

Living the Punk Lifestyle in Jakarta

JEREMY WALLACH / Bowling Green State University

Betapa aku telah kecewakan kau, Bunda, karena aku tak punya kemampuan menulis dalam tembang Jawa. Irama hidupku membeludak begini, Bunda, tak tertampung dalam tembang nenek-moyang. [How I have disappointed you, Mother, because I don't have the ability to write traditional Javanese sung poetry. The rhythm of my life is bursting forth crazily, Mother; it can't be contained in the song-form of my ancestors.¹]

—Minke, the young protagonist in *Bumi Manusia*, by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1981:292)

What interpretive frameworks can we employ to understand punk scenes in non-Western developing countries? Conversely, what can researching these scenes contribute to scholarly understandings of “punk” as a complex cultural and historical phenomenon? In the following discussion, I revisit well-worn claims about the “signifying practice” of the punk subculture in light of punk’s global expansion in the decades following its mid-1970s emergence. Drawing upon ethnographic research carried out between 1997 and 2000, I focus specifically on a historical development that 1970s cultural commentators (and ethnomusicologists!) could not easily have foreseen: the development of a dedicated nationwide punk movement in the Republic of Indonesia during the 1990s.

Subculture, Southeast Asian Style: Indonesian Punk and the Meaning of Stasis

In his *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige famously claims, “punk style is in a constant state of assemblage, of flux. It introduces a heterogeneous set of signifiers which are liable to be superseded at any moment by others no less productive” (1979:126). Hebdige’s argument, based on his readings of the then cutting-edge French semiologi-

cal theories of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and the *Tel Quel* group, was groundbreaking at the time, and has influenced a generation of researchers.² Yet in the quarter century that has passed since the publication of *Subculture*, punk music, iconography, and fashion, instead of constantly evolving, have remained unchanged to a remarkable degree, even as they have spread around the world. In fact I would argue that punk’s appeal, at least to contemporary Indonesian young men and (to a lesser extent) women, lies not in Hebdige’s indeterminate semiotic flux but rather punk’s formal stability. Indeed, contrary to what a semiologist might expect, the proud Indonesian punks I met during the course of my research seemed less interested in punk’s avant-garde potential than in conserving punk as a sort of living tradition.

The world’s fourth most populous country and home to the world’s largest Muslim population, Indonesia is seldom a topic of conversation in Western punk circles.³ Yet—though this fact is usually omitted in Western world music survey classes—Indonesia is home to what is almost certainly the largest punk movement in Southeast Asia, and one of the largest in the world. Following their exposure in the mid 1990s to commercially hyped groups such as Green Day, Rancid, and the Offspring, Indonesian youth in cities such as Jakarta, Denpasar and Bandung began to build informal grassroots networks of bands, local fanzines, small independent record labels, and merchandisers dedicated to the production and distribution of punk music and ideology (Baulch 1996, 2002a, 2002b). These networks overlapped with those associated with other so-called “underground” rock genres, including metal, gothic, and industrial, which had surfaced at roughly the same time. Australian observer Jo Pickles writes:

Close-knit communities of young people sharing an interest in underground music have emerged throughout Indonesia. Underground youth cultures provide a network of like-minded people to experiment, hang out and jam with. A place of refuge from families who don’t understand the aspirations of their youth, and from a society preoccupied with other issues. These groups provide a sense of belonging and family-like support for members who choose nomadic life on the streets in preference to living at home. Distinct from other more segregated social structures, the underground scene is open for all to join and participate in. Money and education are not barriers. (Pickles 2000)

While in most cases Indonesian youths’ exposure to punk music began with major label acts that were heavily promoted through the mainstream global media, Indonesian punk tastes quickly turned to less hyped but indisputably seminal bands from the 1970s and early 1980s, particularly the Exploited, the Ramones, and above all the Sex Pistols. Why these particular bands emerged continually in conversations rather

than other contemporaneous groups such as The Clash, Abrasive Wheels, Crass, or Discharge, is open to conjecture. I suspect that the Pistols and the Ramones were valued for their supposed origination of the punk style, and the Exploited was celebrated because the band exemplified nearly all the features regarded as canonical by Indonesian punks: mohawks, musical simplicity, antagonism toward the musical mainstream, and so forth.

The remarkable rise of DIY (Do It Yourself) cultural production devoted to punk music and culture catalyzed the growth of self-consciously local punk "scenes" in urban and semi-urban areas all around Indonesia, and over the last ten years or so these interconnected scenes have mounted numerous performance events and generated several hundred independently-produced and distributed punk music cassettes recorded, on shoestring budgets, by local Indonesian bands (Perlman 1999:31–32; Wallach 2002:98–101). These DIY endeavors tended to have very limited commercial reach and even less profit potential. Nevertheless, by the start of the twenty-first century, mohawked, black-leather-clad *anak punk* (punk kids) were widely recognized figures in the Indonesian popular culture landscape, and in 2003 Balinese punk veterans Superman Is Dead signed a contract with the multinational conglomerate Sony Music to release their first major label album (Tedjasukmana 2003), a controversial move (given the fervent opposition of Indonesian punks to major labels and commerce in general) that nonetheless attested to the cultural influence that by then was wielded by punk music on millions of Indonesian young people. Ironically, the first song on *Kuta Rock City*, Superman Is Dead's Sony debut, "Punk Hari Ini" ("Punk Today") denounces punk's dilution by Indonesian mainstream popular culture. Its refrain is a rant that in translation would no doubt be familiar to many punks in other countries:

