PopLore#3: The fertile ecologies of Singapore Malay pop

Hanie Nadia Hamzah:
Welcome to part three of *PopLore: Stories of Singapore Pop*, a seven-episode series. I'm Hanie Nadia Hamzah, a producer at Esplanade, Singapore's national performing arts centre. And I'll be telling you the story of Singapore's Malay pop.

Let's start this story with some reflections from singer-songwriter Art Fazil. In 2015, the year of Singapore's 50th anniversary as an independent nation, he curated an exhibition about Singapore Malay music's long history. Here's why he felt highlighting this story was important.

Art Fazil:
Being a musician, I'm also a music student, in a historical sense. I like to see what it was like, who are the artistes from before. Even with the western music, I used to buy a lot of Rolling Stones magazines and just go like, oh, Terrence Trent D'Arby was influenced by James Brown, all right, who's James Brown, then I go and read up on James Brown and buy his music and all that.

With the Malay music scene, it was the same, but it was a lot closer to me, because I was part of it. So I thought, this is an opportunity to show what Singapore initiated. Because the industry that was initiated in Singapore, later on became the Malaysian music industry. Because it started in Singapore. It's a huge body of work, that came out from Singapore, for at least, at least three decades before the Malay music operations moved up to Kuala Lumpur back in late 80s.

Hanie:
How did Singapore become the centre of Malay pop? In episode one, we touched on how traditional Malay music was influenced by waves of migration and colonialism, and how hybrid forms like *bangsawan* music made its way into Malay movies. These movies, produced by Cathay-Keris Studio and Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions, continued to play an important role in showcasing subsequent waves of popular Malay music as the industry bloomed in the 1950s. Regional music-makers made their way to Singapore to find work as composers and performers in this booming film industry, which also gave Singapore the best recording facilities in Southeast Asia. The infrastructure for producing Malay pop music was further enriched by local branches of Western record labels.

Art:
We had the technology. All the major record labels, like EMI that was selling a lot of Western pop music, also had their local branch, which was recording local artistes. And a lot of the artistes who were living in Malaysia came down to Singapore back in the '60s and '70s, even up to '80s, to record because we had the technology. We had the recording facilities, which wasn't in existence in Kuala Lumpur back then.

Hanie:
The fever for British rock 'n' roll that swept Singapore in the early 1960s had a particularly interesting impact on Malay pop. Its musicians did not just copy The Shadows and The Beatles. Instead, they put their own unique spin on this electric

sound, and created something very special. The music they invented was called pop yeh yeh, a name believed to be inspired by The Beatles song *She Loves You (Yeah Yeah Yeah)*.

Here's musician Rudi Salim with more about this made-in-Singapore genre.

Rudi Salim:
Pop yeh yeh is a unique blend of Malay music. It's influenced [by] the Beatles and The Shadow sounds. So during those days, we are under British influence, right? So the locals will listen to their music. After Cliff Richard and The Shadows came to Singapore in 1961, the copy group mushroom all over the island. Everyone wanted to be like them: lead guitar, rhythm guitar, bass and drummer. So the Malay pop bands form[ed] all over the island. Uniquely they had the support of movie industry, Shaw and Cathay-Keris. One of the earlier Malay pop band which made the debut was The Swallows. In 1965, they were tapped by Shaw Brothers for the movie *Sayang Si Buta* and introduced Ahmad Daud and The Swallows with their hit song *Si Manis Tujuh Belas*, followed by *Dendang Pontianak* in [the] movie *Pusaka Pontianak* with their unique modern sound.

They use the Fender (guitar) but they have a special sound, they call it Ekotape to make the sound like a space-guitar sound. So without this Ekotape, the guitar cannot produce the echoing sound. The uniqueness about the music, pop yeh yeh, even if it's a sad song, it become so happy that people dance to the sad song. When you read the lyrics, right, it's a sad song, but people are singing, twisting, with the song.

Hanie:
Suzana, released by M. Osman in the mid-1960s, is widely acknowledged to be the first pop yeh yeh song. And it's a great example of pop yeh yeh's infectious exuberance.

[song plays here]

As you can tell, the British influences are clear. But pop yeh yeh also had its very own flavour.

