18 The Electric Guitar in Southeast Asia: A Serpentine Path

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Introduction

Wherever in the world the electric guitar has traveled—and it has certainly traveled widely, to nearly every country and territory on the planet—it has provoked the most extraordinary innovations in the globally circulating genres of rock, metal, blues, jazz, reggae, and their many subgenres. In Southeast Asia, the electric guitar shaped and inspired new regional and national musics of deep social, cultural, and political significance to specific people and places. In Cambodian psychedelic rock and Pinoy jazz, rock, punk, metal, and reggae, Thai *wong shadow*, Indonesian *dangdut*, and Malaysian *kumpulan gitar rancak* (lively guitar groups), this once-new technology for manipulating, signaling, and amplifying tones and distortions has become as essential and localized as the region's countless lute antecedents, from the Bornean *sape* to the Vietnamese *đàn tỳ bà*.

Even a broad-stroke chronicle of the history and diversity of electric guitar music in Southeast Asia would fill an entire book. While this chapter will only attempt to narrow the knowledge gap on music technologies and popular music innovations in Southeast Asia, it will also explore the cultural, political, and mediatic forces that have shaped electric guitar music and the lives, livelihoods, and aesthetics of electric guitar players and their audiences. Much as Jeremy Wallach has described postcolonial rock music in the Global South, for nearly seven decades the electric guitar in Southeast Asia has been an agent of transformation for musicians, audiences, and even nations.[1] This chapter will tell the story of the electric guitar's serpentine path through Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam, and the rest of the region through its cultural contexts and consequences.[2] The instrument has attended to colliding epochs of decolonization, nation-building, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism. It has inspired youth reverie and dissent, and censorship and oppression. It has been a maligned symbol of Western imperialism and an essential tool of expressive freedom.

This chapter is executed with a debt to the small number of existing surveys, monographic, and edited volume publications examining

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Southeast Asian popular music and cited heavily throughout.[3] One chapter cannot sufficiently document every context with the care and acuity that a scholar or musician focusing on the particular electric guitar traditions of these specific places could. Therefore, it is grounded in the author's greater familiarity with Indonesia, as an ethnomusicologist, popular music scholar, and former professional in band management, festival production, and arts administration in Jakarta and Bali, roles that all called for close contact with electric guitarists, collectors, and luthiers.

Travel, Trade, and the Dawn of Southeast Asian Rock

The electric guitar's predecessor in Southeast Asia is, of course, the acoustic guitar, which traveled to Southeast Asia with European imperialists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the dawn of the twentieth century, cultural exchange was an aim rather than a consequence of trade and conquest in Southeast Asia. Traveling vaudeville troupes, orchestras, and operas ushered in the first intraregional popular musics, featuring creative collaborations between artists from the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Booming colonial economies opened the Southeast Asian market to American and European record companies, who promoted their catalogs of Western recording artists and helped to popularize jazz, rumba, and Hawaiian music across the region.[4] Hawaiian music was particularly popular in Burma, Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia, thanks to dance and music troupes from the islands who toured the region between the 1910s and 1930s. These troupes introduced the region to another lute innovation that remains popular today: the Hawaiian lap steel guitar.[5]

The 1940s and 1950s marked a period of accelerated decolonization in Southeast Asia. The Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Cambodia all gained their independence from the United States, the British Empire, the Netherlands, and France, though the cultural influence of their former colonizers remained. Beginning in the Second World War and throughout the Cold War and Vietnam War, US influence also spread through military bases, alliances, and US film and army radio broadcasts, creating what Barendregt, Keppy, and Schulte Nordholt describe as a "breeding ground for a hybrid popular culture," and for the birth of Southeast Asian rock 'n' roll.[6]

Much as it remains today—and despite its prevalence in jazz, blues, and numerous regional genres—the electric guitar became synonymous with rock 'n' roll in Southeast Asia. This is due in no small part to its ubiquity in film, which provided most Southeast Asians with their first taste of rock music from the United States, United Kingdom, and France. The popularity

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of film—and musicians on film—established what Johan and Santaella call a decades-long “symbiotic relationship” between film and popular music.[7] Films such as *Rock Around the Clock* (1956) and *Don’t Knock the Rock* (1957), featuring American rock innovators such as Bill Haley and Chuck Berry, were major box office hits in Singapore and Indonesia, as was *The Young Ones* (1961) starring Cliff Richard in formerly French-controlled Cambodia and Singapore.[8] By the 1950s, Southeast Asian nations were producing their own rock-centric films featuring local-language actors and musicians. The electric guitar became a mainstay in the film studio orchestras of countries like Malaysia.[9] In Singapore, two releases, *Muda Mudi* (a literal translation of “The Young Ones”) in 1965 and *A-Go-Go ’67*, were exported to Malaysia and Indonesia, the region’s other Malay-speaking nations, kicking off an intraregional film industry that traced the same music and theatre trade routes of decades past, and an intraregional obsession with rock ’n’ roll.[10]

Beyond film, radio broadcasts and playback technologies—first, the transistor radio, and later the audio cassette—were key to the wide circulation of rock music across Southeast Asia, and beyond the cities playing host to the cinema. The American Forces Vietnam Network, first established in 1962 to entertain American soldiers, launched a powerful 50 kilowatt AM transmitter in Saigon that could be picked up throughout Southeast Asia via transistor radios, bringing everything from American rock ’n’ roll to the Top 40 to new Southeast Asian audiences.[11] In due time, The Beatles, Cliff Richard, The Monkees, The Archies, and Peter, Paul, and Mary became mainstays on Thailand’s own FM radio.[12] The Burma Broadcasting System, which mandated English-language broadcasting, all but ensured that US and UK rock bands dominated the airwaves.

