

Myanmar's Pop Music Industry In Transition

In the wake of the November 2010 elections, one important signal of the Myanmar government's commitment to change was the cessation of the censorship of music recordings in October 2012.¹ Prior to that date, the country's Press Scrutiny Board conducted rather rigorous censoring of so-called stereo series (albums), in cassette and later in compact disc formats. Producers wishing to sell their series in retail shops were required to submit a copy of the recording and ten copies of the song lyrics to the censors at the Press Security Board (MacLachlan 2011:148). Although the censoring was supposed to be provided for free, as a government service to recording artists, producers in fact incurred regular and sometimes large costs in the form of "fees" and "fines" (MacLachlan 2011: 149). Ending the censorship requirement, then, represented the lifting of a financial burden borne by musicians and producers. Even more importantly, it was a powerful symbol of the transition government's commitment to freedom of artistic expression.

I began conducting fieldwork in Myanmar in 2007, researching the country's popular music industry. I subsequently published a book (**REDACTED**) which describes the norms that prevailed in the music industry during the era of military dictatorship. In one section of that book I examined how musicians and censors interacted, contesting the assertion found in other scholarly accounts that, at that time, censorship of music was total and that the military government controlled all artistic expression in Myanmar. In fact, musicians and censors engaged in a complex negotiation of power and musicians exercised a considerable degree of agency in the creation and dissemination of their recordings. Nevertheless, I acknowledged that censorship was an important, although not defining,

¹ In October 2012 the Myanmar government announced that it would no longer censor audio recordings. However, at the time of the writing of this chapter in 2016, the government continued to censor video recordings such as films and music videos.

element of professional pop musicians' lives under military rule. In retrospect, I characterize that research as an analysis of the pre-transition popular music scene. This chapter constitutes the next step in a now decade-long inquiry into the Burmese popular music industry, and describes the situation during the current transition period. My findings are based on fieldwork conducted in Yangon, the center of the popular music industry, in May and June 2013.

I begin this chapter with a review of the scholarly literature on music scenes during and after political transitions. Next, I report on how Myanmar's popular music scene developed in the immediate wake of the cancellation of censorship. I argue that the Burmese popular music scene is being significantly impacted by the democratic transition, and that just months after the censorship of recordings ceased, the scene was already marked by important changes. I describe four important changes which were evident less than one year after government censorship ended: the involvement of Anglo foreigners, the democratization of the Myanmar Musicians Association, an increased range of artistic expression, and a shift in how musicians earned (or anticipated earning) income. This chapter concludes by speculating about possible further changes in the Burmese popular music scene.

Contextualizing the Myanmar case: literature on music scenes in transition

A review of the English-language literature on political transitions during the twentieth century reveals varied outcomes for popular music and musicians subsequent to national political transitions of various kinds. Together, the books and articles cited below suggest two conclusions: First, understanding national context – including especially the historical forces that led to the transitional events – is crucial to understanding subsequent changes in the music scene(s) in that nation. Second, the fates of musical genres are often tied to national political changes.

Outcomes for music industries and particular genres of music vary widely, because the national contexts in which musics originate, and then confront change, are so widely different. For example,

Wai-Chung Ho (2000) describes a sharp increase in the number of popular songs sung in Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) in Hong Kong since 1997, when Hong Kong was officially handed over to the People's Republic of China. Ho explains that Hong Kong pop musicians sing in Putonghua in order to promote the idea of a now-unified Chinese community, existing both on the mainland and in Hong Kong. Further, these Hong Kong musicians increasingly engage in self-censorship – avoiding lyrics that mention freedom and democracy – in a “deliberate and calculated act to avoid offending China” (Ho, 2000, pp. 348-349). In another example, Donna Buchanan analyzes the lives of Bulgarian folk musicians who belonged to government-funded national folk song and dance ensembles during the Communist era. After the transition to parliamentary democracy in Bulgaria in 1989, Buchanan found that these musicians faced “a more stressful existence in which they and their art have become steadily dislocated from and devalued within the public mainstream” (2006, p. 7, also p. 460), in no small part because the new democratic government dramatically decreased its funding of folk music ensembles (p. 459).