Rudi:
I think I strongly believe that before these musicians or these singers involve in pop yeh yeh, they already are singing traditional music, like *joget*, *inang*, or *zapin*. They are already singing that song before they went into the pop yeh yeh scene. So I think there's some influence from there, they brought into the pop yeh yeh music.

Hanie:
For instance, Rudi's father, Salim I, was the frontman of the pop yeh yeh band, The Wisma. And he had a background in traditional music.

Rudi:
My father music, some of them are actually a *joget* sound, but he change it into a modern sound during that time. They put in, instead of the *rebana*, they put in the drums.

Hanie:
Pop yeh yeh became a phenomenon, and Singapore was at the heart of this movement. Its lively rhythms even survived Singapore's 1965 split from Malaysia. This historical moment marked the start of the Singapore Malay film industry's decline, as many film-makers here decided to move to Kuala Lumpur. But the pop yeh yeh bands played on, and many continued to tour Malaysia.

Singer Rahimah Rahim remembers being part of such shows in the late 1960s when she was in her teens.

Rahimah Rahim:
Before the Malay scene, music scene transferred to Malaysia, Singapore was very hot that time with all the pop yeh yeh singers like Jeffrydin, Sanisah Huri, Rafeah Buang, you know, the Singaporeans, Sharifah Aini… most of them are from here. I used to follow them because my mom also was an actress. So they used to have road shows, you know, because actress, actors, they go for road shows, so we travelled to Malaysia. You know, like, one event manager will take us, drive up to Malaysia to Johor, the famous Ayer Hitam port where all… we sing on stage, and you know, so many *kampung* people will watch us.

Hanie:
The famous pop yeh yeh bands were the star attractions for these shows, and Rahimah says she was still very new to show business then. But in fact, she had started acting in Cathay-Keris movies when she was just six years old, and began appearing in TV shows when she was eight. As a young teenager, she also joined her father, singer Rahim Hamid, as he performed in Orchard's top nightclubs.

Rahimah:
I know it's not right because we… under-age, right? Still studying, but… Malay call it *curi-curi* lah [sneak in]. So, my dad used to say if you get caught, you just hide under the piano or just, you know, keep quiet.

Hanie:
She hid under the piano quite a few times, but that didn't stop her from learning from her dad.

Rahimah:
He's my mentor because I love entertainment, and I enjoyed his entertainment. He is a very good entertainer actually. He is full of humour. He likes to joke around. My father is very bubbly and he's very jovial. He taught me how to entertain, how to face a crowd. Most important, what I remembered he said, don't bring your problem to work. And even if you're sick, you don't have to show people because people pay to watch you. And then he said, you have to make people happy.

Hanie:
This work ethic served her well as her career took off. In 1974, she won the Kimi Koso Talentime competition in Japan. Upon returning to Singapore, she began performing at several venues operated by Mandarin Hotel. These were the Neptune Theatre, Mandarin Court, and Kasbah. Neptune was a massive restaurant-theatre at

Collyer Quay, where performers could glimpse the sea from the stage. The other two spots were in Mandarin Hotel itself, which was located in the heart of Orchard Road.

Rahimah:
The whole Orchard Road from Cockpit (Hotel) right up to end of Tanglin, you know, the Ming Court (Hotel), that is the famous Singapore nightlife. Neptune is more of… show time. There's always a theme. The theme will go on for one month. So like, for instance, this month is going to be Japanese theme. The setting, the dressing, the songs… we have to sing Japanese also, because of the theme. It was very beautiful those days, you know, it was very exclusive.

And after that, I have to rush because it was only one hour there. So I have to rush to Mandarin Court. Mandarin Court, it was a Chinese restaurant, so I was one of the singers there and I sang in English. As time goes by, I have to learn Mandarin song. So that's where I started singing Mandarin song and you know, the Taiwanese singers they taught me – I teach them English, they teach me Chinese. I work every day without any off day, so I work for three years there. And then when Kasbah opened, and it was an elite, very, very exclusive club where only members can come in. So we see a lot of royalties, a lot of VIPs… that's where we entertain. And Mandarin was the first place where I started alongside with Anita Sarawak.

Hanie:
Rahimah already knew Anita, whose parents were also in the Malay film industry. But as colleagues, she looked at Anita in a whole new light.

