

Andrew N. Weintraub. *Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010. Photographs, musical notation, glossary, bibliography, index. 258+ pp.

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At last, a book on dangdut, and an excellent one. It is hard to imagine that anyone with experience in Indonesia over the past thirty-five years could be unaware of dangdut and its pervasive presence in the Indonesian soundscape. The importance of this music was first recognized in the international scholarly world by William Frederick in his landmark article on Rhoma Irama in the pages of this journal almost thirty years ago.¹ Other scholars have devoted chapters to dangdut,² but it is only with this meticulously researched and engagingly written book-length study by Andrew Weintraub that we have the important combination of perspectives—historical, musicological, sociological, gender, and media/cultural studies—that this rich and multifaceted form of expression deserves. Weintraub offers this highly informative study under the rubric of “dangdut stories,” modestly pointing to the “incomplete and selective” nature of the stories he tells. But what he has accomplished is nothing short of a tour de force, giving us a very readable history of this genre, and untangling much about its diverse origins and the multiplicity of paths it has taken into the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Near the outset, following three telling vignettes of dangdut events he observed, Weintraub explains that the book is a “musical and social history of dangdut within a range of broader narratives about class, gender, ethnicity, and nation in post-independence Indonesia” (p. 11)—an ambitious project that is borne out skillfully in the pages that follow. We do, indeed, learn much about these social formations in Indonesia: the notion of “the people” (*rakyat*) in the decades following Sukarno and the *rakyat*'s association with the dangdut genre (class), the increasing role of women in dangdut and the highly politicized debates leading up to the recent “anti-porno” legislation (gender), the contested notion of “Melayu” as an ethnic and cultural category in relation to dangdut and its earliest roots, and the rise of regional dangdut (ethnicity), and the appropriation of dangdut by the elite as Indonesia's “national music” (nation). In each of these arenas, Weintraub follows through with his argument that dangdut not only reflects social conditions and attitudes, but that “dangdut as a political economy of contested symbols *mediates* meanings about social relations in modern Indonesian society” (p. 28).

Like the best of his ethnomusicologist colleagues, Weintraub combines a range of research methodologies. He interviewed performers, composers, producers, and listeners (including nearly all of the most famous dangdut singers, from A. Rafiq and Rhoma Irama to Inul Daratista); culled through archival and recent print materials (including old radio playlists); listened to and transcribed old and new recordings

¹ William Frederick, “Rhoma Irama and the Dangdut Style: Aspects of Contemporary Indonesian Popular Culture,” *Indonesia* 34 (October 1982): 102–30.

² See, for example, Timothy Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997); and Jeremy Wallach, *Modern Noise, Fluid Genres: Popular Music in Indonesia 1997–2001* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

(including rare 78 rpm recordings of dangdut's predecessors—an invaluable contribution of the book); both observed and participated (on stage, as a performer) in live performances; and took lessons in dangdut performance. This combination of research activities places his findings on very solid ground.

Following a thoughtful introductory chapter, Weintraub launches into the earliest period (ca. 1930s–1950s), grappling with the problematic notion of “Melayu,” so often invoked in discussing dangdut and its origins. Various early genres are discussed, with audio examples provided on the very helpful companion website, including *orkes harmonium* (harmonium/free-reed keyboard orchestra) and *orkes gambus* (gambus/lute orchestra) as well as early *orkes Melayu* (Malay orchestra). It is in this chapter that Weintraub offers some of the best musical description, with several transcriptions of melodic passages from early pieces, as well as discussion of the various rhythms that characterize these early forms.

The solidification of *orkes Melayu* (with its strongest influence derived from Indian film music), and the branch genre known as *pop Melayu* (with influence from American popular music), form the main focus of the fourth chapter, where Weintraub introduces important individual singers (Ellya Khadam and A. Rafiq, among others) and zeroes in on rhythmic and other musical characteristics borrowed from India. This is the kind of musical detail we have long needed in tracing the stylistic elements of dangdut.

Drawing on extensive research data, including a prolonged personal acquaintance with the “king of dangdut,” Rhoma (Oma) Irama, Weintraub devotes most of the following chapter to Rhoma's remarkable career, including his creative combination of rock instrumentation and style with the Indian elements of *orkes Melayu* to produce the sound that soon came to be known as dangdut. It is in this chapter, with focus mostly on the 1970s, that Weintraub demonstrates, convincingly, the growing importance of a mostly underclass urban *rakyat*, for whom and to whom Rhoma Irama's music spoke most directly. Weintraub posits dangdut and *rakyat* articulation operating as narratives on “three intertextual levels, which I will call (1) dangdut is the *rakyat*; (2) dangdut for the *rakyat*; and (3) dangdut as the *rakyat*” (p. 82). This succinct, if somewhat awkward, formulation is clarified at some length. The first is an essentialized and ahistorical notion that ignores foreign elements in dangdut and the corporate structure that produced and circulated dangdut (which Weintraub points out are definitely “non-*rakyat*”). The second shows how “influential social actors and commercial institutions have actively constructed audiences and meanings about the *rakyat*” (p. 82). Weintraub would seem to be accurate in his assessment that only with dangdut did the *rakyat*, as formulated here, become “a group whose class interests were subsequently reflected in a musical genre” (p. 82). The third, drawing largely on popular print publications, exploits representations of dangdut as the *rakyat*, invoked by elites discursively “to distance themselves from the people and culture associated with the music” (p. 83). The evidence in each of these three narratives, while not exhaustive, is compelling and convincing. Weintraub provides a good balance of focus on the lyrics and their social meaning, as well as Rhoma Irama's “style” (covering his costume, performance behavior and venue, as well as melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic features).