With decolonization came a period of nation-building that inspired a rejection of Western cultural domination, at least among political elites. Many radio stations were ordered to prioritize regional acts—the first airwave quotas of the region. Burmese radio subsequently became an early exemplar of radio support for local rock music, playing equal parts broadcaster and promoter: the station aired a weekly amateur talent hour, during which local bands were invited to play live on air.[13] In the Philippines, the rise of Pinoy rock is often credited to legendary rock deejay Ramon “RJ” Jacinto, whose station, Radio DZRJ 100.3, began broadcasting in 1963.[14] Similarly in Indonesia, the widespread popularization of rock ’n’ roll was triggered by Denny Sabrie, who founded *Aktuil*, the nation’s first pop music magazine, as a forum for rock criticism. The magazine was published between 1967 and 1984, hitting a peak circulation of 126,000 in the early 1970s.[15]

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The Electric Guitar in Postcolonial Southeast Asia

Following decolonization, much of Southeast Asia experienced a mass internal migration, as the promise of education and wage-based employment lured young people from the villages to the cities. The cities, thus, birthed the first generation of a postcolonial urban middle class ripe and ready for the mass consumption of popular music. As Barendregt, Keppy, and Schulte Nordholt have noted, for the first time, a minority of young people "could afford to buy gramophone records, a radio set, some electric guitars, and travel to distant places for dancing contests," a popular form of social entertainment throughout much of Southeast Asia.[16] Cities granted rising guitarists access to clubs and other performance spaces, record labels and distribution outlets, terrestrial radio, television broadcasts, and paying audiences. In Phnom Penh, Yangon, Bandung, Manila, Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), and on the island of Penang, the first generation of guitar-centric bands had access to all the resources needed to nurture Southeast Asia's first local rock music scenes and recording industries. By the late twentieth century, the countries of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which all shared the Malay language and geographic proximity, also fostered the cross-pollination of Melayu rock and heavy metal scenes.[17]

While cities connected artists to audiences, this did not immediately resolve the challenge of accessing instruments. Electric guitar manufacturing in Asia dates to the 1960s in Japan, but it largely focused on exports to Western nations. For decades, the only available electric guitars were imported and prohibitively expensive to own for all but the most successful musicians. Resourceful artists such as Mol Kagmol, one of the founders of Cambodia's first "guitar band," Baksey Chamkrong, resolved this problem by building their own electric guitars. Kagmol based his instrument on a magazine photograph of a Gibson.[18] Other instrumentalists, including some of the most successful rock bands today, overcame this resource gap by borrowing guitars from friends or neighbors for rehearsals and performances or sharing the cost of purchase among multiple players.[19] As Emma Baulch has noted of the elusive double pedal in Bali's early heavy metal scene, a culture of borrowing helped to strengthen social ties, supported artists' skill-building, and inspired creative collaborations within local scenes.[20] Eventually, affordable brands such as Yamaha put up a shingle in most city centers, as did local small-scale luthiers and large-scale manufacturers. In the last thirty years, local manufacturing and expanding trade partnerships have made the electric guitar more accessible to burgeoning artists in Southeast Asia. Additionally, though far from ubiquitous, media deregulation and an expansion of information and

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communications technologies have eased access to both regional and international electric guitar musics.

In an assessment of postcolonial rock music in the Global South, Wallach articulates a "four-phase trajectory" for the absorption of rock music by the formerly colonized nations. This model is useful for understanding the electric guitar's assimilation into local, widely variant cultures.[21] It all begins with initial exposure to Western artists through film and radio, the catalyst for budding guitarists to teach themselves by imitating what they hear. Wallach calls this the phase of "precise replication." Singapore's "beat bands," such as Beatles cover bands of the 1960s, were part of this first phase, as were the Balinese heavy metal progenitors Baulch documented in the 1990s, who began by imitating the songs of their favorite death and thrash acts.[22]

During a period of "linguistic hybridity," performers utilize their first language, either by translating existing popular songs, writing new lyrics for foreign songs, or, in the later stages, writing original songs in local languages, but with most of the stylistic and instrumental trappings commonly associated with Western rock originators. Most Southeast Asian rock acts who started out in the 1960s and 1970s—Koes Plus, Indonesia's earliest commercially successful rock band, comes to mind—would fall predominantly into this category, as would the countless current rock, punk, metal, and experimental jazz acts active today, from Indonesian grunge-psychedelic rock band Navicula to Vietnam's popular punk trio 7Uppercuts.

During the third phase, which Wallach calls "musical hybridity," bands begin to incorporate local musical elements into performance, including tunings, rhythmic patterns, vocal timbres, or ornamentation, or dance styles that would be quite familiar to local audiences and largely foreign to Western rock's first generation. Prudente cites, as an example, Filipino rock musicians who incorporated instruments such as the *kulintang*, an instrument made up of horizontally laid, suspended gongs, and the *kubing*, a bamboo jaw harp, into rock performance. Balinese electric guitarist I Made Balawan has incorporated the Indonesian gamelan's instrumentation, tunings, and interlocking patterns in his compositions. All four of the albums he released with his band Batuan Ethnic Fusion illustrate his gamelan experimentation and prowess in the touch-tapping technique he adapted from artists Eddie Van Halen and Stanley Jordan.[23] His contemporary, Dewa Budjana, equally renowned as the electric guitarist for Indonesian rock act Gigi and an experimental jazz artist, also cites his Balinese heritage as an important influence on his playing style, and several of his solo instrumental albums feature song titles referencing Balinese Hindu cosmology, culture, and ecology.[24]

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Of course, musical hybridization is not unique to rock music or accelerated decolonization: in Southeast Asia, it is as old as seafaring and trade. Said Abdullah Bamazham presents an early twentieth-century case for this: the composer combined Indonesian *keroncong* with jazz, rumba, Hawaiian music, the tango, and the Arabic *gambus* (lute) in the 1920s.[25] Further, phases may overlap; certain phases may be truncated, elongated, or wholly absent; and new genres and new bands will likely start the process from imitation to innovation all over again. Malay pop yeh-yeh, for example, originated in Singapore and Malaysia in the early 1960s through bands covering The Beatles and Cliff Richard and the Shadows. It gained wider favor after bands such as M. Osman and The Clans began incorporating Malay lyrics and melodies.[26] Phnom Penh's Baksey Cham Krong began in the mid 1950s by closely imitating Cliff Richard, before moving on to perform traditional Cambodian songs with Western instrumentation, and, finally, writing their own Khmer lyrics delivered with a distinctively Cambodian vocal style in timbre and ornamentation.[27] These bands all moved from precise replication to musical hybridity throughout their careers.

