing a *longyi*, and upwards of ninety percent of the fans at the concerts I attended wore Western clothing.

The many creators of music that I interviewed for this dissertation affirmed that they enjoy their work. They did not talk about class or compare themselves to white-collar workers, but they almost universally conceived of their work as a fortuitous connection between something they enjoy and something that pays well. In response to the question, “Why do you pursue a career in music?” almost all of my interviewees used the same expression: “*wah tha nah ba deh.*” The dictionary translation of this expression is, “It’s my hobby.” Indeed, some fluent speakers of English among my respondents said exactly those words when answering this question.

However, as I talked with each of them more about what this means to them, I came to the conclusion that, in this context, a more appropriate translation would be, “It’s my passion.” In one typical interview, a singer explicitly contrasted this notion with the idea of making money. He said that he works as a musician because this is his “hobby” and that his goal in doing so is not to make a large amount of money (Y011008A). A drummer said that, “Music is in my blood. I love it so much that I always listen to music when I come home at the end of the day, no matter how much I’ve already played that day” (Y123008A). A composer elucidated this notion more poetically: “I was born with music and I will die with music. It’s my hobby, not my profession. I love music so much, all kinds of music!” (Y020708).

MUSICIANS’ RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR FANS, COLLEAGUES AND GOVERNMENT

Burmese pop performers seem to be passionate about music-making in large part because of the relationship they feel they have with their audiences. As I noted earlier, most of them perform live rather frequently.³⁰ A number of them talked about how much they enjoy their audiences’ responses, as evidenced in their behavior at concerts (e.g. Y010108A). One veteran singer talked about receiving emails and phone calls from her fans, encouraging her to record another series; she stopped recording and performing when she had a baby because she became embarrassed by her weight gain. She says that fans addressed this directly in letters, saying things like, “I still love you whether you’re fat or not” (Y122607B). A guitarist said that when he

³⁰ And the large majority of these musicians claim that they never feel nervous before performing. I met one performer who said that he is, occasionally, “a little nervous” (Y012908A) and one other who said that he regularly gets nervous (Y122208A). In the second case, this musician said that his nerves stem from the thought that perhaps the audience will not like him as much as another singer (since he often performs in shows in shows which feature a half-dozen different singers). This statement shows that, like others, this singer is focused on his relationship with his fans.

listens to music, and when others listen to him making music, he feels an “incomparable happiness” (Y121608A).

As positive as the relationship between performers and fans generally is, most of my interviewees emphasized that they did not take fans’ appreciation for granted. They spoke about the responsibility a performer has to gauge an audience’s mood and respond to it (e.g. Y020608A). One young composer says “Without music, people would be deaf and dumb” (Y121908A). His job is to create music that affects listeners’ emotions and “gives them energy.” An older, more experienced performer agrees: he says that his goal, when onstage is to “give the audience more pleasure. But not just pleasure, more feeling...more intense feeling matching the mood of the song” (Y122208A).

One famous male singer outlined how this philosophy – that the role of the performer is to respond to an audience’s mood – plays out in practice. He explains that typical stage show protocol is: a professional singer will arrive at a concert with the notation for five songs in hand, intending to sing only three. He will select these three on stage, basing his choice on his assessment of the audience. “For example, if they [the fans] are energetic and standing up, then you should sing a hard rock song” he says (Y011308A). For him, and for a number of others in his industry, this is the essence of communicating with audiences: reflecting their feelings back to them. Importantly, this belief, and the accompanying behavior, can only operate in the Burmese pop scene because of kinds of skills and expectations around playing that we saw up close in Gita Studio. It is only because professional instrumentalists perform notation at sight, with no thought that they should rehearse a particular program in advance, that singers can walk on stage and decide on their song choices there and then.

Burmese pop performers seem confident that they are not only able to directly communicate with their audiences, but that this communication effects some change in the fans themselves. They believe, to use a more colloquial term, that their music reaches their audiences. One young singer said that her goal is to make her audiences “happy” (Y010908A). She believes she accomplishes this, partly because she can observe fans clapping and singing along with the music, and partly because she knows that she herself feels happy when she listens to music. Therefore she assumes that fans are happy too, when they listen to her. Another, older singer says that he is convinced that his fans hear the messages in his songs (Y011008A). He describes his songs as “spiritual” rather than “political,” and says that the proof of his success is that listeners, having heard his music and absorbed its message of love and freedom, interact with their family and friends accordingly. One singer who records both secular and gospel songs says that she heard that a man converted to Christianity after listening to one of her gospel series (Y122607B).

As these examples show, these musicians and others like them maintain this belief – that their music directly affects their listeners - with little evidence to support it. Their comments are more like statements of faith than of verifiable fact. Jason Toyne, the scholar cited above, is deeply skeptical of the notion that musicians can communicate with audiences and that audiences can understand this communication (2000:60). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the idea plays an important role in performers’ approaches to their audiences. He outlines three predominant strategies, or modes, that pop musicians use when communicating with audiences. First, the expressionist mode, in which the musician attempts to express his or her inner being; second, the transformative mode, in which the musician performs “music which maintains a vision of a better world” (p 64) in an attempt to transform that world; and

third, the reflexive mode, in which a strongly self-aware musician displays his or her skills and presents the music to an audience.

As Toynbee points out, most performances use more than one of these strategies, and this is of course true in Burma. However, my research suggests that Burmese pop performers most often use the transformative mode – that is, they aim to transform their audiences, and thereby, their world. Interestingly, Toynbee argues that musicians who most often use this mode of communication usually perform music that is “a variation of that which has already been played and sung” (p. 63), rather than original music (as expressionist musicians would do). Again, the Burmese pop scene would seem to support his analysis. Its repertoire has historically been dominated by *copy thachin*, or songs which are variations of Western hits.

Burmese pop musicians appreciate the meaningful relationships that they believe they have with their audiences. In addition, they value the generally good working relationships that exist between musicians. One man who (somewhat exceptionally) works as a recording engineer and as a guitarist, and therefore has the chance to observe and participate in many interactions, says his peers usually respect each other: “They listen to each other and do not fight” (Y011009A). Another man, a composer and arranger who has been working in the industry for more than two decades, says that in his experience, industry workers usually get along well (Y010709B). “Mostly people aren’t jealous of each other, and they respect each other,” he says. He links these good relations directly to musicians’ job satisfaction: Burmese musicians are usually “*jay-nah deh*” (satisfied) with their work, and therefore they are relaxed and kind when dealing with each other.

Of course, this perception is not universal. One MMA member who sits on the organization’s dispute-resolution committee, and therefore sees frequent conflict between industry members, says he believes that many of them do not respect each

other (Y010909A). He claims that movie directors, for example, have little appreciation for the time and effort that it takes to compose a song, and so are reluctant to grant that a composer might have some claim on movie profits. Composers, for their part, do not seem to appreciate all the work that producers do, and so on. “They get along fine until money is involved,” he says. “Then, they don’t seem to follow the Buddha, or Jesus, or Mohammed, or whoever they claim they’re following.” A producer says that many famous singers behave like divas, demanding that recording schedules be arranged to suit their own convenience (Y122708A). He claims that the Burmese public would be shocked to know how some of their favorite singers behave towards their colleagues in the industry. A manager at Yangon City FM concurs, saying that some of the famous musicians are “difficult to cooperate” (Y020108A).

Burmese pop music industry members may not be unanimous in their reports on how they relate to each other. However, they all make the identical claim about their relationship to the government: to a man, and to a woman, Burmese pop musicians say that they are independent of the SPDC. They insist that they do not actively support the government, and that they do not work for it. This is a point of pride for many of them, including the MMA committee member who pointed out to me that he was elected to his position by the membership (rather than appointed by the government, as other committee members are) (Y123108A). “The government doesn’t like me much,” he said happily. Another man, the manager of one of Burma’s busiest rock bands, pointed out to me that he never deals directly with government functionaries when organizing concerts: “That’s the contractor’s job,” he emphasized (Y123008B). And one of the leaders of the newly-reconstituted MMA³¹ took pains to

³¹ A precursor to the current Myanmar Musicians Association was created by the SPDC in the early 1990s. It was unpopular with musicians, who largely refused to join it because they believed it to be nothing more than another form of surveillance. The current MMA was founded in 2006, and

explain to me that this organization is not a creature of the government, nor a professional association or labor union for musicians (Y020508A). Rather, he says, the MMA is a “bridge” that lies “in between” the two camps.

Industry members made this claim even when it seemed tenuous at best. For example, one man who has made a good living importing, selling and installing recording equipment in government-run radio and television studios began his interview with me by saying, “I have never worked for the government” (Y121708A). Leading figures at both Yangon City FM and Mandalay FM emphasized to me that their radio stations are “private” and “not like the government radio stations,” even though their broadcasts, like all media, must be sanctioned by the SPDC, and their stations are under the direct control of government ministries (Y122208A and Y020108A). Another man, a performer and arranger, made caustic comments about “some other composers” who are disliked by all the rest because they “write songs for the government and get favors in exchange” (Y010709B). In the next breath he admitted that he had recently performed for, and been paid for, a government-organized sports event. “You cannot say no. If you do, they will take action. Like, they will make sure that you do not get a pass [from the Press Security Board, which censors all commercial recordings] for your next album,” he explained.

In truth, it seems that most, if not all, of the people working full-time in the Burmese pop industry are obligated to cooperate with government at one point or another. (And some of them said as much to me.) The SPDC is constantly asking musicians to create and perform music for government-sponsored events and TV shows. When a “request” is made, musicians are under tremendous pressure to cooperate, and they usually do. In order to square this behavior with their anti-

approximately half of its leadership is elected by the members at large. (The other half are government appointees.)

government stance, musicians must parse their words. For example, they distinguish between more and less acceptable types of “government songs.” Policy songs (understood to be propaganda) are the most morally objectionable sub-genre of government songs. These songs generally promote government policy; one recent example was a song that told listeners to vote “Yes” in the national referendum of 2008. Other kinds of government songs are more like public service announcements. These songs announce upcoming public health campaigns, for example, or give information about how disease is transmitted.

Composers and performers usually point out that they do sometimes participate in government songs, but never policy songs. For example, one composer says that he has written some PSA-type songs at the government’s behest, but that he never writes policy songs, and that in fact he refuses when he is asked to do so (e.g. Y010909A). For him, all songs requested by the government that treat topics other than public safety are unacceptable policy songs. Another composer acknowledged that he wrote a song to promote a vaccination campaign, and other songs for bridge openings and the like, but that none of these are policy songs (Y122408A). In his view, a song which celebrates the opening of a bridge (that is, which touts one of the SPDC’s accomplishments) is not a policy song – although some of his peers would disagree. Yet another composer (the man who created the referendum song mentioned above) admitted that he does sometimes write “political” songs for the government (Y122208A). But he added instantly that when he does so, he tries to redeem the work by making it interesting for audiences by adding “interesting parts, and funny jokes...” He says that his goal is to write a “fair” song, one that takes a stand somewhere between the government and the pro-democracy forces. So even he is unwilling, at least in his own mind, to write a song that does nothing but serve the government’s agenda.

THE WIDER CONTEXT: CIVIL SOCIETY IN BURMA TODAY

One important way in which Burmese pop musicians assert their independence from the SPDC is by contributing to Burma's growing civil society. As many commentators on politics, freedom, and Burma understand, the simple equation of social progress with democratic elections is naïve. This has become particularly evident in some of the G8 countries in recent years, where liberal democratic governments have enacted laws and pursued policies which infringe on the historic rights of their citizens, in the name of fighting the war on terror (James 2006:167). Therefore, much of the scholarly discourse surrounding Burma now focuses on the health of the country's civil society. Civil society consists of voluntary organizations of people (other than political parties) who work together for the common good, such as NGOs, community clubs, religiously-motivated groups who care for the marginalized, and so on. Such organizations require trust, co-operation and disinterest (that is, the opposite of self-interest) from their members if they are to succeed. They are thus the building blocks of a democratic society, and the relatively democratic nature of a community or country can be assessed, in large part, by gauging the strength, autonomy and accountability of civil society organizations.

Burma's civil society is almost always portrayed in the international media as being extinct, or nearly so. A number of Burma scholars concur with this assessment. Monique Skidmore, for example, points out that the regime's policy of forced relocation of populations (both in rural and urban areas) disrupts the local social networks that develop over many years and which are necessary for the formation of civil society (2004:89). Zunetta Liddell (1999) cites a list of government infringements on freedom of association and freedom of speech in Burma and argues that civil society has "no room to move." David Steinberg, a senior Burma scholar, asserts that the military regime has effectively destroyed the country's formerly-robust

civil society, and yet that such organizations must be able to grow in freedom if Burmese people are to develop a democratic political structure (2001:120).

There are some dissenting voices. Calvin Khin Zaw (2007), who now works for one of Burma's most respected NGOs, and who spent more than a decade as a political prisoner, asserts that civil society does exist in Burma. Furthermore, he argues that international focus on individual leaders (like Aung San Suu Kyi) does a real disservice to institutions, including those that constitute the civil society, which will be crucially important to any democratic transition in Burma. Brian Heidel, author of the first comprehensive survey of NGOs and CBOs (community-based organizations) in Burma is categorical: "Civil society is alive in Myanmar today" (2006:60). And a very recent article in *The Irrawaddy* online magazine points out that in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis (which killed and displaced hundreds of thousands of people in Burma in May, 2008), the country's civil society organizations rose up to help the victims. The result was that the most-feared outcomes (in the wake of the government's restriction of international humanitarian aid) did not come to pass. Epidemic disease, for example, was thwarted. The hundreds of examples of small and large groups of Burmese people who worked hard to help their fellow-citizens proved the existence and effectiveness of the country's civil society (Yeni 2008b).

My own research tends to support the idea that civil society in Burma is a nascent but persistent phenomenon. Because this is an ethnographic project, it does not feature graphs and tables based on data culled from official organizations (such as in Heidel 2006, where the author's number-crunching leads to some beautifully-elucidated conclusions). However, my work does have the advantage of being based on living in Yangon for an extended period, spending time in the homes and workplaces of many citizens, conversing with them in their native language and observing their patterns of behavior and belief. For example, I rode Yangon's public

buses daily and was impressed by my fellow-riders' commitment to helping each other during what can be long and uncomfortable commutes. On these buses, those lucky enough to get a seat always offer to hold the bags and packages of those who are forced to stand. They make these offers (which are always accepted, since no one expects the holder of the goods to abscond with them) to strangers and acquaintances alike. Twice, I even observed seated passengers holding the small children of standing parents.

To take another example: Very few people in Yangon have telephones. In middle-income and low-income neighborhoods, those lucky enough to have a phone in their home will almost always share that phone with their neighbors, so that individual phone numbers are, in effect, party lines. The owners of the phones do not ask their neighbors to help pay for the service. In fact, they seem to view this way of helping their fellow-citizens as a kind of duty, albeit one that is welcomed rather than resented (Y011508A). These are small things, perhaps. But they are near-universal behaviors, and they reveal the willingness of Burmese people to participate in and sustain their inter-dependent society. They are a testament to the continual willingness of the average Burmese person to subsume his or her individual interest to the common good, and they are therefore indications that civil society has a fertile ground in which to grow.

Moreover, the research I conducted in Yangon reveals that at least one identifiable and influential group of citizens – creators of pop music – make frequent tangible contributions to civil society in Burma. These musicians do not usually talk of “civil society” or “democracy” – but they are practicing the essence of democracy, by working together for the good of society at large.³² Earlier in this chapter, I

³² And sometimes, they do speak explicitly about creating a better society; see for example Zin 2002. Here rock star Zaw Win Htut talks about how he and his colleagues have a responsibility to work together for “social betterment.”

referred briefly to musicians' goals, showing that some of them desire to become famous in order to be able to further some social purpose, such as, for example, uplifting the reputation and/or morale of the minority population into which they were born. I described how many Christian musicians work for low pay, or even donate their services, in order to help younger musicians or community organizers who are creating recordings on low budgets. This phenomenon is not limited to Christian musicians, to be sure: Buddhist pop singers and instrumentalists also regularly donate their time and talents for Buddhist religious festivals (Y012908B).

And musicians of both faiths are committed to helping to raise funds and awareness for causes that benefit Burmese citizens generally. For example, in January 2008, many of the most famous musicians in Yangon banded together for a concert held at Aung San Stadium. The concert, which lasted three hours and featured approximately twenty-five different acts, was performed specifically to raise money and public sympathy for AIDS patients. This event attracted a standing-room-only audience of about four thousand people and raised seventy-eight lakhs (78 million kyat, or approximately \$7800 USD), according to a leading member of the Myanmar Musicians Association (Y020508A). All of this money was given to a Yangon hospital that treats AIDS patients.

The concert performers appeared for free; indeed, when I asked one singer whether he had collected a fee for his performance, he seemed offended that I had even posed the question. "I would not have taken any money even if it had been offered," he assured me (Y011308A). As I spent more time with Yangon pop musicians, I grew to understand why this singer had found my question inappropriate: He and his colleagues so frequently work for free, on projects benefiting others less fortunate than themselves, that it is almost inconceivable that any of them would attempt to profit from an opportunity to raise money for AIDS patients.

The January 12, 2008 concert was combined with an exhibition soccer game. After the concert, the Myanmar Musicians Association soccer team (composed of male members of the MMA, and other soccer players hired for the occasion) played a match against the country's national team. The game seemed to be as much of a draw as the concert itself; no one left after the singing concluded. Indeed the audience seemed excited to watch the game, cheering equally loudly for both teams.

This match was only one of a dozen or so that the MMA team plays in a normal year. The MMA founded this team at the behest of one of their members who is a former member of a professional team, and now it travels around the country, performing concerts and playing friendly soccer matches with local teams (Y011008A). Funding for uniforms and other costs is provided by another member of the MMA who is privately wealthy (Y020508A). None of the musicians are paid for the trips, and they do not use the concerts/matches as opportunities to sell their *series*. The captain of the team told me that the team's objectives are first, to show that they are not drug addicts, and thereby to present a good example to rural youth, and second, to "build relationships" and "create a network" between musicians and their fans (Y011008A).³³

During an interview, I asked another MMA soccer team member about the team's second objective, which he labeled as "having fellowship" with villagers. When I asked him to define "fellowship," he responded: "That means talking together and listening to each other...like you and I are doing right now" (Y011308A). The captain concurred, explaining that conversations become possible when people play

³³ Interestingly, Brian Heidel specifically excluded the MMA from his study of NGOs and CBOs, saying that it does not constitute a true NGO because it has "no social welfare aims" (2006:9). Clearly, the group does have such aims, and leaders are able to both articulate these aims and provide examples of how they are accomplishing them. This fact points to the idea that much more research could be done, examining other groups in Burma which do not, seemingly, fit the definition of civil society organizations, to discover if and how these groups contribute to the nascent civil society.

sports together, and that the soccer team was created, in large part, to provoke conversations and create friendly ties between famous Yangonites and their rural fans. By funding and participating in the MMA soccer team, Burmese pop musicians are providing opportunities for strangers across the country to work co-operatively and have dialogue. In other words, they are fostering the basis of democratic institutions.

Popular music scholar Reebee Garofalo argues that this kind of behavior has received short shrift in academic writing. He points out that influential authors like Karl Marx and Theodor Adorno had little patience for popular culture. Marx saw it as nothing more than a reflection of ideology of the ruling class, and Adorno as a tool that is used by elites to turn the masses' attention away from the injustices of capitalism (1992:17). Later scholars of popular music, contesting the ideas of Marx and Adorno, emphasized that popular culture does have "progressive potential," because large numbers of people are able to "appropriate" it and craft their own meanings for it (1992:19). But Garofalo contends that scholars need to evaluate the political potential of "mass culture" (as he calls it) by examining the intentions and actions of artists and industry members, rather than just by analyzing the content of their artistic products (popular songs, in this case). He focuses on "mega-events," pop music concerts that are organized to serve four purposes: fundraising, consciousness raising, allowing artists to be involved in the "cause," and mobilizing the general public (usually through mass media) in service of the cause. Garofalo argues that, insofar as mega-events succeed in achieving these goals, they succeed on a large scale. Therefore, they should be acknowledged as important factors that contribute to the political potential of popular music.

When Burmese pop musicians participated in the AIDS fundraising mega-event described above (or other, similar events), they advanced at least three of Garofalo's four purposes. First, they raised a significant amount of money for medical

patients who need it badly. Secondly, they lent their prestige to HIV/AIDS sufferers, people who have not, until recently, been acknowledged by the Myanmar government or by the public at large as worthy of help.³⁴ Thirdly, they reinforced their own (and, they hope, their fans') understanding of themselves as entertainers who are allied with their audience, not with their totalitarian government. By making a tangible, public contribution to a "good cause" that has not been adequately supported by the SPDC, these musicians showed themselves to be oriented towards the common people of Burma. Put another way, they made a substantial contribution to Burma's developing civil society.

By choosing to impact their society in this way, pop musicians in Burma are pursuing a line of action akin to what Gautama Buddha called "the Middle Way." The Buddha taught that the Middle Way – the path that lies between two extremes - is the best way to live.³⁵ The Middle Way strikes me as an appropriate descriptor for the path pursued by Burmese pop musicians as they work toward societal change. These musicians usually do not confront the military government directly by penning lyrics critical of the regime. In other words, they do not choose a path of resistance, as Western scholars would understand it. Rather, they leverage their fame to serve another purpose, giving their energy and skills to projects which are important to local communities.

At least one other scholar has argued for a similar conception of possible political change in Burma. Ardeth Maung Thawngmung says that a growing

³⁴ See the International Crisis Group's 2002 report on the AIDS epidemic in Burma. This report details the government's "deep denial" of the problem and the consequent high infection rate. Archived at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1799&l=1>

³⁵ The Buddha began his earthly existence as a prince in India and went on, as an adult, to practice extreme self-mortification in a search for spiritual awakening. He subsequently realized (and later taught) that neither indulgence in sensual pleasure nor rigorous asceticism could lead to enlightenment. Rather, the spiritual seeker must follow a "middle way" between these two extremes, a way which is composed of righteous actions and attitudes.

number of Burmese people, disappointed with both the military's human rights abuses and the National League for Democracy's inability to effect change, are embracing a "new ideology in Myanmar" which is an "alternative, middle-way approach" to political progress (2003:453-454). Unfortunately, Thawngmung does not say much about this middle way (or "third force", as she also calls it). However, she does contrast it with the repression/confrontation cycle that has characterized the relationship between the SPDC and the NLD. In addition, she points out that this new approach is valued by people of diverse backgrounds who have come to the realization that they can work together because they have common goals (for peace and economic stability, for example). In other words, this middle way is the fruit of dialogue and co-operation between various parties.

All of this is not to say that Burmese pop musicians view themselves as social workers or political activists. (Indeed, had the AIDS fundraising concert been seen as "political" in the local context, the SPDC would never have allowed it to take place). As we have seen, these musicians say over and over that they decided to pursue their careers because they enjoy music-making so much: for them, music is their "hobby." However, when they perform for "good causes" without receiving much or any pay, which is something they all do fairly regularly, they deploy their ability to attract an audience for the common good. When they consciously set aside the opportunity to earn money for themselves and instead perform for the betterment of their fellow citizens, they underline one very important facet of their identities as famous Burmese musicians. They demonstrate to others and themselves the depth of their stated commitment to care for their audiences (that is, the Burmese public).

SUMMARY

As this ethnographic survey of Yangon-based pop musicians shows, these creators of music are, on the whole, happy and productive people. Their own

statements and analyses of their situation account for this. They tend to exercise a great deal of autonomy in their work, while at the same time surrounding themselves with a collegial atmosphere and friendly colleagues. They earn a good living from their work, with the result that they can secure a place in Burma's small middle class. They enjoy this work, since for most of them music-making is a hobby, or passion, that they began to pursue long before they could expect to earn any money from it. They are largely respected for what they do by their fans. They are not expected to violate the social norms of their society, and most of them do not. Moreover, they experience their work as purposeful. Those who have an explicitly religious framework for understanding their lives see their careers as the unfolding of "God's will." Those who do not articulate it in this way nevertheless believe that they are able to communicate with their fans and affect those fans for the better. And they make tangible contributions to those fans' lives by participating in the development of the country's civil society.

These creators of music are not Pollyannas who naively focus on the silver lining in every cloud, no matter how dark the sky. In fact, they clearly articulated their struggles and challenges during interviews with me. Their most-often cited complaint is that they do not have enough money to pursue the recording projects that they wish to create. They are deeply worried about rampant piracy of recordings and are often frustrated by their government's irrational attempts to control musicians through surveillance, censorship and other means. As people who rely on electronic instruments to make their living, they are regularly negatively affected by the unreliable electricity grid in Yangon. They know that their hopes to go abroad, either to perform or to pursue education, are unlikely to be fulfilled. Nevertheless, they are, for the most part, happy to be creators of music in Yangon and have no intentions of doing anything else.

This view of creators of music in Yangon, as I have summarized it here, contrasts deeply with the few journalistic treatments of the same topic that have appeared in the Western press. Phil Zabriskie's article, cited above, is one example of this kind of reporting, as is Scott Carrier's longer piece called "Rock the Junta" (2006). In the view of these journalists, who usually stay in Yangon for only a few days and who do not speak Burmese, musicians are sad figures, pawns of the totalitarian regime. The authors tend to dismiss the music made by Yangon pop artists ("While there was a lot of rock and pop music being played all over town, most of it was just awful" sniffs Carrier) and focus on the dreary lives of average people in the city – and then extend their conclusions about the general situation to the specific situation of the artists. They tend to emphasize the fear of the government that musicians feel, and neglect the joy they find in music.

My research shows that these authors' overwhelmingly negative perspective is not supported by a preponderance of the evidence. Perhaps it seems like tilting at windmills even to make this argument. But these articles are virtually all that English-speaking international audiences ever read about Burmese pop musicians; therefore, it is important to analyze their accuracy. Moreover, I think it is important to challenge this kind of negative assessment, because such a gloomy view can lead to a tendency to dismiss the subject altogether. What more needs to be said, for example, about a rocker who performs "watered-down Burmese covers of rock relics by the Eagles, Rod Stewart and the Beatles" and who "cannot afford to be idealistic"? (Zabriskie 2002). Very little, if these two articles are any indication. My own work reveals that Burmese creators of pop music are so much more than puppets of a repressive junta. Rather, they are complex human beings who are seeking, and often finding, meaningful and fulfilling lives in the midst of a deeply challenging situation. As such, they warrant serious attention from all who care about music and musicians.

CHAPTER 2

BURMESE POP SONGS: SOUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

February 16, 2008, Kandawgyi Park, Yangon: I am one of a few thousand excited people attending the biggest show in the country – an Iron Cross concert. For the uninitiated (and this would exclude virtually every citizen of Burma), Iron Cross – or IC as they are usually called here – is the most famous and successful Burmese rock band in existence. Although it has sold untold numbers of albums, probably the quickest way to mark IC's success is to point out that the band has toured outside of Burma. In 2004, for example, they played dates in Japan and the United States (Anonymous 2004a). However, like the handful of other Burmese acts who have performed abroad, IC remains virtually unknown to the world. Its only audience is Burmese, at home and in the diaspora. But here tonight the excitement is palpable: the members of Iron Cross are veritable stars, almost heroic figures to their fans. Scalpers on the street are hawking tickets for five thousand kyat (or five USD), a markup of five hundred kyat from the official price.

As we walk into the park – my two companions and I abandoned our taxi at the gate, realizing that the crush would prevent us from advancing by car – I am surrounded by people, all of them are trying to move quickly toward the concert area. As they surge past me, I note that most of them seem to be under thirty years of age, that men outnumber women by about five to one, and that virtually no one is wearing a *longyi* (the traditional Burmese unisex skirt). Blue jeans are the uniform of the evening. And the slogans on t-shirts affirm the wearers' affinity for international pop culture: I see numerous shirts celebrating David Beckham, Che Guevara, the FBI and the US Army. And then there are the defiant shirts: F**K the Revolution and God Made Grass. But I am most interested to notice the many people sporting the logos and names of pop bands. All of them are American and British bands (the misspelled

Linkin [Likin] Park t-shirt is the most popular). No one is wearing a shirt representing a Burmese band – not even Iron Cross.

Upon arrival at the natural amphitheatre where the stage is set up, we are enveloped by the crowd. There are no seats here (as there were for another concert I attended in the same venue a month earlier) and everyone is forced to stand. The luckiest are high up on the hills or very close to the stage. The dense crush of bodies in the darkness gives rise to the feeling of being in some different, out-of-the-norm place and time. And this is reinforced by the behavior of my male and female friends, who are hugging - hugging! - each other in public. (I am amused to realize how shocked I am by this; clearly, after only a few weeks here, I have begun to absorb the mores of this society.) Although we are packed in like rats, there is a feeling of expansiveness and possibility. For me, this is quite possibly because I am next to invisible, and so, am relieved from the constant polite attention I receive as a foreigner. For the Burmese, it likely stems from participating in something normally forbidden – that is, a public meeting of more than five people after dark.

At 6:30 pm, the official start time, the loudspeakers begin blaring Mariah Carey. We listen to an entire album until, at 7:00 pm, the concert begins. When it does, I am intrigued to see that the band members simply walk onto the stage, take their places, and begin performing. At every other concert I have attended, the show begins with a long-winded and deeply boring introductory speech in which an announcer reads the biographies of the performers. This is such an integral part of the evening that VCDs of live performances usually include the speech. I always feel vaguely sorry for these announcers, because they are the subject of some heckling (although, since I find them as annoying as do my fellow-concert goers, my sympathy is limited). But tonight, the show begins with the show. And what a show it is! The first act is an extended instrumental improvisation in which each of the players in the

band (a drummer, a keyboardist, a bass guitarist and a lead guitarist) performs a long, virtuosic solo. Chit San Maung, the lead guitarist, is a true showman: he plays his guitar while holding it over his head, then behind his back, and finally like a keyboard, balancing the instrument on a roadie's willing back. Maung's fingers perform seemingly-impossibly fast runs, up and down the range of the guitar, the notes sizzling in the evening air.

After this, we are treated to a standard pop concert. Iron Cross serves as an accompanying ensemble for much of the time, playing for a parade of guest singers who come forward one by one to perform two or three songs each. Tonight the singers include two women, one of whom opens with a copy of Avril Lavigne's "Sk8terboy," and four men. Each of these singers has achieved some success in their own right (Zaw Paing, for example, is a huge star whose face adorns billboards), but there is no escaping the fact that this concert with IC represents the pinnacle of achievement for each of them.

And their presence does not conceal the gaping absence of IC's own lead singer Lay Phyu, who has not performed with the group for years.³⁶ Rumors abound as to why this is. One of the friends who is attending the concert with me tells me her version: Lay Phyu was forbidden to perform in public by the government because 1) he refused to perform live on City FM, the Yangon pop radio station, saying that his songs were intended for the whole country and not just Yangon, and 2) he sang something the government did not like. Whatever the case, the crowd remembers him and misses him dearly: they shout his name before the concert begins, in the lulls between songs, and at any other convenient moment.

³⁶ Lay Phyu appeared again in concert with IC for the first time in August of 2008, in a concert for hurricane relief.

But these Burmese fans generously shower the other performers with their attention, too. They sing along (very loudly – perhaps better to say that they shout along) to almost every song, they take off their shirts to be able to wave them above the crowd, they lift their hands into the air, clap, holler and even dance where there is room. They do not, however, toss many items toward the stage, which is usually standard practice at concerts here. On the way in, security personnel confiscated all of the caps from our plastic water bottles, and no one is selling flowers or trinkets, and so there is not much to throw. Some enthusiastic fans do manage to toss their water bottles, though.

Undoubtedly, if the staging permitted access to the stage, some members of this crowd would mount the stage and present the performers with flowers or balloons, draping them over their necks. This lovely gesture, and the trust between performers and fans which makes it possible, is one of my favorite aspects of Burmese pop concerts. I am disappointed to realize that tonight it will not happen, because the ramp leading to the stage has been blocked. Normally, this ramp is wide open (indeed, I suspect it was built to make it easier for fans to access the stage) and fans use it with enthusiasm. The little ritual always reminds me of Buddhist blessings, during which devotees drape ropes of flowers over Buddha statues. It seems to be a direct descendent of audience behavior at traditional Burmese *bwe* in which people (usually women) approach the *nat kadaw* (spirit mediums) and lay flowers around their necks or pin money to their clothes.

The barrier between the audience and the band tonight is unusual, but many more of the features of their performance are standard practice. For example, family members and techies are clearly visible at the side of the stage, where they hover during the songs. Sometimes, the workers even move equipment around the stage while a song is being sung. Because of this, there is a marked lack of staged formality

to many Burmese pop concerts. The performers seem to be there to do a job, which they do competently and without fanfare. Singers will sometimes move about the stage, dance, and play air guitar, but the moment they finish singing their lyrics, they thank the crowd and walk off stage. (Or, they thank the crowd three or four times before walking off. Burmese pop singers are nothing if not polite.) They do this even if the band is still playing the final notes of the song. I get a strong sense of, “When it’s over, it’s over.” Bands do not usually play encores, and they never make a production of the beginning or the end of a song.

They are limited, of course, by their technology: there are no rotating stages or strobe lights or multi-story screens in Burma. The backdrop used at a stage show (a large piece of cloth which is hung across the back of the stage) usually follows a formula: a couple of logos representing the sponsor and/or the band, and some wording – giving the name of the event and the date – in Burmese and, frequently, in English. The backdrop is never changed during a show, and performers never change their costumes (which are invariably casual Western wear, for both men and women). Bands do frequently use dry ice for effect – but again, without making it an integral part of the show. Normally, as at this IC concert, puffs of dry ice vapor appear at regular intervals, not coordinated with the songs or the action on stage.

This concert, like most Burmese pop concerts, is rather longer than the typical American show: the musicians perform from 7:00 pm to 10:30 pm with no intermission. After the entire group of six singers has performed one by one, they repeat the line-up. All of the songs that are performed are Burmese pop songs, and quite a few seem to be *copy thachin*. Although Iron Cross is sometimes described as a “heavy metal” band (see Carrier 2006), the format of Burmese pop concerts does not really allow for pigeonholing bands into one musical style. Instrumentalists have to be prepared to play for singers performing a variety of styles. Tonight, the aesthetic is

overwhelmingly middle-of-the-road rock – at least from my North American perspective. The entire band plays for each number, with the drums and guitars filling in the rhythms and the chords in a relatively uniform fashion on each song. The singers generally use a clear head tone when singing, rather than shouting into the mike. And their voices are paramount in the texture; although the band evinces great musicianship when accompanying the singers, clearly, they are accompanying the voices. And there is none of the headbanging or smashing of guitars that I associate with heavy metal – rather, utmost decorum reigns on stage throughout the night.

In general, the crowd seems interested and happy, although when a fight breaks out during a lull around 9:00 pm, I wonder if it isn't partly the result of boredom. Certainly the fight seems to alarm onlookers, who try to move away from it in the cramped space. But it is nothing serious. At least, this seems to be the opinion of the security personnel, who watch with disdain from the sidelines and make no attempt to intervene. Dagon Beer Company is the sponsor for the concert, and so beer is on sale and being imbibed in large amounts. I do not notice any open selling of drugs. My very half-hearted attempt to research this point (I ask two different people if I can buy drugs at the concert) leads nowhere: I am simply informed that there are no drugs available. Perhaps the most noticeable feature of this concert is the fact that the electric current runs steadily through the evening. There are no sudden silences or darkenings of the stage, as I have come to expect at shows like this.

The show concludes with a copy of Collective Soul's "December," the bass guitarist drawing out the characteristic Bb-B natural-G riff in haunting fashion. This piece is one of IC's signature tunes – it was included on their 15th anniversary DVD – and I am struck by how representative it is of the larger Burmese pop scene: the most respected group in the country playing a *copy thachin*, performing it with almost eerie

exactness, and the crowd embracing the music as an artifact of Western modernity that nevertheless expresses Burmese ideas using Burmese lyrics.

CATEGORIZING SONGS: INSIDERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TERMINOLOGY

Most of the Burmese pop songs that I have listened to while researching this dissertation can be grouped into one broad category: the ballad. Ballads are relatively short songs, organized into verse-chorus form, that imply some kind of real-life circumstance or evoke some narrative (often a love story); they are usually performed at a fairly slow tempo. The ballad has played an important part in Western European music for centuries, and in the twentieth century it became an important form of popular music (Randel 1986:67). Because ballads aim to tell a story, the words must be clearly understood by listeners. Therefore, the texture of a ballad always prioritizes the singer's voice. Even when ballads are performed by rock bands (as they often are now), the electric instruments will deploy their powerful sound capabilities to accompany the voice of the singer, and on recordings, the mix volume will favor the singer.

Why ballads? One good reason is that this is the particular form of Western pop music that most Burmese people have been exposed to, until very recently. As I explain in the introduction to this dissertation, Burmese government policy (and later, international sanctions) prevented large amounts of foreign-made recordings from flowing freely into Burma after 1962. Any Burmese person who wanted to listen to Western pop, for example, had to content him or herself with whatever recordings could be smuggled into the country. Therefore, they had access only to whatever styles of music the importers (who functioned effectively as gatekeepers) chose to bring to Burma.

I interviewed a man who worked as a “supplier” for one of Burma best-known recording distribution companies from 2002 to 2005 (Y122908A). During those years he traveled monthly to Bangkok in order to acquire original recordings for his employers to duplicate and sell. I asked him what kinds of recordings he chose to purchase, and he followed three basic criteria. First, if the music was “melodic” he would purchase the recording. Second, if the album included a song that was currently playing in heavy rotation on Asian MTV (that is, if the video was already popular with other Asian audiences), he would purchase it. And third, if the recording was a new album from a big-name group (“like Metallica”) he would purchase it. But he emphasized that the first of these criteria – the “melodic” nature of the music – was the most important. In fact, he said, he regularly purchased albums by unknown or indie artists if they sounded “melodic,” because he knew they would be popular with Burmese audiences.

Pressed for a definition of “melodic,” the supplier said that the music could be in any style, from country to heavy metal, as long as the songs had strong melodies that fans could easily hear. This is a fair description of “December,” IC’s signature song, and for that matter, many of Metallica’s greatest hits. And it is an important component of ballads. Like many of his peers in previous decades, this supplier focused on bringing ballads, to the exclusion of other kinds of popular music, into Burma. His story helps to explain why Burmese pop music, which is self-consciously modeled on Anglo-American pop, so consistently focuses on the ballad.

Virtually none of the Burmese pop music industry members I interviewed would agree with my assessment, because it implies that all of their songs are somewhat the same. Interestingly, as I discovered in talking with them, they do not believe that another, more common, categorization is particularly relevant either.

Other commentators, hearing melodies that they recognize as well as ones they do not, tend to think of the songs as falling into two categories: *copy thachin* and original pieces (called *own tune* by the Burmese).³⁷ While members of the Yangon pop scene do use these terms, they never class their songs this way. Rather, they group the songs according to the themes in the lyrics. For example, Christian musicians who enunciate a two-fold division tend to speak of “love songs” and “gospel songs” (e.g. Y011908A and Y010608A). One Christian composer explained it this way: A love song is always in Burmese, with lyrics that speak about romantic heterosexual love, and has three verses and a chorus. A gospel song, on the other hand, can be in Burmese or Karen or another minority language. The words may be about God, but also possibly about nature, family, Christmas, weddings, or other important events.

Both love songs and gospel songs can be composed in various styles, such as country or rock or blues (Y122807A). This composer notes that he usually earns more writing love songs than gospel songs: he makes an average of \$140 USD for a love song that is used on a CD or VCD, and \$200 USD if it is used in a movie. Therefore, he sometimes writes love songs on spec, in the hopes that he will be able to sell them to a well-known singer. When I ask him about the percentage of *copy thachin* vs. *own tunes* in his oeuvre, he tells me that all of his songs are *own tune* songs – but like the other musicians I interviewed about this topic, he did not focus on the *copy thachin/own tune* distinction until I brought it up.

Another singer-songwriter uses a three-fold division to distinguish songs. He tells me that the categories are love songs, gospel songs and songs for special occasions (like Mother’s Day) (Y011308A). On his most recent album – an album of

³⁷ See for example Zaw 2004, where he uses this division to organize his discussion of Burmese pop music.

love songs - he says, two of the songs are *copy thachin* and ten are *own tune*, composed by himself and others. One of his collaborators, who also divided song types into three, spoke of love songs, gospel songs and *ah-kyoh-pyu-tay* (“beneficial songs” or “encouragement songs”) (Y011108A). These songs can be recorded in both Burmese and in minority languages. They are songs that have lyrics of inspiration and encouragement, in which the basic message is: Be proud of your people, be proud of yourself, be strong, and pursue your goals. Again, these songs may be *copy thachin* or *own tune*; their distinguishing characteristic is not the origin of the melody and chords but rather the intent of the lyrics.³⁸

Musicians, like all human beings, tend to classify concepts according to their own experiences. In the course of my interviews with Burmese pop musicians I found two in particular who clearly demonstrated this truism. Their very different experiences in the pop industry were reflected in the way they understood songs to be organized. The first was a Karen singer, a woman who identified herself this way because she records only in the Sgaw Karen language, and never submits any of her recordings to the censors. She believes that the most important distinction between pop songs in Burma is that between songs with Burmese words and songs with words in other languages (Y020608A). Her songs are all Karen songs, but they subdivide into three categories: Love songs, gospel songs, and “national songs.” National songs, she says, are “songs of loving your people.” She sings them to remind her listeners to remember their ethnic heritage, to love it and to live according the traditional values that she understands to be associated with that heritage.

³⁸ Some musicians acknowledged the existence of political songs, but since these are so rarely heard, this seemed to be an unimportant category. Political songs – that is, songs which speak of politics, the democracy movement and/or the ethnic insurgency – are composed and recorded on the Thai-Burma border and the recordings sometimes find their way back to Yangon. Other songs that might fit this category, such as those with coded messages (discussed in Chapter 5) are sung in Yangon, but only in private settings.

One of the most prolific composers in Burma, a Burman Buddhist who writes only in Burmese and who has written many songs for the government over the course of his career, divides songs into the two categories that most closely reflect his own experience: songs he has written “for himself” (for sale to singers) and “government songs” (Y020508C). Within the category of government songs, he identifies five sub-categories: songs about health, songs explaining traffic rules, songs announcing the opening of a construction project, like a railroad or government building, songs about education, and finally, songs announcing government policy. Two well-known examples of government songs, he says, are the “Visit Myanmar Year” theme song and the National Convention song.

For all such songs, the composer works from a blueprint of sorts provided by the government – a thematic idea or a first line. Government songs stand in sharp contrast to all of his other songs, in which he creates all of the lyrics himself. He tells me that when he writes his own music he usually addresses one of three topics: peace in the world, Buddhist philosophy or thought, and love. Again, this composer acknowledges that he writes both *copy thachin* and *own tune* songs. But these two categories are not particularly meaningful for him, since he writes both *copy thachin* and *own tune* songs for himself and for the government.

Another reason that the *copy thachin/own tune* divide is not useful to community members is that the line between the two is not distinct. Some *copy thachin* are clearly copied from a Western model: the rhythm, melody, and harmonization are lifted from a Western pop tune with almost no variation. Others are not so clearly copied from another source, but they depend on that source to some degree. Some composers identified certain of their songs as *own tune* pieces, but acknowledged immediately that the songs relied to some degree on specific source tunes. For example, one singer-songwriter pointed out that one of his songs was, to

some extent, based on a Japanese pop tune - but it was not an exact copy of that tune, although he had taken ideas from it (Y010608A). Another arranger who had many years of experience arranging music for his band said that “We never copy exactly” (Y012908A). He explained that he and his band mates listen closely to foreign recordings, take ideas from them and insert these ideas into their own work as appropriate – but never add Burmese lyrics to an entirely intact foreign tune.

A comparison between Stevie Wonder’s “I Just Called to Say I Love You” and a Burmese pop song called “The Last Time” exemplifies this principle.³⁹ The lyrics are utterly different; Wonder’s song is a joyous expression of unconditional love, whereas the Burmese song is about breaking up. However, the verse sections of both songs have some important commonalities. (See notation on facing page: “I Just Called” is marked as number 1, and “The Last Time” as number 2.) In both cases, the verse is divided into two sections; the second section begins at the eighth measure. The first section opens with a I – I maj.7 chord progression. In the original song, the harmony continues to alternate between these two chords through the rest of the A section, while in the Burmese song, the harmony moves to the dominant. The sameness between the two songs becomes more evident at the start of the fifth bar (the B section): At this point, both songs use II – II maj. 7 chordal movement, and both melodies emphasize this by alternating between the supertonic and the note one semitone below. Furthermore, the characteristic upward-thrusting opening motive of “I Just Called” (bracketed in the notation) occurs in the Burmese melody too. Importantly, it occurs at exactly the same pitch level (ending on the tonic) in both cases. In “The Last Time” this motive is preceded and followed by notes (instead of

³⁹ Listen to the two songs on Youtube.com. “I Just Called” can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PY45DkaP9Ls> and “The Last Time” is at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbi_r38eQog

rests as in the original), but these notes simply reiterate the motive's destination note, so they do not draw attention away from this generating motive.

Like "The Last Time," many Burmese pop tunes cannot fit easily into either the *copy thachin* or *own tune* categories, since they use elements from, but do not

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Figure 3.1 I Just Called (1) and The Last Time (2)

exactly copy, source songs. Small wonder then that Burmese musicians do not usually

reference this distinction when categorizing songs. Ultimately though, the reason that Burmese pop musicians do not usually distinguish between *copy thachin* and *own tune* songs is that they view all of their output as, literally, their own tunes. To a man, and to a woman, Burmese composers and performers insisted to me that their songs, whatever their origin, were expressions of their own ideas and their own artistic voices. The Burman composer mentioned directly above, who has written hundreds of *copy thachin*, grinned wryly as he explained: When he listens to an original recording, he says, he frequently does not understand the English (or Japanese or Chinese) words. He does get a sense of the mood of the song, though, whether it be happy or sad, and then creates his own lyrics according to his own feelings, or his own interpretation of the sounds (Y020508C).

This man's colleagues echoed his words, almost precisely: For example, one told me that he composes both *copy thachin* and *own tune* songs – and immediately added that in both cases, his compositions represent an expression of his own “mood” (Y011308A). Another singer-songwriter said that although he always writes within the frame of a foreign (that is, non-Burmese) musical style, he uses these “beats” to showcase his own ideas, expressed in the lyrics. And yet another composer invoked the deity when I inquired about his songs: “God gives me my *own* idea” he said emphatically (Y122807A).

