PopLore #6: New wave, new sounds

Sai Akilesh:
Welcome to part six of *PopLore: Stories of Singapore Pop*. I'm Sai Akilesh, a programmer at Esplanade, Singapore's national performing arts centre. And in this second-last episode of our series, we'll look at how local music tried to find its footing again in the 1980s, and how this gave rise to the thriving indie band scene of the 1990s.

We ended the previous episode with singer-songwriter Dick Lee, who released *Life In The Lion City* in 1983. This album was all about exploring his Singaporean identity. Unfortunately, it did not connect with local listeners.

Dick Lee:
Life In The Lion City didn't do well at all because nobody cared about anything Singaporean.

Akilesh:
But thanks to the support of his record label head Jimmy Wee, he was able to keep writing songs and releasing albums. As the decade drew to a close, Dick finally achieved a breakthrough with a record that went platinum, and won him awards across Asia. In Singapore, it even sparked a public debate that resulted in songs with Singlish finally being allowed on the radio. This landmark album was *The Mad Chinaman*.

Dick:
Mad Chinaman came out in 1989 and the whole situation was different. The local climate in terms of Singaporean-ness had changed – national songs had appeared. National songs changed everything. They started to introduce a sense of Singaporean-ness to the public. And the national songs also linked music to our feeling of national pride. The first national song, '84, was *Stand Up for Singapore*, and then every year after that, a new song appeared, right? As the songs kept appearing, the public kept becoming more aware of being Singaporean. Without them I think I couldn't have done *Mad Chinaman*.

Akilesh:
Are these national songs part of Singapore pop? As a teenager, music producer Leonard Soosay certainly thought so, and he said as much when he went abroad for his studies in the late 1980s.

Leonard Soosay:
When I was in Canada, when I was in music school, my classmates asked me, oh, what's Singapore music like? And I'd say, oh, actually, we don't have much of a scene. So they'd say, play us some Singapore music, and then I'd play them National Day songs, you know, and they'd go, like, what is this? No, no, come on, play us some real stuff. And to them real meant the stuff that was happening at that time – grunge, you know. I went like, oh, I don't think anyone in Singapore knows about grunge yet.

Akilesh:
Actually, he was simply not around to see the indie scene here take shape, much like Dick, who left for Japan in 1990 when the success of *The Mad Chinaman* gave him a chance to establish himself in that market.

But they were both very much aware of Chris Ho, the man who played a critical role in nurturing Singapore's alternative music. Chris was a musician, a DJ, and a writer. And he was also a lot more than that, says Dick, who helped to produce the album *Regal Vigor* for Chris' band, Zircon Lounge, in the early 1980s.

Dick:
Chris is more like a visionary. I think he's a poet. We were both crazy about Joni Mitchell, who is also like a poet, you know? And he used to write that kind of lyrics like hers, I thought, and of course his own personal tastes are a little bit more indie than mine. His tastes are more eclectic and it is reflected in his music. He knew he had his followers and he just did what he wanted.

Akilesh:
Back then, Leonard was a junior college student who was part of a band named Breaking Glass. They were into new wave music, and Zircon Lounge was one homegrown act that was definitely on their radar.

Leonard:
At Ming Court Hotel, I think, there was a basement and then Zircon Lounge would be playing there. And Chris Ho was actually a singer of that band. We always felt like, okay, you know, in order to be someone in Singapore, we had to be better than Zircon Lounge. And they were really, really good band, like really forward-thinking, because the songs that they were writing were actually very mature. So we really looked up to them at that time.

Akilesh:
But the Singapore music industry of the 1980s was not built for renegade musicians. Here's Chris, describing what it was like to make *Regal Vigor*, in an interview for *So Happy: 50 Years Of Singapore Rock*, a 2015 project by creative agency fFurious.

