PopLore #5: “Barbarous music of this kind”

Christopher Rodrigo:
Welcome to *PopLore: Stories of Singapore Pop*, a seven-part series. I’m Christopher Rodrigo, a producer at Esplanade, Singapore’s national performing arts centre. And this is episode five, where I’ll be taking you through the spectacular rise and dramatic fall of Singapore’s English-language pop in the 1960s. Let’s start with this song.

[song plays]

That’s *Shanty*, performed by The Quests. This group was one of the many bands in Singapore that got together because they wanted to emulate the sound of 1960s British rock and roll. And The Quests became the most successful local band of that decade. This song is written by bass player Henry Chua. And on lead guitar? That’s Reggie Verghese.

Lawrence Lee, a fellow Singaporean music-maker of the 1960s, recalls Reggie’s singular talent.

Lawrence Lee:
He was the musician of all musicians. Very serious in his approach. I have watched many, many musicians on stage. Reggie never made a mistake. That was how dedicated he was to giving the perfect performance. Everybody looked up to him. When Reggie played his guitar, everybody listened. He had the touch. You can close your eyes, when Reggie is playing, you know he is playing.

Christopher:
In 1964, *Shanty* knocked the Beatles song *I Should Have Known Better* off the local charts to take the top spot. It was the first original pop song by a Singapore band to achieve this, and *Shanty* stayed number one for 12 whole weeks. That was how much listeners here embraced homegrown music in those days. Singapore songwriter Dick Lee was just a child then. But the music scene of that decade left a deep impression on him.

Dick Lee:
That was a very formative period, for me musically in terms of pop music, because in the ‘60s, Singapore, the local music scene was vibrant, and there were lots of local artistes. I would say it was the golden age of Singapore pop music. It was a time when it suddenly appeared. And it flourished in the most incredible way for at least 10 years, or maybe slightly less. And in that time it was really huge. I mean, it was boom, boom time for Singapore pop. And it's never been that way since. One minute, there were like 20 bands recording with EMI and the next minute, there was nothing. And there was nothing for years. All through the ‘70s, there was nothing. The music business completely died. I mean, it was very strange. It was like an ice age.

Christopher:
So, what happened? Let’s backtrack a little.

In the early 1960s, it wasn’t easy to become a guitar hero in Singapore. But that definitely didn’t stop music-crazed boys like Lawrence from trying.

Lawrence:
I got started because I won a consolation prize in the Rediffusion programme called *Top Tunes of the Week*. Immediately took the $25, went to the nearest guitar shop, and bought a beat-up six-string acoustic guitar.

I never saw an electric guitar, until I guess it was about two or three years after we started practicing and playing on the acoustic guitar. And then some of our schoolmates decided that hey, let's form a band. Well, there were three of us. Each of us playing a six-string guitar. It was electric. But unfortunately, we couldn't afford an amplifier. So actually, we were playing electric guitar acoustic. And we stood next to the microphone, lifted the guitar very close to our neck, and try and push the sound through the microphone. I tell you, it was horrendous.

Christopher:
Such fervent schoolboys were everywhere back then, and several eventually moved on to bigger stages. Reggie was still in secondary school when he became the lead guitarist of the band called The Checkmates. When he left to join The Quests, The Checkmates moved their bass player to lead guitar, and Lawrence was recruited as their new bassist. This marked his proper entry into Singapore's music scene, which was a pretty diverse one.

Bands here were made up of musicians of different races, and it wasn't uncommon for them to perform and record in various languages. There were even some all-girl bands, and many powerhouse female singers, like Naomi Suriya of Naomi and The Boys, were household names. The Checkmates, for instance, performed with singer Shirley Nair in the early days.

Lawrence:
Shirley Nair at that time, she had two very good friends. She was able to throw in her voice and the two of her friends were dancers. So we had Shirley Nair and we had go-go dancers also. At the time, there was some very good female performers, alright. Veronica Young, I tell you she is really fabulous, Susan Lim… all these ladies were very, very good performers.