Another musician, a band leader, explained to me that this normal disconnect between the English and Burmese lyrics of a *copy thachin* has led to some disconcerting changes of category, at least for Western listeners (Y010908B). For example, he said, the American love song “Sometimes When We Touch” is, in Burma, a well-known gospel song called “Free of Charge.”⁴⁰ (A few weeks later, I heard the song performed during a church service, and had to remind myself that, for the

⁴⁰ “Sometimes When We Touch” was originally written and recorded by American Dan Hill.

Burmese congregants, the song was entirely appropriate in the context.) And some American Christmas songs, including “Jingle Bells” and “Feliz Navidad” and “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus”, are now Burmese love songs. For Burmese Buddhists, these *copy thachin*, with their Burmese lyrics, have no connection to a Christian holiday.

Since the most important distinguishing characteristic of songs for Burmese pop musicians, is, as we saw above, the themes expressed in the lyrics, the fact that a *copy thachin* has original lyrics makes all the difference in the world. A Burmese *copy thachin* may, and probably does, suggest to its listeners rather different ideas than does the English original (religious worship rather than romantic emotion, for example). It may in fact belong to an entirely different category of song. And because its most important identifying feature, the lyrics, is an original creation of a Burmese composer, the song is understood to be a form of Burmese, rather than foreign, artistic expression.

This brings us to another small but significant point about Burmese vocabulary: For Burmese pop musicians, the word “composer” (in English or in Burmese) means “a person who writes lyrics.” A composer can, and often does, write rhythms, harmonies, and so on, but the salient point is that she or he writes the words for songs. Indeed, some of the most respected pop music composers in Burma virtually never write anything but words, since they compose only *copy thachin* (e.g. Y122408A). This idea was made most clear to me by a musician who frequently works as an arranger (Y010709B). In this capacity, he makes many decisions about instrumentation, form, and other musical elements in songs. In addition, he often writes out melodies for soloists (to be played during the instrumental break, or solo, which is common to most Burmese pop songs). However, he insisted that he is not a composer because, as he said, “I don’t ever write words.”

COMPARING COPY THACHIN TO ORIGINAL RECORDINGS

As one of my interlocutors suggested, the term “copy song” should perhaps be re-tooled, since it implies an intent that is opposed to the intent of Burmese *copy thachin* composers, who write lyrics that are markedly different from the originals (Y010908B). Having said that, there is a good case to be made for the term. Comparing well-known Burmese *copy thachin* to the original (American) recordings makes it abundantly clear that the *copy thachin* sounds are usually very closely modeled on the sounds of the originals. The melodies and harmonies are usually identical in both original and *copy thachin*. In general, the *copy thachin* are performed at the same tempo and in the same key (or within a whole tone) of the original recordings. In addition, *copy thachin* feature the same timbral effects as do the originals.

Compare, for example, Shakira’s recording of “Wherever, Whenever” (which she herself subsequently sang in Spanish and recorded as “Suerte”) to Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein’s copy version of the song.⁴¹ The Burmese version is in c# minor, just like the original, and it features the distinctive sound of pan pipes, which are especially audible at the very end of the song. The Burmese singer’s voice is a flexible alto, just like Shakira’s. One small difference between the two is that Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein evinces a slight tendency to slide between pitches, which Shakira never does. Although Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein has to perform the melody slightly differently, because she sometimes has more syllables to sing, the two vocals are clearly intended to sound the same – even the vocables (“lay lo”) are pronounced the same way. The attempt to make the vocal tracks match is most evident at the second phrase of chorus: the words in the English version are “I’ll be there and you’ll be

⁴¹ Archived on youtube.com at 1) “Shakira-Wherever Whenever”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-3brRCRsA8> and 2) “Burmese Shakira”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDIE2sGEyPI>

near.” In Shakira’s version, her voice is digitally processed to produce a robotic effect on the words “there” and “near.” In the *copy thachin*, the same phrase is altered to produce roughly the same effect, although since the whole phrase is processed, we do not hear the same emphasis on single syllables that is present in the original.

The biggest, most obvious difference between the two songs is not aural, but visual: Shakira’s video features only the singer, dancing provocatively before a succession of images representing the wildness of the natural world. Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, on the other hand, is dressed modestly and is surrounded by a group of young people who dance energetically with (but hardly touch) one another. They perform in front of monochrome background screens, allowing the lyrics – rather than background visuals - to suggest images in the listener’s/watcher’s mind. And of course the lyrics are far less sexually explicit than the original; the overall effect, at least to me, is innocently fun rather than sexually intense.

Another pair of examples shows the same tendencies. Two female Burmese singers, May Sweet (now living in the United States) and Lay Lay War (now retired in Yangon) recorded a copy of Madonna’s “Like a Virgin.”⁴² The Burmese song is called “A pyo sin,” which means “a single woman” (and, in Burma, this would imply that the woman is a virgin). The Burmese performers sing their copy song in d minor (the original is in e minor) and create the same texture that marks the original version. The instrumental accompaniment is marked by staccato chords on a synthesizer, and the two women are careful to either sing separately or in unison so that their vocalization approximates Madonna’s monophonic presentation as closely as possible.⁴³ The only obvious difference occurs at the chorus, where, in the original,

⁴² Archived on youtube.com as 1) “Like A Virgin – Madonna”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idzS7LDci40> and 2) “A pyo sin (May Sweet and Lay Lay War)”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEn-qoccCt8>

⁴³ At two points, a man (presumably one of the band members) is heard singing the melody also, and he too sings in unison with the soloists, although one octave lower.

Madonna sings an E above middle C. When May Sweet performs this note (in her case it is a D), the sound is more breathy and more sustained, and the pitch falls quickly. On the third iteration, this note is almost spoken. This is the highest note in the melody, and the fact that the Burmese singer performs it with a less piercing tone (and with seemingly less breath support) is a reminder that, in Burma, high notes are often considered especially foreign, and therefore difficult.

Again, the visual presentation evinces the clearest difference between the two songs. Madonna's original video, and her subsequent live presentations, could hardly be less stereotypically virginal. On the other hand, May Sweet and Lay Lay War are very modestly dressed (in the kind of clothing that wealthy Burmese women wear to formal functions), with long sleeves and skirts and high-necked jackets. And again, their clothing matches the relatively more modest intent of the Burmese lyrics. Although these lyrics do speak of "a single woman who has never loved," this expression in Burmese does not carry the same weight of sexual connotation that it does in English. And of course the character in the Burmese *copy thachin* is a virgin, rather than someone who claims to feel like one.

Examples abound.⁴⁴ The similarities and differences are consistent: *Copy thachin* tend to sound like original recordings, but the visual presentations of the songs look different. The sound of the Burmese *copy thachin* aims to match the sound of the American recording – and usually succeeds. Musicians told me that their efforts to match the original extend past melody and harmony to elements like tempo. An audio

⁴⁴ I direct the reader to youtube.com for further opportunities to compare to visual and aural presentations of American hit songs and Burmese copy thachin. For example: 1) "Bangles – Manic Monday – 1986", archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s48kuKLf0mE> and 1a) "Connie And Hay Mar Nay Win - Tait Chit Lote", archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1QAITWzThU>. Also 2) "Air Supply – Making Love Out of Nothing At All", archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lE6Htee0sA> and 2a) "Zat Sayar yet a lo :D", archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LYTt1EkOWM> and 2B) "ZanNu – Zat Sayar A Lo Kya", archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyFZ-gaLVQs>. Also 3) "Sometime [sic] When We Touch", archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ATL75Bj8yk> and 3a) "Free (but priceless)", archived at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uH5eG1_5kVg

engineer says that he regularly listens to original recordings with a metronome (“Dr. Beat”) in hand so that he can set the click track for the *copy thachin* at exactly the same tempo (Y121708A). And a composer says that when he writes *copy thachin* he often tries to recruit a Burmese singer whose vocal tone matches that of the original singer (Y122408A). “I asked Zaw Win Htut to sing my *copy thachin* of a Rod Stewart song, because they sing the same way,” he says.

One intractable difference between original songs and *copy thachin* is the nature of the English and Burmese languages: in general, it seems to take longer (more syllables) to express an idea in Burmese than it does in English. Therefore, Burmese singers usually have to sing more syllables than do their American counterparts. Importantly, Burmese singers will almost always fit their “extra” syllables to the original melody (by intoning them, very quickly, on the same pitch as the corresponding English syllable) so that the melodic contour remains the same.⁴⁵

However, the look of Burmese *copy thachin* (including live shows and video performances) is usually quite different from the look of the original made-for-MTV model. First, Burmese pop videos are now almost always released in VCD (rather than DVD) format, meaning that the words of the song show at the bottom of the screen when the singer sings them.⁴⁶ This aural plus visual format makes the lyrics more clear than the lyrics in a typical American video. Second, the look of the video usually underlines the rather different intent of the lyrics, which in Burma is less overtly sexual and often more focused on love of family and religion – in other words, more conservative. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say, more Burmese.

Even now, Burmese public culture is considerably less outwardly expressive than is American culture, so that sexuality is generally only revealed in private and

⁴⁵ To this foreigner’s ears, the lyrics are therefore sometimes incomprehensible, because syllables pass by so quickly that they are, in effect, unheard.

⁴⁶ Western readers will recognize the technology from karaoke discs.

public actions are comparatively calmer and less demonstrative. And dating is still somewhat controversial; a remarkably well-educated and worldly-wise friend of mine said that she would not allow her daughter to go on dates, and that most parents of her class and generation would not either (Y122308A). Burmese pop music videos almost always reflect this kind of conservatism. They feature modestly-dressed young people who, in the course of acting out their love story, rarely dance together and certainly never kiss or grope each other. No doubt some of this restraint is due to the strict regulations of the censors. But some of the images in the videos (and perhaps most) are obviously the reflection of an artistic vision, one which has developed in the context of Burmese society. And so we see in these videos many visuals of young lovers longing for each other – but this longing is frequently mediated by some kind of restraining agent. For example, men and women are frequently depicted looking at each other, but not directly. Rather, they look at each other through something (a window, or a camera) or else they look at a depiction of each other (in a mirror or in a photograph). When characters are shown in happy communion (hand in hand, for example) the scene is usually revealed to be only a memory of earlier, happier times.

COPYING: A RATIONALE

Why are *copy thachin* such an important and enduring part of Burmese pop culture? I put this question to several Burmese composers, and they offered the following rationale: First, *copy thachin* offer Burmese people the chance to understand and appreciate English songs, something that many of them could not do because their English is simply not strong enough to decode the original English lyrics (Y122408A). In a country where many people are deeply interested in all things modern, and yet have little access to them, locally-made *copy thachin* are an entry point into international (read Anglo-American cosmopolitan) culture. Secondly, *copy thachin* have served as teachers to aspiring Burmese musicians, who want to perform

at an international level but have no access to American or British music teachers (Y122708A). By copying songs from numerous different countries of origin (across East Asia and the West), Burmese musicians have learned a wide repertoire of songs and styles (Y010709B). Thirdly, writing *copy thachin* allows Burmese composers to develop and even improve the original songs. One composer who primarily writes *copy thachin* said he was deeply gratified when one of Burma's most respected authors, a woman named Ju, pointed to his Burmese lyrics as examples of this (Y122408A). In her book, which gives side-by-side comparisons of original (English) lyrics and Burmese *copy thachin* lyrics, she argues that this composer's new lyrics for Aerosmith's "Angel" and Eric Clapton's "Wonderful Tonight" were "*po kaun deh*" (better) and more profound than the originals.⁴⁷

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, Burmese society values the basic idea of copying something that has already been established as valuable or successful. As one veteran of the music industry said, when we discussed the issue imitating Western culture products, "Our Myanmar habit is, when you get the chance, you do the same [as has already been done]" (Y121708A). For Burmese people, copying some work of art (say, a song text or document) is not an act of laziness or theft, but rather an intelligent, sensible move. Modeling one's own work on something that has already proven its worth strengthens one's own work. For this reason, the American idea of plagiarism, for example, is almost unknown in Burma.

I recently met a young Burmese woman who is attending college in the United States, after completing all ten standards (grades) in Yangon. She shared that during her first year in Minnesota, she got into serious trouble for plagiarizing. She did not understand the concept, even after it was first explained to her, because during her high school years in Burma she had been encouraged by her teachers to copy

⁴⁷ As I confirmed for myself by reading the book.

sentences or even entire paragraphs from other sources into her own essays. The idea, she said, was that copying these points from established sources is a way of improving one's own writing; it is a smart and honorable thing to do. The story rings true to me, since I have read a handful of English-language Master's theses in seminary libraries in Burma, and have noted that the authors sometimes include portions of text from other books without making even the briefest attempt to cite their sources.⁴⁸

Not all Burmese people think this way, of course. The pop music industry, for example, includes members who are deeply committed to the idea of trying to create something new. Some of these people focus on creating new musical genres, which I discuss below.

THREE EXAMPLES OF BURMESE FUSION MUSIC

The nature of the repertoire in Burma contradicts the linear theory of musical development articulated (or at least implied) by pop music scholar Edward Larkey (1992). Larkey proposes a four-stage model of “diffusion and tradition-formation for popular music innovations” (1992:151). He asserts that popular music, once it has arrived in a Third World country, develops in four stages: First, it is integrated into the local context by being consumed as is. Second, this music is imitated by local artists. Third, it is de-anglicized – that is, musicians perform in the style of Western pop bands but sing lyrics in the language of their own country. The fourth stage is re-ethnification, during which local musicians fuse Western pop music ideas with local ideas and approaches to create new genres (1992:152).

In the Burmese case, reality is not so neat. It is true that Western pop recordings first came to Burma as consumer products, and that *stereo* music first

⁴⁸ Another glaring example: the chapter on Burmese music in the recent volumes titled *Sonic Orders in ASEAN Musics* includes long sections of text taken verbatim from BSPP publications originally issued in the 1960s, with no citation included (see Nyunt and Ko Ko 2003:271-272).

appeared in Burma as “English songs” (that is, Burmese performer playing English hits, singing in English and copying the instrumental parts as closely as possible). Nearly fifty years later we are seeing a few examples of fusion. But the reality is that Burmese pop musicians have been, for most of the history of the genre, creating *copy thachin* and *own tune* songs. Indeed, as of 2008, the most highly-paid performers in the country (including Iron Cross, described at the beginning of this chapter) record and perform nothing but *copy thachin* and *own tunes*. At the moment, Burmese pop musicians as a group are continuing to devote most of their energy to re-creating Western pop music in their own country, and very little energy to developing a locally-marked sound or style.

To be fair, I met a number of composers and arrangers who spoke about pursuing innovative projects. But as a whole the Burmese pop industry trends toward continuation of the pop music tradition rather than toward developing something innovative beyond that tradition. This seems to be true even when musicians state that they intend to be innovative. I experienced one very clear example of this kind of dichotomy in January 2009, when I attended the taping of a television show called Living Song. Each week, the show focuses on a different composer; the host interviews the composer and the in-house band plays “new versions” of five of that composer’s songs. On the day I was there, the director arranged to have the original recording pumped through the sound system just before the “new version” of each was taped.⁴⁹ Thus it was possible to compare the old and new versions of each song. In each case, the aesthetics of both were the same: the same instruments played in the same key, accompanying the same gender of singer, who sang the same lyrics in the same order. Indeed, it was hard to hear any significant difference between the old and

⁴⁹ The band had no chance to rehearse with, or even warm up with, the singers who were slated to sing the songs. (See Chapter 3 for more on the industry’s rehearsal culture). So the show director probably played the originals so that the band could hear, once, what the song was supposed to sound like.

new versions. Later, the featured composer concurred with me: the “new” versions of his songs did not sound terribly new to him, either (Y011209A).

All in all, it seems to me that Yangon-based musicians are busy working on the kind of music they know, like and identify with: Western pop. For the most part, they exemplify Larkey’s third stage (de-anglicization). The Burmese pop scene, as a whole, does not seem to be moving inevitably toward “tradition-formation” as his model would have it. Notably, Larkey derived his model from his research on Austrian pop music – in other words, he based his theory on musical development in a Western country. As might be expected, the situation is rather different in a place where the national culture is so different.

However, the Burmese pop scene does include some notable examples of fusion music, which we might call Burmese pop (note that this term is not used by Burmese people, and is only a provisional label in this dissertation). In what follows, I will describe three instances that seemed to me to be interesting and well-integrated, and which offer some possibilities for other artists who may pursue Burmese pop in the future. The first of these, to date, has sold well and gained widespread recognition, showing that Burmese audiences are open to creative attempts to fuse distinctly Burmese sounds and cultural markers with a musical form that developed in the West. The second is known only to a select audience, because it originated in the Karen community and is being spread via the church networks that stretch around Burma and beyond; it was never presented to the government censors and therefore is not sold in retail outlets. And the third had not yet been released to the public when I was in Yangon, so it is still too early to say what kind of impact it may have.

EXAMPLE NUMBER 1 - Nu electro hip hop: In 2006 a pair Burmese DJs recorded a DVD which quickly became known as the country’s best example of fusion, or Burmese pop. They decided to call their album Yawthama-hmwe, which translates

as “Mix Mix Mix,” signaling their intention to mix Burmese and Western musical ideas. The album garnered such respect for the musicians and the concept that when other respondents told me in interviews that they hoped to one day create some kind of fusion music they often said, “like Yawthama-hmwe.” The producer of the album calls this newly-minted style “nu electro hip hop” (Y121908A).

The album contains eleven tracks, all of which unfold in the context of a sonic framework of digitally-produced sounds. This label that best describes this framework is “house music” (or “electronica” or “dance”). Generally, the tempo is extremely quick and each beat is emphasized equally (a rhythmic approach called “four-to-the-floor” in house music). The sounds of percussive instruments - or better said, digitized samples of drums and cymbals - are very prominent in the texture. In addition, the music features other characteristic sounds (like human voices pronouncing one syllable, or a vinyl disc squeaking on a turntable) which are combined to create short, distinctive patterns. In a couple of cases, pitched sounds outline short chord progressions, but generally, the pitch structure of the music is even more simple: One low pitch is repeated throughout, while higher pitches (which often combine with the lower pitch to imply a major chord) trace short motives. These melodic motives and analogous non-pitched rhythmic motives are repeated, often four times, creating a sort of four-bar phrase.

The first four tracks on the album successfully mix this sonic framework with traditional Burmese musical sounds. (The subsequent tracks mix house music with pop songs and rapping; these are interesting fusions also, but the first four tracks are the ones which clearly show a fusion of local and international ideas.) In three of these first four tracks, the music is a combination of the “house” sounds described above and sounds from the Maha Gita tradition. For example, the first track features a male singing a traditional Maha Gita melody in the rather nasal tone that is idiomatic

to the genre. This melody appears near the beginning and end of the track, and the studio engineer has mixed the sound so that the human voice comes through clearly. In the middle section, the two DJs rap some lyrics.

Throughout, the video features images representing tradition (a Buddhist spirit medium – the man who sings – and a group of *longyi*-wearing, instrument-carrying men proceeding joyfully down a street) and modernity (young women wearing jeans while dancing in a dimly-lit nightclub and the DJs working with their mixing board). One of the most arresting moments occurs when the composers incorporate the sound of a siren (in short bursts of rising pitch) into the music, to support the video image of a parade member being taken to a hospital. The Burmese *hnay* (like an oboe) is heard continuously, playing brief repetitive melodic ideas. Although in traditional performance, the *hnay* does not play repeated motives, it usually does play fast and wide-ranging melodies. In Yawthama-mhwe's music, the *hnay* retains its characteristic frenetic quality, so that it fits extremely well in the context of house music. And because the *hnay* has such a distinct tone color (piercing and high-pitched) its sound never gets lost in the mix.

The third and fourth tracks also feature *hsaing waing* instruments. Importantly, the tracks have been mixed so that these instruments can actually be heard.⁵⁰ The third track begins with the clapper and cymbals that usually play the *si neh wah* pattern, but here they play a fast-paced syncopated rhythm which is later incorporated into the house sound. The *pat waing* (drum circle) is also featured here, and the Burmese tuning of the drums clearly contrasts with the low low C of the electronic framework. The music increases in volume, with rapped lyrics and electronic sounds

⁵⁰ During my research, friends pointed me to a number of examples of what they thought of as fusion music. These usually consisted of pieces in which Western instruments and sound technology completely covered the sounds of traditional instruments, so that the Burmese instruments were, for all intents and purposes, just there for show.

filling the mix. But at the two-minute mark, the DJs eliminate all of the digital sounds except for the anchoring low pitch, so that there is no competition with the sound of the *hsaing waing* instruments. Here, the music is accompanied by images of a dancing *nat* (spirit); for a few moments, it is as if we are watching a *nat bwe*. Then the composers deftly return to a composite sound, showing hip hop dancers performing together with *Anyein* dancers. The transitions between traditional and modern sights and sounds are not jarring, since the images are constantly shifting and since the sonic framework remains always in place.

The second track on Yawthama-hmwe's album is evidently an attempt to incorporate indigeneity into the project. Here, the electronica framework supports a pentatonic Shan melody, which is first played on a bamboo flute and later sung by a young woman. This short melody is presented over and over together with images evoking Shan State and Shan culture (particularly, women wearing traditional Shan dress). Unfortunately, we never hear the sound of the *osi* (the Burmese long drum) although the video depicts a man playing it. However, the melody is clearly enunciated over a digitally-produced low low C. The way the melody is continually repeated in various guises allows it to become part of the house aesthetic without becoming unrecognizable. As in the tracks described above, the continual focus on the bright colors and energetic movement common to both the "traditional" and "modern" images makes for a well-integrated video. All in all, the first four tracks on this album constitute an innovative and successful attempt to "mix mix mix" Burmese and international sights and sounds, without compromising the most significant features of each.

EXAMPLE NUMBER 2 - Karen Songs: In 2008 a young Bwe Karen man organized the recording of a number of "Karen songs," in view of making an album of "Karen music" (his terms). The tracks, which were not at the time of my research

released as an album, feature a deliberate attempt to combine Karen melodies and singing style with pop instruments and recording techniques. I went to visit this artist at the home of his uncle (the house includes a small recording studio where this musician recorded his album). I was struck by the depth of his commitment to his Karen identity; for example, he makes a concerted effort to speak Karen rather than Burmese with his friends, about a dozen of whom were present when I arrived.⁵¹ In addition, he has a small collection of Karen instruments, some of which I was not allowed to touch, since he respects his elders' teaching about gender restrictions and musical instruments. He claims that he depended on these instruments for inspiration (if not for actual use) in his recording.

The album in fact sounds as though almost all of the instrumental tracks were played on a keyboard synthesizer. The composer uses the sustained sounds of strings to outline I, IV and V chords, a drum track to maintain a steady beat, and favors flute and guitar sounds for melodic fills. His sonic framework reflects a now internationally-recognizable soft pop aesthetic. This pop sound serves as the basic frame for the nine tracks on his CD. The one exception is the fourth track, where the accompaniment sound consists mostly of traditional Karen instruments: A pair of cymbals plays on every beat and a large drum plays on every second beat, creating a steady unvarying pattern which is idiomatic to other Karen musical forms, including *don* dance performance (MacLachlan 2006a).

The “Karen” component of this album is the sung melodies. First, six of the nine melodies are distinctively Karen in their pitch organization. Using solfege terminology (which many Karen people do), we would say that they emphasize, and frequently begin with, the *do-low sol-do* motive, and they only rarely use the pitches

⁵¹ But he has to speak Sgaw Karen with them, rather than his native Bwe Karen; the two are different languages and not merely dialects.

la and *re* (Y122907A). These melodies do make frequent use of *ti*, but *ti* is not usually “resolved” by moving up to *do*, as is common in Western melodies. Rather, cadences usually consist of *sol-do* or *mi-do* melodic movement. Given these parameters, it is a rather straightforward proposition to harmonize Karen melodies with the Western tonic and dominant chords – as the composer on this album did, and as many other Karen people have done during the past two centuries. Secondly, and more distinctively to an outsider’s ear, these Karen melodies are sung in a Karen (and Burmese) style.⁵² This style is remarkable for its expressive power. It features a nasal tone, lots of sliding in between melody pitches, frequent upward-moving appoggiatura on melody notes, and a rhythmic freedom allowing the singer to arrive at cadence points before the instrumental accompaniment does. At times, this style can sound almost like sung speech, because the flexibility in the voice communicates a strong sense of emotional import.

On this album, the best examples of this kind of singing are contained in the first four tracks. Here a male soloist (tracks one and four) and a female soloist (tracks two and three) sing in this markedly local style while being accompanied by the very different synthesizer sounds. The combination works in part because the melody notes at the ends of phrases are always consonant with the instrumental harmonies, so that there is no lasting sense of dissonance. At the same time, the tracks are mixed in such a way that the vocalizations shine through the texture. The chord notes on the synthesizer are usually above and below the melody pitches, rather than competing with them in the same register.

On the final track, which features a folksong often sung at Karen New Year celebrations, the composer uses the synthesizer’s flute sound to play the melody after it has been sung by the male soloist with the usual ornaments – showing aurally the

⁵² The style is the same as the singing style in the Maha Gita tradition.

outline of the tune, in contrast with the first iteration. Then, the synthesizer plays “do-ti-sol” over and over, as a triplet. This creates a hemiola effect which momentarily disturbs the duple meter of the piece but simultaneously reinforces the most important pitches in the melody. At this point, when the accompanying instrumental frame incorporates elements of the sung melody, the “Karen” and “Western” features of the music fuse. In the earlier tracks, we can clearly hear the differences between the two sound systems: the one with sliding gestures that reveal sounds in between the diatonic pitches (sometimes we even get the sense of quarter tones being sung), and the other with a chordal harmonic organization. The two sounds are independent, but they do not sound “out of tune” with each other. Rather, they are mixed together to create a kind of Burmese pop fusion which highlights some of the central ideas of two very different traditions.

EXAMPLE NUMBER 3 - New Age Myanmar: In the spring of 2009, a group of musicians who work in the Burmese pop music industry released the first recording in a new, fusion style they call “New Age Myanmar stereo music” (Y123108A). The album is called *Homage to Buddha*, and it is a deliberate attempt to fuse Buddhist devotional texts and local ideas with New Age sounds. The most specific gesture toward locality is the second track, “Land of Love.” The song is constructed around a melody attributed to the Pyu (the civilization that dominated lower Burma prior to the rise of the Myanmar people) which was recorded by Chinese officials in 802 A.D. The seventh track is an English-language version of the same song, so foreign listeners can clearly hear the Buddhist concepts included in the lyrics (“The only escape from the grind of Samsara is love,” and so on.) The other tracks all feature similarly Buddhist-inspired titles (“Love to All,” “The Song of Peace,” etc.). The composer of the songs on this album said that his goal was to “maintain Burmese tradition – but not just strictly preserve it. That is other’s work” (Y123108A).

All of the tracks share some commonalities, which clearly stem from the composer/producer's particular understanding of a "New Age" aesthetic.⁵³ A pair of female vocalists sing all of the melodies, accompanied by a synthesizer playing a variety of digitally-created sounds. The singers, who virtually always sing in unison or homophonically, use a clear open tone; they add vibrato only occasionally. Interestingly, they sometimes sing rapid turns on melody notes which appear at the ends of phrases, very briefly referring to the ornate Maha Gita singing style. During instrumental interludes, plucked strings sounds outline melodies based on arpeggiated chords.

The instrumental and vocal melodies stand out clearly in the texture, which is dominated by synth pads (long tones generated by a synthesizer, often used as background harmonies in "New Age" recordings). The synthesizer plays accompanying chord tones, simply sustaining each one until the harmony changes. These sustained tones - which never crescendo or decrescendo as they would if they were played on acoustic instruments - are composed of digitally-created sounds that rather resemble a combination of flutes and violins. In track 6, the singers imitate the synth pads by singing sustained "ah" vowels to accompany an instrumental melody. The result is a gentle, airy tone that permeates the music.

These long synth pad sounds create a sense of expansiveness, because they usually move slowly from one chord to the next, leading the ear from harmony to harmony with no changes in tone color. This musical spaciousness is accentuated by unpitched synthesizer sounds (often at the very beginning and end of a track) which move slowly and smoothly up and down the sound spectrum. (And this sound is

⁵³ "New Age" is used to describe a large number of sonically-different styles. One definition of this category of music focuses not on what kinds of sounds are most common, but rather, how listeners usually feel when listening (Long 1991). New Age music is supposed to be "soothing and spacious," so that it induces feelings of relaxation (p. 538).

imitated at some points by a set of pitched wind chimes.) None of the tracks feel particularly slow, however, because the percussion sounds maintain a steady mid-tempo beat throughout.

Because all of the melodic and harmonic tones belong to the twelve-note Western chromatic scale, the tuning of these pieces does not sound particularly Burmese. However, the composer seems to have made a concerted effort to avoid perfect cadences (and thereby depending on Western tonal harmony). For example, he prioritizes chordal movement between the tonic triad and the triad one whole tone lower – a harmonic progression which could be analyzed as I – bVII. (The beginning of track 3 is a particularly clear example of this.) In addition, he favors the melody note that is a minor seventh above the tonic (again, this could be called flat 7). The clearest instance of this is track 5. Here, the important opening melodic motive unfolds over an F in the bass: the voices move from A up to Eb and then back down. The melody evades the rising semi-tone movement (ti to do) that implies a perfect cadence and that is so characteristic of the Western major scale.

In other places (especially in tracks 3 and 5) the melody outlines an augmented second, starting with the note one semi-tone above the tonic. And in track 2 (which is also track 7) the harmony moves from a tonic A7 chord to an e minor chord. The bass line steps from I to V, but the chords built on top of these notes do not function as they would in Western tonal harmony. All of these sounds evoke the “Orient,” if not Burma specifically.

The *Homage to Buddha* album was released to the public in the spring of 2009, as this dissertation went to press. Therefore, I cannot say what kind of impact it will have on the Burmese pop music scene. However, it is important because it represents, along with the two examples described above, a conscious attempt by Burmese pop musicians to create music that fuses musical instruments and aesthetics from the West

with distinctively Burmese sounds, visuals and lyrics. Along with *Mix Mix Mix* and the untitled Karen songs, this album shows that Burmese pop musicians do, at least sometimes, develop innovative musical projects.

THEORIZING MUSIC: NOTATION, METER, HARMONY AND VOCALIZATION

Notation: In the West, any discussion of music theory comes almost immediately to notated music written on paper. In Burma, when I broached the topic of music theory with Burmese pop musicians, this proved to be a convenient starting point – although, as I discovered, most of these musicians do not read or write standard Western notation. Their ideas about notation, however, reveal other interesting aspects of their musical culture.

At least three different types of notation are known and used in Burma. First, some choral conductors and singers use the European solfege system, in which letters representing the tones do, re, mi, fa, so, la, and ti are written to show pitch, and dots and lines are set above these to show rhythms. Second, Western notation, in which notes are written on five-line staves, is used by musicians who play European art music (usually instrumental). In addition, the government of Burma is now using this notation to notate the high art repertoire of their own country, publishing books of Maha Gita repertoire in piano score (Douglas 2001). The third method of music notation is called by a variety of names, as I will discuss below. In this method, the numbers 1 through 7 represent the solfege pitches, and lines below and dots between the numbers represent rhythms. Students studying traditional Burmese music at the University of Culture, for example, use this method to notate melodies from the Maha Gita. And a specialized form of it is used throughout the Yangon pop industry.

When pop musicians talk about notation methods, they use a variety of terms to identify the second and third kinds of notation that I identify above. Western

notation is often called “staff notes” and less frequently “professional notes” (these English words are used in the context of Burmese sentences). Charmingly, it is also known as *paka* notes, which means “bean sprouts,” because the notes, with their long stems and round heads, look like beans growing up among the lines of the staff. But most frequently, and most tellingly, this kind of notation is called “international notes.” This term is used to contrast Western notation with the third method that I designate above. This third method is sometimes called “number notes” or “1234 notes” but is most frequently known as “Chinese notes” or “Oriental notes.”⁵⁴ As these names reveal, Western notation is understood to be the universal standard or norm for writing notation, while the number notes system – the most locally prominent system – is clearly understood to be the product of a particular bounded geographic area.⁵⁵

I would not put a great deal of emphasis on these names for notation systems if it were not for the fact that they seem to reflect their relative status in the eyes of many Burmese people. For example, musicians and music teachers I interviewed consistently valorized “international notes.” One of them pointed out that he believed that this notation, which he cannot read with any fluency, must be important since it is used worldwide – thus proving that the name attached to the notation does in fact create perceptions about it (Y122807A).⁵⁶ He and two others independently shared with me that one of their life goals was to learn how to read and use international notes (Y011108A and Y010608A). And when I was asked to teach a week-long class on “music” at one of the local music schools, the students (all of whom were adults and

⁵⁴ These number notes seem most reminiscent of the cipher notation used in Indonesia for writing gamelan parts.

⁵⁵ English is now so widespread in Asia that English is often perceived there as an international language, rather than a British or North American language; see Bodden 2005:18.

⁵⁶ In other words, a rose by any other name would not smell as sweet.

most of whom were music students either at a music academy or at the University of Culture) asked me to focus on explaining how to read this notation.

The Burmese opinion on their own local notation vis-à-vis European notation is part of a larger tendency, that is, to express some degree of humility, if not fatalistic acceptance, about their own version of worldwide pop music culture. Doubtless this attitude is in part a legacy of the colonial era, when all things English were considered to be more worthy than anything that was locally-made, including the Burmese language itself (see Aung-Thwin 1998:150). Sometimes this attitude manifested itself in slightly defensive statements in interviews. Usually these kinds of statements were made in a tone of simple acknowledgement, like the woman who explained that her career has been hampered by the fact that she cannot purchase industry standard instruments and recording equipment inside Burma (Y012908B). A composer told me that Burmese *own tune* songs “are not world standard, but okay for Myanmar” (Y122408A). The country’s most prominent impresario said it the most clearly. I asked him about some stage practices that struck me as being unique to Burma (like having stage hands on stage during the performance and singers who leave the stage before the song is over). He assumed that I was criticizing local norms as being inferior to the international standard: “My own goal is that each show I organize will be the best. But in Myanmar, sometimes it is not possible. So we settle for what is acceptable [i.e. acceptable by local standards]” (Y020808A).

To be sure, some pop music composers and instrumentalists were more sanguine about international notes. They pointed out that this system was very limited, because a note on a staff represents only one absolute pitch. Their own system, a modified form of “Chinese notes,” is much more efficient than international notes because it is more flexible, they claimed (e.g. Y020508A). This system, which was

apparently invented by a Yangon guitarist named Zar Lian in the 1970s, is called “C Rule.”⁵⁷

REGGAE BEAT
♩ = 89

BRASS

LEAD DUET

OH

CHORD

RAP BRASS

FUNK

FUNK

The image shows handwritten musical notation for 'C Rule' notation. It includes several lines of notation with various annotations. The first line is labeled 'REGGAE BEAT' with a tempo marking '♩ = 89'. Below it, there are several lines of notation, some with 'BRASS' and 'LEAD DUET' annotations. The notation uses capital letters for chords and lowercase letters for notes, with rhythmic values and bar lines. There are also some circled notes and arrows indicating phrasing or accents. The notation is dense and appears to be a personal shorthand for a specific style of music.

Figure 3.2 Example of C Rule notation

In the C Rule system, the focus is on notating chords rather than melodies.

The chords are written using capital letters of the Roman alphabet separated by bar

⁵⁷ I tried repeatedly to find Zar Lian, to no avail. Various authoritative sources told me that he was living in Thailand, that he was still living in Yangon but unable to do interviews due to his advanced alcoholism, and that he was dead. The person who seemed to be most in the know said that Zar Lian is alive, but incapacitated due to drinking (Y121508A). He mourns Zar Lian’s decline, saying that, in his heyday, Zar Lian was one of the most gifted and creative musicians in Yangon. “I think this country [i.e. the political situation] killed him,” he concluded sadly.

lines, just like the chord charts used by session players in the American recording industry. The difference is that in the Burmese C Rule system, “C” indicates the tonic chord of the song, “G” the dominant, and so on. The letter C does not represent the chord C-E-G, unless of course the song is in the key of C major. Accordingly, at the top of any C Rule notation, the key of the song must be prominently indicated.

The Burmese musicians who use this system find it useful because it gives the entire harmonic progression, and the song can be played in any key; to change the key requires only changing the key at the top of the page. Of course, this system is successful because pop musicians who play harmony instruments (guitars and keyboards) are able to transpose at sight into any major key. For the most part, however, they do not conceive of the process as “transposing” – or at least, they do not recognize the word. They take it for granted that professional pop musicians can play any song, in any key, at sight, and they attribute this reality to the “easiness” of C Rule notation.

The expectation for keyboard players seems to be changing, however. The latest electric keyboards have “transport” buttons that allow players to automatically transpose the music they are playing into any other key. The transport function has led to some diminishment in skill level among keyboard players, at least by some accounts (Y020508B). Because keyboard players can use this button to change the music to any key desired, they can play all of their songs in C (that is, they can read the C Rule notation literally, rather than transposing it as they play). One studio engineer I interviewed said laughingly that now some keyboard players “dare not touch the black keys” on their instruments, since they are so accustomed to playing always in C (Y012908A).

C Rule notation seems to have originated as a way for Burmese musicians to capture the music they hear. Arrangers used it, and still use it, to notate the Western-

made recordings that they use as a basis for their art. Now, C Rule notation has an expanded function. In the usual way of things, a Burmese composer presents his or her composition to an arranger in the form of a demo tape (with an accompanying sheet of lyrics). The arranger then listens to the tape and creates a sheet of notation which represents what he heard. However, the arranger often adds significant information to the sheet, indicating, for example, where recording musicians ought to play solos. Some arrangers create more detailed notation than do others, of course. The example of C Rule notation included here was written by a composer who subsequently arranged his song for a band: he had very definite ideas about how the piece should sound, and so his page has rather more symbols on it than many others I have seen.

C rule notation includes rhythmic indicators. Composers usually use slash notation (with a slash for a beat and a circle for a rest) to fill in measures after the initial letter indicating the chord. In addition, they use the “1234 notes” system, with its numbers, lines and dots, to write in melodic fills for piano, bass or lead guitar. Further, composers or arrangers use English words (“verse,” “chorus”, “solo” etc.) to indicate where sections begin, and they use the *segno* and *coda* symbols to mark repetitions.

One thing that does not usually appear in C rule notation is any marker for meter. When I asked musicians about this, they explained that there is a very simple reason: All songs (or most songs) are in 4/4 time, so therefore there is no need to indicate meter. I did see one example where an arranger had written “3/4” in front of two bars in the bridge section of a song. He explained that he had written it in because at that particular point, the meter changed – but this it was clearly an exception (Y010908B).

Interestingly, when Burmese musicians talk about this issue, whether they are speaking in Burmese or in English, they use the English expression “four-four time.” In fact, all of the music vocabulary used in the Burmese pop industry seems to be in English. When listening to musicians work in the studio, I often heard them using a kind of industry lingo that combined Burmese grammar and context with technical terms in English (“Chorus *hma sa*,” for example: Start at the chorus). Sometimes, Italian terms were used – but pronounced as they would be in English (so “Fine” rhymed with “mine” in the mouths of some musicians). The constant use of English to refer to music emphasizes the fact that in Burma, pop music is a foreign import. There are literally no words in Burmese for the concepts embedded in the music. Therefore the musicians, coming to it as outsiders, have had to make sense of it for themselves, and in so doing, they have developed theories about it.

Meter: One of these theories, as I just mentioned, is that all pop songs are in 4/4 time. This makes sense, since so many songs are indeed in common meter. And others can be counted as if they are. A song in the compound meter of 12/8, for example, can be counted as having four beats in a measure, and songs in 2/4 and 6/8 can be counted that way if the musician combines bars into pairs. Indeed, most musicians that I met were aware that music could be organized into other meters, but did not have a good understanding of those meters.⁵⁸ (Those who had had formal lessons pointed out to me that one of the things they had learned was the various meters (e.g. Y010108A and Y020708A), but these people were in the minority.)

Some musicians seemingly believed that all songs are in 4/4 time because, basically, all music is in 4/4 time. To explain: The high art music of Burma, familiar to virtually everyone in the country, is always performed with a steady beat pattern

⁵⁸ Nyunt and KoKo explain that the 3/4 and 6/8 “nayee” (in English: hour, or way of marking time) do not exist in traditional Burmese music (2003:247).

called *si neh wah* (Keeler 1998:379). The *si* beat is played by a pair of hand cymbals and the *wah* beat is played by a wooden clapper. These instruments outline the colotomic structure of the music, which is organized into phrases of eight beats. Although the melodic lines in this music float over top of the beat pattern, not necessarily accenting pulses in co-ordination with the *si* and *wah*, this pattern is ever-present, underpinning the music and providing a steady pulse. Some pop musicians believe that this *si neh wa* pattern is analogous to the accented first and third beats and 4/4 time. As one very experienced composer and performer told me: “They are alike. The *si* is like the first beat (in common meter) and the *wah* is like the third beat” (Y020708A).

This man went on to say that his music teacher explained meter this way back in the 1960s. Evidently the theory is spreading: When I visited a State High School of Fine Arts in Yangon, I discovered that the music teacher advances exactly this theory during her music classes. Furthermore, she equates the notes of the traditional Burmese scale (which is tuned rather differently than a Western major scale) to the solfege pitches in the diatonic Western scale.⁵⁹ In fact, the principal at this high school explained to me that the goal of the class is help students understand how to equate Burmese and Western music theory concepts. However, for Burmese pop musicians the idea of meter is ultimately an unimportant issue, because they know what they need to know: that is, the “beats.”

⁵⁹ This seems to be logical development of a trend identified by Ward Keeler (1998:387, 389). The Burmese scale contains seven tones, as does the Western scale. In the Burmese scale, the third and seventh pitches are tuned slightly lower than in the Western scale, and the fourth pitch is tuned slightly higher than in the Western scale (Nyunt and KoKo 2003:244 and 245). During the twentieth century Western tuning became so prevalent in Burma that even senior classical musicians began to forget the Burmese tuning. Now, we see explicit teaching which says that the Burmese note *hyin loun* (or *than hman*) is exactly the same as do (or the first degree of the Western scale), and *hnit pauk* is exactly the same as ti (the seventh degree of the Western scale), and so on for the rest of the series of pitches.

One of the most important theoretical concepts in Burmese pop music is the notion of beats. Beats, or rhythm patterns as a Western musicologist might call them, are foundational because they determine the genre of the music. When musicians label the various characteristic beat patterns, they use the names of musical genres to identify them. For example, a drummer who explained to me the development of her career said, “First, I asked friends to explain to me about the beats – like reggae, slow go-go, cha cha, and rock” (Y012908B). Another singer explained that when she works with accompanying musicians, before she begins she must always tell them the key of the song, the tempo (or speed) and “the beat: like rock, cha cha or beguine....”(Y020508B). And an arranger said that when he arranges a song, he always begins by specifying the beat – because this will determine the style of the music (Y012908A).

Of course, when musicians create studio recordings, the drum track is always recorded first, and so in effect, beat patterns do play an important part in establishing style. People in the Burmese recording industry call the drum track “the body,” while they use the terms “multiple,” “vocals” and “harmony” for the guitars and keyboards, the solo melody singing and the harmonic singing respectively. The drum track, or beats, is understood to be the body of the song, the core on which the clothing of the other tracks is hung.⁶⁰

Pop instrumentalists in Yangon know the all the beats, and therefore can play in a variety of styles. They do not pigeonhole themselves as players of one particular genre or another. In general, however, they do not theorize about the various pop genres beyond differentiating their respective beats. They do not talk about various styles being associated with different timbres, for example, and so the same group of instruments is played in the same basic way for all songs, whether those songs are in

⁶⁰ The industry term in English-speaking countries is “backing track or basic track” (Zak 2001:135).

bossa nova style or heavy metal. My own theory is that this linking of beat patterns with genre explains, at least to some degree, why Burmese pop songs tend to sound very much the same. To Western ears, the Burmese pop industry evinces a certain homogeneity of sound aesthetic. I have attended pop concerts in Yangon at which friends have identified various singers or songs as being “alternative,” “rock,” “reggae” and so on. Without their guidance, I would not have been able to distinguish these various styles, since the singers and instrumentalists used much the same techniques and musical approaches in each.

C Rule notation has no symbols to indicate distinct rhythmic patterns (the slashes and circles mentioned earlier designate only quarter notes). Therefore, musicians learn beats aurally, usually listening to foreign-made pop recordings. One singer and music teacher used the word “running” where other Burmese use “beat” and I use “genre.” She explained that she learned the different runnings (“Rock running is the worst – the hardest”) by listening to recordings for hours at a time (Y011908A). She then theorized that the running skill “must be a gift from God” because so many well-educated musical people cannot seem to pick it up. She herself teaches it to her students by demonstrating the various beat patterns and having them imitate her. Although she uses Western notation fluently, unlike most Burmese pop musicians I met, she also has an aural, rather than visual knowledge of characteristic beat patterns. When I asked her to show them to me, she was able to clap various beats – but she could not write them down.

C Rule scores show the link between beats and genre. These scores often include a beat indicator in the spot where a tempo marking is usually placed in Western notation. In the example included here, the marking is given at the upper left hand side: “reggae beat.” Incidentally, I have seen the same kind of marking in church songbooks (examples include “rock”, “country rock,” “cha cha,” “beguine,”

“bossa nova” and “slow go-go.”) Evidently, in Burma, this way of thinking about meter extends beyond the pop music industry.

Harmony: Probably the most widespread theoretical concept of music in the Yangon pop music community is the idea of chords and chord families. Knowing chords is considered to be foundational for pop musicians, so much so that when interviewees talked about beginning to learn pop music, they often said “When I learned the chords...” In fact, one guitarist said that the most important thing that one needs to know about “American” music is “the chords” (Y122507A). This makes sense, since one of the most immediate differences between Burmese art music and European-derived musics is that Burmese music is heterophonic, while European music focuses on chordal harmonies (Nyunt and KoKo 2003:244). But Burmese musicians differentiate the idea of chords from Western classical music also. For example, one singer who also works teaching piano lessons says that she teaches her students to read notes *and* to play chords (Y011908A). Another singer explained to me that she took piano lessons as a child but doesn’t play European classical piano repertoire anymore because “Now I play chords. Chords are better for hearing and singing” (Y020608A).

