

weish:

Welcome to the final episode of *PopLore: Stories of Singapore Pop*. Over the course of this series, we have traced the ups and downs of local music across generations and genres through different eras of Singapore's history. Are the insights from these artistic journeys of the past that can help us navigate today's music industry?

So I'm weish, a sound artist who works across different genres and disciplines. I'm also part of electronic duo .gif, part of experimental band sub:shaman, audio visual collective Syndicate and theatre company Checkpoint Theatre. In this episode, I'll be chatting with some of today's music makers to find out what they think the future holds.

I'm joined today by Ruth Ling, Yung Raja and Charlie Lim. Let's start by checking in with everyone and what they're up to. Let's start with maybe Ruth, a musician who founded indie label Red Roof Records in 2012. She was also the head of A&R for Universal Music China, and is now exploring new opportunities in the intersections of music, tech, and business. Hi, Ruth!

Ruth Ling:

Hi, weish! Well, that was a great introduction. I've been lucky to have a multi-faceted career. So in my early career, I was a singer-songwriter, even played in a girls' band, put out a couple records, which is really important because to be the artist is to understand the artist's psyche. And as I pivoted, I started to become a music producer, did a lot of arranging. You know, as I got into my mid-30s, I thought that my one dream, at that time was to become like a Motown, you know, because I love Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin and all of that. And so I started Red Roof Records, which was one of the scariest things I've ever done in my life. 'Cause I'm just a musician. What do I know about business? So you learn from the ground up. And I became a music manager. I became a music publisher. And that all led me to Universal Music China, where I spent the last three years in Beijing, learning much more on the ground about the China market. So I was head of A&R, and that is a totally different side of my brain, the business side, the strategic side of that all came up. And I think that helped to put, kind of that, complete the picture of how executives, of how business and corporate really think about the music industry, because it's a business.

weish:

Amazing, it sounds like you've done it all! All different facets of the industry, used all the facets of your brain, as you said. I really look forward to mining all these rich experiences in this chat.

Next up, let's hear from Yung Raja whose signature English Tamil lyrics have made him one of Singapore's hip hop trailblazers. Hey, Yung Raja!

Yung Raja:

Hi, weish, thanks for having me on the show. It's a pleasure to meet all you guys. Say, it's a real pleasure to be in Singapore and to do what we love and to even get the opportunity to,

you know, represent the city. Very grateful to be able to do what I do with the people that I do it with. It's all very fun.

weish:

Yeah, I know, it looks fun. Like you've got this signature smile that's all over everything you do. And it's just such a joy to watch you like do your thing. Again, gonna mine your brain in the coming minutes.

And last but not least, we have singer songwriter Charlie Lim, who recently received a Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council, and is also currently music director of indiego, an internet radio station that showcases local and independent music, finally.

Charlie Lim:

Hey! Hi, weish! It's so good to see all of you. And thanks for having me on this. I'm not a multi-hyphenate like you guys are, you know, I'm just a singer songwriter doing my thing. Guess I've just kind of stumbled into, I guess, various parts of the industry. I've been doing music for about more than 10 years now. And I've been very blessed and privileged to just be able to kind of do what I love for a living.

weish:

You really downplay what you do, Charlie, 'cause I mean, you're so much more than a singer-songwriter too. Not that there's anything wrong with being just a singer-songwriter, but you know, you've been writing with people, producing with and for other artists, and sort of taking a director role for, you know, new initiatives and supporting the scene in so many different ways. So I really do consider that a multi-hyphenate thing.

Okay, we're gonna dive right in because this whole series has been sort of covering the journey that Singapore music has taken, right, and was created partly because the history of Singapore pop is not super well-known. So I'm curious about how relevant or present local music history has been to you as creators. Like, does our past shape your present in any way, as you are today?

Ruth:

Well, I'll start because I have more history than you guys. I think that, you know, as we grow up what we consume, and what inspires us forms our unique personalities. I mean, we take what's distinctive to us, but most definitely, we fuse it with the stuff that we love, right? I've been following the series, I was very jealous that in the 60s, it sounded like party town, rock 'n roll Singapore. I grew up in the 80s but it was pretty sterile. Everyone's in engineering, banking, finance, you know, medicine and law and everything. Very few musicians that came out in the 80s. As I was growing up, I loved the music of Dick Lee, of Jimmy Ye, of the xinyao pioneers, so that very much shaped my aesthetic. So I think understanding our history gives us that sense of identity. It's like, oh, that's why my aesthetic is that way. It's not fully westernised, it's not fully Mando, in that sense, but it's just a little bit rojak. Yeah. How about you guys?

Raja:

I love what you just said, like, it resonates so deeply with me. I guess when I stumbled upon music or hip hop, that is exactly what it helped me do, you know, like merge the east and west. And we as Singaporeans are so unique, right, like we grew up with that type of a circumstance that allows us to be influenced by two or more worlds. And then we as Singaporeans contextualise all of the worlds as like a Singaporean experience. And me as a first-generation Singaporean, like my family found it very interesting that within the same household, we are going through different journeys, you know, and music helped me do that. So, I feel you, Ruth.

weish:

How about you, Charlie?

Charlie:

For me, I guess I found it really difficult. You know, I didn't have many heroes growing up, you have to go out of my way to look for... hey, how come, why... then not many people doing music in Singapore, where are the artists, where are the singer songwriters, you know. In fact, Ruth was one of them at that time, and, you know, artists like Corinne May as well. So I think I had to kind of go out of my way to learn more about local bands, and then realise like, oh, crap, there was an entire, like, 20 years of history just kind of wiped out, we had our own little cultural revolution... hehehe whoops!

