The Beginnings of Indie: An Interview with Joe Ng

In 1991, Joe Ng formed the indie rock band The Padres. It performed numerous times at The Substation, Singapore's first multidisciplinary arts centre, which was housed on Armenian Street from 1990 to 2021. A prolific and versatile composer and sound designer, his works span multiple musical styles and screen genres. He has worked on over a hundred projects from feature films, shorts and commercials to art installations, including box office horror hit, *The Maid* (2005), acclaimed art house film, *7 Letters* (2015), and most recently, HBO Asia's *Invisible Stories* (2020).

This is an edited transcript of an interview with him in September 2021, conducted as part of the research for the exhibition *Home Grooves: A History of Singapore's Live Music Venues* at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

How did you come to be a musician, and what was the scene like when you were starting out?

When I was a teenager, there was a particular form of music, alternative music, which really woke me up. I discovered that it wasn't just the music that I was interested in. I was fascinated by the fact that in the UK and the US scene, whether in the mainstream or independent scene, there was a very well-organised ecosystem with a healthy economy of creators, facilitators, exhibitors, pundits and consumers. And when I say creators, I mean the bands, artists and singers; facilitators are the record companies and promoters; exhibitors are the venues; and pundits are the magazines writing about it, with critics and consumers. So, there was this very healthy economy in which everybody co-existed and complemented each other, and the system encouraged and grew this particular music form. It represented not just what young people of that generation in those countries were doing, but also what the culture and atmosphere was like at that time and what the socio-economic, political situation was like during that time in the '80s and '90 — particularly the '80s, [a politically charged period in the United Kingdom when there were riots protesting policies introduced by the Conservative government of] Margaret Thatcher.

So, we saw all that, and it made my friends and I think, "Hey, why do we not have this ecosystem here in Singapore?" Then we started to ask, "Why? We have record companies." The major record companies came to Singapore in the late '80s. I think the intellectual property law came into effect in 1987[1]. Anyway, we had record companies and a lot of pubs back then in Singapore, but none of them were encouraging or letting local musicians perform original works. However, a lot of works in that ecosystem in the UK or in the US were all original works, whether it was Echo & the Bunnymen, the Sex Pistols, The Clash or Philip Glass, so we started asking why. The funny thing is that I didn't feel frustrated because it hadn't existed before [in Singapore]. I just took it as, we didn't have [that kind of scene], so it just didn't happen. It wasn't happening.

At that point in time, I was getting involved with the guys from *BigO* magazine – Michael Cheah, Philip Cheah, Steven Tan. I was starting to write for the magazine, so we started knocking on doors and going to libraries. Then I was starting to work for a record company back in 1990, and I was also starting to knock on doors at various schools. I organised concerts for [indie band] AWOL and a couple of local bands at Tanjong Katong Girls School, a few schools here and there. So we were trying to open up, trying to knock on doors, and it was quite challenging. The funny thing is, after having said all that, the concept of original music is a [new] concept for a lot of people. When I knocked on the doors of pubs, live houses and schools and said we were gonna have a local band play at their spaces, and

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[1] With the passing of the Copyright Act in 1987, Singapore developed indigenous IP laws. Prior to 1987, IP protection took reference from the laws of the UK.

they'd be playing original music, their reactions were, "Hmm? Local music?" That's when the frustration started to [come], and even a bit of anger. Why, for me personally, did it come [to this]?

So the only way forward was to keep doing it. And, thankfully, we had a couple of great people from [the record labels] Warner Music, including Jimmy Wee [of] Pony Canyon. Jimmy Wee was fantastic. I mean from the onset, since the '80s, he was championing Dick Lee. He was [championing local music] as much as he could, because there wasn't any existing stuff. The whole ecosystem just died in the '70s, when the government clamped down on long hair, rock music, et cetera. There weren't any jobs, so everybody from the [sound] engineers [to] club and pub owners and promoters had to switch lanes or livelihoods, they had to do other things. And so the entire ecosystem that had existed in the '60s and all that just disappeared. So everybody was starting from square one, or even square zero. Fortunately we had people like Jimmy Wee and *BigO* magazine starting to come in and recruiting us young 'uns: me, Patrick Chng [of indie band] The Oddfellows, Ivan Thomas, Mike See. We were doing stuff, trying to knock on doors and organise concerts. There was also Nazir Hussain, a good friend of mine, who was also writing for *Big O*. Nazir started his own fanzine and entertainment company, and I was basically his right-hand man.

What did the opening of The Substation do for live music?

When [theatre director Kuo] Pao Kun opened The Substation in September 1990, Philip, Michael and Steven got wind of it. I can't remember who told who. Then me and Nazir went down to The Substation. We knew somebody who was working there at that time who facilitated the meeting, and we asked if we could also have music at The Substation garden. The music and the concerts that we liked to have over there would be what I'll call left-wing music, or liberal left wing, unpretty music. There would be punk rock, there would be trash metal, anything that was non-mainstream at that period of time, which meant no Abba and no Richard Clayderman. And Pao Kun was very cool about it and he agreed. Then I looked at him and I said, "Hey, it won't be pretty music," and then he said something—I'm just paraphrasing what he said, but it was something like this—The Substation is a place for people to experiment and to do anything they want. And true to his words, many years down the line, it wasn't just non-mainstream music, there were also mainstream artists performing there, and it was open to anybody coming in, so it was a place where all forms are welcomed. The genre or the categorisation of it, for him, does not matter. What matters for him is that you have something to say, so he has a space where you can say it the way you want to say it. And it was very cool. I mean, during the first gig that we organised, for the life of me I cannot remember who played or anything about it. [But I remember] he was there at the gig, and then I think Professor Tommy Koh (the first National Arts Council chairman) and him were sitting together in the crowd at The Substation garden, watching some trash metal [or] heavy metal band.