<i>Kubenci semua yang tak pasti</i>	I hate everything that's uncertain
<i>Rambut spikey dibidang funky</i>	Spiky hair is considered trendy
<i>Mall dipenuhi lambang anarki</i>	Malls are full of anarchy symbols
<i>Yang akbirnya hilang tak berarti</i>	That in the end are lost and meaningless
<i>Cheerleader ingin jadi punk rock star!</i>	Cheerleaders want to be punk rock stars! ⁴

Responses to the signing of punk bands on major labels (which in this context meant large commercial labels, both national and multinational) among punk scene members were overwhelmingly negative, though sometimes laced with ambivalence. In the words of one Indonesian punk enthusiast discussing Rage Generation Brothers, the first Indonesian punk band to break ranks with their DIY compatriots by releasing

an album on the large national recording label Aquarius in mid 2000, "Don't boycott, better to pirate" (*Jangan boikot, lebih baik bajak*), meaning it was better to make unauthorized recordings of the album than to refuse entirely to listen to it. Since punks in Indonesia had long relied on homemade illegal copies of music cassettes, this statement in essence gave this fan's fellow enthusiasts permission to enjoy a "sellout" group's music, so long as they did not pay for it.

The Indonesian punk movement came of age during a tumultuous period in modern Indonesian history. In 1998, in the wake of the Asian economic crisis, the Soeharto dictatorship (in power since 1966) was overthrown by a broad-based reform movement spearheaded by student activists. These students were members of the most globally aware generation in Indonesia's history, and the music of choice for many of them was underground rock. Almost from the beginning musicians in the Indonesian underground movement performed songs attacking the corruption and brutality of the Soeharto government, even when it was dangerous to do so (Sen and Hill 2000:177–85; Wallach 2003, 2005). Thus, although Indonesian punk is as politically divided as its Western counterparts, it is not surprising that many Indonesian punks place their movement and their allegiance to it in the context of the struggle against Soeharto. A particularly eloquent punk from Cirendeui, a region on the border between Jakarta and West Java province, stated that he became a punk because of the pain he felt as one of Indonesia's "little people" (*rakyat kecil*) victimized by the oppression and injustice of the Soeharto regime. He added that he was a member of a local band named Stainlees, which sang about this theme. Our conversation took place in front of a wall of closed-up shops covered with graffiti sprayed by members of the Cirendeui scene, which included a mohawk-sporting punk stick figure, anarchy and peace symbols, local band names (including Stainlees), and a series of intriguing English-language slogans: *Our Lifestil* [*sic*], *Smash Capitalism*, *Hardcore The Way of Life*, *Punk Not Dead*, and *We Are Not Komunis* [Indonesian for "Communist"].

Social Class and Stylistic Conservatism

Punk is the most working-class-identified of the subgenres that constitute the underground music movement in Indonesia, though in reality local punk scenes are composed of both middle-class students and followers from humbler backgrounds who are unable to afford schooling. In this sense, Pickles' idealistic claim that "money and education are not barriers" (2000) to membership in the Indonesian underground scene would appear to contain an element of truth. In fact, class differences are

often downplayed among Indonesian punks, and the number of homeless runaways from middle-class homes that join their ranks blurs class lines significantly (as they do in scenes elsewhere). There is, nonetheless, a tendency for Indonesian students to become politically oriented "anarcho-punks," whereas working-class kids are more likely to identify themselves as apolitical, hedonistic "street punks" dedicated, I was told, to an ethic of hanging out and substance abuse (summed up for one Jakartan punk by the English phrase "drunk and pogo"). Both subgroups, but particularly the latter, stress the importance of living a punk lifestyle. Their appropriation of the English loan word "lifestyle" (used in everyday conversation far more frequently than the Indonesian equivalent *gaya hidup*) does not include the ephemerality and consumerism with which the term is sometimes associated in the West. Instead, commitment to punk lifestyle entails participating in a set of subcultural practices that include hanging out in public places with other punks, attending punk concert events, drinking alcohol (a grave offense in Islam), and wearing punk clothing and hairstyles. The value placed on "living the punk lifestyle" among punks from nonaffluent backgrounds is an example of how global flows have dramatically transformed working-class culture in Indonesia (see Jones 2005).

Just as class differences between members of the punk scene are de-emphasized, so too are ethnic differences. An overpopulated, metropolitan national capital located in the western portion of the island of Java, Jakarta is a city where nearly every ethnic group in the archipelago is represented, though the vast majority of its inhabitants are from groups indigenous to the island: Sundanese, Javanese, or Betawi (native Jakartans, from the Malay for "Batavia," the city's former name under the Dutch colonial government). Despite the Soeharto regime's valorization of appropriately presented "traditional cultures" as foundations for identity in the archipelago, such allegiances seemed tangential at best to one's membership in a local punk scene. Even internal rivalries in the scene tend to be based on geography (e.g., South Jakarta versus East Jakarta punks) rather than ethnicity (there are no groups labeled "Betawi punks" or "Javanese punks" in Jakarta). Similarly, the Indonesian punk subculture's relationship to organized religion appears to be one of polite coexistence and avoidance (I have more to say on this subject later on in this essay). More research certainly needs to be done in these areas, particularly as the Indonesian scene enters its second decade of existence amid widespread national uncertainty on matters of ethnic autonomy and the separation of mosque and state.

