

Ska Dangdut? The Cultural Politics of the Indonesian Ska Craze

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Abdurrahman Wahid's brief and doomed presidency will be remembered by many Indonesians as a period of separatist violence, economic stagnation, uncertain leadership, and political disillusionment, but some will also remember those years as the golden era of Indonesian ska. In the capital city of Jakarta in 1999 and 2000, the most common statement one heard about ska music was that it was "currently trendy" (*lagi ngetrend*) or currently booming (*lagi booming*) among the *anak muda* (the young kids). Indeed ska was seemingly everywhere. Upper class university students and street children alike knew the latest ska tunes and the characteristic "running in place" dance steps with which to accompany them. Locally made ska T-shirts, stickers, patches, and posters, often featuring ska iconography's distinctive checkerboard graphics were on sale all over the city both in upscale malls and in outdoor markets. [You'll see some examples on your handout.] Most importantly, dozens of recordings featuring ska music in one form or another filled local cassette stalls and climbed the national charts. Even established Indonesian recording artists participated in this latest craze. The veteran pop group KLA Project added a "ska" interlude to one of their best-known songs during a concert in a five-star hotel. Even Suckerhead, an Indonesian thrash metal band, released a humorous metal-ska song, "Pegawai Negeri", about the life of underpaid civil servants

in Indonesia. But perhaps the most unusual aspect of the Indonesian ska “boom” was that the popularity of this global music genre was fueled almost entirely by the productions of local Indonesian artists.

In the following discussion based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, and online, I look at the ska phenomenon and discuss the factors that led to its popularity and its indigenization in the Indonesian context. After briefly sketching the convoluted history of ska music and its arrival in Indonesia, this paper examines how the reception of this imported genre became entangled in local, contested hierarchies of musical value. Specifically, I will discuss how ska music's popularity cut across social boundaries that normally divide the Indonesian popular music audience into separate taste publics.

In an article on the unexpected commercial success of the roots music soundtrack album for the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Michael Powers, a senior vice president at Mercury Records, is quoted as saying the album was a “phenomaly”—an anomalous phenomenon. The same could perhaps be said of ska music’s runaway popularity in Indonesia in the period that coincided with my dissertation fieldwork on Indonesian popular music genres, youth, and globalization. In order to account for ska’s phenomenal success in Indonesia, it may be helpful to briefly consider the prior history of this genre.

The music that became known as ska evolved out of imported American rhythm and blues and indigenous Jamaican influences in the working class neighborhoods of Kingston in the years after Jamaican independence in 1962 (Bilby 1995). By the late 1960s, ska had been largely superseded in Jamaica by newer genres like rock steady and

reggae, but ska, with its infectious, upbeat-stressed rhythms, subsequently caught on in Great Britain, where it was performed by “two-tone” bands composed of black and white musicians for multiracial youth audiences. The so-called “third wave” of ska bands emerged in England and the United States in the 1980s, many of which, such as Berkeley, California’s Operation Ivy, combined ska’s characteristic rhythms with the noisy aggression and socially conscious lyrics of punk and hardcore, forging a hybrid style known as “ska-core”.

The next phase in ska’s development brought the genre to the attention of large numbers of Indonesian music fans for the first time: for a brief period in 1996-1997, segments of the transnational music industry attempted to turn ska into “the next grunge” by introducing a rash of major-label, heavily promoted, and mostly white ska and ska-influenced groups like Sublime, No Doubt, and Reel Big Fish. Ultimately, ska lacked the staying power of what came to be known as “alternative rock”, and after producing a handful of modest hits, the style sank out of sight, at least in the American mainstream. Nevertheless, this relatively brief but far-reaching exposure brought the ska sound to Indonesia, and a small number of rock bands in the urban, middle-class so-called “underground” music scene there subsequently began to play in that style.

When tracing this complex history it is worth noting that ska music’s initial popularity in Jamaica over three decades ago predated the widespread influence in that country of Rastafarianism, the religious and cultural movement that, along with the reggae music it inspired, so often is used to define “Jamaican-ness” in the contemporary world. Thus, it is not altogether surprising that by the time California hardcore musicians appropriated the style of reggae’s forgotten ancestor in the 1980s and 90s, ska’s

connection to Jamaica, and indeed with “blackness,” had been significantly attenuated. This was the state of ska at its point of contact with Indonesian youth. In fact, most Indonesian “ska” is actually ska-core; the heavily distorted guitars, fast tempos, and jackhammer drumming that British and American musicians introduced into the genre (exemplified by groups like the Mighty Mighty Bosstones) have become trademark features of the genre as a whole in Indonesia.