I guess like, you know, our generations' influences were definitely drawn from like, what we're exposed to at the time, right. So, you know, with the boom of internet, file sharing, and YouTube and whatnot. So a lot of what we consume growing up, it would be Western pop music, right. So we might not be tied to, like specific musical heritage or identity, per se, but at the same time, like we exist and do what we do, because of who laid the foundation before us. So I say it's necessary to recognise the ones that paved the way, even though it's not related to your genre of music at all, right. But you know, these artists, and also the people in the music industry, and those in the public sector, who champion for the arts, you know, so that's why we can do what we do today.

weish:

Yeah, you're absolutely right. That really resonates with me, though, that growing up for me as well, you had to go out of your way to discover that the local scene existed, like it wasn't really a major part of our consciousness, and I guess growing up with like emo and hip hop, and all of those things from outside of Singapore. And then for me, only later discovering that, oh my gosh, we have a history here. And then as in for my own journey, it was more underground scenes like Syndicate, The Observatory, realising that they've paved the way for alternative voices and have this cult following. And there's a place for weirdness and experimental music here, which was to me like, mind-blowing, and so weird...

Charlie:

And that people outside of Singapore were actually listening to our bands that we don't even realise existed.

weish:

Exactly. Yeah. And but that wasn't always the case. So for me learning, right, that, you know, local music was thriving organically in the 60s, where like The Quests and all these bands were sometimes taking top spot on the radio above the Beatles, you know, locally and regionally. And all the way up until famously, the government clamped down on rock music, which kick started that decline in the local scene and eventually created, you know, a listening public that was not used to or exposed to hearing original English local music at least and thus no longer very supportive of it.

And yeah, I mean, what Ruth was saying earlier rings so true in history that this lasted for close to 20 years and only up in the late 1980s, when made-in-Singapore English songs started to become, you know, more regularly heard again on radio. Yeah, so there's been that general common theme of local music being very hard to sell to listeners here as a result of what happened in the 60s, the no-long-hair no-rock-music situation. I don't know how I feel about this, but do you guys think we've recovered from the death of the music scene in the 60s? Or that we're still finding our way there? Or are we there?

Ruth:

Yeah, I think if there wasn't this sudden breaks in the music industry, it would have been so different now, because perhaps we would grow up as a culture with music and the arts integral to us. I think as Singaporeans, generally, in the past few years, past decades, the emphasis has been very much on survival in terms of technology, business. And that's all very important, obviously. And so I think the arts become something that was sidelined for quite a long time.

But that being said, we can see, you know, with, for example, with the Esplanade, or with SOTA, with the coming of arts college, I feel that we plant the seeds for the future. So there's a shift in mindset now, where the government and the people want to embrace the arts more. And we've been attracting all these tech companies, entertainment companies to have their Southeast Asian or Asian hubs in Singapore. And so this is a great opportunity for our young people who are interested in the creative arts, to really have a shot at doing something that is extremely high quality and can travel. I feel that is not as bad as in the 70s and 80s and 90s. I see a lot of young, hungry crowds at Charlie's concerts, you know, Gentle Bones and all that. So I can only hope that this is going to pick up more and more as we go forward.

weish:

How about Charlie and Raja? Do you guys feel like we are in a golden era or like not yet golden?

Charlie:

I guess, for myself, like, you know, releasing my first record in 2011, now? So it kind of rode that wave of like singer songwriters, and indie bands just coming out and doing their own thing. You know, just being like unabashed about it. And then there were a lot of opportunities at the time as well. In the last five years or so, there's so many festivals going on, pre-Covid, you know, Laneway and whatnot, right, being like the kind of most commercial indie festival. Of course, that also invited a lot more of the international bands to come in to perform. There were a lot of promoters coming into Singapore, because we're just like a easy like transit place.

Think that also opened up a lot of opportunities for local bands to perform and play and share stages.

There's also a lot more, I guess, journalism around music and entertainment. Bandwagon, for example, you know, kind of spearheading that, like growing from like a gig finder, into a whole editorial thing. That kind of planted the seeds, you know, for what it is today, and social media and pop culture and whatnot, that's also a huge part to play in how people like get to hear music and how things go viral. Like, for example, how, like this whole rap, hip hop, trap culture, you know, in just the last four or five years ago, exploded. I guess a lot of artists here also rode that wave and re-contextualised it in their own mother tongue. So getting to see Rajid and Fariz doing like "Poori Gang", that just blew my mind. I was like, yes, finally, I was so excited. You know, seeing that, and it resonated with so many young people. Yeah, that's been very encouraging and inspiring.

Raja:

Absolutely. Like, that has been the biggest shift that I have noticed. I mean, I started about five years ago, when I started off, the vibes were different, you know, by pursuing hip hop. I guess nobody could see how this could work, you know, because such a small scene and there's no foundation that's already been built, a framework that's already been built for you to just walk in and yeah, I'm going to be a full time rapper today. And I mean, like, it's nobody sees that path. What Charlie said about social media is facts, like my life, Fariz's life changed because of Twitter, because of a freestyle we posted, and, you know, the series of events that came from that has shaped the hip hop and rap community here. And now you see a lot more younger kids thinking about being a rapper, they don't see it as something that is not possible. The hip hop scene now is way more vibrant than it was like five years ago, if all these young talents that are committed, and they are pursuing it for real, it's all very exciting.

weish:

It is. Yeah, I mean, definitely, I think you can only go up from here. Thanks to you guys, as well. And you know, all the sorts of examples you are setting visibly online, you know, to young people who now see that it's possible. Like you said, I'm feeling that so hard. Especially Charlie and Raja, where you guys were talking about, with re-contextualising, you know, genres into local-ness. And being a version of hip hop, or of indie, or of pop that is sort of unapologetically still ourselves.