Christopher:
Susan Lim was the lead singer of The Crescendos. You may remember two of its founding members, John Chee and Raymond Ho, from our first episode. John was the big brother of the group.

John Chee:
Susan was a minor, 13 years old. Her mother always told me being the eldest of the group, you take care of Susan. So when we were invited by Philips to go up to Malaysia to be the ambassadors for their launching of their TV and all that sort of thing, I said yes, we can go but how am I to take care of Susan, all guys in one room? Christine Kiefer says, I will give her a chaperone. And that's how she got her chaperone.

Christopher:
Christine Kiefer was an Englishwoman working with the record label Philips, which had signed The Crescendos in 1963. In an interview, she declared: “The Crescendos can compare well with any European teenage singing group, and there is no reason why they shouldn’t do as well in Europe, as European artistes have done in Malaysia.” Besides being very supportive of local music, Christine was a wonderful person, says Raymond.

Raymond Ho:
We love her. She fell ill. She went home to London. So we gathered our pocket money, John, Leslie, Susan and I. Four of us, we bought her a Christmas gift. Here is a letter from Miss Christine Kiefer, dated 28th of December 1965:

“My dears, thank you all very much for your lovely Christmas gift. A most desirable one. But it was very naughty of you to spend so much money. Nevertheless, your kind thoughts is very much appreciated. Yours affectionately.”

That’s her signature there. I can't remember what the gift was but knowing that, you know, those days we were school boys with limited pocket money, I don't think it was a diamond.

Christopher:
Another champion of homegrown music was Daisy Devan, the artistes and repertoire manager of EMI in Singapore, and the first Asian to helm a record label in Southeast Asia. She had a hand in the careers of many local pop stars, including Sakura Teng, Rita Chao, Anita Sarawak, and Sharifah Aini.

Daisy was also the person who signed The Quests to EMI. In fact, her insistence on original material spurred the band to create *Shanty*. The Quests gave Daisy the affectionate nickname of “the iron lady at MacDonald House”, which was where EMI’s Singapore offices were housed.

As for The Checkmates, they were signed to Philips. Scoring a recording contract offered no financial security, but it did give a band some bragging rights.

Lawrence:
Doing a record is something that everybody had to do. How would it look if all the other groups had records, and then you don't? Alright, Philips approached us and we say, hey yeah, you know, at last we can become recording artistes. I remember the news was broken to us in a dance somewhere in the Fraser and Neave Hall, and we were all so excited. The payment is royalty-based, a very small percentage of the sales. The record label had to manage the cost of recording. Studio time is expensive. And they had to manage the cost of production and marketing. We would be recording in the studio, mind you, at the time there was no 32 track, 64 track, alright. There was only four track. Everybody played their instruments simultaneously. If anybody made a mistake, you redo it again. No editing, no isolation of tracks, nothing. So you had better be prepared. The producer is there in the studio, standing there and looking at his watch. High pressure environment.

Christopher:
Outside of the studio, live performances were how local bands honed their style and built a following. And the most significant performance platform of the era was the tea dance. This curious term originally referred to social gatherings in England's suburbs that featured light refreshments and some genteel music and dancing. In Singapore, tea dances of a similar nature started in the 1920s, and these were held at the top hotels and attended by the European community.

But, by the 1960s, tea dances had essentially become ticketed parties for teenagers. Veteran broadcaster Brian Richmond emceed many of these events, which were often put together by budding entrepreneurs.

Brian Richmond:
They will get hold of venues like the Indian Association, the St. John's Headquarters Hall. And another popular tea dance venue would be the F&N Hall at River Valley Road, there. These are enterprising Singaporeans, that's where their sense of business and all comes into play, and that's where they start learning, you know, I'm going to make money out of these crazy teenagers.

