
This book is currently the most exhaustive ethnomusicological study of the dangdut genre of music in Indonesia. Dangdut Stories is an essential preliminary study of dangdut in Indonesia that examines the social and political dimensions of a music genre. Weintraub observes music as a cultural discourse of a nation’s political history. The book achieves this by exploring the historical, cultural, and stylistic origins of dangdut. The major themes discussed in the book are ethnicity and nation, dangdut and its association with “the people” or rakyat, and the embodiment of gender and Islam. The methods the author uses in investigating dangdut range from analysing numerous dangdut songs, observing social gatherings and public events where dangdut is featured, and drawing from a wealth of interviews with musicians, composers, arrangers, producers, and fans.

The popularity of dangdut and its impact on political, social, and cultural life in Indonesia is discussed in the first chapter. The second chapter deals with issues of authenticity and Melayu (Malay) associations with dangdut by uncovering the history of the orkes Melayu (Malay orchestras) in the 1950s, a significant precursor to dangdut bands. The following chapter addresses some early dangdut performers and the syncretism of musical influences from “India, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States” that were “appropriated, translated, transformed and blended with a localized Indonesian sensibility” (p. 58). Chapter Four discusses the complex notion of “the people” or rakyat in relation to dangdut. Dangdut, in depicting the rakyat in different contexts, is a voice for the rakyat, and is equated as the rakyat. In Chapter Five, the overt sensationalism and excessiveness of dangdut is interpreted as a complex and unpredictable articulation of the problems and aspirations of the economically marginalized in Indonesian society. Dangdut’s undeniable popularity throughout Indonesia led to its appropriation by the Indonesian ruling elite as music that was emblematic of the nation. In light
of this phenomenon, Chapter Six observes government control of dangdut music in the form of political and ideological appropriation, internationalization, and censorship.

In the proceeding chapter, Weintraub discusses gender, Islam, and the politics of embodiment with regard to the controversial eroticized performances of the dangdut singer, Inul. Inulmania generated intense debate in post-Soeharto Indonesia between conservative Islamic groups and a variety of opponents, including women’s advocacy groups and opportunistic politicians. In observing this controversy, the author demonstrates the political relevance of music in encouraging progressive discourse about women’s rights while challenging conservative notions about sexuality and expression.

The next chapter on “dangdut daerah” or “regional dangdut” examines the advent of independently produced, localized dangdut from across Indonesia. Weintraub argues that these “ethnic” styles of dangdut do not perpetuate dominant Western-informed cultural hierarchies but, rather, demonstrate the ways in which diverse “meanings about ethnicity and nation have been re-articulated in music” in post-Soeharto Indonesia (p. 223). Weintraub argues that the shift from a “national” to “local” discourse in cultural production is a democratizing force rather than a controlling hegemony. Aside from this, the chapter also deals with an interesting case of copyright contestation regarding a hugely popular Malay dangdut song produced in Jakarta called “Laksamana Raja di Laut”. It was revealed that the song’s melody was composed by a Malaysian, contrary to the many recent claims that the Indonesian state has made over the appropriation of musical and cultural artefacts by Malaysia. This example does not legitimize any one country’s claim to this art form but demonstrates the futility of claiming “state-ownership” on any cultural entity such as music and dance. Indirectly, Weintraub signals an understanding of music beyond the misleading boundaries of nation states. In doing so, he clears a path for scholarship in Southeast Asia that looks beyond national divides by observing transcultural connections.

In summary, this book provides an insight into the complex musical world of dangdut as well as the political history of Indonesia.
Dangdut Stories is a study of music “as an aesthetic practice and a social discourse” that articulates issues of “class, ethnicity, gender and nation” interpreted “as symbolic mediations that represent ideological, institutional, and commercial interests” (p. 228). While the book offers a valuable framework for the study of music, central to this framework is the notion that musical cultures are always in dialogue with social and political structures and institutions. Perhaps one shortcoming of this work is its briefness, which the author duly acknowledges (pp. 231–32). While the book undertakes a limited scope of studying dangdut within the confines of Indonesia for logistical and practical reasons, it paves the way for future musical studies to cut across and beyond national borders. Nonetheless, Weintraub has provided a theoretical approach to studying music that is especially useful for studying musical traditions in Southeast Asia. An examination of the discourses of nationality and ethnicity symbolized by culture must be viewed in the larger context of transcultural dialogue and exchange beyond nation-state boundaries. Weintraub’s book provides a significant amount of material and methods to realize further studies of music that take into account the influence of music across borders.

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