And that's something that I want to talk about next, actually, it's this phenomenon of cultural cringe. It's an actual academic term that I've learned recently. And it's defined as an inferiority complex about one's own culture and accents and, you know, ideas and everyday habits and that kind of thing. And I think, at least when I was growing up, I would hear many people like listen to local singers for the first time and go, wah, don't sound like Singaporean, cannot tell it's local, very good, you know, or like cringe when they hear any hints of Singlish or local accents, be it in songs or even in theatre, even in poetry. And the major shift when I felt that that attitude shift was with hip hop, you know, with Akeem Jahat, Sheikh Haikel, Fariz, and of course, you Yung Raja, who you've always been so boldly and unapologetically yourself, and brought your own flavour to the hip hop scene that at least I've never seen before. And I think that elevating of local-ness and yourself-ness, as worthy of becoming art is so important, like

the kids can now see that it's actually very cool, you know, to be yourself, and not an imitation or carbon copy of what you hear in American or UK hip hop scenes. Yeah, if you could speak about that for a bit, like, what gave you the confidence to sort of break the mould in this way, and just be you, you know, in a world where we're all kind of trying to approximate to what we think is cool.

Raja:

My experience was very interesting, because I grew up with a lot of kids that are third-, fourth-, fifth-generation Singaporeans, and they didn't really feel a connection to their roots. They don't speak their mother tongue, they don't know much about their culture. You know, it's not like they choose to not know about their culture, it's just not in their peripheral, so to speak. But I grew up being a first-generation Singaporean, like my connection to the roots and the culture was so intact, because of my family that moved from South India. And being the only person that was born and raised in Singapore, within the family like that duality was always there. Like, I was always connected to my culture, and my language, and my traditions. So I went to school, in primary school, secondary school, I would see all these kids that are shy to speak Tamil. They would pretend like they don't know how to speak Tamil, because of what you said, like they feel some kind of weird feeling to, you know, just be themselves. And I never understood that. And I've spent pretty much my entire life trying to get to the bottom of why somebody would shy away from being who they are, you know. And that is exactly the part that music came in. That help me say things that I've always said, you know, like Tanglish, is what they call it, Tanglish. And I realised that a lot of people were aligning with me, and not aligning with me. And I feel like the music allowed me to glue those things together, and kind of set like a new representation, you know. Because we have to know about ourselves, we have to know our stories. And those conversations don't happen as often. So I use my music to set that message across.

weish:

Eh, you suddenly allowed people to consider Tamil, or whatever their mother tongue is as cool and worthy of being a part of music... in a lyric... exactly.

Raja:

It's a part of them. It's a part of you. The longer you spend, not addressing the parts of you, it's going to be tough, you know. Because you're trying to put yourself across to the world, you're trying to speak your truth. How are you going to speak your truth if you're ignoring 50% of you? It doesn't make sense, right? Like, I mean, that's... I'm still uncovering it. I'm still learning about it. But it's been so fulfilling in the last five years, to empower people in my community.

weish:

Yeah, you've totally done that. And more. So it's really great to hear. Ruth, Charlie, any thoughts on how that might have played out for you in your own experience?

Ruth:

Yeah, I'm guilty of it, for sure.

weish:

No, me too, for sure. Along, along the way.

Ruth:

Growing up, Singaporean sound was a bit like, why you so lidat ah, eh why you so lidat, or it was a mix of, you know, for People's Association, we have to put tablas together with gamelans together with guzheng and then like, you know, have some... for National Day it kind of works. But as much as it may resonate with me, am I proud to show it to my friends in US or even in Taiwan? It's kind of like, oh, no, maybe I should just keep it to myself. And yeah, I never thought about it as cultural cringe. But I think I'm most definitely guilty of it. But that being said, I feel that the tide is most definitely changing. And I think the difference is we've come to accept ourselves. The difference is there is an economic shift as well, certainly from the west to Asia. And so you know, our time most definitely, if hasn't already come, is coming. And we kind of really want to get on board with that, so I'm very, very, very excited about that. I really feel the tide changing. How about you, Charlie?

Charlie:

I feel like the term like cultural cringe is also perpetuated, when you purposely try to like, oh, let's do this, like fusion of...hahaha... what you're talking about earlier about, you know, putting the guzheng and tabla, oh my gosh! Like, as soon as you have like this formulaic kind of rojak-ness, to me, that doesn't sound authentic, you know. Like, so I think, trying to experiment like trial and error, fusing things that are, you know, in this case, that is like trap music or hip hop, you know, with, yeah, because some of the way that like, Rajid can spiff, the subdivisions, the flow that he has, you know, it just goes so well, right, with a certain like tempo in a certain beat. I think like, finding those little like elements of juxtaposition, that you can bring new things together and experiment, I think that's like when it becomes fun and exciting. And like, that's fresh. You know, I think that if you can embrace that, I think that's like, that's really exciting.