They will organise all these events. You will have to get a permit for it, so no liquor to be sold, only soft drinks and some cakes and curry puffs and about that, that's all. And your event can begin at 3pm, but it has to finish by 6pm. Of course they want the kids to go back home. That's a Sunday, the next day is a school day. They'll get about two bands, one will be the resident band and the other will be the guest band, and usually the guest band is a better band. After the resident band opens, play for about an hour and a half, then make everybody excited, you know, stay back, because here comes the other band, which is very popular, and up and coming bands.

Christopher:
Local bands also played in nightclubs, which hosted tea dances as well.

James Tan:
Prince's Garni in Orchard Road, they have, I think the Dukes were playing there. There were a few other band… that area they played mostly Cliff Richard Shadows numbers. On the local scene, each of the band have their own niche audience, you know, like Benny and The Trailers who play at the Palace Theatre, Katong.

Christopher:
That's James Tan, the drummer of another local band, The Straydogs. This group played regularly in the British military bases, and those gigs paid pretty well.

James:
We will play at the British establishment, like the Arc Club. They call it The Arc, A. R. C., Arc Club, and the Malcolm Club. The clubs are in the camps. They have the RAF, the Air Force camp, and they have their army camp in Changi, and they have the naval base camp in Sembawang camp in the north. And so, the camps, they have their halls. On Saturdays, the adults and the teenagers want to have sort of a party, and they will go to the halls.

We were playing music that they know well, because the 60s was the golden era of the British music. So we played songs like Rolling Stone numbers and John Mayall and Procol Harum and so they love all those music.

Christopher:
These British artistes were influenced by African-American rhythm and blues. By the mid-1960s, this grittier sound had begun to change UK pop. The Singapore bands playing the British circuit learned more about R&B from young servicemen at the military bases, and the Rolling Stones even played in Singapore in 1965. While R&B never became a mainstream trend among local listeners, several musicians here were intrigued by how different it was, compared to earlier British bands like The Shadows.

Lawrence:
Shadows was bright. It was clean. It was very attractive. And then later on, the trend changed. And you can see a very significant difference between The Shadows and, for example, The Kinks, The Animals… The image itself changed completely. Gone was the clean-cut, nice-looking guys. So the look changed, the way the songs were delivered changed, there was a lot of angst in the lyrics in the music, it became very raw. So we tried it. And the more we played it, the more it turned us on.

Pop music is simple music. R&B is also simple music. But in R&B, it is mostly 12 bar blues. And we are using a lot of seventh note. Pop music is also about love. It's about broken hearts. But R&B is about something else. Sometimes, the lyrics and the meaning behind the lyrics can be lost to the person listening to it.

For example, there's a song that I always love, it's called “Bald-headed Woman” by The Kinks. Look, it's meaningless. It goes, “I don't know want no bald-headed woman, you got my time, you got my time, I don’t want no bald-headed woman, you got my time, you got my time...” One chord, singing in seventh, lyrics totally meaningless. But when you go on stage, when you sing this, you put on a snarl and you know, the audience, oh, they go wild.

Christopher:
Lawrence kind of feels the same way about *The Dew*, a song The Checkmates recorded with Siva and James Choy, a singing duo who called themselves The Cyclones.

Lawrence:
The lyrics are very, very abstract. One has to listen to it and ponder what it really means. To this day, I really don't know what it means. Siva Choy wrote this, but he refused to explain the full meaning of it to me. I knew it was deeper than what it sounded like. Of all the songs that we did, the recording for *The Dew* was one of the best.

Christopher:
To book more gigs, The Checkmates kept a foot in the pop game. But The Straydogs dedicated themselves to R&B. For James, that meant he had to change his style as a musician.

James:
It's a lot of emotion, and aggressive, and a lot of riffs then, where I have to adjust in my playing, so much so that I was able to play with feel.