Other studies of post-Soviet contexts – which have been of special interest to scholars interested in the links between music-making and political transitions – show that in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Communism, national governments and fan bases had a conflicted relationship with Western popular music. Shortly after Václav Havel assumed power in Czechoslovakia, he sponsored concerts in Prague by the Rolling Stones and Lou Reed, for which local fans of rock music were deeply grateful (Mitchell, 1992, p. 191). Recordings of Western rock and rap became available in Czechoslovakia in 1990, albeit priced very expensively. Similarly, “Polish rock....was almost completely replaced in the media by Western products” due to “large local demand” (Pekacz, 1992, pp. 206-207). However, during this same period post-Soviet democratic governments failed to clamp down on piracy, that is, the illegal copying and selling of recordings (Buchanan, 2006, p. 453). Jolanta Pekacz explains that “Piracy became possible thanks to a chaotic situation...in which both moral and legal distinctions between ‘entrepreneurship’ and crime [became] hazy” (1992, p. 207). Ultimately, Western pop

super-groups including U2 and Dire Straits refused to perform in Poland due to their concerns about unrestrained piracy.

Scholars have shown particular interest in the question of whether popular music-making is a factor in aiding political transitions, specifically, whether popular music itself can be credited for promoting democracy. Their varied answers to this question underline, once again, the importance of accounting for specific contexts in analyzing specific outcomes. Ingrid Byerly (1998) argues that popular musicians used a number strategies, including collaborations between musicians of different racial heritages, to effectively contest the ideology of the apartheid regime in South Africa, ultimately “prophesying” the downfall of the National Party government. Jeremy Wallach asserts that underground rock music in Indonesia – which both expressed and modeled dissent - became “the soundtrack for an activist youth movement that helped topple an entrenched thirty-two year military dictatorship and start Indonesia on a successful road to democracy” (2005, p. 17). By contrast, Francis Nyamnjoh and Jude Fokwang found that lyrics from most of the popular songs created in Cameroon during the repressive rule of President Ahmadou Ahidjo - from 1960 to 1982 - expressed “pro-establishment” messages and that “lyrics openly critical of politicians or politics were rare” (2005, p. 264). “Critical songs” and “questioning songs,” which have since become an important part of the repertoire of Cameroonian popular music, emerged only after Ahidjo was removed from power (2005, p. 266). Craig Lockard found that in Thailand, “overtly political [popular] music” was created in Thailand after massive student demonstrations in 1973 which led to “the installation of a democratic system” (1996, p. 172). However, popular songs with critical lyrics were repressed when military rule was reestablished, leading Lockard to write that “Political music has frequently flourished in Thailand, as long as conditions permit, but it is hard to judge how much actual influence it has enjoyed....Certainly it was not powerful enough to help prevent the triumph of right wing forces in 1976” (1996, p. 175).

In some cases, we observe that the relative popularity of a musical genre, and/or the extra-musical ideas with which the genre is associated, is directly linked to changes in the surrounding political context. For example, an Indonesian popular music genre called kroncong, which centers on two ukulele-like instruments called *cak* and *cuk*, was widely appreciated during the Indonesian Revolution of 1945-1949, when the Indonesians successfully fought for independence from the Dutch. During this era “kroncong was transformed from a despised lower class popular music to a nationalist emblem” (Lockard, 1996, p. 160). During the latter half of the twentieth century, however, kroncong declined in popularity, as successive generations of young people connected the music with an earlier generation. In Cameroon, two popular music genres emerged during the 1940s: makossa, which is associated with the Sawa ethnic group, and bikutsi, associated with the Beti ethnic group (Nyamnjoh and Fokwang, 2005, p. 254). During the Ahidjo era (discussed above), makossa flourished. However after 1982, when a Beti president assumed power, the national government chose to promote bikutsi, showing a “noted insensitivity...towards the music of other ethnic areas in Cameroon” (p. 259). Makossa then became the genre of opposition protest.