I was just thinking about this, this cultural cringe thing again, and like, I definitely grew up with that inferiority complex. I don't know if this, like a Chinese Singaporean thing. I never resonated with, like Chinese music. Like I never really understood Mandopop or, you know, and then also, like, moving to Australia, you know, when I was like, 14, I got to do music there. For a while, like, oh, actually, you know, people do appreciate what I do, you know, and I can perform and sing and... That's another whole thing to unpack altogether, because that's this goes into me thinking that I'm getting validation when I'm performing overseas, right, and then performing to an international crowd, etc., then, oh, maybe I can do music. That was my thought process at the time. And, you know, there weren't that many opportunities back when I was in secondary school, right, to perform and suddenly going, moving overseas, I had more opportunity to do that. I guess it's similar for yourself, Ruth, when you went to Berklee, and I guess that was like a paradigm shift, right? I think there are a lot more opportunities now, for younger kids to go to art school, find different communities to make music and art with.

I was doing this like indiego session, like a live session at Snakeweed, and we were recording like these boys from Carpet Golf. And they did like an introduction, hey, you know, we're Carpet Golf, we're from Serangoon. And like, there was this brief moment of hesitation, they was like, hey, is that lame ah? And then immediately, aiya, no lah, let's just own it, then, yeah,

hi, we're Carpet Golf from Serangoon. You know, it's like, you'd never get that, like, you know, 10 years ago, right... Hey, you know, I'm Sam from Geylang, or whatever. And speaking of Geylang, there's this whole commune of artists and producers, like just setting up shop there... Yeah, Kribo Records as well, amazing. There's so much going on. And they're just owning it. Yeah, G-town, exactly.

weish:

G-town, yeah, and like under that whole series, like the Geylang Afro Band, and like, all of that. Even when Akeem Jahat just released that song way back when, about Woodlands, you know, or Ribena... like, Minah Moto... You know, and elevating all of those everyday things that are part of our experience into something that's suddenly cool and like, worthy of being art. Yeah, so it's so big. I'm so glad. Like, there's so much of that shift as well.

Raja:

I just wanna add on something like, it's so cool. Because I feel like nowadays, one of the biggest shifts that has been happening is the fact that we as one country, we as like Singaporeans, we're all figuring out what it means to be Singaporean. And I feel like that has been something that has been in people's minds for a long time, you know, across all the different communities in Singapore. Like, what does it actually mean to be a Singaporean. And artists have gone through their own path and try to figure that out. People from other industries all trying to figure that out, too. But this generation, thanks to internet, thanks to Gen Zs with TikToks, right, everybody is so connected. They now feel a different type of energy when it comes to being Singaporean. And the way they talk about it is different. The way they represent themselves is different. They are more vocal about Singlish. They're more vocal about things that make Singapore Singapore, you know, which I think is so cool, because I see it in my nephews and nieces. Like, I see them, the way they talk about the country, so different from the kind of conversations that was around when I was growing up. And that wasn't too long ago.

Ruth:

Yeah, you know, I love that. And you know, I just spent two months in Australia. So I decided to visit this Australian music vault, which is a bit like a pop history museum of Australian music. And I think they, a bit like us, are also struggling to find what Australian music really is. I think in the end, they just decided it was music made by Australians. But the difference is, every gig I go to, people are always cheering for the Australian bands. And I just feel so happy to see that there's so much pride, right, in the fact that you're supporting local music. And I'm so envious of that. But it sounds to me, yeah, like what Raja said, you know, we have more and more of that, listeners who are proud of that kind of authenticity and the music, and happy to support local.

weish:

Yeah, like crowds singing along and rapping along with you, the scores of people who've remembered all your lyrics, like, that kind of thing makes me so happy to see. Yeah.

Raja:

That's a shift for real. Like, I feel like I've been feeling it firsthand, you know. For too long, too many people have been thinking that local music is not for us, like Singaporean music, nah. We'd rather listen to Kpop, we'd rather listen to things that are outside of Singapore. And that's been like, almost like a pattern of behaviour from Singaporeans. Like, in all of us, you know, but that is changing, man. Like the way people now rock up to these local concerts, to our concerts, the way they show love, the way they talk about Singapore music. So different. Makes me feel very happy.

weish:

Yes, same. Yeah, that's awesome. And yeah, it really, like you guys said earlier, doesn't need to be this, like sort of curated manicured version of like, oh, we are multi-cultural, so we like represent ourselves in this manicured like, government approved way. But you know, in just an organic way of being ourselves, even if we didn't grow up very connected to our mother tongues or culture. Like for Charlie or I, like, I guess just being able to do what we do without trying to be something else is so important, you know, to shift the whole landscape of it.

Charlie:

I'd say even the commiseration of that is also part of, contribute to the identity. Maybe the cultural cringe is part of the Singapore sound. I think there's no point asking that lah. Everyone... I always get interviews, oh, what is the Singapore sound? Do you think we have? I don't think it matters. It's just something that like, I think maybe you can figure it out, like, you know, retrospectively. But I don't think that people in Iceland just went oh, we're going to come up with the Icelandic sound, like I don't think that happened, you know.

Raja:

I feel like they're missing the point a little bit.

Charlie:

You know, I think even with like Kpop and whatnot, and I guess the arguments like oh, yeah, you know, there's market size, and they're a more homogenous culture, etc. But then I'm just like, okay, why don't we just embrace the differences and the diversity that we have and just see where it goes? You know, we don't necessarily need to be like, oh, what is the essence of...

weish:

What are we?