Punk is the most "purist" underground music subculture in Indonesia, and Jakarta punk musicians therefore tend to be reluctant to experiment

with writing lyrics in Indonesian.⁵ They prefer to sing in English—the original language of punk—even though many working-class punks have little knowledge of the English language. Unlike Indonesian heavy metal and hardcore⁶ enthusiasts, punks are also loath to embrace musical innovations, instead maintaining their stylistic allegiance to what they perceive as a classic punk rock sound. Moreover, male and female punks in Indonesia follow the same dress code as their forbears in England and the U.S., and, as stated above, they are the underground music fans most opposed to "major labels."⁷ That a punk cassette is produced and distributed independently of the commercial music industry is for punks a crucial mark of its authenticity. Such formal conservatism and ideological purism arguably characterize both punk movements and working class subcultures around the world, but the question remains: why does the punk lifestyle hold such strong appeal to a segment of Indonesian youth?

An Ethnographic Vignette: A Punk Show in a Banana Grove

On June 25, 2000, I was invited by Wendi Putranto, then a Moestopo University communications student active in the Jakarta underground scene, to an *acara total punk* (totally punk performance event) which took place in a *kampung* (poor urban neighborhood) located on the unfashionable far southern outskirts of Jakarta. The concert's organizers, all residents of the neighborhood, had obtained permission to hold the event from the kampung's *Rukun Tangga*, the local municipal official. The kampung was located in a region known as Joglo. Like other working-class areas of Jakarta I had visited, Joglo consisted of a main road lined with simple wooden food stalls, behind which lay a labyrinthine network of narrow alleyways connecting a mosque and a large number of cement single-story dwellings. The event took place near the main road in an open, grassy area normally used as a soccer field by neighborhood residents. At the far end of the field was a makeshift "stage" set up in the shade of a grove of banana trees. The performance area consisted of five small portable guitar amplifiers placed on the ground on either side of a rudimentary drum kit. The amps were connected to a single extension cord that ran into a nearby house. In front of the drum kit stood a microphone stand holding a battered microphone that had been plugged directly into one of the guitar amplifiers. Facing the stage was a narrow wooden bench, which served both as a barrier separating performers from slamdancing audience members, and a place for weary fans to sit and rest.

Unlike numerous other popular music concerts I had attended in In-

donesia, including some that had featured punk bands, this acara lacked a professional sound system, video screens, and corporate sponsorship.⁸ The daylong event featured fifteen punk and old school hardcore bands playing two or three songs each, using the drums and amplifiers provided by the organizers. Though the event's "host band" had an Anglicized Russian name, Glasnost, most of the bands had English names like Dislike, Straight Answer, Street Voice, Ruthless, Total Destroy, and Error Crew. The groups (the members of which were all male) played in front of a small but enthusiastic audience, and their music, with its headlong rhythms, shouted/barked vocals, and three churning, distorted guitar chords, differed little from that of the early Western punk groups aside from the strong Indonesian accents of the vocalists (see Figure 1).

The concert lasted until *magrib*, the Muslim evening prayer, when the organizers had promised the local authorities that the music would cease. The concert also paused briefly for *asar*, afternoon prayers, in order to "respect the religious," in the words of one participant. I did not observe any event participants actually praying during this intermission. Looking back at this, I would argue that this accommodation to religious authority, coupled with the absence of any actual participation in religious praxis, typifies the interactions between music-based subcultures and Islamic orthodoxy I observed in pre-9/11 Jakarta: rather than criticize the strictures of religious fundamentalism, the punks tolerated

Figure 1. A punk concert in a banana grove, Joglo, Jakarta. 2000. Photograph by the author.

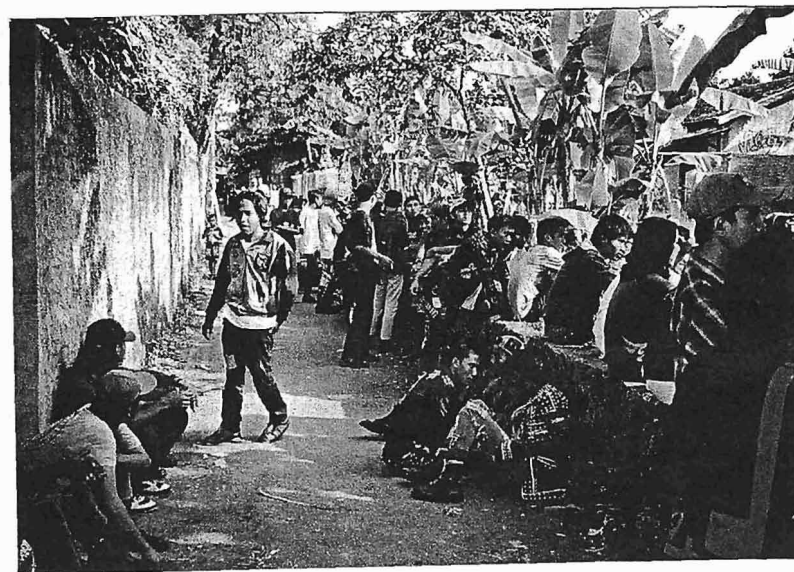


its rules and hoped in turn that their presence in the Indonesian body politic would similarly be tolerated.

While the bands played, some members of the audience clustered in front of the stage in a sweaty makeshift "pit," while others sat a distance away in the grass or hung out in the sunken area on one side of the stage (see Figure 2). A few local kampung residents, married women holding babies, old women, and a group of about a dozen young boys watched from a discreet distance, their carefully neutral facial expressions occasionally betraying a hint of consternation or bewilderment. The punks in the audience totaled about sixty and were almost all male. Some arrived in full punk regalia—mohawks, spikes, and leather jackets (despite the intense midday heat); many also wore locally made T-shirts depicting both foreign and domestic band logos. One shirt for a local band called Stupid Bones featured the English slogan "Here's the Punk Rock. We come from our self." Another shirt, for a band called Out of Control, displayed the text, "Stop the hate/ Support one another/ Still exist for the punx."