When I first visited Jakarta and Bandung in the fall of 1997, ska was just another “underground” genre, alongside punk, hardcore, black metal, death metal, grindcore, Gothic, industrial, and other imported rock genres on the loud side of the spectrum. These genres were all part of a burgeoning national youth music movement that had emerged in the early 1990s and was characterized by small independent record labels and a strong anti-mainstream, anti-commercial posture. By mid-1999, however, when I returned to Indonesia, ska’s status as an underground style had become controversial. By then, several Indonesian ska groups had been signed by major labels, and the most successful—Jun Fan Gung Foo, Tipe-X, Purpose, and others—were selling hundreds of thousands of cassettes and CDs across the archipelago. Also wildly popular were a number of ska band compilations with names like *Skamania* and *Ska Klinik*.

While a few Indonesian bands playing other underground genres had obtained major label contracts in the past, none had ever reached a level of commercial success commensurate with that of the best-known ska groups. In a relatively short time, ska had strayed far from the underground scene and had become, in the words of those who marketed the music, a “seasonal” (*musiman*) music appealing to a broad national youth audience. Moreover, in the absence of any new ska acts being promoted in the

transnational music industry, the domestic demand for ska was being met by homegrown artists singing in the national language.

Ska's phenomenal success in the marketplace gladdened the hearts of Indonesian record executives but appalled members of the underground scene. The veteran Bandung underground group Waiting Room, recognized by scene insiders as the first Indonesian ska-core band, chose to abandon ska on their second album, turning instead to rap/funk/metal. "Ska is dead," Lukman, the band's singer, told me in early 2000, and many others in the scene agreed. In an essay entitled "Ska Telah Kehilangan Ekspresi", "Ska Has Lost Its Expressiveness", published on an Indonesian web site devoted to underground music, an anonymous author decries ska's commercialization [the full quotation is on your handout] :

Akhirnya ska telah mati termakan oleh trend yang sering kali timbul dan tenggelam, siapa yang akan bertanggung jawab atas semua ini, setelah semuanya berakhir banyak yang mengaku sebagai rude boys dan rude boys atau rude girls cuci tangan atas segala yang terjadi, para enterprise bajingan tertawa dengan hasil yang ia dapat setelah meraup keuntungan dari ska yang ia jadikan sebagai jalan menuju kaya dengan memeras keringat para musisi ska dadakan yang tidak mengerti tentang ska, hanya teriming imingi oleh sebuah ketenaran dari para ABG pemuja trend, Mereka adalah poseur !!

In the end ska is already dead, devoured by the *trend* [cycle] that frequently rises and sinks, who will take responsibility for all of this, after it's all over many will identify themselves as *rude boys*, and [real] *rude boys* or *rude girls* will wash their hands of all that has happened, [while] sleazeball entrepreneurs laugh with the yield that they get after scooping up the profit from ska, which they turn into a road to riches with the toil of ska musicians that all of the sudden don't understand about ska, are only enticed by some popularity among teeny bopper trend worshippers--They are *poseurs*!

<http://www.bisik.com/underground/essaydetail.asp?idw=40&page=1&choi=1&pr=1>

Such rants about the sacrifice of artistic values on the altar of commerce are of course nothing new in global popular music. Notice, however, in the above passage (all one

sentence!) there is no rhetorical appeal to the lost “roots,” Jamaican or otherwise, of ska music. Instead of defining authenticity with reference to ska’s origins (which were only understood among a small number of Indonesian fans) authenticity is equated with what we might call expressivity, one way to translate the Indonesian *ekspresi*. Indonesian underground music fans often used the term *ekspresi* to denote true self-expression unfettered by the demands of the marketplace or any other force external to the self. This suggests that in Indonesia the meaning of ska music had been assimilated into the larger underground movement’s jargon of authenticity, which we may note would probably have been quite alien to the Jamaican pioneers of the genre.