Charlie:

I don't think that matters.

weish:

Yeah, not anymore, at least in like today's world. And just seeing how if we feed off and continue to feed, you know, cultures around us and how that grows into a whole new animal is rewarding in and of itself.

Raja:

I foresee a day where we have a all-Singaporean act festival. It's going to be called something super cool. And people from all over the world will fly down to catch our festival. And it wouldn't even be positioned like, oh, local concert, no, no, no. It's just, we just say the name and everybody knows what it is. And people come for Singaporean acts. And they think that dope, just like how people go to Coachella and watch American acts, you know. We will have that one day. Trust, I can feel it in my bones, man, I'm telling you, we're getting closer to that day, every day.

Ruth:

Love it.

weish:

Yeah, a bunch of us tried, obviously, not people around the world came to see it. But it was called 100 Bands Festival. And it was in like the Kovan Bus Interchange, the very first one. And there was like every local band from screamo to like, twee pop, to hip hop and like whatever. And I just remember this like screamo band just growling and screaming, and right next to them was this sort of Taoist procession for a funeral and I thought, wah, this is the most beautiful Singapore moment I have ever witnessed. Just the klang klang klang klang klang klang, of the lights and the, you know, the whole funeral procession and then like, a heavy emo screamo band...

Raja:

So cool, which year was this?

weish:

I think it was like 2014 or something. I'm gonna take us through a couple more questions. Actually very related to what we're talking about, but sort of looking beyond, like we've been saying, right, and accessing larger markets, because I keep hearing, as I guess I was trying to do music, people saying, oh, you know, the only way to be successful as a local artist is to achieve success in other countries first. We're all a bit suspicious of something until it has received validation from somewhere else. And I wonder if, I mean, I've heard that so much, and I'm wondering, is that still the case? Do you guys still think that's the case?

Raja:

I do.

Charlie:

I think it depends what you mean by success, right? So...

weish:

That's true, that's true.

Charlie:

Yeah. I mean, if you want to be like a superstar, then like, by default, you would need to conquer the world, right? So then Singapore's definitely not big enough, right. But you know, if

you're an artist, yeah, just survive, I think it's very possible. So I think to do what you love, you know, and make the art that you want to make, I think that's a really good endeavour.

Ruth:

Yeah, I think I agree with what Charlie said, which is, it's about your definition of success, for sure. But there's also a definition of market, you know, and I think you find the market when you find people who want or need, what you're serving, or what you're producing. I may like the songs that I'm singing and writing in my own unique, little Singlish way. But how many people will like it too. So if you're like blessed like Raja, where he comes up with something that's truly himself, and then he's got like, thousands of kids wanting to embrace that, then you have your market. And perhaps you don't even need to go out of Singapore. And I think we talked about how in Singapore it's so fragmented, that there is no one Singapore sound, but there certainly is an audience who resonate with your sound. So even though I'm Singaporean, and you guys are Singaporean, but we have very different markets, right, the music that we produce are going to attract a different kind of audience.

So for me, I think half by choice and half, just by the sheer size of the market, my career has always been defined by my success in the Mandopop industry, because it's a big market. And again, it may not be doing the music I really love, which I mentioned is Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin. But when I start doing more of the stuff that works in the markets, so like the ballads, you know, the kind of more pared down groovy stuff, and that really works. And I serve the artists that are working in those markets, you know, they have their own unique voice, and they have a market. And so when I'm there as a producer, arranger, music manager, all these roles, I'm going to find a lot more exposure, you know. And there's this scale, there's this effect where I can just do the same, put in the same amount of effort, but the result at the end is tenfold, hundredfold, just simply because there are more eyeballs, there's more ears listening to your product.

I'll give one very clear example in my own life, which is that, you know, I spent three years trying to produce music for Joanna Dong. We did YouTube videos, we put out our own records, I did some collabs, did shows, didn't really matter, nobody really cared, to be honest. And our big break was when she went on a China singing competition. And it wasn't so much about the competition, as it was about the judges in those competition, endorsing her. The fact that Jay Chou, you know, someone who was endorsed in that sense by the Mando market, within 15 seconds, he turned around and then he had nothing but praise for her throughout the whole series. To me, Jay Chou made her career. So I think, you know, going overseas has that kind of effect.

For the younger ones, again, coming back to that, I find that it's quite different. I don't feel that they need this stamp of approval. I feel that, you know, with Spotify playlists, it's very easy to hear a local group, you know. For example, I was on a disco playlist and I heard something I really loved. And I was like, who's that? And my friend was like, it's Disco Hue, they're Singaporean. What? No way, you know, so good, can it be? And so it doesn't matter anymore. I feel to the younger generation who's listening to playlists and finding music through this kind of discovery. It doesn't matter if you're Vietnamese, doesn't matter if you're Indonesian or

Singaporean, but the music moves you. And that's what matters and they will follow this artist because they're authentic.

weish:

Yeah, I really like what you're saying about that, like platforms like Spotify kind of democratising the judgement of music process, right? Everybody kind of knows better now, knows what they like, and knows what is good.