Chris Ho:
We were actually just doing it for the love and inspiration of punk, basically. We were hoping against all odds that we'd get somewhere, but by the look of things it wasn't gonna get anywhere anyway. I remembered when we went in, we had to bring in our own snare drum. Because they had put in sacks of sand inside the snare drum to soften the sound of the snare drum, because it was meant to have the Tracy Huang sound, drums cannot be cracklingly loud, no. And I remembered when we kept telling the engineer, turn up the sound of the guitar, he was like, it's already maximum. We used to laugh about it. But that was really how it was. It was not easy. Because there really was no experience in that field to record music of our nature. We were the very first. Back then in the west, you had, yeah, the whole punk explosion, you had the Romeo Void, the REM, and the U2. But in Singapore all that didn't happen. People didn't know all that music. People were just still listening to, at most, Deep Purple, Grand Funk, you know that sort of thing. They didn't know the whole punk new wave sensibility at all.

Akilesh:
Taiwan-born singer Tracy Huang was a huge star in Singapore back then, and her Chinese ballads, and covers of English evergreens, were massively popular. What else was on the radio during this time? Joe Ng, who would become one of the most prominent figures of the 1990s indie scene, paints a bleak picture.

Joe Ng:
I was in primary school and like any kid when you were 11, 10, you were just listening to a lot of radio, and I was listening to all the pop hits, ABBA, Anne Murray, Anne Murray and more Anne Murray.

Akilesh:
Anne Murray, by the way, is a Canadian singer who was known for her easy listening, adult contemporary music. These kinds of songs shared the local airwaves with lots of disco bops.

Joe:
One day, I was listening to this Dan Hartman song, I cannot remember the title. It was a disco song. And I felt sick listening to it. I felt repulsed by it because I was thinking, like, what the hell, I mean, is that what music is all about? I mean, is that, is that it? It's just this… and then I got repulsed, and I said, I need something more.

Akilesh:
The Internet was still some years away. For those like Joe who were trying to plug into an alternative sound, finding their tribe took some doing.

Joe:
Access to music back then, you really have to hunt the records down, the songs, albums that you want. The information I got was mainly from magazines like New Musical Express, Melody Maker, Smash Hits. That was when I was 12, 13, 14 years old and I got turned on to it by listening to a lot of BBC World Service. I got turned on to John Peel. From there, I got exposed to a lot of other stuff. And on Singapore Radio One back then, they had a couple of Britpop programmes and they had a couple of like DJs, who were spinning stuff like Duran Duran, Depeche Mode. What they were playing was against the grain of like Anne Murray, Anne Murray, Anne Murray, and more Anne Murray. So that was my induction to another form of music.

And of course, there's Chris Ho! I was listening to him every Sunday at 12 noon, or 11am. He has a show, and he played pop hits, but once in a while he would drop in something which is like, wow, I've never heard anything like this before. It was mindblowing. It's like, wow, suddenly the road is wide open, is a yellow brick road, you can go anywhere you want to. And it boggles the imagination because it… different kind of instrumentation, different way of singing, different way of expressing themselves. Lyrics which were really introspective, deeper meaning, more expressive, darker, sexier even, and more thought-provoking.

Akilesh:
Around this time, Chris was also writing about music for a local newspaper called the Sunday Monitor. Patrick Chng, another future indie icon, was in secondary school then, and he became a big fan of Chris' column.

Patrick Chng:
I followed the Sunday Monitor religiously every week because they will write about very interesting music.

Akilesh:
When Sunday Monitor went out of business, two of its writers, brothers Michael and Philip Cheah, decided to start their own publication along with their friend, Stephen Tan. They named it *BigO*, an acronym for the lyric "before I get old", which is from the song *My Generation*, by English rock band The Who. BigO debuted in 1985, and it became Singapore's first independent music magazine.

Patrick:
BigO was a window basically to a lot of alternative music for me. It was also about indie films, about comics. It was the whole alternative culture. Every month, I just waited for the fanzine to arrive and then I would just, like, read from cover to cover, you know.

Joe:
And on the very first issue, right, there was a quote by Chris Ho. And in the quote, he says, success to me is not how much you sell, but how much you inspire. And that quote, right, remain with me the rest of my life. Until… I think the day when I die or whatever, it will still be like, yeah, because it's a wonderful quote. I got inspired by Chris, by BigO.

Akilesh:
Soon, Joe started writing for BigO.