My presence, rather conspicuous at this small gathering, was tolerated by most of the event's participants, though many bands refused to

Figure 2. Audience members hanging out next to the stage, Joglo, South Jakarta. 2000. Photograph by the author.



be photographed and one lead singer spat at me from the stage (which I interpreted as a sign of aggression, despite the complex meanings of "gobbing" in other punk contexts). Following this incident, my host explained that punks disliked publicity and did not want to be "exposed" to outsiders (*nggak mau di-expose*). After all, I was told, this concert event was supposed to be "pure underground" and "just for having fun," with no commercial motives whatsoever.

Punk ideology in Indonesia valorizes self-sufficiency and existence on the margins of society. At the concert I was introduced to Amsoi, an especially flamboyant street punk sporting a colorful mohawk haircut, who explained to me in a combination of colloquial Indonesian and badly fractured, obscenity-laden English that he survived on the street by working as a *tukang parkir* (freelance man who helps motorists park their cars and exit from Jakarta's parking lots for a modest tip) and as a *pengamen* (roving street musician) (see Figure 3). He showed me the

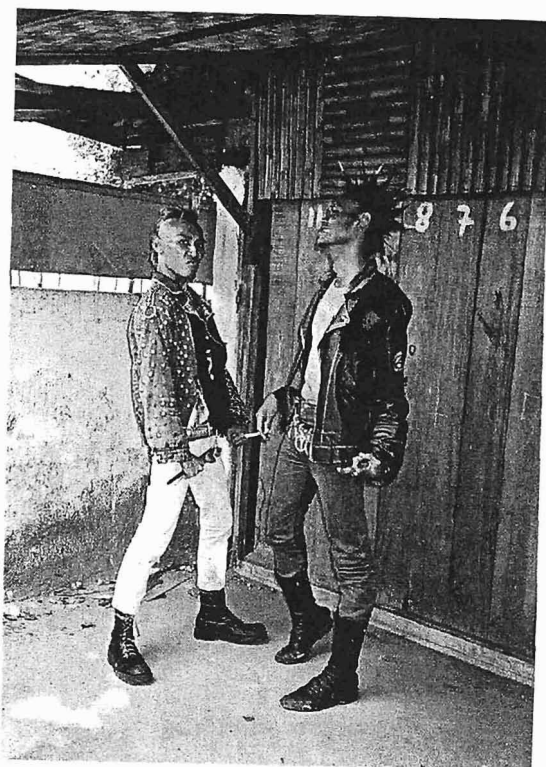


Figure 3. Amsoi (left) and friend pose in front of a warung (food stall) in Joglo near the concert site. Amsoi is holding a gicik in his right hand. Joglo, South Jakarta. 2000. Photograph by the author.

two tools of these respective trades: a whistle (to direct traffic) and a very large *gicik* (homemade percussion instrument made from a wooden dowel with punctured and flattened bottle caps nailed to it). Instead of carrying around a battered guitar like other *pengamen*, Amsoi resembled an overgrown punk *anak jalanan* (street child), singing with his *gicik* on the streets of Jakarta for spare change. Amsoi was rumored to be the son of a civil servant and was the lead singer of a band called Civil Disorder, which, I was told, was about to release a cassette.

A handful of women wearing punk rock regalia were present at the event; they smoked openly and laughed and talked with the men—atypical behaviors in mainstream Indonesian society. One of my companions referred to them as *pecun underground* (underground sluts), which suggests that feminism's impact on this particular scene was limited, though his choice of words was later criticized by a fellow punk, who stated that as a rule he avoided all misogynist language. Berta, one of the young women present at the event, was an active member of the punk scene in the neighboring West Javanese city of Bogor.⁹ She mentioned to me that she played in an all-woman punk band called The Hookers. While Berta assured me that she knew what the English word "hooker" actually meant, she said that the band's name was merely intended to be humorous and was not intended to suggest sexual impropriety. Berta admitted that punk music was "difficult to understand," but claimed that while punks' outfits were *brutal*, their *jiwanya* (souls) were not. The neighborhood children present at the concert agreed: no, punks did not scare them, they were humans, after all, not monsters. Furthermore, they told me punks were definitely preferable to the neighborhood *preman* (thugs, criminals). The children did not seem to mind the music being played, but nonetheless expressed a strong preference for *dangdut* (a national popular music genre influenced by Indian film songs and Western hard rock) over punk music, adding that *dangdut* was the only other style of popular music they had ever seen performed in their neighborhood. When I asked them if they thought about adopting a mohawk-type hairstyle in emulation of the punks, they laughed and one boy remarked that they could not wear their hair that way because "at school we'd get scolded."

As at many other *kampung* concerts I attended where solitary physically or mentally disabled men danced freely to the music regardless of its specific genre or the skill of the performers, an older blind man holding a cane and wearing a clean white shirt and a *peci* (black Muslim cap) was present at the punk acara.¹⁰ He stood alone in the field in front of the stage dancing, his gyrating movements, executed with both of his feet planted firmly on the ground, expertly following the rhythmic

contours of the punks' music. When I asked one of the local residents about him, she said, "Oh, he likes any kind of music!" (*O dia suka musik sembarangan!*). The blind man, seemingly oblivious to everything but the sounds emanating from the makeshift stage, smiled radiantly as he danced. During the breaks between songs and band sets, he shouted "*Musik!*" impatiently, but otherwise seemed quite content. The other audience members, both the punks and kampung neighbors, paid very little attention to him—like the tall American ethnomusicologist with the camera and notebook, he was just another participant in an event that, despite its subcultural affiliations, was inclusive and fully embedded in the everyday realities of the neighborhood.