Burmese musicians say that chords belong to “chord families.” These chord families are not groups of chords based on the notes of a diatonic scale, as students in the West learn. Rather, they are common chord progressions, successions of chords that occur so frequently that they are understood to constitute a kind of family. A guitarist explained the theory to me: “With C Rule, you have to know every key. You have to know the chord family for each key” (Y012408A). When I asked him to give me an example, he named the tonic, submediant, subdominant and dominant chords in C major. I then asked him to give me the chord families for a few more key signatures,

and each time, not needing a moment to reflect, he named the same chords in the same order.

One composer expanded on this theory, saying that chord families are related to genre (Y122807A). Writing rapidly on a piece of paper, he showed me the chord family for rock tunes:

A7 D7 E7

The verse of a pop song, he says, uses the following chord family:

C Am Dm G Em Am

Dm G C

And, according to the same composer, the chorus in a pop song always follows this pattern:

Fmaj7 Em7 Dm G C

Fmaj7 Em7 A7 Dm G Em Am Dm G C

From these two brief examples it is clear that chord families are not all understood in the exact same way by all Burmese pop musicians, but the general theory – that certain chords typically follow other chords – is common to all.

Vocalization: Burmese pop musicians also theorize vocal performance. The general consensus is that there are at least two distinct ways to approach singing in pop music. It seems that a lyrical, unforced sound is considered “sweet.” A sweet sound may or may not be desirable. One woman, who has recorded an album and spent her career working for the Burma Broadcasting Service, explained the terminology to me. She said that she herself has a “sweet voice.” I listened to her VCD and heard a vocal tone which I can best describe as gentle, quite the opposite of the forcefully-projected chest tone (sometimes called belting) that I often associate with Western popular singers.

My informant distinguished her own sweet sound from a “heavy voice” – which she demonstrated by singing in a loud, high tone (Y010508A). Furthermore, she says that she was invited to record an album because members of her community like her sweet voice. Pressed to give more examples of sweet and heavy voices, she listed Cliff Richard (the British pop star) and Elvis Presley as singers with sweet voices. She identified Lay Phyu (the former lead singer of Iron Cross) and “hip hop singers” as examples of heavy voices.

Another rather poetically-inclined musician agreed with the sweet and heavy voice distinction. But he says he prefers to describe the two types of voices like two kinds of alcohol (Y010608A). Heavy voices, he says, are like whiskey; a good example of a whiskey voice is Chester Bennington, the lead singer for Linkin Park. By contrast, Billy Joel has a voice like wine. This man characterized his own voice as somewhere in between whiskey and wine.

One well-known singer also used some of the same terminology when she spoke to me about vocal tone. She explained: “My mother and her sisters were singers. But I wanted to sing like American singers, like Celine Dion, so I forced myself to sing in high keys like them. Normally, here [in Burma], the songs are easy to sing, not high. And they have to be sung sweetly” (Y122607B). When I pressed her to explain what a “sweet” sound is, she demonstrated by singing a short phrase with a soft, diffuse head tone. She then contrasted this with a “Whitney Houston style” of singing: a loud chest voice.

Like most of the Burmese musicians I spoke to, this woman correlated loud volume and high pitch with foreign singers.⁶¹ For example, one rather young female

⁶¹ Another singer, who mentioned the former singer as one that she particularly admires, said that she likes this singer specifically because she can sing high pitches (Y011908A). And a male singer who has made a career of singing *copy thachin* says that he notices that in Burma, most female singers sing in B flat or C major while most male singers use G major when they perform (Y012408A). He himself performs most, but not all, of his songs in G.

singer whom I heard in performance sings with a well-projected chest tone. She says that her voice is “loud by Myanmar standards” (Y010908A). Another woman, a music teacher who has some connections to members of the pop music industry, underlined this point: Her students do not like to sing high notes, she says, because they are difficult to sing loudly – and she has noticed that even her professional friends prefer to sing in middle or low ranges and often request that songs be transposed down (Y021308B). Overall, this seemed to be a common perception: high melody notes are associated both with foreignness and with difficulty.

As I conclude this section, it must be said that, on the whole, these musicians are not theorists. Composers tend to be more willing and able to articulate theories about music than performers, which is perhaps to be expected. But as far as I can discover, given the communication difficulties that arose in virtually every interview, Burmese pop musicians do not spend a lot of time generalizing about their work, and are therefore somewhat puzzled by questions about it. In light of this, I asked a number of composers how they would define a “good song.”

THEORIZING BEAUTY: A “GOOD” SONG

Unsurprisingly, composers have a diversity of opinions about what constitutes a good song. For example, one of the country’s most prolific composers of pop songs focuses on form when assessing quality. He says a good song consists of verses whose lyrics address the same theme and maintain the same mood (Y020508C). A song can tell a sad story, or a love story, or really any kind of story, but it must be narratively coherent. Further, he says that the refrain of the song must “*paut*.” This word is often literally translated as “to explode,” but the composer clarified that he means that at the refrain, the music must become louder, or higher, or somehow more dynamic. A guitarist said that a good song is well-integrated; “all the parts [i.e. the

melody and accompaniment] have to be good, and they have to fit together” (Y121608A).

The most common idea that arose when I broached this topic with Burmese pop musicians was: A good song is a song that is successful with audiences. For most of these men and women, the popularity of a song seems to be a measure of its inherent good quality. This audience-centered way of thinking about music stands in direct contrast with the philosophy so prominent in the West (especially in indie rock circles), which implies that the more popular a tune is, the more likely it is to be pandering to the lowest common denominator and, therefore, the more likely it is to be of poor quality (Kruse 2003). For most composers of Burmese pop songs, the opposite is true. And so it follows that when attempting to write a good song, a composer must prioritize what fans want to hear.

This was explained most clearly to me by one of the country’s most influential composers. This man hosts a weekly radio show on Yangon’s City FM station; the name of the show translates as “Showing New Song Class.” During this show, the host plays an as-yet unreleased recording and comments on its strengths and weaknesses. Up-and-coming artists send their recordings to the station in the hopes that their song will be selected for some on-air criticism. Although this composer says that he cannot identify any pattern of positive and negative features in the songs he critiques (“I have to give different advice according to each song”) he does have a strong and well-articulated opinion about what makes a good song (Y020708A). The most important point, he says, is that a song must “coincide with the rhythm of the period [of time.]” A song must “strike at the majority of people’s feelings, so the composer must be aware of the environment, because people’s feelings coincide with [their] surrounding lives.” That is, a good song will be one which is easy for the audience to relate to, to both understand and feel. A good melody, he says, is one that

is “easy to get into your ear and stuck inside your heart.” The melody of a good song should be “easy for you [the listener] to sing,” he emphasizes. The criteria should not be whether or not it is easy for another professional vocalist: “A composer should aim to write something that is easy for the majority [of the] people. The words must be understandable to the majority. It must be up-to-date and used [i.e. useful] for all.” Specifically, he adds, “If you write a melody with [the pitches] do, sol and ti, it will be easy for Myanmar people, and they will like it.”

Other composers expressed the same idea. A good song is broadly popular and accessible to a large audience (that is, fans find it easy to sing along with the song) (YY010909A, Y010409A). The man who summed it up most cogently said, when I asked him to define a good song, “I can’t. The audience decides that,” (Y011209A). He pointed out that every time he sits down to compose, he does his best to create a good song. However, not all of his songs become hits. Those that do not find a wide following are, evidently, not good songs.

This is not to imply that Burmese pop composers are solely concerned with writing music that will appeal to their audience. As we saw in Chapter 1, these musicians say consistently that they want to engage their fans and to entertain them (to make them happy, as a few interviewees put it). They maintain this idea in conjunction with a seemingly-competing approach: they compose in order to express their own ideas, emotions and stories. To each and every musician I met, these two notions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are simultaneously true. When Burmese musicians compose and perform music, they do so to express their own feelings as well as to stimulate the feelings of their listeners. Interestingly, a wide range of musicians who spoke to me in different contexts used the same expression (in

Burmese and in English) to describe this phenomenon: they call it “*say pyin pya deh*,” meaning “showing /revealing the heart.”⁶²

The performer who first articulated this idea to me, in both languages, explained that he performs music ultimately not for money but because he is “keen on it” (Y020508A). “It’s an outlet for me, it comes from my heart” he said. Musical performance is therefore a way to reveal the musician’s heart. Others said similar things: “My singing comes from my heart” (Y010908A) and “When I am composing, it comes from my heart” (Y011008A). This latter musician explained that sounds that come “from the heart” are not necessarily those that express his own emotions, or that describe events that happened to him. Indeed, his songs can tell stories based on the experiences of others, or even recount imagined events – but on some fundamental level, all of his songs are outworkings of his own feelings, that is, his heart. One recently-married singer and composer asserted the same idea: she described her about-to-be-released single as a song about a girl who is broken-hearted but proud and so refuses to long for the past (Y010108A). When I asked if this song accurately reflected her own life, she acknowledged that, well, this particular story was not her own – in fact it was a reflection of a friend’s feelings. However, since she composed and performed it herself, she considered it to be legitimate example of her work, which comes from her heart.

Composers especially emphasized the idea that music is a way of revealing the heart when they spoke about their compositional techniques. There was a general consensus that because music comes from the heart, composers do not have particular formulas or methods for creating songs. In vain did I ask composers whether they generally began by writing words, or melodies, or chord progressions. Most of my

⁶² The syllable *say* is usually translated as “mind” in English. It is used in many Burmese expressions that convey emotion (such as confusion or calm). The Burmese word for the organ that pumps blood is *nilohn*.

interviewees puzzled over this question and then said they could not answer because the whole process is driven by emotion, and therefore does not proceed according to a series of steps. One young star said, “When I am composing I am expressing my mood, so first I write the words, and then the melody...but sometimes I write the melody and chords first, and then the words...” (Y011308A).

He went on to explain that the depth of his emotional involvement with the song also determines how long it takes to compose it: when his feelings are welling out of him, he can write a song in as little as ninety minutes, but at other times it can take up to three days. One of his colleagues said almost the same thing. “Sometimes I start with a story, other times with a melody, other times with a beautiful pattern of chords. Usually I start with a melody idea. If I have strong feelings [my own emotions] about it, I can write a song in one or two hours. However if I am writing to fulfill someone else’s request, it takes longer” (Y010608A).

Another composer flatly rejected the idea that composing involves some kind of planned procedure. When I asked him what he thinks about first when composing, he retorted that he never “thinks” about a song before starting, adding that his emotions, not his head, influence what he writes (Y122807A).⁶³ Another more experienced composer acknowledged that he has a preferred method of composing (guitar in hand, he creates a chord sequence that he likes, and then adds a beat, then a melody and finally lyrics). However, he too followed this immediately by saying that “there is no formula” (Y020508C). He smiled gently when I asked him about composing government songs; in that case, he says, he is fortunate that he has so much experience in songwriting. When writing songs for the government he relies on that experience rather than on his heart.

⁶³ Ironically, this is the same composer who wrote out the chord progression that he always uses to structure his music (see p. 125 of this chapter).

SCHOLARLY ANXIETIES ABOUT ANALYZING BURMESE POP

The Western academy puts an enormous premium on originality. The field of popular music studies, and cultural studies more generally, has been deeply influenced by Walter Benjamin's oft-cited essay, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1968). In this essay, Benjamin argued that an authentic work of art cannot be mechanically reproduced (218). An authentic work of art, he claims, has an "aura" because it is uniquely and permanently present in the world. Technically reproduced works of art (which Benjamin calls reproductions), such as photographs, movies and recordings, exist at a remove from the original, authentic instance of performance. Therefore, reproductions lack the aura that originals have. Furthermore, as reproductions, they are subject to manipulations (photographs can be enlarged, recordings can be slowed down, and so on) and therefore cannot be relied upon as faithful recreations of the original piece of art. In addition, people experience such reproductions outside of the original context in which the art was created, and thereby fail to grasp their full meaning.

In Benjamin's view, a person who listens to a recording of a Beethoven symphony at home on her stereo cannot possibly experience the richness of the symphony in the way that she would if she heard the live performance of that symphony in a concert hall. To him, the act of mechanically reproducing a work of art inevitably threatens the authenticity (that is, the aura) and thus the authority of the work. The "quality of the presence [of the work of art] is always depreciated" when it is mechanically reproduced (221).

Critics of popular music – scholars and laypeople alike – have not always come at the question of authenticity from the same angle, but they have largely shared Benjamin's distaste for reproductions. In the West we have a widespread preference

for newly-created, demonstrably original songs, and an accompanying suspicion of those that seem to be derived from another source.⁶⁴

Recently, Albin Zak provided a helpful analysis of Benjamin's theory vis-à-vis contemporary popular music (2001). Zak argues that the aura of the live performance of a rock song is not diminished, but rather transferred, when that performance is recorded (19). In modern pop music, it is the recording itself which has an aura: the aura is created by the recording's unique arrangement of sound elements, which is not depreciated by the millions of instances of its reproduction. These uniquely organized sounds constitute in themselves a work of art. Cover versions of pop songs – which Zak dismisses in a single page – simply show us the importance of particular sounds to the identity of a given recording.

Ultimately, Zak's argument defends Benjamin's notion that an "authentic" work of art – whether that be a live performance or a recording – derives its authenticity from its originality. An authentic pop song, in this view, is not simply a copy of another song, but rather one that expresses something of the artist or artists who created it, who are, of course, unique individuals (Frith 2004:33). As pop music scholar Richard Middleton points out, rock music shows a strong "tendency to autobiography" because of its commitment to this notion of authenticity: "The aesthetic of 'authenticity' dominates mainstream rock vocalism: 'real experience,' expressed with 'sincerity,' is regarded as the indispensable basis of good (that is 'honest') singing" (Middleton 2000:38).

Here I am arguing that the popular music of Burma, almost all of it self-consciously copied from or modeled after original works of arts created in England

⁶⁴ Indeed, no one can earn a degree – the emblem of success – in academia unless they produce original work. And plagiarizing another's words or ideas is possibly the greatest sin in the academy.

and America, is an “authentic” art form which deserves serious scholarly attention.⁶⁵ I do so because my analysis rests on the expressed convictions of the creators of Burmese pop music. As I have shown above, these musicians assert over and over that their music is an expression of their own ideas and emotions. To them, their songs - *copy thachin* or *own tune* – are all legitimate representations of their personal artistic intentions. But at the same time, they acknowledge with pride the fact that their music is modeled closely on the popular music of the West. “I try to make my voice sound like a singer I admire,” says one very popular young singer (Y010108A). “Depending on the style, I try to sound like Pink, or Avril Lavigne...I watch Avril Lavigne’s videos constantly and sing along with her.”

How is it that Burmese pop musicians can copy Western melodies, styles and vocal timbres while at the same time claiming that their music is authentically their own? Before answering this question, it is important to explain that it defies some strongly-held premises in both Burmese and Western scholarship.

The notion that Burmese musicians embraced a form of Western music, and are to be celebrated for trying to preserve it intact, runs counter to ideas articulated by both Western and Burmese scholars. To begin with the Burmese: In their book chapter “The Musical Culture of Myanmar,” two prominent performers in the Maha Gita tradition attempt to provide a full description of Burmese music from pre-history to the present (Nyunt and Koko, 2003). The essay begins in nakedly ideological fashion by insisting on the historic unity of the country and defending the name “Myanmar” as a word which represents all of the inhabitants of the country.⁶⁶ The

⁶⁵ Keeping in mind Simon Frith’s comment that the word authenticity is “the most misleading term in cultural theory” (2004:36).

⁶⁶ Contrary to many commentators, but see especially Thant 2001:88. Thant contends that “Myanma” is the name of one “lu-myo”, or descent group, which has been identified in contrast to other “lu-myo” living in the Irrawaddy delta for four centuries (including the the Shan, the Mon and many others we now know as “national races” in Burma). “Myanma” thus represents one particular group, and is not representative of all of the people in today’s Union of Myanmar. Nyunt and Koko provide much

authors go on to describe “Myanmar music” as the outgrowth of *nat* worship and Buddhist rituals, and they attribute most of the developments in the Maha Gita repertoire to the innovations of kings, princes and ministers. They do acknowledge that Portuguese settlers, Chinese emissaries and local ethnic minority groups provided tunes that were eventually absorbed into the Maha Gita, but the authors are at pains to underline that these musical developments were always the result of peaceful interactions between the Burmese court and their loyal subjects or allies. For example, when discussing the portion of the repertoire called “yodiya [Thai] songs,” the authors claim that these songs became part of the Burmese tradition as “the result of beneficial contacts” between Burma and Siam in 1564, 1767 and 1789 (2003:264). All of the historical accounts of Burma and Thailand show that each of these years was the occasion of an invasion of Siam by Burmese forces. However, the authors of this book chapter insist that each of these dates was an opportunity for Burmese musicians to exchange knowledge with Thai musical experts, rather than the occasion of a bloody war.

I suspect that this omission is rather deliberate, because the current regime in Burma (whose functionaries no doubt signed off on this document) is not interested in acknowledging any kind of debt to Thailand.⁶⁷ In addition, the chapter does not mention the piano, the violin, and the steel guitar – instruments that were introduced to Burma by British colonizers and which became central to Maha Gita performance in

helpful information concerning musical instruments, repertoire and the like, but when they discuss the context of the development of the music, they tend to resort to broadsides against current political foes. For example, in the midst of describing musical development in the post WWII era: “There was thirty percent illiteracy in Myanmar as an evil result of colonialism under the British regime” (2003:282).

⁶⁷ The most celebrated instance of conflict between Burma and Thailand (or Siam as it was then) occurred in 1767. After laying siege to the Siamese capital of Ayuthia for many months, on March 28 the Burmese forces breached the walls of the city and laid it waste. They killed the Siamese king and pillaged the riches of the city. “Thousands of the population were carried away into captivity, so that many a private could boast of four slaves” (Harvey 1967:253). It is widely believed in Burma that these great numbers of Siamese prisoners exercised an influence on Burmese culture, and in particular that their songs were the source for the Maha Gita tunes known today as “yodiya” (or Ayuthia) songs.

the twentieth century (Keeler 1998:398). The reason is clear: the authors are quick to point out that, while Burma has been subject to musical influences from outside, Myanmar music continues to develop and innovate while preserving its most Burmese features (like heterophonic textures). Indeed, the article insists that all of the musical ideas, instruments and factors that originated elsewhere were “adapted to the Myanmar ambience” when they appeared in Burma (2003:265).

This book chapter reads like a musical version of the official history of the country as per the SPDC. In that recounting of history, the junta asserts that it is the legitimate power broker in the country because it is the heir to the Burmese monarchy, which presided over a unified and peaceful territory in its day – and of course, was not elected by popular vote. In this version, the Myanmar people are independent, both culturally and politically, from time immemorial (and thus any criticism of the status quo by outsiders who are, for example, concerned about human rights abuses is interference with the internal affairs of a sovereign state). As a self-sufficient society, the Myanmar people need no input from any outside source - and therefore the government does not acknowledge such input in any serious way (see Houtman 1999:91 and 103).

Western academics, too, are reluctant to valorize a musical culture that seems to be imported from outside – especially from the politically and economically dominant West. As Bruno Nettl points out, when Western music has come into contact with local musics, it is often the local musics that have had to react to the “impact” of the West, rather than the other way around. Sadly, sometimes the result of this impact is an impoverishment of local music, as less energy is directed toward it (1985:26). In addition, Western music – which arrives via technologies which allow wide market penetration – can lead to a homogenization of sound, thereby weakening local diversity (Lockard 1998:265). Ethnomusicologists, who have historically been

interested in the plurality of musics around the world, are especially hesitant to promote a musical form which has arisen from and now fosters the growth of global capitalism. Michael Hayes, writing on popular music in Thailand, provides one clear example of this perspective: “This music can praise materialism and/or reassert basic patriarchal and social divisions which may get blurred in the turmoil of economic development” (2004:29).

Western scholars of popular music are particularly uncomfortable with the phenomenon of cover songs – which are similar in some ways to the Burmese *copy thachin* – because of these songs’ clear link to racial exploitation in American popular music. For example, Michael Coyle calls cover songs “hijacked hits” because, as he points out, such songs were first recorded by white singers who were looking to capitalize on the successful recordings made by African American artists (Coyle 2002). To be fair, some Western academics have noted that there is more to the cover song art form than thievery. The May 2005 issue of *Popular Music and Society* is notable in this regard. In that journal, Don Cusic articulates a strong defense of cover song performers, arguing that when they interpret previously-recorded materials they perform legitimate and creative music-making – just as legitimate as that of singer-songwriters who perform their own compositions (2005:171-177).

In general, though, Burmese and Western scholars are reluctant to attribute creativity and agency to non-Western musicians who copy Western pop songs. And so are laypeople.⁶⁸ While researching this issue, I discovered dozens of dismissive, insulting and even profane comments directed towards Burmese pop music on the

⁶⁸ Timothy Taylor (1997:26) makes the same point, saying that consumers in the West have an overriding concern with authenticity as primality: “This is perhaps the oldest assumption made by westerners of musics from outside the west...[Music must have] some discernable connection to the timeless, the ancient, the primal, the pure, the chthonic; that is what they want to buy, since their own world is often conceived as ephemeral, new, artificial and corrupt.”

internet. The following representative sample comes from people commenting on videos of *copy thachin* posted on youtube.com:

From kayaliphu: i can't imagine why burmese artists can't create their songs. so, what is the point of being singers?⁶⁹

From Xacque: Gosh! I never thought I have to be ashamed of being a burmese (at least one fourth of my blood). I am now and shame on you whoever the singer is for copying an English song and shame on the person who posted this awful video. yukkkk...⁷⁰

From kokoooo14: fuck u lay phyu, fucking copy guy⁷¹

And from someone more sympathetic:

From dminsong: everybody says that lay phyu sings just copies but nobody says of his work hards, determinations, crushed tone and high pitch voice. f..k to all of that person!! If u think singing copies r easy, just try it.⁷²

These commentators are getting at one of the biggest concerns expressed by Western scholars: that Burmese pop music is not an expression of Burmese creativity, but rather a result of cultural imperialism. We cannot but acknowledge that an originally Anglo-American art form, that is, popular music, dominates the musical culture and airwaves in Burma. And this is a serious concern, because Burma was, for more than one hundred years, a colony of Britain. During their tenure in power in Burma, the British re-shaped the society. British officials exiled the last Burmese king (King Thibaw) and dismantled the monarchical system which had governed lower Burma for nearly one thousand years. They then put their own functionaries in charge – few of whom made a serious effort to understand the language, religion and social norms of the place – and incorporated many members of ethnic minority groups, who

⁶⁹ From “Lay Phyu Myanmar”, archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eMq7Oqw5Ls>

⁷⁰ From “Zat Sayar yet a lo :D”, archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LYTt1EkOWM>

⁷¹ From “Lay Phyu Till the End of Journey,” archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8knmzscpAJw>

⁷² This comment also underlines an earlier point: that Burmese people often perceive high pitches as difficult and not natural to their own voices. From “Lay Phyu Myanmar”, archived at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eMq7Oqw5Ls>

had long been at odds with the majority Burmans, into the national army (Callahan 2003:33-36).⁷³ In addition, the British treated Burma as an extension of their Indian empire, and facilitated immigration by money-lending Indian castes to rural Burma (Turnell 2005). And most importantly for this analysis, they established the English language as the language of higher education and business and cultivated among Burmese people a reverence for all things English.

And so it is beyond question that the contemporary Burmese pop scene is closely tied to the Anglo-American pop music tradition at least in part because of the legacy of British colonialism. Many generations of Burmese people were taught that European culture was superior to Asian culture, and that to succeed in society one must become fluent not just in the English language but also in the Western way of thinking. Small wonder then that some, even many, of them today conceive of all kinds of issues using a European paradigm, including musical sound.

However, it is important to understand that Western cultural imperialism cannot entirely account for the situation in Yangon today. My analysis of pop music in Burma in the twenty-first century rests on the many interviews I conducted with members of the Yangon pop scene, and those interviews revealed that this explanation is only one part – a very small part, according to my informants – of the story.

Unfortunately, other similar analyses of popular music, developing countries and cultural imperialism are not often based on culture members' first-person statements.

Jan Fairley sums it up rather well:

Many of the arguments about world music, pessimistic and optimistic, lack the backing of ethnographic evidence, of empirical analysis of how local/global

⁷³ Helen Trager (1966) is a helpful source for understanding how British colonialists came to view their Burmese subjects as dishonest and disloyal. However, the most-cited author on this issue is George Orwell, who wrote about his experiences as a police officer in colonial Burma. Although his book Burmese Days is a novel, it is widely hailed as an accurate description of the mistrust and misunderstanding that characterized relations between Burmese subjects and British officials.

musical communication actually works...I'm sometimes struck by the irony that, while not wishing to ignore macro economic power relations, the most pessimistic readings of world music in terms of cultural imperialism tend to be the most culturally ethnocentric, showing the least understanding of the motives of either the musicians or entrepreneurs involved (2001:275).

I agree with Fairley; my theories about Burmese music and musicians are best developed by examining the data provided by culture members. Secondly, I want to focus on culture members' statements because I am mindful that, as Robert Walser puts it, the discourse of value is really the discourse of power (2003:19). Walser argues that popular music – which has received relatively little attention from “serious” musicologists – deserves the kind of analysis that classical music usually receives. Analyses should be “less interested in describing or legitimating than in understanding how music works and why people care about it,” he asserts. “Ultimately, judgments of music are judgments of people” (38). To dismiss Burmese pop music – as no more than the product of Western imperialism, as inauthentic, as somehow less worthy than pop music in America – would be to dismiss the people who create it and listen to it.

BURMESE MUSIC INDUSTRY INSIDERS SPEAK

According to all of the people that I interviewed in Yangon's popular music scene, Western pop music is a wonderful art form that is deeply appreciated by many Burmese. Rather than seeing it as some kind of manifestation of cultural domination, all of my informants described this music as being admirable, and therefore, worth learning and performing. Indeed, they often mentioned making special efforts to become involved in this music simply because they liked it so much. For example, one full-time composer explained how he fell in love with the sounds of Elvis, the Beatles and other Western rock artists when he was a child: he often went to the village market to listen to pop music on the radio, since his parents did not own one (Y020708B). Another composer of the same generation pointed to the Beatles as a group who “changed music around the world” in the 1960s. Inspired by their use of

electronically-amplified instruments, he decided to try to make “electronic music” himself (Y020708A). Not being able to get an electric guitar, he made his own by attaching a pickup to an acoustic guitar. Yet another performer and arranger talked about the Beatles, saying that because his parents listened so often to them (and to others such as Jim Reeves), he grew up with pop music and therefore likes it tremendously (Y012908A).

For these musicians there is seemingly no necessary link between ethnic or national identity and local musical traditions. Being Burmese, even being proudly Burmese, does not preclude embracing a musical tradition that is clearly not Burmese. First of all, these musicians genuinely like the pop music that they create and perform. One composer explained this to me in the plainest terms: “I like English songs – and Chinese and Korean songs too,” he says (Y122807A). He insists that for him, being a Karen Burmese composer of pop songs is not oxymoronic – indeed he was puzzled a little by my suggestion that this might pose some kind of conflict. “But I think the foreign music is beautiful. Western songs have beautiful melodies, and chords, and words....” A female singer echoed his words. When I asked her about the potential contradiction between being committed to her Karen identity and devoting her life to American pop music, she rejected my premise completely: “Those English songs are excellent, I like them too much [i.e. very much.] There is no problem” (Y011908A). Another woman, who teaches European church music at a local seminary, pointed out to me that musical preference is sometimes irreducible. When I asked her why she and her students choose to learn and sing English hymns, she said, “Well, because we like it” (Y011708A). When I asked *why* they liked it, she was stumped: “We like it just because we like it.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ This same music teacher said later in the interview that there are other factors which may account for her students’ desire to sing English hymns: First, it is a long-standing tradition to sing in English during church services (as I experienced myself at numerous different churches). She says that

Indeed some Burmese musicians went even further in their descriptions of American popular songs. For example, a guitarist and arranger said to me that the ABBA song “S.O.S.” has “the best fill” [i.e. piano and guitar interlude] of any song he has ever heard (Y121608A). He pointed out that the drum and bass guitar parts are “different, but they work together perfectly to make a good foundation for the song.” He claimed that he learned the art of arranging pop melodies by listening to this and other ABBA tunes repeatedly. And a *copy thachin* composer said that not only are Western pop songs superior to Burmese songs, but that “those [American pop] songs are perfect” (Y122408A, his emphasis). He went on to say that he spent nearly two months trying to create Burmese lyrics for Rod Stewart’s hit song “Downtown Train,” a song that he characterized as “serious and serene.” Normally, he said, he writes lyrics in an evening or two. But “Downtown Train” impressed him as such a profound work of art that he needed to spend a much longer time writing Burmese words that were equally meaningful.

Burmese pop musicians know that others, millions or even billions of others, like American pop music too, and so the music has tremendous cachet in their minds. One well-known singer explained that she models her singing and stage performances after Western pop singers like Celine Dion and Shania Twain (Y122607B). She

this tradition developed in the early days of Christianity in Burma, when English-speaking missionaries were always present during services; church leaders wanted to make sure that the service contained at least some English so that the missionaries could participate, if only a little. In addition, the teacher says that her students are well aware that good English skills will stand them in good stead when they graduate and so they appreciate every chance to practise their English pronunciation. Finally, she says that older congregation members appreciate the English singing because it reminds them of the British colonial era, when they were young and presumably happier. A few other informants told me that Christian Burmese people – who make up a significant number of the major players in the pop industry – like Western music because it is associated with missionaries (e.g. Y122507A). This makes sense; Western missionaries are still venerated in Burmese Christian communities. Members name buildings after their missionaries and tend their graves with devotion. Although missionaries did not specifically introduce Christian Burmese people to the Beatles – most of them had left Burma before the Beatles became popular – they did inculcate diatonic tuning and Western instruments and forms. Therefore popular music, which uses these Western features, is still redolent of Western missionaries and their musical culture.

thinks of these world-renowned singers as “international” singers. Not only does she like their songs, she respects the role that they play on the global stage. Who better, then, to model oneself after? Another singer told me the same thing. “American music is leading the world,” she said (Y010108A). “American singers are great – that’s why I want to be like them.”

Another one of the most-popular performers of the first generation of Burmese pop musicians explained that respect for Western pop superstars and their music is nothing new. He recounted how he and his teenaged friends got their start playing covers (“English songs”) of the Beatles, Cliff Richard, Roy Orbison and other big Western pop stars (Y020508A). He explained that, young as they were, he and his band mates immediately garnered respect because they could do “something different [i.e. foreign].” People looked up to them, he said, not because they created their own music, but precisely because they were able to play the best-known music on the planet so well. A guitarist who was especially active in pop music in the 1980s confirmed this, saying that the performer above was a “hero” to him and his friends, precisely because that performer was fluent in the American pop idiom (Y121508A).

SIMILAR EXAMPLES IN JAPAN, INDONESIA, THE USA, AND BRAZIL

Recently, scholarly literature has described a number of cases which contest the received notions of cultural imperialism and authenticity in music. For example, Christine Yano analyzed popular Japanese songs (called “enka”) which are recorded, sometimes dozens of times, by various artists, who attempt to make their recordings sound as close as possible to the original (2005:193-105). She argues that the act of reproducing a pop tune by re-recording it does not, in Japanese society, diminish the song’s aura, as Benjamin would have it. Rather, covering a song is a way of conferring authenticity upon that song, because Japanese culture has long promoted

the idea that learners need to be able to reproduce a model. Models – in this case, popular songs – that are covered over and over are therefore authoritative, and they gain status as they are copied by respectful newcomers. Authenticity, then, is not threatened by reproduction, and our understanding of this idea must be re-evaluated when we look at popular music outside of the West.

In another recent example, Jeremy Wallach (2008) describes how punk fans in Jakarta, Indonesia are “loath to embrace musical innovations, instead maintaining their stylistic allegiance to what they perceive as a classic punk sound” (103). Like pop music performers in Burma, these Indonesian punks pose a challenge to theories about Western cultural imperialism:

Absorbed in the documentation of the cultural particulars of specific genre-based music movements, it is all too easy for the ethnographic researcher of global music subcultures to forget the still-dominant, trivializing perspective toward such phenomena, both inside and outside the academy. For many observers, the existence of punks in Indonesia exemplifies the tragic “mimesis” of Western culture by a formerly colonized people (see Manuel 1988:22). In this view, the Indonesian punk movement is little more than a latter-day cargo cult of cultural dupes in the thrall of imported commodities and the aura of global consumer culture. Punk music in Indonesia therefore cannot be anything other than derivative and inauthentic (108).

Indeed! Wallach does not leave it at that, of course. He goes on to point out that the “true punk” (as opposed to the “pop punk”) that is loved by punks in Jakarta is a musical form that has evolved remarkably little since it developed in England in the 1970s. It is, in that sense, a traditional style, and it is appreciated as such by its Indonesian fans. The sounds and symbols of punk rock constitute “stable points of reference for identity” (111), and therefore those in Jakarta who identify with them are not particularly interested in changing them, nor in adapting them to the Indonesian context.

In this, punks in Jakarta are remarkably like another group of musicians who link authenticity with reproduction rather than with originality: practitioners of historical performance music – that is, historically-accurate reproductions of European classical music.⁷⁵ In the 1970s, many practitioners of European classical music in the West began to wrestle with the concepts of authenticity and interpretation with new vigor. At that point, influential performers increasingly chose to perform pieces of music on the instruments for which they had originally been written (harpsichords instead of modern pianos, for example, or baroque violins instead of the modern variant, and each of these tuned lower than modern instruments are. In addition, they rediscovered historical treatises on how to perform this music, and used these treatises to guide their musical choices.

Many musicians and listeners have now embraced the idea that one's performance should mimic as closely as possible the performance that the composer would have heard. And commentators designated music that was performed in this way as "authentic music."⁷⁶ The most authentically authentic music, in this view, is an interpretation which is purposely *not* innovative. An authentic performance seeks only to reproduce the mythical original performance, and to reproduce it as exactly as possible (Taruskin 1989). In the European high art tradition, then, committing to an ideal of authenticity leads logically to an emphasis on copying, and an accompanying lack of concern for original creation.

Alexander Dent's article highlights the case which is closest to the Burmese *copy thachin* (2005:207-217). Dent makes a strong argument against the notion that such songs are evidence of cultural imperialism and third-world dependency. He

⁷⁵ Other scholars draw similar conclusions. See for example Moore 2002: 218. The author makes a direct comparison between British cover bands and historical performance practice. "[In both of these cases] it is the song which has an identity, which is the key to the experience."

⁷⁶ The current terms are early music, or historical performance, or historical practice.

points out that Brazilian *música sertaneja* (which consists of Nashville country tunes and Brazilian lyrics), despite being explicitly modeled on hit songs from America, nevertheless are “clearly communicating a Brazilian message via a Brazilian style” (217). Performers of *música sertaneja* are not signaling their alienation from their own traditions and their inability to do anything other than produce a culturally-derivative product. Rather, they are showing their fans that they have the power to appropriate globally successful American music and make it their own.

Like the Jakarta-based punks and the Brazilian country music performers, pop musicians in Yangon have identified themselves with a musical tradition that developed in the West. Some of them, especially those Christians who grew up in communities which still emphasize their ties to American and British missionaries, no doubt see themselves as “Westernized” (and several of them used exactly this term in interviews with me, without the least embarrassment). Others found that they had a strong preference for the sounds they heard on bootleg recordings brought into the country during the BSPP era – possibly in part because these sounds represented potential identities and futures that did not exist in Burma at that time. Still others - those born during the last twenty-five years - grew up hearing “stereo” songs on their parents’ radios and associated those sounds with home and family, an important source of ideas about one’s identity (Turino 1999). But to a greater or lesser degree, all of them consciously embraced a musical tradition that they knew had been generated in another time and place.

Like the authentic music practitioners in the United States, Burmese pop musicians seek to reproduce an art form that is, in some sense, foreign to them. They too attempt to be as faithful to history as possible, valorizing those interpretations which sound most like the original. And they too do this while simultaneously

believing that their musical practice is an authentic expression of themselves and their community.

BURMESE POP MUSIC: AN AUTHENTIC ART FORM

To answer, at long last, my earlier question: As I have shown throughout this chapter, Burmese pop musicians believe that popular music forms and styles that originated in the West (including country, rock, pop and now hip-hop) are legitimate vehicles through which to express themselves. For them, this is an “authentic” form of artistry, because it is music that is tied to their sense of who they are as individuals and as a group of Burmese performers. To recapitulate:

1) Burmese pop musicians like American popular music. By participating in music they like, they are expressing their own preferences and values. To understand the significance of this preference in the Burmese context, it is important to know that popular music is used by the government (government songs are commissioned for use as propoganda) but it is not patronized by the junta. The current regime gives its support to “Burmese music” – generally, music in the Maha Gita tradition – rather than to Western-inspired pop songs (Douglas 2001). Therefore, when musicians embrace popular music, they are expressing a preference that is different, if not opposed, to the preferences valorized by their totalitarian government.

2) Burmese pop musicians know that their parents, their fans and people around the world like this music. It is commercially successful on a worldwide scale. Therefore, it is “good” music. It has earned the respect and loyalty of people both at home and across the globe. And therefore this music is admirable, something worth seeking out and trying to master. By performing this music, Burmese musicians participate in an eminently respectable art form – thereby contributing to their own self-respect.

3) As these musicians know very well, Anglo-American popular music has become an “international music” during the past few decades (Negus 1996:174). Inside Burma, this music is not notated using “international notes,” but it is clearly understood as an art form that transcends national boundaries. Therefore, when they compose and perform this music, Burmese musicians participate in an art form that is as logical a choice for them as it is for any member of any nation on earth.

4) The music is composed of sounds that have been issuing out of Burmese radios (on government broadcasts) for some forty years. For at least two generations of musicians, these sounds are not foreign, though they may have been first used by foreign musicians in foreign contexts. Millions of Burmese people have grown up with these sounds. In addition, the small minority of people who had the chance to study music formally during the past half-century (and this group would include some who went on to become members of Yangon’s pop music scene) learned the diatonic major scale as the foundation of pitch organization. And those very few who studied the Maha Gita in government institutions were taught that the traditional Burmese systems of pitch and metric organization have exact parallels in Western scales and meters. In this sense, pop music is not an unfamiliar art form that is inscrutable to Burmese listeners. It may be “foreign” music, but it is not foreign to the daily lives and musical education of most Burmese pop musicians.

5) Burmese pop musicians do not share Benjamin’s (and therefore, many Western academics’) perspective on authenticity in art. For them, the notions of authenticity and originality are not linked. Rather, they understand that a musical performance can be a sincere expression of one’s own emotions while simultaneously being a reproduction of another’s musical conception. They reject the implicit assumption that to copy a foreign style or even a specific piece of music is to diminish the “aura” of the original piece of music. Rather, as people who have grown up in a

society which valorizes copying as a form of self-expression, they believe that copying the Anglo-American pop music they so admire is a valid, and valuable, way to create their own music. They disagree with that the notion that to imitate a model is to forego any opportunity to express oneself. To these musicians, self-expression is not a zero-sum game (if one person expresses herself by writing a song, then no one else can express him or herself by copying it).

SUMMARY

The Burmese pop music scene does include some features which are unique in the global pop music culture. For example, Burmese pop music composers have developed a notation system that incorporates their understanding of chord families and keys. In addition, the Burmese scene is now witnessing the beginnings of some fusion genres – musics which incorporate ideas both from home and abroad. But for the most part, Burmese pop music is remarkable for its similarity to the most mainstream of the mainstream: the hit songs of the American and British pop charts. And it is this similarity, this self-conscious modeling of local artistic expression on foreign originals, that is, ironically, the most salient “local” aspect of the Burmese scene.

The similarity stems from Burmese musicians’ approach to pop music. As this chapter shows, the Burmese definition of a “good song” is a song which is meaningful to contemporary audiences and which demonstrates its meaningfulness by selling well. These musicians valorize hit songs as good art. They are therefore committed to imitating the most popular music in the world: (usually) Anglo-American pop recordings. This commitment does not pose significant conflict for them as they aspire to express themselves and their ideas in their art. Since they are not constrained by the Western scholarly belief that authenticity derives from originality, they create and perform songs which are authentically their own while also being explicit copies

of English hits. Further, Burmese pop musicians do not think that the ubiquitousness of Western sounds in their current musical scene is largely due to the cultural domination of the American empire. Rather, they tend to see this music as an admirable, international art form that they and others around the world enjoy and can participate in without compromising their own sense of agency and identity as non-Westerners. Ultimately, these musicians understand pop music to be an authentic way of revealing their hearts to the world.

CHAPTER 3

LEARNING MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY BURMA

It is a scene repeated at almost every rock concert I attend in Burma: A singer walks on stage, hands a piece of paper to each of the instrumentalists, turns to face the audience, and the music begins. The passing of papers is done so unobtrusively that I sometimes fail to notice it happening. However, it is standard practice at virtually all of the big shows, where one group of instrument players backs a succession of solo singers. In fact, the giving of papers to musicians is a vitally important component of the performance. And I will argue here that, as brief as it is, this part of the action reveals important dimensions of Burmese pop musicians' musical learning and rehearsal culture.

These ubiquitous pieces of paper are musical notation (in C Rule form). Singers carry them onto the stage and give them to the players who will accompany them immediately before the performance begins. The ensuing performances are always smooth, even spectacular, with coolly competent instrumental parts played perfectly in sync with the singing. Two conclusions are obvious: First, rehearsals are not a normative part of the Burmese pop music scene. Shows are organized in advance, but they are not usually formally rehearsed. Therefore, singers must give the notation of the songs to the instrument players at the moment of performance – there is usually no opportunity for even a brief exchange of information prior to the show. Second, despite the fact that shows are presented live and unrehearsed, they are successful: the music proceeds as the participants and fans expect, with no breakdowns or glitches (other than the inevitable power surges). It would seem, then, that rehearsals are not needed.

In Chapter 1, I described a typical recording session in Yangon. Such sessions exemplify the same trend: Instrumental players, hired to perform on one or more

tracks, receive or create the music notation for the song when they arrive at the studio. After listening to the demo tape and writing the notation (or reading notation created by the arranger, who is often a guitarist or keyboardist), they begin to record their parts. Again, there is no rehearsal here. Individual performers may rehearse their parts in private (although I met only one person who claimed to do so) but musicians generally do not rehearse as a group (Y012908B). Like live performances, recorded performances are created on the spot. Naturally, in the recording studio musicians can, and do, re-record parts if they make mistakes. However, this musical work happens in the same context which governs live stage shows, where formal rehearsals are considered optional (and are rare in practice). Therefore, there is virtually no expectation that musicians doing *duty* will prepare for it in advance.

One singer, when confirming to me that her most recent performance had not been rehearsed, said that this was normal, but she could not explain why (Y011908A). She guessed that perhaps the “bandmaster” did not have time for a rehearsal. She hastened to add that, in the rare cases when a show organizer does call a rehearsal, she always tries to attend: “If I don’t, they [the other musicians] will think of me as a proud lady” she says. Rehearsing, then, at least in this singer’s mind, is an act of humility.

But she believes that the real obstacle to rehearsal is not her colleagues’ attitudes but rather their schedules: she assumed that the reason for the lack of rehearsal was a lack of time. Others, too, cited time pressures as the reason that group rehearsals are so rare. Professional full-time musicians (who constitute the central focus group for this study) often have daily performances and/or recording sessions on their calendars, especially during the busy season of October through March (Y123008B). Rehearsals therefore represent an investment of time that musicians cannot afford to make: to do so would be to take time away from paid work.

My own sense of the situation is that, whether these musicians have time for any given rehearsal or not, they generally do not plan to hold rehearsals, because they see them as unnecessary. The following email, which I received from a musician friend in Yangon, seems to confirm my theory. I wrote to him to tell him that I would be returning to conduct further research, and he responded with:

hello ..

long time no see. i hope all of ur family members fine. i glad to hear that u will come to yangoon again. i will inform [Names of three friends who also work full-time in the music industry] to help u in ur programm. now i am doing my new Karen album. so i want u to do me favour . just play piano for me,
could u ? anyway see u that time . God bless all of us.

sincerely,
[Name redacted]

The writer assumed that I would be able to record the keyboard part for one song on his *series*, despite the fact that I had been living on the other side of the globe while all of the preparation for the series occurred. Although he knew that I had never heard the song before, he felt confident asking me to record it. Of course, these are the conditions under which he would ask his Burmese colleagues to participate in a recording project. Practicing and rehearsal, at least in a group, are not the norm, and so it made sense to him to invite me to record music, knowing that I had not practiced it for weeks or months beforehand.⁷⁷ When I arrived in Yangon, I met with this musician, and explained to him that I was doubtful that I could accomplish the task, since I did not have notation and had never heard the song. He smiled and said – gently – that he and his colleagues at the studio had discussed the situation, and had

⁷⁷ It is worth noting that the writer had also never heard me play the piano or the keyboard when he wrote to me with this request. Again, he assumed that I would be able to play competently – but likely because I am a Western-educated musician who was, as he well knew, completing a doctorate in music.

scheduled time for me to listen to the demo and “write some notes.” When I emphasized that I would like to have time to practice, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Fine! You will write the notes, and then practice, and then record” (Y010608A). Clearly, he did not anticipate that the practicing would take much time, since it was to happen during the studio session for which he had already paid.⁷⁸

In general, Burmese pop music culture does not prioritize preparation, or rather, does not valorize the idea of devoting large amounts of time to preparing for musical performance. For example (as I will discuss further below) music students expect to spend only a matter of months preparing themselves, via formal lessons, to play an instrument – much to the dismay of some music educators (Y121808A). One musician of long experience said that when he worked as an arranger for Burma’s most prominent rock band in the 1980s, he sometimes spent as much as a full day arranging a song (Y012908A). He emphasized that devoting a full day to one song was exceptional: “Our band was the top, so we had to care” he said.

In general, Burmese musicians prize efficiency, and they therefore aim to prepare for musical performances (and careers) in as little time as possible. Their collective attitude toward rehearsing for live shows and recordings grows out of this larger concern. If they can perform adequately after rehearsing only once, or even without rehearsing at all, then they are happy to do so. They do not see a value in spending days or weeks in rehearsal if they can sing and play successfully without rehearsing.