Okay, I want to move on to talk about ecosystems and technology, right. And I think you guys are really the right brains to pick for this. So one of the reasons music flourished in the 1960s was because Singapore music could tap on other ecosystems like the local movie industry, which was burgeoning at that time, as showcases for local songs, and we had Rediffusion and you know, all of those other ecosystems. And I think many of you have worked in other areas of the arts like theatre. For me, it wasn't just cross-disciplinary work from other industries, but also sort of community spaces that we used to have, you know, The Substation, Home Club that brought together different musicians from many different genres or like visual artists, filmmakers, literary scene or kind of, you know, being in spaces like that, that lead to collaborations and opportunities. And I'm wondering, for you guys, what are these ecosystems that have shaped your development as artists?

Ruth:

I'll start because I came back from Berklee in 2002. And so I'll speak about, you know, that decade, 2002 to about 2012. Yeah, I was performing a lot at that time at the Esplanade. And I have to say that really felt like home for me, like, I think I was there at least once a week, watching something, playing something, music directing something, doing a theatre show, there was always something going on. I think that made a huge difference. I wish I had that, you know, in the 90s, or when I was growing up, because I have so much more time then obviously, as a student, you know, that's where I want to hang out, you know. And it wasn't just local acts, but they were bringing in top acts. And I think that is something that solidified that decade for me. That it was a very vibrant space that was world class, that we felt privileged to perform in, and we could put up all sorts of different types of acts. So I was with my girl band, I was featured as a solo artist. And then I was doing this xinyao thing with TCR Music Station.

Talking about TCR Music Station, I think it's important that with the venues, we have concert promoters, you know, people who are so passionate about a certain kind of music, that they create a movement. You know, xinyao, people think it died in late 80s, it kind of fizzled out, you know, but the people who lived through the era are very much alive. You know, and so once a year, or maybe twice a year, TCR Music Station, they bring these xinyao artists back together again, in this huge concert. They started out really small, and slowly they grew it. That's how it goes, you know. You do something you're passionate about, you have venue support, you have artists support, you have the audience support, it just grows and grows and grows. And I think it was very lucky to live through that kind of ecosystem in that decade.

Coupled with, I'll just say one more thing that I was very lucky to hop into, which is the concert tour. So I always wanted to be a music producer. But when I came back from Berklee, you know, there was the age of piracy and P2P and recordings kind of just was slowly crashing,

but live took off. And so I kind of caught that wind of the Stephanie Sun's, you know, the A-meis, where their music directors were Singaporeans, and so they chose Singaporean musicians to be in their bands. And we would tour not just greater China, but we would go to wherever there's Chinese diaspora really. These are the kind of opportunities I feel I was given by the previous generation. And I really hope to be able to give back in that way to younger musicians so that they can get that kind of exposure and opportunities much sooner. Yeah.

How about you guys? I mean, you guys live through the, I think, 2010 and after? What's the ecosystems like?

weish:

Yeah, you Charlie, especially with like Blu Jaz, and I guess, you know, all of those smaller communities, but also with your connection to Melbourne and everything. What did those ecosystems look like for you?

Charlie:

For me, like, you know, even though I was living in Melbourne at the time, we'll come back every year for holiday and like, I'll try to book like a mini tour, try to play a show every day in the time I was back in Singapore, and just like, play every backpackers like pub, you know.

weish:

Hardworking sia.

Charlie:

I was, I was actually the first act to play at Blu Jaz. This is something that I'm very proud of, because I'm not a jazz musician.

weish:

The first ever act?

Charlie:

Like, I gave my demo CD to the owner, hey, I really want to play your thing. You don't have to pay me, I just want to, you know, do like, just to get experience. Not many people know this because I was very bad. It was very embarrassing at the time. I think I got replaced shortly after I enlisted. But those were really good times. If I didn't have those like opportunities to like, you know, work on my craft, then I definitely will not be doing what I do today, you know. And when I look back at those, I guess, formative years, yeah. I think it was very important part of you know, being able to perform as a musician and that I think spaces are really important, community spaces are really important.

And for me, like, yeah, similar to yourself, Ruth, the Esplanade to me was like yeah, it's the go-to thing that we all looked up to. The festivals, obviously, the Mosaic Festival was a big deal for me, getting to play it after going to it, you know, as a spectator for so long. And then having our own show at the concert hall back in 2015. I think that kind of also broke some, yeah, maybe misconceptions that a local band, a local act, could never, like, sell out a concert hall. I think from then on, like, you know, more and more local artists were just like, yeah, let's just do it.

Why don't we just work with the Esplanade and just, you know, book out the venue, make it work. Yeah, we just kind of push each other along, and so that was very encouraging.

weish:

I'm just thinking also about Baybeats, right, and how Baybeats is like, bringing, you know, everything from death metal from Indonesia, and like jazz, or very sub-genres that are not very well known from around the region and putting them together. Or like punk rock band Plainsunset having something like, I don't know, 10 to 12,000 people show up at the Powerhouse stage for their massive comeback at Baybeats. And it's like, we don't need any further testament that people care that we're here, right? Yeah. What about you, Rajid?

Raja:

Well, I started off as an actor, like one of my earliest dreams has always been to be an artist. But just the idea of being an artist, the idea of being an entertainer has been in my mind, like, since I was very young. But it took all these different forms. I was acting and then went into Music and Drama Company, and then I was a host. And then I would emcee in all these clubs and all these hip hop nights, I'd be the guy yelling, everybody to put their hands up. But all these different things that, like, I didn't put myself in a box, and I was just trying to find it, just trying to find what is the medium that speaks to me the most, and the medium that I could be creative in, creative using, and be as seamless as I can in my expression, or in my creativity, you know, wasn't until I found music, which was about 6... 2017, around that time.