Following dangdut into the 1980s, Weintraub notes the increased involvement of women performers, the emphasis on themes of suffering and surrender, as well as the

performative “spectacle of excess” (citing Barthes’s work on wrestling), as dangdut gained wide popularity. Denigrated by Indonesia’s elite and a growing middle class during through the 1980s, dangdut found itself appropriated and, in part, “upgraded” by the Indonesian government in the 1990s and touted as Indonesia’s national music. As a frequent visitor to Indonesia (Java and South Sulawesi) during the 1990s, I would concur with Weintraub on the remarkable transformation of dangdut’s image among the elite and on his sense that, for dangdut’s main fan base, the disenfranchised lower class, dangdut’s national legitimacy and international recognition mattered little if at all.

Dangdut’s association with Islam reached one extreme in Rhoma Irama’s *dakwah* (proselytizing) messages in lyrics and films, and his public persona. It reached another in the highly controversial erotic performances of female dangdut singers, epitomized by Inul Daratista, who rose to national fame and notoriety due to her exaggerated dance moves (her famous “drilling,” or *ngebor*) and the ease of wide distribution via unlicensed video compact disks (VCDs) that bypassed established media-industry control, beginning in the late 1990s. Inul’s dangdut dancing (not so much her singing) triggered contentious debate that continues to the present over gender rights and representations. Weintraub skillfully weaves his discussion around the confluence of gender issues and varieties of Islamic response in post-Suharto Indonesia.

The final core chapter covers two variants Weintraub sees dangdut taking in the early 2000s: its move away from “national music,” and the “center–periphery” model of production and dissemination. His examples are telling, though I was expecting a more extended discussion of this trend in the context of the major shift toward political decentralization occurring simultaneously. He distinguishes between the “regional nationality” of basically regional forms that incorporate a few dangdut elements (primarily its characteristic rhythms) and the “national regionality” of basically mainstream-style dangdut that employs a regional language and some regional musical elements. While some of the regional dangdut songs are no doubt new, it is clear that dangdut in regional languages began several decades ago—something Weintraub acknowledges (p. 206), but chooses not to discuss in chapters covering earlier decades.

A few other minor points deserve mention here. Though Weintraub states that “local popular musics ... are produced in local recording studios for a local market” (p. 19), there is abundant evidence of local music (e.g., Pop Toraja and Pop Batak, among others) being produced in Jakarta.³ One can always wrangle over translation, and there are lyrics that I would have translated slightly differently than Weintraub did, but the basic sense seems to have been captured and rendered well throughout. Still, I would take issue with Weintraub’s statement on page twenty-two that “*Goyang* simply means ‘to move’”; more accurate would be “to rock, swing, or sway.” And Javanese music specialists, at least, would question his translation of *cengkok* (as used in an interview with Ellya Khadam) simply as “ornaments” (p. 60). As I have encountered it, in both Indonesian and Javanese discourse, it refers to a melodic phrase, often a formulaic one that can be used in different contexts, and often implies elaboration and some degree of complexity, rather than simplicity.

³ Andrew V. Hicken, “*Slankers Tongkonan Blues: Toraja (South Sulawesi, Indonesia) Songs in a Disjunct Mediascape*” (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2009).

Weintraub tells us he is offering us “stories” rather than exhaustive or comprehensive coverage. Nevertheless, I found myself relishing the occasional passages dealing with musical details, and particularly those still fewer passages that related musical detail to aesthetic response. Weintraub clearly has the (ethno)musicological tools with which to offer much more on musical style and, for me—and I suspect for other readers—this is the main “story” that still needs to be told. The earlier chapters start out in this direction, but the compelling social issues that dominate the latter chapters seems to have pushed discussion of musical style to the margins, or even off the page.

This being said, I would not want to argue for a reduction in the social analysis throughout these chapters in order to add greater musical detail. Weintraub has accurately assessed the interest of readers from diverse fields—foremost among them ethnomusicology and Indonesian studies, for which his study will stand as an exemplary book, solidly researched, foregrounding numerous important themes without burying them in exhaustive detail. Indeed, Weintraub concludes that there are other stories to tell about this remarkable genre. What he omits to mention is that he is clearly qualified to offer us more than a few of those stories himself. He leaves the door open for more research and writing on dangdut. Let’s hope he decides to do some of this himself. This reader, for one, is eager for a sequel.