ENGINEERING TECHNO-HYBRID GROOVES IN AN INDONESIAN SOUND STUDIO

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Introduction

This paper will discuss an important site of cultural production in the Jakarta music scene: a recording studio on the eastern fringe of the city. It will focus on particular practices of what Paul Greene calls "sound engineering"--the technological manipulation of sound for social strategic ends (1999). In describing these engineering practices, I want to suggest that they are symptomatic of a characteristically Indonesian mode of coping with the heterogeneity and fragmentation of modern life.

The studio in question is the 601 Studio Lab, a multipurpose recording complex used to record a variety of popular musics. Today I will focus on one of the most central and lucrative of these musics: dangdut remixes.

But first, some background information is in order for those not familiar with the Indonesian pop music scene. Dangdut, musically an amalgamation of Indian film music, Middle Eastern pop, Western rock, and disco, is the quintessential Indonesian pop genre. Its two most distinctive musical features are a propulsive dance rhythm and a mournful, melismatic vocal style that avoids the leaps and histrionics of pop balladry. Though often a source of laughter and derision among members of Jakarta's educated elite, who dismiss it as *kampungan*, characteristic of backward village life, dangdut remains by far the most popular musical genre in Indonesia, with a large and diverse audience of ordinary Indonesians young and old. (A prominent dangdut producer suggested to me that many members of the middle and upper classes secretly enjoy dangdut music but are unwilling to admit it.)

While considered backward and provincial by its detractors, dangdut music is actually quite cosmopolitan. I have heard dangdut songs that incorporate musical elements from Javanese gamelan, Kenny G-type "jazz" fusion, the Balinese *kecak* dance, heavy metal, Latin pop, Mandarin pop, and Hindustani light classical music, to name a few. And if this were not sufficiently eclectic, in recent years a number of novel

dangdut offshoots have been created by musicians and record producers seeking to engineer profitable new musical hybrids. These styles include cha cha dhut, dangdut reggae, dangdut jaipong, dangdut disco, rock dangdut, and, the style discussed in this paper, dangdut remix. Most of these musical "mixtures"(*campuran*) involve adding new rhythms and rhythm instruments, such as electronic drum machines, to familiar dangdut songs. For example, cha cha dhut is exactly what one would expect from the name: dangdut with a "one two cha-cha-cha, three four cha-cha-cha" rhythmic feel.

These self-consciously hybrid musical forms are not created by an artistic elite for a limited audience of postcolonial intellectuals or even for transnational "world beat" consumers. They are instead aimed directly at the Indonesian mass audience, with successful recordings selling hundreds of thousands of legitimate copies--not bad for a national music market where the ratio of pirated to legitimate versions sold is roughly six to one.

The Studio

601 Studio Lab is one site where such lucrative hybrid musical forms are created. The facility is located on the far outskirts of East Jakarta in a new upscale housing development. It occupies a two-story house that has been converted into a sophisticated recording complex--though one still has to enter the vocal booth through the kitchen. I was told that the studio was located so far from the city center in order to discourage musicians and their entourages from spending all their leisure time there. Such people have a tendency to nongkrong, hang out, in recording studios at all hours, even and especially when there's no recording that needs to be done.

The studio offers a very impressive array of recording technologies. On the first floor is a 24-track analog studio used for recording dangdut, rock, and pop music, while upstairs is a 32 track digital studio (with over one hundred virtual tracks) used for electronic dance music and creating dance remixes of dangdut songs. The studio also owns state-of-the-art computers used for mastering, sequencing and graphic design, as well as samplers, synthesizers, guitar amplifiers, and racks full of electronic effects.

All this technology is not neutral, nor is the origin of most of the equipment in the so-called "developed" world of no consequence. Raymond, the head engineer of the second-floor digital studio at the time of my first visit, told me of his struggles to learn English so he could understand the technical manuals for the studio's equipment. After spending countless hours with an English-Indonesian dictionary he proudly reported that he now understands about forty percent of the vocabulary in these manuals, and our conversations (in Indonesian) contained an abundance of English technical terms: "frequency response," "gain," "panpot," "distortion."

The division of labor between analog and digital recording seems to suggest that Indonesians have adopted the natural/synthetic and "dirty"/"clean" sonic distinctions often employed by popular music producers and consumers in the west. Dangdut, like rock'n'roll, has to have a warm, rough, and unpolished sound. To record it digitally would be unthinkable, "not dangdut." Furthermore, everyone I spoke to agreed that the kendang drum -- the central rhythm instrument in dangdut, sounds too thin and "clicky" if recorded digitally. Remixes of dangdut songs, which rerecord the analog tracks of the original and import them into the digital domain, are another matter, however.

Edy Singh, an ambitious thirty-year-old record producer who speaks fluent English (learned in private school), frequently compared his studio unfavorably with its counterparts in America, even though the facility was actually quite well equipped by American standards. He also criticized dangdut musicians for their backwardness and reluctance to embrace new musical technologies, even while admitting that dangdut had to sound *kasar* (coarse, unrefined, rough) in order to be authentic and that the audience demanded that dangdut recordings stay faithful to the classic dangdut sounds of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, a striking feature of contemporary dangdut is the performers' attachment to obsolete pre-sampler digital keyboard timbres. Edy maintains that if the dangdut genre was permitted to "develop" it would one day become a recognized global pop genre like reggae and rap music (which resemble dangdut in their non-elite, populist origins), and even have a market in the United States. At least this is what he hopes will happen--his "dream," as he put it.