And one of my biggest goals also, in the realm of trying to or wanting to be an artist was to ask myself, like, how can I be for Singapore. I saw a lot of artists, my peers, and they were doing a lot of work, a lot of things that were for their communities, it was all within their community. And it's not like we're a super big country in the first place, you know what I mean, like, so you want to talk about a small community within a small country, it's like you talking to what, 10,000 people? It just didn't make sense. One of my goals was, how can it be expanded? How can it all be like one nation? How can I speak to my whole country, and I never would have thought that rap music or music would be the platform or like the avenue that allows me to do that. Getting the opportunity to do music, and for it to not be just targeted to like, very specific demographic, and for it to be enjoyed by a wider audience. All the things that I went through has allowed me to cater my creativity for everybody, you know.

weish:

We've talked all about all these types of ecosystems, but I guess, looking towards the future, a big ecosystem is technology. And I'm thinking about, you know, Charlie, being part of a team launching a new DAO, thinking about Ruth's startup, what do you think the future looks like in terms of tech, empowering artists and being a sort of new, big ecosystem for everybody to live in?

Raja:

Charlie, tell them about The Great Wave, baby.

Charlie:

Gosh, we're gonna be here for another two hours.

weish:

I just threw you into the deep end of The Great Wave, to be washed.

Charlie:

Oh my gosh. I think it's exciting time. I'm generally like cautiously optimistic about Web3. I think blockchain as a tech is, you know, it's going to be implemented, whether we like it or not, right. It's just how we use it, right. And I think a decentralised autonomous organisation, or a DAO, you know, can be one of those vehicles to try empower artists and communities. So we are trying it out. I think for me personally, it's also to see if we can incentivise a collaboration for local artists, and then partner them up with international artists as well. I think the cross-pollination of audiences, I think that'll be interesting, getting different producers on board, engineers as well, visual artists.

weish:

It's kind of giving me strange nostalgic vibes for the times that used to happen so organically, right. When like every Friday without fail, you'll be hanging out somewhere, there are ten people who do different things, who want to be like, eh, you want visuals for your music video or not, or eh, I can do live, I can do lighting, I can do live visuals for your show, or like, you want album cover? I mean, all of those things, I think used to happen so quickly and organically but creating new spaces for that in the ever-changing world we live in. Yeah, I'm really excited for that.

Ruth:

You know, I wanted to say that tech has definitely changed the music industry. We see that in the many, many years of music industry recording history, right? Tech always changes the medium in which consumers consume the music. So much so that I feel like live music has become like this traditional art form now. It's like, oh, so organic, five human bodies on stage with...

weish:

How quaint!

Ruth:

No animation behind like, what, no strobe lights, like, you mean, it's not synced to the MIDI. How can this be? You know, I agree with what Charlie said, which is the shift towards web three, I think is inevitable, but it's not quite here yet. I mean, we're not at the tipping point, you know, we haven't really gotten our heads around to what is the metaverse. Or, you know, we haven't had our royalties come to us in blockchain, which I think is a wonderful thing for musicians, by the way. You know, why do we need all these gatekeepers and the slow accounting systems, which are not very transparent. I mean, the hope of a technology like blockchain is that it would be transparent, right? I think a lot of people in the music industry are trying to solve this problem of this broken system where our work as musicians isn't valued, you know, in terms of the creation being a net monetary loss. So you spend money to create this thing, which gives people pleasure, but then they consume it for free, or very little. So how

can you be motivated to make more music? It's a free good, you know, it doesn't make sense. But it's terrible.

Because the world needs more artists, the world is a better place with more music. So we need to incentivise artists to do their best work. And what that means is, we're not spending all their time earning money by going through ad endorsements, because they have to, you know, because everybody needs to make a living. And so we're trying to solve this problem. And we hope that we can find new ways in tech and in finance, help musicians to really get the kind of support that they deserve, you know, so whether it's helping the audience that who are supporting them to directly support them by buying the merchandise or showing up to their live event, or live streaming or other kinds of merchandise, such as, you know, NFT and all that. It has to be done in a way that is a win-win. So the artists win, their fans also win, and the people who are in the middle, giving some service to both sides also can win, right, has to be something like that. I think that kind of ecosystem is not quite here yet.

So in terms of the startup, I think I've been thinking quite a lot of different fields, using tech in education. Like for example, making the music industry deals a lot more transparent, giving more industry specific knowledge to young musicians who are coming out of college, you know, what are publishing deals, how to make multiple income streams from your music. Education, I think is one big part of it. But other than that, you know, the distribution of music, is it in, you know, something like, what Charlie's doing, the collective, is in NFT? Is it pairing. with animation in the way that I feel that the metaverse, whether you're a gamer or not, I think it's already a very huge part of our entertainment industry. And it's something that could fuse with music to become a very creative product of value. So I think looking into all of that, creating new ways, I think, to monetise all of this music, you know, I think is a very important space that people who love music need to step into. So that it is done in a way that is with integrity. So that's what I'm exploring.

weish:

Everything's a work in progress. But like no, so grateful for people like you guys who keep thinking about how to improve the lives and survival of artists as a whole. And you know, not just in our own little bubbles doing, making our own thing, but like really trying to improve the world around it for everybody. What about you, Yung Raja, like being native to, so integral and so native to like, digital, social communities, What is that like for you?