In post-Soviet Czechoslovakia, Czech folk singers who had been banned by the Communist government were allowed to return to the country and sing freely, and punk music became an officially accepted musical genre (Mitchell, 1992, pp. 192 and 200). In other post-Soviet countries, the nationalism of the 1990s gave rise to a renewed emphasis on national sounds and symbols in popular music. In the Ukraine, for example, popular music bands began underlining their commitment to their Ukrainian identity and simultaneously symbolically distancing themselves from Russia. They transformed their genre by singing in Ukrainian, using traditional musical forms from Ukrainian folk music, and by showing images associated with Ukrainian tradition in their music videos (such as well-known landmarks, rural settings, clothing, food, and musical instruments) (Wickstrom, 2008, pp. 66-73). In Hungary, an entirely new genre emerged in the 1990s. “National rock” or “patriotic rock”

differs from mainstream rock in that it is openly wedded to the Rock Against Communism ideology (Kürti, 2012). The lyrics of the songs in this genre celebrate freedom from communism and evoke a mythic past during which Hungary was a unified and mono-ethnic Christian country. The most extreme examples of such lyrics, sung by “hard-core” nationalist punk and death metal bands, espouse Hungarism (Hungary for the Hungarians), Nazism, racism, homophobia, and hatred of Jews and Roma (Kürti, 2012, p. 113).

In what follows, I describe Myanmar’s popular music during the transition period. Following the scholarship cited above, and the other chapters in this volume, I seek to pay particular attention to the national context in which these changes occurred. Importantly, I acknowledge the reality implicit in the case studies described above (and explicitly stated in Buchanan, 2006, p. 25), which is that a political transition is not usually a single event, but rather a process lasting years or even decades. Therefore I emphasize again that my statements about the Myanmar popular music scene are temporally-bound, referring to a time rather early in the transition process. More research will surely be needed, and I anticipate that further changes, linked in various ways to the evolving political climate, will occur.²

Increasing involvement of foreigners in the Myanmar popular music scene

One change I noticed immediately when I returned to Yangon in 2013 was that Anglo foreigners (meaning, citizens of English-speaking countries) were becoming increasingly involved in the Burmese pop music industry. Just a few years earlier, there had been no foreign nationals working in the Yangon music scene in any capacity, and so the presence of Anglo foreigners in a previously mono-national industry was striking. All of the foreigners I met had moved to Myanmar recently without the intention of devoting themselves to popular music; that is, they came to work in other industries but, after becoming fans of and developing sympathies with local musicians, became their advocates. Their

² Here I am mindful of László Kürti who bravely and humbly revised his earlier conclusions about Hungarian popular music when he analyzed the scene “twenty years after” (2012, p. 127).

presence in Yangon was linked to the newly-democratic government's efforts to end the country's isolation and allow foreign immigration.

The group of Anglo foreigners who were involved in Burmese popular music was, in 2013, quite small – only a handful – but they had a disproportionate effect on the industry. The best known example of this phenomenon is an Australian dance coach named Nikki May who moved to Yangon in 2009. She quickly became involved with a recently-formed girls group, then known as the Tiger Girls. Under Ms. May's leadership, this group changed their name to the MeNMa Girls and achieved an impressive amount of international success. The MeNMa Girls became the subject of documentary film (*Miss Nikki and the Tiger Girls*), performed for Hilary Clinton at a UN summit, and in 2014 moved temporarily to Los Angeles, having received a recording contract from a US-based record label.

In Myanmar however – as the group members admitted to me – the MeNMa Girls did not have much of a following. Notably, the group had few links with local industry power brokers. Among the twenty-seven industry members I interviewed in 2013, only one said that he had ever worked with the MeNMa Girls; the general consensus was that this group was not well known and “not very talented” (e.g. G Latt, personal communication, May 23, 2013).