By contrast, Koes Plus began writing Indonesian-language songs in the early 1960s, although heavy metal bands did not begin to compose Indonesian-language songs until the 1990s, preferring instead the English language of their Western rock heroes. Sundanese artist Rhoma Irama introduced his prized Fender Stratocaster to the lineup of his *orkes melayu* ensemble in the early part of his career, and later into *dangdut*, along with the synthesizer and drum kit, helping to transform the regional genre into the nation's most beloved popular music.[28] *Qasidah*, a broad category of Islamic devotional songs, became *qasidah moderen* (modern *qasidah*) when artists adopted the stylings of pop and jazz, eventually adding Western popular music instrumentation including the keyboard, synthesizers, and electric guitar. The all-female and multigenerational *qasidah* group Nasida Ria is an outstanding example: active since 1975 and famous for their large ensemble (with up to twelve members) and matching Javanese attire and hijabs, they include the electric guitar, bass, and keyboard, alongside the tabla and *suling* (flute) in their accompaniment. Each of these examples illustrates that while phases of musical replication and hybridization are neither predictable nor entirely linear, they are commonplace and help trace the aesthetic and technological innovations inspired by the electric guitar's pathways through Southeast Asia.

Equally commonplace, and key to understanding the electric guitar as an indigenized musical technology—and not a Western import to Southeast Asian popular music—is the assimilative naming of genres and

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music ensembles in which it features. In Malaysia, the term *kumpulan gitar rancak* (lively guitar group) or *kugiran*, for short, dates to the pop yeh-yeh groups of the 1960s and refers to any band featuring an electric lead and rhythm guitar and electric bass.[29] Thai *wong shadow*, named after Cliff Richard's influential band, initially combined Cuban cha-cha-cha and rumba rhythms with Thai percussive ornamentation and instrumentation, and would later include any Thai music based on rock music's standard four-part band.[30] In Burma, the genre "stereo" derived its name from the dual-track tape decks used in recording. Stereo originally referred to any Burmese-made pop, rock, R&B, disco, or country music, and now refers more narrowly to Burmese psychedelic rock.[31] The term "Pinoy" began as a derogatory term for Filipinos migrating to the United States before the Second World War but evolved into an endearing form of self-reference, attached to musical styles as early as the 1970s—music was performed by Pinoy artists, for Pinoy audiences. While today's Pinoy pop, Pinoy rock, Pinoy folk, Pinoy punk, and Pinoy hardcore may appear to carry no trace of indigenous aesthetics in terms of musical style, instrumentation, or even language, each of these genres has been explicitly named and claimed as an integral component of Filipino culture. As Prudente succinctly explains, "American and British bands served as models and became a springboard in the creation of local rock music."[32] Then, local artists did as artists have always done; they created something new with deep meaning and cultural significance in both the local context and the Pinoy diaspora.

The Electric Guitar, Politicized

For nearly seventy years, the electric guitar has played a transformative role in Southeast Asian cultures, inspiring musicians and audiences, genres and scenes, and instrument manufacturing and trade. As an instrument requiring a cultural reorientation toward "sound *and* noise," the electric guitar has also been polarizing, pitting young people against their parents, tradition against modernity, and West against East.[33] The governments of Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam have each, at pivotal moments, attempted to "stifle rock and roll influence" and its instrumentation as a tool of Western imperialism.[34] Foreign rock and pop were banned in Burma by the Burmese Socialist Programme Party in the 1960s and for the better part of the country's fifty years of military rule.[35] Singapore's infamous 1967 ban on the Beatles songs "Yellow Submarine," "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," and "With a Little Help from My Friends," due to their perceived glorification of drug use, was not lifted until 1993, and the state-run Media Development Authority

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continues to monitor and censor film, art, broadcasting, publications, and music recordings deemed inappropriate for Singaporean citizens.

Cambodia's electric guitar story presents an exceptional case of government intervention in popular music, including chapters on active endorsement *and* brutal suppression.[36] Following independence from France, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, a leader with xenophilic tendencies and a penchant for European jazz, rock, and pop, actively supported the development of Cambodia's own versions of these genres. He viewed European influence not as a threat to Cambodia's nation-building but as a pathway to its modernity and participation on the global cultural and political stages. By the 1960s, hard rock, psychedelic rock, soul, and funk all thrived in Cambodia, finding ample support for recording and live performance in the vibrant metropolis of Phnom Penh.[37]

Between 1969 and 1973, the political landscape—and popular music—shifted dramatically in response to the United States' catastrophic military operations. Officially launched to drive out the North Vietnamese and protect Cambodia's borders, the United States campaign of carpet bombing left nearly half a million Cambodians dead. A military coup, a common phenomenon under the politically destabilizing conditions of decolonization, placed blame on Prince Sihanouk for the Vietnamese invasion and triggered his overthrow. The military regime also censored much popular music: rock music was pulled from the radio, nightclubs were only permitted to operate during the safer daylight hours when bombings were easier to avoid, and musicians were informed they would only be permitted to record and perform nationalistic songs.

When the Khmer Rouge seized control of Phnom Penh in 1975, the new regime took even swifter and deadlier measures to eliminate "Western decadence and urban perversity."[38] The Khmer Rouge took over national radio, destroyed vinyl records and cassettes, closed all night clubs, and banned any music other than what it explicitly commissioned. The city of Phnom Penh was emptied, and the entire country was transformed into a prison farm, with everyone, including musicians, laboring for the state. Seen as threats to Cambodian subservience and loyalty, the Khmer Rouge murdered or disappeared an estimated 90 percent of the country's artists and entertainers, including both traditional and popular music performers. In a period of less than four years, Cambodia's love affair with the electric guitar and rock music came to a tragic and bloody end.