Christopher:
Here's a taste of that soulful R&B feel, courtesy of the song *Katong Blues*, which is written by The Straydogs' founding member, Lim Kiang. Most of the original members of the band, by the way, are proud Katong boys.

[song plays]

In the 1960s, being an R&B band meant moving away from the tailored suits of pop bands, and adopting the flower power hippie look. This was more challenging than you might expect.

James:
We have long hair, flowered shirt, you know, bell bottoms and pretty rough-looking group lah. I would go to Geylang market and buy the material that my mother will use for samfoo, you know, flowered and all that, and bring that to the tailor and make a shirt out of it. And that's how we get our flowered shirt. That's the only way to get flowered material.

Christopher:
Togged out in their bohemian best, The Straydogs also performed at venues like the legendary Golden Venus.

James:
We were at Golden Venus. It was Orchard Hotel then. It was a basement, very cozy place and we had our crowd there, which is comprising of locals who liked our kind of music, and the servicemen, because at that time, there were the British armed forces still here. And then sometimes, the American craft carriers will stop by for their R&R, then the sailors will drop by at our tea dances.

Christopher:
There were actually dedicated venues in Singapore for American soldiers on leave from the Vietnam War. Playing at these spots were local bands like The Esquires, who even accepted a lucrative offer to perform for American GIs stationed in Vietnam. They called that experience "terrifying and exhilarating". When they got home, The Esquires continued catering to this battle-scarred crowd, some of whom would cry when the music hit them hard.

The October Cherries was another band that played at these R&R venues. In his autobiography, band member Peter Diaz describes observing sex workers trying to ply soldiers with booze and drugs at one such spot, The Serene House. "I often felt a deep sense of sadness and depression standing onstage performing and watching the interplay between these two groups of people," he writes. "You had these desperate women eking out a living as only they knew how, and on the other hand you had these traumatized young men fully aware that their chances of staying alive might be narrowing with each passing day."

Over at the Golden Venus, the vibe was much more energising.

The Checkmates was the resident band there for several years, anchoring the club's *Beat & Blues Sessions.*

Lawrence:
Golden Venus became the centre of our lives at that time. Mind you, some of us were still schooling, others were having day jobs. The Golden Venus tea dance sessions, which occurs every Sunday between 2:30pm to 6pm. It was the highlight of our week. And, would you believe it? Entrance fee was only $3 per head, and they threw in a beer. The British forces people love to drink. So of course, they drank beyond the one beer that the $3 cover charge gave them. So management was very happy. The arrangement we had with the Orchard Hotel management was that, all the take, the management would keep 60% and the band would take 40% of it. So each afternoon, there was probably about 300 people there. It's always packed, alright, it's always packed. So you just work out the maths.

At that time, I think everybody would agree that The Checkmates had the best instruments and amplifiers in town. Vox AC-100s. They stood as tall as a five-foot person, huge amplifiers. Three of them. We had Fender guitars. We had a Rogers drum set and it was top of the range. So these instruments have to be paid for, alright. Every gig that we perform on Sunday, we came out with $25 pocket money. But that was a sacrifice we had to make, in the interest of acquiring the best instruments available.

Golden Venus meant a lot of things to us. It was where we were able to play our music. It was there that we get to interact with the crowd whom we know loved our music. It was a steady place to play. There was an avenue of funds to pay for instruments. So it was all in all a very good deal.

Our friends who were exponents of R&B looked forward to playing there. There would be three sets, alright, we would take the first set, the guest band would take the second set, and we would come back on stage and round off with the third set. We had good friends who came... there's a band called The Easybeats, they played R&B very, very well. And then there was Sonny Bala and Moonglows. He had the voice. When he sang the blues, everybody pricked up their ears and listened.

Christopher:
James also has very fond memories of this venue.

James:
The Golden Venus. To me, the best place I've played in. The acoustics were very good. And so we feel so comfortable performing there. There are times where we played so much. You know, we're supposed to stop at 6 or 6:30, we didn't want to stop playing, and then the management would come and yell at us, you know, to stop. We wanted to go on and on.

