

Rock and Roll is Forbidden Here

By Alvin Yunata, one of the founders of Yayasan Irama Nusantara

World War II had just ended, as Indonesia had also declared its independence. Whereas Western associations with this era are of reunions and a return to peacetime, a weakened Japan meant a fresh start for this island nation, a chance to throw off hundreds of years of colonial rule. Imagine a newly independent country eager to define itself, while hungrily absorbing popular culture, now flowing freely from the West. A cultural stuttering was taking place in Indonesia in the early 1950s- whatever was trending in the world, was appearing on the country's radar.

Of course, when we speak of popular culture, we are speaking about the younger generation who were just beginning to feel the freedom of the state at that time. The offer of (a new) identity and mode of self-expression was of the utmost importance. Imagine the rock and roll fever trending in the world, with the musical *Rock Around The Clock* being aired internationally in 1956, as one of the triggers. New access meant the arrival of electric musical instruments, music recordings, radio broadcasts, lifestyle magazines, and fashion- the sum total of which seemed a ready-made solution for the younger generation in their search for (a new) identity in this moment of independence.

The tendency to absorb elements of Western culture in Indonesia had without a doubt become commonplace, from the Portuguese to the Dutch colonial eras, respectively. Indeed, influences from Latin American, North American, and European music in Indonesia had been present since the pre-independence era; music such as cha cha, jazz, pop, are of course, very popular. One example which illustrates this is the emergence of the Keroncong music style, with its inherited Portuguese influence, namely of Moresco, Prounga, and Kafrinyu which grew rapidly, evolving into several forms in various regions of Indonesia. So historically foreign material was always adapted with local flavor to make it more lively and connected to the Archipelago style.

It should be agreed in advance with the readers that we must disregard the presumption that rock and roll music is exclusively loud and played with a fast tempo- after all the somber style of Elvis Presley's was also considered rock and roll in the early 1950s. Bill Haley, through the film *Rock Around The World* had in fact succeeded in enchanting most of the younger generation of Indonesia at that time, just one in a series of new idols that included Bing Crosby, Doris Day, the Andrew Sisters, Jo Stafford, Frankie Laine and Elvis Presley. The result was an era marked by the proliferation of groups of young people who ventured to form a band (formerly often called a three-chord band).

Irama Records, as the first private record label, founded by Sujoso Karsono in 1951, played a key role at that time, with a lot of female singers¹, and other musicians joining the roster.

Thanks to the rock and roll epidemic, even the concept of a pop music festival began to appear, in the form of a sort of battle of the bands, documented as starting in 1958, as young people across all regions of Indonesia participated to showcase their talents. This event competed with the prestige of the talent search program for singers (*biduan*) and female singers (*biduanita*) from Bintang radio, which was initiated by Radio Republik Indonesia in 1951.

The old order government (*orde lama*²) saw this frantic presence of western popular culture as a threat, especially to the sovereignty of the Indonesian nation. Wary of any return to foreign imperial control, the obsession with Western pop culture was seen as an attempt by western nations to erode the morals of young people. At first, Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) contributed greatly to popularizing western songs, partly because of the lack of other local album material at the time. But upon seeing this effect, the Ministry of Information and Communication formed a state controlled recording company called Lokananta in 1955, tasked with accommodating the collection of material of a more local and regional nature.

The old order government's concern about this situation grew, (and) finally at the celebration of the Republic of Indonesia in 1959, President Soekarno made a speech criticizing the lifestyle of young Indonesians who followed the rock and roll trend, the cha cha cha dance, and the *ngak ngik ngok* (a term for western music), and inviting all levels of society, especially young people, to restore the cultural integration in the country. This speech is known as "The Rediscovery of Our Revolution" or The Political Manifesto of the Republic of Indonesia (Manipol for short). At that time, music was included in this golden child category, all forms of art which were considered treasures of national culture and therefore regulated by the old order government.

Following the government's official declaration of its Manipol statement in October 1959, all Radio Republik Indonesia stations in various regions are prohibited from playing songs originating from America or England, particularly songs with rock and roll rhythms, as well as Latin material, including cha cha cha, mambo, and rumba.

¹ Here they use the term Biduan which specifically means a singer that is accompanied by instruments/bands. Nowadays it has more of a negative connotation in society. Biduanita (female singers) could strongly be associated with the Dangdut music (in the past, associated with adult imagery).