Soekarno, Indonesia's first president following independence from the Dutch Empire, publicly vilified the electric guitar and the music and dance of rock 'n' roll as signs of both Western imperialism and cultural degradation. In 1957, the state-owned Radio Republik Indonesia temporarily

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removed rock music from the airwaves, and municipal authorities banned public dancing to rock 'n' roll.[39] On August 17, 1959, to commemorate Indonesia's independence, President Soekarno delivered his notorious *Political Manifesto* (Manipol) speech, equating economic imperialism with cultural imperialism and urging young people to reject the West's neocolonialist agenda, advanced through the cultural products of music and dance.[40] He said, "And you, young men and women, who certainly oppose economic and political imperialism, why are there many among you who do not oppose cultural imperialism? Why are there so many among you who still like to rock 'n' roll, dance the cha-cha-cha, and listen to this crazy-style [*ngak-ngik-ngok*] music?"[41] Soekarno's declaration caused the public burning of rock records and a second ban on radio broadcasts of rock music.

As Sen and Hill have noted, "official censure turned rock into a symbol of defiance against state authority."[42] Foreign albums were accessed on the black market and via radio broadcasts by overseas stations (accessible through shortwave radios), and the nation's earliest electric guitarists thrived, despite Soekarno's rock condemnations. The Koes Bros (later, Koes Bersaudara and, most famously, Koes Plus) first formed in the early 1960s as a tribute band for The Everly Brothers and The Beatles, before developing their own sound and earning a reputation as Indonesia's first commercially successful rock band. In 1965, the bandmates were detained by authorities for three months for playing "*ngak-ngik-ngok*" music. But arrest only solidified their reputation as rock music rebels and accelerated their successful careers through the 1960s and 1970s.

While the West often figured as the spectral threat of neo-imperialism and cultural demise in Southeast Asia, the true target of state censorship has more often been the dissenting citizenry, particularly young organizers and student organizations who were active in the anticolonial struggle and remained committed to protesting corruption and oppression following independence. Conversely, Soeharto, Indonesia's second president, was not averse to Western influence: he even secured an American alliance to help achieve his political agenda. He also seized power through a deadly coup and genocide, and orchestrated the government's militarization, the state's control of all broadcast media, and the brutal oppression of his opponents, including artists, novelists, and poets, alongside teachers and journalists. Yet the New Order regime, as Soeharto called his administration, also defined a new era of Indonesian cosmopolitanism that enabled Western rock music to circulate widely, both through the reentry of Western music labels and the circulation of pirated cassettes. Unlike his predecessor, Soeharto was unconcerned

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about Western influences like rock 'n' roll. Indonesian rock bands such as The Rollies and God Bless flourished throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Rock musicians recorded and performed relatively free from state censorship, despite penning songs that overtly criticized the New Order. Several artists were even involved in the mass student protests that catalyzed Soeharto's downfall in 1998.

The New Order was not entirely free from intervention in rock music subcultures, however. Baulch has documented how metal and punk fans in the 1980s were at high risk of being labeled *preman*, underclass gangsters who were targeted for police brutality, imprisonment, and even execution.[43] As part of a secretive campaign dubbed the mysterious shootings (*penembak misterius*), the Indonesian Army undertook the targeted detainment and extrajudicial execution of young men whose visible tattoos and mohawk hairstyles supposedly signified their criminality. These men were often blamed for public disturbances and riots, which occurred with increasing frequency in the tumultuous final years of the Soeharto regime and often coincided with large public gatherings, such as open-air rock concerts. Rioting followed Mick Jagger's Bandung performance in 1988, local folk rock legend Iwan Fals's performances in Jakarta in 1989 and 1992, and most notoriously, Metallica's stadium performance in Jakarta in 1993. Iwan Fals was subsequently banned from public performance for years, as were all heavy metal bands following the riot on the night of Metallica's show.

The last decade has marked a reversal of fortune for the electric guitar in Indonesian national politics. Perhaps no Southeast Asian leader since Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk has more enthusiastically or publicly embraced rock music than President Joko Widodo. Jokowi, as he is affectionately known, has spoken publicly about his love of international metal bands such as Metallica, Megadeth, Lamb of God, and Slayer. He was photographed alongside other metal fans during Metallica's second concert in Jakarta in 2013, sporting a Napalm Death t-shirt and gesturing with the devil-horn metal salute. He celebrated his inauguration at a rock concert organized in his honor featuring local rock giants Slank and British band Arkana. Jokowi was even embroiled in political controversy resulting from his love for metal: first in 2013, as Jakarta's governor and a presidential hopeful, when he was gifted a bass guitar by Metallica's Robert Trujillo, and then in 2017, when he received a limited-edition box set of *Master of Puppets* from the Danish Prime Minister. The gifts were viewed by anti-corruption investigators as unlawful bribes. The bass was ultimately sold at auction, and the president paid a reported 11 million rupiah (USD $800) to keep the box set.

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The Electric Guitar, the Metropoles, and the Internet

In the final phase of postcolonial rock's expansion, described by Wallach as a rare occurrence, "the periphery influences the metropoles."[44] In other words, songs, genres, and instrumentalists from the postcolonial world reach audiences in the formerly colonizing nations. A recent example is the female metal trio Voice of Baceprot (VoB) from Sunda, West Java, who have attracted worldwide news coverage, earned a spot at the preeminent Wacken Open Air rock music festival in 2022, and staged their first US tour in August 2023. VoB's success has greatly expanded awareness of Indonesian metal beyond diehard metal fans. Notwithstanding their clear talent as players, their global stardom may have something to do with the exoticism imposed on young female rockers donning hijabs. Earlier Indonesian metal acts who made Wacken appearances and toured internationally—metal band Burgerkill played Wacken in 2015 and 2022 and toured the US and Canada in 2019, delivering sixteen shows in sixteen days—have received far fewer international media mentions or critical accolades than the West Java metal trio. Other electric guitar-wielding punk, rock, metal, reggae, and rockabilly bands from Indonesia have staged world tours, performed at South by Southwest, and, in the case of Bali's psychedelic grunge outfit Navicula, even recorded in the hallowed halls of Los Angeles's Record Plant. By and large, however, reception in the West for Southeast Asian electric guitar music has been warm but short-lived, and the strongest fanbases are still found closer to home.