Christopher:

It was a magical time. But, for the Singapore bands of the 1960s, the music was about to stop. Here's writer CT Lim with more.

CT Lim:
Popular music thrive and survive in the early 60s because the British bases were still around. It went away slowly from the late 60s onwards, because in 1967, the British announced that they're withdrawing their bases from Singapore. By '71, when the British completed their withdrawal, in '72, Led Zeppelin and Cliff Richard, were not allowed to come in to play. Cliff Richard had played in Singapore in '61, alright, ten years later, he couldn't. Jimmy Page, the guitarist for Led Zeppelin, came to Singapore and played as part of The Yardbirds in '67. And in '72, he couldn't do that anymore. So I think these are important landmarks.

In '68, the Singapore government changed the Employment Act. They tightened it, right, basically, you need to work longer hours, there are less public holidays. They were trying to discipline the workforce, alright, because they realise that it'd be hard times ahead. Don't forget, in '67, '68, there's also a student movement, alright, in Paris, in Japan. So I think they were scanning what's happening, and they also worried, okay, all these young people, they're going to be hippies, or they take drugs, or free sex or whatever, we don't want that. Not just because it's bad for society, but also with the British withdrawal, we better boost our productivity, employment, so on and so forth, to prove that we are a good workforce, so that we can invite other industries to come in. So this is linked to the history of industrialization in Singapore.

Christopher:
Articles about this period of Singapore's music history often reference a 1973 speech by then Defence Minister Goh Keng Swee. Here's part of what he said:

"Let us not consider the subject of music as a trifling matter, of no import in the affairs of state. The ancients knew better. Both Plato and Confucius correctly recognised the crucial role which music as an instrument of state policy could play in producing the desirable type of citizen. Neglect in Singapore on this subject has given rise to serious problems. I refer to the widespread popularity of the barbarous form of music produced by the steel guitar linked to an ear shattering system of sound amplification. Voice accompaniment takes the form of an inane tasteless wailing. It is barbarous music of this kind that is mainly responsible for attracting the mindless young of Singapore to the cult of permissiveness of the western world. It is hardly a coincidence that the problem of drug addiction has become serious where performers and audience foregather. I trust the Ministry of Home Affairs will take stern action against this menace."

He made the speech at the official opening of the Japanese Garden, which is in Jurong, the heart of Singapore's drive to industrialise. The garden was one of several amenities meant to give the workforce there a way to unwind. And, in the same spirit of making space for the finer things in life, this speech actually called for a more prominent role for the arts in Singapore. Goh even referenced Liverpool, noting that it was a major sea-port like Singapore, and had managed to produce a renowned orchestra.

Again, this was 1973, long after the Beatles had become Liverpool's most famous cultural export by completely transforming the world of pop. But the Fab Four are not mentioned in a speech with emphatic views about the negative influence of Western pop. To counteract this perceived influence, stern action was indeed soon taken.

Over the course of the 1970s, pop songs seen to glorify drug use were banned from the airwaves. The taxes for nightspots with live shows increased. And tea dances were curbed. This hit James hard, because he loved performing at these events.

James:
We get to interact with the audience, you know, because they were so close to us, they dancing in front of us. We made many friends. When you have friends, they look forward to seeing us every week, we look forward to meeting them every week. So when they ban the tea dance, I was very disappointed. I was very disappointed.

CT:
In the 70s, this is where the rhetoric became reality. The rhetoric of the government in the late 50s and early 60s became the reality 10 years later, alright. Again, for political and pragmatic reason because they feel that, okay, now, we must be serious, we better discipline our workforce, not just physically, not just through education, but their mindset. So even when they are going home and resting at home, they shouldn't be listening to rock and roll because it will corrupt their minds. I think that's the idea. So that really impact our development in terms of band culture, in terms of songwriting, in terms of performance. I mean, just imagine if we had continued, right, maybe we have, like, I don't know, our own Rolling Stones, or Beatles, or Oasis, or whatever… right, but there was really a break in the '70s.