Raja:

I mean, I was born in '95, that's the age of the internet, you know? So that's like, I grew up with Web1 and then getting to see Web2, which was social media, more or less, and then Web3. It's all very exciting. Like, we don't know, like less than 5% of the world population is into crypto and NFTs and metaverse, less than 5%. But it may look like, wow, a lot of people are talking about it. But no, like mass adoption hasn't kicked in yet. And we're all figuring it out. We're all trying to stay on top of things as it's unfolding at such a rapid rate. And being somebody that is born in '95, same year internet was born, I am all about that. Like I said, right, if it wasn't for Twitter, I'm not sure what I'll be doing right now. Newer tech means newer things, more exciting things, things that weren't previously possible to achieve. Can't wait to see what three years later, what the scene would look like or what the world's landscape would look like.

weish:

Possibly completely different, right, given how rapidly things have been shifting.

Raja:

Because remember, remember the days when Facebook just came out and then you knew like 10 people that had Facebook. Or remember when iPhone came out and then everybody was still using phones that had keypads in it. And very few people had touchscreen phones. Yo, everybody has a touchscreen phone right now we don't even realise it. Like...

weish:

It's only been a few years.

Raja:

Yeah, when was the last time you saw somebody that had buttons on their phones? The same thing. Like we wouldn't be posting pictures up anymore for our social media, like the way we socialise, we won't be posting pictures with captions anymore. We will be doing other things. We'd probably be having a chat right now like this, but in the metaverse and we will all be wearing some kind of goggles, Oculus, and we can...

weish:

My avatar would be like pouring me some water...

Raja:

Like we're hanging out. And I really like, it's also exciting, right? Like, I am all for it. I can't wait to see.

weish:

Let's sort of see if we've got any wrap up things to say about Singapore pop. Or what we're looking forward to or what the scene is for you in a nutshell, or anybody got like closing things to share.

Charlie:

Maybe I'll add on to something that I mean, Ruth also saying, hell yeah, you know, now it's like, there's no better time to do it now and whatnot. I would say it's also very difficult and intimidating for a lot of people to enter this space, because it feels like you have to be everything these days. You're not just the writer, the performer, you have to curate yourself, you're your own brand manager, your own social media manager, right, you have to figure out how to write captions and talk to people. And it's really crazy. I guess, I hope that the tech and whatever things that we're building on allows also for more specialization, allows for more people to bring their contribution to the table and be recognised for it, and to add to a bigger picture. Generally, I feel like I'm quite optimistic when it comes to like the future of Singaporean pop music. For example, I guess my hope is like, that just keeps opening more doors. First of all, people will be proud of, you know, their own artists and musicians, but also then to check out slightly more obscure stuff, or underground stuff that they would never have had an opportunity to in the first place. You know, hopefully it opens more doors for that as well.

weish:

Yeah, absolutely just making space and you know, making sure that we level the playing field every time we sort of move forward, right, and have space for everybody.

Ruth:

Well, for me, I'm suddenly realising there was a bit of a dearth of local acts between probably 2000 and 2010. But one of the first acts that I saw that kind of inspired me again, to feel that Singapore music actually sounds completely different, was Charlie's show. I think it was probably 2012 or 2013, in the attic of Blu Jaz, and it was full. And Charlie and his band, were just doing their thing, and then I saw these young people go crazy. This shortly after that, I saw people singing like every lyric to Gentle Bones. And then shortly after that, I saw people at the Sam Willows, like a restaurant gig or something. And it was like, crowded, and I was like, oh my gosh, there's a scene you know. And you know, coming back to what we were saying about the Singapore sound is about the young Singaporeans growing up with this kind of exposure. You know, they get exposed, of course, via the Internet to every kind of music available. But if domestically, they're hearing our local acts, and they're going to the shows and being influenced and inspired, then the sound that's coming out from this next generation is going to be totally different. And they're just going to think it's so normal that all of these local acts should have such crowded shows, like what we were saying about the acts in the 60s and also in the 90s. I'm very, very excited about the future. I hope that I can continue to contribute.

Raja:

I'm very excited to see how we can continue to force Singaporeans to have an opinion on things. How we can continue to expose Singaporeans to what we have to offer. You know, I mean, we've been doing that steadily over the last couple of decades, but I think it's ramping up now. Thanks to how connected the world is, thanks to social media, thanks to internet. And the more we force Singaporeans to have an opinion, the more the scene will grow, I feel, and I think that's exactly where we're at right now. We are right in the middle of that evolution. Like I said, man, I'm very excited to see where Singapore's music scene will be in five years and how diverse and integrated it will be, and how globalised it will be. Yeah, I'm so hopeful. I'm so excited. I have so much faith.

weish:

That's really rubbing off on me right now. And it's, no, it's so nice to hear 'cause you get this general feeling, right, especially now during the pandemic like in your own little bubble, like, I think it's good, I think it's good, I think is going up, but then to hear all three of you from vastly, like, different pockets of the scene with such different experiences, both here and outside of here. And to hear everybody kind of chiming in and feeling the same, you know, rise or burgeoning of something to come, is the best, the best feeling. Thank you so much for that. Thanks so much for joining me today, Charlie, Ruth and Yung Raja. And it's been such a pleasure hearing from all of you...

Charlie:

I'm loving the thunderstorm, ASMR.

Raja:

It's a big one. It's definitely a big one.

weish:

We're like, the future is bright...

Ruth:

...where the underscore comes in and...

weish:

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