Indonesian Punk and the Authenticity Question

How can one account theoretically for events like the one described above? Absorbed in the documentation of the cultural particulars of specific genre-based music movements, it is all too easy for the ethnographic researcher of global music subcultures to forget the still-dominant, trivializing perspective toward such phenomena, both inside and outside the academy. For many observers, the existence of punks in Indonesia exemplifies the tragic "mimesis" of Western culture by a formerly colonized people (see Manuel 1988:22). In this view, the Indonesian punk movement is little more than a latter-day cargo cult of cultural dupes in the thrall of imported commodities and the aura of global consumer culture. Punk music in Indonesia therefore cannot be anything other than derivative and inauthentic.

In a similar way, sociologist Hilary Pilkington uses a perhaps overly literal interpretation of Hebdige's arguments about punk in Britain to describe the punk scene in late 1980s/early 1990s Moscow: "In some ways Soviet punk is one of the clearest examples of 'imitation' of Western subcultural forms—there can after all be no social base for a movement subverting consumerist lifestyles in a society where a safety pin or a dustbin bag is an article of deficit not abundance" (1994:228). Such a view suggests that punk symbols can only be meaningful in particular societal contexts. Outside those contexts, the appropriation of those symbols can only be construed as "imitation" without a "social base" in actual lived experience. In order to respond to the logic of those who would dismiss the punk phenomenon in Indonesia, it is instructive to compare the Indonesian punk music movement with Indonesia's most celebrated "authentic" musical export: gamelan, a traditional orchestra composed of gongs, drums, bronze xylophones, and other indigenous instruments,

As the brilliant work of Sumarsam (1995), Michael Tenzer (1997), and others makes clear, the development of gamelan music traditions on the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali over the past two-and-a-half centuries resulted from an intensely collaborative process involving local musicians and composers, native aristocratic elites, European colonialists, Indonesian government officials, and Western musicologists, performers, composers, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists. The cooperative efforts of these various social agents have helped develop gamelan music along the lines of decontextualized, formalist Western art music traditions. Thus, while gamelan's original musical materials—its instruments, performance practices, tuning systems, and the like—were assumed to be purely indigenous, gamelan's subsequent creative development, contextualization, and institutionalization cannot be understood apart from continuous contact with and direct influence from powerful cultural outsiders (Wallach 2004).

In contrast, while the fundamental musical materials of punk are indisputably imported from the vast elsewhere of global cultural commodities, the expansion and development of the punk music movement in Indonesia was largely an autonomous affair, unknown to and unexplored for the most part by Western musicians or researchers. My ethnographic research in Jakarta as well as in the cities of Bandung, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and Denpasar suggests strongly that Indonesian punk scenes emerged in those places with minimal interference or direct influence from Westerners. Instead, the scenes crystallized via often-idiosyncratic interpretations of imported cultural forms (fanzines, sound recordings, album artwork, etc.) and local replications of those forms informed by such interpretations. These interpretations and replications were then disseminated through highly efficient patterns of social organization and group formation derived from indigenous notions of sociability. Hence, contemporary Indonesian punk rock could be viewed as nearly the opposite of gamelan music: Indonesian punk is a Western, imported musical form framed by local agents, whereas gamelan is an indigenous musical form framed in large part by translocal agents employing an imported Western ideological category, namely that of "classical art music."

Despite this contrast, a striking similarity exists between classical gamelan and punk music in Indonesia: both are formally conservative and place high value on musical continuity with the past. Hebdige's theories aside, punk's post-1980s traditionalism happens to be a remarkable strategy for resisting co-optation by the culture industry, which is concerned with distinctiveness, novelty, and innovation when searching for sounds to introduce into the mass market. Despite the current global popularity of "pop punk," "true" punk music is perhaps safe from total

commodification because, in a sense, it is nothing new. But how can we best interpret this stubborn refusal to evolve, and again, what could punk possibly mean in an Indonesian context? To address these questions we must turn to approaches to cultural meaning other than those employed by Hebdige.

In the years since *Subculture* was published, the dyadic, Saussurean model of signification on which Hebdige's study was predicated has been questioned from a variety of angles. Among the most persuasive alternative models of meaning that have been proposed for cultural phenomena are those derived from the semiotic theories of American philosopher Charles Peirce, which are based on a triadic model of signification in which the "signifier" and the "signified" (in Peircean terms, the "sign" and "object") are always accompanied by an "interpretant," an entity present in semiosis that connects the sign-object relationship to a larger world of signs relevant to the specific semiotic encounter. Above all, Peircean semiotics reminds us that signs do not really operate in an abstract, closed system—they signify to concrete perceivers inhabiting specific locations (or, to use a different lingo, subject positions) at specific moments of encounter.

Thomas Turino, in his pathbreaking essay, "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircean Semiotic Theory for Music," argues that it is only through ethnographic research that one gains access to the interpretants of a particular musical community's meaningful encounters with musical signs (1999:224–25). Punk music is no exception, and Hebdige's questions about what punk subculture "signifies" cannot be answered without reference to a particular historical moment and from the inside of a specific interpretive community, whether in 1977 London, 1989 Moscow, 2000 Jakarta, or anywhere else.