Rahimah:
I feel like I'm very small, you know, because I'm new, right? I was 18 and she's already there, you know, singing and she's very, very sizzling lady. But as a person, she's very… she's very quiet. She don't speak much. She only talk when necessary, like that, but we are friends. Yeah, we are good friends. And I also watch her perform. I learn also a lot from her. When she's on stage, she's an entertainer, she's a real entertainer. Because singing is like this, singing everybody can sing. How they sing is their own way, their own creation. That's why you have to be yourself. I just be myself.

Hanie:
What did it mean to be Rahimah Rahim? Well, she was disciplined, often working till 3am every day. She was also very adaptable. Even though she had first fallen in love with music through the jazz standards her father performed, Rahimah was quick to master new genres as they became popular.

Rahimah:
I follow what the market like. Because when you sing in the club, we have to follow what the people like. So it's always the current music, the current music… I love challenge. That's why I'm… actually, I'm a master of none, you know, but I love to learn something new, and someone give me that, I'll take that challenge.

Hanie:
Besides doing live shows, the 1970s also saw the release of Rahimah’s first record.

Rahimah:
Those years, the songs are from Japanese songs turn into Malay songs, covered songs, Chinese songs, Japanese, German songs, whatever songs you have, English, you know, in the 70s very popular, right? In the 70s, they do have originals also, one or two only, but singing my originals, that was 1982 for that album *Gadis dan Bunga*. That was done in Malaysia, by Johari Salleh. He was a Singaporean. He went to Malaysia. He was Singaporean actually, originally.

Hanie:
Here's a taste of her hit song *Gadis dan Bunga*, which means "The Girl and The Flower".

[song plays]

Rahimah:
This song is very simple, actually. But the arrangement, the way the lyrics… is simple and… and everybody can sing it. Until today, they're still playing it on radio.

Hanie:
One musician who got his start around the same time as Rahimah was Tahir Ali, better known as Jatt, from the band Black Dog Bone. For this podcast, Jatt spoke to us remotely from his home, where his seven cats occasionally chimed in with their opinions as well. So look out for their meowsings in Jatt's soundbites.

As a boy growing up in Tanjong Katong's Kampong Amber, Jatt had no family connections to showbiz. But he did have a very supportive father.

Jatt Ali:
You know, that time, my dad is not a rich man. I can't afford to buy drum set. You know what I did, you know the kerosene tin? Then I put the one wood, and then with the cover, as if that was a cymbal. So I just play ta-ta-chang.. like Chinese *dong-dong-chang*… So after a while, my father maybe look at me like that. And I think he really work hard and then he keep some money. Then he got me a second-hand drum set. It's about $500 during that time. It's only simple drum set, not full set. That mean you have one drum, one snare and one floor and one cymbal. So from there, I started playing, practice, practice, practice, practice, practice, practice... That's where my music passion really deep inside me.

When I was Sec One, I go to school, I don't bother about my study. I bring a transistor radio, go to school and then I listen to music. The teacher saw me, caught me, "Hey, what are you doing? Why you bring this transistor radio? Okay, you don't want to study, you go right behind, go and sit behind." So it's going until my Secondary Two, I told my parents I give up study, I don't want to study. My father is okay, my mother, no no no…! I told her, no, why you must waste your money, I don't like study. You keep ask me to go to school but I don't really want to study. Then my father back up me, yah yah, it's true, it's true. Because my father is the one lah, save me from that. So after that, Secondary Two, I quit.

Hanie:
That left him free to pursue music full-time. While he was still under-age, Black Dog Bone, which was made up of Malay and Chinese members, played at venues where there were no age restrictions, such as weddings. Eventually, they made their way into some of Orchard's buzziest discos, including Ming Court Hotel's Barbarella, and Shangri-La's Lost Horizon.

Jatt:
Barbarella is a nice place to work. And we are the backup band for all the international artistes like Teresa Carpio. That's where the band become more tighter, more tighter… and people more know about Black Dog Bone because we can back up all the international artistes. We love to work in Barbarella. You learn a lot, there's a lot of good artistes playing there.

Lost Horizon is a normal club, but it's a nice place to work also, nice ambience, nice everything, you know? We love everything. We love to play rock, we love to play funk, and we love to play even classical Chinese. Because you learn, you learn something, you learn something from there. Our music is open.