Underground ska fans in Indonesia were already indignant over the genre’s crossing over into the pop mainstream, but soon they would have to confront a new and unexpected outcome of ska’s indigenization, one that turned the prestige hierarchy of Indonesian popular music on its head. Unlike other previous “seasonal” musics in Indonesia, including rap and R&B, that were mostly popular with middle class youth before declining and being replaced by newer, even trendier Western genres, ska music managed to cross the social gap separating the relatively small number of young people in the urban middle-to-upper classes from those in the poor and working class majority.

Ska music’s newfound popularity with the *orang kampung* (village/slum people) encouraged some local music producers to release cassettes of new musical hybrids that combined ska’s distinctive rhythms and sounds with national and regional musical genres popular among working class people but considered low-class and backward by many middle class Indonesians. To a young hip Jakartan, such genres, including dangdut, *jaipongan*—an indigenous dance music from West Java--and *pop daerah*—pop sung in

regional languages that often incorporate elements of local traditional musics—were the antithesis of the Western-derived cosmopolitan trendiness represented by ska. Suddenly the Indonesian cassette consumer was faced with a range of newly created hybrid genres such as *ska-dhut* (ska and dangdut), *ska-pong* (ska and *jaipongan*), and *ska tarling* (ska and a regional Javanese style associated with the city of Cirebon).

[Play musical examples]

The results of these innovations have met with mixed commercial success in Indonesia, but they certainly show an inventiveness of a sort that can perhaps be found nowhere else in the world. One extraordinary recent cassette, entitled *Ska Minang India*, contains a song that appropriates the melody from the popular Hindi film song “Kuch Kuch Hota Hai,” adds a synthesized ska rhythm and brass arrangement, and is sung in *bahasa Minang*, a regional language spoken by the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra. This song is perhaps the world’s only West Sumatran Bollywood ska composition.

[Musical example played here, time permitting]

Recording studio-based musical fusions like these, which I like to call “techno-hybrids,” did not result from the organic, gradual developmental processes that gave rise to ska in Jamaica, but from the self-conscious manipulation of sonic material and technology in the studio. These hybridizing manipulations were, to use Paul Greene’s phrase, *sound engineering* practices by shrewd local producers attempting to capitalize on a recent musical trend.* But even in Indonesia, musical hybrids of this sort were unusual, for they audaciously combined the trendiest, most Western sounds with the most village-bound and “ethnic” ones.

How was this combination possible? I thought I had the answer, though I was unable to find many Indonesians who agreed with what I thought was obvious: Dangdut and regional pop music actually shared some conspicuous formal features with ska, the result of a decades-earlier cross-fertilization with reggae music. While ska was considered a “new” musical fad in Indonesia, having taken three and a half decades to arrive, reggae had long been a familiar style in the Indonesian music-scape. Interestingly, in contrast to the general lack of knowledge about ska’s origins I encountered in Indonesia, some Indonesian music fans I consulted were aware that reggae came from Jamaica, not America (and that Jamaica was not part of the United States). Some also drew explicit parallels between reggae and dangdut as working-class-identified populist genres. More important in the present context, dangdut itself contained strong reggae influences dating back to Rhoma Irama’s pioneering dangdut recordings of the mid 1970s. Most prominent among these elements was a clean electric rhythm guitar strumming chords on the upbeats, also one of the most conspicuous musical features of reggae’s ancestor, ska.

This rhythm guitar pattern, played on guitar or with a keyboard approximation, has also been a recurring element in regional pop recordings. In fact, the music on the aforementioned ethnic ska cassettes differed little from ordinary regional pop other than the liberal use of brass and horn sounds and the occasional distorted hardcore guitar. Thus, while many of my interlocutors were loathe to admit a music strongly associated with the cosmopolitan West sounded very much like musics associated with backward village life, I would argue that a primary reason ska crossed over to Indonesian working class audiences was its familiarity, not its novelty.

This familiarity was cleverly expressed in this t-shirt on sale at an outdoor bazaar in Central Jakarta. It depicts a musician playing *tanjidor*, an old syncretic urban entertainment genre played with Western brass instruments that originated in the early 20th century (see Yampolsky 1991). The caption reads “*Ska Tempo Dulu*”—“Old Time Ska.”