Turino also emphasizes the creation of musical meaning not through the arbitrary symbolic relation between signifier and signified, but through what Peircean semiotics identifies as indexicality (a non-arbitrary relationship of copresence between sign and object), and iconicity (a non-arbitrary relationship of resemblance between sign and object). Turino argues that the phenomenological immediacy of these non-arbitrary relationships lends music its affective power and anchors musical sound and performance to lived experience (1999:234–37; see also Cumming 1999). Given these semiotic properties, it is perhaps not surprising that Hebdige paid very little attention to punk *music* in his famous study, for it is rather difficult to detach non-arbitrary signifiers from their objects in the fashion he argues is constitutive of punk signifying practice.

In the case of punk in Indonesia, I would contend that it is the materiality of the sign vehicles themselves that constitutes a stable point of

reference for identity. More importantly, the non-arbitrary meanings of musical sound are what ground these signifiers in affective experience. Thus punk in twenty-first century Jakarta is not a radical signifying practice that treats style as the manipulation of ahistorical, disembodied symbols, but rather a traditionalist discourse rooted in the powerful indexical and iconic meanings of particular sounds and images—distorted guitar chords, pounding rhythms, shouted vocals, English obscenities, mohawks, studded leather jackets, etc. Furthermore, punks in Indonesia *do* care about history, particularly the history of their movement. An example of this can be found in one of the few changes in Indonesian punk style I observed—one that diverged from the classic 1970s Anglo-American model. This shift involved the use of the German swastika in local punk iconography.

Hebdige holds up early punks' sartorial deployment of the swastika as a prime example of punk's radical resignification of cultural symbols from the so-called "parent culture." He claims that the punks' incorporation of the swastika into their fashion and iconography was part of a nihilistic attempt to "willfully detach" even the most potent social symbols of their historico-referential meaning. In his words, the swastika was "exploited as an empty effect" (1979:117).¹¹

When I first visited Indonesia in 1997, before the fall of Soeharto, I was dismayed, but not entirely surprised, to see swastikas frequently appearing on stickers, T-shirts, and iron-on patches worn by punks. Many, perhaps most, of these punks were not aware of the particular political and ideological history of the symbol they chose to wear, and to them the swastika really was perhaps an empty signifier of punk rebellion as envisioned by Hebdige.¹² But two years later things had changed. As the Indonesian underground punk scene developed, its more intellectually engaged members increased their knowledge of punk history, including the movement's frequent (if not always consistent) opposition to fascism, racism, and neo-Nazism in the West. Many Indonesian punks who had bitterly opposed the corrupt Soeharto dictatorship and the brutal tactics of the Indonesian military saw an obvious parallel to their own struggles, and they began to reject the swastika. While some punks in Jakarta still wore the symbol, many more adopted anti-Nazi symbols. By late 1999, anti-Nazi slogans and iconography had become conspicuous at punk shows. Those slogans included "Destroy Fascism—Fight Back!" and "*Gegen* [Smash] Nazis," as well as the felicitous title of a 1983 song by leftist California punk band the Dead Kennedys: "Nazi Punks Fuck Off!" More than once I even observed punks wearing swastika patches with lines drawn through them in permanent marker, almost as if after having purchased the patches they had experienced a change of heart.

Such a turn of events casts doubt on the essential, disconnected nihilism of the punk movement posited by Hebdige. Instead, this transformation of the swastika sign resembles what M. Gottdiener (1995:233–52) calls the “recovery of lost signifieds,” a reclamation of the historical significance of particular sign systems that operates as a form of resistance to the decontextualizing commodification of culture under capitalism. Ultimately, however, I want to reiterate that, far more than their semiotic potential, it was the sheer, forceful *materiality* of dyed mohawk haircuts, tight black jeans, shouted English obscenities, painted leather jackets, safety pins, iron-on patches, and punk music’s visceral sonic icons of rage and alienation that originally appealed to late-twentieth-century working-class youth in the US and UK as well as their counterparts in Indonesia—where the working class has its own distinct but not entirely unrelated experiences of violence, marginalization, and disempowerment—twenty years after the birth of the genre. While punks in these varied spatiotemporal settings express their opposition to the dominant order primarily through embodied symbolic practices (sartorial, hygienic, kinesthetic, iconographic, musical) rather than through formal involvement in politics, their actions are hardly apolitical. In early twenty-first century Indonesia, punks themselves could be considered sign vehicles that index the social inequality, corruption, and as-yet-unfinished project of national self-definition that continue to characterize life in their country despite its having successfully transitioned to a multiparty democratic form of government.

Conclusions

The story of punks in Jakarta provides one illustration of how Western-derived musics have become a fundamental component of generational identity for youth around the world. It is evident that cultural globalization has not resulted in a decontextualized, semiological free-for-all but instead is a process entangled with real purposes, real social agents, and real life. We must point out the limitations of non-ethnographic approaches to the interpretation of this phenomenon, for all meaning is situational and dependent on a limited set of interpretants characteristic of a particular interpretive community. Moreover, “. . . an interpretant can only be grounded or justified in relation to some goal of interpretation” (Short 1982:285; see also Short 2007:108–12, 172–4). In other words, the interpretation of punk music by Jakarta punks (for instance) is *purposeful*, in this case motivated (I would argue) by their desire to connect specific musical forms with their everyday social experience. But even ethnographers must be careful to avoid oversimplifying the diversity of

purposeful relationships between the signs, objects, and interpretants they encounter. Music is powerful because different people invest it with complex meanings at different times, and through its non-arbitrary, sensible features music can amplify those meanings and make them palpably present and experientially true.