Joe:
Every month or something we would hang out at Philip's house in his living room. And we had the BigO meetings there, whereby Philip would pass around records to us to review. What was very, very interesting and very good about the BigO meetings, it was actually a very nurturing kind of environment, whereby, in particular Philip Cheah, he will try and understand like, Joe is like that, okay, I think this particular record you'll find interesting, or you will find some meaning there somewhere whereby you'll connect with the music. He's very perceptive like that, and he's also very nurturing, very kind.

Going for BigO meetings was something I really really really look forward to every month because I felt I wasn't alone. Back then, there's no internet, there's no IRC, no Messenger, no WhatsApp, whatever. For most part, I'm living like in my own world, not knowing there are actually people who like the same kind of music as me. A lot of them back then were older than me, like couple years older, so I would listen to them and be like in awe of their opinions. The environment was very democratic. There's no, I tell you young man you don't know what rock and roll is, there's no such

thing, the environment wasn't like that. I love that space that Philip Cheah and Michael and Stephen created.

Akilesh:
Besides the launch of BigO, 1985 also saw the release of a compilation album called *Class Acts*. The brainchild of Jimmy Wee, it featured several local bands who were popular club acts. Its success seemed to indicate that the tide for homegrown music-makers was turning. Patrick was one music-lover who was inspired by this album, in his own way.

Patrick:
Because there was the Tokyo Square song *Within You'll Remain* and then Zircon Lounge as well, and Gingerbread's *Roses*, those were big hits on radio. So growing up I was like, wow, those are Singapore bands, you know. We wanted to do a compilation as well, with indie bands, you know, with very young raw indie bands. That's why we call it *Ruff Ax*, you know, and the "Ax" is A X, you know, kind of spoof the name. It's a very homemade thing. Basically we duplicated the cassettes at home, photocopied the covers, and it looks very amateurish, very DIY. I think *Ruff Ax*, we sold through BigO mail order. So people have to write in, you know, send in their money, then we mail it out to them.

Akilesh:
In 1986, BigO released its own compilation album. Titled *Nothing On The Radio*, it featured music selected from submissions by local indie bands, including one called Corporate Toil. This was Joe's first band, and it originated from his musical explorations as a teenager.

Joe:
I tried to do something at home with some toy microphone, and got myself some Casiotone. Together with my best friend from school Wong Fook Yew, we're just fiddling around, trying to do stuff, like, that were inspired by Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark, by Joy Division, and stuff like that.

Akilesh:
Besides releasing music, BigO also started organising gigs. In 1987, it staged the first alternative concert in Singapore. Called *No Surrender*, this event was held at the Anywhere lounge.

Patrick:
Anywhere was at Tanglin Shopping Centre. The house band that played there was Tania, very popular band in the pub circuit. I think BigO approached Anywhere to host a gig, an indie gig. So it was in the afternoon because at night will be, you know, their regular hours. I saw so many bands for the first time. Zircon Lounge played. And then Opposition Party played also. There was Joe Love & The Hoodlum Circus, there was The NoNames, and then Corporate Toil, Joe's band, performed. And then he got me to play guitar for a cover of Joy Division, so I got to perform during the concert as well. The whole place was packed. There was a vibe about the place, the energy. It was a very memorable gig for me.

Akilesh:
It was a memorable afternoon for Joe as well, partly because the gig had not gone well for Corporate Toil.

Joe:
Being such close proximity, right, between audience and band, right, there was almost like a… borderline confrontational? And the crowd was very, very rock-based crowd. Corporate Toil, we are better off in a home studio environment doing what we do. And I think we do it pretty okay. But live, right, oh, we suck. We were rubbish and then we were booed, we were jeered. It was a terrible, terrible experience. I went back home and wanted to like, arrrrrh, no one understands me. What we had was interesting and good ideas, but we fail to present it well in a live environment.

Akilesh:
Dealing with tough crowds was a rite of passage for bands in those days. And Joe had no intention of stopping.

Joe:
Yeah, I keep going. I was very much in touch with my internal anger, and I wanted to rage on, and to find a kind of… it's like a catharsis, a space to let go and a space to find myself to grow.

Akilesh:
With BigO leading the charge, the indie music scene was gathering momentum. In 1988, Patrick formed the band The Oddfellows, and their first gig was the Alternative Pop concert held at the Botanic Gardens as part of the Singapore Arts Festival. But, despite a somewhat higher profile, it was still an uphill battle to get their music distributed.