The familiar sounds and grooves of ska may also help explain its introduction into the normally conservative live dangdut repertoire. To my surprise, by the spring of 2000 local dangdut ensembles performing in the working class neighborhoods of Jakarta had added a Tipe-X ska song and the *ska-bon* hit *Waru Doyong*. These songs would be very well received by the young male dancers in the audience. A dangdut singer explained to me that these renditions of ska songs were “ska-dhut”. When I asked what was dangdut about the performances she replied that the songs were played with an “organ.” This may sound a bit strange, since the organ was originally a key component of the ska ensemble, but in fact, the keyboard had been largely dropped in the transition from ska to ska-core, only to reappear in the recreation of ska-core in ska-dhut.

More dramatic still than the inclusion of ska and ska-bon in the live dangdut concert repertoire was ska’s influence on younger dangdut fans. The following video segment is from a performance at a wedding celebration in a poor South Jakarta neighborhood. Preteen boys, who dance enthusiastically to the music, frequent small neighborhood dangdut concerts like this one. But instead of the usual sedate dangdut *joget*, their dancing is of a different sort in the following video segment.

[Play video clip]

So what does all this show us? I would argue that ska's circuitous transnational journey across geographical, cultural, and class boundaries from the urban underclass neighborhoods of Kingston to the urban underclass neighborhoods of Jakarta can teach us something important about the circulation of global music forms. Many studies in the new and expanding multidisciplinary field of musical globalization tend to emphasize the metamusical discourses and images that accompany musical sounds as they circulate through the global soundscape. Less attention has been paid to the musical grooves themselves and the bodily practices (such as dancing) they encourage on the ground. The case of ska in Indonesia allows us to observe the trajectory of a widely traveled global musical genre that arrived on the shores of Indonesia more or less denuded from the ideological trappings of Jamaican-ness, and seems to have become a cross-class national signifier of youth. Yet I believe it would be wrong to argue that ska's origins are irrelevant to its adoption by young Indonesians. Despite its absence in local discourse, the subaltern origins of ska may still have contributed to its enthusiastic adoption by Indonesian youth.

Perhaps we need to take a closer look at the musical forms and bodily motions themselves. Ska, like many other African and European derived musics of the Americas and Caribbean, is rhythmically compelling and participatory (Manuel 1995). Its distinctive upbeat-accented rhythms, which Robert Farris Thompson once likened to "orchestral hyperventilation," invite dancing and grooving. While the ideologies that accompanied and shaped ska music in other places and times—multiracialism, the underground authenticity complex, downtown Jamaican identity— may well be completely absent in the concert scene captured in the preceding video, *something* vital

remains, something that in its participatory energy and subaltern positionality resembles ska's original Jamaican performance context. I will end by suggesting that figuring out new ways to study what that something is, which appears to exist not only in the musical sounds themselves but in the embodied imaginations of those who encounter them, is one of the most pressing tasks we face as ethnomusicology enters the globalized 21st century. At the very least, such an endeavor can help us assess the impact of the musical "phenomalies" we encounter.

Note

* Ska was not the first imported dance genre to be indigenized in this way. In the early 1990s, for example a similar phenomenon occurred when house music, called *house music* or simply *musik tripping-tripping*, became the trendy music of the moment. The popularity of house music first among middle class youth then working class audiences, spawned ethnic hybrids such as *house dangdut*, *house jaipong*, *house Jawa*, *house Minang*, and the like. The main difference between these techno-hybrids and the genres derived from ska was that the former only existed in recorded form, whereas ska hybrid songs could be easily performed live.

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Figure 1. Locally produced ska stickers, purchased in Jakarta and Yogyakarta,



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Figure 2. Image accompanying the online article “*Ska Telah Kehilangan Ekspresi*” (“Ska Has Lost its Expressiveness”) with an excerpt from the text (*italics added*). Source:

<http://www.bisik.com/underground/essaydetail.asp?idw=40&page=1&choi=1&pr=1>

Translation:

In the end ska is already dead, devoured by the *trend* [cycle] that frequently rises and sinks, [and] who will take responsibility for all of this, after it's all over many will identify themselves as *rude boys*, and [real] *rude boys* or *rude girls* will wash their hands of all that has happened, [while] sleazeball entrepreneurs laugh with the yield that they get after scooping up the profit from ska, which they turn into a road to riches from the sweat and toil of ska musicians that all of the sudden don't understand about ska, are only enticed by some popularity among teeny bopper *trend* worshippers--They are *poseurs*!

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Figure 3. Ska hybrid cassette covers,