The real question, then, from an ethnomusicological perspective is not how Indonesian punk is distinctively Indonesian but rather how punk music and style operate within an Indonesian national youth culture where it is one musical genre alternative among many for social agents struggling to find meaning, community, and self-expression in a complicated, globalized, post-authoritarian reality (see Wallach forthcoming). For Indonesian punks, the forms themselves, by virtue of their physical stability, articulate a coherent subject position. Furthermore, in addition to possible interpretants such as the opposition to Soeharto, the continuing social injustice and inequality of Indonesian society, and the cultural impact of globalizing processes, Indonesian punk’s social infrastructure is itself a powerful interpretant. Punk music provides a social gathering place for alienated youth, and in many working-class Jakarta neighborhoods it constitutes a viable alternative to the grim choice young men face between religious fundamentalism on the one hand, and gang membership and criminality on the other. And for many of punk’s adherents, the fact that the fundamental stylistic features of punk music and fashion are thought to be unchanged since the dawn of the movement only adds to their potency.

Acknowledgments

I am greatly indebted to Wendi Putranto and to the members of Jakarta’s punk scene for their cooperation and assistance with this project. A version of this essay was presented at the panel “Punk in the Twenty-First Century” in 2002 at the Society for Ethnomusicology’s 47th Annual Meeting in Estes Park, Colorado. I am thankful for the feedback I received from my fellow panelists, Barbara Rose Lange, Jason Oakes, and Angela Rodel, and from several members of the audience. I am grateful as well to philosopher Thomas L. Short for sharing readings on Peircean semiotics, and I thank Tim Cooley, David Harnish, Michael Mooradian Lupro, Sarah Morelli, Sharon Wallach, and four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. All errors and shortcomings in the text are mine alone. E-mail: jeremyw@bgsu.edu.

Notes

1. My translation of this quoted passage differs from other published translations.
2. This influence has rarely gone uncontested, however. For recent critical appraisals of the semiological approach to subcultural forms that characterizes the work of Hebdige and other scholars associated with the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural

Studies, see the essays in Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004), and Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003).

3. For a notable exception see Johannsson (2003). Writing for an Australian punk webzine, Johannsson starts by acknowledging possible objections his readers might raise regarding his chosen subject:

I know that at this stage some of you will be rolling your eyes and thinking "Sheesh! Why would I want to know ANYTHING about the music scene in a Muslim country . . . don't they hate Westerners over there anyway?" Well, here are a couple of reasons why you should:

I remember that even at the start of the 90s, most "underground"-type cats around town would just laugh at the thought of Japanese underground music. These days most of us know that in fact Japan had an amazing scene even back in the early 70s stoner days of The Flower Travellin' Band and Speed, Glue and Shinki, and now Japanese bands are probably more popular than ever in worldwide independent music circles. Now, I'm not saying that Indonesia is the "new Japan." But if you really want to be, as Julian Cope charmingly puts it, a "forward-thinking motherfucker," you should open your mind to the idea of rock'n'roll from non-European cultures.

We live in pretty screwy times, where nuts like Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush (the guy, not that band with the ex-Mindsnare drummer in it) and John Howard conspire to keep people divided on the basis of their religion, race and culture. Therefore the fact that people in two very different cultures can share a common love of ripping punk rock and a common hatred of shitty corporate pop is a very, very good thing.

A lot of Indonesian bands just flat out rock anyway. (Johannsson 2003)

The presupposition here that members of Australia's well-established, longstanding punk scene would be wholly unaware of the enormous punk movement in one of Australia's closest neighbors underlines a point I make later in this essay regarding the relatively autonomous development of the Indonesian punk movement.

4. Superman Is Dead is one of the bands featured in the recent documentary film *The Punks Are Alright: A Punk Rock Safari from the First World to the Third* by Canadian filmmaker Douglas Crawford (2006). A version of the film was shown at the Jakarta International Film Festival in December 2005 (Taufiqurrahman 2005).

5. The Indonesian standardized variant of Malay is spoken as a second language across the archipelago. It is the language of public performance, formal politics, education, the mass media, and pop song lyrics, and its role as a relatively neutral communicative vehicle that transcends ethnic boundaries seems neither to be resented nor questioned, at least not in Java or Bali. In addition to having some command of formal Indonesian, residents of Jakarta may also speak slang-filled Malay speech variants closely related to nonstandard Betawi Malay as languages of everyday socializing.

6. Punk and hardcore are considered related but separate genres in the Indonesian underground movement. The latter is divided into "old school" and metal- and rap-influenced "new school" variants, and in general hardcore music is stylistically more diverse than punk. Old school hardcore bands like Jakarta's Straight Answer occasionally play at punk concert events such as the one described later in this essay. Significantly, Indonesian hardcore bands are far more likely to sing songs in Indonesian (instead of English) compared to Indonesian punk groups (Wallach 2003).

7. This bias does not apply to canonized Western punk groups such as the Ramones and the Sex Pistols who recorded on major corporate record labels.

8. See Richter (2006) and Wallach (forthcoming) for discussions of the sponsorship of live music events in Indonesia by agents of the state and by large corporations.

9. Berta also gave me the URL of the Bogor punk scene's official Web site. Unfortunately,

as of July 2006, that URL (<http://www.geocities.com/bogoriot>) was no longer functioning.

10. I did not observe any handicapped women playing this role, and I suspect such behavior would not be as well tolerated as it is with men.