Remixing/Reimagining Dangdut

Edy is justifiably proud of his disco, house, and rap remixes of dangdut hits. In the early nineties, he was one of the originators of a true remix technique: taking the original analog recording, subtracting the rhythm instruments (usually kendang and bass guitar) and adding electronic drums and samples in order to transform the rhythmic feel of the track and create a cyborg-like fusion of the machine rhythms of electronic dance music with the warm organic sounds of dangdut.

Remixes differ from other hybrid dangdut forms in that the standard dangdut rhythm is replaced by a modified rock or disco backbeat played on a drum machine. Perhaps most striking to American listeners is the insertion of samples of spoken Black English Vernacular that characterize the remix sound. Such samples, which include James Brown's musical exclamations and all manner of voices exhorting the listener to "get funky" etc. are available commercially to Indonesian sound engineers on CD's and vinyl records designed for especially for sampling, and their frequent use has become a trademark of the remix genre. Often the same sample will appear in a number of different songs. Another characteristic sonic feature of remixes is the insertion of rhythmic vocal

shouts called *senggak*, found in many types of Sundanese traditional music. These shouts, either sampled or recorded "live" in the studio add a distinctively Indonesian flavor to an already hybrid and complex sonic texture.

Edy's first album of remixes, released in 1993, was recorded with surprisingly basic equipment: a turntable, a DJ's mixing console containing a rudimentary sampler, and a reel-to-reel tape of the original tracks. A sampled backbeat had to be synchronized with rest of the song by manually adjusting the speed on a reel-to-reel tape recorder--in realtime, which proved difficult and time-consuming. The album was then completed at considerable cost in a damp, scorpion-infested sixteen-track studio where various instruments and effects were painstakingly added. In the end, Edy's expensive gamble paid off, and the album went on to sell over 380,000 copies, still his biggest hit to date. Edy's follow-up album of remixes contained another first: along with the usual samples of American rappers were some raps in Indonesian by Jakartan rap group Papa Weewee (pronounced WAY-way) their voices yet another sonic ingredient to be manipulated and incorporated into the final mix.

These days, with the facilities of the 601 Studio Lab at his disposal, Edy can create new dangdut remixes with far more sophisticated equipment. These are usually released three to four months after the original dangdut song is released--in other words, toward the end of the first recording's commercial shelf life. Often the remix version does better commercially than the original, sometimes selling three times as many copies. Edy explained that one reason for this is many young cassette buyers prefer the newer styles, and purchasing the dance remixes allows them to simultaneously maintain a nostalgic attachment to the classic dangdut sound and embrace "modern," more contemporary dance grooves.

The following musical example consists of an excerpt of an "original" dangdut song, followed by an excerpt of a dangdut remix.

>{play musical example here}

Epilogue

Much has changed in the two years since my first visit to Edy's studio. During the riots of May 1998, which specifically targeted Chinese citizens and Chinese-owned businesses, the offices of Edy's music company were burnt down and looted. The studio itself was almost ransacked by a mob that had just destroyed a nearby shopping complex. Fortunately the army arrived in time to prevent the rioters from reaching the studio's residential location.

Edy's spirit remains unbroken. Since the riots the company has opened new offices and has entered a rebuilding phase. With the current promise of economic recovery under new President Abdurrahman Wahid and

Vice President Megawati Soekarnoputri, Edy is looking forward to a new expansion of dangdut music and its related offshoots. While disco and house remixes continue to sell, the newest and most popular dangdut hybrid is called "combination ethnic"--dangdut songs played with modified traditional Javanese or Sundanese rhythms. Edy explains this new interest in traditional music as resulting from the new spirit of "reformasi" in Indonesia. He also informed me that new hybrid styles combining dangdut with bossa nova and drum'n'bass are currently in the works.

Conclusion

One of the truly rewarding aspects of empirical research into sound engineering practices is that there appears to be no limit to the creative uses to which sound technologies can be put. What is striking in the case of dangdut remixes is both their commercial success and their accessibility to a large audience of ordinary Indonesians. It is instructive in this regard to compare the dangdut remix phenomenon with the Nepali remix culture describe in Paul Greene's paper. While Greene found that the primary audience for Nepali remixes was upwardly mobile university students, if anything the Indonesian university students I spoke to considered dangdut remixes even *more* low class and backward than classic dangdut. Their disdain is countered by the enthusiasm of the vast majority of Indonesians for whom college was never a possibility.

Along with this class difference is an equally significant difference in aesthetics. While Greene finds that Nepali remixes sonically emphasize disjuncture and discontinuity between different musical genres, I would argue that the intricate layering of sonically diverse materials found in dangdut remixes emphasize _coexistence without synthesis_. Such an aesthetic of additive layering, to which multitrack technology is extremely well suited, bears a striking resemblance to the syncretic, resilient, and cacophonous texture of everyday life in contemporary urban Indonesia, where Hindu-Javanese mysticism exists side by side with orthodox Muslim piety, American fast food consumerism, and activist democratic politics. In the midst of this bewildering array of cultural alternatives, remix artists like Edy Singh take sonic elements from global popular culture, Indonesian traditional musics, and classic dangdut (itself a highly syncretic genre) and engineer hybrid grooves, designed expressly for the purpose of moving equally hybrid Indonesian bodies. And in doing so they produce a version of Indonesian musical modernity that is populist, creative, and compelling, not to mention quite danceable.