Lawrence:
At that time, a lot of musicians were starting to play in pubs, in clubs. They were honing their skills, they were learning from foreign groups that come, they were getting better and better. And then this happened. And a good majority of them had no choice but to take up other trades. And I think if that did not happen, Singapore could very well be the mecca for producing good solid music and musicians today.

Christopher:
One of the most infamous policies of the era was the official position on men with long hair. They were attended to last at government offices, and those entering Singapore from abroad were turned away at immigration if they refused to cut their hair. In the 1970s, that resulted in Cliff Richard and Led Zeppelin not being able to perform in scheduled concerts here. Members of the October Cherries, returning home after a stint overseas, tried to hide their flowing tresses under respectable-looking wigs when they were going through customs, which was a ploy that met with mixed success.

Musicians with long hair were also not featured on TV. And, as society became more conservative, they had to deal with the occasional hostile looks from members of the public. In the clubs though, their hairstyles didn't matter, said Jatt Ali of Black Dog Bone. But signs of the changing times could be felt there too.

Jatt Ali:
You cannot play rock music, you cannot play rock music all this… funk music, pop music, commercial music, very light music. You want to play? You want to play rock music, you play outside, like Fort Canning, National Theatre, special event, that's it. The clubs don't like it, the people, they didn't really go for rock music.

Christopher:
By this time, Dick had entered his teenage years. And he still remembers the stigma surrounding long hair and rock music during that era.

Dick:
So in schools, we had hair check in assembly, where a teacher will go around and your hair cannot touch your ear or the top of your collar. So we would fold our collar down, try and pin the hair back and all that, because you want to look cool, right, outside of school. But that's not everybody. This is just like a few of us who was trying to be cool lah.

As, you know, sort of rebellious in inverted commas, teenagers, we all were into the pop culture of the day, right? All of us had a guitar attached to us, you know what I mean, like, part of our body, it was, it was something that you had to do to be cool. You had to play the guitar. We will all sit around after school and jam. The music that was popular at that time was a bit more of a hard rock, heavy metal. We play Deep Purple covers. We had to do it secretly, because this was something that I didn't dare tell my parents I was doing. Because there was a whole stigma around that time, which started in the late 60s, when the clean up of Singapore youth started. And National Service had begun. And long hair was frowned upon. But you know, if you're rebellious, you know, you try to break all the rules. And I remember going out with my friends prowling Orchard Road at night. We had to avoid police cars that were patrolling to catch us long-haired louts, you know. The police comes by, you just have to hide. And I remember I fell into the drain once. Trying to hide and then I sort of fell into the drain because it's hard to run with platform shoes.

By the time I was 14, 15, I was going clubbing already. That also introduced me to a lot of more grown-up music, for example, and exposed me to the bands of that period. Now, don't forget that this era when I was about 15, it was already early 70s. So the whole music scene, that whole boom of Singapore pop music had already died at that time. So the only local music that I was exposed to were show bands, dance bands that played in nightclubs.

Christopher:
Brian shares his memories of the decade's club scene.

Brian:
In this early '70s, I was doing part-time disco DJing at The Boiler Room. The Boiler Room was in the basement of the Mandarin Singapore. Then, there was a period, I believe it was in '75, '76, when the whole night scene collapsed. It was completely shut down. Because certain clubs were pushing drugs and what have you. So the government came in and said, no, we don't want that in Singapore. And then after about a year, nightlife was dead in Singapore. And a lot of people, especially tourists, they were giving Singapore the skip. They would rather go to Bangkok or Indonesia

or Manila. After the government revive the night scene here, they had a lot of, you know, it's open, yeah, there are lots of do's and don'ts, with more don'ts than dos, you know. What happened was, when we reopen, I was invited by the Shangri-La to work with a band at the Lost Horizon. So in other words, 45 minutes disco, and then another 45 minutes the band takes over.