The Girls' relationships with Burmese pop musicians may have been weak because during a number of media interviews they had stated their commitment to “original music,” and disparaged the *copy thachin* tradition of their country. To explain: During the roughly fifty years that Burmese musicians have been creating popular music in the international pop-rock style, song composers utilized two composition techniques, both of which are appreciated by Burmese fans and professional colleagues. The first of these techniques, and the only one widely understood in Western countries, involves using all new sonic elements to construct a song: a new melody accompanied by new harmonies and sung using new words. Such a song is called an *own tune*. When using the second

technique, Burmese song composers copy varying amounts of a melody, harmony and accompanying timbres from a previously-existing song, almost always a hit song originating in the United States or the United Kingdom. In such a song, called *copy thachin*, the only completely new element is the Burmese-language words, which are not a translation of the original English words. Both *own tunes* and *copy thachin* are widely performed by professional pop musicians in Myanmar, although *copy thachin* are frequently derided by outsiders as nothing more than plagiarism (MacLachlan, 2016).

The MeNMa Girls' articulation of their position on *copy thachin* – indeed, the very position that has earned them admiring press reports in venues like the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Singapore Times and Newsweek Magazine – may be attributed in part to the influence of their Anglo manager, Ms. May. After all – as group members acknowledged to me - when they were the Tiger Girls, the group performed *copy thachin* (personal communication, June 3, 2013). The Anglo foreigners who became involved in Burmese popular music in the early years of the political transition shared the conviction, widespread in English-language majority countries, that “originality” is the *sine qua non* of artistic endeavors. Their influence was evident in other cases.

The punk band Side Effect, for example, had a Canadian manager named Daniel Gelfer. Due to Gelfer's connections with the Anglo ex-patriate community in Yangon, Side Effect gained an important following among foreigners. I attended a Side Effect concert at a restaurant in Yangon in May 2013, and was fascinated to be part of an audience that included more Anglos than Burmese. Side Effect toured Germany in 2014, and their lead singer claimed that they have more fans in Europe than they do in Myanmar (Roberts, 2014). Darko C, the lead singer, told me that he “hates” *copy thachin*, although Side Effect has covered an English-language song. Darko insisted that covering a song is different than copying it, because covering is a way of paying tribute to a song one loves (Darko C, personal communication, May 15, 2013).

Both the MeNMa Girls and Side Effect performed at Yangon's 50th Street Café and Bar, an important concert venue in the heart of Myanmar's largest city. In 2013 the manager of the bar was Phil Blackwood, a New Zealander who, like Nikki May and Daniel Gelfer, had a strongly negative view of *copy thachin*. Blackwood was committed to booking local live bands to perform in the bar, and this represented a great opportunity for local musicians, since there are very few small venues in Yangon where up-and-coming performers can present concerts for well-heeled audiences of locals and foreigners. However, as Blackwood told me gently, he did not plan to ever book a group which performs *copy thachin* – meaning that, like the other influential Anglos entering the Burmese pop music scene, he would promote artists who share his own value system (personal communication, June 12, 2013). Since this value system differs sharply from the value system common across the Burmese popular music industry, and especially from that of the *copy thachin*-performing singers who are very popular with Burmese fans, foreigner influence may have a rather distorting effect on the scene.³ In the near future, Burmese musicians who gain international followings may be, ironically, musicians who have relatively little support at home.

The Myanmar Musicians Association and the advent of the royalty payment system

The Myanmar Musicians Association, or the *Myanmar Gita Asiayon*, is an umbrella group which aims to represent the interests of recording artists in Myanmar. I wrote at length about the work of the MMA, and musicians' responses to it, in **(REDACTED)**. Pre-transition, the members of the MMA were appointed by the military government, and therefore the organization was distrusted and dismissed by most musicians, although MMA board members whom I met insisted they were pursuing initiatives which would redound to the benefit of musicians. In September 2012, the MMA had its first-ever fully