Patrick:
When The Oddfellows' first cassette came out in '88, right, I approached a few record shops. Shops that I go to lah, you know, basically to buy stuff. So I thought okay, maybe they might find me familiar because I'm their customer, you know? Yeah, so I'll go there and say oh, you know I've this cassette, would you like to sell it in your shop. Then they took a look at it, then they were like, what is this? Is this like pirated and all that, right? I said, no no, no, it's my original. So I got rejected lah. But I managed to get Scoop Bookstore to sell it. I mean, they were like an indie bookstore, Funan Centre, I think second floor. And then one floor up was Da Da Records. Peter Quek, the owner was quite supportive. He said, okay, okay, you can put your cassettes here on consignment. If they sell then they'll give me the money. So basically it was this two shops that sold our cassette.

Akilesh:
1988 also saw another landmark gig — the *10 Years of Punk* concert, organised by Chris. This took place at the Rediffusion Auditorium.

Patrick:
It's like a hall without any seats. Imagine a school hall. So there's a stage at the end. Basically three bands played, Opposition Party, The Oddfellows, and Mortal Flower. And the crowd was crazy, like, really unruly crowd, you know? Very difficult crowd. A

lot of punks lah, basically, you know. I remember when I was performing, there was this guy just playing with my microphone, it was so irritating. And then I think Chris also had played some games with them, musical chairs and all that and it was crazy, you know. The place was a riot. After that, it was like, the whole place was so messed up, if you go toilet, I think there were like, the mirrors were smashed, I think there were blood on the floor. So after the gig, we all have to help to clean up the place lah. Actually, I have a photo of Chris with a broom and dustpan, cleaning up. I have it somewhere, I need to find the photo.

Akilesh:
They may have been rowdy, but these audiences were showing up. That meant a lot for a music scene that had not received much support for original English-language local music for almost two decades. By and large, however, there were still very few places for these up-and-coming bands to perform. Joe had started to organise gigs himself by then, and he remembers how resistant most venues were to hiring local musicians who wanted to play their own songs.

Joe:
If you ask me what is the most painful rejection, right? The most painful rejection is not one rejection, but it's death by a thousand cuts. Each time you go to a club, to a pub say, hey look, can my band play original song, so whatever. Then the club owner or pub owner, whoever say, cannot lah, must play *Hotel California* or Led Zeppelin or the flavour of the month or the top hits of the UK and US. It's a constant rejection, constant constant constant constant constant, and we keep pushing. It's not just me but everybody in the scene, we kept pushing pushing pushing.

When Substation opened in 1990 September, right, that was a big turning point. The late Kuo Pao Kun was very very very open. We went to see him, we ask him, can we have gigs here, he said sure. But I remember telling him say, look the music won't be pretty, we're having like hardcore, we're gonna have metal, punk and trash, and he said sure, Substation is a place whereby it's open for any form of expression. Substation really open up the space. And it kickstart the possibilities for a lot of people to go and like, express themselves and say, well, we have a platform now, and have a connection with fans or people who are interested in discovering and knowing more about music.

Akilesh:
It was a time of new beginnings. Joe formed the band called The Padres in the early 1990s, and he describes what it was like to perform and attend gigs at the brand-new Substation at the start of this promising decade.

Joe:
One of the thing about The Substation is that, the way that it is built, right, somehow it face itself in a particular direction or angle whereby it's just very hot. And that makes unpleasant kind of like space to be in, but it's great for rock and roll, because you go there, you're hot and sweaty. If you're not hot and sweaty, you're not at a rock and roll gig. I swear there was one time, there were 500 people there, I swear, okay, not wanting to buy a $5 ticket, you know, assholes, so they were climbing over the walls, and it was very tight, it was very packed, it was very sweaty, it was anything goes.

In terms of let's say presentation on stage, right, there is no YouTube you can watch and you can mimic. The first few years of all these original English language gigs, right, you will see a lot of people just standing around, okay, what do I do, arms akimbo, what do I do now, is it okay to shake my leg… you see a lot of that. But along the way, they start to find their own feet, and not just the audience but the bands also. The bands are discovering themselves on stage and discovering how to connect with the audience and likewise vice versa. So it's very, very interesting to look at that.