Only a few electric guitarists from Southeast Asia have been afforded the freedom of travel (beyond humanitarian crisis) or global attention (except for a handful of outliers). But electric guitar fans in the region have greatly influenced the global touring industry, keen to corner an enthusiastic and lucrative touring market for the world's biggest rock acts. More than thirty years before Metallica's 1993 performance in Jakarta, Cliff Richard gave a blockbuster performance in Singapore in 1961. Deep Purple played for audiences of more than 100,000 for two consecutive nights in Jakarta in 1975. Green Day, Iron Maiden, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Lamb of God, and many others have followed in their footsteps, connecting European and US acts with a fanbase of millions across the region.

Generally, when Southeast Asian guitar-centric music *has* traveled abroad and planted roots elsewhere, it has done so by following the waves of postcolonial, accelerative immigration, joining the soundscapes of the diaspora. In the United States, the quadrupling of the Filipino population since 1980 has created an audience for Pinoy rock, particularly in the greater Los Angeles area. Long Beach, California, boasts

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a neighborhood called Little Phnom Phen, an official business corridor that highlights the large number of Cambodian retailers in the area. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the United States' global influence and the relative ease with which many Americans travel abroad, the first band to bring widespread attention to Cambodia's rock 'n' roll history after the fall of the Khmer Rouge was started by a white American keyboardist, who learned about Cambodian psychedelic rock while traveling through country in the 1990s. He formed the Los Angeles-based band Dengue Fever and invited Cambodian singer Chhom Nimol to front the band after holding auditions in Little Phnom Penh.

Eventually, the electric guitar's Cambodian story would be rediscovered by the children of refugees, who would lead a renaissance for Cambodian rock 'n' roll, thanks in large part to user-uploaded audio tracks on YouTube featuring the best-known performers of the 1960s. While the near-total severing of the nation's citizens from their rock music past is unusual, most Southeast Asian nations have struggled to preserve their rock music legacies through war, military coups, and economic crises. But the internet has enabled the rediscovery of some of their earliest electric guitar players. For example, a YouTube clip posted in 2010 of the Indonesian-Dutch Tielman Brothers, who fled Surabaya to avoid racial persecution and eventually settled in the Netherlands, adjusted the Indonesian rock timeline back from the formation of the Koes Brothers in the 1960s to a start date in the mid 1950s. Compilation albums, such as *Those Shocking Shaking Days: Indonesian Hard, Psychedelic, Progressive Rock and Funk 1970–1978* by Now Again Records (2011), *Thai Beat A Go-Go* released by Subliminal Sounds (2004), and *Cambodian Rocks* by Parallel Worlds (1996), were all promoted to a Western audience, but ultimately renewed widespread interest in Southeast Asia's rock music history, including at home. *Cambodian Rocks*, a literal bootleg compiled by an American tourist from tapes he purchased in Siem Reap, also sparked an important debate about intellectual property and cultural extractivism: the first release failed to name the featured performers or even the song titles. In a critical album review for *Far East Audio Reviews*, Mack Hagood described the album as "an early example of the anonymous-Whitey-finds-weird-Asian-music phenomenon."[45] Song credits were eventually crowdsourced from Cambodian listeners and now feature on the album's digital version.

In the last fifteen years, several Southeast Asian artists and music industry insiders have taken on the mammoth task of archiving the region's rock music history, both through the digitization of audio recordings and the establishment of physical archives and museums. Irama Nusantara, for example, was started by David Tarigan, a cofounder of

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the Indonesian independent label Aksara Records, with a mission to digitally archive as many commercially released Indonesian albums as possible.[46] The archive's foundation has collaborated with the Ministry of Education and Culture to accelerate this digitization project. With initial support from the State Museum of Penang and a shoestring budget, Malaysian music industry veteran Paul Augustin, in partnership with British expatriate and social policy planner James Lochhead, established the Penang House of Music (PHoM). Through its museum, archives, black box events space, and research center, PHoM has helped to preserve the relics of Penang's unique musical heritage—including several vintage electric guitars owned by Malaysian artists active in the 1970s—and educate artists, scholars, and audiences about the long history of Penang radio, music venues, and commercial recording industry.[47] PHoM's exhibitions pay tribute to Penang's many beloved electric guitarists, such as Akashah Ismail of the Falcons and New Faces and Ernest 'Boy' Barnabas: both were active in the 1960s and regionally popular, thanks to Shah's Singapore and Vietnam performances and Boy's extended residence in Thailand. The museum also honors the diverse cultural influences of Malaysia's ethnic communities on Penang's popular music, such as Indonesian and Malay traditions like *ronggeng* and *joget*, Chinese opera, and Indian instrumentation, including the tabla and sitar.

Minding the Knowledge Gap: Southeast Asia's Unseen Players and Luthiers

Despite the valiant efforts of self-made archivists such as Tarigan, Augustin, and online music fans, and the considerable contributions of Southeast Asian electric guitarists to the dynamism and ingenuity of postcolonial rock, all of these important players remain overshadowed by the English-speaking instrumentalists and luthiers, mostly white and mostly men, who have failed to look beyond the United States and United Kingdom for great instruments and players. As a result, the best-selling white male US and UK performers remain the primary influencers on burgeoning players in Southeast Asia. Much as in the US and UK, the electric guitar's earliest Black innovators, from Sister Rosetta Tharpe to Muddy Waters, remain largely unheard by Southeast Asians.