Of course, exceptions exist. Musicians who organize themselves into bands (like Iron Cross, for example) do rehearse their material – and so at their shows they

⁷⁸ Read more about my experience making this recording in the Appendix.

do not need to pass pieces of paper to one another.⁷⁹ It is important to keep in mind, though, that in the twenty-first century many Burmese pop musicians either do not belong to bands, or do not function as if they do. Rather, individuals continually come together in various groupings for various projects, and when they come together they usually do not rehearse. However, during the course of my fieldwork, I was able to observe three rehearsals; I depend on these three instances for my conclusions about Burmese pop musicians' rehearsal culture.

At the first rehearsal, which took place in January 2008, a number of senior musicians – who in the past constituted a band - worked together to create a kind of revival show. The show featured an *own-tune* composer/singer who was very popular in the 1980s. The singer and his four instrument players rehearsed in a tiny room, completely unlike the stage on which they would perform the next night. It was enormously enjoyable to attend, because the “practicing” consisted of the group playing each song once, flawlessly, from start to finish. In other words, it was exactly like the show (which I subsequently attended) but in a more intimate setting.⁸⁰ The experience ultimately resembled the live shows that I describe above: there were no stops, no repetitions, no obvious problems, no sense that the musicians were improving as they went along. Rather, it seemed that they were, at the moment of their coming together, completely prepared to play.

Another rehearsal that I attended – this one in January 2009 – was largely similar. This rehearsal took place in the practice room of a recording studio (the studio was unusual in that it had a designated room for rehearsals). The band was preparing for a performance the following day. They were to perform with a singer

⁷⁹ See for example some clips of Iron Cross rehearsing – or at least warming up for a live show - at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Xcd7GaD4IE&feature=related> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qfM1FAOxC4&feature=related>

⁸⁰ So much like a show that a half-dozen people, like me, stood around the room and listened at length.

who had, until then, never sang with them before. Although the rehearsal was scheduled to begin at 10:00 am, the musicians arrived one by one well after that time, with the singer finally arriving around 12:30 pm. At that point it was time for lunch, which we all shared sitting outside the studio at a picnic table. After 1:00 pm the rehearsal began in earnest.



Figure 4.1: One of the dozens of recording studios in Yangon

The same casual, friendly atmosphere that had dominated the interactions all morning long pervaded the practice room. The musicians played through each song once, with very few stops and starts. The instrumentalists played the C Rule notation virtually flawlessly at sight, and the singer was clearly comfortable with his entrances, with how his voice balanced with the accompaniment, and so on. Although the instrumental players did indulge in some brief discussions about timbre and form, for the most part the afternoon proceeded as if the musicians had no need to discuss or

repeat sections – because all of them were confident in their abilities to perform the songs correctly the first time they tried.

I was invited to the third rehearsal, which occurred in December 2008, by a prominent member of the Yangon music community. During our interview we talked about my perception that Burmese pop musicians rarely practice together. A few days later, I received a surprise phone call, inviting me to come to a practice session for the annual City FM awards show (which is, in effect, a pop music concert). The caller wanted me to see that musicians do, in fact, rehearse in Yangon (Y121708A). The rehearsal was illuminating: Although singers arrived with lyric sheets and a basic knowledge of the melodies they were to sing, the instrument players (who were all members of the same famous band) arrived with no prior knowledge. The first hour or so was spent waiting for the guitarist to create notation (i.e. to arrange) for the instrumental parts.

Like his colleagues at this highest level of pop music performance in Burma, the guitarist has outstanding aural skills. He later guesstimated that it took him about fifteen minutes to write out the guitar, keyboard, and percussion parts for each song (which seems right according to my notes from that afternoon (Y121608A)). He has developed these skills in the context of a culture which expects him to operate at this level: although the composers of each of the songs were present, only one of them brought notation for his song (and then it was only the lyrics with chord symbols written above). The other composers evidently expected the guitarist/arranger to listen to the demo and write out notation on the spot – which he did, since that is his expectation for himself too.

After all of the parts were handed out, the band settled down to play with the singers. The rehearsal was held in a studio – which I later discovered was standard practice for rehearsals when they do occur – so that the group could listen to the

recording of themselves after each run-through of each song. Ultimately, they worked through four songs in about four-and-a-half hours. Near the beginning of each hour, the performers went through parts of each song, stopping and starting as needed. They worked towards complete performances, and accomplished this in each case (as one singer announced at the end of the rehearsal of her song: “*Aun bi*” – or “We’ve succeeded!”)

The performers were joined in the studio by two recording engineers, the band manager, a producer (who was to later produce a video recording of the concert), composers, studio employees, a City FM employee, and observers, including family members of performers. At various times, all of these people felt free to comment on the evolving performances. While listening to the recorded tracks, the musicians talked to each other about errors in pitch and timing and shared ideas for alternate timbral effects. In addition, they made comments to the recording engineers, who also shared their opinions in return. Furthermore, all of the non-performers made comments to the musicians at one point or another. The performers seemed especially interested in soliciting the composers’ opinions, but they made statements to, and listened to statements from, all of the people there.

The lack of overt hierarchy was noticeable: there was no one person in charge, no conductor or director of music whose artistic vision shaped the performances. As in the many recording sessions I observed, musicians operated with a great deal of autonomy, although in this context they welcomed other opinions and modified their performances based on those opinions. Furthermore, every interchange was marked with respect. The afternoon stands out in my memory as particularly enjoyable because I was part of an atmosphere of such high morale and good humor. One of the singers who were present that day told me later that he felt the same way: “It was like a party,” he said (Y010109A). He added that he stayed for the entire rehearsal,

although his presence was only required for one hour, because he so deeply enjoyed the opportunity to spend time with and encourage his friends.

EXPLAINING THE BURMESE APPROACH

Why did this rehearsal occur? Numerous musicians explained to me, then and in other contexts, that they rehearse only under certain conditions. First, if the instrument players have no experience playing with a particular singer, they may rehearse. In many cases, live shows consist of performances that link instrument players and singers with whom they have previously made recordings, so that they know and have performed the repertoire before the show takes place. Some of the most prominent bands make a practice of regularly appearing with the same singers, so they know those singers' songs particularly well (Y012908A). If the band does plan to rehearse with a new singer, they will rehearse with this singer once only, usually on the day before the performance – as in the case of the second rehearsal described above (Y123008B). In the case of the City FM rehearsal, half of the featured singers were not in fact professional singers, but actors who had been invited to sing for this prestigious event. (One of the concert organizers explained that they hoped that the inclusion of actors with singers would increase the audience for the show, which would be broadcast on national TV sometime after the awards show (Y121708A).) Therefore the band needed to rehearse with these singers.

Secondly, musicians rehearse only for “big shows.” A big show seems to be, according to the consensus opinion, a show for an audience of some thousands - at least two thousand, according to one of my informants (Y012908A), or four thousand, according to another (Y122008B). In addition, the audience must consist of ticket-holders (that is, people who paid to see the show). Therefore, one guitarist dismissed a recent concert at which he played, which attracted thirty to forty thousand people by his own estimate, as not being a “big show” because it was a free New Year concert,

open to all members of the public (Y121608A). He added that he and his band did not rehearse for this show. By contrast, the City FM show was a “big show” in all of the musicians’ minds, because it would be televised to a large segment of the population on government TV and because it was to be performed before an invitation-only audience.

How is it possible that Burmese pop musicians are able to perform so well without rehearsing together – or at least, without regularly rehearsing together? When I asked musicians about this, most of them pointed out that when they come to perform music, whether live or in a recording studio, the music is already familiar to them – and therefore, becoming able to play it themselves is a simple proposition that takes little or no time. The musicians develop their familiarity with the repertoire in a number of ways. If the song to be recorded is a *copy thachin*, for example, the musicians are likely to have heard the original Western-made recording. If it is an *own tune* song, musicians always listen to the demo tape before recording – and one or two listenings are sufficient to render them familiar with the song (Y012908A). And as I explain above, in the case of live performances, musicians often find themselves playing music that they have already played in the studio. Live shows, therefore, are not usually first-time performances – and thus the instrument players need only to glance at the notation in order to play it successfully for the audience.

One musician who attended the January 2008 rehearsal (described above) explained it to me this way: “All of the people here [that is, all of the musicians who were rehearsing by simply playing each song once] have twenty years experience, or more. And they have worked together before on recordings” (Y020508A). Rehearsal is optional in the Yangon pop-music scene because the musicians who work in it have spent so much time becoming familiar with so many songs – and therefore, with the aid of notation, these professionals can sing or play virtually any song with precision

in performance. For this musician (and his colleagues) the idea that rehearsal is not needed because he is already familiar, on some level, with songs before he records or performs them pretty much settles the matter.

It seems to me that these musicians are able to operate this way in part because their work consistently takes on the same form. That is, Yangon pop musicians are not just familiar with many songs, they have completely mastered the art of playing a song. And this is possible because song performances, in this culture, are rather formulaic. North American readers will recognize the idea that pop songs usually have a verse-chorus-bridge-chorus form. In Burma, this is equally true. Songs generally have the same overall structure, with an instrumental (usually lead guitar) solo occurring two-thirds of the way through the song, and a Fine or Coda section to end it. (The most common song structure I encountered was verse-verse-chorus-solo-verse-chorus-Fine).

What is more, they are almost always in common time, and the introduction to the first verse is almost always eight measures long. Furthermore, the sung phrases are virtually always eight bars each, with a verse or chorus lasting for four phrases. In addition, the instrumental solo always lasts eight or sixteen measures. Chord changes always occur on the first beat of a measure (and sometimes on other beats, but always on the first beat). The instrumentation which accompanies any song is always the same: one drum kit, one bass guitar, one lead guitar and one set of keyboards. The players of these instruments do not have to co-ordinate their playing with singers' movements, since singers usually do not dance while performing. And shows do not feature elaborate light shows or revolving stages or other infrastructure that might affect the players' performance.

Therefore, once a musician has developed the skill of playing a pop song, he can apply this learning to almost any song he encounters. He is unlikely, as a

professional in Yangon, to have to deal with many deviations from this norm. Thus he is able to fully master it. Also, he works with others who have mastered this norm. They do not require many rehearsals to co-ordinate their playing, since they can predict how each one will play and how the song will develop. Together, these musicians can execute a song with little or no rehearsal, since the song is unlikely to hold any musical surprises for them.

Furthermore, these musicians are able to play so many songs with so little rehearsal because of their excellent aural skills, that is, their ability to rapidly re-create (on paper or in performance) sound that they have heard. To be sure, none of the musicians I interviewed said anything like, “We can perform with little or no rehearsal because we have very good aural skills.” Burmese musicians simply do not talk this way, in part because it would be perceived to be self-aggrandizing (more on this in my discussion of musical talent, below). In addition, they do not have a specific vocabulary for discussing this kind of skill.

For example, I discovered that a number of the instrumentalists I interviewed for this project have absolute pitch – that is, they were able to listen to pitches that I sang, and without resorting to any reference pitch, to immediately play them on their own instruments. I asked them about absolute pitch, and either they did not recognize the term, or they thought it meant “ability to sing in tune” (Y121608A, Y011108A, Y012908A, Y010109A). One music teacher (who was educated abroad) told me that there is no word or term in Burmese which identifies this particular skill; after pondering the idea for moment, he said that the closest equivalent would be “*na kaun teh*,” which means, “The ears are good” (Y121508A). However, some members of the community clearly do have absolute pitch, and many others have very strong relative pitch. In addition, as a group they manifest consistently excellent ability in re-creating rhythms and identifying timbres.

These tremendous aural skills are especially apparent among guitarists (and note that many Burmese pop musicians play guitar, although they work professionally as singers, drummers or keyboard players). Guitarists often work as arrangers – that is, they write the notation for the songs that bands will play. It was when I observed guitarists working on arrangements that I most clearly saw how skilled they are in listening to and understanding musical sound. Here is one incident out of many that exemplifies this trend: In December 2008, I observed a guitarist at work in a recording studio (Y121608A). He was writing out the lead and rhythm guitar parts for a song that he was about to record. The “demo” of the song was actually an earlier commercial recording of the same song, made by Iron Cross. Knowing that this guitarist had a strong relationship with the IC guitarist, I asked him why he did not just phone his colleague and request the notation from him. He seemed surprised by my question but gamely tried to answer. He said that the IC guitarist would likely have difficulty finding the part, since he does not keep his scores in well-organized files. Therefore, he said, it would take “too long.” I thought it over: travel time from our location to the IC guitarist’s home, plus twenty minutes or so to locate the notation, would add up to less than one hour. “Yes!” my interlocutor pronounced. An hour was far longer than the time it would take him to create his own notation from scratch. And indeed this proved to be the case. The guitarist managed to write out both parts and record them in less than one hour.

Of course, he did not decide to create the notation himself due to time constraints. He did it because this is how he *always* works – and indeed, this is how all of his colleagues in the Burmese pop industry always work when creating recordings. In this culture, master scores are not created and then passed along to whoever will learn the repertoire. Rather, arrangers create their own notation after listening to a song. This expectation is so strong that even composers do not give the

notation they create (in the process of composition) to musicians who record the song. Instead, they give demo recordings to arrangers, who create new notation for the purposes of recording.

And arrangers live up to this expectation. They create notation very quickly, relying on their finely-honed aural skills. Having watched a number of keyboard players and guitarists do this, I can verify their assertions that they are generally able to create notation for the “multiple” parts of a song while listening to it once or twice. They write chords (in C, always), numbers indicating melody notes where instruments play solos, symbols representing rhythm (especially rests), and indications to outline the complete form. Arrangers say that they are able to work so quickly and accurately because they have had so many years of experience doing this work, and this is undoubtedly true. But it seems to me that they are able to do so also because they are expected to do so. People live up to what is expected of them, and Burmese pop musicians are no exception. It simply does not occur to them to rely on notation generated by others when preparing for recording. Witness the guitarist I refer to above: when I suggested that he call his friend to get a copy of the notes, he laughed. For him, the idea was absurd. And the recording engineer, who overheard our conversation, found it equally laughable.

During another encounter with another professional Burmese pop musician, I saw similarly-strong aural skills at work. While interviewing the man, I asked him to show me what it means to “follow” a song. Musicians frequently use this word to describe their learning and I wanted to observe it in real time. The man, who works as a guitarist but who makes bamboo flutes in his leisure time, picked up one of his flutes and said, “Well, if you sing a song for me I’ll play it” (Y012408A). Nonplussed, I pressed him: Any song? He smiled, serenely self-confident. I decided to sing a song that he could not possibly have heard before, a Canadian folk song called “Land of the

Silver Birch.” The melody is in Dorian mode and is therefore a little less predictable than a melody using a major scale. I launched into the song, and after I had sung the first five or six notes, my interviewee played them, exactly as I had sung them, at the same pitch level and in the same rhythm. As I continued to sing, he continued to play, imitating my voice with perfect accuracy. Importantly, he did not wait until the end of each phrase to repeat after me, but rather played the notes I sang, remaining three or four pitches behind me for the duration of the melody. The best way to describe what happened was - as my friends had tried to tell me - this professional musician “followed” the melody I sang. What is more, he did so perfectly on his first exposure to the new melody. After we finished he grinned at me and said, “See? My hands just follow!”

How do these musicians develop their advanced aural skills? Or put another way, how do these musicians become so familiar with so many songs so quickly? Musicians often referred to the idea of “talent” when I queried them on this point.

CONTRASTING NOTIONS OF MUSICAL TALENT

In Burma, as in the West, the ability to learn music is closely linked to the notion of talent. Western scholars have discussed the concept of talent at length (see Haroutounian 2002:xiv for a brief summary of this scholarship, dating back to Plato and Aristotle). The most complete account - from an ethnomusicological point of view - comes from Henry Kingsbury (1988). I will be referring to Kingsbury’s assertions, which are based on his research conducted at an elite American conservatory, throughout this section. To begin, Kingsbury points out that North Americans generally hold the idea that “rock music requires little or no talent” and therefore, believe that rock music does not need to be taught (1988:60). In Burma, at least among the music teachers and rock musicians that I interviewed, the view is precisely the opposite: To be a successful rock or pop music performer does indeed

require talent, but talented people do not need extensive teaching – and that is why Burmese pop stars mostly learn on their own.

Burmese pop musicians unanimously believe in the idea of talent – that is, that some people are more talented than others – and that talent is necessary to a successful career in music. Although there are a few Burmese words that approximate the English word “talent,” (especially “pa-ra-mee,” which is a Buddhist concept meaning “accumulated virtue”), most of the people I interviewed used the English term or at least recognized it. They differed, however, from their Anglo-American counterparts in their beliefs about where talent comes from and how it manifests itself in the lives of musicians.

Most Burmese musicians – Buddhists and Christians – believe that talent has a supernatural origin. Christian singers and instrumentalists not only agreed on the concept, but were almost unanimous in the way they worded their idea: “Talent is a gift from God,” they said, over and over. They tended to say this not only when I asked direct questions about talent, but also when I expressed admiration for a musical performance. For Christians, this belief about talent tended to be part of a larger belief that “everything [we have] is a gift from God,” as one singer-composer put it (Y011008A).

Like talent, success in musical endeavors is a gift from God, and so Christian Burmese musicians say that they and/or their families pray to God for sustainable careers and even for specific performances. For example, one young singer from a devoutly Christian family, who performed at a live show without having rehearsed, explained that she was not nervous during the show because “I trust in Jesus; I put my trust in God for a good performance. I always pray before I go on stage” (Y010908A). The one Muslim performer that I was able to interview for this project also affirmed

without hesitation that “God gives talent” when I asked him about the origin of his skill (Y010409A).

Buddhists also believe that talent originates with the supernatural. Generally speaking, Buddhist musicians agree that musical talent is a direct result of an individual’s righteous behavior during a past life. In that sense, this notion of talent is equally as inscrutable as is the Christian idea: just as gifts given by God are unpredictable, so is the good karma that must have been created by some past, unknown, action. However, in Buddhist belief the relationship between one’s past and current lives is a direct cause-and-effect relationship, and it is the responsibility of the individual soul to regulate this relationship.

One Buddhist pop singer who ascribes to this notion theorized that perhaps his talent comes from having performed and taught music for free in a previous life (Y122708A). Although he is not certain of this, he says that he is committed to performing live shows “FOC” (free of charge) for charity in this life, so that his accumulated meritorious deeds will redound to his benefit in his next life (Y122708A). One of his colleagues, another successful pop singer, said that because he believes so firmly that past lives influence future lives, he is careful to follow the teachings of the Buddha in the present (Y010109A). He says that he does his best to do good to others, to honor his parents, and to pay homage to the Buddha and to Buddhist monks; in this way he hopes to ensure that he will be blessed in his next life.

For many Buddhist musicians, the idea that one’s past deeds account for one’s present circumstances extends beyond the idea of having talent. This belief system helps them to account for material prosperity and for success in their careers. For example, as we discussed musical talent, one devoutly Buddhist singer said to me that his good deeds (in his past and present lives) explain why he is able to live comfortably in a poor country, and why he has been able to start a business

(Y010109A). And a record producer – one who has been able to hang on during the recent developments which have eliminated most music producers in the Burmese market (see Chapter 4) - claimed that his substantial material success was due to “luck” and “decided by fate” (Y122708B). This luck is, of course, not random fortunate circumstance as Westerners understand it, but rather the logical result of the producer’s actions in his past lives.

The one substantial difference between Christian and Buddhist views of musical talent seems to be that Buddhists are more likely to say that one’s talent derives from one’s “genes” or one’s “DNA.”⁸¹ For example, a senior Burman Buddhist musician told me that talent really boils down to identifiable, natural causes: “A gifted singer is a person who is born with a body structure that can create a good vocal tone” he said, mentioning that the shape of one’s mouth and one’s lung capacity affect this tone (Y020708A). This does not necessarily negate the idea of past lives and accumulated virtue. As one composer said to me, “I think talented means gifted. It is something you are born with. My religion says it comes from a previous life. I think it’s in your DNA. I believe in Buddhism *and* science” (Y010909A).

There are some dissenters, of course. A small minority of Burmese musicians and music teachers, both Buddhist and Christian, say that either they have no explanation for musical talent, or that musical skill is primarily the result of an individual’s hard work and practice (e.g. Y012908B and Y010908A). One Karen Christian music teacher, who has decades of experience mentoring younger musicians, told me that “talent is a gift from God,” but then immediately followed that up with, “You have to use your common sense. God gives this gift but you have to exercise your own resources” (Y011708A). Interestingly, this woman describes herself as “Westernized.” She speaks perfect English, is highly educated, and is conversant with

⁸¹ Interviewees used these English terms in response to my questions.

many Western ways of understanding the world. Perhaps this is why she, like the Buddhists quoted above, expresses what Kingsbury articulates as a Western notion: “Talent...is understood as located “in” the person’s mind, psyche or perceptual apparatus, and is widely felt to be transmitted genetically, like hair and eye color” (1988:63).

Kingsbury goes on to argue that, in Western classical music culture, musical talent is a “potential” or a “gift” which nonetheless has to be developed, through years of rigorous work, by the talented person himself (1988:76). And Haroutounian describes talent, again from her Western point of view, as a “spark” that can be fanned into a flame, by the diligent work of the talented, guided by their teachers (2002:xvi).

This view is not widely-held among professional Burmese musicians. Indeed virtually all of them, be they Buddhist, Christian or Muslim, agreed on one crucial point: being talented means that one does *not* have to work hard to learn music, and by extension, to achieve professional success. Some of them expressed this idea as a clear opposition, saying that it is possible for untalented people to achieve success by exercising extreme effort – that is, by practicing a lot (e.g. Y123008A).⁸² Most simply said that being musically talented means that a person is able to learn music quickly, that he or she does not have to work particularly hard to master it (e.g. Y121508A, Y121608A). One singer/composer stated flatly, “You cannot practice your talent” (Y122908A).

Specifically, musicians frequently said that being talented means that one does not need many, or any, formal lessons in music (e.g. Y122607B, Y010108A, Y010908B, Y010409A). In fact, a number of them explained that they knew that they had talent precisely because they had been able to learn a lot about music despite the

⁸² This seems to be a hypothetical proposition however. No one mentioned any examples of untalented musicians who had succeeded because they worked hard.

fact that they had had no access to formal lessons. One well-known singer, aware that he had been quoted in the local press implying that musical success is entirely due to “san” or luck⁸³ took pains to emphasize to me that he “never spoke against training [taking music lessons]” (Y010109A). He added that people “who are interested [in music] but don’t have talent should get training.”

When I asked musicians and music teachers to explain how one can know that one or another person is talented, most of them said the same thing: talent manifests itself as the ability to learn music by ear, quickly. Talent is particularly evident in people who can reproduce a melody they have just heard (either by singing it or by playing it on an instrument). Because most Burmese pop musicians teach themselves by listening to and following along with recordings, talent is often described as the ability to perform what one hears on a recording.⁸⁴ One man described his cousin, a lead guitarist, as a “genius” because the man could listen to a recording ten times (or so), turn it off, and play the lead guitar part flawlessly (Y020508A). One Karen Sunday School teacher said that she selected three young girls to perform as a trio in a special Christmas concert because she knew they were “talented” – and she was proved correct when these grade-schoolers were able to sing their song correctly from memory after she played the melody for them only three times (Y122607B). Another man, a singer, said that he was sure that God had given him talent because he can listen to a recorded song only once and then sing the tune himself (Y010608A). And

⁸³ See Than 2005.

⁸⁴ The idea that artistic talent boils down to the ability to learn by following along was made clear to me by a teacher at the State School of Music and Drama in Yangon. Students at this school learn the venerable arts of traditional Burmese music and dance, and they learn virtually all of it by following teachers’ examples, rather than by reading notation or dance choreography. The dance teacher explained to me that she knows right away if students in her classes are talented or not, because she observes how quickly they can follow her (reproduce her example). She showed me the basic dance posture (feet together, knees bent outwards, chest forward and hands at sides) and told me that students who can perform this posture as soon as it is shown to them, and then hold it for five minutes without shaking, will be able to succeed in the school’s dance program. I tried out the posture myself, trembling to hold it after only thirty seconds or so, and she looked at me sadly: clearly, I am not talented (notes 02/13/08).

yet another man, a Buddhist composer, said that talent means being able to hear a song on the radio (or on a recording) and to understand it “immediately - like knowing how many bars [in the phrase]” (Y010709B).

To contrast this understanding, once more, with Western notions of talent: In Burma, musical talent is an ability that is given to, or is born into, a person fully-fledged. When a Burmese person has talent, it is understood to be a mature, ripened talent that needs little or no nurturing from a teacher in order to be useful. It is not a spark that needs to be coaxed into a flame, but rather a brightly-burning fire. In scholar Susan O’Neill’s terms, Burmese people tend to subscribe to an entity theory of talent (“the notion that people only have a certain amount of musical ability”) rather than an incremental theory (that “anyone can improve their musical ability through effort and practising musical skills”) (in MacDonald, Hargreaves and Miell 2002:82). Talent, coming as it does from the supernatural, is not partial or in need of development. Rather, it is divine gift that frees the recipient from the need to practice, and it grants to him or her the most-needed ability in Burmese pop music culture: the ability to learn by ear.

For Burmese pop musicians, talent has nothing to do with the ability to sight-read notation easily, nor to play one’s instrument with virtuosity (two ideas that were emphasized to me and many of my peers when I received my own classical music training in Canada). Instead, talent means that one is able to easily accomplish the task that is most necessary to Burmese pop musicians: to learn and reproduce music that one has heard. However, both Burmese and Western musicians usually experience the recognition of their talent in the same way: the talent of a “talented” musician is usually proclaimed by someone other than the musician.

In the West, this person is often a music teacher, adjudicator or master class instructor (Kingsbury 1988:68). In Burma, the person who most often affirms to a

young person that he or she is talented is a member of the family. One singer shared that she recalls her parents (one of whom was a professional guitarist) saying “She will be a famous singer!” when she was only five years old (Y010108A). Another said that he believed his prayer for musical talent was answered when his older brother, who was already working as a professional musician in Yangon, wrote to him, inviting him to come to the city to play in a hotel band (Y010608A). Yet another said that leading nun in her convent school (the “Mother”) insisted that she had a good voice and made her join the choir (Y020508B). And a composer said simply that he realized he had talent when he was a teenager, because his grandparents told him so (Y020708B).

Although Burmese pop musicians are happy to talk about theories of talent, and about how their talent was initially recognized, they are markedly less willing to verbally claim that they are personally talented. Approximately two thirds of my respondents basically refused to answer “Yes” to the question, “Do you have talent?” Despite my prodding (“Surely you must be talented! Look at how successful you are in music!”) even the biggest stars in the country ducked their heads in shyness when I asked them to affirm their own talent. One young singer did finally agree that she is “a little talented” (Y010908A). Another admitted that he was simply embarrassed to make such an assertion (Y122907A).

I came to believe that these musicians are in fact comfortable with the idea that they are talented, but reluctant to say so out loud, especially to an interviewer who is writing down their statements. In Burma, as in many other countries, it is rather self-aggrandizing to claim that one is talented, and socially-appropriate people usually do not do so. But when I proposed this theory to a very successful and clearly self-confident musician, he flatly denied the possibility. No, he said, he was not feigning humility; he simply did not believe that he had any talent (Y010909A).

While talking about one's own talent was difficult for many Burmese musicians, talking about learning music was not. Indeed, virtually everyone I interviewed spoke at length about what he knew and how he had learned to do it.

LEARNING MUSIC IN PRIVATE LESSONS AND IN INSTITUTIONS

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the large majority of people working in the Yangon pop music scene served long apprenticeships in the city's tourist hotels and restaurants, where they developed their abilities to learn and remember large numbers of songs, in order to be able to play them on request. Three musicians who are currently working in such venues told me that they know hundreds of songs from memory (roughly one hundred, two hundred, and seven hundred songs respectively - Y012908B, Y122507A and Y012408A).⁸⁵ Furthermore, they say that they spend roughly one half-day, maximum, learning a new song.⁸⁶ These musicians are representative of Yangon-based pop musicians as a group. Their experience shows that they and their colleagues are able to familiarize themselves with, and then confidently perform songs in short order, because they have trained to do so by the institutions where they developed their performance skills.

Interestingly, though, none of the musicians I interviewed for this project described their hotel experience as a kind of "training" or "apprenticeship" as I am doing here. Rather, when I asked them how they learned to play and sing at a professional level, they pointed to times and places where they had learned music in their youth. According to these informants, Burmese musicians usually acquire their skills in one of three ways.

⁸⁵ An impressive feat considering that these two musicians perform almost all of these songs in English, which is not their first language.

⁸⁶ Hotel performers often learn repertoire at the behest of the hotel managers with whom they work. The managers anticipate that certain new songs will begin to be popular with patrons. In at least one case, a hotel manager requires the house band to learn music representing certain ethnic traditions for theme weeks like "Arabia" (Y010908B).

Private lessons: Some musicians take individual lessons with music teachers in their home communities. Lessons usually take place weekly, and occur in either the teacher's or the student's home (Y011908A). In every case that I was able to identify, the teacher belonged to the same ethnic group as the student. This may be simply a matter of geography: Students usually take lessons in their own villages or urban neighborhoods, and these communities are, even today, often ethnically homogeneous. More to the point: This fact partially explains why members of ethnic minority groups are so over-represented among Burmese pop musicians.

First, we must note that music is not one of the subjects taught in public schools in Burma, so Burmese children are not learning the basics of one musical language or another. Those who do learn rely on sources that they access via their social networks, and these social networks are often locale-based. In “mixed” (predominantly Burman Buddhist) areas, where the monastery is the most important focal point for the residents, Burman teachers often teach traditional Burmese music, not Western music. And in areas centered around churches, Christian *tain-yin-tha* teachers usually teach European classical and pop styles.⁸⁷ Students studying with Chin, Karen or Kachin teachers (who are themselves usually members of these groups) are likely to be taught about fundamental concepts like melody and accompaniment – which is helpful to understanding how pop songs are structured – while Burman students often learn the heterophonic sonic structure of classical Burmese music. *Tain-yin-tha* youngsters therefore often have a more direct path to success in Western pop music than do Burmans.

⁸⁷ A Burman Buddhist friend of mine, who lives in downtown Yangon, attempted to find a piano teacher for her daughter in late 2008. She said that all the teachers she had been able to find were members of the “national races” (Y122308A). One day when we were together, I saw her approach another acquaintance, a professional keyboard player, for advice. He turned out to be a Christian Sgaw Karen. And his suggestion for her led her to another Christian Karen piano teacher: the pianist from the biggest church in the downtown area, who was apparently accepting students.

In their individual lessons, Burmese music students usually learn basic theoretical concepts, that is, rules about how sounds are organized and written. At least this is what all of the adults who recalled their lesson experiences for me remembered. Musicians said that their teachers taught them how to read both “Chinese” and “international” notes, and explained to them how chords and rhythms are organized. Now grown up, students did not recall learning much beyond these foundational ideas from their teachers. Indeed, most of them said that their lessons went on for only a matter of months at most – presumably because it does not take much more time than that to cover this material (e.g. Y010109A). One high-profile composer, though, proved to be a notable exception. He shared that his teacher, a Burman Buddhist like himself, was fluent in “English, Burmese and modern music” (Y020708A). This teacher taught the music theory (that is, the different rhythm styles and melody structures) for each of these traditions. In addition, the teacher taught composing styles, singing techniques, “emotion in music” and even Burmese literature. This composer acknowledged that his teacher was “great” by local standards, and that he received a richer education than many of his colleagues.

Secondly, some Burmese pop musicians receive institutional training of some sort. As I mentioned above, many of them develop their performance skills by working for years in tourist venues prior to commencing recording careers. However, they do not view this work as a form of training. Rather, many members of this community made the comment that “there is no music school in Burma.”⁸⁸ This is not accurate – as I will explain – but the fact that so many professional musicians believe it to be true reflects their tendency to think of music education institutions as being restricted to formal conservatories and the like (of which there are very few). In

⁸⁸ Meaning, there is no school where Western theoretical concepts, like chords, are taught. The musicians are of course aware of government-run Fine Arts high schools and the University of Culture, where students receive formal instruction in the Maha Gita tradition.

fact, during my fieldwork in Yangon I discovered that formal musical learning takes place in a number of institutional settings, and that some members of the pop music scene point directly to this training as centrally important to their development as performers. These settings include schools dedicated to music instruction and churches and para-church organizations which offer music instruction as one of their programs.

Music Schools: Yangon is home to number of music schools, most of them founded and directed by teachers who trained outside of Burma. Some of these are small storefront operations in which a single teacher offers private and group lessons. In some cases, if the business grows large enough, the founding teacher deputizes one or more of the senior students to deliver lessons to beginners (Y122907C). One singer I interviewed for this project explained that she developed her pop music chops in a little school like this near her home (Y011908A). This singer had some previous knowledge about Western musical concepts, and so, she says, it took her only three months to “learn the chords.” After mastering the various chord families, she began to work as a teacher in the school.

Another performer, an instrumentalist, followed a more circuitous route toward learning in a shop (Y012908B). She first began working as a clerk in a well-known Yangon musical cafe called Mr. Guitar. Seizing the opportunity, she prevailed upon a fellow worker – a young man who already knew how to play - to teach her how to play an instrument. When the store was not busy with customers he taught her the basics by rote. Today she works full-time as a performer; she reached the pinnacle of the industry recently when she was invited to record with Iron Cross.

The two best-known music schools in Yangon at the moment are the Art Music Academy and Gita Meit. Each was founded in the past decade by an energetic, charismatic teacher who developed a kind of conservatory model to deliver music

education to committed young adults. At each school, students range in age from eight or nine to thirty years of age, with the core group of students being in their mid-twenties. This core group usually attends multiple classes per week for years at a time. Though neither school, as yet, offers a formal diploma, the reality is that the students are experiencing post-high school intensive training in one subject area – rather like students taking undergraduate degrees at universities.⁸⁹ At both of these schools, the founding directors are determined not to limit the instruction to Western music theory and performance, although, at this point, such instruction comprises the bulk of the lessons.

Kit Young, the founder of Gita Meit, says that many of her students arrive saying that they want to study there so that they can become “famous,” although this is an unlikely outcome for most of them (personal communication). To date, one of the school’s graduates has embarked on a promising career as a pop music pianist, and the school’s choir, the Gita Meit Voices, has become very active (Y121508A). The choir performs at many events around the city, including at some live shows, and participates in some pop music recordings. It has even been featured at the annual Yangon City FM awards banquet – effectively cementing Gita Meit’s place in the Burmese pop music scene.⁹⁰ The Art Music Academy, which is a little older, has now produced a handful of veritable stars. The two DJs at the center of Yaw-thama-hmwe (described in Chapter 2), for example, trained at the AMA, and so did the two young singers collectively known as No. In addition, students from the AMA also performed at the 2007 City FM banquet.

⁸⁹ The founder of Gita Meit is actively working to get the school accredited to offer A.B.R.S.M. (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music) theory exams, for two reasons: She says that her students really want to have an international evaluation and affirmation of their learning, and that earning such certificates is the usual route to success in international classical music.

⁹⁰ For a look at the Gita Meit voices performing with Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, Burma’s most prominent female pop singer, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LYTt1EkOWM>

The founders of the Art Music Academy and the Gita Meit school both insist that their schools aim to inculcate not only an understanding of Western music, but also other, more fundamental, “foreign” ideas. Kit Young says that her school’s first goal is to encourage a mindset that she believes is largely missing from contemporary Burmese culture (personal communication). In fact, she states bluntly that her school “is not a music education project.” Gita Meit, she says, focuses on teaching young adults two things: to develop self-confidence and to be socially responsible – that is, to develop skills and then to use those traits to work with others to build a stronger society. She says that she senses an identity crisis among aspiring Burmese musicians: “We are not good musicians because we are not good *Western* musicians.” She hopes that the school will give the students the tools to master Western classical music, but more importantly, that it will offer students the chance to succeed in a tradition that associated with high-status (foreign, white) people.

Ultimately she hopes that her students can deploy their newfound self-confidence in the wider Burmese society, where hierarchical relationships between “upper” and “lower” people have, in her view, made it difficult to sustain mutually-beneficial relationships between people (or, more simply said, have made it difficult to create a mutually-respectful community). She points out that her school is not intended to be a conservatory, but is deliberately modeled after the community music school concept articulated by Dr. Herbert Zipper, the classically-educated conductor who survived the Holocaust and went on to be a leader in the community music school movement in the United States.⁹¹ Therefore, Gita Meit emphasizes social service projects rather than competitions, exams and rankings. Gita Meit students have undertaken tasks such as teaching music in one of the poorest neighborhoods in

⁹¹ See Cummins 1992 for more information on Dr. Zipper’s life and career. Kit Young says that this book was important in helping her to plan Gita Meit.

Yangon, delivering supplies to victims of Hurricane Nargis in the delta region, and presenting free performances for audiences as far away as Mandalay.⁹²

Ko Doo, the leader of the AMA, was quoted in the *Myanmar Times* in 2005 saying that his school aims to...

...change the thinking of Myanmar people, who [are] used to spoon-feeding and parrot-style learning methods. International music-teaching techniques focus on creativity and improvisation. But in Myanmar, most people are reluctant to do something new. That's why I always drive my students to change their attitudes. I want them to be music creators, not imitators (Than 2005).

Accordingly, he teaches composition and encourages his students to write songs and to share their work with others. (And two of his students did exactly this when I visited the school in 2007). For Ko Doo, fostering innovation is primary – more important than teaching all of the formal theory and performances classes. And at this point, he still sees innovation as an “international” rather than a local way of thinking.

In an interview with me in December 2008, Ko Doo emphasized that he is trying to teach his students to have an “open mind” – that is, to cultivate the “mental flexibility” that is necessary to think new thoughts and create new music. He sounded some of the same themes that I heard from Kit Young (above). He bemoaned the fact that many older Burmese people are still interested in maintaining social hierarchy and are therefore unwilling share their knowledge with younger people. (He cites a Burmese “tradition” that a teacher never teaches all that he knows, so that the student will never supersede the master.) In addition, in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, he is starting to combine his ideas for a music school with his desire to do social service work. Accordingly, he recently initiated a new project, Green Island Education, which

⁹² See Gita Meit's website for more information on their social service projects: <http://www.gitameit.com/wp/>

grew out of the free music classes he is now offering to young people affected by the cyclone.

Churches: Christian churches and para-church organizations offer significant amounts of musical instruction, both in Yangon and in other urban centers. In fact, this kind of institutional learning is probably the most overlooked factor in the broader context of Western musical learning inside Burma. My own brief survey revealed that churches provide important opportunities for formal musical learning, and that some of the most prominent Burmese pop stars point to these opportunities as their main source of training.

In churches themselves, formal musical instruction, mostly focused on choral singing, often takes place during the time designated for Sunday school. In the few Sunday school classes that I observed, approximately fifty percent of the class time was devoted to singing, not just for fun or worship, but in preparation for performance during an upcoming service. During Sunday School classes, the teachers instructed the children on part singing, diction, posture, and other technical points.

One of the most important learning opportunities that churches provide to young musicians is the late-afternoon youth-oriented service that takes place each Sunday at churches all across the country. The format for this service (which was always held at 4:00 pm in the churches I visited) is roughly the same as that of other services: opening prayer and announcements are followed by singing and then a sermon. However, during youth services the singing portion is open-ended, and all congregants who wish to come to the front to share a song or musical performance are “warmly welcome” to do so (Y011108A). Performances usually consist of soloists or groups of singers presenting the gospel song of their choice to the accompaniment of whatever guitars, keyboards and percussion may be available. Performers are not usually greeted with applause (this being forbidden in most churches), but each and

every one gets an attentive listening. The youth service represents a chance for aspiring pop singers to become familiar with the use of microphones, the feeling of being on stage, and – of course – the necessity of performing without having spent much (or any) time rehearsing with the instrumentalists.

Importantly, the “youth” service is open to people of any age, and frequently very young children sing solos at this service. Every congregation I visited included at least a couple of five-year-olds who belted out pop standards in perfect tune, singing flawlessly from memory.⁹³ Seeing these kindergartners perform at such a high level, without much or any prior rehearsal with the band, made it clear that churches’ youth services represent a valuable learning experience where up-and-coming musicians can hone their skills weekly. It also helped me appreciate the statements of my now-grown informants who said things like, “I started singing in church when I was three years old” (Y010108A). To have repeated opportunities to perform pop music in a supportive environment is to have a chance at future professional success. Thus churches are contributing to the training of pop stars in a tangible way.

These youth services can become so musically engaging that they draw an audience (that is, people who do not belong to the church congregation). For example, I attended the 4:00 pm service at a non-denominational church in North Yangon where, as many city residents know, Chit San Maung, the lead guitarist for Iron Cross, plays guitar every Sunday. Although I arrived before the appointed time, the sanctuary of the church and the overflow space were already packed to bursting. Chit San Maung and two other professional musicians (whom I recognized from my time spent in recording studios) provided exciting accompaniment for two young men who sang

⁹³ See Nge Nge Lay (the young daughter of Chit San Maung, the lead guitarist in Iron Cross) performing at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUrznS1Izx0> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Jgt3YcczWQ>

solos, and then to a tiny girl who sang *Free of Charge*.⁹⁴ Best of all – from the point of view of the many young men who attended church that day in order to take in a free live show – the musicians improvised a blistering instrumental postlude while the ushers were stacking chairs.

The most consistent source of explicit musical instruction in churches stems from choir rehearsals. In all of the churches that I either attended or inquired about, the choir is open to all interested teenagers and adults. The choristers always sing from hymnals (or books of choral anthems) and therefore the choir leader must explain to the members how to read notation. In some cases, such as in the church I attended most often, the explanation is cursory at best. Choir rehearsals often resemble rehearsals in the pop music scene: that is, they are used as an occasion to sing through the repertoire once, with no time given to practicing or repetition. However, in other churches, the musical instruction given during choir rehearsal is so helpful that now-famous professionals pointed to their church choir experience as foundational to their success. One young singer exemplified many others by saying that her church's choir conductor taught her about meters, singing in parts and reading "1234 notes" – skills which she uses now in her professional career in pop music (Y122607B). Another singer of about the same age went even farther, saying that the choir conductor at the church she grew up in is her "hero" (Y011908A). This woman provided choir members with a "remarkable experience" because she taught the complexities of vocal tone, English pronunciation and dynamic expression, eventually leading the choir in performing a complicated cantata.

Churches also facilitate other, more focused, opportunities for musical learning. Some of the largest Yangon churches, for example, run two-week-long summer music camps for teenagers from across the country. I attended one of these camps and was

⁹⁴ This is the famous gospel song copied from *Sometimes When We Touch*.

impressed by the rigorous training on offer. The one hundred or so enthusiastic young people in attendance worked through a theory textbook and participated in choir rehearsals each day. The program consumed most of the working day, so that the camp was devoted mostly to training rather than amusement. Para-church groups also co-ordinate music training sessions. For example, in 2008, the Karen Baptist Convention organized a week-long song-writing seminar for interested members. The convention invited three Nashville-based songwriters to come to Yangon to instruct aspiring Burmese songsters in the art of the popular song.

In February of 2008, I attended a meeting of the Church Music Institute of Myanmar to get a sense of how such programs come to be. The CMIM was founded in 2003 because, as the chair of the meeting explained, “There is no music school in Myanmar” and the Myanmar Baptist Convention saw a need for young people to get training in order to sustain the tradition of choral singing in Burmese churches (personal communication). The funding for the group comes from donations, including some money from the American Baptist Association. During the three hour meeting the committee members planned their annual month-long music training course. The subjects to be taught, they decided, would include ear training, sight-singing, music theory, conducting, how to lead a choir⁹⁵, vocal development, hymnology, church music history, music ministry, piano, keyboard, violin, guitar and vocal lessons. They decided to use the textbooks they have used in the past: a Burmese translation of a theory book published by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, and an English-language ear training textbook.

At the end of the of course, the committee decided, each student must sit for a juried exam: this aspect of the course is likely an attraction for many Burmese

⁹⁵ In Burma, being a choir leader and being a choral conductor are two different things. The conductor leads rehearsals and the choir leader functions more like a secretary, taking care of the paperwork and logistics involved.

students, since those who pass the exam will receive a certificate attesting to their educational achievement.⁹⁶ Interestingly, the CMIM committee is interested in branching out into teaching other musical subjects. The committee members discussed the possibility of adding classes called “Eastern music” (which would focus on teaching the basics of Burmese traditional music, using the recordings of Burmese piano master U Ko Ko as a starting point) and “Computer music” (which would focus on learning to use recording-editing software).

The meeting revealed the breadth of educational opportunity that para-church groups in Burma are able to provide. It also illuminated the truism that many Burmese people shared with me: that members of *tain-yin-tha* minority groups are prominent in the pop music industry because “they learn to sing in church.” The group of people at the CMIM meeting united under the umbrella of “Myanmar,” and they conducted their meeting entirely in Burmese, but all seven of them were in fact Sgaw Karen. Four of the seven are employed full-time as music instructors at Karen seminaries. Although musical leadership in the Burmese Christian community is theoretically open to Christians of any ethnic background, the reality is that the overwhelming majority of that leadership is provided by non-Burmans. This makes sense, since the large majority of Christians in Burma are not Burman, but rather members of *tain-yin-tha* groups.

In addition, the church tends to focus on Western forms of music education, teaching sound concepts organized according to paradigms developed in the Western academy, and even relying on textbooks developed in the West. (Unsurprisingly, given that Burmese music teachers often rely on Western expertise, I was treated as a kind of resource at the CMIM meeting. The chair told me that the committee has in

⁹⁶ The committee discussed the possibility of having this certificate recognized by the Myanmar Institute of Theology, the flagship institution of Christian higher education in Burma.

the past recruited guest teachers from the United States, and asked me to recommend names of people who might be available for the 2009 course.) Therefore, *tain-yin-tha* Christians do, in many cases, have more access to Western musical education than do Buddhist Burmans, and so a larger percentage of these groups are able to proceed with careers in Western popular music.