Akilesh:
The Substation wasn't just for hardcore music. Singer-songwriter Art Fazil got his start in the English-language scene there, when he took part in a folk music event.

Art Fazil:
I didn't really get a chance to perform English songs until an event called Acoustic Vibes. That was probably 1992 at The Substation. It was organised by the late Steve Hogan, and Denyse Tessensohn, this wonderful couple who wanted to create a certain kind of scene, vibe, which is probably derived from the early 70s folk club music scene, which was happening in Singapore at that time. I think The New Paper carried a story about that, those who are interested to come and just drop in and put your name down and perform. So I thought, aha, you know, your Eureka moment, like, aha, this is a chance.

Life is full of magic, you know, so when I was heading to that event, I kind of felt that this is… there's a moment here, there's something happening here. I perform with the Malay crowd very often by then, but I've not really performed my English songs to the public before. I think I did two songs. I think I was feeding off the energy of the crowd, which was like, in the 90s, because we didn't have Esplanade. There was there was a lot of stuff that in the 90s that were very much initiatives by individuals, or groups of musicians, it was a bit of an underground thing going on, you know.

Akilesh:
His performance got him some very favourable press coverage, and that soon led to a recording contract with Pony Canyon, which by then was headed in Singapore by Jimmy Wee. For most of the indie bands in the alternative scene, however, access to the resources of a major label was still a very distant dream. Instead, they sought out affordable jamming studios, which had started to appear by the early 1990s. The most iconic one was TNT, run by a man everyone called Ah Boy.

Joe:
His name is KK Wong. He is affectionately known as Ah Boy although he's 60 plus years old now, hahaha, but we still call him Ah Boy. He already had a jamming studio but he was looking at all the kids that's coming in, wow, all these kids, they got heart, you know, I think maybe I can invest in a four track. In his jamming studio there's two rooms, so he broke down one wall, and one room is the band room, and the other room, right, he partition up into the recording space, and set up console there, and then he made it very affordable. So all of the kids started flooding, going to Ah Boy's studio. It's a very down-to-earth punk alternative space. TNT started being a place where everybody start to hang out, gravitates towards because anytime you want to go there, you definitely meet somebody that you like, or don't

like. After he started the studio, right, he completed the equation, because can record, can put out a cassette album, and then that ecosystem sort of is complete.

Akilesh:
In some ways, though, the local music scene of this time was less diverse than it had been in the 1960s, when women had been prominent as performers and in some cases as music label executives. In the 1990s, women who joined the fray did not always find it a welcoming environment. Ginette Chittick was a member of the all-girl punk band Psycho Sonique back then, and she recalled her time at TNT in a 2015 interview for *So Happy: 50 Years Of Singapore Rock*.

Ginette Chittick:
You know being all-girl, even jamming at TNT, people will be like, eh, all girls ah. And then, like, through that little window at the door at TNT's jamming studio, people will be like, can they tune their guitars? What are they doing, hee hee, you know. It's very nerve-wracking, but yeah, so that's how we started lah.

Akilesh:
Elsewhere in Singapore, other areas of the arts were bubbling with new life as well. There were indications that music was starting to cross-fertilise with these disciplines in ways that almost recalled the way local movies had showcased homegrown music in the 1960s. The indie film scene was taking shape, and director Eric Khoo also made music videos for local bands, used their music in his movie soundtracks, and even cast Joe in the title role of his film *Mee Pok Man*. Joe also occasionally collaborated with performance artists like Tang Da Wu.

In 1991, The Oddfellows negotiated a deal with BMG Singapore that saw the record label manufacturing, distributing and marketing their album *Teenage Head*. Its lead single, *So Happy*, hit number 1 on Singapore radio. The success of this song was a major milestone for original local English-language music.

Patrick:
It was a very exciting time, because after the album came out, we played so many shows, you know, we did like 40 over shows in three months. We played Hard Rock Cafe, we played Europa, we played NUS, a lot of venues. It was cool. It was very, very fun period, yeah.