There is work to be done to render this history visible to Southeast Asian guitarists. It is also important to grant Southeast Asian guitarists pride of place on the global stage, both for where they come from and the excellent music they make. When asked to name the most prolific and influential players worldwide, guitarists from the US to Indonesia will

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likely place Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, and Eddie Van Halen high on the list. But Indonesians will likely point with pride to Van Halen's Indonesian heritage: his mother was from Rangkasbitung, West Java. His parents moved to the Netherlands after Indonesian independence, though a combination of anti-Asian racism and his father's enlistment in the US Air Force would eventually bring the family to Pasadena, California.[48] Notable Indonesian guitar players who match in creative prowess and technical virtuosity the best Western guitarists include Bali's Balawan, who rose to fame for his eight-finger tapping technique on a custom double-neck guitar; Ian Antono, lead guitarist for God Bless since 1974; Abdee Negara, lead guitarist of rock band Slank, and active since the 1980s; and Dewa Budjana, founder of the rock band Gigi and a prolific jazz guitarist with an international reputation in the global experimental jazz scene. Further, almost every band formed from the 1990s onward will cite homegrown acts as primary influences on their style. Koes Plus always earns a mention among Indonesian rock bands, as does God Bless, who formed in 1967 and remains active today, even collaborating on albums and performances with the current generation of rockers.

Southeast Asian luthiers and guitar manufacturers also deserve the attention and praise afforded to companies in the United States and Western Europe for high-quality electric guitar craftsmanship. Yet one need only spend a few minutes browsing electric guitar blogs and forums to recognize a widespread fetishization of American-made Gibsons and Fenders, and derision for Asian-made electric guitars of any ilk—apart from Japanese manufacturer Ibanez. This is due, in part, to the provenance of instrumental innovations, dating to Fender's Telecaster and Stratocaster in the 1950s, which contributed the "blueprint" for the modern solid-bodied electric guitar.[49] However, as early as the 1960s, Japanese luthiers were producing excellent copies of American brands. Yamaha released its first electric guitars in April 1966, and by the 1970s, several Japanese companies were established to satisfy a regional market. By the 1980s, as production costs soared in the United States, several American makers partially moved production to Asia: first to Japan and, after costs rose there, to Korea and Taiwan. In the 1990s, Harmony, Gibson, and Fender each moved production for at least one of their guitar lines to Southeast Asia.[50] Several Fender Squier Strats have been jointly manufactured in China and Indonesia since 1998, and PRS Guitars now exclusively manufactures its PRS SE, designed with Carlos Santana, at its Surabaya factory. Yet despite a long history of production outsourcing by US and European companies to Asian countries, especially for entry- and mid-level lines, the value hierarchy still tends to place US-made instruments at the top and ranks Asian-made instruments by the degree of perceived

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economic and technological "development" of their countries of origin. Japan tends to get high marks, Korea comes in second, and Chinese, Indian, and Indonesian-made instruments rank lowest for craftmanship.[51] Unfortunately, the hierarchy is often adopted within Southeast Asian contexts, creating a class divide between the wealthiest instrument collectors and players, who can acquire US-made Fenders and Gibsons, and most guitarists who depend upon the availability of more affordable, entry-level Yamahas and local brands.

During the 2000s, a sea change in attitudes toward local guitar-making was set in motion by a "buy local" movement in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Today, local luthiers boast a solid market of new and experienced players passionate about Indonesian-made custom guitars. Radix Guitars has been the most successful, securing design collaborations with recording artists such as Gede Robi Supriyanto from Navicula and Edwin Marshall Sjarief from the Bandung rock band Cokelat. Supriyanto even brought his custom-made Radix Jarvis Telemaster on his Central European tour with Navicula in 2018. Havoc Guitars bill themselves as "the darkside of radix guitars" [*sic*], specializing in Flying V and Warbird designs based on models by Gibson and ESP Guitars, respectively, and popular among heavy metal guitarists. A notable trend in custom guitar-making across acoustic, resonator, and electric guitar models is the feature of custom woodcarving and paintwork, evoking Indonesian visual arts, puppet theatre, and textiles. Ivan Mulia, luthier and owner of iVee Guitars, is a blues guitarist who etches well-known batik and *songket* patterns onto his handmade resonator guitars. For decades, Dewa Budjana has collected guitars hand painted by artists specializing in sacred painting, depicting characters from the Balinese iterations of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Budjana has also commissioned several guitars featuring figures from shadow puppetry and Javanese and Balinese cosmology from luthier and master woodcarver Wayan Tuges. Before turning his attention to guitars, Tuges grew up and trained in traditional Balinese woodcarving, which transforms local teak, hibiscus, and crocodile wood into sacred statues, wall reliefs, and musical instruments. He brings that same craftsmanship to his handmade instruments, produced and released by Blueberry Guitars. In 2015, Budjana announced plans to open Museum Gitarku (My Guitar Museum), a museum dedicated to the electric guitar's history in Indonesia, to feature his own collection of more than 200 pieces as well as instruments autographed and donated by international stars such as Peter Frampton and Carlos Santana.[52]

Despite these many exciting innovations in guitar music and lutherie in Indonesia alone, few music researchers have attempted to address the knowledge gap on guitar-centric music in Southeast Asia. Most popular music researchers tend to direct their intellectual energies toward studying

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US and UK popular music, while ethnomusicologists, who are more likely to take an interest in Global South musics, have tended to favor so-called traditional musics for much of our history. Anything considered derivative or tainted by Western encounters has been largely dismissed until relatively recently. The proof is in the published word: Jaap Kunst, the Dutch researcher credited with giving ethnomusicology its name, published *De Toonkunst van Bali* with his wife, Katy Kunst-van Wely, in 1924, focusing on the classical music-dance-theatre complex. Countless books, research papers, articles, and dissertations written by scholars, musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and practitioners that delve into various aspects of the Indonesian gamelan have followed, well into the twenty-first century. Yet the first book covering Indonesian rock music was not published until 1998,[53] and very few books on Indonesian popular music and culture have followed. Wallach, one of the earliest American scholars of Southeast Asian popular music, provides important context for this research gap: "popular music scholarship has underemphasized the socio-political impact of rock music in the decolonized world, due to outright ethnocentrism, misguided preoccupations with cultural authenticity, and the outmoded 'cultural imperialism' thesis."[54] Unfortunately, as this chapter has illustrated, the cultural imperialism thesis was also adopted by authoritarian leaders to characterize rock music as an imposition of Western musical traditions and a threat to national identity.