² 1945-1966, under Soekarno. He was known to be strongly anti-imperialist, hence the fear of the western pop-culture.



Orkes Teruna Ria

But the country has just become independent, and young people have tasted popular culture as free citizens- the anesthetizing magnet of rock and roll is too strong, and strict government regulations of culture, especially music, are not an excuse for the younger generation to stay silent. A handful of young people continue to look for gaps in the growing regulations to find ways to express themselves.

Before long, a magic formula emerges for a qualified approach to the acculturation the government so fears, but the youth so desire...

Oslan Husein and the Cubana Irama Orchestra, dare to recompose a folk song from 1940 by Gesang Martohartono, entitled "Bengawan Solo" into the style of rock and roll- in which Oslan's singing style perfectly replicates Elvis. The original, indicative of the Keroncong style, already beloved over the whole of Indonesia, had even gained popularity over wider Asia. In short, the pride of the nation. Apparently, this version of "Bengawan Solo" recorded in 1958, is the first documented release of rock and roll recorded in a shellac format under the label Irama Records. With that, the flood gates were open; more and more musicians began to adopt a similar formula, recomposing folk songs to create new songs in the sounds they craved through "safe" lyrical content adapted to the nation's personality.

However, it seems that this was not enough for the old order government. According to the *Selecta* magazine, October, 30 1963, the Minister of Education and Culture at the time, Prijono, stated that the western culture, in this case is rock and roll music, was equally unwelcome in all its various forms- not only the rhythms but also in the form of lyric writings as well as the way of singing which imitated western popular culture. With that, RRI began to filter and boycott songs that were considered identical to and imitated the style of, western pop music. Several names were deemed to violate the statement, such as Diah Iskandar, who was considered to be imitating Connie Francis, complete with his twist style; Koes Bersaudara who were considered to be imitating The Beatles and The Everly Brothers; Rachmat Kartolo, who was considered to be imitating Cliff Richard, and many more. Ultimately the drama escalated to the arrests of Koes Bersaudara and Dara Puspita at an officer's house party on June 29, 1965, for playing rock and roll.

Nevertheless, the repression of the old order government did not dampen the spirit of expression of the young people at that time, many of whom succeeded in finding ways to live out the spirit of rock and roll despite all limitations. The now legendary names of Zaenal Combo, Eka Sapta, Simanalagi Orchestra, Eka Djaja Combo, Combo Ria, Arulan, and Gumarang to name a few, are amongst those whose albums are today considered treasure troves of alien sounds, and sought after by foreign record collectors. For contemporary listeners, this response to the limitations of the time, the practice of adding 'local wisdom' (*kearifan lokal*) to rock and roll a la the old order, has yielded what today stands as an entirely autonomous body of music, both exotic and interesting.

Young people in Indonesia have never entirely escaped the grip of rock and roll, and it will likely remain so for some time. On the next page you'll find a few numbers (only a small selection) of the old order style of rock and roll from this pivotal moment in Indonesia for the listening pleasure of readers of this light article. Enjoy.

Alvin Yunata

Born in Bandung, June 28, 1977, started his musical career with Harapan Jaya as a vocalist from 1996 until the band was declared disbanded. Made Teenage Death Star as guitarist with Sir Dandy in 2002. From 2005 to 2012 served as Feature Editor at Trax Magazine. In 2013 formed the Irama Nusantara Foundation. A foundation for archiving Indonesian popular music from pre-independence to 1980 (until now).

1. Oslan Husein with Orkes Irama Cubana Teruna Ria - [Bengawan Solo](#)
2. Lies Embarsari with Zaenal Combo - [Burung Kaka Tua](#)
3. Nuskan Sjarif with Orkes Kumbang Tjari - [Mak Tatji](#)
4. Nien with Orkes dbp Jack Lemmers - [Betjak](#)
5. Zaenal Combo - [Ampar Ampar Pisang](#)
6. Ivo Nilakreshna with Orke Simanalagi - [Kebile Bile](#)
7. Band Nada Kentjana - [Djaleuleudja](#)
8. Juul & Rene with Orkes Pratama - [Ole Ole Bandung](#)
9. Eka Sapta - [Tirtonadi](#)
10. Eka Djaja Combo - [Kembang Rampai](#)