During that time, the Singapore band, our local band, if you want to see them, every time after three o'clock, at this Newton Circus, after 3am, you can see all the musicians with all the jackets and all the suits, because we hang out there, we *makan* [eat], we chit chat chit chat… you can see all the bands there, you can see all the colours there.

We have to spend our money on the outfit. It's not cheap, y'know. Every month at least two suits. Not one suit, ah, play for three months, no no no no no... The contract is six months, always six months, so you, at least, you must have three or four suits. Bell bottoms also, with the high heel shoes, five inches.

Hanie:
Black Dog Bone got signed to local label Tony Tony, and then moved to EMI, where they recorded a mix of originals and covers. In 1979, they scored a six-month contract to play at a club in Amsterdam. That was where they first performed *Fantasy*, a song by American band Earth, Wind & Fire. Later, their Malay cover of this song, *Khayalan*, became one of their biggest hits.

Jatt:
This song is, everywhere I go they want me to sing this song. During that time the key was very high. It's on E, an original key from the original singer. But the original singer sing falsetto and I'm singing a natural voice. I told the producer, "Hey, I can't reach this key, it's very high." He forced me to do it. I said I cannot do… you can do it, he forced me to do it. So I have to force myself and fight myself. Thank God it's there.

Hanie:
When they returned to Singapore, Black Dog Bone staged a concert at the National Theatre, which had a seating capacity of close to 3,500. Fans snapped up every ticket. Jatt shares an old tradition for those who couldn't get into gigs held at this beloved venue, which has since been demolished.

Jatt:
If the ticket is sold out, where they go? They climb the trees. In Malay we call it "*tiket daun*", plant tickets, that mean you have to climb the trees and watch the band, 'cause already sold out, there's no ticket. A lot of memories there, a lot of good bands, all good local bands in Singapore is playing there, even Anita Sarawak is performing concert there.

Hanie:
The same year, Black Dog Bone performed to an even larger crowd in Malaysia.

Jatt:
At National Stadium, Kuala Lumpur, you know the capacity? 60,000. Serious, 60,000. And we are shivering. We scared to play. 60,000 crowd, just imagine. But once we start the music and the crowd was jumping, woah… the fans were jumping… all gone, enjoy, we give our energy, we give them. Because we really put our passion in music. Make sure you play right. Everything is right. That is what they call passion. That's why people are… other musicians like, inspired by us. Because we really work hard for the music. We don't *cari makan* [to get by], no no. There's no attitude of *cari makan*. When it comes to music, we are serious in music.

Hanie:
Around the time of these homecoming concerts for Black Dog Bone, things were starting to change in Singapore's Malay pop scene.

Art:
The Malay operation shifted with the change of currency. You know, at one time, Singapore (dollar) and Malaysian ringgit was at same value. And then I think somewhere in the 80s, it just changed. The dollar was not to the ringgit anymore. So it makes sense for companies that had a bigger Malay market to move the operation to the city, to their capital. So that's when they all moved the Malay operations to Kuala Lumpur (KL). And it's a gain for the Malaysians, and it was a loss for the Singapore-based artistes. So that led to a brain drain because a lot of the producers, songwriters who were involved with the Malay music industry, moved to KL.

Hanie:
The trending sound of Malay pop also shifted. The sunny riffs of pop yeh yeh gave way to hard rock and heavy metal. The representative Malay rock band of the era, Sweet Charity, was influenced by Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin. Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, Art was aware of these sounds even though he was writing songs that leaned more towards pop and folk. And, as it turned out, his start in the business would come about through Sweet Charity frontman Ramli Sarip.

Art:
I had an uncle who was a musician. Back then in the '70s, he was buying all these vinyl records that were like, lying around… it was like, Deep Purple, Jimi Hendrix, all stuff like that, you know. And you could smell the vinyl and go like, wow, this is really cool. And then eventually, I started learning the guitar. Because my other friends were also learning it. Obviously, rock was very big in the '70s, and eventually 80s as well. It was the time of AC/DC, Kiss, all the guitar bands. So you end up learning the guitar more properly, because, you know, rock music very much based on guitars.