The current generation of Southeast Asian music scholars is correcting this narrative however, both by promoting and reclaiming the study of popular musics of the region, and asserting that globally circulating genres such as rock, punk, and metal are fully assimilated local "traditions" that have played a crucial part in shaping national and regional identities. This is evidenced by the establishment of the Inter-Asia Popular Music Studies Group (1982), the Indonesian Chapter of the Punk Scholars Network (2020), and the Southeast Asian Chapter of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (2019), as well as the 2021 publication of *Made in Nusantara: Studies in Popular Music*, which convenes authors from the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia to examine the popular musics of nations and regions long connected through maritime trade.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the electric guitar in Southeast Asia through its history, cultural and political significance, and signature within locally popular genres of music. As the instrument made its way around the world

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through film, records, radio broadcasts, and instrument manufacturing, it has nourished both popular music's globalization and an emergent youth culture and market. It has been a technology for aesthetic innovation and cultural exchange, inspiring new genres and intraregional scenes, and new playing techniques, instrumentation, and instruments.

The electric guitar has also witnessed the turbulence of decolonization, nation-building, and ensuing political instability and cultural identity crisis. In postcolonial Southeast Asia, the electric guitar has armed an emerging youth culture seeking independence both from colonial-era subservience *and* the previous subjugated generation. It has also been a target of political strategy for the region's bloodiest dictators and most progressive presidents in their efforts to define sovereignty, progress, and national identity.

In the various nations of Southeast Asia, the electric guitar's legacy and resonance have been determined by the Southeast Asian players, makers, documentarians, archivists, and fans who have transmitted and transformed it—in performances, recordings, film, YouTube videos, and luthier workshops—and who have preserved it through instrument collections, archives, and research texts. The electric guitar has much to tell us about what Steve Waksman calls "a deeper shift in the cultural disposition toward sound" *and* noise, as Southeast Asian guitarists have broadened their tonal and timbral palettes with new possibilities in electronic signaling, amplification, and distortion.[55] But it has an equally important role in helping us understand the residual impacts of cultural contacts, the rise of nations and youth cultures, and the past, present, and future of Southeast Asia. It will be up to the next generation of Southeast Asian scholars to continue to seek out the electric guitar's serpentine path.

Notes

1. Jeremy Wallach, "Global Rock as Postcolonial Soundtrack," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rock Music Research*, edited by Allan Moore and Paul Carr (Bloomsbury, 2020): 469–485.
2. This chapter will address some, but not all ASEAN Member States (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam), due to the constraints of space and resource availability. Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea, current candidates for membership, are not covered here, though musicians—including electric guitarists—have played pivotal roles in the Freedom Movement and merit deeper investigation.
3. Particularly relevant to this topic are Craig A. Lockard's seminal *Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1998); Bart Barendregt, Peter Keppy, and Henk Schulte Nordholt's concise but instructive *Popular Music in Southeast Asia: Banal Beats, Muted Histories* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017); and Adil Johan and Mayco Santaella's outstanding edited volume assembling the current generation of Southeast Asian popular music scholars, *Made in Nusantara: Studies in Popular Music* (Routledge, 2021).
4. Barendregt, Keppy, and Schulte Nordholt, *Popular Music in Southeast Asia*, pp. 18–19.
5. See Mantle Hood's "Musical Ornamentation as History: The Hawaiian Steel Guitar," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 15 (1983): 141–148. Even following the guitar's electrification, Hawaiian

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guitar music remained quite popular in Indonesia, inspiring a new genre of hybrid popular music called *Hawaiian*, which employed an electric Hawaiian steel guitar. See Philip Yampolsky's liner notes for *Music of Indonesia, vol. 20: Indonesian Guitars* (Smithsonian Folkways, 1999), pp. 5–6.

