**Dangdut, the sound of Indonesia**

Until recently, studies of Indonesian pop culture invariably dealt with the state. The formation of modern pop culture coincided with the New Order (1966-1998) fostered by the economic growth and development that the regime oversaw. Once it was established that the New Order was an authoritarian regime, the state was taken to be the determining institution in the production and regulation of culture.


Weintraub’s analysis is substantiated by his analysis of song structures, lyrics, instrumentation, rhythm and melody. This method is particularly crucial to the chapter on authen-
ticity where he is able to show how dangdut and its distinctive chote drumbeat emerge. It is because Weintraub is an ethnomusicologist by training, and an avid dangdut musician himself, that he is able to draw out musical and lyrical content of the music that would remain opaque to a majority of listeners. This approach is thus very textual, and no doubt comes from his earlier work on traditional music such as presented in his Power Plays: *Woyong Golik Puppet Theatre* of West Java (2004).

The convincing argument about authenticity feeds into what is the book’s crucial chapter: the construction of the ‘people’ (e.g. Frederick, 1982). Weintraub brings a great passion to his work, being a self-confessed fan of the music. Broadly, the book is chronological in its approach, tracing the genre from its beginnings to the present, with thematic emphasis on the music and its origins. It also serves as a good introduction to the music for those unfamiliar with this very Indonesian form of popular music. Hopefully, the book will prompt more people to consider Indonesian pop culture with far greater seriousness and theoretical ambition than it has hitherto enjoyed.

**Top:** Dangdut singer. Photo by gentia.com via flickr.

**Above left:** Dangdut Monia ’91 taken at *Pesta Kesenian Bali* di Pasar Seni (People’s Art Festival in Pasar Seni) by Densi Ioamto (via flickr).

**Bottom right:** Author Andrew Weintraub singing on the television show *Bukan Emas Mati*. Alongside him are Rikma Irama, In Dahla and host Tulu Arwana. Broadcast 17 January 2011 on Trans7.

Weintraub only gives us a relatively superficial consideration of dangdut, as its appropriation by New Order politicians and the cultural elite as a means of reaching out to the people. What is lacking, however, is an account of how dangdut figured in the politics of the reloty in any way.

The dearth of cultural politics in the book relates to the fact that the book is a study of dangdut as music. Hence, the methodology that gives the book so much of its empirical richness also produces the book’s unresolved tension. Whilst this method works in studies of traditional culture, where the object under study is ‘static’ and can be studied as a distinct musical form, the approach is limited when it encounters modern pop culture such as dangdut. This is most perceptible in the fact that there is little in the way of pop culture theory in the book. Weintraub treats dangdut as a genre of music, rather than as pop culture. As a result, the book is sorely lacking in what Stuart Hall insists must be the topic of pop culture studies: politics, and the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful.

At various points in the text, Weintraub tells us that songs were controversial or were banned. In the chapter on Islam and singer Inul Daratista, these instances are explored, but in earlier sections such contextualization is missing. There is discussion of Rikma Irama’s diverse oeuvre of songs, yet although he was banned from performing by the Soeharto government in the late 1970s, Weintraub fails to tell us the details of why, how, what, and who. Then, in chapter five ‘Dangdut and the Spectacle of Excess’, the emphasis is on song lyrics, what they evoke and whether audiences respond in the way according to the songs. Weintraub’s readings are almost purely textual, and there is little effort to link the lyr-
ics, their message and their responses to the broader cultural politics of the period.

It has always struck me that dangdut is not just a music but also a space within Indonesian society in which various types of moral and cultural transgressions take place. Weintraub reads this more narrowly as the perceived ‘excess’ of the genre, and its challenge to middle class poliness. There is more to say here about what dangdut means culturally and socially, as a carnivalesque space that counterpoises the routine and morality of everyday life. Dangdut is in part the music of decadence, associated with prostitution, alcohol, sexuality, dancing and skimpy clothes. Touring dangdut groups, reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century parietatic theatre groups studied by Cohen (2006), also provide sanctioned spaces in which transgressions can occur. This holds much in common with the local cinemas screening *film eok-eok* (sex films) that have become sites for prostitution and ‘teenage trade’ since at least the 1990s.

With his emphasis on the music and the meaning of dangdut, Weintraub only gives us a relatively superficial consideration of dangdut. In his emphasis on the music, there is little empiri-
cal data about the music industry and its output; in talking about personalities, there is little information about the size of dangdut in terms of the number of performers, companies and so on. Lacking is also some sense of the pull of artists like Rikma Irama who features prominently in the book. His con-
cert audience numbers, where he toured, how frequently he played, and so on. These details would substantiate the claim in the book’s title of dangdut being ‘Indonesia’s most popular music’. Anecdotally we know this to be true, yet Weintraub offers little empirical evidence to substantiate this claim.

Overall, *Dangdut Stories* is a fascinating and exhaustive overview of the music of dangdut and its place in Indonesian social life. Although dangdut is familiar to anyone who studies Indonesian as the ever-present beat of the city, the romping and everywhere in between, this book provides much needed detail about the music and its origins. It also serves as a good introductory text to the music for those unfamiliar with this very Indonesian form of popular music. Hopefully, the book will prompt more people to consider Indonesian pop culture with far greater seriousness and theoretical ambition than it has hitherto enjoyed.

Thomas Barker

National University of Singapore
sontc@nus.edu.sg

**Bibliography**