I daresay that from 1990 to 1991, we must have had at least four or five gigs [at The Substation], and those five gigs featuring local original music were more than all the gigs featuring local music in the '80s. The Padres played there during that period. The other bands [frequently in the line-up] were [punk band] Opposition Party, The Oddfellows, [rock band] Humpback Oak [and hardcore band] Stompin' Ground.

What were the challenges organising indie music gigs in the '90s?

Most of the gigs in the early days were packed. The technical, marketing, security, front-of-house – [all these different aspects of organising gigs fell] into place because there were a lot of people in the scene, mostly people we got to know through the first [few] gigs [who

agreed to help out)]. The challenges were not in finding people [to help] or getting the audience. It was all quite smooth sailing, until the police came in (laughs). I wouldn't even say it was a bad thing, mostly fights in the car park and cops breaking it up.

I think the main challenge was after the 1992 concert by The Rollins Band (where Stompin' Ground was the opening act). The New Paper ran a sensationalist headline (on its front page), "Would you let your son do this?" After that there was a ban on moshing. This affected us (gig organisers). Down the line, under the CID (Criminal Investigation Department regulations), there were a number of prerequisites you had to meet to get your licence [for a gig]. You had to have barriers in front of the stage, [maintain] X amount of distance between stage and crowd. And then there was a very strict rule whereby audience members are not allowed to speak to the artists. You also had to have a deposit of $1,000 or something like that before they issued your licence, and if the organisers breached any of these rulings, it would be confiscated. Nazir did not have to give the money upfront. Instead, he had to sign a guarantee, so if there's any breach it will be $2,000 or $3,000.

For our small gigs at The Substation, [the ticket] at the door was about $5, so if there were 200 people, we were looking at $1,400 [at most]. That was one of the challenges that we faced. And where would we get barriers? So Nazir said we could rent it from the People's Association. The irony! So we hired a huge pickup truck and went to the People's Association at Kallang and we collected the barriers. For each one of them, the rental was about $50, so 20 times 50 was like $1,000. It was a lot of money. And we brought them to The Substation to unload and set them up. We had to do this for every gig. We were so scared. During the show, we would have to place bouncers to [tell audiences], 'Hey, make sure you don't touch the artists ah, don't touch the band ah!' Looking back, it's funny, but it was very infuriating at the time.

So what would you say was The Substation's impact on the indie music scene?

In 1991, Nazir and I were the only guys organising gigs. I think towards the tail end, in 1991 or 1992, there were other players coming in, people were coming in and saying, 'Hey look, wow, I also want to organise my own gigs featuring singer-songwriters.' They were a bit deterred by the money they had to come up with upfront and all the rulings that they had to adhere to, but like all rulings by the government, [the authorities] came down hard, then relaxed after that. Because [then Prime Minister] Goh Chok Tong said in the 2000s, Singapore is a fun city now (laughs).

The impact [The Substation] had was incalculable. It was a domino effect. Students [would] come for the gigs, and when they went back to their schools, they would say, "Hey, why can't we have it in my school?" Kids studying at Lasalle College of the Arts, at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, especially those at Ngee Ann Poly, started their own series, Radio Heat Wave Presents. Radio Heat Wave was their so-called college radio station. Within the campus, they tried to follow the model of college radio in America where DJs played [music]. They basically started organising their own [gigs]. Every quarter, the numbers were increasing. Every three years down the line, they were increasing, to the point where I remember in the late '90s or early noughties, I was looking at a listing—I can't remember whether it was a *Straits Times* listing or online [publication] like *BigO* or some magazine. I was looking at the listings and I said, "Wah, so many gigs ah." So it was like a domino effect where pundits started organising gigs themselves. Venues, looking at this, realised there was a trend. There was a market for original indie music. Hard Rock Cafe also had their [indie music] night. So did [big clubs like] Sparks and Fire Disco.

As you entered the 2000s, how did the live music scene change?

There was a major event: the Asian Financial Crisis (of 1997). About six months after it hit, Jimmy Wee's Springroll (Entertainment, a record label) cut down the number of recordings and releases because everybody was cash-strapped. The number of gigs went down. A number of independent releases by other bands were also [scrapped], because there was no money. Everybody suffered. During the early noughties, the next wave of (local) bands emerged—Electrico, Plain Sunset, The Great Spy Experiment. But there weren't any new venues, just a lot of existing venues.

***Home Grooves: A History of Singapore's Live Music Venues* is an exhibition at the Esplanade Concourse. It is free of charge and runs until 18 August 2023.**