11. The reality was likely more complex than that. See Stratton (2005) for a subtler, more historically grounded examination of the complex, contradictory meanings of fascist imagery in early punk and heavy metal music in the United States. For a journalistic but fascinating account of the close relationship between Jewish culture and the early punk movement and 1970s punk's fraught relationship to Nazi symbols, see Beeber (2006), especially Chapter 13. Beeber states bluntly, "No Holocaust, no punk" (ibid.:164) and given what is known about the early history of the genre, it is difficult to dispute such a statement.

12. A number of readers of this essay pointed out that the swastika is also an ancient Hindu symbol. While I did not encounter any evidence that this fact was at all relevant to Indonesian punks' decisions to accept or reject the symbol, it could be in some cases, particularly in Hindu-dominated Bali—home to Superman Is Dead and known around the region for its punk scene—where Hindu swastikas are fairly common. The association of the swastika with anti-Judaism, of which Jakarta's punks, being predominantly Muslim, presumably approve (though I would take issue with such an assumption), was also suggested as a factor in its adoption. Again, in my research I found no evidence for this hypothesis, and would argue that for most Jakarta punks in 1999–2000 at least, the association with a fascist regime outweighed any appeal the symbol might have had for other reasons.

References

- Baulch, Emma. 1996. "Punks, Rastas and Headbangers: Bali's Generation X." *Inside Indonesia* 48. Online edition: <http://www.insideindonesia.org/edit48/emma.htm> (18 June 2003).
- . 2002a. "Alternative Music and Mediation in Late New Order Indonesia." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 3:219–34.
- . 2002b. "Creating a Scene: Balinese Punk's Beginnings." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 5(2):153–77.
- Beeber, Steven Lee. 2006. *The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Inc.
- Bennett, Andy, and Keith Kahn-Harris, eds. 2004. *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*. New York: Palgrave.
- Crawford, Douglas, director. 2006. *The Punks Are Alright: A Punk Rock Safari from the First World to the Third—From the Profane to the Sacred*. Orange-Tang Productions.
- Cumming, Naomi. 1999. "Musical Signs and Subjectivity: Peircean Reflections." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 35(3):437–74.
- Gottdiener, M. 1995. *Postmodern Semiotics: Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- Johannsson, Jan. 2003. "Indonesian Punk Underground." *Missing Link Records Newsletter* 8. <http://missinglink.net.au/newsletter.php?Issue=jun0303> (4 September 2007).
- Jones, Tod. 2005. "Angkutan and Bis Kota in Padang, West Sumatra: Public Transport as Intersections of a Local Popular Culture." Paper presented at the Arts, Culture and Political and Social Change since Suharto Workshop, Launceston, Australia, December 16–18, 2005. Available from http://www.utas.edu.au/indonesia_workshop/abstracts.htm (13 August 2006).

- Manuel, Peter L. 1988. *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World: An Introductory Survey*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Muggleton, David, and Rupert Weinzierl, eds. 2003. *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. New York: Berg.
- Perlman, Marc. 1999. "The Traditional Javanese Performing Arts in the Twilight of the New Order: Two Letters from Solo." *Indonesia* 68:1-37.
- Pickles, Jo. 2000. "Punks for Peace: Underground Music Gives Young People Back Their Voice." *Inside Indonesia* 64. Online edition: <http://www.insideindonesia.org/edit64/punk1.htm> (18 June 2003).
- Pilkington, Hilary. 1994. *Russia's Youth and Its Culture: A Nation's Constructors and Constructed*. New York: Routledge.
- Richter, Martin. 2006. "Grounded Cosmopolitans and the Bureaucratic Field: Musical Performance at Two Yogyakarta State Institutions." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 21(2):178-203.
- Sen, Krishna, and David Hill. 2000. *Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Short, Thomas L. 1982. "Life Among the Legisigns." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 28(4):285-310.
- . 2007. *Peirce's Theory of Signs*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stratton, Jon. 2005. "Jews, Punks, and the Holocaust: From the Velvet Underground to the Ramones—The Jewish-American Story." *Popular Music* 24(1):79-105.
- Sumarsam. 1995. *Gamelan: Cultural Interaction and Musical Development in Central Java*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Taufiqurrahman, M. 2005. "Punk Film Director with a DIY attitude." *The Jakarta Post*, December 17. Online Edition: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/yesterdaydetail.asp?fileid=20051217.S02> (4 September 2007).
- Tedjasukmana, Jason. 2003. "Bandung's Headbangers." *Time Asia*, June 16. <http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/article/0,13673,501030623-458837,00.html> (19 June 2003).
- Tenzer, Michael. 1997. "The Life in *Gendhing*: Current Approaches to Javanese Gamelan. A Review Essay." *Indonesia* 63:169-86.
- Toer, Pramoedya Ananta. 1981. *Bumi Manusia* [This Earth of Mankind]. Jakarta: Hasta Mitra.
- Turino, Thomas. 1999. "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircean Semiotic Theory for Music." *Ethnomusicology* 43(2):221-55.
- Wallach, Jeremy. 2002. "Exploring Class, Nation and Xenocentrism in Indonesian Cassette Retail Outlets." *Indonesia* 74:79-102.
- . 2003. "'Goodbye My Blind Majesty': Music, Language, and Politics in the Indonesian Underground." In *Global Pop, Local Language*, edited by Harris M. Berger and Michael T. Carroll, 53-86. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- . 2004. "Of Gongs and Cannons: Music and Power in Island Southeast Asia." *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 3:1-28.
- . 2005. "Underground Rock Music and Democratization in Indonesia." *World Literature Today* 79(3-4):16-20.
- . Forthcoming. *Modern Noise, Fluid Genres: Popular Music in Indonesia, 1997-2001*. New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies, vol. 3. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.