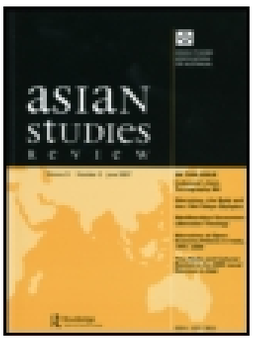

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# THE INVENTION OF HERITAGE: POPULAR MUSIC IN SINGAPORE

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## INTRODUCTION: WHY HERITAGE?

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) in their oft-cited work, *The invention of tradition*, successfully illustrate that many traditions which seem to have roots in an immemorial past are in fact products of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These traditions may be "invented, constructed and formally instituted" or they may emerge in a "less easily traceable manner" but within a "brief and dateable period" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 1). They derive from a need to provide structure, continuity and stability in a modern world of change and innovation. While Hobsbawm and Ranger were particularly interested in tradition as practices of a ritualistic nature, those governed by accepted rules, and those which seek to inculcate certain values, their arguments are also applicable to an understanding of other values, practices, behaviours, activities and artifacts of the past (which may be neither ritualistic nor rule-governed). My intention is to illustrate how some of these practices are invented as heritage in particular localities within specific historic moments for very particular ideological reasons. At the same time, I will consider the extent to which different constructions of heritage converge or diverge, using popular music in Singapore as an example.

The worldwide interest in heritage is evident from the proliferation of international organisations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and the Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Architectural Works (IIC), and the World Heritage Convention. This global concern also finds expression in individual countries, although some became involved earlier and more actively than others. Britain, for example, is so embroiled in the heritage industry that the entire country has been described as one large museum (Hewison 1987). Among the array of British agencies dealing with heritage

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are government departments such as the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (or English Heritage), the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, and the National Heritage Memorial Fund, as well as independent voluntary organisations such as the National Trust. In other countries, however, interest in heritage has surfaced in more recent years and with comparatively less fervour. Singapore is a case in point. Singapore's National Heritage Board was established as recently as 1993 and the only voluntary body which engages with heritage issues, the Singapore Heritage Society, was only established in 1987.

Nonetheless, it can safely be said that "heritage" has found a place in many official agendas in recent years. Why has there been such concern for heritage? A number of reasons come to mind. The first centres on the argument that globalisation intensifies trends towards localisation. Globalisation has occurred in a number of spheres: in the technological revolution through which technologies move at high speeds across previously impervious boundaries, creating technoscapes; in the transnational migrations of people (ethnoscapes); in the rapid movements of global capital and the integration of the world economy (finanscapes); in the production of information and images (mediascapes); and in the proliferation of ideas and ideologies (ideoscapes) (Appadurai 1990).

While some have argued that globalisation leads to homogenisation (Featherstone 1993, 170), others have argued that with increasing trends towards globalisation, we are in fact made more aware of "the finitude and boundedness of the planet and humanity", and at the same time become familiar with the existing range of local cultures (Featherstone 1993, 169). Indeed, others go further and argue that beyond familiarising us with such local cultures, globalisation "produc[es] or perpetuat[es] distinctive cultural practices and differentiated identities" (Schiller 1994, 1). Massey (1993) discusses this production and perpetuation in terms of a search for a "global sense of place", involving "the search after the 'real' meanings of place" and "the unearthing of heritages", a "response to [a] desire for fixity and for security of identity in the middle of all the movement and change" (Massey 1993, 236). This echoes Harvey's (1989) contention that locality only matters *because* of globalisation and that the uniqueness and identity of place has become important because of the need for security in a shifting, uncertain age.

While these represent cultural quests for identity and social pursuit of community and stability, it is not difficult to imagine how the assertion of the local amidst global forces may easily become a reactionary response, involving "certain forms of nationalism" and "sentimentalized recovering of sanitized 'heritages'" (Massey 1993, 232). In other words, heritage could become a political project, an arsenal for states in their nation-building efforts (see, for example, Johnson 1995) and in their engagement in "cultural prestige competitions" (Smith 1990). The

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use of heritage to serve political ends is thus a short step away from its integral role in a people's search for cultural and social identification.

Another reason for the resurgence of heritage is economic rather than cultural-social or political. As more and more people travel for pleasure, the leisure and tourism service sectors have expanded, and heritage sites and events have found their places on tour itineraries as people search for the "exotic" and the "unknown". Quoting Tibbett (1987), for example, Walsh (1992, 117) highlights the fact that heritage-based tourism has become more important in recent years. In Britain, tourism and heritage are officially recognised as crucial to the country's economic success, as Hewison (1987) rightly acknowledges in *The heritage industry*. This is further reflected in more recent work on how cities are manipulated as cultural resources for capital gain (Kearns and Philo 1993). This argument has been carried further in the suggestion that heritage is not something that a society needs or wants, but the result of "an artificial desire imposed on society by capital" (Walsh 1992, 116). According to this view, the only reason that heritage is important in any society is because people are persuaded by capitalists that they wish to pay to experience various forms of heritage.