But I had a problem. My problem was I couldn't copy the chords. I couldn't copy the style because you know, a lot of the bands when they go for jam session, they want to try and emulate and copy note for note of the song, you know, it's not an interpretation, but rather a proper cover of a song. I just couldn't do it properly, you know. So, because I wanted to learn new chords, I kind of imagine a song using those chords. So that's how I ended up writing my own songs.

By the time I was doing my A levels, I was writing a lot of songs in both languages, Malay and English. So I kind of just have this kind of bipolar thing going on, like on one hand is I have to learn how to write songs that will appeal to the Malay listeners which are my friends, at the same time, I'm thinking I should write songs in English.

So I wrote some songs and made acoustic demos at home. The one that I sent to Warner Music… I made a call after I sent it in and then I was told to come down to the office. I met with Jimmy Wee, who spoke to me for a while and he said, you know, your songs are good, but you can't sing. Why don't you leave your songs and, you know, maybe somebody else can record it. And I was, you know, with the ego of a young man going like, no, I'll just take my demo back, thank you very much.

So what happened was, as I made a belakang pusing, I made a u-turn and going out of the office, there came in Ramli Sarip. Ramli Sarip is a crossover of Bruce Springsteen and Robert Plant. At that time he was with a famous band called Sweet Charity that was signed to Warner Music, and he, himself is signed as solo artiste to Warner Music. So he was just coming in, and I go like, okay, he's a rock star coming in, what do I say? This is where you learn the importance of marketing. I said, I have some rock songs, would you like to listen to them? You know, because he's a rocker, right? So I had put in that word, “rock” songs. They were not like heavy, big sound, you know, but it could pass off. Anyway, he said, why don't you just send me your songs? As Bob Marley would say, when one door is closed, another is opened. So that door was closed and then immediately when I turned around, I got my songs to Ramli Sarip. And then he end up recording some of my early songs. And that got me started into the music business.

Hanie:
We’ll be finding out more about Art’s adventures in the English-language music scene in a future episode. But here, he talks about his Malay-language folk band Rausyanfikir, which is Persian for “thinkers”. The other members of the group were Esham Jamil and Mohd Khair Mohd Yasin.

Art:
We were friends first, who had the same idea about doing our own songs, and we were performing at kind of poetry recitation events around Singapore. We just thought, well, just write songs and perform them ‘cause there was no roadmap how to get a record deal.

Hanie:
He would write the map himself. By 1992, he had gotten a record deal with Pony Canyon, offered to him by the same Jimmy Wee, who had evidently changed his mind about Art’s potential. Art asked the label to consider distributing Rausyanfikir’s

first record as well, and they agreed. The group became known for songs that explored social issues, such as *Dhikir Fikir Fikir*.

[song plays]

Art:
The song is about identity. Your identity as a modern person, where you are in between the modern world which is, a lot of it is derived from the Western civilisation, and then you also have your cultural stuff, which is from your roots, from your history, from your culture. That song became quite popular on radio. The lyrics, if I may sum it up, is a juxtaposition of different traits of each culture and where do you put yourself in it? Like, for example, I said “dangree, *songket*” – dangree [dungaree] is like jeans and songket, which is a Malay kind of textile. And I put “heavy metal, *dondang sayang*”, you know, heavy metal from the west, *dondang sayang* [traditional love ballad], you know, so I kind of juxtapose two different things west and east and west. And the song ends with a question like, think, where are you? So it was more of trying to find a safe ground, to put yourself as a modern human being, at that time in society, like you can't be too strict within your culture that you can't move within the society, and you can't be too westernised because then you're just not being yourself.

Hanie:
Rausyanfikir was part of the Nusantara movement in the 1990s.

Art:
The Nusantara music movement started in ‘89, ‘90 up in Malaysia. It was actually just a codification of sound. So it was more like putting a label to it. The sound has always been around. This came about with world music that was happening there with Paul Simon, and a lot of the stuff that comes under the category of world music, that I think some of the movers and shakers up in KL decided that, yeah, we need to just put a brand to it so that you can sell it as a style. The music essentially is syncretic. It's a mix of Western pop and using also ethnic instruments. And this has been done even in the ‘60s, with people like Ismail Harun who was signed to EMI Records, but it was just never labelled as such. But in the ‘90s, it was M. Nasir, Zainal Abidin, Ramli Sarip came into it later on, and then obviously, my band Rausyanfikir. Which actually is basically pop rock music fused in with ethnic elements or sound from the region, the Nusantara, that’s from the Malay Archipelago region. So we use sound samplings, live instruments to convey that idea of that kind of music.