What do aspiring musicians learn in Burmese musical institutions? First, they learn how to read “international notes.” Importantly, for many students, learning notes is not the same as learning music. Once, while trying to research music education at a Yangon seminary, I asked some upper-level students when the “music” class was scheduled. I had been told that it would occur on a Thursday, but I did not know the exact time. This provoked quite a discussion amongst the students, who finally told me that I must be asking about choir rehearsal, and that this was scheduled for Friday. When I insisted that I had been told that Thursday was the day, they discussed it some more. Finally, the light dawned: “Notes” class was on Thursday. Did I want to observe the “Notes” class? And thus I learned that the study of notes and the study of music are two very different things, not only for these students but for many people in Burma. However, all of the institutional music education programs I encountered did emphasize note-reading and introductory music theory, and indeed this facet of their programs seemed to be one of the features that drew students (Y010408A).

Secondly, choral singing seems to be a central focus of music training programs both in churches and in music schools. Indeed, Kit Young of Gita Meit told me that thrice-weekly choir rehearsals are compulsory in her school because one of her goals is to counteract the stereotype that “Burmans can’t sing” (personal communication). By attending choir rehearsals at the Gita Meit school, at a music camp and at two seminaries, I discerned some common trends. For example, choirs are usually not formally conducted. The conductor often serves as pianist and vocal

coach, but rarely stands in front of the group to keep time during the performance. Nevertheless, I will use the word “conductor” here to distinguish this person from the choir leader.

At all of the choir rehearsals I observed, the conductor’s focus was on note learning. He or she led the choir in singing their parts using solfege syllables. Without exception, all of the choirs I saw demonstrated high levels of competence in sight-singing, and so the parts usually came together in a short amount of time. Conductors also talked about posture, projecting one’s voice, and the importance of pronouncing English words correctly. I was fascinated to note, however, that conductors almost never spoke about the importance of dynamic expression or word painting. The lack of focus on expression was so glaring to me (coming from a “Sing it with feeling!” background) that I began to question conductors about it.

All of the conductors I spoke with affirmed the importance of using expression (and especially of varying the amount of volume used) in singing. And they acknowledged that their choirs do not usually sing with the amount of dynamic variation that they, the conductors, or I the listener, might wish for (e.g. Y010408A, Y012308A, Y011708A and Y020708C). One conductor joked, “My choir only knows how to sing three different ways: loud, louder and loudest!” (personal communication). Others were a little defensive, saying that the singers in their choirs know that they are supposed to pay attention to dynamic markings in scores, but fail to do so. When I asked one conductor why he had not talked about this during the two-hour rehearsal I had just observed, he said that he simply had not had time to address the issue (personal communication). This after a session in which he had had time to rehearse four songs, give a fifteen-minute break, and allow numerous choir members to try out their conducting skills by directing one song each! (I had a similar discussion with a piano teacher who said that, although she believes it is important to

teach expressive concepts like the *ritard*, she generally does not have time to focus on this during a thirty-minute piano lesson (Y011908A.) I began to wonder if my questions were off-base, since there seemed to be such a disconnect between what conductors told me they expected and what they asked of their choirs during rehearsal. Ultimately I decided that these conductors simply have other priorities.

Like the musicians in the professional pop scene, they value efficiency and expect singers to learn large amounts of repertoire quickly. Choir rehearsals often – not always – resembled the January 2008 rock band rehearsal that I observed: generally, the group would sing through each song from start to finish, with no glaring mistakes, once, using solfege syllables. After some verbal pointers from the conductor, the choir sang the same song once more, with the words as printed, and then moved on to another song. Given the time constraints imposed by this kind of rehearsing, there is indeed not enough time to focus on the details of crescendos, articulations, tempo changes, and so on. And it should be said that even without these kinds of niceties, Burmese choirs do generally sound wonderful: they sing correct pitches and rhythms, creating a uniform ensemble sound, and they always do it with full-throated enthusiasm. Concern for dynamic variation is, for Burmese choir conductors, a little beside the point. As one former chorister - now a professional pop singer - told me, “I only recently realized that people in foreign countries think more about expression and take much longer to learn a piece [of music], when I saw the movie *Shine*” (Y011908A).⁹⁷

SELF-TEACHING: LEARNING BY IMITATING

Among Burmese pop musicians, by far the most common way to acquire musical knowledge is to teach oneself, that is, to learn without explicit guidance from

⁹⁷ This movie is a bio-pic which tells the story of the life of an Australian classical pianist named David Helfgott.

another person. Burmese people do not usually describe this process as “teaching myself,” however. They sometimes say that they “learn by hearing” or “learn by looking” or “learn by heart” (e.g. Y010109A, Y010908B and Y122507A). Most often, they use the lovely Burmese expression “*kya-saya, myin-saya*,” which literally translated means, “Teacher that I hear, teacher that I see.” One singer who referenced this idea said, “I didn’t have any formal lessons (other than Sunday School), but all of the shows I attended and all of the singers that I heard were my teachers” (Y011008A). His “teachers” were his *kya-saya-myin-saya*. Others who used the same expression used it in the same way, as short-hand for the concept that one learns by observing and imitating others who are not intending to serve in a formal teaching role.

Aspiring Burmese pop musicians most often look to performers on Anglo-American recordings as their *kya-saya-myin-saya*. In fact, in the course of my interviews, I only rarely heard Burmese musicians cite other Burmese musicians as teachers or role models.⁹⁸ Rather, musicians pointed to British and American musicians as their main source of guidance. This was true even when the Burmese musician in question had an outstanding Burmese model close at hand. One man, whose mother is one of the most prominent pop singers in Burma, cited the Ramones and David Bowie as his first musical “heroes” (Y122908A). A woman whose father had a long career as a guitarist and composer said that she loves Avril Lavigne and Pink and tries to sound exactly like them, omitting any mention of her father (Y010108A). And another man, a drummer who followed in his father’s footsteps, acknowledged that his father gave him some musical guidance early in life, but said that his “main teachers” were video recordings of Deep Purple, Bon Jovi, Metallica and Eric Clapton (Y123008A).

⁹⁸ Three musicians who are currently at the top of the Burmese pop music scene did mention a Burmese *kya-saya-myin-saya*. Interestingly, they all identified the same man, Htoo Ein Thin, an *own-tune* composer and performer who is now deceased (Y121508A, Y122708A, Y010109A).

Older musicians cited Elvis Presley, Cliff Richard, the Beatles and Jim Reeves as the performers that they tried to imitate (e.g. Y020508A), and younger musicians mentioned the stars of their own generation. One singer whose career peaked in the early 2000's said that, "Whitney Houston, Shania Twain and Celine Dion are like my teachers" (Y122607B). A guitarist remembered his *kya-saya-myin-saya* with great specificity (Y121608A). He recounted how, when he was a young aspiring musician, he approached Burma's two most famous guitarists for counsel. Unsurprisingly, they advised him to learn not from their own example, but rather to listen to well-known rock guitarists from the West, including Joe Satriani, Vinny Moore, and Eddie Van Halen. They also recommended that he use specific Anglo-American recordings as teaching tools, including the guitar solo from "Hello," by Lionel Richie, and albums made by Deep Purple and Pink Floyd – but *not* Jimi Hendrix, as he was "too old" by then.

I asked my informants to describe how they learn from these kinds of teachers. The musicians consistently said that they learned by listening to the recordings, over and over, eventually singing and playing along with the recorded sounds. For many of them, this kind of learning began in childhood, when they listened repeatedly to songs they enjoyed. At this point, young musicians become aware of a developing passion for rock music ("wah-tha-na bah-deh", or, "It is my hobby.") Over time this kind of listening became more purposeful, as young people began to picture themselves as performers and aimed to learn the songs to performance level. One guitarist described his approach as the "pause-and-rewind method" (Y121608A). He said that he listened to short sections of recordings, attempted to play them, and then repeated this as needed. He added that he was able to slow down the speed of the tape using a control button on his cassette player, thereby providing himself with an accessible model.

Burmese musicians sometimes look to other resources when they teach themselves. For example, two guitarists remembered using “how-to” instructional videos as teenagers (Y122507A and Y121608A). Both of them said that these videos featured “foreign” teachers and one recalled specifically that he used one of Paul Gilbert’s instructional videos (Y121608A). Other musicians said that they used method books to teach themselves basic music theory and notation. Again, these books, as my informants remember them, were either copies of or Burmese translations of books from abroad (e.g. Y012408A). One guitarist told me that his father acquired a method book on a trip to Europe in 1980, and that he depended on this to learn how to write international notes (Y121808A). Later, he attended a class with a teacher who had acquired a similar book about harmony and counterpoint. Since the teacher had only the one copy, he read the directions aloud to the students and then designed exercises for them.

One keyboardist described how he learned the names of some of the beat patterns: he observed the names that appeared on his keyboard’s screen when he selected various rhythm patterns that were contained in the keyboard’s computer (Y012908A). A singer said she learned the names of chords the same way, essentially picking up the English-language vocabulary from her electric keyboard (Y020608A). Finally, some professional musicians – usually instrumentalists - create their own C Rule notation as part of their learning process (e.g. Y012408A and Y012908B). They describe writing scores for demo recordings as they listen to them, particularly if they are intending to create a *copy thachin* based on that recording.

Importantly, musicians who teach themselves in this way usually do it when they are alone. As I pointed out earlier, group rehearsals are rather uncommon in the Burmese pop music scene. However, although groups may not practice together, individuals certainly practice, or learn, for long hours by themselves, particularly

when they are teenagers and still developing their craft. Of course, sometimes musicians do listen to recordings together, particularly when they are working professionals who need to be able to imitate a specific song for the purposes of performance or recording. However, musicians did not cite these experiences when they talked about “learning” music. Instead, they referred to the time period they associated with their musical training – their teenage years - and recalled how they had learned the basics of the art. At that time, for most of them, their learning was essentially self-teaching, following the examples of Western *kya-saya myin-saya*.

One might be tempted to explain the tendency for Burmese pop musicians to teach themselves, alone, by referring to notions of Burmese individualism. Certainly, other anthropologists of Burmese culture have remarked that Burmese society is marked by factionalism rather than collective unity (see for example Sprio 1992:148 and Fink 2001:253). Burmese people themselves sometimes sarcastically explain the nature of their politics (even the idealistic pro-democracy movement is marked by infighting and the continual creation of new splinter groups) by joking that “When you have two Burmese people in a room together, you have at least three different opinions.” As we have seen, many pop musicians work primarily as individuals, coming together with others for one performance only, rather than belonging to stable groups (bands). This may be one manifestation of the Burmese preference for individual activity. But I do not think that musicians’ tendency to rely on self-instruction stems from the same root.

Burmese pop musicians do not primarily learn by self-teaching *because* they are Burmese, that is, because this way of operating is endemic to Burmese society. Rather, they tend to learn this way because they are pop musicians, and pop musicians around the world most often learn their skills this way. Lucy Green (2001), who studied British pop musicians in order to discover how it is that they learn to perform

their music, has written the most substantive piece of scholarship describing this process. She discovered the same tendencies among British musicians that I am identifying here as common to Burmese musicians: that is, they learn to play their instruments primarily by listening to and copying recordings (2001:60-61), usually in solitude (2001:76-77). Although aspiring British musicians have much more access to private lessons and institutional training than do their Burmese counterparts (note that music is taught in government schools in the United Kingdom), they too mostly learn informally. For British pop musicians also, notation is used as a “supplement” and a “memory-jogger” rather than as the principal source for learning new music (2001:38).

Interestingly, Green found that in the United Kingdom, informal learning practices are not considered true learning, even by the musicians themselves (2001:184). Therefore musicians there often feel somewhat embarrassed about their learning methods. In Burma, by contrast, the musicians I met were proud of their history of self-teaching, in part because their society valorizes learning from *kya-saya myin-saya*. For Buddhists especially, the notion that one relies on oneself, or stands on one’s own two feet, is deeply respectable – in one’s spiritual work of making merit as well as in daily activities (Y122308A). Therefore, during interviews Burmese musicians were glad to tell me about their experiences of teaching themselves.

Indeed, other members of the Yangon industry also said proudly that they were self-taught in their respective professions of recording engineer (Y121608A, Y011009A, Y012908A and Y121708A) and band manager (Y123008B). While they regretted the lack (as they perceived it) of a music school in their country, they were happy to depend on themselves for musical training. As one singer, who has reached the pinnacle of success in Burma’s pop music scene, explained: “I am still learning from *kya-saya-myin-saya*. Every time I go to a recording session, I watch the others to

learn more about singing in harmony, about music notes and about guitar chords” (Y010109A).

CRITICISM: UNCOMMON

It is important to note that Burmese musicians do not learn in one important way: they do not learn from public criticism. They do not have the opportunity, by and large, to receive comments from a music critic, nor to read such comments directed at their peers. This is because the profession of music critic does not exist. Now, the Burmese do have a word for “critic” and they do sometimes use this word to describe journalists who write about music, film, literature, or other forms of cultural production. However, as far as I can determine, these “critics” generally do not write analytical opinion pieces about artists’ work. The writing may be descriptive, and it will give facts about the subject of the article, such as a new *series*, and it may include the writer’s opinion – but that opinion will always be a positive one.

At least, this seems to be the recollection of all of the musicians I queried about this. One man who has nearly thirty years experience in the Yangon pop music industry said that he can only remember ever reading positive reviews of concerts and *series* (Y012908A). Another man, whose experience is nearly as extensive as that of the first, said that journalists sometimes do (negatively) criticize a famous singer’s songs in print. However he instantly added that such comments are the result of petty conflicts (Y123108A). “Like maybe they [the singer and the interviewer] didn’t get along during the interview” he offered. Taken in this light, any negative comments about music are seen as deeply biased, and therefore unlikely to be taken seriously by musicians.

I continued my search for a music critic until the second-last week of my research, when I met a Yangon-based pop culture journalist. She understood instantly why I was unsuccessful. “Journalists don’t want to be called critics,” she said bluntly

(Y010609A). She said she was unsurprised that I had been unable to find anyone who would consent to an interview, since, in her field, people would be unlikely to consider themselves critics, and in fact might be offended to be approached on that basis. She acknowledged that sincere criticism was more common in the past (in the 1970s, she hazarded) but that even then, all music and movie critics – like most Burmese journalists – wrote under pseudonyms. Now, she says, these kinds of reviews are extremely rare.⁹⁹ Instead, articles about pop culture celebrities tend to be based on interviews with those celebrities, and that the questions usually go along the lines of: “When is your next *series* going to be released? Who is the songwriter on that *series*? How do you personally feel about the *series*?” She noted that Burmese magazine readers tend to be interested in the stars’ personal lives, and so her responsibility as a journalist includes asking about the famous person’s family, for example.¹⁰⁰ However, the average interview lasts only fifteen minutes, she says. Evidently there is hardly time to go beyond basic facts, and certainly not enough time for a wide-ranging discussion.

It is important to point out that some public learning opportunities do exist for Burmese pop musicians. In the TV show *Melody World* (Burma’s version of *American Idol*), for example, three judges comment regularly – and often negatively – about performances. And at one point in the mid-season, the format of the show allows members of the live audience to voice their opinions of the performances (Y123108A). Another example of public musical learning, or criticism, occurs

⁹⁹ And she believes that this is because the government censors are “concerned.”

¹⁰⁰ However, “sensitive” facts that come to light in the interview are usually suppressed, either by the Press Security Board or by the writer herself. She recalled one specific example: an actor overdosed on drugs, but “we would never write this.” My own limited experience bears this out: During an interview, a composer showed me three recent articles that had been written about him in Burmese journals (Y011209A). Each of them focused to some extent on his life with his wife and daughter. None of them mentioned the fact that he had been married once before. Here again, the concern seems to be that journalists do not want to be perceived as criticizing famous artists – not for their personal choices nor for their artistic ones.

weekly during the New Song Class on Yangon City FM Radio. During the broadcast, a pop music composer of great experience, U Htun Naung, plays an unreleased recording made by an aspiring singer or group, and then comments extensively on the work. However, these kinds of formal, public criticisms are few and far between in Burma. When they do occur, evidently some musicians dismiss them on the grounds that the opinion is completely subjective. Therefore, developing musicians do not have the opportunity to read criticism of their own and others' ideas and to reflect accordingly.¹⁰¹

Generally, Burmese pop musicians do not benefit from criticism they might receive in private, either. Rehearsals are few and far between, and when they occur, the participants usually do not spend a lot of time discussing how to improve their performance. Rather, they most often play straight through each piece of music and move on to the next. Beyond this, I think privately-leveled criticism is uncommon because musicians are committed to maintaining an egalitarian social structure in the studio. To criticize another person would be to imply that one is somehow more knowledgeable or more competent than that person. Therefore, critical comments are rare in studio and in rehearsals.

During interviews, industry members confirmed my own limited observations about this. They said that global criticisms of performances (e.g. "That wasn't good") are virtually never spoken. One guitarist said that if a recording engineer and a performer, for example, are very good friends, then the engineer might make suggestions to the player (Y011009A). But usually, he says, unless a composer is present and talks about his own song, musicians do not comment critically on each other's performances. He did say that if a musician's playing is "very bad," then

¹⁰¹ Virginia Danielson (2008) argues that celebrity is created by an entire society, which includes the celebrity herself, her fans, critics and others. This may be true of pop stars in many countries, but not in Burma. There, there are no critics to "contribute to the public understanding" of the celebrity.

others in the studio might say something like, “Why don’t you take some time to practice?” His comment reveals, once again, that practicing, as well as criticism, is the exception rather than the norm in this culture.

COMMUNICATING THE “MOOD” OF THE MUSIC

As I researched the topic of teaching and learning music with teachers, students and performers in Yangon, I often asked them about singing. I was particularly interested in singing for a couple of reasons: my own career to date has largely focused on teaching children to sing, and the core activity in Burmese popular music is the singing of songs. Respondents pointed out a number of norms related to singing in Burma. For example, experienced professionals claimed that the highest extent of the vocal range for female singers is usually D5 (Y012408A). Singing notes higher than this is considered to be very difficult and those who can do it are respected. One female singer, who is well-known in part for being able to sing “high notes” says that this is one way that singers can “show their talent” (Y122607B). On the other hand, male singers routinely sing up to G4. Again, Burmese audiences appreciate the few male singers who can sing higher than this (Y012908A), but singing above middle C – well into what Westerners understand as a “high tenor” range – is quite normal.

In effect, Burmese pop singers, be they male or female, often sing in approximately the same range. This is evident in one recently-released VCD called *U Saw Nu: Vocal Lesson*. In this recording, a famous Yangon-area singing teacher works through some vocal exercises with a group of young men, and later, with a group of young women. The teacher uses most of the same exercises, in the same keys, for both groups. Interestingly, the students sing up to the exact pitches which my informants told me was normal for Burmese singers: the highest note the women ever sing is C5, and the highest note the men sing is G4.

While conducting research in Yangon, I heard out-of-tune singing rather more frequently than I would expect to hear it among professional musicians in the West. But in-tuneness did not seem to be a big concern for my interlocutors. For example, after sitting through a choir rehearsal in which the conductor played a dreadfully out-of-tune piano to accompany the singing, I queried her about it. Did she feel the piano was out of tune? Yes, she said, the piano goes out of tune frequently because of the intense heat and humidity in the city (Y011708A). She said that the normal procedure was to call a piano tuner when she had time to do so, and that she had not had time recently. She was also unsure how often, on average, the piano got tuned, although she was the person responsible for making this happen. And in the U Saw Nu video mentioned above, at the beginning of Lesson Six, the assembled male and female students sing very sharp – so sharp that the sound is a semi-tone higher than the keyboard pitch. And U Saw Nu does not comment, but continues with the exercise.

In another telling incident, I interviewed an organizer for the TV show *Melody World*. He told me that the judges on the show evaluate the competing singers according to the “five components of good singing: pitch, timing, tone color, performance and diction” (Y123108A). He went on to explain that pitch problems are by far the most common weakness that the judges encounter in contestants, and that only those who can sing consistently perfectly in tune make it to the final rounds (Y123108A). However, when I watched the final episode of the second season (which aired on January 4, 2009) I noted that the judges picked the most out-of-tune singer as the winner for the evening.¹⁰² Her opening pitches (Ab – G – F above middle C) were terribly flat, and she struggled to hit other notes as the song progressed. At the end of

¹⁰² Note that this singer was not the overall winner of the contest, but she did receive the highest score for her performance on that particular episode.

the show, the four finalists performed a group number, and the other woman in the group could clearly be heard singing flat on her highest pitch, a B above middle C.

Of course, it makes sense that these singers might have these problems, singing at what is the top of their range in a nerve-wracking, nationally televised event. And it is worth noting that I subsequently heard both women perform live, and both of them sang well in tune at that time. However, it is striking that during this culminating episode of a national singing contest, the judges' professed concern for in-tune singing clearly did not weigh heavily in their evaluation of the singers.

Intrigued by the striking opposition to my own Western experience, where singing in tune seems to be the *sine qua non* of good singing, I repeatedly asked my interviewees to either describe good singing or to give me a quick lesson in singing. "What do I need to know or to do to be a good singer?" I said. As I discovered, Burmese musicians only rarely focus on issues of technique. Not one person, for example, mentioned in-tuneness, vibrato, or vowel shaping, or vocal projection, or other similar concerns. I was able to document only one exception to this trend. This singer – the same woman who told me that her foreign-trained church choir conductor had given her an outstanding education in singing – said that good singing involves pronouncing words correctly and performing in the range that is most comfortable for one's voice (Y011908A).

Interestingly, a number of musicians answered my question by talking about health practices. For example, one singer said that in order to maintain his singing voice he drinks no alcohol (except for beer when he is at parties) and avoids drinking ice water before recording sessions (Y122708A). He further advised me to get plenty of sleep in order to become a good singer. Another singer said that getting regular exercise is important for good singing (Y010409A). Still others said that aspiring singers should avoid fatty foods, since weight gain can affect one's ability to sing

(Y122907A and B). It is not clear, however, how consistently Burmese musicians follow their own advice. For example, one young singer said that her teacher had told her not to eat ice cream (Y010908A). She hastened to add that she pays no attention to this rule! Three other singers smoked cigarettes while I conducted interviews with them – and ironically, all three said that being physically healthy is central to singing well. When I questioned them about this, they offered various caveats, such as that they are containing the damage by consuming only two or three cigarettes a day (Y122708A) or by never finishing a cigarette (Y010109A).

However, the main thing to know about singing, according to Burmese musicians, is that a good singer communicates the mood of the song. As with much of their musical vocabulary, my Burmese informants used an English word to elucidate an important concept. The “mood,” or emotional affect, of a song is so important, in fact, that most people mentioned it first when we discussed the issue of good singing, and some mentioned nothing else (Y010109A, Y122708A and Y010409A). One man, a professional performer and band manager, said that the most important thing to be able to discern about a particular song (or style of pop song) is the mood, and that he constantly encourages his band members to watch DVD performances of new music in order to determine what the mood is, and how it is communicated musically (Y010908B). He must be successful in relaying this message, because when I interviewed a guitarist who regularly plays with this manager, he said that the most important thing to do when singing is to match your voice to the mood of the song (Y122507A). For example, if you are singing a pop song, he said, your voice should be energetic, and for a jazz tune, the singer should have a cool and calm voice.

As these comments imply, Burmese musicians believe that mood is an identifiable property that is located within a song. Beyond that, the concept is somewhat amorphous. Mood is clearly not a function of lyrics, since *copy thachin*

composers repeatedly say that they can sense the mood of a English-language song even when they cannot understand the lyrics. Further, they say that when composing government songs, they virtually always write *own tunes*, since the “mood” of preexisting English-language songs would never match the lyrics required by the SPDC (Y122408A). Mood cannot be directly linked to pitches, rhythms or timbres, either. As one very active arranger explained to me, the “mood” of a song determines what kind of arrangement he will create (Y010709B). For him, then, mood is already present and distinguishable when a song exists in demo form - that is, before the basic melody, harmonies and lyrics have been recorded by professionals who improvise large portions of their parts and presumably contribute to its emotional impact.

Mood may be hard to pin down, but this in no way reduces its importance. Indeed, professional performers insist that they must be able to enter into the mood of the song, and to share that with an audience, in order to be successful in their artistic endeavors. Indeed, complained one producer, singers’ focus on “mood” causes all kinds of problems, because they frequently refuse to show up to recording sessions until they feel that they are in the mood of the song (Y122708B). Furthermore, mood seems to be a somewhat fragile or slippery characteristic. One guitarist, who has much experience playing Western classical piano, says that focusing on reading and playing the right notes in the score (as one must do in that tradition) can cause the player to “lose the feeling” of the music (Y121508A).

I once observed for myself how the mood of a song can be lost. During a rehearsal in which four band members and a singer were performing a song, the drummer suddenly noticed a tarantula-sized spider in the corner of the recording studio. All of us vacated the studio within seconds, and the brave keyboardist went back in and killed the spider with a broom. Laughing a little shakily, we reconvened inside the studio and the band members took up their instruments, ready to play. But

the singer said that he could no longer sing. What if the spider's mate was somewhere in the building? He insisted that he could no longer feel the mood of the song because he was distracted by the fear of more spiders. We all waited for some minutes for the singer to recapture the mood (notes 12/30/08).

THE LINK BETWEEN CULTURE AND PRACTICE

Some of the pop musicians I interviewed for this project said that they perceive historical shifts in learning and teaching among their peers. For example, one woman said that “the kids” are noticeably stronger musicians than were the stars of the 1980s and 1990s (Y012908B). She attributed this change to the advent of VCD technology. In VCD recordings (also known as “karaoke DVDs”) the song lyrics appear at the bottom of the music video as the singer performs them, allowing the viewer to easily sing along with the performer. My interviewee assumes that young people are using these VCDs as self-teaching tools to learn the craft of pop music. Some of this woman's colleagues agree with her observation, if not her reasoning: Two prominent men, both of whom have nearly thirty years experience in the Yangon industry, said that a new and skilled generation of pop singers emerged in Burma in the early twenty-first century (Y012908A and Y020808A). (One of them identified 2003 specifically as the turning point.) However, another man of equal experience and stature in the community says that many of the current crop of singers struggle with basics like singing in tune, because they are so busy working in movies and advertising and have little chance to rest their voices (YY121708A). He says that he sees a clear decrease in skill level when he compares today's stars to those of the previous generation.

The scope of my own research is too limited to allow me to make claims about historical trends in the learning of music in Burma. However, as this chapter reveals, the current situation is marked by certain patterns which are evident in the pop music

industry and which extend even beyond its parameters. To wit: Burmese musicians deeply value their teachers, whether these teachers are private instructors from their communities or *kya-saya-myin-saya* that they hear on foreign-made recordings. They expect to learn basic theoretical information during formal lessons, and do not expect to spend much more than one year doing formal study, perhaps because the most important skill they can learn (“following” a melody) is not taught in lessons. They believe in the value of formal education and lament the lack of widespread music education in their country, but at the same time they are proud of their ability to “learn by hearing.” They do not rehearse in groups very often, and when they do, they value efficiency over opportunity to experiment with expressive devices (like crescendos, ritardandos, and the like). Above all, they valorize the importance of communicating the mood of a song when performing.

Burmese musicians’ culture of learning and rehearsing developed in the context of their religious beliefs. Whether they are Buddhist, Christian or Muslim, almost all of them believe that their ability comes from some supernatural source. Indeed, some of them made this link explicit. When I asked, as I did on a number of occasions, how they were able to play and sing so well with so little (or no) rehearsal, individuals said simply “That’s God!” Although they universally believe that individual musical talent also comes from the same supernatural source, they are frequently unwilling to state aloud that they themselves have talent. Whether famous musicians are willing to proclaim themselves talented or not, their understanding of the concept of musical talent is informed by this belief. And this belief leads to a kind of fatalism, an attitude that says: An individual has no control over his talent, because talent comes (or does not come) from God. And if one does have talent, then of course one can learn quickly and well. And therefore one does not need to rehearse

extensively. At least, this is the argument of some of the influential music educators mentioned in this chapter. A 2005 Myanmar Times article sums it up:

Many of Myanmar's most famous singers have had no training whatsoever. Famous pop diva, Htun Eaindra Bo, said she believed her success as a singer was due to "San", a god-given-gift, and she did not need to take any lessons. Popular rock singer R Zar Ni, said he also believed he owed his success to "San" and had no interest in formal training. This is the mindset Ko Du, U Saw Nu and the Gitameit team said they are struggling against.

(<http://www.myanmar.gov.mm/myanmartimes/no280/MyanmarTimes14-280/t003.htm>)

Indeed, it seems that Ko Doo, U Saw Nu and Gita Meit leaders (all of whom are referenced in this chapter) will have to struggle if they intend to counter religiously-rooted beliefs and practices that hold sway among the most influential musical figures in Burma. Furthermore, they will need to acknowledge that the current norm is the norm in part because it has certain advantages: it fosters strong aural skills among musicians, and it allows them to maximize their earnings, since they do not spend much time in unpaid rehearsals. Of course, the musicians who are operating according to this norm would benefit from considering how a change in their learning and rehearsal culture might be for the better. Spending more time working in groups and experimenting with music would probably lead to more innovation in pop musicians' creative output. And creating new music may shortly become not only an artistic but an economic imperative – as I will explain in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE BURMESE POP MUSIC INDUSTRY

The Myaynigone junction on Pyay Lan is one of the best-known in Yangon. It is significant in part because in 2007 a huge electronic billboard, the first in the city, was installed there. The “big TV”, as it is called, plays an endless loop of advertisements for locally-owned businesses. The two ads I notice – probably because I see them so often – are for a brand of iced tea (during which a supple tenor sings the praises of said tea to the tune of John Denver’s “Take Me Home Country Roads”), and for a photography studio (which is accompanied by the theme from *Mission Impossible*). The combination of current technology, brash capitalism and American hit music tempts me to think of this junction as the Times Square of Yangon. But I resist using the label, because Burmese people do not, and I am committed to understanding their city, as best as I can, on their terms. What my friends do usually mention is that this junction is the site of the famous Dagon Center, an upscale shopping mall where one can buy musical recordings and concert tickets. Accordingly, I head off towards Dagon Center on my first afternoon in the city, and I return frequently thereafter.

Entering Dagon Center is no uncomplicated task. The junction is the site of a major bus stop and a sidewalk market. During shopping hours, public buses, private chauffeured cars, taxis, trishaws, pedestrians and even the odd man on horseback all compete to arrive at the entrance. The noise is almost deafening; the bus conductors holler their vehicles’ destinations, taxi drivers call out to potential customers, beggars plead for money, and parking attendants blow furiously on whistles to the never-ending stream of cars and SUVs entering the parking lot. Crossing the street is tricky: the traffic is mostly uncontrolled, with no lanes marked on the road, no speed limit, and aggressive driving on the part of most drivers. Mature adults often hold hands

when they attempt to dart across this particular junction, as much for mutual reassurance as for convenience. But it's worth the trouble. Once you finally make it to the front steps, you can feel the blast of air conditioning, a relief from the year-round tropical heat.

At the top of the steps, all customers have to pass through a metal detector, submit their bags to be searched and then allow themselves to be patted down by security guards. The security system was installed after Dagon Center was bombed on May 7, 2005. The bombing occurred within minutes of explosions at two other locations which symbolized power and affluence – another well-known shopping center, and the Yangon Trade Center. Government reports at the time indicated that eleven people were killed and one hundred and sixty-two wounded in the bombings. The state-controlled newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*, immediately blamed the bombings on “terrorists,” pointing the finger at their perennial enemies, the ethnic insurgents that operate in the border states, and urban-based pro-democracy activists (Anonymous 2005). The government offered no proof to back this assertion, and never brought any suspects to trial.

Burmese citizens had their own opinions. I have been told, for example, that “everyone knows” that the bombings were the result of internecine fighting amongst members of the army: one faction, perhaps those loyal to the recently-deposed prime minister and chief of intelligence, was attempting to undermine the authority of another faction, presumably that of the head of state, General Than Shwe (Y020708C). The fact that fire trucks, normally parked in a station nearly a mile away, were observed in front of Dagon Center an hour before the bomb exploded, lends some credence to this theory (Y010408A). What the government does not say is that the 2005 shopping mall bombings are part of a pattern. During the last decade, civilian targets all over Burma have been bombed, at the rate of nearly one per month

(MacLachlan 2006b). The bombings regularly remind the public that the country is unstable and unsafe.

However, there is no sense of impending doom hovering over Dagon Center in 2007, when I first begin to visit it. The mall is flooded with well-heeled customers; their affluence is evident in the foreign-made goods that they are able to acquire: youth wearing blue jeans and sporting dyed hair, young mothers looking at exercisers, and middle-aged professionals in business wear shopping for imported peanut butter and chocolate. The security procedures seem lax. The guards perform their duties perfunctorily, barely glancing in the bags they check.

At a small retail shop which sells cassette tapes, CDs, DVDs, and VCDs, music is booming over the sound system. Here you can see the Burmese pop music industry at a glance. The store stocks the latest releases of all of the biggest stars in the Burmese pop scene, as well as Western-made recordings, on floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall shelves. In addition, the staff posts a monthly list at the entrance, so that customers can see the “Top Twenty” recordings sold there – separated into the categories of “English” and “Burmese.”



Figure 5.1 Retail shop selling recordings in Dagon Center

Customers do not seem to consult the list, though, and the sales clerks have difficulty answering questions about it when I ask. The list is valuable to the foreign researcher for the way in which it organizes information: the “English” category includes all Western-made recordings, including, for example, an album by the Columbian artist Shakira. (In Burma, “English” songs are songs which are recorded in the United States, or, songs recorded by artists singing in English – and many people believe that these are one and the same. More to the point, singers of English songs are almost always believed to be Americans.¹⁰³ Every time I informed Burmese friends that some of their favorite “American” singers – like Celine Dion, Bryan Adams, Shania Twain and Avril Lavigne – are actually Canadians, they expressed surprise).

The category of “Burmese” albums shows some of the important ways in which Burmese popular music differs from American popular music. In this category most – but not all – of the album titles and artists’ names are written in Burmese. But more importantly, so-called group albums predominate here. Group albums are *series* to which a group of solo artists have contributed songs. On these *series*, the singers do not sing together, but rather perform as soloists, with a back-up band. One singer usually contributes one or two tracks, so that on an average group album, the listener can hear twelve or fifteen different singers. Duet albums are a subset of group albums: on a duet album, two singers sing six or seven songs each – but rarely sing a duet.

The average price of a CD at the Dagon Center Star Mart, in 2008, is sixteen hundred kyat - or, a little more than one American dollar. To put this in context: the average daily wage in Yangon is one thousand kyat. To earn this amount, workers

¹⁰³ Which is not to say that Burmese people conflate all English speakers with citizens of the United States. Caucasian speakers of English in Burma are almost always referred to as “foreigners” rather than “Americans.”

often put in twelve hour days.¹⁰⁴ Despite the government's protestations that this amount is an adequate living wage, the fact is that it is barely enough to feed an adult for the day.¹⁰⁵ This helps to explain why, when the government raised fuel prices in the summer of 2007, and thereby caused bus fares to double in price (up to an average of two hundred kyats), thousands of people took to the streets. People faced the impossible choice of paying for transportation to work, or of having enough to eat. The demonstrations of September 2007, which initially focused on demanding reliable electricity, a reduction of fuel prices, and other quality-of-life issues, quickly expanded to include calls for democracy – and the international media labeled the events as pro-democracy demonstrations. In reality, Burmese people were protesting not only their country's seemingly-intractable political situation, but also the current regime's inability (or refusal) to provide a reasonable standard of living to the majority of its citizens.

Understanding that many Burmese people, perhaps the majority of people in Yangon, have little or no money left over after paying for the bare necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter, transportation) helps to explain the significance of a CD at the Dagon Center Star Mart: it is clearly a luxury item which can be purchased only by the economic elite. Indeed, the appearance of the customers that I have seen there during my visits supports this notion. Star Mart customers tend to be young adults, appearing to be under the age of thirty, and they are always dressed in the latest Western fashions. They are free to shop during business hours, suggesting that they are not obligated to hold regular jobs. It is impossible to tell by looking at them, but the conventional wisdom would suggest that these customers are the children of

¹⁰⁴ For example, staff at my guest house, which caters to foreigners, make between 24000 and 30 000 kyat/month, working twelve hours per day, six days per week. In the current economy, these are relatively desirable jobs.

¹⁰⁵ See A Pensioner 2007.

international (Chinese, Thai, Korean, Singaporean) business people or of Burmese military officials. They are the young people whose families' lifestyles permit them to shop for music at Star Mart.



Figure 5.2 Pirates selling musical recordings and films on the sidewalk outside Dagon Center

Is it therefore possible to argue that Burmese pop music is truly popular? The answer is yes, and the proof lays only steps away, just beyond the front entrance of Dagon Center. There, among the sidewalk vendors selling fresh food, sunglasses, locks and a thousand other, is a pair of men hawking pirated CDs, VCDs and DVDs. The discs are not encased in hard plastic, the way the legal ones are, but their paper covers feature vivid graphics, making it easy to see what is what. Here, customers can find virtually any of the *series* being sold inside at Star Mart – and pay far less for them.

The sellers are engaging in what is known as “piracy”: they are selling cheaply-duplicated recordings and pocketing the profits. It is a widespread phenomenon, as this junction exemplifies: on this one street corner alone, six different groups of pirates set up shop on a daily basis. And they do a brisk business. They

deliver to their customers all of the latest pop music recordings, often with cover art identical to the original releases. One veteran singer ruefully recounted to me the story of her most recent *series*, a Christmas disc released in December of 2007: It was delivered to retail stores at 9:00 am, and she celebrated the official release at that time (Y020508B). By 2:00 pm on the same day, a relative of hers found a pirated version for sale on the street. She points out that some *series* have been pirated even before they have been officially released, so it is clear that at least one industry insider, employed perhaps in a legitimate recording studio, is working with pirates.

BURMA'S MUSIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM – PETERSON'S PRODUCTION PERSPECTIVE

In the course of researching this project, I purchased pop music *series* at both the retail shop inside Dagon Center and at one of the ubiquitous stalls on the sidewalk outside. As a consumer, I participated in the system which is described in this dissertation as “the Burmese pop music industry.” The vendors – both the in the legal shop and the pirates on the street – are important components of the distribution arm of this system. The system includes many other people who play a number of different roles. I divide these people into four categories, according to the part they play in the system:

Creators of the music: Composers, arrangers, performers (i.e., singers and instrumentalists), recording and audio engineers

Controllers or gatekeepers who control which music reaches the consumers: Censors, hotel managers, and radio station management

Consumers of the music: Fans, that is, people who purchase recordings and concert tickets (fans include both citizens living inside and outside Burma, and foreign guests at Yangon tourist hotels)

Distributors of the music: Producers (i.e., people who fund recording projects), legitimate vendors in retail shops, pirates who sell illegal copies, impresarios, corporate sponsors, and market researchers

Elsewhere in this dissertation, I describe the work of creators of music (Chapters 1, 2 and 3) and controllers of music (Chapter 5). (The role of consumers is outside of the scope of this project). In this chapter, I will focus primarily on distributors of popular music in Burma.¹⁰⁶ I will first explain how distributors work to disseminate recordings, and describe how the system is in the midst of change. In addition, I will tentatively assert that further significant change is about to come. Finally, I will argue that the Burmese case challenges one of the central claims of scholars who have analyzed similar culture production systems in the West.

In this chapter, I am relying on a theoretical framework developed by sociologist Richard Peterson, who has spent his career developing ideas about how cultural products (books, films, paintings, musical recordings, and so on) come to be produced. Peterson is an influential scholar in organizational research. His ideas are also helpful for the ethnomusicologist, because he clearly elucidates the connections between music and its cultural context. For four decades, Peterson has been articulating what he calls the production-of-culture perspective (e.g. 1976:10). This perspective focuses on the systems, especially the organizations, which work to produce culture, and argues that cultural products take the shape that they do in part because of the nature of the system that produces them. Certain kinds of books are published, for example, because the particular nature of the book publishing industry facilitates their publication (Coser, Kadushin and Powell, 1982).

¹⁰⁶ Note that I do not include in this analysis people and products which are part of the alternate recording industry, that is, the growing industry which creates *series* ostensibly recorded by Christians for religious purposes, and distributed to church members. For more on this see Chapter 5.

Though it is helpful (and convenient) to privilege the ideas of the author in this process, the production perspective argues that the author's work is fundamentally shaped by the reality that her ideas must be presented in such a way that the existing industry will be willing to publish them. This perspective takes the focus off individual initiative and creativity, and places it squarely on the institutions and organizations that work together to make cultural products. As another prominent scholar in this discipline asserts, "It is impossible to understand the nature and role of recorded culture in contemporary society without examining the characteristics of the organizations in which it is produced and disseminated" (Crane 1992:4).

In his masterful review of the literature on the production perspective, Peterson presents a "six-facet model of production" (2004:313). The six facets are: industry structure, the market, organizational structure, technology, law and regulation and occupational careers. Changes in any of these six facets, even seemingly-mundane changes, lead to changes in the kinds of cultural products which are created by the system. And "a major change in one of the facets can start a cycle of destabilization and reorganization in the entire production nexus" (2004:318). In what follows, I examine each of these six facets of the distribution arm of the Burmese pop music industry. In particular, I point out that a major change in the available technology has provoked other changes that are already making themselves felt across the industry.

INDUSTRY STRUCTURE

One of the most immediately noticeable features of the Burmese popular music industry's distribution system is its lack of lack of formal institutions. This is, of course, a "lack" only from the perspective of the field of popular music studies, which has developed its models and theories based on Western norms (see Burnett 1996). In Burma, most pop musicians do not belong to bands, or at least, do not work exclusively with a stable group of colleagues. In addition, there is no Ticketmaster-

like entity; concert tickets are sold through beauty salons and upscale retail shops. Furthermore, in Burma, there is no such thing as a record label. The individuals (or very small groups of individuals) who create and produce albums have no long-term relationships with businesses that fund their work. Instead, these individuals, known as producers, raise private funds to cover the costs of making a series.

Producers pay composers for songs, musicians for performances, studio owners for duty (time spent recording music), and the City of Yangon for advertising space on billboards. These costs add up to anywhere from 150 lakhs (approximately \$12 000 USD) to 400 lakhs (\$30 000 USD) per album (Y020508B and Y122708B). Producers are also responsible to submit recordings to the PSB for censorship. In addition, producers liaise with music distribution companies, who send copies of the recordings to retail shops around the country. When I asked one of my interviewees (who works as an audio engineer and has produced three albums) what producers do, he smiled and said, “Everything!” – noting that sometimes producers who are musicians like himself also do the arrangement of the songs on the *series* (Y012908A).

There are three main distribution companies in Burma (Chokyithar, Manthiri and Yadana Myaing) and all of them are headquartered in downtown Yangon, on or near 36th Street. These three distribution companies are private entities whose owners are solely concerned with making a profit. Therefore, they ship their wares only to major population centers, where they can be sure that enough customers will purchase recordings to make the travel costs worthwhile (Y122708B). They hedge their bets when dealing with producers: If the distributor believes that a *series* will sell well, it will accept one master copy of the recording from the producer (and then arrange for copies to be made, packaged and shipped). However, if the company predicts that the disc will not sell many copies, then the producer must supply all of the for-sale copies to the distributor, and provide further funds if more copies need to be made. The

distribution companies also send representatives around to retail shops to collect profits generated by the sales of recordings. Finally, the distribution companies split these profits with producers.

Importantly, producers trust distribution companies (who trust retail shop owners) to calculate profits honestly and to pay the correct amount owed (Y122708B). These business deals do not operate according to written contracts. Rather, like other aspects of the Burmese pop music industry, the distribution arm seems to depend largely on personal relationships, friendships of long duration, which provide the basis for entering into an unwritten financial agreement. And although there are usually no formal agreements between industry members to work together for more than the duration of one recording project or concert, it is true that certain producers fund multiple albums made by the same musicians (e.g. Y122708B). In addition, well-established bands tend to appear in live shows with the same singers (Y012908A). For example, one band manager explained to me that when he organizes a live show for his band, he routinely asks five singers – individuals whose names he rattled off – to participate (Y123008B). He says that he always invites these particular singers because, first, the band has performed with them so many times before, and secondly, because the band likes to work with them. In addition, show organizers (or “contractors”) may focus on promoting the same few singers and bands (e.g. Y020808A). Composers often end up writing songs for a handful of singers and/or movie directors, and some musicians routinely record in only two or three studios.

So while the Burmese industry is marked by individual rather than institutional activity, the reality is that individuals know each other and, over many years, evolve working relationships that are as stable (or more stable) than those governed by legal

documents or formal business arrangements.¹⁰⁷ In fact, in Burma professional relationships tend to be like family relationships, where unwritten but extremely powerful expectations of loyalty govern behavior. My Burmese friends told me numerous stories about how these expectations come to bear on their working lives. Here I share two of those stories that pertain to the pop music industry: One man was working as a recording engineer in a studio in North Yangon while simultaneously building a performing career as a guitarist (Y121608A). Eventually he realized that his guitar playing was taking so much of his time that he needed to quit working for the studio. He asked the studio owner's permission to quit – it was inconceivable that he would simply write a resignation letter – but the owner refused. The guitarist had to find a replacement to work in the studio before he could honorably leave the job. So the guitarist recruited his younger brother. The brother had never previously worked in a studio, but because the business atmosphere in the studio, like in many Burmese businesses, was somewhat akin to that of a family, the new employee was welcomed: he was, in a sense, a relative.

In the second situation, a composer/singer began his recording career very young (Y122208A). A family friend funded his very first *series*, since he was unknown to professional producers. (And knowing people, or being known by them, is essential to getting anything done in Burma (Y011908A, Y020108A, Y122308A).) The album was a success and so the singer was able to attract a producer for his second *series*. However, before embarking on a new project with a new producer, the singer asked permission from the original friend. He shared that, nearly forty years later, he still visits this now-elderly friend regularly, to show his respect and gratitude.

¹⁰⁷ The personal nature of these relationships became very clear to me when, during the last week of my research, I attended the wedding of a musician who is quoted in this dissertation. At the wedding I encountered two other music industry members whom I had previously interviewed. Although there was no formal business relationship between the groom and these other two people, so far as I am aware, the friendship was strong enough to merit a wedding invitation and wedding gifts in return.

As these two stories illustrate, professional relationships in the Burmese music industry are sustained by personal relationships rather than by formalized agreements. This system is problematic (and a system of written contracts would no doubt be problematic in other ways, if Burmese musicians chose to adopt it.) But the “honor system” has worked well enough until now that they are loath to see it change.