³ Note, however, that the three Anglo individuals described in this section will presumably have little influence going forward. By 2016, both Nikki May and Daniel Gelfer had left Myanmar in pursuit of other opportunities. Phil Blackwood had been expelled from the country after serving a prison sentence (Edwards, 2016).

democratic election, meaning that members were able to vote freely for a board of leaders who make decisions that affect musicians' livelihoods. In 2013 the elected General Secretary was Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, a highly successful singer who described the MMA's evolution by saying that the group had become "a real NGO" (personal communication, May 18, 2013). One of the first changes the MMA made was to post the minutes of their monthly meetings on Facebook, in an effort to show their commitment to transparent and democratic government.

Musicians I interviewed in 2013 were generally happy about this development, although they were sanguine about the new leadership, pointing out that, while the new leaders meant well, they were inexperienced (e.g. Min Oo, personal communication, May 29, 2013). For their part, the elected leaders seemed sincerely committed to protecting the interests of their members. However, the MMA and its members dealt with a number of controversial issues, and during interviews with me, dissent was evident. In 2013, early in the transition era, the MMA's relationship with its members reflected the messiness of democracy, a messiness which can be disappointing to people who have idealized expectations about freedom and progress.

The most controversial issue the MMA took on was the payment of royalties. The MMA is the body to which radio stations and movie producers are supposed to pay royalty fees each time they broadcast a recording. The MMA is then supposed to disburse these royalty fees to the artists involved in the creation of the recording. As of 2009, virtually no one in the Burmese popular music industry used or even understood the concept of "royalties." When I explained this notion to musicians during interviews (conducted pre-transition), they were somewhat puzzled. They told me over and over that "the Burmese way" was for producers – that is, the financial backers of recorded albums – to pay flat fees to songwriters, singers and other performers at the time they purchased their services. Any profits from the sale of recordings were returned to producers. And the only radio station in Myanmar which played a lot of popular music, and which welcomed caller requests for airplay, did not compensate

artists or producers for broadcasting their works. The principal way in which musicians made money under this system was by earning flat fees working in recording studios or doing live concerts.

Since 2010, the number of privately-owned radio stations in Myanmar has grown exponentially. In 2012 the newly-elected MMA board decided to aggressively pursue radio station owners for royalty payments. The MMA decided to charge 750 kyat (slightly less than one US dollar by current exchange rates) for each broadcast of any given song. They committed to disbursing the royalty fee as follows: 150 kyats, or 20%, to the MMA, 150 kyats to the lead singer, 150 kyats to the songwriter, 150 kyats to the producer, 90 kyats to be divided among the instrument players, and 60 kyats to the recording studio (Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, personal communication, June 7, 2013). The amounts that different industry members earn under this scheme is a direct reflection of their relative amounts of power in the industry. Lead singers, for example, often spend less time in the studio than do instrument players. However, because they are literally front and center during concerts and in music videos, their faces and names are well-known to fans. They are “nammeh-kyi deh,” or big names, and they can therefore command a larger portion of the royalty payment than, for example, guitar players who may have contributed more time and effort to the making of the recording. Note that back-up singers, or “harmony” as they are called in Myanmar, get nothing under this scheme.

As of 2013, the MMA had not paid out many royalty fees, for a few different reasons. Musicians were still, to some degree, uneducated about royalties and therefore did not file the necessary paperwork in order to collect them. (And some musicians told me that they heard the paperwork was so confusing that they did not even bother trying (Ah Moon, Htike Htike and Kimi, personal communication, June 3, 2013)). The MMA also had difficulty extracting royalty monies from radio station managers, many of whom are well-known musicians in their own right, like Zaw Win Htut. These musicians/managers have their own opinions about what kinds of payments are appropriate, and what role the MMA ought to play in the newly-emerging music economy. And, unfortunately, the MMA hired

a corrupt office manager who embezzled 500 000 kyats worth of royalty payments in 2012 (Myint Moe Aung, personal communication, May 24, 2013). The MMA pursued this case in court, but in the meantime, the unpaid fees undermined the trust they asked musicians to place in the organization. The challenges the MMA faced resembled those scholars have documented elsewhere; in brief, when small-scale music industries in developing countries create organizations to oversee royalty payments, these organizations are often unsuccessful at funneling the money owed to the artists (Wallis and Malm, 1984).