Hanie:
Another dominant trend in 1990s Singapore was *dikir barat*. This form of Malay choral singing is believed to have originated from Malay villages in southern Thailand, and then spread to Kelantan in Malaysia. Traditionally, it is performed during the harvest seasons, weddings, and festive occasions. A *dikir barat* group comprises of the *tok juara*, the leader who sets the theme during a performance; the *tukang karut*, the song initiator; a chorus of about 10 to 15 performers known as the *awok-awok*; and a percussion ensemble.

Zaharian Osman, the co-founder of the Singapore Dikir Barat Federation, explains how this genre found a new lease of life here.

Zaharian Osman:
Back in the ‘80s, so… there was this competition organised by the Malay language and culture society of National Junior College. So they were trying to do a competition of *dikir barat*. I was also involved in judging some of those years, in the *dikir barat* competition. I discovered that back in 1977, there were a group of Malaysian students who were in Victoria School. So they were preparing some performance for Teachers’ Day, Speech Day. Student from Malaysia was recommending, why don't they try *dikir barat* as a form of performance. It so happened, during those times, there were a lot of Malaysian workers from Kelantan, different parts of Malaysia, peninsular Malaysia, that was working in Singapore. They happen to get to know some people from there, and that's where they started to develop this *dikir barat*. So *dikir barat* was already in Singapore back in the late ‘70s. ‘83, ’84, when the competition started to form up, that was where the increasing popularity and interest of the Malay youths.

When we were to compare the kind of *dikir barat* from Malaysia and Singapore, Singapore youths injected a lot of creativity in the form of movements, in the form of costume, in the form of creating new melodies, composing new songs. And above all, what interest is the language. That means the Malay youths were trained to write proper Malay. Linguistically, they learn a lot of things through the theme that was given by an organiser during those competition. It requires a lot of team spirit, a lot of togetherness, to develop the performance. Like, somebody will take charge of getting the movement, somebody will be in charge of the rhythm of the *rebana* [the drums used in traditional Malay music], the percussion, somebody will be in charge in writing lyrics, and the song, composing the melody. It is a group effort altogether.

Hanie:
That sense of camaraderie was exactly what drew Rudi to dikir barat when he was in primary school in the 1990s.

Rudi:
During that time is the very peak of *dikir barat*, so everywhere, every CC (community centre), every school have *dikir barat*. So I was influenced lah. Like, you play *dikir barat* like you are famous, y’know, so everybody know you, so let’s play *dikir barat*, fun lah. We always meet together, we are more like a family… we create new bonding, new arts for the *dikir* barat, new music. When we enter a competition, the minimum number is 20 people. So we are like huge number of brothers. Every year or every one year, like, there's so many competition, so we are competing among each other group to be the best in Singapore.

Hanie:
As the popularity of *dikir barat* grew, Zaharian began thinking about developing the form even further. He put together the group 2D, whose members all came from *dikir barat* groups, and he was the executive producer for their first album.

Zaharian:
So I picked up those melodious songs that we can develop into a commercial song, send for arrangement… we deal with top-notch Malaysian musician to record the song. So in a way, it was kind of experimentation, trying to get those *dikir barat* song which is very traditional, and shifting it or transforming it into a commercial song. So it received overwhelming response from the public, because, I think before that we have Rausyanfikir, we have Nuradee, we have Teacher's Pet, but we didn't have five guys who can harmonise, that kind of thing. They were called “boyband” but actually they don't dance.

Hanie:
One of 2D’s biggest hits was *Cenderawasih*. Zaharian shares more about how this song was crafted for the pop market.

Zaharian:
I think what makes that song a bit more special is the lyrics and the way it was penned. It is a poetically nice description of *Cenderawasih*, *Cenderawasih* is a bird. It’s a beautiful bird, we call it paradise bird. Whereas the person that was singing the song is a crow. Imagine the crow was full of praises for this bird, but the crow understands that he could never be together with this paradise bird, because of the difference in their stature. And it was well written. It is an original melody and lyrics. I think it was wrote by the late Zaidy Nandir.