For example, the industry does not pay royalties to composers and performers. Rather, these musicians receive a flat fee for their services (usually the equivalent of a few hundred US dollars) from the *series* producer at the time they either compose the song or record the *series*. I asked a number of full-time professionals if they recognized the word “royalties” and almost none of them did. The one exception was a man who has been active as a singer since the early 1980s (Y010409A). He recalled that in 1996 a large group of professional musicians met together to discuss the possibility of establishing a system of royalties. After the idea was explained, the group took a vote. The storyteller rather bitterly named off the five people (including himself) who voted for the idea. Since the large majority was not interested – either not understanding the concept, or preferring a bird in the hand to two in the bush – the proposal died. This singer was the only person I met who remembered any such proposal. Indeed, most of the others (who are younger) had only the vaguest notion that pop musicians are paid differently in Western countries, and that these payments have historically been the source of their wealth (e.g. Y123008A). When I asked one young woman about payment methods, she seemed a little surprised: Of course she always gets paid once, up front, for her work, she said. “It’s the rule of Burma” (Y012908B).

MARKET

As I discovered during my shopping trips to Dagon Center (and other places where commercial music recordings are sold), the market for popular music in Burma

prioritizes group albums. Group albums are so dominant now that they constitute the majority of the recordings made by famous singers. Indeed, when I interviewed some of the most famous singers in the country, they each said that while they knew how many solo albums they had made (usually a handful), they had lost count of the dozens of group albums in which they had participated (e.g. Y122607A, Y010108A, Y010109A). The fact that their musical culture takes this form can be traced back to a marketing decision. In early 2001, Pee Paw (the impresario we met in Chapter 1) was working as the manager of one of Burma's best-known rock stars, Zaw Win Htut. Pee Paw decided to promote him by presenting him in concert with a band and some guest singers (Y020808A). This was a strategic choice: Pee Paw was determined to turn a profit, and figured that the way to do so would be to sell "a package" rather than an artist. He believed that if a potential ticket buyer was not interested in hearing Zaw Win Htut, but did want to hear one of the other singers on the program, the buyer would be likely to buy the package – and thus the manager could maximize ticket sales. Pee Paw's prediction came true; he sold many tickets for his show and established the idea of group performance (many singers with one band). The show was the first live show of the new millennium and the first large public concert in many years. It marked the beginning of a new era in Burmese pop music history, one in which the format of that first show predominates.

Of course, a few shows do feature only one singer (e.g. Y122208A) and most of the successful singers do record a few solo albums. However, there is a general consensus among musicians that since the year 2000 it is getting harder and harder to sell solo albums, and that fewer of these are being produced because they often do not "paut" (or burst, meaning, to succeed commercially) (e.g. Y012908A, Y010608A). Instrumentalists pride themselves on being able to "play all the styles", that is, to be able to accompany any singer singing a song in virtually any popular style – and of

course they need to be able to do this in an industry where most recordings feature a variety of singers and styles (Y020508B). But I propose that this situation may change, and that if it does, it will likely be due to marketing practices.

Until very recently, market research was unknown in Burma. The Myanmar Marketing Research and Development Company (MMRDS), which began operations in 1997 and is headquartered in Yangon, now has eight branch offices around the country. MMRDS provides social, consumer and business market research to paying customers who want to strategize about selling their products.¹⁰⁸ Its founder, Peter Thein, says that he got into business in Burma by publishing Yangon's very first City Directory (or Yellow Pages). He and his employees now address questions such as the incidence (among Burmese people) of owning home appliances, watching television and listening to the radio. During their years of operation the company has interviewed more than 200 000 Burmese households on these and other topics. Thein began collecting information on musical preferences not for a customer, but because he hoped to establish a Billboard-type chart which would document the popularity of Burmese pop singers, songs and *series*. Although this project did not come to fruition due to lack of financing, Thein discovered that he could sell this information to Yangon City FM, as well as to a spate of entertainment-oriented magazines and journals, all of which began publishing during the past decade. As of 2008, two data collectors from MMRDS visit 65 retail stores around Yangon, with pen and paper in hand, every week. They ask the store managers how many copies of each album currently in stock were sold during the past week. This data is entered into a computer and tallied, and then used to identify the best-selling *series* in Burma.

This data, while undoubtedly reasonably accurate, is beset with limitations. For example, MMRDS employees do not have a particularly consistent way of

¹⁰⁸ See the MMRDS website at: <http://www.mmrdrs.com/Default.aspx>

knowing when new albums are released. They rely on seeing new advertisements on billboards around Yangon and on the recollections of store managers (Y020408A). In other words, the big three music distribution companies do not communicate directly with MMRDS – nor do they post new release information on the internet – and so market researchers have to back track to find it. In addition, most retail shops do not have computerized cash registers. Vendors use a calculator (if needed) to figure out the price and then announce it verbally to the customer, only rarely handwriting a receipt. Store managers rely on their memories and (possibly) written sales orders to establish how many copies of a given *series* were on the shelf at the beginning of a week, subsequently subtracting the number remaining to find the difference. Again, this system is roughly accurate, but not perfectly so: discs can easily be misplaced on the shelves and then miscounted.

Most importantly, MMRDS' data is selective (as is data collected by any market research firm). MMRDS workers survey more than five dozen shops weekly – but there are 284 retail stores that sell music recordings in Yangon alone, not to mention the hundreds (possibly thousands) of shops in other cities (Y020108A). Claims about sales numbers based on MMRDS research must be evaluated in the light of these limitations. And conclusions about which music is the “most popular” in Burma must be understood to be provisional.

However, Burmese media outlets which purchase the MMRDS data do not treat it in this way. Yangon City FM, for example, instituted the first-ever national music awards beginning in 2002. At its annual awards banquet, the radio station hands out prizes for the Best-Selling Album of the Year (Male), Best-Selling Album of the Year (Female), Best-Selling Group Album, Most-Requested Singer of the Year, and a number of similar prizes (Y020108A). The station consciously awards prizes on the basis of objective data (like sales numbers) rather than for subjective criteria such

as Best Album or Best Singer.¹⁰⁹ And the prizes go to the usual suspects, the most famous artists who are widely-believed to have the highest sales numbers.

During the two years that I spent researching this dissertation, the prizes were given to some of my interviewees, singers who command the highest performance fees in the Burmese industry (approximately \$1500 USD for one live show) and whose faces appear on billboards around the city. Were it possible to document every sale of every disc in Burma, we would likely discover that the prizes were in fact given to the best-selling artists of the year. But given the widespread sales by pirates (more on this below), and the fact that the market research on which the conclusions are based is rather limited, it is impossible to claim that Yangon City FM is accurately identifying the best-selling singers and albums.

Yangon City FM does make this claim, though, and publicizes it widely by televising the awards banquet on national television. For the past few years, recordings of the television broadcast have also been sold, and tabloid-style reporting about the banquet is common, so that a message (in January 2009) like “R Zani is the best-selling male singer in the country” is widely inculcated. Giving this kind of prestigious recognition to R Zani virtually guarantees that he will become more famous and that potential consumers will become more interested in buying his albums. This claim, then, can have a tangible effect on sales. It can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The net result could be that already-successful artists become even more financially successful as a result of marketing practices. At the same time,

¹⁰⁹ I assume that prizes are awarded this way in part because the management of the station wants to avoid the appearance of bias and corruption. Burma’s annual prizes for movies (The Academy Awards) are given to the Best Director, Best Sound Editing and so on. The judges are widely believed to be either accepting bribes or working at the behest of the junta, since the prizes frequently go to movies that the majority of the Burmese public does not like. One of my Burmese friends sarcastically calls these prizes “The Government Awards.” Another of my friends, who told me that he was asked to serve as a judge for the movie awards, admitted that he had not seen any of the movies on which he was supposed to render judgment (Y012908A).

the sales numbers of new artists with poorly-advertised albums, who may be very popular with customers outside of Yangon, can be undercounted or even overlooked.

There is no way of knowing if MMRDS' market research is actually having an impact on or even distorting the consumption of Burmese pop music. But one well-informed insider, at least, is sure this is the case. He says that he is convinced that "the *mono* market is much bigger than *stereo* music" and that "many people" buy these recordings (Y012908A). He has no way of confirming this, though. And distribution companies, those who decide in advance whether a *series* will be popular or not and provide copies to the public accordingly, have no way of confirming this either. They do know, thanks to MMRDS, that popular (*stereo*) music is the "best-selling" music in the country and that they can rely on selling this music to make a profit. They are therefore less likely to distribute *mono* recordings – so *mono* music is less likely to reach the general public, and may therefore decline in popularity. If my interlocutor above is correct, then this trend has already begun. I visited the retail store operated by Manthiri Music Distributors in early 2009 and perused their inventory. Although they do sell *mono* music and some other, more marginal, *tain-yin-tha* recordings (such as recordings of traditional Mon music, for example), the reality is that the large majority of their wares are pop music *series* (solo and group albums).

Yangon City FM, and a new, similarly-conceived radio station called Mandalay FM Radio, also use MMRDS' marketing research to make programming decisions. Programmers and advisors (who often work as on-air personalities) are now creating shows like the weekly "Yangon Top 20" (the best-selling Yangon-produced albums) (Y020408A) and "Star On Line" (during which listeners can call to speak to a "star" singer) (Y020108A). Every week announcers on Yangon City FM announce the title of the best-selling VCD on the market. Insiders at both of these

stations say their goal is to entertain the public by providing programming which is appreciated by the public (Y122208A and Y020108A). The advisors see themselves as responding to the audience by playing recordings that the audience has already indicated that it likes - as documented by MMRDS.

However, we must acknowledge that these radio stations are also influencing their listeners by presenting to them singers who are “stars” and albums which are “popular.” By playing these recordings, the radio stations help to promote them, and thereby likely help to increase their sales. Again, by prioritizing the “best-sellers” the stations leave less air time for new artists and innovative projects, thereby effectually depressing their sales potential. The stations contribute to a sales spiral in which the rich get richer (or, the popular albums become even more popular) and the less well-established, poorly-funded projects have less chance to become popular.

In addition, the two pop music radio stations are developing niche shows (for example, an hour of hip-hop music, or an hour of *mono* music, etc.) (Y122208A). Again, the goal here is to serve a broad swathe of the listening public by targeting a variety of tastes. However, what may happen is that innovative music which crosses stylistic boundaries will be played less often on air, since it cannot be categorized as belonging to one style or another. Take for example the *Land of Love* album described in Chapter 2. The composer and producer of this album has worked for his entire career in the pop music industry. With this new album, he is attempting to establish a new genre, which he calls “New Age Myanmar.” The music on the album is unlikely to be programmed on a pop music-focused show, but then again, it does not neatly fit into any of the other categories used by radio stations either (such as “oldies,” “traditional” and so on). If it does not receive extensive radio airplay, the album will not make it into the “Yangon Top 20” and the producer, who funded the recording

privately, will not earn a profit which could be used to finance a second album in the new genre.

The marketing of Burmese popular music may be directly impacting its consumption – and therefore, transforming the nature of the music itself, since producers are unlikely to fund “unpopular” projects that may not turn a profit. This is conjecture at this point, but history teaches that it is a strong possibility: a similar phenomenon has been documented in the United States (Anand and Peterson 2000).

I am arguing here that just two radio stations (Yangon City FM and Mandalay FM) play an enormous role in the Burmese pop music industry. They are both semi-independent stations that are dedicated to entertaining the public (rather than to indoctrinating them, as one could argue is the case at the state-run radio stations. Indeed, the four people I was able to interview who are involved with these stations make this argument rather strongly (Y020108A, Y020708A, Y122208A and Y122408A). They point out that the new radio stations play music and traffic warnings and public health messages, but not news and commentary from the SPDC perspective. Yangon City FM is the first radio station in Burmese history to permit listeners to call in and express their preferences on air). It is impossible to know how widely-appreciated they both are, but I can say that I heard Yangon City FM frequently in public spaces when I lived in Yangon, and friends told me that the station was the “only one” to which Yangonites now listen.

In addition, musicians say that their earning potential decreased after the advent of pop radio, because listeners could hear their music for free on air and therefore stopped buying *series* in stores (Y123108A). One organization, the Myanmar Musicians Association, successfully advocated for musicians’ interests by negotiating an agreement with the government vis-à-vis the radio stations. I turn now to this organization and its importance in the production of Burmese pop music culture.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Myanmar Musicians Association (or Gita Aseeayon, hereinafter the MMA) is the only formal organization which exists to protect and promote the interests of musicians in Burma. It is an umbrella group which aims to represent not only pop musicians, but also studio owners, recording engineers, music producers and composers. It was originally created in 1991 by the then-new SPCD regime (Kyaw 2005). As such, it was widely viewed as front for government interests and was not trusted by musicians. However, in 2005, the MMA was re-constituted. It now has twenty-five board members, fourteen of whom are elected by the membership at large, and the balance of whom are appointed to their positions by government ministers. None of the board members receive any pay for their work. In the course of my research, I interviewed three elected board members and two appointed members of the MMA board. All of them said – and their actions indicated – that they wanted to “help musicians” and therefore were glad to serve, whether they had come to their positions voluntarily or not (Y020508A, Y020508B, Y020508C, Y123108A and Y010909A). And, as insiders, they asserted that this new, more democratic version of the MMA can and does help musicians.

Unfortunately, this viewpoint does not seem to be widespread among musicians themselves. One composer was flatly contemptuous (“I will never join”) when I asked him about belonging to the MMA, and another told me that he had been “forced” by a highly-placed government official to join only one month earlier (Y020708B and Y122208A). Many other musicians said that they do belong to the MMA, but that their membership means almost nothing to them, because they do not believe that the group is truly helpful. In the eyes of these men and women, the MMA is still an empty symbol, a government-organized group which does nothing but provide political cover for the government. A few others cautiously said that the

MMA can support, or should support, musicians, and that the new MMA may be providing some limited advantages to their community (e.g. Y010409A and Y123008B).

MMA insiders point to a number of tangible benefits that the group provides. First, it helps producers to prepare their submissions to the PSB, essentially providing a pre-check for spelling errors or offensive language, thereby helping the producer to avoid being fined by the censors (Y020508C). Second, the MMA organizes a dispute-resolution committee which meets weekly. The committee, which functions like a kind of court, renders judgment on disagreements between members (Y020508B). For example, if a movie director uses a recording for a soundtrack, and the composer or performer of the song alleges that the director did not pay for the song, the MMA committee will arbitrate the dispute. One member of this committee says that she has seen substantive progress made on behalf of musicians because of the work of this committee: prior to its formation, she says, musicians had to approach movie directors individually, and (lesser-known musicians especially) were frequently ignored or victimized (Y020508B).

Another member of the committee says while the committee is making a good-faith attempt to render justice, they have not yet developed a “mature” system for dealing with conflicts (Y010909A). Decisions are not made based on precedents or informed study of the situation, he claims. The difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that the industry does not use written contracts to document financial agreements, so it is hard for the committee to regulate problems when the evidence consists of competing verbal accounts. The MMA has not been working in this way for very long, and so it is certain that their dispute resolution committee functions rather imperfectly. However, this is the one aspect of their mission that musicians – even

those who have nothing good to say about the organization – seem to know about and grudgingly appreciate.

Third, MMA board members claim that their organization helps defend musicians' rights when they are encroached upon by the ever-present government. One board member even describes the group as "an NGO," emphasizing that the MMA is not a branch of the SPDC apparatus (Y020508A). In Chapter 5 I tell the story of how the MMA refused a direct request for public support from the government. But here I offer another story as an example, one I heard during an interview with an elected member of the MMA (Y123108A). In 2001, when Yangon City FM began broadcasting, station employees went directly to the three big music distribution companies and asked them for complimentary copies of their latest releases. They then played these recordings on the air. The composers, performers and producers of the albums did not receive any compensation from the radio station, despite the fact that the station was earning good profits by selling advertising time on shows that featured their music. After a couple of years, musicians began expressing their discontent with this situation in interviews and op-ed articles. At that point, the general manager of the Yangon City Development Committee (which owns and operates Yangon City FM) stated publicly that the station only played the recordings of artists who had previously agreed to allow them to be played for free. At this point, a group of about twenty of Burma's most popular musicians jointly sent a letter to City FM saying, "Why are you playing our music on air? We never consented to this!" The YCDC retaliated against these musicians (including Lay Phyu, one of the signatories to the letter) by banning them from appearing on city billboards, which the YCDC controls. This was a major blow to the musicians because, as we have seen, billboards are important way for them to advertise their new *series*.

After the international media began asking questions about the situation, the government minister responsible for media agreed that Yangon City FM would in future play only the recordings of musicians who had explicitly consented to this by signing an agreement (Y020108A). More importantly, the government delayed the planned opening of Mandalay FM (which began operating in 2008) in order to negotiate the issue with MMA board members. Ultimately, the government agreed that, for each time a song is played on Mandalay FM, the station will pay 1000 kyat (a little less than one USD) to the MMA. The MMA is then tasked with distributing the money to the musicians who participated in that song. As of early 2009, Mandalay FM had paid for three months worth of broadcasting fees (about 4500 lakhs, or \$450 000 USD), but the MMA had yet to disperse the money. No doubt the organization will have some difficulty determining who (composer? performer? recording engineer? studio owner? producer?) should get the money, and what proportion of the 1000 kyat that s/he will receive. And it is yet to be seen how accurate the station's record-keeping will be.

Nevertheless, the beginning of a royalties system is now in place. The financial benefits will redound to musicians, and the MMA can take credit for helping musicians in the face of government pressure. The composer who told me this story signed the original protest letter and subsequently worked to negotiate the payment system. He asserts that he is respected by the rank and file MMA members who elected him for precisely this reason: "I fight for ordinary musicians, so the government doesn't like me much" he says calmly (Y123108A).

The change in the organizational structure of the MMA may very well contribute to a significant change in the larger Burmese music industry. Now that a significant proportion of the board is elected by musicians, the board undoubtedly believes – as it should – that it has an increased mandate to represent musicians'

interests. In pursuing this mandate, MMA board members have already won a significant victory for musicians whose music is played on Mandalay FM. Once the radio royalties begin to filter down to musicians, these musicians will have money at their disposal to pursue their own interests (for example, to self-produce new *series*). If the MMA can convince a critical mass of its membership to actively support the organization, Burmese musicians may be empowered as never before to pursue their own agendas.

MMA board members do often talk about “helping” and “supporting” musicians. However, the issue that they say that they are primarily concerned with is the problem of piracy. This problem, as I explain below, exploded in Burma because of a technological change.

TECHNOLOGY

Arguably the most significant recent change in the Burmese pop industry was provoked by the advent of new technology. After the turn of the millennium, personal computers and CD burners became available in Burma. As many of my informants pointed out, this single addition to their market sparked a revolution in the distribution side of the industry, and may ultimately lead to its destruction. This technology allows small groups of people to copy thousands of CDs very quickly. Thus it is directly responsible for the explosion in piracy that marks the contemporary scene.

Of course, piracy was always a problem in Burma, as it is in many other countries. As one of my interlocutors said, when we discussed the issue of piracy and copyrights: “Many people here use the copy and they neglect the right” (Y020708A). However, in previous decades would-be pirates were obligated to create copies of recordings using tape cassette machines. Recording a copy of a tape took as long as playing the tape itself – usually approximately one hour. One machine could therefore only create a dozen or so copies of a tape in one working day. CD burners, on the

other hand, create durable and accurate copies of CD recordings in a matter of minutes. Enterprising people who invest in multiple CD burners (which are now standard equipment on most personal computers) can produce thousands of copied recordings in a day.

One man who, like so many others in the Burmese pop music industry, has spent his career filling a number of different roles, told me about his experience working as a supplier for one of Burma's best-known "music production companies" (as duplicating businesses are called). From 2002 to 2005, this man traveled monthly to Bangkok, where he purchased original recordings, thermal printers (to print CD covers) and burner machines "of the highest quality" (Y122908A). The company owners, he said, were teenagers when they got started, and they lost money during their first two years of operation. Eventually, as they matured and learned how to track their own sales, they became financially viable and ultimately very successful. However, by 2005, another technological advance - high-speed internet access - made the role of supplier obsolete. At that point, the company owners found that they could download entire albums from internet sites like itunes, and could sell them to well-heeled Burmese customers who are increasingly buying ipods and mp3 players.¹¹⁰

Music production companies, like the one discussed above, are distinguished in the minds of Burmese people from pirate companies. I will discuss this distinction in greater detail below, but suffice it to say that a "music production company" duplicates and sells recordings (usually English-language recordings) made in the West, whereas "pirates" duplicate locally-made Burmese-language recordings. Both of these kinds of enterprises use the same technology, however, to create their

¹¹⁰ My informant's insider perspective on music production companies allows him to see a side of the industry many others, including most Burmese music professionals, are not aware of: these companies, by and large, operate on shoe-string budgets and do not turn large profits. He says that the money made by analogous Burmese companies pales in comparison to that earned by the big Thai recording duplication companies (Y122908A).

duplicate copies. And both of them became much more successful after the turn of the millennium because they acquired high-end, imported CD burners. However, professional creators of music in Yangon reserve all their anger for pirates, and say that piracy is a “huge problem”, if not the biggest problem, that they face (e.g. Y012908A, Y020108A, Y020408A).

One singer memorably described pirates as “parasites...because they prey on others to survive” (Y020508B). One community elder, a man who has written articles and spoken on government TV about the piracy problem, says that for every legal copy (of a local artist’s *series*) that is sold in legitimate shops, pirates now sell approximately one hundred copies (Y020708A). I quoted this ratio to a number of this man’s colleagues in subsequent interviews, and most of them agreed that the proportion sounded accurate. (Two interviewees gave similarly-high estimates of one legal copy for 30 pirated copies (Y121908A) and one legal for fifty pirated (Y122208A) respectively.) In fact, a number of them said that, because of piracy, the very future of their industry is in serious danger.

Burmese musicians explain that piracy endangers their livelihoods because it discourages potential producers from investing in the production of new *series*. And this is a serious problem because, for most of four decades during which a veritable pop music industry has existed in Burma, the system has been structured around producers. Producers are business people (almost always men) who provide the funds to pay for the creation of a new *series*, and then reap the profits when the *series* is sold. In legal shops in Yangon, a series usually sells for between 1200 and 2000 kyat (most often for 1600 kyat). Until recently, a successful *series* (one that “*paut-teh*” or that “bursts”) would sell approximately 50 000 copies (Y020508). A producer who backed a top-selling *series* could count on a significant profit, since the cost of producing a *series* is usually around 200 lakhs, or 20 million kyat. Indeed, producers did succeed

financially, and some numbers of them, until quite recently, devoted their entire business lives to producing pop music. Producers apparently represented the entire ethnic spectrum in Yangon, with musicians recalling producers of Burman, Indian and *tain-yin-tha* descent. At no time did foreign nationals ever constitute a significant percentage of producers; music producing has always been a locally-controlled phenomenon (Y122708B). However, producers are hard to find these days – as I discovered when I attempted interview a producer for this dissertation. Most of them have ceased working as music producers because it has become a money-losing proposition.

Pirates, that is, networks of men who sell duplicated copies of recordings on the streets and along the highways and byways of the country, sell one *series* for 400 kyat. Most often, they sell three *series* for 1000 kyat, lowering the price per copy even further. Burmese people of all economic classes value a bargain, and are happy to buy the latest *series* from their favorite singer for one quarter of the retail cost. The pirates' networks are now large enough that they employ traveling salesmen who journey to rural areas, where per capita income is even lower than in Yangon, to sell recordings on credit. They allow poor customers to make monthly payments of amounts as small as 100 kyat (Y012908A). They are well-organized, as the singer I quoted in the introduction to this chapter explained: they are able to offer cheap, pirated versions of new *series* on the very same day that those *series* are released, and even sometimes before they are released. And they even create new products, of a sort: pirates sometimes compile popular tracks from a variety of *series* to create a *Best of...* recording (Y020508B).

By undercutting the legitimate market, pirates have effectively monopolized the business. They sell the large majority of the copies that are sold, leaving producers to shoulder the recording costs without being able to earn much, or any, profit.

Producers, therefore, have turned away from the music industry, leaving musicians struggling to find financial support for their new recordings. This is deeply troubling to musicians, most of whom have matured in their careers knowing only the system as it functioned in the 1980s and 1990s, and who find it hard to imagine other possibilities. One very experienced guitarist, when decrying the growth of piracy and the increasing rarity of producers, said that this is “not natural” (Y121608A). To him, as to many of his colleagues, the idea that musicians should be able to rely on individual producers to fund their work is simply the way of things, and to defy this system is to tamper with the natural and inevitable social order.

After repeated queries, I did manage to locate and interview a producer in Yangon in 2008. By all accounts, this man is one of only a handful now working full-time as a music producer. He was introduced to me by a composer, who called the producer “a hero,” in reference to the fact that he is continuing to fund new *series* in the face of widespread piracy (Y122408A). The producer himself pointed immediately to the fact that his family owns a very successful construction business, and it is this financial cushion that has allowed him to pursue his work as a producer (Y122708B). He has produced eight *series* to date, including some of the best-known recent *series*. He says that as late as 2003, he and his colleagues were able to earn anywhere between five times to fifteen times the amount of money they invested in a *series*. He recalls that, at that time, *series* featuring the most popular singers in the country could sell as many as 150 000 legal copies. However, now the norm is roughly 10 000 legal copies – too few to create a profit for the investing producer. He himself, he says, is currently losing a little money on his musical projects, and anticipates losing more in future. But he is hanging on, hoping that he can maintain a viable business long enough to pass it on to his children when they come of age. He places his hope in the government’s anti-piracy campaign.

This campaign has been featured in the state-run media on a number of occasions during the past two years. For example, the *New Light of Myanmar* periodically runs stories about how police have arrested pirates for selling copied *series* on the streets (Y020708A). Quite a few musicians said, when I asked them about how this problem might be solved, that only the government can stamp out piracy – the problem is too big and too persistent for anything other than a national entity to deal with it (e.g. Y122708A and B). However, none of them seem to be holding their breath. The government of Burma is, as all Burmese people know very well, fundamentally inept and corrupt. It devotes very little of the national budget to services which aid the general population and, as a result, fails to help its people on many fronts.¹¹¹ Music industry insiders have no more reason than any of their fellow citizens to trust that the government will help them with their greatest need. Indeed, they have good reason to believe precisely the opposite, that the government is aiding and abetting pirates because members of the government are in fact profiting from piracy.

This is a logical deduction even if one does not have insider information about the situation. Pirates sell their wares on the busiest corners of the biggest city in the country, in broad daylight, on a daily basis. It would be a simple matter to arrest them red-handed, if police officers were empowered to do so. (For example, the six pirate stalls at the Myaynigone junction, described above, are located only one block from a continually-manned police post. Needless to say, the police officers at that post never ventured outside their small shelter for any reason except to direct traffic during rush hour). There are laws on the books protecting intellectual property, but they are not

¹¹¹ To cite just one statistic: According to the World Health Organization, in 2003 the government of Burma devoted only \$10 (international dollar rate) per capita to health expenditures (see the WHO 2006 report archived at: http://www.who.int/whr/2006/annex/06_annex3_en.pdf) By contrast, the SPDC is estimated to spend approximately 40% of the annual budget on maintaining the military.

enforced, with the result that many Burmese people are not even aware that such laws exist (Y020508B).¹¹²

The fact that the police hardly ever take action against a crime that is being committed constantly, in public, indicates that they are willfully ignoring it – and that, of course, indicates that they have been ordered to do so, as the totalitarian rulers of the state do not encourage individual initiative in their employees. However, some of the people interviewed for this project went farther than this, asserting that they “know” that the government has a vested interest in sustaining piracy. For example, one singer relayed the story of another singer, who, along with her producer, created a *series* that was supposed to be tamper-proof (Y010409A). The producer arranged to have a virus installed on the recording, so that if someone attempted to copy the disc, his or her computer would be infected with the virus. Days after the release of the series, the IT specialist who had created the virus got a telephone call from a government official, warning him never to do such a thing again.

Burmese musicians do not hold a uniformly pessimistic view of the piracy problem. I was surprised at how many of them expressed nuanced and even sympathetic opinions about pirates and piracy. For example, the owner of a legal shop said that pirates are doing Burmese pop stars a favor, since they help to spread their recordings around the country and contribute to their popularity (Y122008A). One singer said that, although it would be best if piracy did not exist, he understands that those who sell pirated *series* on the streets do it in order to survive (Y010109A). Another said that piracy is, at its heart, a problem of poverty: many music fans in

¹¹² And I have every sympathy with their confusion. Despite asking many people for information about these laws, I am still uncertain that I understand what Burmese law says, because I heard so many different answers from so many people who claimed to know. Here is one example: The *Myanmar Times* reports that the country became a member of World Intellectual Property Organization in 2001 (see Phyu 2005). However, the country is not listed as one of WIPO’s member states on the WIPO website (see <http://www.wipo.int/members/en/>)

Burma are simply too poor to pay for legal copies (Y010409A). Still others said music consumers in rural Burma have no option but to buy pirated copies, because the legal distribution companies do not stock the shops in small towns and villages across the country.

In this sense, pirates are filling a gap in the market, bringing products to customers who cannot access legal copies, either because they are too highly-priced or sold only in distant locations. Indeed, some musicians who have traveled around the country to perform claim that many rural Burmese folk do not understand the difference between original and pirated recordings, since they have never seen a legal *series* and therefore cannot make the comparison (Y122708B). One singer grimly recounted the story of how, when he was on tour in Northern Burma, he was approached by a fan who presented a pirated copy of his series and asked him to autograph it (Y122908A). “I won’t sign that shit,” the singer told the fan, who was

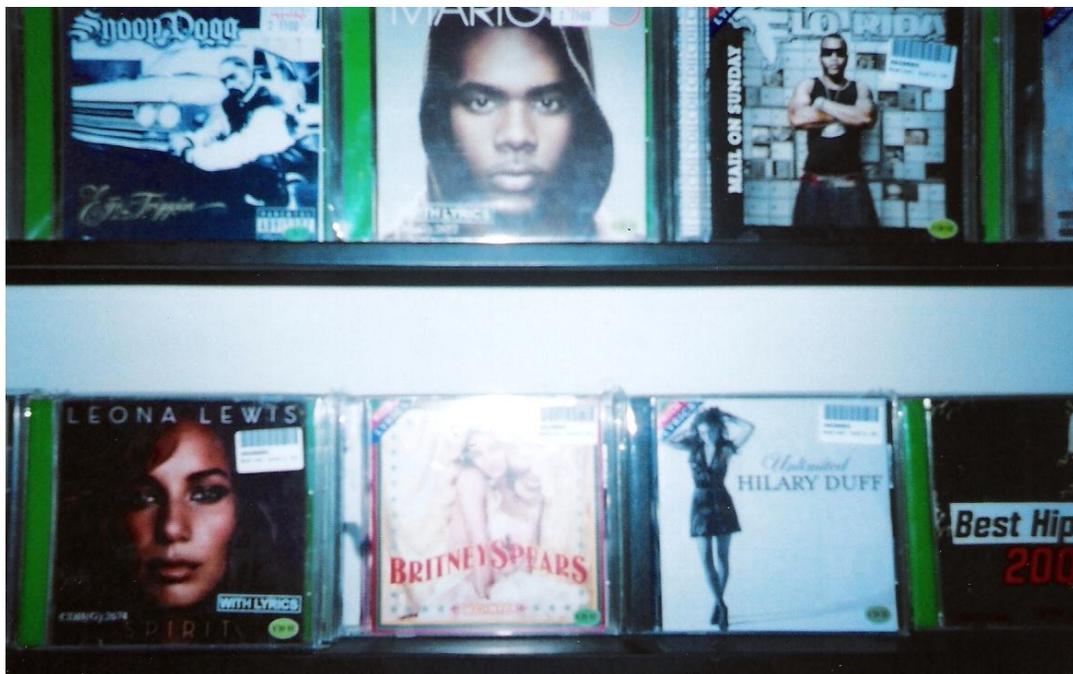


Figure 5.3 Duplicated copies of American recordings (including Snoop Dog, Leona Lewis, Britney Spears and Hilary Duff albums) for sale in a legal retail shop in Yangon

shocked by his refusal, since he did not understand how his request could possibly be offensive. This singer, along with a few of his colleagues, said that the ultimate solution to piracy will be a public education campaign. Currently, the average Burmese person simply does not perceive the copying of recordings to be a moral issue.¹¹³

Here we must acknowledge that the notion of intellectual property (admittedly a modern construct) is almost unknown in Burma – and that it has been undermined by pop musicians themselves. Taking the long view, the music community in Yangon has been its own worst enemy. Composers and performers have, for decades, presented *copy thachin* to the public, thereby valorizing the idea that a legitimate artist can take an entire tune from another artist, write new lyrics, and then proclaim it a new song – without ever offering payment to the original creator of that tune. In addition, they have, like millions of customers over the years, purchased duplicated copies of original Western recordings for pleasure or for learning. These duplicated copies are, as we have seen, sold in legal shops for fair prices (or at least, for the same price as a Burmese-made recording, about one-tenth of the price in the United States).

When I spoke with one man about this – the touring singer who was so offended by the autograph request – he acknowledged that, from a Western outsider’s perspective, it does seem hypocritical for local stars to insist that their own recordings not be pirated while they simultaneously purchase duplicated American recordings in order to create *copy thachin* (Y122908A). But, he says, “in Myanmar and in other Asian countries” duplication is not considered to be theft. It is not illegal; it is not even questionable behavior. “It’s like they [the music production companies] are

¹¹³ Although there is some indication that some middle-class and high-income people are starting to view copied recordings as somehow inferior to originals: One industry insider shared with me that “a few people” are ashamed of owning pirated CDs and never give them as presents, especially to family and friends living abroad (Y122708B).

doing the public a favor,” he claims, since the average Burmese person could never access original copies of Western albums, and if they could, could not afford to pay for them.¹¹⁴ He says that he himself took a long time to adjust to the idea that buying duplicate recordings is tantamount to stealing from the original artist. Since 2000, he has made it a practice to buy only original recordings, which he obtains when he travels to Japan or Thailand – but he knows that he is rare, even among his worldly-wise peers in the Burmese pop music industry.

One amusing incident from my research illuminates this way of thinking: I was spending the day in a recording studio. During a conversation with the audio engineer, a well-educated man of high moral principle, he articulated a strong complaint about piracy and government inaction. At the very same time, he was making duplicate copies of the movie *Rambo IV*.¹¹⁵ He gave these copies to a line of grateful customers who dropped by his recording studio that day. He embodied the simultaneous concern about local theft and disregard for, or ignorance of, foreign laws that I encountered a number of times among Yangon musicians.

It is clear that piracy will be a difficult problem to solve in Burma. For all kinds of reasons – financial, systemic, and cultural – this will be a hard row to hoe. However, the SPDC claims that it is going to solve the problem, and rather quickly, by

¹¹⁴ Smuggling goods into and out of Burma is such a big business now that international sanctions against the country have hardly any noticeable effect, at least on the availability of recorded music. Foreign recordings come into the country in the luggage of citizens who travel abroad to acquire them. This has apparently been true since at least the 1970s, according to my interviewees. Recently, though, smuggling has become a desirable profession. One friend shared with me the story of two acquaintances, a married couple who are both medical doctors (Y122308A). They have given up their medical careers to work full-time as porters. They charge fees to Burmese folks who want to send local goods (often food and medicines) to relatives living in the diaspora, and to those same relatives who send Western-made goods and currency back home. They fly in and out of the country, toting their bulging suitcases, twice a month. This couple, and people like them, effectively make a mockery of sanctions. Porters can and do bring the best-selling albums from the West into Burma shortly after their official release in Australia or Japan (of course, they need to bring only one copy of each album, since the duplicates can quickly be made in Yangon).

¹¹⁵ This movie features Rambo fighting on the Thai-Burma border against SPDC soldiers. Rambo is victorious, of course, and so the movie is banned in Burma.

changing the regulations that control duplication of intellectual property. In the next section, I describe this proposed change and predict how it may affect the production of Burmese pop music.

LAW AND REGULATION

The government of Burma has given the MMA a mandate to join the World Intellectual Property Organization by 2014. WIPO is a United Nations agency that is “dedicated to developing a balanced and accessible international intellectual property (IP) system.” (<http://www.wipo.int/about-wipo/en/what/>) The organization has a mandate from its member states “to promote the protection of IP throughout the world.” To do so, WIPO administrates twenty-four treaties which govern the use of intellectual property, including those which specifically outline the issues of copyright and payment of royalties.

The history and work of WIPO are too detailed to explain here, but suffice it to say that WIPO membership should signify that a member state is serious about developing legislation to protect the owners of intellectual property, and then enforcing that legislation. In addition, member states co-operate with each other to protect the use of intellectual property across national boundaries. In many countries, collective management organizations (CMOs), operating under the auspices of WIPO, administrate the use of musical works and co-ordinate payment to the owners of those works (Wallis and Malm 1984:164). Generally, CMOs communicate on an organization-to-organization basis. For example, the CMO representing a purchaser in the United States will pay the CMO representing a rights-holder in Brazil, and the Brazilian CMO is responsible to funnel that payment to the rights-holder. In Burma, the MMA is specifically tasked with forming a CMO (Y020508B). Once a CMO is in place, the country can join WIPO and begin participating in the international system of exchange that governs payment for intellectual property. It is a huge task, to be sure:

the CMO must represent all creators of intellectual property, not just musicians but also authors, movie-makers and so on.

If the MMA is able to form a CMO, and if the government takes seriously the responsibility of enforcing WIPO rules (and these are both debatable prospects) then the Burmese music industry will see two immediate effects: First, it will most likely produce many fewer *copy thachin*. *Copy thachin* has historically been and continues to be an important part of the Burmese pop music repertoire. If Burma were to become a compliant member of WIPO, *copy thachin* composers would have to obtain permission to write their *copy thachin* from the person holding the rights to the original tune. According to WIPO:

The **original creators** of works protected by copyright, and their heirs, have certain basic rights. They hold the **exclusive right** to use or authorize others to use the work on agreed terms. The creator of a work can prohibit or authorize: its **reproduction** in various forms, such as printed publication or sound recording...and [importantly] its **translation** into other languages, or its **adaptation**, such as a novel into a screenplay. (http://www.wipo.int/copyright/en/general/about_copyright.html)

Rights-holders may be unwilling to sell their rights. Most Burmese *copy thachin* are based on English-language songs, which originate in Anglo-American culture, where most artists have rather different ideas about artistic integrity, originality and copying (or “ripping off” someone else’s work). As WIPO points out, “Copyright protection also includes **moral rights**, which involve the right to claim authorship of a work, and the right to oppose changes to it that could harm the creator's reputation.”

(http://www.wipo.int/copyright/en/general/about_copyright.html) It is entirely possible that a Western songwriter would object to the idea that a Burmese composer could assign to their music an entirely different meaning by creating new lyrics. But even if they are willing, since the original songs are usually very financially valuable

to the rights-holders, they will demand a high price for their intellectual property. Given the difference in the Burmese kyat versus the American dollar or the Euro, it is unlikely that most Burmese musicians, even the very richest, could amass enough money to pay for the rights. Therefore, they will not be able to continue to legally record *copy thachin*.

WIPO membership would have a second effect on the current Burmese pop music industry: it would codify and strengthen the notion of intellectual property among Burmese musicians and their fans. WIPO insists on the idea that “a created work is considered protected by copyright as soon as it exists.”

(http://www.wipo.int/copyright/en/general/about_copyright.html) Creators of works have inherent rights concerning the distribution of their property, and they need not formally register those works with WIPO or with a national body in order to *obtain* copyright.

In Burmese society – even among creators of music, who depend on selling their intellectual property for their livelihood – most people do not understand copyright in this way. Rather, they believe that “copyright” (which is a word that virtually all of my interviewees used, in contrast to “royalties”) is a right that will be granted to them only when their country becomes one of WIPO’s member states. Over and over, musicians said to me “We have no copyright here,” or “We need to get copyright.” The establishment of a CMO which operates according to WIPO principles could help to shift this way of thinking, effectively empowering musicians to defend the use of their property. For example, if Burma began to govern copyright according to international norms, musicians would not only become educated about royalties, but might begin to insist on them, rather than signing a form allowing the most influential pop radio station in their country (Yangon City FM) to broadcast their recordings for free.

However, it is equally likely that, in the short term at least, WIPO membership could increase conflict between music industry members. WIPO regulations are based on the idea a work of art (let us say a recording of a song) has an identifiable “original creator.” This notion is immediately problematic in the case of pop music. Hit songs are colloquially identified by fans as belonging to the famous singers that perform them, and indeed, performers do generally believe that their recorded performance is part of the creation of the song, and therefore that they are in some sense the creators of the music. Most CMO’s rules say that fifty percent of any royalty fee should be paid to the song’s composer and lyricist (Wallis and Malm 1984:168). And of course other people involved with the creation of a recording can also make a legitimate argument that they contributed to its creation and are therefore entitled to a portion of the money. It is a tricky thing, in any country, to identify the “original creator” of a song. If Burma joins WIPO, music industry members will be obligated to join in this debate, and it is likely to be a contentious one.

Indeed, this has already begun to happen. Because the MMA is now operating a dispute resolution committee, industry members have a forum in which to assert their rights. As one insider explained to me, “In the past, singers did not share their income from live shows with composers. But [composers accepted this state of affairs because] they could earn extra income by selling their songs again to movie directors. But now, when a song is used in a movie, everyone, the singer, the recording engineer, the studio owner and others all want to be paid for it” (Y010909A). This same insider says that he has become quite pessimistic about the work of the MMA committee, since it does not seem to be producing good results. Complainants, he says, often argue with the mediators even after they have pronounced judgment. Ultimately, he believes that the problem stems from the fact that industry members do not understand each other’s work and therefore do not appreciate it. A movie director, for example,

may believe that songwriting is very easy, and therefore not accept the idea that a composer should receive a substantial sum of money when his song is used in a movie.

This MMA member argues passionately that Burmese people in general are poorly-educated and self-interested, and therefore thinks that the MMA committee is not effecting substantial progress. Whatever the case – and numerous other community members have much more positive views of this committee – it is clear that the MMA, in trying to standardize norms and dispense justice, is causing industry members to reconsider theirs and others' rights. If the MMA creates a CMO, I imagine that this debate will increase dramatically, as many people with opposing interests try to decide who exactly is entitled to payment for a song.

I wonder if, in the brave new world of copyright and royalties, some Burmese musicians may wish they had maintained the old system (the “rule of Burma” as one of my interviewees put it, above). As we have seen, when a Burmese pop recording is being made, producers pay flat fees (usually fairly standardized amounts) to composers, performers, arrangers, recording engineers and studio owners for their services. Creators of music are virtually guaranteed to get a reasonable amount of money for their work at the time it is recorded. However, if Burma switches to a system of copyright and royalties, musicians will create recordings in the hope that they will eventually be reimbursed for their work with future royalty payments. As Roger Wallis and Krister Malm (1984) discovered in their grand survey of recording industries in twelve small countries, the existence of a CMO and national support for intellectual property rights does not guarantee that rights-owners will be fairly reimbursed. As they point out, CMOs often have an easier time collecting money than dispersing it (1984:171). And when they do disperse it, they cannot do so perfectly precisely. CMOs usually pay rights-holders when their works are performed – but “it is virtually impossible to keep track of the actual works performed” (1984:173).

CMOs usually rely on samples of radio playlists, missing all of the songs that were performed in night clubs, for example, and all of the songs that were not included in the sample.

The parallels with the Burmese case are clear. As we have already seen, the market research firm which provides the only music sales data available in Burma renders an incomplete picture of the true situation. And although the MMA has begun to collect royalty payments for members whose songs are performed on Mandalay FM, they are experiencing difficulty dispersing the money to their members after only three months. It may well be that, by receiving payment at the time they complete their work, musicians are better off. They are more likely to collect what they are owed under current norms than if they wait for potentially bigger royalty payments.

At this point, though, no members of the Burmese pop music industry are expressing any concerns about the advent of enforced copyright law. Quite the contrary: they are virtually unanimous in hailing this possibility (and here I emphasize that they see it only as a possibility, not a certainty). And this is because they believe that the new regime will lead to the eradication of piracy. When I asked musicians to predict what the effects of joining WIPO might be, they all focused on the prospect of ending piracy, which they linked directly to “having copyright.” However, they seem, as a group, to be markedly optimistic about the other possible consequences.¹¹⁶

For example, when I pointed out that copyright would protect not only Burmese musicians but also artists from whom they regularly copy (like Shania Twain, Bryan Adams, the Eagles and so on) several people asserted that they were not worried. One composer, a man who has made a career of writing *copy thachin* and by

¹¹⁶ One might even say many Burmese musicians seem ill-informed. For example, musicians – MMA members – told me a variety of different target dates for the country to join WIPO. I am quoting 2014 in this dissertation, since that date was told to me by two MMA board members who seemed to be particularly knowledgeable about the process.

his own count has written only a handful of *own tune* songs, said that he will simply switch to writing nothing but *own tunes* when Burma joins WIPO. “It won’t be world standard, but it will be okay for Myanmar” he offered (Y122408A). Another said that he was confident that local composers would still be able to rewrite and adapt original songs (Y122708A).

Yet another asserted that Western companies should be prepared to “do business differently in a country like this [i.e., a poor country with a widespread practice of duplicating foreign recordings]” (Y122908A). He suggested that multinational record companies should not bother trying to sell individual copies of recordings in Burma, but rather sell a license to copy the master recording an unlimited number of times, for a flat fee. Others hoped – and claimed there is good reason to believe – that after joining WIPO, Burmese musicians will not be held to international standards with regard to the intellectual property of others. One man claimed he had been told by an MMA official that, in future, the Big Four record companies will charge less than normal for permission fees to Burmese composers who want to buy songs to make *copy thachin*, because they will be sympathetic to a developing country (Y122408A). Another woman told me that a friend of hers, a book publisher, told her that a WIPO official made an informal agreement with Burmese publishers, allowing them to photocopy English language original books and sell them (Y122308A). Apparently this official expressed deep sympathy for the Burmese situation, acknowledging that, if WIPO rules were to be followed to the letter, most Burmese people would lose all access to English books.

