

# 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.

Thomas Barker



Andrew N. Weintraub, 2010.

*Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music.*  
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KRISHNA SEN'S 1994 STUDY of the Indonesian film industry is representative in this regard. Sen argued that the history of film post-1966 was the history of increasing state hegemony over film. Conversely, other cultural theorists came to emphasize resistance as the *modus operandi* of pop culture. In this vein, oppositional art cinema director Garin Nugroho came to represent the entire 1990s film industry because of his political stance. This was despite the fact that his films were seen by few people domestically and catered mainly to a global film festival audience.

With the end of the New Order regime in 1998, the emphasis in studies of pop culture changed. Andrew Weintraub's book *Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music* is one such study. Alongside recent work by Ariel Heryanto (2008), Matthew Cohen (2006) and others, Weintraub articulates a much more complex cultural history. He begins by tracing the musical roots of the *dangdut* genre in pre-independence popular music, following what would become *dangdut* as it developed through the 1970s with iconic figures such as Rhoma Irama. He moves through the New Order to the post-1998 present with *dangdut* at the centre of debates around Islam, women and regionalism. Although minor studies of the genre have appeared before (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 in each chapter.

In exploring the origins of the genre, Weintraub situates himself into a debate over cultural authenticity that has reverberations across other cultural forms. By showing how *dangdut* is rooted in a variety of musical styles such as Orkes Melayu, Indian film music, etc., he disputes the oft-cited claim made by musician Rhoma Irama that *dangdut* is a single-origin Malay music from a sultanate in Deli, Sumatra. This places *Dangdut Stories* amongst a growing body of work that recognizes the broadly cosmopolitan cultural history of Indonesia, a counter to the ethno-nationalist conception of Indonesia that was ascendant in the 1950s and which came to be institutionalized during the New Order.

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Top: Dangdut singer. Photo by [gastia.com](#) via flickr.

Above left: 'Dangdut Mania #1' taken at 'Pesta Kesenian Rakyat di Pacitan' (People's Art Festival in Pacitan) by Doni Ismanto (via flickr).

Bottom right: Author Andrew Weintraub singing on the television show *Bukan Empat Mata*. Alongside him are Rhoma Irama, Iis Dahlia and host Tukul Arwana. Broadcast 17 January 2011 on Trans7.

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 authenticity where he is able to show how *dangdut* and its distinctive *chalte* 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: Wayang Golek Puppet Theater of West Java* (2004).

The convincing argument about authenticity feeds into what is the book's crucial chapter: the construction of the 'people' (*rakyat*) through *dangdut*. Reminiscent of James Siegal's reflection on the May 1998 violence, Weintraub perceptively looks at how the people are represented in *dangdut*, by *dangdut*, and as *dangdut*. This chapter nicely encapsulates the cultural debates that surround the meaning of *dangdut* in Indonesia, and can be read into the later chapters that deal with cultural debates in post-Suharto Indonesia. *Dangdut* becomes a kind of signifier of the people that can be mobilized by various interests and groups, such 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 *rakyat* 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 Rhoma 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 to the lyrical content of the songs. Weintraub's readings are almost purely textual, and there is little effort to link the lyrics, 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 politeness. 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 peripatetic theatre groups studied by Cohen (2006), thus provide sanctioned spaces in which transgressions can occur. This holds much in common with the local cinemas screening *filem esek-esek* (sex films) that have become sites for prostitution and 'tearoom 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 empirical 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 Rhoma Irama who features prominently in the book: his concert 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 Indonesia as the ever-present beat of the city, the *kampung* 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  
[socactb@nus.edu.sg](mailto:socactb@nus.edu.sg)



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