Over at the Lost Horizon, I was working with The X-periment. And the band that replaced them were The Blue Star Sisters from the Philippines. Good band. And then we had another band from the Philippines called Eddie Katindig and The High Chord. So I was working with all these three bands. One of the ways that they enjoyed working with me is when I'm playing, like, for example, their last song is "That's The Way I Like It" by KC and The Sunshine Band, I will take KC and The Sunshine Band's song on record, and I'll mix it with the band that's playing. And then, when the curtain opens, yeah, I'll be announcing, ladies and gentlemen, Eddie Katindig and The High Chord and… and then, hey, welcome to our dance session here. And it's seamless.

Christopher:
Dick enjoyed checking out this scene, but he didn't see himself becoming a club musician. Growing up in a household that was full of diverse musical influences, he had started writing songs when he was very young. As a teenager, he became enthralled with singer-songwriters like Elton John, Joni Mitchell, and Neil Young. But Singapore artistes at the time were mainly performing covers, and he had no idea where his song-writing would take him.

Dick:
I was at that point going through my angsty teenage, existential period, you know. And that's where I started writing, like, songs with themes and messages and stories. When I was in secondary four, I joined a singing group in my school, because the thing that was very popular at that period was talentimes. And so for amateur singers, like myself, and my group called Harmony, we would just take part in these talentimes because it was the only way we could have visibility, we could have exposure.

The thing at that time was, of course, we would sing covers. So while we were doing that, I was writing songs. And so I kept asking them to sing my songs, which, well, they didn't want to because also, it wasn't the thing, you know. Who wants to hear an original song? I mean, the thing to win is to sing a popular song. So I left the group after sec four and I started to take part in the talentimes by myself, singing my own songs. One day, I took part in a talentime, organised by Rediffusion. I went and auditioned, and I sang my own composition. And the song that I sang was a song that I still perform today called *Life Story.*

Christopher:
The person at Rediffusion who was auditioning him was hidden from sight in the control room. And when he emerged from that room, Dick got a very big surprise.

Dick:
The person was auditioning me was Vernon Cornelius, who was the lead singer of The Quests. I was really shocked because I was a fan of The Quests. And here he

was… He was a DJ at Rediffusion at that time, and he came up to me and he said, what is that song? Is that?... Yeah, I wrote it myself… And he was like really surprised because he'd never heard anybody come in and sing their own song. And then he told me he liked it, but he didn't want to put me in the talentime. He wants to do something better. He wanted to put me as a guest artiste throughout the talentime. So he said, every episode, every week, every heat, every round, you come on, and you sing your song while the judges are deliberating.

I was so stunned. And so I started writing avidly. Every week, I wrote a song and I performed for maybe, I think, it was about 12 weeks or something. All the songs that I was writing were very, very inspired by Elton John, Joni Mitchell, you know, those idols of mine. But for the finals, I thought I must do something a little bit special, very different. I thought, why don't I try and write something that's very Singaporean. So the idea of infusing my Singaporean-ness into my music. This is the first time it occurred to me. So I went and I wrote the song called *Fried Rice Paradise*.

I performed it at the finals. And then one of the judges at the finals was an Englishman, who was an executive at EMI. And he was so surprised hearing it because he'd been in Singapore, working in the music business, right? And you never come across a songwriter. You know, at that time, you must think that they were recording people like Anita Sarawak, Tracy Huang, you know, they were all doing covers. So here he suddenly comes across this kid that's singing an original song, a very Singaporean song, because the song is full of Singlish and is about food, you know?