Members of the Burmese pop music industry are optimistic – and possibly naïve – about their government’s efforts to join WIPO and enforce copyright law. If such a move does result in the lessening or elimination of piracy, then WIPO membership will provide a tangible benefit to musicians. Legal sales will likely

increase if consumers lose the option to buy a pirated version. In addition, Burmese customers will likely buy more locally-made recordings, because duplicates of Western-made albums will no longer be for sale in legal shops. On the other hand, as I mention above, pirates do offer a service to Yangon-based musicians: the pirates are the only vendors selling pop music, in any form, in many rural communities. Even if piracy were to be eliminated, the three major distribution companies in Yangon would not likely expand their sales networks into impoverished townships where few people can afford to pay nearly two days wages for a disc. Therefore, pop musicians would lose some of the rural audience that piracy has helped them to acquire.

OCCUPATIONAL CAREERS

Changes in the first five facets of the distribution wing of the Burmese pop music industry (that is, industry structure, the market, organizational structure, technology, and law) have already begun to spark changes in the sixth. The nature of industry members' occupations are beginning to change. As I discuss in Chapter 1, industry members have long functioned as generalists, rather than specialists, with many individuals filling several roles simultaneously. Because this pattern of behavior is so well-established, I believe that expanding their career repertoire will be well within the reach of most Burmese musicians. As a group, creators of Burmese pop music are resourceful, energetic and adaptable. Despite the gloomy predictions that many of them expressed to me ("In two or three years no one will produce any albums" said one man) there is good reason to believe that they will find ways to continue to make and sell music in their continually-changing industry (Y020108A). Indeed, some of them have already begun to do so. Creators of music (composers, arrangers, performers and studio engineers) are moving into the distribution realm. This phenomenon is manifest in two main ways: first, music creators are becoming

distributors of their own music, and second, they are developing new relationships with other entities to aid in the distribution of their music.

Because of the almost-total disappearance of professional producers during the past five years, many Burmese composers, arrangers and performers are now self-producing their *series*. In some cases, musicians rely on savings or family money to fund their projects (e.g. Y010608A, Y011008A). In other cases, they solicit sponsorship (more on this below). I met very few people who were enthusiastic about this way of operating – the now-dying system of producers seems to be more desirable – but certainly people are making a success of their self-produced *series*.

Others are going one step farther and taking charge of the physical distribution of their latest albums. For example, one singer/composer/arranger/studio owner/self-producer told me his plan “to combat piracy”: he intended to spend the month of February 2009 touring around Burma, stopping at all of the major cities and as many of the small towns as possible (Y122208A). At each stop, he planned to give a short performance and then sell autographed original copies of his latest album. The sale price, he decided, would be 500 kyat: more than what pirates charge for an illegal copy, but not so much more that average people would be dissuaded. He was able to price it this low because he planned to drive himself and to sell his discs in plastic pockets rather than regular CD cases. He hoped if his tour was profitable that other musicians would follow his lead. “Right now, one hundred percent of people are losing money on their albums” he said frankly.

There is nothing to be lost – and perhaps much to be gained – by offering one’s wares directly for sale to the public, rather than sharing profit with distribution companies and retail store owners. Another younger musician (who also produces his own *series* in his home recording studio) articulated a very similar plan when we began to talk about piracy (Y121908A). He too intended to do a “CD release tour” in



Figure 5.5 Billboard advertising Lay Phyu's BOB album

Sponsorship is mutually beneficial for both musicians and sponsors.

Musicians approach Yangon-based businesses and ask them to cover the cost of producing a *series*. In return, the musicians promise to feature the businesses' logos on the cover art of the recording and in the video portion of a VCD. (Frequently now, when watching a VCD, the viewer is treated to the sight of the logo for a bottled-water company scrolling across or down the screen at the beginning of, or even during, a song). The corporate sponsors that I observed most frequently were beverage sales companies (coffee, tea, and so on). Myanmar Beer and Dagon Beer, for example, are frequent sponsors of live shows. These companies gain a tangible advantage by advertising at pop music concerts: since they are not allowed to promote their stock on television in Burma, they seize the opportunity to do it in front of large crowds of well-heeled consumers (Y121708A). They also maximize their profits by supplying all of the surrounding restaurants with their products, and then announcing at the show that customers can get a discount if they buy three or more drinks (Y020808A).

It can be difficult to find a sponsor, just as it was presumably challenging in the past to find a producer (Y020708B). However, those that have been able to do it

report that it is a relatively straightforward transaction. One well-known singer says that he routinely goes to his sponsors' corporate offices in person, asks for the money he needs, and receives it about one week later (Y122708A). Local brands provide seventy to ninety percent of the sponsorship that pop music currently receives, so Yangon-based musicians are dealing with Yangon-based business people (Y020408A). Corporate sponsorship, then, would seem to be an increasingly important part of the Burmese music industry. But insiders are sanguine about how helpful sponsorship really is.

They point out that, first, corporate sponsors do not pay enough to defray all of the costs associated with recording a *series* or presenting a live show. Typically, corporate sponsors pay thirty to fifty lakhs (or one-quarter of the cost) to get their logo onto a VCD, and twenty-five to one hundred lakhs to hang their banners at a live show (Y020808A). Producers (usually musicians who are self-producing) and contractors must approach multiple sponsors to completely cover their costs. This becomes very time-consuming. In addition, producers then must deal with the challenge of organizing the space available to present all of the sponsors' logos while still preserving the visual aspect of the performance. Secondly, a sponsor is not equivalent to a producer because a sponsor only provides financial support (Y011009A). A producer, on the other hand, commits to the whole project. He helps to organize all of the different stages of the recording and distribution process. A producer, ultimately, is personally present and invested in the production of music in a way that a corporate entity simply is not.

And while my interviewees did not mention it, it is of course true that corporations and musicians have dissimilar goals. While musicians aim to "share their hearts" with audiences, corporations want to promote their brands. "The goal of the corporation...is to support art that is decorative, entertaining and safe, as befits a

vehicle for public relations” (Crane 1992:152). Musicians may find themselves at odds, then, with their corporate sponsors, particularly if their songs are perceived to be provocative. (And Buddhist musicians may have strong objections to being linked with a sponsor who sells alcoholic drinks). But since musicians are financially dependent on their sponsoring companies, they may have difficulty staying true to their artistic goals, or else they may find that they cannot disseminate their music at all, since no business will sponsor it.

It is possible that, if corporate sponsorship continues to increase in importance for both musicians and sponsors, yet another occupational career shift will occur. At present, sponsoring companies do not employ people specifically to act as go-betweens with personnel in the music industry. The arrangements are made directly between musicians and company managers. However, activity may increase to a point where companies need to employ public relations officers (or something of the sort) and musicians need to delegate their search for corporate money to experts (like agents).

In addition, other occupations may arise, and other significant changes may occur as the other five facets of the Burmese pop industry continue to evolve. For example, a seemingly-small technological change could have major ramifications. As this dissertation went to print, Burma’s Press Security Board (the government entity responsible for censoring all publications including musical recordings) announced that it will soon begin accepting submissions in digital form (Myat 2009). Industry members are cautiously welcoming this prospect, because it will mean that they can submit an alterable document, rather than a hard copy, to be censored, and incur much less expense if the censor demands a change. But digital submissions could provoke other changes. For example, the memory sticks and computers that producers will need are very expensive – much more expensive in Burma than in the United States or

in the rest of Asia, in real terms.¹¹⁷ Musicians who are bearing the cost of producing their own series may not be able to afford this technology. Some marginal musicians may be completely shut out of the industry, meaning that their artistic contributions will be lost.

Possibilities abound. Rather than speculating, I end this section by pointing out that whatever new occupational careers do come to the forefront of the Burmese pop music industry, these careers will inevitably affect other parts of the industry. A change in one of the six facets of the production of culture provokes changes in the other five. And as the industry changes, so do the cultural products it creates.

REVISITING PETERSON'S THEORY

Burma's pop music recording industry is undergoing a period of marked transition. It remains to be seen how current changes will affect the future structures of the industry, the market, organizations, technologies, laws, careers and musical products. But at this time, one conclusion seems clear: the Burmese case, analyzed according to Richard A. Peterson's six-facet model, ultimately brings into question one of his major assertions. Throughout his career, Peterson has observed, and then stated as a "regularity," that the presence of oligarchic organizations tends to stifle innovation (see Peterson and Berger 1975 and Peterson and Anand 2004). He claims that when an industry is dominated by a handful of large, hierarchically-structured companies, those companies will tend to produce standardized, homogeneous products.¹¹⁸ The corollary to this theory is the idea that, when an industry is composed of a multitude of small, flexible and independent organizations (like for

¹¹⁷ Electronic equipment, most of which has to be imported into the country, is more costly in Burma than in the G8 countries where it is made. Burmese people pay the equivalent of hundreds of American dollars for used cellphones, for examples. Cars, computers, videocameras and the like are all more expensive in real terms. I once paid \$60 USD for a disposable camera, an item that would cost me less than \$5.00 in New York.

¹¹⁸ Note that Burnett modifies this assertion (1996:115).

example, indie record labels), then that industry will tend to produce a diverse array of innovative cultural products. “The greater the number of competing firms in the popular music industry, the greater the diversity in types of music presented” (DiMaggio and Hirsch 1976:745). Peterson developed this theory during three decades spent studying the American popular music industry. He argues that, for example, rock and roll music developed when it did in part because the nature of the popular music industry, which until then had been dominated by four firms that produced recordings by swing bands and crooners. Technological innovations made it easier for smaller independent firms to compete in the marketplace. These small firms were responsible for promoting rock and roll and the diversity of popular music styles that followed (Peterson 2000).

In Burma’s pop music scene, the industry is almost atomized. Individuals cooperate for the duration of a common project, which is often just one song on a group album. In the recording studios, performers work independently. Groups virtually never record their tracks at the same time. On stage, instrumentalists often form a band for the duration of just one concert. And that band backs a rotation of six or seven singers. Since they rarely rehearse together (more about this in Chapter 3), musicians ultimately spend very little time creating music as a group. Since there are no record labels, musicians rely on producers to fund their recordings, and producers commit to funding only one album at a time. (And now musicians are increasingly relying on their own fund-raising abilities and limited agreements with sponsors to raise money for their *series*). While long-term relationships do exist, and do tend to regulate interactions between individuals, the fact remains that individual members of the Burmese pop music industry operate as quasi-free agents. Musicians, especially those at the top of the earning bracket, are fundamentally flexible, since they often own their own recording studios, are capable of doing many of the varied tasks needed

to produce an album, and do not have to answer to publicists or agents. The Yangon industry is virtually the polar opposite of the Nashville industry, where Peterson has spent so much time and on which he bases his conclusions.

And yet Burmese pop music is not marked by innovation. I explore this theme in Chapter 2, but here suffice to say that Burmese pop musicians tend to be focused on preserving the pop music song tradition rather than on creating significant variations on that tradition. One might expect, given the regularity claimed by Peterson and other sociologists, that Burmese pop musicians would be creating an intense diversity of musical forms and frequently advancing new ideas. After all, the Big Four record companies have no presence in Burma, and the informal groupings that do exist are small, egalitarian and flexible. However, these musicians create music that is largely standardized. Oligopoly may stifle innovation, as Peterson and others have shown in Western societies, but my analysis shows that its opposite does not necessarily foster innovation.

Because Burmese pop musicians, functioning as individuals, have limited resources, they want to minimize the financial risk that they face. They therefore prefer to repeat a successful formula; that is, they prefer to create music that sounds very like music that has, in the past, sold well. If one or more of the Big Four multinational recording companies were to establish a business presence in Burma – that is, if they were to operate as an oligopoly – they would offer Burmese pop musicians much more financial stability than the musicians currently enjoy. Oligarchic companies would likely give musicians contracts and pay them large advances and royalties. The musicians would therefore have more time to experiment in studio and would likely be more willing to take artistic risks. In Burma, the presence of an oligopoly might very well foster innovation. Certainly the lack of one is doing little to

encourage creativity. Peterson's regularity, therefore, needs to be re-evaluated in light of this case.

CHAPTER 5

MUSICIANS AND THE CENSORS: THE NEGOTIATION OF POWER

Observers of international affairs consistently identify Burma's junta as a totalitarian regime which manifests its cruelty towards its citizens in a myriad of ways, including by restricting public expression. The titles of two of the best-known recently-published books about Burma exemplify this: *Living Silence* by Christina Fink (2001) and *Karaoke Fascism* by Monique Skidmore (2004). These book titles evoke the dangers of making sound, literal and figurative, in the midst of Burmese society. Reporters Without Borders, which releases an annual report that "reflects the degree of freedom that journalists and news organisations enjoy in each country, and the efforts made by the authorities to respect and ensure respect for this freedom," ranked Burma as number 164 out of 169 in 2007 (see http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=24027). Upon releasing their 2007 list, the group made a statement of special concern about Burma:

We are particularly disturbed by the situation in Burma (164th). The military junta's crackdown on demonstrations bodes ill for the future of basic freedoms in this country. Journalists continue to work under the yoke of harsh censorship from which nothing escapes, not even small ads (see http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=24025).

As the Reporters Without Borders website implies, freedom and censorship are closely linked.¹¹⁹ Some scholars of Burma have already written helpful accounts of censorship in that country. The best of their writing, to date, has focused on the government's treatment of written texts and their authors.¹²⁰ The Fink and Skidmore

¹¹⁹ I am depending on Martin Cloonan's definition of censorship here: "Censorship is: the attempt to interfere, either pre- or post-publication, with artistic expressions of popular musicians, with a view to stifling, or significantly altering, that expression. This includes procedures of marginalization, as well as the overt banning, of such expressions" (1996:23).

¹²⁰ See Anonymous 2004b f for a concise overview of the development of laws governing written expression in Burma.

monographs mentioned above treat this subject¹²¹ and Anna J. Allot's *Inked Over, Ripped Out: Burmese Storytellers and the Censors* (1993) focuses exclusively on it.

Aung Zaw's book chapter (2004) is the only comprehensive article treating the censorship of music in particular. (The article is a compilation of the research he has performed and supervised during his tenure as editor of *The Irrawaddy* online magazine, which has an ongoing interest in music and censorship in Burma.) In total, the literature about censorship of artistic expression in Burma is remarkably brief, given the importance of this issue to artists and their audiences – meaning, millions of people in Burma.

In order to learn more about how censorship impacts musicians, and how they respond to it, I interviewed many Yangon-based creators of music. In an effort to understand how the relationship of power between musicians and censors works, I also interviewed censors of music. Censorship always occurs on multiple levels (Cloonan 1996). In Burma, the most widespread level of censorship occurs at the level of the individual. In the case of musicians, composers and performers censor themselves as they write and perform music, in order to conform to the government's requirements. In addition, they are "edited" by others who control the public performance of their work, such as radio disc jockeys and stage show organizers. But the most frequently-identified concrete manifestation of the government's control over public expression is the Press Security Board (hereafter, the PSB). In this chapter, I examine the interactions between Burmese pop musicians and the PSB. But first, I outline the scholarly debate that has influenced my own perception of those interactions.

POPULAR MUSIC, RESISTANCE, AND THE SCHOLARLY DEBATE

The field of popular music studies has, since its inception, been deeply concerned with the notion of power, political change and musical performance.

¹²¹ See Fink 2001:197-212.

Theodor Adorno, the mid-twentieth century philosopher and musicologist, could be identified as the founder of the discipline, for his writings about popular music, capitalism, fascism and power are lodestones to all who have come after him. Indeed, analyses of Adorno's thought are almost obligatory at the beginning of monographs on pop music (for some particularly well-written examples, see Middleton 1990:34-63 and Burnett, 1996:29-32). Briefly, Adorno (and his colleagues who formed what came to be known as the Frankfurt School) questioned the value of cultural products for "the masses" – particularly popular music. In the 1940s, Adorno began arguing that the pop culture industry, which was then developing in the first world, is solely concerned with making a profit (see Adorno and Horkheimer 1991.) The industry therefore values and continues to produce whatever has been profitable in the past. The result is that the industry – let us say here, the pop music recording industry – produces sameness. This sameness causes stasis, stasis of imagination and critical thought: "No independent thinking must be expected from the audience: the product prescribes every reaction" (137).

Popular songs are insidious not just because they are formulaic: they are also pleasurable, and therefore a distraction from the daily reality of social injustice. After being subjected to popular music on the radio, on television, and seemingly at every turn, "the masses" lose their ability to question the status quo. They become politically impotent, unable to challenge the capitalist economic-social hierarchy that controls their lives: "Capitalist production so confines [consumers], body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them" (133).

Adorno's grim vision has been contested by numerous scholars of popular music, particularly those who were born during or after the 1960s, when rock music became the soundtrack for a youth movement that challenged almost every norm in the Western world (Rodnitzky 1997:99). Some of these authors argue in direct

opposition to Adorno: popular music provides a locus of resistance precisely because of some of the characteristics so vilified by him. Craig Lockard, for example, argues that the mass nature of popular music is its strength: its distribution through the mass media enables it to reach large audiences. His detailed study of popular music in Southeast Asia (1998), for example, documents numerous songs from various countries whose lyrics enunciate resistance. He argues that “as one of the most accessible media, the popular music industry inevitably became one of the few possible venues in which protest and criticism could be presented, and the major practitioners inevitably became important voices in their own right” (263).¹²²

To cite just a few of the works which claim popular music as the music of resistance: Timothy Ryback (1990) wrote a comprehensive book about rock and roll in the Soviet bloc. Finished just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the book triumphantly concludes:

[Rock-and-roll] transformed the sights and sounds of everyday life in the Soviet bloc. In a very real sense, the triumph of rock and roll in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has been the realization of a democratic process...In the course of thirty years, rock bands have stormed every bastion of official resistance and forced both party and government to accept rock-and-roll music as a part of life in the Marxist-Leninist state” (233).

Jeff Chang (2005) characterizes hip-hop as “revolutionary” (111). His study points out how rappers like Public Enemy managed not only to articulate a message which was sharply critical of the economic and cultural marginalization of Black people in the USA, but also to sell millions of albums. Hip-hop artists actually transformed society, setting fashion trends for middle-class white youth and empowering hundreds of inner-city kids who became well-respected and affluent

¹²² Lockard is sensitive to the implications of his conclusion. He notes that it is not clear that overtly resistant music has been able to foster significant change (1998:206). He says that the political impact of this kind of popular music is indirect, at best (267).

artists, producers and label owners (419). Michael Bodden (2005) says that rap's association with social protest is well understood by youth in Indonesia, and that Indonesian musicians began using it to express rebellion against their own authoritarian government in the 1990s.

Both Robert Walser and Richard Middleton, scholars who write about a broad spectrum of popular music styles, assert that popular music is, if not a site of resistance, at least a locus where fans and consumers ("the masses") exercise agency. Pointing out that pop songs emphasize stories, characters, and feelings, these authors say that popular music is "where [people] find dominant definitions of themselves as well as alternatives, options to try on for size" (Walser 1993:xiv; see also Middleton 1990:249 for similar wording). Great numbers of ordinary people construct meanings for the songs they hear, and for their own lives, and they are able to do so in part because of the very nature of this kind of music: As Jason Toynbee reveals, the conventional musical ideas (or hooks) that are ubiquitous in pop music (and were so despised by Adorno) carry tremendous social meaning, because they have been so often re-used (2000:45). Popular music therefore, in the eyes of these scholars, offers the *possibility* of social change on a broad scale.

To be sure, the discipline of popular music studies has not completely rejected Adorno's thesis; in fact, a number of scholars who study not only the songs but the global industry that produces them make compelling arguments which resemble Adorno's. Roger Wallis and Krister Malm, for example, have spent decades examining the production and consumption of popular music around the globe. They point out that, due to the dissemination of sounds and production methods that originated in America, by the 1970's it became possible to talk about a "transnational music" – a popular music using the instrumentation and performance practice of American rock and roll bands, now well-known in many countries (1984:302; see also

Negus 1996:174).¹²³ This transnational music is created and sold by a global recording industry which is controlled by only a handful of record companies. As of this writing, Big Six record companies (the oligopoly discussed in Burnett 1996) have become the Big Four: Sony BMG, Universal, Warner and EMI control some eighty percent of the commercially-available music recordings worldwide. Independent record labels, which often support new and experimental artists, do exist. However, virtually none of them outlive their founders. Indie labels are inevitably purchased by one of the Big Four or disappear when they are no longer financially viable (Gebesmair 2001:131). As Marcus Breen (1995) points out, the convergence of entertainment and information technology in the digital age means that the Big Four now deliver music to consumers as part of a music/telecommunications/software package; the influence of these few companies is therefore increasing in ways that even Adorno could not envision.

In the face of this pervasive control over mass-market music by a tiny elite, some scholars are skeptical of claims that popular music affords any opportunity for resistance. How, they ask, can people envision and effect significant social change when the context for such change, the very field in which they might operate, is sharply limited by the forces of capitalism? Keith Negus, for example, states flatly, “Making meanings, actively using technologies and interpreting texts is not the same as having the power and influence to distribute cultural forms” (1996:178). And Michael Hayes is equally blunt: “Regardless of the cultural value placed upon pop music, its fundamental allegiance to corporate structures...must lead to a reconsideration of the transgressive ability of this form” (2004:30).

¹²³ Note that Wallis and Malm do not consequently argue for cultural imperialism; in fact they explicitly state that the flow of cultural influence is not a one-way movement from the West to the Rest (see 1984:303-313 and 1992:208-215).

Clearly, the debate about the political potential of popular music is central to this field. (Indeed, cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek claims that the hegemony-resistance discourse has become the new dominant discourse in academia more generally (2002:66).) It is important to note that the debate usually focuses on the musical artifact (a song, or less commonly, the complete oeuvre of an artist): Is this piece of music politically progressive, or not?

After interviewing both Burmese pop musicians and government functionaries who censor their music, I decided that, in this case, the question should be framed somewhat differently. I depend on scholar James Scott's work for that frame. In his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott elucidates the idea of public transcripts and hidden transcripts. Ultimately, I found that this frame provides the most penetrating analysis of the Burmese situation.

PUBLIC TRANSCRIPT AND HIDDEN TRANSCRIPT: SCOTT'S THEORY

Scott defines the public transcript as “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (1990:2). In other words, it is the story about society that the most powerful in that society wish tell. It is the “truth” that the elite promote, since it justifies their own continued dominance. And because this story is told by the most powerful in the society, it becomes the accepted story, the narrative that is proclaimed publicly. The hidden transcript is “the discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (Scott 1990:4). This is the story that subordinates tell each other when they are out of the spotlight. It serves to uphold their own dignity and autonomy, and it differs from the public transcript in significant ways. “While the hidden transcript cannot be described as the truth that contradicts the lies told to power, it is correct to say that the hidden transcript is a self-disclosure that power relations normally exclude from the official transcript” (Scott

1990:114). Occasionally, subordinates succeed in inserting a disguised form of the hidden transcript into the public transcript (Scott 1990:136). In these cases, the message of the hidden transcript is cloaked in euphemism: “While it is surely less satisfying than an open declaration of the hidden transcript, it nevertheless achieves something the backstage can never match. It carves out a public, if provisional, space for the autonomous cultural expression of dissent. If it is disguised, it is at least not hidden; it is spoken to power” (Scott 1990:166).

In Burma, the powerholders are the leaders of the Tatmadaw, the national army. Unelected, they have controlled the government of the country since 1962. While the population at large has descended into poverty, they have enriched themselves by virtue of their control over business and trade (Callahan 2003:191). They have repeatedly shown their willingness to deploy the power of their arms against the citizens of the country. Of course, they maintain control over all forms of media with the aim of ensuring that the public transcript – the story which justifies their refusal to cede power to a democratically-elected government – remains the only “truth” available to the Burmese public. In short, the public transcript is: “The Union of Myanmar is just that, a united country that is happily developing itself. Citizens may experience inter-personal problems (the kind that pop songs tend to speak about), but they have no complaints about the SPDC’s ‘disciplined road to democracy.’” Longer versions of this transcript appear in state-run media constantly. Here is one that appeared in *The New Light of Myanmar* in 2009, just over a month before the annual Union Day:

Myanmar is a country where national races reside in unity. All the national people have been living and consistently safeguarding their own nation, sovereignty and national prestige and integrity from time immemorial.

Myanmar regained independence and sovereignty through national solidarity. The Union Day is observed every year with the aim of keeping Union spirit alive and

upholding fine traditions in the history among the people. . . . Nowadays, the government is building a new modern developed discipline-flourishing democratic nation with the participation of all the national people. Brilliant achievements have been made in political, economic and social sectors. The national objectives of the Union Day for this year indicate the national duties to be discharged by all at present or in the future. Therefore, all the national people need to discharge the national duties in accord with the Union spirit and noble traditions so that there will be peace, unity and prosperity nationwide (Anonymous 2009a).

The hidden transcript, on the other hand, claims that Burma is home to groups with deep historical, ethnic and religious differences. Many of the national races (most of them non-Burman, non-Buddhist groups) mounted armed resistance against the central government shortly after independence, and many members of those groups cherish dreams of self-determination. Furthermore, the large majority of all Burmese voters voted for democratically-constituted political parties in the 1990 elections, when Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won 83 percent of the seats in the Hluttaw, or People's Parliament. The SPDC, which has held Suu Kyi under house arrest ever since, is unjust and corrupt. This hidden transcript is indeed an offstage narrative, and many Burmese people, while acceding to it, deeply fear it being spoken aloud. Like other visitors to Burma (see especially Skidmore 2004) I have participated in numerous conversations when my Burmese interlocutor has resorted to whispering words like "democracy," "refugees," and "KNU" (the acronym for the largest armed ethnic insurgent group). Twice, I was reprimanded for saying "Burma" rather than "Myanmar" (the SPDC's official name for the country).

The Burmese pop music industry as a whole, and individual musicians who work within that industry, manifest a variety of responses to the government's ceaseless promotion of the public transcript. I will explain these responses below, but I begin by describing the Press Security Board, the organization which is charged with upholding the monopoly of the public transcript.

VISITING THE PRESS SECURITY BOARD

On January 30, 2008, I went to the PSB office to request an interview. The office, a large white building built around a quadrangle, sits on a recessed lot in a narrow, dusty street directly across from Kandawgyi Park in central Yangon. I did not know at the time I visited that the building had served as the headquarters for the Japanese Secret Police during the brutal WWII occupation – but had I known I would have found it hard to believe (Allot 1993:16). There were no ominous vibrations in the air as I approached the front door.

The building was a hub of activity that day, with vehicles entering and leaving the small parking lot, and businessmen crowding the halls. Upon arrival, I was asked for my name, address, and six other identifying markers (none of which I could provide, since I do not hold a Burmese identification card). Clearly, I was an oddity – a foreigner in a government office – but the innate courtesy of Burmese people towards visitors in their midst won out, and despite the fact that I could not adequately account for myself, a young woman showed me to an office room where workers censor music. The office held ten desks, and the walls were covered by floor-to-ceiling shelves which contained stacks of dusty files, each encased in an identical dark-green cover. There were literally piles of work in evidence. There wasn't much work being done, though, at least at that moment. Most of the desks were empty, the computer screens were dark, and the ceiling fan was motionless.

When a worker queried me about the purpose of my visit (“Do you want to publish an album?”) I explained that I would simply like to interview someone who works for the PSB. Immediately, a young man who spoke perfect English (perhaps a client?) intervened: “Why would you even try?” he said. “No one here will answer your questions honestly. They won't admit that they take bribes.” It was unnerving to hear my own fears articulated so clearly and quickly.

My request was clearly a strange one, and no one quite knew what to do. My guide took me to a male superior, and then another one, before I finally got a chance to speak with a woman who was a supervisor. At each point, I was asked, “What do you want to know?” I answered as vaguely as I could (“I want to know what kind of work people do here”) and each time, my answer was met with laughter. I had relationships with Burmese people for years before I realized that they tend to laugh when a situation is uncomfortable, as well as when it is humorous. In this case, the situation was clearly uncomfortable. No one wanted to deny my request point-blank, but it seemed dangerous to accede to it. I managed to convince them of my sincerity when I pointed out that all countries have censorship laws, and that in my own country of Canada, the government exercises strict controls over Canadian content on the airwaves. Therefore there are great debates in Canada on what constitutes “Canadian” music. I finished up with, “I want to learn about Burmese music and the laws here” - and this seemed to do the trick. During the thirty-minute interview that I was finally granted, two representatives of the PSB told me the following:

Producers are responsible for submitting musical recordings to the PSB for checking. (And remember that many musicians self-produce their own *series*, so that quite a number of performers interact with the PSB.) The PSB employs forty full-time staff to censor all books, magazines, movies and musical recordings. All of the workers have university degrees, although there is no special qualification required to work at the PSB. These staffers are paid “normal” government salaries (which is to say, they are not very well-paid). The supervisor believes that workers generally like their jobs, although it can get stressful when the volume of work is very high (for example, when a worker has to check a complete novel).

The workers check all musical submissions, even those which contain only instrumental pieces. Their main concern, however, is the lyrics. They do not

discriminate against particular musical styles, but they do check all the words of all the songs. (When prompted, the supervisor allowed that yes, censors also evaluate performers' appearances, particularly on videos; they must "look Burmese" in order to get a pass.) Each worker is provided with the technology needed to check the submissions (cassette players, CD players, televisions, etc.). Generally, the worker listens to the song once while simultaneously reading the typed lyrics, checking to see if the words being sung match the words on the page, and determining whether those words are acceptable. (When a producer submits a *series* for censorship, he must also provide ten copies of the lyrics.)

Usually, one listening is all that is required, since "Burmese singers sing clearly." However, if the censor senses a "problem," s/he will listen to the song again. If the worker is not sure whether the recording is problematic or not, s/he can approach the manager for help. If the manager is unsure, then the recording will be reviewed by the director, and so on up the chain of command. It is possible to send difficult cases to Naypyidaw - the new capital and the top of the government food chain - for censorship. This is usually unnecessary, because most submissions get a "pass" right away. If a worker does perceive a problem, s/he will notify the producer, and the producer simply has to fix the problem in order to receive a pass.

Perceiving a "problem" is an art, not a science. The staff at the PSB does not rely on any list of forbidden words or even a detailed policy. According to the supervisor I interviewed, the only document which guides their work is the Printers and Publishers Registration Act of 1962.¹²⁴ This act requires that all printing presses be registered with the government, but does not outline what can or cannot be

¹²⁴ For a translation of this document see http://burmalibrary.org/docs3/Printers_and_Publishers_Registation_Act.htm I suspect the supervisor intended to reference this document along with the 1975 Memorandum to Printers and Publishers Concerning the Submission of Manuscripts for Scrutiny – an addendum which amplifies the 1962 regulation by describing unacceptable content.

published. Censors must therefore use their personal judgment to determine whether a recording “is acceptable to Burmese culture,” in the words of my interviewee. The manager trusts the workers (“They grew up here, so they know Burmese culture, and they know what is acceptable”) and it seems he must do so, as a matter of logistics: there are far too many submissions for the manager to be able to review each case himself.¹²⁵

All of this information accords with what I learned during interviews with musicians (with the possible exception of the assertion that “most” submissions earn a pass immediately. At least one composer told me that “most of the time, something has to be edited” on each submission (Y122807A).) However, some of the other information that the PSB officials shared with me is not borne out by what I know to be true, based on my own observations or my interviews with musicians. Essentially, the PSB officials who spoke with me recounted the public transcript – that their particular branch of the Burmese government, just like the rest of the government, works for the good of the people.

For example, the officials told me that the electricity is “always on” in their building (meaning that the PSB works efficiently) although I could see for myself that the electricity was not working when I first arrived. In addition, they assured me that producers do not have to pay fees when they submit their work, and that they do not assess fines when they find problems. Musicians, by contrast, consistently claimed that they have to pay fees when they first submit their work – to shadowy “agents” who work unofficially for the PSB - and that they also have to pay fines whenever a problem is discovered.

¹²⁵ A producer says that the PSB sometimes farms their work out to other government ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, to ensure that the recording meets the government standard of “Burmese culture” (Y122708B).

Some of these fines seem to be standardized (10 000 kyat to submit a VCD, for example, and 1000 kyat per spelling mistake (Y122807A).) Since these fees are not officially required, according to the PSB supervisors I interviewed, they could be described as bribes. Interestingly, none of the musicians referred to them as such. Evidently, these fees are so consistently required that musicians perceive them as the kinds of costs one normally pays when filing government forms. The costs that musicians most frequently complain about are those associated with re-recording songs that have been deemed problematic. In some cases, re-recording songs may be prohibitively costly or logistically impossible, and so *series* must be released without the full complement of songs originally planned.

According to the musicians I interviewed, as an application makes its way through the system, producers must grease the wheels of the PSB system by giving “presents” to officials. At each level, PSB workers expect to receive increasingly expensive gifts from musicians who have submitted their recordings – and musicians give these presents in order to ensure that the workers will process their applications in timely fashion. As one producer explained to me, PSB officials do not actually ask for these gifts, so it is technically true to say that they do not request bribes (Y122708B). However, everyone involved in the “censorshit” system – as another musician called it – is well aware that these gifts are required in order to obtain a pass (Y121908A). In fact, producers have to factor the costs of such gifts into their budgets when they plan their projects (Y122708B). The gifts, apparently, are usually not used by the recipients themselves, but rather re-sold so that officials can supplement their salaries. One musician told about a friend of his who wanted to prove to himself that his presents to PSB workers were not appreciated as gifts (Y121908A). He therefore marked the bottom of an expensive bottle of liquor that he gave to a manager at the PSB.

Sure enough, two weeks later he found that marked bottle for sale in the same shop where he had originally purchased it.

Generally, though, my interview with the PSB officials produced accurate information – *pace* the young man who tried to warn me when I first arrived. Interestingly, the officials confirmed for me the facets of their operation that musicians and producers find the most irritating. First, they affirmed that they do not have any mechanism for notifying artists once their work has been passed - they do not phone or send out letters - and so the artists must make repeated trips to the PSB to inquire in person about the progress of their submissions. Second, the PBS supervisor asserted repeatedly that workers do not have a checklist of forbidden words and phrases; workers are expected to use their own discretion when awarding passes.

This latter policy is a source of great frustration to musicians. If a list existed, composers would abide by it and thereby forestall the possibility of “problems,” and the consequent expenses associated with paying fines and re-recording the music. But since no list exists, the composers are at the mercy of the censors, who can justify denying a pass, and then demand a fine, under almost any circumstances. So this policy is a tool which facilitates corruption at the PSB.

It is important to note here that the Burmese government does have a written policy of sorts that lays down some ground rules for print publications (and by extension, the sheets of lyrics which accompany musical submissions to the PSB). This document was written in 1975 as an addendum to the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Act that was mentioned by the PSB officials I interviewed. It is entitled *Memorandum to All Printers and Publishers Concerning the Submission of Manuscripts for Scrutiny*:

The Central Registration Board hereby informs all printers and publishers that it has laid down the following principles to be adhered to in scrutinizing

political, economic, and religious manuscripts, and novels, journals, and magazines. They must be scrutinized to see whether or not they contain:

1. anything detrimental to the Burmese Socialist Program;
2. anything detrimental to the ideology of the state;
3. anything detrimental to the socialist economy;
4. anything which might be harmful to national solidarity and unity;
5. anything which might be harmful to security, the rule of law, peace, and public order;
6. any incorrect ideas and opinions which do not accord with the times;
7. any descriptions which, though factually correct, are unsuitable because of the time or the circumstances of their writing;
8. any obscene (pornographic) writing;
9. any writing which would encourage crimes and unnatural cruelty and violence;
10. any criticism of a nonconstructive type of the work of government departments;
11. any libel or slander of any individual (translation quoted in Allott 1993:6).

Interestingly, this document was never referenced or quoted to me during my research; neither PSB officials nor musicians ever mentioned it. On the whole, I thought this made sense. Given the vagueness of these criteria, it is perhaps more accurate to say, as both PSB officials and musicians did, that “there is no list.” Certainly there is no useful list. Anna J. Allott’s analysis of the memorandum is a propos:

First...almost any written statement or piece of descriptive writing could be objected to under one or another of these headings, and second, the decision to label something "harmful" or "detrimental" would, of necessity, be arbitrary and depend on the whim of each individual censor (1993:7).

In the next sections, I describe how this vague, virtually useless government policy affects both censors and musicians.

CENSORS’ EXPERIENCES WITH CENSORSHIP

My own experience with the PSB struck me as being somewhat reflective of musicians’ experiences with the board. Although the interaction produced results – I got the interview I requested – the episode was rather uncomfortable. The problem, as

I saw it, was that I did not trust the PSB officials, and they did not trust me. Indeed, I was warned not to trust them, and given the fact that my request for an interview provoked debate amongst the staff, it seems that they were reluctant to trust me. In the end, we came to an accommodation. But I did not ask all of the questions I wanted to ask – in particular, I would have liked to enquire about the Saw Wai incident (explained below), which had become public knowledge the week before – and the officials did not truthfully answer some of the questions that I did pose. Ultimately, neither I nor they were completely transparent in our dealings with each other.

And this seems to be the crux of the relationship between artists and the PSB. The artists generally assume that the workers at the PSB will deal treacherously with them, and the workers must maintain a suspicious posture toward the artists, since their work consists of being on the lookout for “problems.” Since a problem is not usually self-evident, that is, since it does not consist of the use of a word or phrase on a list of *verboden* vocabulary, it is difficult to detect. Indeed, as another censor explained to me at length, the work obliges a censor to constantly question an artist’s motives.

This man, who represents another level of censorship in the Yangon pop music scene, is U Hla Myint Swe, a retired army general and the director of City FM, Yangon’s most listened-to radio station (Y020108). Because he has other responsibilities, he spends only two to three hours per day working on City FM tasks. He says that he spends most of that time censoring the station’s broadcasts; he calls himself “the final decider.” “I check again and again” he says, to ensure that nothing said or sung on air will be “dangerous.” “My radio station is very pure,” he adds, clarifying by saying that the programs contain “no politics” and no “wrong words.” I asked him if on-air personalities or callers to the station ever make explicitly anti-government statements, and he responded in the negative. The job is much more

subtle than that. Basically, he must continually ask himself, “What is their aim in saying this?” He admits that, on occasion, on-air interviewees will make statements that have, or could have, a double meaning - that is, referring to politics. In such cases he edits out the problematic statement. “Now with computers [i.e. digital editing] it’s very easy,” he says.

What is unacceptable in Burmese popular songs is not precisely defined, and, on the one hand, this means that censors in Burma have a great deal of power over musicians. The censors, untrammelled by any specific policy or list of forbidden items, can deny a pass to anyone on almost any grounds. If the work is “not Burmese” enough or “dangerous” in some way, censors can edit or completely suppress it. On the other hand, the huge gray area that constitutes the unacceptable makes censors’ work difficult. As we have seen, they must guess at composers’ and performers’ intentions. They must assume that a song may contain some hidden message and then try to ferret it out. After just one listening, they must determine the “meaning” of a song and decide what implications that meaning might have – no easy task, as any musicologist will attest.

Essentially, a PSB worker’s job consists of trying to sustain the public transcript by ferreting out any whiff of the hidden transcript. And this is difficult to do, because the hidden transcript evolves over time. Keeping this in mind, the PSB’s no-list policy makes sense: if PSB workers are going to be successful in censoring the hidden transcript, they need to exercise latitude in their work. Any list of specific words would effectively constrain them. Last year’s list of problem words would not contain the vocabulary of the new and improved hidden transcript. In order to be most effective at their jobs, censors need to, as the PSB manager said, exercise their own discretion in determining whether a given song is “acceptable to Burmese culture.”

Of course, they sometimes make mistakes.

One renowned example of censor error occurred in January 2008, while I was in Burma to research this project.¹²⁶ A poet named Saw Wai wrote a poem about an innocuous boy-loses-girl affair of the heart. The PSB passed this poem, and it was published in the weekly journal *Achit*. The day of publication, delighted readers noticed that, read acrostically, the poem says “*Ana-yu Bogyoke Than Shwe.*” This translates to “power-crazed General Than Shwe.”¹²⁷ To explain: “power hungry” or “power-crazed” is a deeply offensive insult in Burma. According to the value system espoused by most Buddhists, good people are always striving to lessen their attachment to the things of this world, including positions of earthly power. The junta knows this very well, and often claims in its own defense that it is not clinging to power because it is power hungry, but rather because it is obligated to ensure that the country remains stable and unified. In fact, government media even levels this accusation at its opponents, claiming that democracy activists are cynically using the vocabulary of democracy and human rights in order to gain political power.¹²⁸ So the poet’s encoded insult, aimed at the head of state, was clearly an example of “wrong words.”

Saw Wai was arrested immediately, and eventually sentenced to two years in prison. The journal editor (who is supposed to act as a censor in the same way that the radio station director does) also fell under suspicion.¹²⁹ For their part, PSB workers are now equipped with magnifying glasses, so as to be able to more closely scrutinize each submission (Naing 2008). Friends who shared this story with me – and many

¹²⁶ For a more complete accounting, see Yeni 2008a.

¹²⁷ Written Burmese uses a syllabic alphabet. Sounds are written in syllable combinations (rather than as separate letters). Therefore, the first graphic of each line of a poem is not a letter, but a syllable. In addition, there are many mono-syllabic words in Burmese, so many single syllables carry meaning. Thus it is possible to write the message “Power-hungry General Than Shwe” using only the first graphic in each line of an eight-line poem.

¹²⁸ For an example, see Lu 2007. Burma scholar Michael Aung-Thwin makes the same argument, albeit in a more graceful manner (1998:145-160, see especially p. 159).

¹²⁹ For more information on the Saw Wai case and other similar cases see Phaw 2008 and Naing 2009.

people were happy to talk about it, seeing it as a rare victory, however short-lived, over the junta – joked about the censors. They laughed when thinking about how PSB workers would now have to read each submission four times (left to right, right to left, top to bottom and bottom to top).

In fairness, I must add that there exists the possibility – however slight – that individual PSB workers do not expressly or implicitly solicit bribes and presents, and that they are uncomfortable with the current system. I deduce this from an interview I conducted with a man who is an important part of Burma’s version of the American Idol TV show. This show, called “Melody World” has aired for two years (2007 and 2008) on Myawaddy TV, and is, by all accounts, very popular (Y123108A). My interviewee has a history of speaking for musicians on difficult issues, and is widely perceived as a man of integrity. He says that contestants on Melody World frequently offer gifts to the judges, directors and producers – in the hopes that these presents will positively affect their chances for success in the contest. He claims that these presents do not, in fact, make any difference, and that the judges are committed to picking the best singer as the winner. However, he says, Burma’s bribery culture is so engrained that many contestants wrongly assume that they must provide presents to those in power.

This story is distressing proof of the corruption that pervades not only the music industry but many aspects of Burmese society (Y010409A). This kind of assumption may – I emphasize may – be at work in interactions between musicians and the PSB, and PSB workers may be unhappy with the current state of affairs – but since the present-giving culture is literally unspeakable, they cannot discuss it.

MUSICIANS’ EXPERIENCES WITH CENSORSHIP

The Saw Wai case is a bit of an anomaly. Usually the intended message, or meaning, of a Burmese poem or song text is not clearly spelled out. Like poetic texts

from many other societies, Burmese texts depend heavily on poetic devices, especially metaphor and allusion. When censors approach such texts, they are not generally looking for an encoded phrase whose message is clear although not obvious. Rather, they attempt to determine if the text's literal message could be read as an allusion to a forbidden topic (particularly if it could be read as a criticism of the government). Basically, they are looking for a disguised version of the hidden transcript.

My research revealed that Yangon-based pop musicians' predominant experience with censorship is that they are censored for lyrics that *could* be perceived as political criticism. The self-proclaimed intent of the musician usually makes no difference to the censors; when a pass is denied, generally, no appeal is possible. Musicians may argue with PSB workers, protesting that their song lyrics refer only to the topics referenced at the surface of the words (the literal meaning) – but such arguments typically fall on deaf ears. An individual censor may believe a composer when he says that his song was innocently meant, but this belief is somewhat beside the point. Censors have very little interest in authorial intent. Instead, they focus on listeners (or readers, or consumers of texts): their over-riding concern is to forestall any possibility that the listeners could infer a forbidden meaning from the song. They worry more that audiences will think “wrong thoughts” than if creators of music intended to provoke such “wrong thoughts.” To be sure, when there is no doubt that an author or composer intended to make a forbidden statement (such as Saw Wai did), the government acts quickly and harshly. However, the more common situation among pop musicians is that composers and singers will have their work edited. Ultimately, they are allowed to continue working, although under a cloud of suspicion, when their songs are judged to be potentially subversive.

The story of one composer illustrates this point (Y020708B). This man, now aged fifty-five, has lived and worked in the Yangon-area pop scene all of his adult life,

and is able to support himself and his family with this work.¹³⁰ He estimates that he has written over 500 songs. He outlined for me the story of the four interactions he has had with the PSB – all of them negative.

First, a *series* for which he had written the songs was denied a pass. The PSB objected to the cover art, which featured a large “A.D.” beside a photo of a dove. The composer, who is a Baptist Christian, tried to explain to the PSB that the graphic was a Christian reference, with A.D. representing Anno Domini, or the Christian calendar, and the dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit of Christian belief.¹³¹ The censors dismissed this rationale. At the time, U Ne Win, the head of state, was living on a street in Yangon called AD Lan (or AD Road).¹³² The censors believed that the cover could be interpreted as saying, “There should be peace on AD Street” – that is, U Ne Win should be removed from power.

On another, more recent occasion, he wrote a song called “Eighteen Rains.” He says he picked the number randomly, wanting to reference an extended period of time. However, the censors perceived this as a possible reference to Aung San Suu Kyi, the pro-democracy leader, who had been under house arrest for eighteen years when he submitted his song. His protests made no difference and the producer was required to remove this song from the series.

¹³⁰ Interestingly, he described himself as a “famous songwriter”, not a composer, insisting on the difference between the two. He believes that the word “composer” should only be used to describe people who write music using “international notes” – about which more in Chapter 2. He was the only musician I met who made this distinction.

¹³¹ Note that the Buddhist calendar differs from the Gregorian calendar; the Buddhist calendar dates from the birth of Buddha rather than the birth of Christ. Therefore dates calculated according to the Buddhist calendar are always 543 years more than dates on the Gregorian calendar. The Buddhist calendar was used across lower Burma for centuries, and when Burma became a part of the British empire, the BC-AD system did not entirely dislodge it. Most Burmese are equally comfortable with both. The Buddhist calendar is a lunisolar calendar, and in my experience most Burmese people are much more aware of the waxing and waning phases of the moon than are Westerners, even if they commonly refer to dates using the Gregorian terms.