In 2013 I met a number of prominent musicians who told me that they had quit, or refused to join, the new MMA (e.g. Shwe Gyaw Gyaw, personal communication, May 25, 2013; G Latt, personal communication, May 23, 2013; Lin Lin, personal communication May 24, 2013; Ayo, personal communication, May 31, 2013). These musicians wanted to manage their own careers, and they rejected the control (or “protection”) offered by an organization that was, for decades, a patsy of the military regime. These musicians hired, or told me they planned to hire, lawyers to help them pursue the royalties to which they felt entitled. They pointed out that, while lawyers do charge fees, their fees are generally lower than the 20% the MMA reserves for itself. A number of these musicians stated that they felt the MMA’s division of royalty monies was inequitable; for example, why should a studio owner, who has already profited by renting out his studio to recording artists, be further compensated when the recording is broadcast? Songwriters mounted a campaign to advocate for royalties each time singers perform songs live in concert – a campaign that failed, largely because tremendously influential singers like Lay Phyu refused to cooperate. Musicians who disdained the MMA argued further that by dealing directly with radio station managers – who in some cases were their industry colleagues - they could negotiate different royalty fees for their work. A number of them said they would like to offer their latest albums to radio stations for free, in hopes that the radio stations would broadcast them frequently and thereby build a fan following. In other cases, they would like to charge far higher royalty

fees than the standard amounts set by the MMA. They were particularly angered by the fact that the new and supposedly improved MMA declined to reopen a deal reached with cell phone companies, in which the cell phone companies pay 300 kyats for 20 years of use of a recording as a ringtone (G Latt, personal communication, May 23, 2013). Given that the cellphone market was exploding in Myanmar, these artists pointed out that they could have negotiated for much more money.

Artistic freedom and its discontents

Another thorny issue that the MMA attempted to arbitrate at the very time I was interviewing musicians in Yangon was that of rating, or somehow otherwise commenting on, recordings. To put this dispute in context: just months after the government ceased censoring music recordings, not one person among the twenty-seven I interviewed in 2013 thought the country should return to the old system of government censorship. Musicians were uniformly relieved that they no longer had to endure the inconvenience of submitting their recordings for approval, and that they no longer had to pay bribes to the staff members at the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division. Also, musicians were generally very glad that in the newly-free market they were now able to produce “political songs.” In truth, few of these “political songs” were available as of May 2013, but a number of my interlocutors pointed me to a recording produced by the National League for Democracy (Aung San Suu Kyi’s political party). The CD was titled “Freedom Songs;” this very title would have been disallowed by censors pre-transition. However, in 2013 I found it for sale in the very first retail shop I entered, where a clerk sold it to me without any noticeable reaction. In less than one year, then, forbidden music had become commonplace. However, some recording artists were still cautious, pointing out that the federal government had promised a democratic government for decades, and had even allowed a general freedom of expression for short periods – only to later punish opponents of the regime. These musicians said that, whatever progressive agenda the government was now proclaiming, they were unwilling to record songs which expressed open and targeted dissent. “I’m pretty sure you can’t sing,

“Fuck you, Mr. President,” even now,” said Darko C (personal communication, May 15, 2013). As film director Ko Myint pointed out: “They can put you in jail *any time*” (personal communication, May 21, 2013).