6. Barendregt, Keppy, and Schulte Nordholt, *Popular Music in Southeast Asia*, p. 12.
7. Johan and Santaella, *Made in Nusantara*, p. 10.
8. Barendregt, Keppy, and Schulte Nordholt, *Popular Music in Southeast Asia*, p. 41.
9. Tan Sooi Beng, "Revisiting Post-Cultural Imperialism: Singing Vernacular Modernity and Hybridity through the Lagu Melayu in British Malaya," in, *Made in Nusantara*, p. 69.
10. Johan and Santaella, *Made in Nusantara*, p. 12.
11. See Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard, Armed Forces Radio and Television Service Collection (finding aid), Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2019 [rev. 2023]. Available at https://findingaids.loc.gov/exist_collections/ead3pdf/mbrsrs/2019/rs019006.pdf (accessed October 18, 2023).
12. Viriya Sawangchot, "Thai Popular Music and Its Unsatisfied (Popular) Tastes in the 1960s and the 1970s," *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 6/4 (2021): 518.
13. Heather MacLachlan, *Burma's Pop Music Industry: Creators, Distributors, Censors* (University of Rochester, 2011), p. 7.
14. Felicidad A. Prudente, "Colonialism and Identity: A Short History of Popular Music in the Philippines," in Johan and Santaella, *Made in Nusantara*, p. 38.
15. See Emma Baulch, "Genre Publics: Aktuil Magazine and Middle-Class Youth in 1970s Indonesia," *Indonesia* 12 (2016): 85–113.
16. Barendregt, Keppy, and Schulte Nordholt, *Popular Music in Southeast Asia*, p. 43.
17. See Johan and Santaella's introduction to *Made in Nusantara* for more on pan-Southeast Asian scene-building, pp. 1–22.
18. LinDa Saphan, "Norodom Sihanouk and the Political Agenda of Cambodian Music, 1955–1970," *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* 64 (2013): 4.
19. Drum kit ownership remains even rarer: only professional drummers of the highest caliber own their kits—though most recording drummers invest in quality cymbals. Others depend on recording and rehearsal studios and venues for access, making live performance a coveted opportunity to play on a complete kit.
20. Emma Baulch, *Making Scenes: Reggae, Punk, and Death Metal in 1990s Bali* (Duke University Press, 2007), p. 55.
21. Wallach, "Global Rock," p. 473.
22. See chapter 2 in Baulch's *Making Scenes*, pp. 49–72.
23. For an excellent overview of Balawan's style and influence, see David Harnish's "The Hybrid Music and Cosmopolitan Scene of Balinese Guitarist I Wayan Balawan," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 22/2 (2013): 188–189. For explicit illustrations of his guitar-gamelan fusion, see "Magic Reong" and "The Dance of Janger" on *Magic Fingers* (Sony BMG, 2005), an album that earned him international critical acclaim and invitations to perform in Europe, Australia, and Japan (*ibid*., p. 194).
24. See the albums *Nusa Damai* (Dawaiku Records, 1997) and *Surya Namaskar* (MoonJune Records, 2014), the latter recorded in collaboration with drummer Peter Erskine and bassist Reggie Hamilton.
25. Johan and Santaella, *Made in Nusantara*, p. 23.
26. See Hidzir Junaini, "We Love You Pop Yeh Yeh: A Brief History of Malay Rock 'n' Roll in the 1960s," *Redbull Music* (July 28, 2016). Available at www.redbull.com/sg-en/we-love-you-pop-yeh-yeh (accessed October 18, 2023).
27. Saphan, "Norodom Sihanouk," p. 4.
28. *Orkes Melayu* (trans. Malay Orchestra) is a broad genre of Malay-language songs historically accompanied by Western orchestral instrumentation but maintaining distinctively Malay verse and melodic structure and vocal ornamentation. See Andrew Weintraub's "Music and Malayness: *Orkes Melayu* in Indonesia: 1950–1965," *Archipel* 79 (2010): 57–78. *Dangdut* was initially influenced by Indian film music and Malaysian orchestral music, with the added vocal embellishments common to Muslim recitation and West Asian song. For more on Rhoma Irama's decades-long career and role in popularizing dangdut, see Weintraub's *Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

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29. Mayco A. Santaella, “Revisiting the ‘Traditional’ and the ‘Popular’ in Maritime Southeast Asia: Towards a Nusantara Popular Praxis,” in *Made in Nusantara*, p. 30.
30. Barendregt, Keppy, and Schulte Nordholt, *Popular Music in Southeast Asia*, p. 49.
31. MacLachlan, *Burma’s Pop Music Industry*, p. 4.
32. Prudente, “Colonialism and Identity,” p. 38.
33. Steve Waksman, “The Turn to Noise: Rock Guitar from the 1950s to the 1970s,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Guitar*, edited by Victor Anand Coelho (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 110.
34. Barendregt, Keppy, and Schulte Nordholt, *Popular Music in Southeast Asia*, p. 45.
35. MacLachlan, *Burma’s Pop Music Industry*, p. 4.
36. This history is reconstructed through archival recordings, photographs, and interviews with survivors of US military operations and the Khmer Rouge in the 2015 documentary *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten: Cambodia’s Lost Rock and Roll*, dir. John Pirozzi (Argot Pictures), 2015.
37. Barendregt, Keppy, and Schulte Nordholt, *Popular Music in Southeast Asia*, p. 48.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia* (Equinox, 2007), p. 166.
40. See Teraya Paramehta, “Mencari Rock ’n’ Roll: Akses Musik Anak Muda di Masa Pelarangan, Musik Barat oleh Soekarno, 1959–1967,” in *Lanskap: Mosaik Musik Dalam Masyarakat*, edited by Irfan R. Darajat (Yogyakarta, 2018), p. 136.
41. Author’s translation.
42. Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia*, p. 166.
43. Baulch, *Making Scenes*, p. 20.
44. Wallach, “Global Rock,” p. 473.
45. Mack Hagood, “Various: Cambodian rocks,” *The Far Eastern Audio Review* (April 26, 2004). Available at https://bit.ly/48XjRqa (accessed October 18, 2023).
46. After launching in 2004, Aksara Records became one of Indonesia’s largest independent record labels. It ceased operation in 2009 due to financial difficulties.
47. See Paul Augustin and James Lochhead’s *Just for the Love of It: Popular Music in Penang, 1930s–1960s* (Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2015), which is based largely on the museum’s collection.
48. Van Halen briefly describes his family’s experiences in the Netherlands and move to the United States in 2017; interview with Denise Quan for the Smithsonian Museum of National American History and Zócalo Public Square’s project, “What It Means to be an American.” Available at youtu.be/yb26D8bBZB8?si=ZgYg6HZ-rdbOV_Yj (accessed October 18, 2023).
49. Tony Bacon, *The Ultimate Guitar Book* (Alfred, 1991), p. 66.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 110–113.
51. This was confirmed by American guitar professor Junauro Landgrebe by personal communication (October 3, 2022).
52. The museum has yet to open its doors, but Budjana continues to use the name to refer to his personal collection.
53. Lockard’s *Dance of Life* was the first publication dedicated to Southeast Asian popular music, including Indonesia.
54. Wallach, “Global Rock,” p. 469.
55. Waksman, “The Turn to Noise,” p. 110.

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