Akilesh:
In 1993, The Padres released *Radio Station*, which became a sort of anthem for the underground music movement.

In 1994, another local band Humpback Oak released their debut album, *Pain-Stained Morning*, under Pony Canyon. This won several accolades at the Perfect 10 Music Awards.

Joe:
Things were on the rise. Humpback Oak, Concave Scream, and then there was a few other bands that were doing things… there was the awareness about local music was coming up and together with The Padres, blah, blah, blah. It was like, there's almost this sense of feeling that you cannot stand back the tide of this… finally,

where Singapore English-language original music has finally, we are moving from square one to square two to square three already.

Akilesh:
As local acceptance for made-in-Singapore songs grew, music-makers here could also see that a bigger landscape might be within their reach as well. The 1990s was the age of globalisation. The Internet had arrived for the masses in 1994, and as information began to flow faster across borders, the world was starting to look a lot smaller and much more accessible. In 1995, Art decided to leave for London, and he would remain abroad for the next 15 years.

Art:
Pony Canon offered me to do a second English album. And I said, not yet, because I want to go to London first. An artist, in the right frame of mind, would go like, yeah, let's do the second album and, you know, build a career, but I think I was very curious about life in general, you know. I have this philosophy, or rather, this saying, which I carry with me at that time was, god created the whole world for you, don't get stuck in one island for the rest of your life.

Akilesh:
Over in Japan, Dick was exploring a whole new world as well.

Dick:
Asia was changing. And the Japanese public started to notice what was going on in Asia. And then I turned up presenting a very modern vision of what was going on in Southeast Asia. And my music had all those elements in it. It's multi-racial, like what Singapore is lah. And so I found myself in Japan, recording album after album with Asian themes. My whole songwriting style changed. I started to use more Asian pop songs and you know, like sort of the mash ups and all that. This is something that I was just doing because that's what I felt I was expected to do.

Akilesh:
Then, in 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis struck. Its impact rippled across the music industry. At the time, The Oddfellows was halfway through recording an album under Pony Canyon.

Patrick:
Because of the financial crisis, the label had closed its office in Singapore. So basically, the master tapes were lost *lah*. I went to the studio to try and find it, but at that time it was all tape reels, then they're not really labelled properly. So when I was in the studio, there were so many laying around and I couldn't really find it. You know, so ah never mind *lah*, just forget about it. It was a bit disappointing because of, you know, we spend so many hours, hours recording and then it's all like, gone. So, a bit disheartened. I mean, we can do it on our own, you know, but it's like, oh, got to start from scratch again. So, yeah, so we didn't really get around to doing it.

Joe:
By '99, everybody pulled back. And it was really bad. Even when I spoke to Ah Boy at that time, and he was telling me, if I remember correctly, right, the number of people coming to record at his studio, right, dropped significantly. So it's across the

board everywhere. When you do not have the output, right, the number of releases, things start to slow down, and gigs also slow down.

Akilesh:
But in other ways, this low point of the decade also seeded some new glimmers in Singapore music. 1997 was the year Dick created the song *Home*, which was not composed for National Day but nonetheless became a National Day theme song the following year. He wrote it while he was living in Hong Kong and feeling homesick, and just a little while before he would move back to Singapore. *Home* has since become a beloved song familiar to all Singaporeans, and that's what makes this song very special for Dick.

Dick:
People are still singing *Home*, you know, 21 years later. That means they relate to it from a Singaporean level. And I wrote that song in 1997. Almost 20 over years since I started with *Fried Rice Paradise*, and it took me that long to be confident enough in myself, to come up with a song like that, that express my Singaporean-ness without a tabla or an erhu. You know what I mean? Finally, I came to what being Singaporean meant to me and expressed it in the song. And I find that people can relate to that. They use that song to express their feeling for Singapore. And I think that made me feel, okay, I think I found it.

Akilesh:
1997 was also the year Leonard left Canada and came home. The indie scene then may have been at a crossroads, but he still felt inspired by the young musicians he met.

