

*Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music.* By Andrew N. Weintraub. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 258.

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 preceding 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 brevity, 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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