Although most of the musicians I talked with were openly glad about the new freedoms they enjoyed in 2013, they evinced a range of opinions about how that freedom should be deployed. The leaders of the MMA and many rank and file musicians were concerned about the influence of uncensored songs on the general public. A number of my informants used the English phrases “rude words” or “bad words” to describe lyrics that could now be written, and that they had heard in recent recordings. These “bad words” generally fell into two categories: First, lyrics – or visual representations in music videos – that refer to sexual acts. One example mentioned to me in multiple interviews was a hit song called “In Love With You,” recorded by a young singer called Eain Eain. Although the words in this song are innocuous, the accompanying video shows a young couple cuddling on a bed, with repeated references to more sexually suggestive visuals (for example, the woman licks her lips and lifts her skirt, and eventually they engage in a very close embrace while beginning to remove each other’s clothes).⁴ It is important to point out here that musicians objected to this not because they were reactionary conservatives or especially prudish about sex. Rather, they feared that sexual content in music could lead to family breakdown. As Nay Win Htun, a well-known music teacher, said, “We can’t listen to this music between mothers and sons, or between brothers and sisters” (personal communication, May 16, 2013). And this is a legitimate concern: while the government elected in 2015 may be more democratic, it is not yet supplying a reliable social safety net to vulnerable citizens. As Burmese people age, they must be able to depend on their children and other relatives to support them financially. Therefore, strong relationships between parents and children are of utmost importance.

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFBTPQ385tU>

The second type of “bad words” which worried my interlocutors in 2013 are those that evoke racist attitudes. Here again, my respondents were unable to identify many examples of such words, although they were sincerely concerned. One song referenced in interviews (e.g. Myint Moe Aung, personal communication, May 24, 2013) was the “Song to Whip Up Religious Blood,” which encourages listeners to “buy Buddhist.” This song was not recorded by professionals, but the recording is attractive enough that it is frequently played at Buddhist religious events (Marshall, 2013). Musicians feared that more such songs could be recorded and that they could enflame the deadly conflict between Buddhists and Muslims which was then spreading around Burma, and which subsequently flared up in Malaysia.

Although none of my informants could identify an anti-Muslim song created by industry professionals, I did come across a professionally-created recording that makes generalized negative comments about another racial group. It is titled “The Death of Mandalay” and the composer, Lynn Lynn, is a well-regarded and successful member of the Burmese pop music industry.⁵ He told me that this is one of his “political songs” (personal communication, May 24, 2013). In the second verse, the lyrics say that Mandalay is dying because it is now filled with “compassionless,” “pale-skinned foreigners” with “slit eyes.” I played the Youtube video of this recording for seven well-educated Burmese people during a presentation at the INGO Relief International (June 5, 2013). None of them seemed to find it terribly offensive, and one pointed out that “this is what people think” about Chinese immigrants in Burma. I highlight it here as a clear-cut example of racist lyrics, or “bad words,” and as evidence that fears about songs like this coming to the fore are not overblown.

The MMA responded to the concerns about “bad words” in now-uncensored songs. The association’s position was articulated by one of their elected board members, Myint Moe Aung: “There has to be some rules, otherwise there will be destruction” (personal communication, May 24, 2013). Late in 2012, the MMA proposed a plan to rate musical recordings. The plan was to attach a letter to

⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYQFb9-1gO8>

each song on a *series*: A, meaning appropriate for all ages; B, meaning something like parental guidance, appropriate for those age 16 and over; or C, appropriate for adults only. I asked most of my respondents their opinion about this plan. Twelve of them said they supported the idea. Interestingly, four of them said specifically that they supported the notion of rating songs specifically because they understand that recordings are rated for content in other countries. (When I asked what they meant by other countries, all said the United States).

However, I did hear some strongly dissenting voices during my interviews, which began in the second week of May 2013. Several prominent musicians objected to having their music evaluated, in any way, by anybody – but especially by the MMA, which until recently had been controlled by the military government. As they pointed out, it was entirely unclear who would decide what kinds of songs were appropriate for what ages, on what basis these decisions would be made, and how the ratings might affect airplay and therefore, royalty payments. On May 31, 2013, the MMA announced that they would not pursue a rating system. The General Secretary, Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, told me that the decision was taken because so many MMA members were “allergic” to the idea (personal communication, June 7, 2013). Instead, she said, going forward the MMA intended to listen to all newly-recorded songs and make “comments” on songs which have “dangerous categories for the community.” These dangerous categories are 1) lyrics which might promote ethnic or religious conflict and 2) lyrics which promote drug use, smoking or prostitution. The MMA will forward the comments to radio and television broadcasters. The program managers will then have to decide whether or not to broadcast these potentially dangerous songs.