What makes this song special is, besides the melody, it is a mixture of acoustic feel with *tabla*. We had this fusion of Indian instrumentation plus the *seruling*, which is the bamboo flute. That makes the song melodious, melancholic. And when you first hear it, you fall in love. That's the whole idea. We didn't want to create a commercial song that depart from the roots of Malay music and even our ethnic music. So it was a fusion of Malay and our multi-ethnicity of our cultures. So I thought it would be nice to have that mix.

Hanie:
For Rudi, *dikir barat* was his gateway into exploring more traditional Malay music.

Rudi:
During the maybe late 1990s or early 2000, I saw there’s a audition for… last time they have the Kemuning Association, so they are actually involved in theatre, in dance, and Malay music. So I go for the audition. So from there I learn how the basic rhythm of traditional, like *inang*, *asli*, *zapin*, *joget*, *masri*, so these five basic beats you need to know. And also I learn a bit of dance step. My teacher said if you want to be a good percussionist for the dancer, you need to know how they do their dance, so you need to feel how they dance, and feel how the *rebana*, to follow their steps. The main element of Malay music is actually *rebana*. So *rebana* is the Malay instrument, and there's no other *rebana* in other music. So, the heartbeat lah. So they need us to feel, and they also need to feel us to perform.

The love of the arts of Malay music is so deep inside me, so strong. So I start to play traditional music. I have my own band. So we are lucky enough to be recognised by the community. So most of our weekends, we are playing at the wedding gig. My friend told me, hey Rudi, you every week play your music, you play all the traditional

music, why you never bring your dad song ah? From there I said, oh yah ah, why I never play my dad song ah? So from there, I said, okay, let's try. Then I start to listen back all his song. So I say, eh, there's some song that I can actually bring to the wedding, because some of it can rearrange to become a traditional song.

[song plays]

Hanie:
From then on, he started looking for more opportunities to perform his dad's pop yeh yeh songs. And in 2015, he was invited to do so at Esplanade. But he ran into a big problem as he tried to find more of his father's old repertoire.

Rudi:
Okay now, where should I get my father's song? Because I don't have any records of his song you know. Because my father don't even have his own song, he never keep. Then I know that my auntie keep, but sadly she passed on. So I ask my cousin, hey, you know where auntie keep? Don't know, we don't know where she keep. During that time, also YouTube, there's limited, there's not many people put on in YouTube. So my friend said, I got someone who sell records in Malaysia, y'know, so why don't you ask him? Finally I get this person, he got a few of my father EP. So I said, he want to send me the EP, I say, if you send me the EP, I don't have EP player, I don't have record player, how to listen? I said, okay, can you help me put in a thumb drive lah. And I go Malacca, y'know, just to buy that thumb drive.

Hanie:
In a way, Rudi's experience of recovering his father's music reflects just how much today's Singaporeans have lost touch with the body of work created when Singapore was the heartbeat of the region's Malay music. But this inheritance is still ours, and Rudi believes that it can still inform our music today. He continues to perform pop yeh yeh with his band, The Wismas II, in the hope that he can help to introduce this music to younger generations in Singapore.

Rudi:
Maybe we need more songs to be played in the radio or podcast or more shows in the TV, to show this kind of era, the pop yeh yeh era, so people… we get their attention. In Malaysia there's a lot of fans in pop yeh yeh, a lot. Because I think the radio station still have the segment of pop yeh yeh. For us, I don't think we have. I want these traditional things or even the pop yeh yeh scene to be still alive in Singapore. So that's why I choose myself to be part of traditional and pop yeh yeh. As a musician I think it's important we know our history, how the Malay music evolve from the traditional to the modern music.

Hanie:
Tradition can enrich. But it can also constrain. How can music-makers draw on the richness of tradition while transcending its constraints? In the next episode, we find out more about Singapore Indian pop's love-hate relationship with the dominance of Indian movie music, and how it has shaped their creativity.

PopLore: Stories of Singapore Pop is produced by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore's national performing arts centre, in celebration of its 20th anniversary. Look out for more episodes on Spotify and Apple podcasts.

To listen to more of the songs mentioned in this podcast, check out our music playlist on esplanade.com/offstage.