Leonard:
So you could have, say, at The Substation, an event that started at 12 noon, it would go up to maybe about 9 to 10pm at night, and you had like 13 bands playing, you know, and then there would be punk rock bands, there would be indie bands, there'd be metal bands, ska bands. And it was amazing, because, you know, we had all these bands of different genres, playing in the same gig, with people who were there from early afternoon to late night, watching all these bands, you know, so they were not divided. They would watch a metal band, they'd watch an indie band. It seemed like everyone was very, very united at that time because they all wanted to achieve the same goal, to make the scene even more popular, and they were all friends. That was the best part because, you know, you could listen to indie, but then no one's gonna judge you if you're not listening to metal. I realised then that, that was a space that I could make a difference, to work with all these young kids, work with all these bands and try to produce music that was of a higher standard, so that they wouldn't remain underground all the time.

Akilesh:
One of the bands that got started around this time was Electrico. Here's band members Desmond Goh and Dave Tan sharing how the 1990s scene influenced them.

Desmond Goh:
A lot of things were happening. You have a lot of gigs in like The Substation, the old World Trade Centre amphitheatre. And with the help of BigO magazine, releasing a lot of compilation of all these Singaporean bands. So I think to us, it's kind of like serve as a lot of inspiration to like say, hey, so many people, you know, putting out stuff, writing their own music, things like that, I think that we can do it.

Dave Tan:
Just to add to what Desmond was saying, I mean, in the 90s, there was a very powerful energy in the scene. Back then, the scene was a lot more of a kind of tangible, visceral scene, where you are actually involved physically. So it was a case of really going down to discover bands, meeting people, attending gigs, and being part of an actual physical community that kind of fed off each other. So it was a very, very dynamic and fun time to actually be in a band.

Akilesh:
Electrico went on a hiatus in the late 1990s, and got back together in 2003. By then, the scene had evolved.

Desmond:
During the early 2000s, I would say that there's a big change. And I think what's changed is the live scene. These gigs during the 2000s are more properly produced. Like, for example, Baybeats. It started in 2002. That's when the Wake Me Up Music people decided to bring this festival into Esplanade and everything. That is definitely exciting times. Three or four days of live music for free, by the bay and everything. It was like a big explosion of, like, different type of genre coming together and stuff. I remember us coming back in 2003. We will know that, woah, definitely, we must play Baybeats.

Dave:
That’s right, I do remember us actually aiming to, as a goal, to try to make it on the Baybeats bill. That would have been our first festival, you know, because prior to that, it's just really just little pop-up gigs here and there, which we had been doing for quite a number of years before that, you know, like bar shows, or small Substation gig, or maybe play at this poly(technic) or that poly. But never a music festival that was kind of organised specifically to bring bands together in a festival setting, you know, and so it was exciting to us to be able to do that.

Akilesh:
Baybeats is an annual free alternative indie music festival, and it was co-curated by local label Wake Me Up Music and Esplanade in its early years. Since 2008, it has been fully programmed by Esplanade. From its inception, this festival has been an important showcase for local and regional acts. In fact, Electrico’s William Lim says the band pushed themselves to finish their very first album as part of their journey towards playing Baybeats.

William Lim:
The first Baybeats caught our attention to inspire to do the album and do everything to try to get where we are lah.

Desmond:
The first album was a collection of like, songs that we wrote in the 90s and new stuff that we kind of, like, knock it out, during I mean, when we came back again in 2003. We went to Leonard Soosay to help us.

Dave:
And it was a total learning curve for us, right, because we've never done something like that before. But it kind of humbled us into realising that there's so many nuances in terms of crafting a sound and putting it together and songwriting and everything, you know.

Akilesh:
They named this album *So Much More Inside*, and one of its biggest hits was *Runaway*, yet another beloved Singapore song that was written outside Singapore. Leonard shares more about what it was like to produce this song.

Leonard:
So *Runaway* was an old song actually written by Dave when he was studying in Oregon. When I first heard the song, I thought, like, wow, you know, this is a really, really good song, you know, with the catchy hook at the start. It was the thing that will catch people's attention immediately. And then the way Dave sings, truly Julie it's another day, you know, it's… the first line itself is very strong also.

And I remember when we were producing that song, we didn't cut it up or anything, like William played the drums and then we tried to just take the take that he took, and then you know, Dave singing, all the parts were recorded. Even though they were multi-track, they were not like the whole band playing at the same time, but we tried to retain the essence of the band, the meaning of the song and to give it a new life, because it was an old song, so we tried to record it and make it sound like it came from that generation.