¹³² This street is now called Parami Lan, although many Yangonites still know it as AD Lan.

His third interaction with the PSB was an unofficial one. He had written a song in Sgaw Karen for a gospel *series* which was not submitted to the censors. (More about these kinds of *series* below). The title of the song was “They are trying to kill me.” Government workers heard about the song and asked acquaintances of the composer’s to enquire about the title and its meaning. The composer told these unofficial ambassadors that indeed, the title did have a political meaning: he was alluding to the United States trying to kill Myanmar. This explanation – which he delivered to me with a wink and a nod - apparently satisfied the PSB, which was not entitled to investigate the case anyway.

The fourth situation that this composer wanted to tell me about seems to be an outgrowth of the first three discrete instances. He says that “the government watches me constantly now” (Y020708B). “They” – government agents - continually question his work and his motives. He is never allowed to leave the country, something he dearly wishes to do. He claims that he has no fear for his physical safety, but he has genuine concerns for the viability of his career. “They will not kill me with a gun, but with a pen,” he says [that is, by writing “pass denied” on his submissions to the PSB.]

This composer’s story is unique to him, of course, but elements of it are common among Yangon-based pop musicians. Sporadic frustrating interactions with the PSB, which result in costly re-writes of songs or of complete *series*, the sense of being dismissed and distrusted, and the inability to travel due to government surveillance: numerous interviewees recounted these same experiences to me. Other stories are more dramatic: one composer told me of being jailed for three days and then losing his sole income (when he was banned from performing and recording) for an entire year, after one of his recordings was deemed to be “too political” in the wake of the 1988 democracy protests (Y122208A). His story, and the eventual outcome, mirrors the well-known story of Sai Htee Saing (now deceased).

Sai Htee Saing, a prominent composer and performer, worked as an organizer for the National League for Democracy (Aung San Suu Kyi's political party) in 1988. After being arrested and denied his sole source of income, he decided to do whatever he needed to do in order to support his family. He subsequently became known as a singer of "government songs," just like my interviewee above. It is easy to criticize such musicians for giving in to government pressure - and indeed a number of my friends spoke disparagingly about my interviewee - but one wonders what all the critics would do if they were faced with similar harsh treatment. In any event, while most Burmese musicians have not faced such extreme choices, all of them are aware that the possibility looms in their futures too.

Musicians can never predict how censors will react, since no document exists which clearly defines the boundaries that they must not cross. There are lists, of course. Industry insiders have devised their own mental lists based on their experiences, and they were quick to rattle them off in interviews. One experienced composer came up with the following list of forbidden words and topics (Y122807A):

- Anything about sex
- Any rude words
- Anything to do with God (e.g. "Jesus" is acceptable but "Jesus Christ" is not)
- Politics
- Human rights and democracy
- The country situation (that is, the present state of Myanmar)

He also pointed out that, interestingly, composers are allowed to address the topics of AIDS and orphans - both of them pressing social issues in Burma, where 1.3 percent of the adult population is HIV-infected¹³³ and where hundreds of thousands of children live in orphanages, many of them funded by international sources. (See Zaw

¹³³ See the USAID 2008 report on HIV prevalence in Burma, archived at: http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/aids/Countries/ane/burma_profile.pdf

2004: 45 and 56 for other lists of forbidden words derived from Burmese musicians' experiences).

Performers pointed out that their VCDs are censored not only for words but also for visual appearance (Y010108A, Y122607B, Y011108A). They add the following to the list of the forbidden in musical performance:

- Dyed hair
- Long hair (men)
- Nose rings
- Visible tattoos
- Shorts or short skirts or split skirts
- Sleeveless or wide-necked shirts (women)
- Blue jeans (at least for performances aired on government TV stations)
- Men and women dancing together
- Vigorous dancing by either gender

One singer said that Myanmar TV and Myawaddy TV producers insist that performers look “neat and tidy” (Y011108A). (Performers can deduce what “neat and tidy” is by reading the regulations posted on a billboard in front of the Myawaddy TV studio.)¹³⁴ Another said that the justification for banning all of the above items is that they are “not Burmese” according to the PSB (Y122607B). In truth, this seems to be an amazingly reductionist version of Burmese culture. A little more than a century ago, long hair (pinned up on the head) was the hairstyle of choice for upper-class Burmese men, and even today many of them get tattoos in the belief that the tattoo protects one from spiritual and physical harm. One songwriter told me that his experience convinces him that censors are not, in fact, concerned about preserving

¹³⁴ When I announced my intention to head over to the studio to photograph this billboard, the respondent and two friends who were also present reacted with alarm. “You can’t do that!” they said. I offered that I would simply stand in front of the billboard and write down the rules in a notebook, but they said that this was not permitted either. I asked whether Burmese people could do this and they said, “No, no one is allowed to make a copy of the rules. People are only allowed to read the rules and memorize them.”

Burmese culture: “They just don’t like it if you criticize *them* [i.e. the government]” (Y122908A).

Whatever the case – and no doubt some government officials are genuinely concerned about preserving the uniqueness of Burmese culture – it seems that the PSB standards regarding visual experience are loosening somewhat. I myself have seen skirts above the knee and dyed hair on recent government TV broadcasts, for example. Of course, given the ambiguous nature of the PSB’s no-list policy, standards are probably constantly changing. One singer pointed out that lyrical standards are even more restrictive now than they were two decades ago, and that he is quite sure he would be unable to record new versions of some songs that were popular in the 1980s – songs about marching or “showing your desire” for example (Y010409A). Certainly it is impossible, in the current climate, to publish songs about “standing firmly for the truth” (Y010909A).

Currently, musicians’ most common generalization about the government’s attitude toward musical productions is that they must meet the censor’s criteria for “niceness.” Musicians used various words to reference this idea. The composer whose experiences are detailed above, for example, says that the PSB insists that music must always be “pretty” and “polite” (Y020708B). Another singer/composer said that censors seem to be continually concerned that song lyrics be “not rude” (Y011308A). Accordingly, he was once obligated to change a line in a love song that he wrote. His original words were *ah-chit ko mohn deh*, or, “I hate her loving”; the PSB required that he re-record the song singing *chit-ta ma chai bu* (“I don’t like her loving”). A producer recalls that, using the same justification, the PSB once denied a pass to a song which contained a word which, in itself, was inoffensive (Y012908A). The word rhymes with the Burmese word for “penis” and the PSB deemed it to be potentially rude. Again, rational argument made no difference (that is, the word

“penis” would make no sense in the context of the song and therefore listeners would be unlikely to misunderstand it). The producer had to incur the expense of re-recording the song in order to obtain a pass.

This same producer summed up the situation by explaining that Burma’s military government insists that TV and radio broadcasts (and other artistic productions) focus on “nice things” so that the public at large will be led to reflect on those nice things – and will thereby be distracted from the grim reality of day-to-day life under a totalitarian regime. (When I told him that this sounded like the criticism of popular music lyrics leveled by a famous European scholar named Adorno, he said that he had never heard of Adorno, but that Adorno must have gotten it right). This producer believes that ultimately the government’s scheme is a failure, though; he says that “everyone” is well aware that government-controlled TV shows and the like are “all lies” and so the public turns to foreign movies and other products for entertainment (Y012908A).

Clearly, the SPDC has not convinced this producer of the validity of their public transcript. (And I would say, in agreement with him, that they have failed to convince large swathes of the Burmese population.) It does not directly follow from this, however, that the producer devotes his musical career to proclaiming the hidden transcript. Like virtually all of the other Burmese musicians I met, he pursues a variety of approaches in his work.

THREE STRATEGIES: SUBMISSION, DEFIANCE AND SUBVERSION

Yangon pop musicians use a variety of approaches, or strategies, as they negotiate their relationships with the Press Security Board. I identify the first three of these strategies as *submission*, *defiance* and *subversion*. These three strategies (and a fourth that I will discuss below) largely accord with strategies identified by both James

Scott (1985) and Ardeth Maung Thawngmung (2004) in their studies of rural farmers in Southeast Asia. Of course, these strategies manifest themselves quite differently in the context of popular music and censorship.

Submission: Composer and performers who *submit* to the PSB's rule accept the limitations imposed on their expression in order to obtain a pass from the censors. By implication, when they submit to the censors, they uphold the public transcript. As they create their music, they keep in mind all of the board's unspoken rules, and are careful to remain well within the limits of what is acceptable. In essence, they exercise self-censorship, so that they will not have to bear the expense of re-recording their work should the PSB identify a problem with their lyrics. According to the PSB official that I interviewed (above), the majority of *series* submitted to the board for scrutiny earn a pass from the board (Y013008). Her statement implies, then, that the majority of Burmese artists are submitting to the government's censorship policy.

This strategy of submission is exemplified by one singer/composer that I interviewed for this project. He quickly listed off all of the forbidden words and topics that he could think of, and then said, "But I don't worry about that when I'm composing. The government will censor it if they don't like it, so I don't think about that while writing a song" (Y011308A). Clearly, he has internalized the PSB standards to the point that he does not bother consciously reminding himself of them while working. But more importantly, he accepts the reality that his work will be scrutinized and could possibly be rejected. (Incidentally, the PSB has censored some of his lyrics in the past, so he has personal experience with the reality of censorship). He betrays no anger or annoyance when we discuss the issue. He submits himself to PSB regulations and is creating a profitable career in the music industry by selling government-approved *series* in retail outlets.

Another composer, a man with twenty-five years of experience, expressed this same idea of self-censorship in response to government standards even more bluntly: “I’m immune to PSB problems,” he says. “The censor lives in my hand” (Y122408A). He too is accustomed to submitting to PSB standards – so accustomed, in fact, that he no longer has to consciously think about writing problematic words. Therefore, his songs now consistently earn passes from the censors. His past experiences have inoculated him against the possibility of writing “wrong words.”

It is important to note here that the musicians I interviewed did not use the word “submission” (or any synonym) when describing their actions. Indeed, they were anxious to be perceived as independent actors, since they perceive themselves this way. They reject the notion that, by co-operating with the censors, they are somehow aiding and abetting the promulgation of the government’s public transcript. They pointed out, over and over, that their songs come from their hearts, that they are sincere expressions of real emotion and experience. That these songs are also acceptable to the PSB does not make them, perforce, mere pieces of propaganda. For example, virtually all of the pop performers in Burma regularly write and sing songs about love of family members (called, appropriately, “mother songs,” “father songs” and “children songs.”) In these kinds of songs the musician celebrates family relationships and exhorts listeners to love their closest kin. These kinds of songs easily earn passes from the PSB – but they are not written in order to conform to some government standard of niceness. Rather, composers create these songs to reflect their own ideas and to speak to their audiences. It is simply fortuitous that these sincerely-meant songs are acceptable to the censors as well.

In addition, some well-connected musicians find that, even while they submit to the PSB, there is room for negotiation with the censors when a “problem” arises. One composer/producer likened the whole PSB application process to a game: “It’s a

kind of fun challenge,” he said (Y122908A). He points out that one can debate the finer points of language, and even win, only if one “knows someone” – that is, if one has a personal relationship of respect with a powerful personage at the PSB. Since he himself does know the Tatmadaw general currently in charge of the ministry, he feels free to contact this man if a lower-level employee determines that his work is problematic. This general is a former musician himself and is “a reasonable guy,” according to my informant. Therefore, he is genuinely open to changing his mind about lyrics, provided that someone he respects offers him a good argument for doing so.

Another singer, a man who is currently one of the highest-paid performers in Burma, says that he too has found that negotiation is possible (Y010109A). In his case, he uses the leverage he has with PSB workers in order to help producers of *series* on which he sings. “They [PSB clerks] are my fans,” he explains, and so they respect him. They appreciate the fact that he has come to the office to discuss the problem with them. He says that his advocacy for producers and composers has paid off on a number of occasions – that is, that he has successfully convinced PSB workers to accept and pass lyrics which they had previously flagged as problematic.

Defiance: Some composers and performers *defy* the PSB’s attempts to censor them. They write lyrics which proclaim some facet of the hidden transcript, some kind of “truth” that contradicts the public transcript. This is a very small number of artists, by all accounts, because the penalty for defiance is so severe (Naing 2009). Artists who openly promote ideas which are forbidden by the government risk being banned from performing for years at a time (thereby curtailing their careers) and may even be imprisoned (Y010108A and Zaw 2004). Examples of defiance are few and

far between - in part because any openly-critical words which are submitted to the PSB would be censored before the public ever knows of them.¹³⁵

The best-known instance of an artist's attempt to defy the PSB occurred in 1995, when Lay Phyu, the charismatic lead singer of the Iron Cross band, released an album titled *Power 54*. The title was widely assumed to be a reference to Aung San Suu Kyi's ongoing house arrest, because her address is number 54, University Avenue. Although Lay Phyu denied that this was his intended meaning, he was subsequently banned from performing live in Yangon. Or at least, this is the rumor – the fact is that Lay Phyu did not perform in public between 2006 and the late summer of 2008, and he has never stated why (Anonymous 2009b).

During the course of this project, I met only one musician who openly spoke about defying the PSB. This man says that he has recently written a new arrangement of the English song “We Will Go On,” and that he intends to get a group to perform it (Y121508A). He intends that the song be understood as a message of defiance – that is, that “we will go on” despite the regime's attempts to curtail true progress and democracy in Burma. In other words, he plans to create music that will proclaim the hidden transcript.

Subversion: When singers and composers *subvert* the censorship system, they manage to get a pass while simultaneously violating one or more of the PSB's unwritten rules. In James Scott's terms, they insert the hidden transcript into the public transcript. The most immediate and obvious way for an artist to do so is to bribe a PSB official for a pass. There seems to be a perception among the Burmese public that this is a common practice. Remember, for example, the anonymous young man who told me this prior to my interview at the PSB (and see also Zaw 2004:46).

¹³⁵ And there are persistent reports of politically defiant hip hop recordings being made, although these are not circulating openly. See Seng 2003 for an example.

As mentioned earlier, producers do pay bribes, or “give presents,” but this is just to grease the wheels of the system. My feeling is that bribes, whether or not they are frequently offered, do not constitute an important method of subversion.

The reason is, as one prolific composer explained to me, that low-level officials who are responsible for determining whether a pass is merited are afraid of losing their jobs – or worse – if they are perceived to have passed a problematic piece of music (Y020708B). Interestingly, for a man who breathed fire when I first raised the topic of the censors, he expressed some sympathy for the workers who review his lyrics. He believes that many of them are rational people who would, in another time and place, be willing to listen to a composer’s self-defense should a potentially-problematic lyric be identified. However, it is not politically expedient for them to be perceived as exercising any leniency. And, he believes, a bribe offered to a superior would make no difference; once a decision is made to deny a pass, no appeal (formal or secret) is possible.

Another obvious opportunity for subversion exists due to the fact that none of the PSB staffers speak or read languages other than Burmese and English. They therefore require that all recordings made in minority languages be submitted along with translations of the lyrics in Burmese (Y013008). The translator has a golden opportunity to subvert the system at this point, by submitting an innocuous “translation” of words that carry forbidden meaning in the original language. I did manage to find one person who owned up to providing such a mis-translation: he provided a softened version of lyrics which in the original Sgaw Karen spoke about a future independence for the Karen people (Y012908A). (His translation simply mentioned a generic “freedom.”) However, this type of subversion does not seem to be common. Those few recording artists who record in minority languages and then

submit their work to the PSB generally claim to provide faithful translations of their lyrics, which, of course, remain within the limits of acceptability.

It is impossible to know for certain how often artists are subverting the censorship requirements, because artists are understandably unwilling to divulge their secrets.¹³⁶ My sense of it, though, is that it is an occasional rather than a regular practice: artists who customarily submit to the PSB will, on occasion, subvert the system. What is clear is that, when they do practice subversion, the method they most commonly use is that of double entendre. (The “real” meaning, that is, the politically subversive meaning, is *sous-entendu*, to use another French expression.) They disguise the message of the hidden transcript by using ambiguous language.

Composers and performers write lyrics that have one literal and inoffensive meaning and another, usually anti-government, message that can be plausibly denied if the censors question the intent. They usually employ metaphors to do this linguistic work. Thus we see that censors’ continual concern about lyrics that *could* be dangerous is grounded in reality. As censors suspect, musicians do sometimes create lyrics with the express purpose of countering the government’s version of the truth.

The following four examples of subversive lyrics are presented here without contextual details, in order to protect the people who shared them with me. In one case, lyrics about a man who promised to return to his lover after ten years, and then broke his promise, were written as a criticism of the government’s breaking of the Panglong Agreement. In that agreement, which was signed in 1947, the newly-independent government of Burma undertook to address concerns of the ethnic minority groups by promising some of them the right to secede from the Union of

¹³⁶ For example, one singer/composer who was active in the early 1980’s, and who now lives in Switzerland, acknowledged to me that some of his songs contained coded messages, but was unwilling to discuss the issue further (and was specifically unwilling to “decode” the secret messages for me). He pointed out that he still has family living in Burma, and fears that they could be the subject of reprisals if he were to reveal this information (email 03/04/2007).

Burma after ten years should they so choose.¹³⁷ As history shows, the agreement was not honored, and this denial of the promised right to secede fuels the ambitions of ethnic minority insurgents even today.

In another case, a song which described a vine which grows around a tree and eventually strangles it offered a criticism of the government's language policy. The BSPP (and subsequently the SPDC) frequently touted its unification of the diverse ethnic groups in Burma, and cited the Panglong Agreement as the genesis of this unity. The reality is, though, that during each iteration of its existence, the military government has enacted more and more stringent rules regarding the promulgation of minority languages, eventually banning the teaching of minority languages in public schools. Prior to 1993, no magazines in languages other than Burmese and English were permitted to be published. The result is that many members of the youngest generation of ethnic minority groups who live in urban areas can no longer speak their parents' languages (Y122707A). In the song being discussed here, the composer – who herself grew up in a Sgaw Karen-speaking home in Yangon and was educated in Burmese through the public school system – condemns this government's policy using a metaphor: Burmese language instruction (the vine) is strangling the seemingly-strong tree of the Sgaw Karen language.

In the third example, the composer chose to criticize the ubiquitous Tatmadaw soldiers who patrol the streets of Yangon. In the midst of a love song, he inserted the line “When I see all the stars, my eyes open wide [with astonishment].” Tatmadaw soldiers wear an olive-green uniform with a patch showing a five-pointed star on each shoulder. The lyric is therefore a veiled reference to these soldiers, and a criticism of the totalitarian military government which controls the country.

¹³⁷ See the English translation of the text of the Panglong Agreement at: http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/panglong_agreement.htm



Figure 6.1 Tatmadaw soldier in uniform

The fourth example is a song which talks about always having to wait. Although the composer does not specify what the singer is waiting for (and the assumption is that it is a lover, since the song is a love song), I am assured that this song, too, is a criticism of the government. Because Burmese bureaucracy is so inefficient (and corrupt), people spend a lot of time waiting, in frustration, for government services. Yangon dwellers, for example, have to wait every afternoon for the electricity to come back on, and people across the country have to wait weeks or months for paperwork to be processed. Students have waited years to complete their degrees, because the government regularly closes universities (to forestall student organizing). The song is an expression of anger towards a government which claims that it remains in power because an abrupt transition to democracy would disrupt the country – and yet is unable or unwilling to deliver basic services in a timely manner.

As these examples demonstrate, coded messages in Burmese pop songs are subtle, and their decoding requires detailed historical and cultural knowledge. In fact,

their very subtlety is their strength. Only because each of these lyrics had a clear and logical literal meaning did they earn a pass from the censors. In each case, it is likely that some listeners did not understand the hidden message the composer was articulating. However, others certainly did – and therefore, the composers successfully subverted the PSB’s censorship system.

In addition, lay people in Burma are broadly aware that such subversion is common. Some of my informants made statements like, “All songs have secret messages.” This clearly is not true. However, such statements reveal that music consumers are aware that subversion is occurring. Some listeners no doubt read unintended meanings into straightforward lyrics. As we saw above, even employees of the PSB do this. Christina Fink argues that such inferences are common among Burmese people: “People are reading meanings into everything around them” she asserts, linking this psychological tactic employed by individuals to the larger struggle for power in Burma (2001:229). Craig Lockard has a similar perspective; he sees this kind of assigning of meaning as a way for fans to exercise agency in the face of the government’s attempt to control what they hear – and thereby, what they think (Lockard 1998:265).

The three approaches that musicians use when they interact with the Press Security Board (submission, defiance, and subversion) mirror the strategies they use to deal with more generalized government control. Some of them, perhaps most, submit to government requirements when planning their performances, for example. Since outdoor gatherings of more than five people are forbidden after dark, performers need to get permits to perform night-time concerts. Although Pee Paw, the successful impresario, says that such permits are easy to get (“I just go to the local police or fire station, and I don’t have to pay”), other informants said that such permits can be difficult to obtain (Y020808A). One performer who has spent much of her career

performing at Kandawgyi Park says that permits are often denied (Y012908B). Her response to such denials is to submit to the limitations imposed on her. Although she is unhappy about it (describing it as the “biggest challenge” of her working life) she accepts the situation and does not attempt to change it.

Other musicians periodically defy the government. They sing anti-government songs in private settings, for example (Y012908A). Aung Zaw says that one frequent setting for such performances is university dormitories (Zaw 2004:47). One of the most popular anti-government songs, titled “Scarecrow,” speaks from the perspective of a lowly Tatmadaw soldier, one who is deeply regretful over the role he plays (note the reference to stars on the shoulder in this excerpt from the lyrics):

Dead or alive, sacrificing my life for my country
Gold and silver, silver stars on my shoulder
Oh my friend, what honor and rewards I would get
My heart is crying, while my mouth was muzzled from telling the truth
A pierce through my eyes which have seen the truth
Oh my friend, I am a scarecrow in human form
Though I am alive, I am no longer living.¹³⁸

Despite the risk involved, fans themselves sometimes also defy the Burmese government’s control of music. One friend showed me some CDs that he owns, full of Karen nationalist songs (that is, songs that celebrate the Karen revolution, thereby enunciating the hidden transcript). These CDs were recorded by an artist who recently fled Yangon and is now living in one of the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. His CDs are smuggled back into Burma in defiance of the government’s ban on any expression of support for ethnic insurgents.

Public defiance is less common, but does occur. In November of 2007, for example, a rapper named G-Tone turned his back to his audience and lifted his T-shirt, showing the crowd the tattoo on his back. The tattoo consisted of two clasped hands

¹³⁸ Lyrics quoted in Zaw 2002.

holding a string of beads. He and his fellow performers were immediately arrested, and G-Tone is now banned from performing for one year. I heard various interpretations of his actions from my Burmese friends: he was simply being immodest, or, his tattoo was the symbol for Amnesty International, or, his tattoo was a representation of Christian or Buddhist devotional prayer. *The Irrawaddy* online magazine claimed that the Burmese government seized on the latter option, and arrested him for showing support for the Buddhist monks who led the anti-government protests that had erupted two months earlier (Anonymous 2008a). Whatever the case, no one was surprised that a three-second public declaration of the hidden transcript was met with immediate and harsh reprisals.

Musicians submit to and sometimes defy the government's power over their lives, and they also, on occasion, subvert it. By so doing, they either endorse the public transcript, proclaim the hidden transcript, or insert the hidden transcript into the public transcript, respectively.

A FOURTH STRATEGY: AVOIDANCE

Pop musicians in Yangon use one or more of the three strategies described above (submission, defiance and subversion) when they interact with the government in the course of their work. In addition, many of them use a fourth strategy:

Avoidance: When musicians *avoid* the government, they either do not create music on demand, or, they create music which is not destined for sale in mainstream retail outlets, and therefore does not have to be vetted by the PSB. I begin my discussion with an example of the first:

One composer explained to me that, when the government calls the Myanmar Musicians Association to demand a composition (a "government song") to be used in an upcoming ceremony, the bureaucrat may request a composer by name (Y020508C). In such a case, there is no help for it, and the composer must compose the song as

required. If, however, the request does not include a specific composer, then the MMA must find someone – anyone - to do the work. At that point, composers who are approached with the request may, and often do, turn it down. They may plead a busy schedule, for example (Y121608A) or even say that they are not competent to write such a song (Y010909A). (Composers and performers who co-operate with the junta, like Sai Htee Saing and Zaw Win Htut, often lose the respect of their fans, and so most musicians are reluctant to be known as composers of government songs.) If they refuse the opportunity (and the money), they will not jeopardize their membership in the MMA and will not suffer reprisals.

And even if they are obligated to work on a government recording project, they can prevent this from becoming known. The arranger who played guitars on the government recording that I described in Chapter 1 accepted the commission on one condition: the responsible minister had to promise that he would not put the arranger's name anywhere on the recording (Y012908A). The minister, needing to have the song recorded in time for the bridge opening, agreed to this condition – and so the arranger collected his money and avoided any damage to his reputation.

The second kind of avoidance is characterized by taking action (doing something) rather than by not doing something (i.e. not writing a song for the government). When Burmese musicians actively avoid the government, they create recordings which would, in most cases, not earn a pass from the PSB. Subsequently they distribute these recordings through private networks. Most commonly, these recordings are made by members of Christian *tain-yin-tha* communities. The lyrics of the songs are in one of the minority languages, and they usually reveal explicitly Christian and/or nationalistic themes. (Most of my informants spoke of such recordings as “gospel *series*.”) The musical styles vary from hymn-singing (often by children) to soft pop to moderately-hard rock – which is to say that they sound very

like mainstream Burmese pop recordings, except for the words being sung. So many of these recordings are now being made that we can speak of a separate and parallel *tain-yin-tha* recording industry in Burma, one that has developed outside of the government apparatus. This industry, and the people who work in it, avoids all interaction with the censorship board and with government-approved impresarios like Pee Paw.

Although the *tain-yin-tha* industry separates itself from the government, it is interwoven with the engines of the mainstream Burmese pop industry. For example, minority-language *series* are made in the same studios where mainstream *series* are recorded. Furthermore, many of the people who work in the Burmese-language industry (including performers and recording engineers) also work frequently on *tain-yin-tha* recording projects. These creators of this music are usually themselves Christians and self-identify as ethnic *tain-yin-tha*. However, they often describe their work on *tain-yin-tha* recordings in different terms (like “service” or “helping.”) And whether they use different terminology or not, their attitude is manifest in their practice: all of the Christian *tain-yin-tha* composers and performers that I interviewed said that they charge different – and lower – rates for their time when they work on *tain-yin-tha* recordings, or perform at *tain-yin-tha* community events.

In fact, they will often perform live shows for free. One guitarist, who was unwilling to specify exactly how much he charges for working on a *tain-yin-tha* series, simply said it was “a lot less” than less than his regular fee of about 200 000 kyat, or \$200 USD (Y011108A). Another industry insider claimed that exact figures for gospel albums are hard to specify, since “it depends on the situation” (Y012908A). He said that because ethnic minority recording artists typically have very small budgets, full-time professionals like himself will take this into consideration and

adjust their fees accordingly. He claimed that the discount off the standard industry rates can be as much as seventy percent.

One singer explained this phenomenon very clearly. The *tain-yin-tha* recording industry has a different purpose, he says, and therefore those who participate in it are differently motivated (Y010608A). While the Burmese-language industry is intent on making money, the *tain-yin-tha* industry aims to support minority languages, cultures and religions. Therefore, when he and his colleagues work on a *tain-yin-tha* recording, or play in a *tain-yin-tha* concert, they do not expect to make a profit. They participate in the Burmese and *tain-yin-tha* industries for different reasons, and therefore have different expectations of themselves and others in each case.

These same industry insiders, who work in both camps, say that in order for an artist to have wide distribution in Burma – to have a chance at becoming famous – he or she must co-operate with the government’s system of censorship. Retail shops do not stock *series* that have not been vetted by the PSB. However, it is my observation that some *tain-yin-tha* recording artists have a wide reach, wider in fact than that of some “famous” mainstream musicians. *Tain-yin-tha* recordings circulate primarily in ethnic minority communities in Burma. These communities constitute a small percentage of the Burmese population, but they tend to be well-organized. Church denominations in Burma are efficient bureaucratic structures, and leaders from around the country know each other, meet regularly, and work together. It is thus possible that a *series* devised by a church-based group of pop performers in northern Kachin State, for example, can be recorded in Yangon and disseminated to Kachin-speaking groups around the country (as I observed for myself during the course of this research). Furthermore, such recordings travel easily over the border and are in wide circulation in refugee camps populated primarily by members of *tain-yin-tha* groups (Chin refugees on the India border and Karen and Kayah refugees on the Thai border).

Some *tain-yin-tha* recording artists have become refugees themselves, and others travel clandestinely to the camps to give concerts and publicize their music.¹³⁹ Since 2006 many thousands of Burmese refugees have left the camps, resettling in Western countries, bringing the music of home with them. These refugees, and other expatriate Burmese in the developed world, are now uploading clips from both Burmese and *tain-yin-tha* VCDs onto the Youtube website. As of this writing, Youtube.com hosts dozens of such videos. Thus we can say that Burmese popular music, both the mainstream and *tain-yin-tha* varieties, has gone global.¹⁴⁰

One singer, who works exclusively as a “Karen singer” (that is, singing in Sgaw Karen on *tain-yin-tha* recordings) outlined her experiences for me, showing how it is possible to become a successful pop musician in Burma while avoiding the government at all turns (Y020608A). Her CDs, she says, are sold in unofficial retail outlets in Yangon, located on Christian-owned institutional property. (I encountered four such shops in my visits to churches, seminaries and denominational headquarters in Yangon. One of them, at least, is rather well-known, since three different individuals advised me to visit it.) In addition, shops in Pa-an, Toungoo, and Dawei (all Karen population centers inside Burma) sell Karen recordings, she says. The owners of such shops come to Yangon and purchase hundreds of copies of her *series*, paying her either in advance or after they sell the lot.

Also, she herself visits Thailand once a year or more to perform for refugees there. While in Thailand, she mails copies of her *series* to contacts in the Karen diaspora (the Burmese postal system being vulnerable to surveillance, and more

¹³⁹ Three of the Karen musicians that I met during my second trip to Yangon left the city for the camps on the Thai-Burma border in mid-2008. Therefore I was unable to re-interview them during my third trip.

¹⁴⁰ I asked a number of musicians in Yangon about Youtube.com. They were mostly unaware of it, but a handful said that they had been able to view it via internet connections in Burma. Based on this, I assume that *tain-yin-tha* videos on Youtube.com reach viewers inside the country, but only rarely.

importantly, terribly inefficient). Often, she sends one master copy of the *series* and the cover art, trusting her friends abroad to reproduce it and disseminate it.¹⁴¹ In this case, she accepts a flat fee of \$100 USD from her contact in Thailand. Operating in this way, she has managed to sell 10 000 cassette copies and 8000 VCD copies of her first series. She says that demand for this series, her first and one which has become “famous among Karen people”, is continual. She is still selling copies of it seven years after its release. In July, 2008, when I entered her name into the Youtube search engine, I found more than a dozen videos of this singer, appearing either as a featured or guest artist. Clearly, as this singer’s career illustrates, artists who avoid the Myanmar PSB can develop successful careers for themselves. Avoidance, then, is a legitimate and useful strategy for *tain-yin-tha* pop musicians in Burma.¹⁴²

Ironically, the *tain-yin-tha* industry is able to exist and thrive because of a loophole in the system provided by the government itself. The PSB makes provision for groups who wish to record religious music with lyrics that would normally be

¹⁴¹ In December 2008, I became part of the dissemination of *tain-yin-tha* music when I was asked to take a master copy of a new Karen *series* in my suitcase back to the United States, for sale to people in the Karen diaspora there.

¹⁴² A foreigner friend of mine, who has lived and worked in Burma for six years, asserts that avoidance is *the* dominant strategy employed by Burmese people in the face of a repressive government. She argues that people generally survive by avoiding conflict, or even contact, with government bureaucracy as much as possible (Y010408A). I do not care to make such a broad statement about a large and diverse group of people...but intriguing traces of this idea seemed to pop up every so often. For example, I once met a retired diplomat who regaled me with stories about working as a representative of the Burmese government in various first world countries over thirty years. When I responded, “You should write a book!” he said very seriously, “I would like to but I never will. My goal for my retirement is to simply not be noticed by the government.” Two of my respondents for this project claimed that “the Karen way” (or philosophy) is to want to stay away from government bureaucracy, and that this stems from the traditional Karen way of life, which is still lived by millions of Karen people: Villagers live in isolated communities where they are not dominated by a central political authority. This “simple” and “honest” life is directly tied to the idea that Karen people like to be left to themselves, according to these two Yangon-dwelling Karen leaders (Y011408A and Y012908A). And the same themes (preference for simplicity, isolation, and independence from the Burmese central government) are evoked in a recent article about the Wa people of Shan State (see Norling 2008). In addition, author Anna Allot implies that avoidance is a common life strategy for Burmese people in general. She offers this analysis of a Burmese expression, which translates as “If you don’t do anything, and don’t get involved, you won’t get fired”: “[This expression] suggests that the best way to keep out of (political) trouble and avoid personal loss and suffering is to keep one’s head down and avoid taking initiative” (1993:39).

forbidden. The board simply requires the producer of the series to put the following phrase on the series cover: “*ah-thin-daw twin kan-tha.*”¹⁴³

The phrase translates as, “For distribution within the congregation.” The idea is that church groups are allowed to make recordings and circulate them amongst the members of the church. In practice, this phrase provides cover for movement of the series not only within a congregation, but all over the country (and even beyond, as outlined above). Producers of *series* that are not totally devoted to gospel songs and not intended for use by one local congregation often put this phrase on the *series*. The phrase acts as a kind of license, virtually guaranteeing that no government agent will look too closely at the contents. Again, this particular case illuminates Scott’s assertions about the functioning of hidden and public transcripts. He points out that subordinate members of society often use the ideas in the public transcript to support their own agendas (1990:96-102). In Burma, producers leverage the government’s stated dedication to religious tolerance for their own ends, to facilitate the movement of their hidden-transcript recordings.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Censored recordings are labeled also. The official label is a multi-colored, one inch square sticker which shows the date when the series was approved.

¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, some producers of religious and nationalistic recordings do not make even this minimal attempt to disguise their normally-forbidden product. I have in my own collection a handful of CDs and cassette tapes containing explicitly Christian content which are not labeled. Obviously, the likelihood of such recordings being discovered by government agents is very slight, so slight that it is not worth the trouble of asserting in print that they will only be circulated “within the congregation.”



Figure 6.4 Album produced by the alternative *tain-yin-tha* recording industry

The creators of these “avoidance albums” express the hidden transcript in various ways. Most of the songs are straightforward expressions of Christian faith, of course. Some songs on such recordings are subtly or overtly nationalistic, affirming the long-held desire for autonomy among ethnic minority groups. And Christian faith can be a cover for an anti-government message. For example, the Bible verse prominently displayed on the cover of one Chin-language CD says, “Our help is in the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” However, in the original context this verse is preceded by a poem which speaks about God being “on our side” in our conflict with our enemies. The Chin refugee who gave me this album handed it over with a snicker. Noting my confusion, he explained this verse, demonstrating his clear understanding of the hidden transcript that it references.

Much more rarely, avoidance albums convey flat-out criticism of Burma's military junta. I learned of one such example in late 2008. This album was funded by a Yangon-based para-church organization, and the project involved some prominent pop music industry members. All of the songs on the album are based on oral accounts given by child victims of Cyclone Nargis. The visuals which accompany the songs show the tremendous devastation that the cyclone caused, including photos of corpses. The producer of the VCD explained to me that she had two, equally important goals in organizing this recording (Y122408B). First, she wanted to create a product that could be sold to raise funds for child victims of the cyclone. Second, she wanted to inform the public about what really happened in the delta area – that is, she wanted to make very clear to viewers, especially those in foreign countries, how deeply destructive the effects of the cyclone, and the government's negligible response, were to people in rural Burma. In order to achieve these goals, she decided to use photos which are banned for publication to accompany the music.

The VCD is a clear expression of the hidden transcript: the album shows the deep need of the victims, and by extension, the gross negligence of the SPDC, which failed to warn citizens about the coming storm, and then refused to allow international aid to enter affected areas for many weeks. As the VCD implies, the government therefore exacerbated the effects of the natural disaster and is responsible for loss of life and property. This album, then, constitutes an expression of political resistance. And this is not just my own scholarly interpretation of the work: the producer of this album, whom I interviewed, told me that she was visited by an SPDC agent and threatened with arrest shortly before she released the album. She told me that she was willing to be jailed for the cause (holding her wrists out dramatically, in a pantomime of being handcuffed) but ultimately avoided this possibility by falling back on the

justification described above: “This series is only for circulation within my congregation” she said to the agent.

Here is another, similar example: The Christian Musicians Fellowship created a single which tells the story of the suffering that Cyclone Nargis caused. The producer of the album explained to me that, had this VCD single been submitted to the censors, the words would have earned a pass but the visuals would have disqualified it from publication (Y012908A). The visuals in this video resemble the visuals described above: they consist of a montage of banned photographs showing property damage and dead human bodies. The video is available on the CMF website.¹⁴⁵ Importantly, this website is not blocked in Burma, so Burmese citizens can view this in internet cafés. It is definitely politically sensitive material, though, as I found out for myself, when the producer of this video gave me a hard copy of it. Within minutes, he changed his mind and burned a copy on a blank CD, “because it is not approved,” he said.

GOVERNMENT DEPENDENCE ON POPULAR MUSIC

Another important, but usually unacknowledged reality which impacts the power relationship between pop musicians and the Burmese government is that the government is in some ways dependent on the national pop music industry. This relationship of dependence developed very early, when the government (then in its BSPP incarnation) first leaned on popular music in order to market itself. As we have seen (in the Introduction), *stereo* music was the creation of private citizens in Burma. In the early 1970s, when the government held a referendum, it decided to use *stereo* songs to promote its message. Ever since, bureaucrats have been paying pop musicians to write and record so-called government songs – songs which are used in

¹⁴⁵ See <http://cmfmyanmar.multiply.com/>

public education campaigns, for national holidays and on state television. This choice is a tacit acknowledgement of the public's taste. The military regime in Burma is ultra-nationalistic, given to jingoistic celebrations of the superiority of Burmese culture and people. (For example, for the last few years the government has been promoting the idea that the human race originated in Myanmar, proof positive that the Myanmar people are founders of all the glory of human civilization).¹⁴⁶ The generals therefore usually validate cultural practices which are distinctively Burmese.

Musically, they prioritize traditions like the *hsaing waing* and the *Maha Gita*, funding state schools and music competitions which focus on exclusively promoting these musics. The fact that they so often pay for American-style pop music to promote their projects reads like a capitulation of sorts, a recognition that the music of the “neo-colonialist axe-handles” is widely liked and that they, the leaders, have been unable to control the tastes of their citizens. In order to influence public opinion, therefore, the generals must depend on pop musicians, the ones who are able to play pop music and thereby communicate with that same public.

The government depends on pop music and musicians not only for songs but for money. It is important to note that the Burmese junta, for all its harsh repression of basic human rights, is a rather weak government which does not effectively govern its people (nor even control all of the land within its own borders) (Callahan 2007:10). For example, it does not collect taxes in a comprehensive way. To be sure, it levies taxes – but it seems to have few mechanisms for enforcing the payment of those taxes.¹⁴⁷ And so it is perpetually short of cash.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ See for example 2007a, an article in the state-run newspaper: “Fossils found reveal the origin of human beings in Myanmar.”

¹⁴⁷ Heidel (2006:18) reveals a fascinating fact: Most of the NGO workers who were surveyed in his large-scale survey of 64 NGOs in Yangon were confused about their organizations' tax-exempt status. (Although non-profit organizations in Burma are tax-exempt, workers did not know this.) These workers represent some of the best-educated people in the country. Clearly, the government is not even effectively educating the population about tax requirements.

U Hla Myint Swe, the manager of City FM (mentioned above), explained to me that the station is one of the branches of the Yangon City Development Committee. All of the advertising revenues earned by the station go to the YCDC. “It’s like a tax,” he says (Y020108A). The national government does not provide funds to Yangon (despite the fact that it is the largest city in the country and home to some five million people) and so the radio station “raises local funds to repair roads and so on.” Of course, in order for the city to raise these funds, advertisers have to be willing to purchase air time, and they will only do so if the music that the station plays is popular with a large number of potential consumers. Therefore, the government is obliged to rely on pop music and musicians for its economic well-being.

Obviously, the Burmese military government does not hold all the cards in the game it plays with pop musicians. This became crystal clear in September of 2007, when the country was convulsed with a series of anti-government demonstrations, demonstrations which the government ultimately stopped at the point of a gun. In the wake of the violence, the government sought to justify itself. It therefore contacted various allies (ceasefire armed groups, state-controlled NGOs and the like), asking them to issue statements condemning the demonstrations and the demonstrators. This is a common practice: when the regime feels itself to be the subject of criticism, it demands that purportedly-neutral parties defend it and its policies. To give just one short example: A year earlier, when the United Nations Security Council decided to put “the situation of Myanmar” on its agenda, the Shan State Army North – Special Region 3 (a cease-fire group now allied with the SPDC) “volunteered” the following statement, which appeared in the state-run newspaper *The New Light of Myanmar*:

¹⁴⁸ A significant portion of the Burmese economy consists of remittances. In fact, the government requires that Burmese citizens employed abroad are required by law to deposit remittances in the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank. This rule especially impacts on sailors and seamen. In addition, millions of Burmese are being supported by relatives who are unofficially abroad, especially migrant workers in Thailand and other SE Asian countries (see Turnell, Vicary and Bradford, 2007).

We object the decision [sic] and declare it unacceptable as it will undermine and disturb peace and stability and the rule of law, that are prevailing in Myanmar, and the national solidarity, developments in all sectors and the ongoing democratization process. (Archived at <http://mission.itu.ch/MISSIONS/Myanmar/06nlm/n060929.htm>)

In 2007, when the junta was looking for similar statements in reference to the demonstrations, it approached the Myanmar Musicians Association. The leadership of the MMA, twenty-five persons in total, held a meeting to discuss the issue, and then voted. They decided *not* to honor the government's request. They refused to publish a statement. Importantly, neither the group nor any of the individuals in leadership suffered any reprisals because of this decision (Y020508A). Clearly, the military regime cannot be said to control the MMA, a significant organization representing popular musicians. In fact, it cannot even count on the MMA for a meaningless gesture of support at a time of great crisis.

REVISITING SCOTT'S IDEAS

As this account of the power relationship between Burmese pop musicians and their government shows, it is impossible to say that the all-powerful government renders musicians powerless by censoring their music. Clearly, as musicians and censors interact, each exercises some degree of power over the other. The government relies on popular music for financial and moral support – and musicians sometimes refuse to lend this support. Censors attempt to prevent any songs which are not “nice” – and therefore possibly critical of the status quo (and thus the government) - from reaching the public's ears. They often, but do not always, succeed. Musicians alternately submit to, defy, subvert and/or avoid the censors.

This detailed look at Burmese case allows us to extend James Scott's theories in two ways: First, these strategies, which we often associate with farmers and peasants, are also used by middle-class music industry members, and even by famous

rock stars, in Burma. These strategies, therefore, are not just the weapons of the “weak.” Secondly, this case study shows that the fourth strategy, avoidance, can be quite politically productive. Active avoidance allows musicians to express their disagreement with the government’s public transcript. This strategy is now embodied in an industry which reaches a wide audience – and therefore it is tremendously effective in disseminating the hidden transcript.

APPENDIX

My experience of recording the keyboard part for a song on an upcoming album highlighted a number of themes that I discuss elsewhere in this dissertation. When the day set for the recording arrived, the writer (who is a singer and was self-producing a *series*) was working on his family's goat farm. Luckily, the studio owner is a friend of his, and was able to contact him to find out exactly which song I was supposed to record. He directed his recording engineer to play the demo for me, and I dutifully sat down to write out the chord progression and melody in order to be able to improvise a piano accompaniment. When he saw that I was working through it much more slowly than expected, the studio owner came in to help me. (I managed to write down the chords for the verse after one listening, but asked the engineer to play the track repeatedly so I could discern the rest. Professional Burmese musicians, including this studio owner, would likely be able to write down the entire song after one or two listenings.) At this point, the differences in our respective backgrounds became apparent. As a Western-trained classical musician with perfect pitch, I can write out a series of chords, but since I have not spent much time doing this, I find it challenging. I write the chords as I hear them – in this case, in E major, since the demo track was recorded in that key. The studio owner, on the other hand, listens to and writes complex chord progressions on a daily basis, but he always writes them in C, since he uses C Rule notation. After about ten minutes, during which we tried to merge our understandings of the music, the recording engineer mentioned that the singer had already created notation. I seized on this, of course, wondering why he had not said anything earlier.

After playing through the part repeatedly, using the singer's notation, I told the recording engineer that I was ready to record. He misunderstood me, thinking that I merely wanted to re-record the solo section. It turned out that he had been recording

every “take,” unaware that I was only practicing. Although I had tried to explain this, he seemed genuinely confused by my actions. This makes sense: during his 18 months of employment as a recording engineer, he has likely not often seen musicians rehearsing, that is, playing their parts over and over without intending the performance to be the final product. However, we did finally realize that each of us was making incorrect presumptions about the other, and we managed to create a recording that I thought was adequate, although not excellent. I comforted myself by thinking, “Well, once the other *multiples* (guitar parts) are added, it will sound better.”

After the recording was concluded the studio owner clued me in: The recording was intended to be a voice-and-piano-only performance. Therefore, no other parts would be added. He informed me that the recording was now “finished” and prepared to burn a CD copy of the track for me. I protested: In my opinion, the recording was not finished, since the singer/producer had not been present and had not pronounced it to be what he wanted. “We should wait for him to decide whether or not it is finished. Maybe he will want me to re-do it,” I said. The studio owner and recording engineer burst into laughter. What an idea! They assured me in all seriousness that the singer/producer would approve of my playing – because, of course, musicians usually work independently in Burma, and do not criticize each others’ work. No producer would expect to tell a keyboard player to re-record a part.

Of course, they were right. On my insistence, they phoned the singer/producer and explained the situation to him. He too laughed, and then assured them (and me) that he approved the recording sight unseen (or better, sound unheard). The recording was finished. The singer/producer simply requested that I return once more to be photographed for the cover art.

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