It is unclear, at this point, how efficiently the MMA will implement this policy, and also, what the impact will be if they do. Musicians will have to submit their recordings to the MMA in order for them to be commented upon. But, under Myanmar’s newly-democratic regime, the MMA cannot force musicians to submit their work. Secondly, it is unclear whether radio station managers will pay any

attention to the MMA's comments on recordings. These managers' priority is to play music that appeals to their stations' fans, rather than to adhere to the agenda of the MMA.

Future possibilities

What does the future hold for Myanmar's popular music scene and for the musicians who make their living in it? As the literature review above demonstrated, musical genres and approaches to music making are often profoundly affected by national political changes. In the Myanmar case, it seems possible that, if foreign (Anglo) influence on popular music increases, *copy thachin* will decrease in number and popularity. If Yangon-based musicians collaborate more frequently with foreigners who believe that *copy thachin* creation is nothing more than plagiarism, they may decline to record such songs. Indeed, in 2013 some of my informants claimed that writing *own tunes* – that is, the creation of original songs – was already becoming the preferred composition method among their colleagues (e.g. Minn Chit Thu, personal communication, May 19, 2013).

It seems likely that the majority of Myanmar's professional musicians will embrace the idea that royalties ought to be paid to them by the MMA. Although in 2013 musicians expressed confusion about, and even distrust of, the MMA's royalty payment plan, just two years later, royalties were being paid by the MMA. The payment of royalties is, in effect, its own convincing argument. A sound engineer told me that he was happy to receive approximately \$3000.00 USD in royalty monies in 2015 (Aung Doo, personal communication, September 12, 2016). For him this was a bonus, an addition to the money he earned in the traditional way (that is, being paid a one-time fee at the time tracks are recorded). By 2016, other musicians had come to understand royalties as rightfully belonging to them, and the MMA as responsible for disbursing those royalties. In September of that year, composer Jet Mya Thaug held a press conference to announce that he planned to sue both the MMA and five FM radio stations for unpaid royalties (Su Myat Mon, 2016).

Perhaps the greatest concern for the Myanmar music industry in the future is the ongoing tension between the desire for freedom of expression and the perceived need for control of that expression. As composer Shwe Gyaw Gyaw told me in 2013, “freedom” can be abused in a myriad of ways. He saw this notion being abused by the pirates who make illegal copies of Burmese recordings and sell them for their own profit: “Freedom is good, but they [fellow Burmese] think piracy is freedom. Government does not help to educate them. If you tell someone, ‘Don’t [illegally] copy this disc or this file, they say, ‘Hey! This is democracy!’” (personal communication, May 25, 2013). Piracy undermines the economic security of musicians; and the freedom to sing “bad words” can endanger society at large. The recent history of White Power music in the United States reminds us that music can be a powerful tool in the service of hatred and violence. As both Mark Hamm (2002) and Jonathan Pieslak (2015) have demonstrated, sales of White Power recordings are a major source of funding for vicious racist groups, White Power concerts have sparked violence on numerous occasions, and the musicians in this movement have become attractive role models for disaffected young people. Hamm concludes that “chronic and persistent exposure to [such music] provided American skinheads with the vitality, the emotions and the excitement necessary for committing violence against their perceived enemies” (2002, p. 89). When Buddhist mobs are being encouraged to destroy Muslim schools, businesses, mosques and even people, Burmese people rightly fear any move by musicians to make violence seem glamorous or cool. At the same time, one of the greatest promises of Myanmar’s democratic transition and the election of 2015 was that the country’s citizens could speak, write and sing without being limited by government censorship. Musicians, in particular, will continue to expect to see this promise fulfilled.

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