The popular music at that time was probably Coldplay, Keane, you know, it was the British invasion. And Dave was very, very heavily influenced by Oasis at that time. We tried to make the song sound a bit British also, in terms of the instrumentation like, Daniel Sassoon was in the band at that time. So Daniel Sassoon has a large collection of guitars, expensive guitars, and then we would borrow his guitars and then everyone would play them just to get the tones that we liked. They were one of the first few bands to come out and release stuff that was very different from everything that was being released in Singapore. So it caught people's attention, and it caught the media's attention, so that's why Electrico's first album was the one I think that was groundbreaking in terms of production, in terms of the sound, and also in terms of the songwriting. You had so many bands form at that time also, who wanted to sound like Electrico, so they, you know, they were buying the same stuff that Dan Sassoon had, then and yeah, I think that was the start of the whole new revolution in music.

Akilesh:
Leonard's observation about Electrico's influence actually gets at something quite profound about their place in Singapore music history. After decades of being shaped by external influences, a critical mass of budding musicians here were finally

starting to see a homegrown act as role models — not just in terms of their musical tastes or their persistence in creating an ecosystem for local music. They actually wanted to emulate the sound of a Singapore band.

Of course, Singapore pop is still tied to the trends of many different places, and an awareness of music created by Singaporean predecessors and peers is by no means a given. But getting to know our own music is a key step to evolving the Singapore sound. And that goes for all generations of music-makers.

Dick:
Last year, I started writing songs. And it's been really cathartic for me, because I was writing songs like, I was writing them in 1973. Writing songs just because I was feeling blue or wondering about how COVID is going…. Just, you know, not writing songs that are government commission.

I decided to work with a band, a young band, so that they would include their take on my music. And so I decided to find individual musicians who are very good musicians. And then I went on Instagram. And I just found them on Instagram. I found them separately and put them together. They know nothing about our music history. I'm teaching them. But they love music. They love playing, and they're all 25 years old. And they're playing my music, and we're going to be performing it. It's so much fun. And I learned so much from them. And they are hopefully learning from me. So I think this kind of exchange is important. This kind of collaboration and just to keep evolving, you know, I think that's what musicians need to do.

Akilesh:
Technology can definitely help to connect. It also pervades all aspects of music-making these days. And Leonard believes that it must be used with care, and never at the expense of what makes music special.

Leonard:
I feel that music has to come from the soul, you know. It’s little nuances that you leave in your song, right, is what gives it character, is what psycho acoustically will remain in your head, and make you feel a certain way when you listen to the song.

If you listen to like, some of the best singers in the world, if you just listen to the vocal track naked, right, you can spot actually mistakes in the tuning, maybe they sang a bit flat. But when you put it in the song, it sounds perfect. You know, so music is about that. It's about having all these imperfections that makes it perfect. If you create everything that's perfect, then it becomes an imperfect thing.

There are many releases in Singapore that I feel could have been better, or if they left it the way it was performed, instead of using too much Auto-Tune, or too much programming. One of the things that the computer cannot replicate is the soul. And that is what I actually look for when I'm listening to a band or listening to music, is trying to identify the sound, trying to see what message they are trying to send out through the music, and also like, the soul behind the song, the songwriting.

Akilesh:
To put it another way, making compelling music requires an exploration and understanding of who you are, imperfections and mistakes included. And that's the ongoing rite of passage for Singapore pop.

We kicked off our first episode by asking the question: what is Singapore pop? Before we wrap up this series in our next episode, here's an answer to this question, from Electrico's Desmond.

Desmond:
I think Singapore pop is very much musicians over here trying to tell their stories in their own way. Be it whatever genre, or be it whatever style that they have, they want to showcase, I think that's good enough. Not trying to emulate whatever other people from overseas are doing by just being true to yourself. Being a Singaporean and sharing your story through music. I think that's Singapore pop.

Akilesh:
Stay tuned for our last episode, where new generations of Singaporean music-makers share their reflections on what it takes to tell their stories now.

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.

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