And so just like in a movie, he came up to me and offered me a recording deal. Of course, I'm very happy. And then what happened next was he introduced me to EMI and his boss, who was a local boss. The local boss rejected his proposal because he said, who wants to hear original songs? We want only covers. And Ross Barnett, the Englishman, he was so angry. And because you know, coming from England, that's what you do. Right? You go and look for talent, and you sign them and that's where the the artistes come from. I mean, but in Singapore, it wasn't like that. So he was so angry. Do you know what he did? He quit EMI. He resigned on the spot. And he funded my first album with his own money. And the first album was called *Life Story*, based on that song that I audition, and *Fried Rice Paradise* was in it.

The album came out, and right away the local radio, they banned the album because it contained Singlish. So that was very confusing, and it was disappointing. Confusing because I thought, yeah, I'm just doing something that is Singaporean, what I thought was Singaporean. And disappointing because, you know, here's local original songs and then they're not supporting it. But luckily, Rediffusion, which was not a government station, they were also like, so angry because I was discovered there. I am like a Rediffusion artiste, so they kept playing it. And those days Rediffusion was quite popular. And that's how I became known – through Rediffusion playing *Fried Rice Paradise* uncensored.

Christopher:
The whole experience left Dick with very mixed feelings.

Dick:
So on the one hand, it gave me a lot of encouragement. On the other hand, I was very disappointed and a bit afraid of being Singaporean. So this is something that sparked the theme for my musical journey throughout my life – was to find that Singaporean-ness. And you must remember also, at that time, we're talking about 1974, Singapore had just become an independent nation. The whole idea of being Singaporean had not yet formed. So, my wanting to express my Singaporean-ness through my music was something like a real challenge. I mean, what was it like to be a Singaporean? And I'm Chinese and I don't speak Chinese because I'm Peranakan, very westernised Chinese. I was Asian, you know, what did that mean, you know, and I'm Singaporean. What ever did that mean? You know, that, that had no meaning, you know, at that time?

Christopher:
He soon left for studies in England, where he continued to write songs.

Dick:
One day, I submitted some songs that I had written to Warner Chappell, and I got an interview. This is in London and Warner Chappell was one of the biggest music publishers in the world. So I went there, and when I entered the office of the executive, he was surprised because he didn't realise I was Asian. He said, where are you in this music? The most interesting thing about you, is that you are Asian, but I don't see that in your music. Can't you, like, reflect that a little bit? And that really made me think.

Christopher:
When he returned to Singapore in 1982, he got a record deal with Warner's WEA Records.

Dick:
When it was time to do my album, I said, okay, I'm going to do what the Warner Chappell guy advised me to do. And I made an album all about Singapore, called *Life In The Lion City*. And in that album, I explored my Singaporean-ness, as much as I knew how. And one aspect of myself that I was not familiar with enough was my Chineseness.

Christopher:
One of the songs born from this creative exploration of identity was "Flower Drum Song", which riffed on a Chinese folk song of the same name.

[song plays]

The song's searching lyrics, dramatic arrangement, and Dick's propulsive vocals reflect a time when he, and Singaporeans in general perhaps, had not yet found a satisfying answer to the question – Who are we?

It would take several more years, and more bumps in the road, before Dick found his answer. Supporting him through this long journey was Jimmy Wee, who headed WEA Records in the 1980s. You've already heard Jimmy's name come up in several earlier episodes, which reflect just how influential he was in Singapore's music scene.

Dick:
Jimmy is the reason music was revived in Singapore. He is the one person that brought it back. And supported it all through the ‘80s and into the ‘90s lah. But it was an uphill struggle. Every album he did was a risk. Knowing that nobody would be interested in local music, he still produced so many local albums, taking chances with all of us. He really believed in Singapore talent. He really believed that we could produce some quality artistes. And he never gave up. That is the most amazing thing about him. He showed me that you need to persevere.

Christopher:
In the next episode, we’ll hear more from Dick about how he kept himself going in this musical journey, which intersected with the rise of another boom time in original Singapore music in the 1990s. Did the indie bands of that decade leave any lasting impact on today’s local music scene? Stay tuned.

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.