Within these larger contexts, I will examine the "rise of heritage" in the case of Singapore, a newly industrialised country and a young nation, which recently turned thirty-three as an independent state. In particular, I will explore the reasons why, and the processes through which a cultural phenomenon (in this case popular music) becomes defined as a country's "heritage" by the state. I will also examine the related issue of how such definitions of heritage are "consumed" by Singaporeans and how different constructions of heritage may co-exist alongside the state's. In the process, I will focus on the Singapore state's attempt to "invent" a popular music heritage and appropriate music in the project of nation-building and community bonding. I will also explore musical practitioners' expression of their experiences and heritage, as well as the "consumption" of the state's invented heritage by Singaporeans. In this sense, my work follows on from the excellent cultural geographies of music which have appeared in recent years which explicitly recognise and interrogate the nature of soundscapes, music and cultural value, as well as the place of music in local, national and global cultures, societies, economics and politics (see, for example, Leyshon, Matless and Revill 1995).

## MEMORY, HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Before proceeding with the empirical analysis, it is important to clarify the notions of memory, history and heritage. I will begin by problematising the notion of

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heritage (see Jacobs 1992), taking as my starting point the common notion that heritage is anything that is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present. According to Shils (1981, 12), "tradition"

> makes no statement about what is handed down or in what particular combination or whether it is a physical object or a cultural construction; it says nothing about how long it has been handed down or in what manner, whether orally or in written form. The degree of rational deliberation which has entered into its creation, presentation, and reception likewise has nothing to do with whether it is a tradition . . . the anonymity of its authors or creators or its attribution to named and identified persons likewise makes no difference as to whether it is a tradition. The decisive criterion is that, having been created through human actions, through thought and imagination, it is handed down from one generation to the next. [Yet], [b]eing handed down does not logically entail any normative, mandatory proposition. The presence of something from the past does not entail any explicit expectation that it should be accepted, appreciated, reenacted, or otherwise assimilated.

If heritage is equated with tradition, as is sometimes the case (for example, see Kwok 1993), the concept of heritage as something that is transmitted from the past that is not necessarily assimilated at all by later generations is a problematic one. It is therefore necessary to clarify the notion of heritage, and this requires consideration of two other notions, *memory* and *history*.

*Memory* comprises "a disjointed, fragmentary recollection of what we heard or read about and did" (Kwa 1993, 2). Memories may be personal and collective (Lowenthal 1985). Personal memories anchor our existence as individuals, and are the font of our personal identities. As Kwa (1993, 5) articulates,

> our memories of the objects, people and world around us form the framework within which we recognize friends and kinsmen, decide how we interact with them, identify space around us, the objects in it and decide how we live in that space. Without our memories we will be amnesic, unable to distinguish friend from kinsmen and relate to them. We will not be able to orientate to the space around us and will move around it as we will move around a foreign country.

Such memories can be so peculiar to individuals that they hold little meaning for others. On the other hand, personal memories can be closely tied to a collective memory, built on shared experiences. These could be the shared recollections of social and cultural experiences—such as common rituals and festivals—and of

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political events that shaped collective lives, including wars and other struggles (see Connerton 1989 for a detailed discussion of "social memory"). A collective memory would include a "living memory" (that is, memory based on actual experience of the past) or a memory that is handed down, for example, through the narration of our pasts, passed down from generation to generation, or learned through "historical accounts". While these memories may be shared and are hence social and *collective*, they may not be *collected*. This is left to the realm of *history*.

To distinguish between memory and history, I adopt the view argued within one school of thought in history, historical sociology and historical geography that history is a conscious reconstructed version of the past. As the widely cited historian Hayden White (1973) argued, history is a narrative construction or, in the words of other historians, "representations of pastness" (Tonkin 1990, 27) or "one of a series of discourses about the world" (Jenkins 1991, 5). This contrasts with what others (for example, Elton, cited in Samuel and Thompson 1990, 1) make of history and historians: "exact knowledge" built on "empirically verifiable truths". In the view that history is reconstruction, the fragmentary and ad hoc nature of recollection is replaced by a systematic and deliberate emphasis on certain events, woven together in a coherent manner, made possible by a certain hindsight, and guided by particular perspectives or even ideologies. In as much as certain events are included, there is also a selective amnesia at work in the construction of history. Thus produced or constructed, history becomes a body of knowledge which may or may not be known, let alone understood, by all.

If we accept these conceptions of memory and history, the notion of heritage must take our understanding one step further. In my mind, heritage must go beyond idiosyncratic personal memories to embrace collective memory. Collective memory implies shared recollections, but for it to constitute heritage it must suggest a sense of "ownership" of the past, where people derive from it a shared understanding and a sense of belonging. Thus, it is possible for people to have a collective memory but not a heritage. It is, for example, entirely possible for young Singaporeans to have a collective memory of the struggle against communism in Singapore without feeling that it is their heritage, and without it contributing to a sense of belonging to Singapore. However, I would also emphasise that a shared collective memory may take different shapes which may diverge from one another. Hence, the state's history of popular music in Singapore may be constructed as "heritage", but this may not be shared by young Singaporeans. On the other hand, the popular music community's own collective memory, while it emphasises different pasts, may in fact provide a sense of belonging and identity for the community.

Thus, to return to Shils' (1981) argument that tradition is whatever is transmitted and that this need not be accepted, appreciated, reenacted or otherwise assimilated, I would argue that this reflects the existence of historical knowledge

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and certain forms of collective memories rather than a genuinely shared heritage. In my view, heritage requires a certain knowledge of the past, and that past must be perceived to belong to a people by those people in question, and to be a living reality for them, perhaps because some aspects of the past are still practised, or because it provides a shared understanding and serves as a binding force. In this context, I would like to emphasise three points about Singapore's English popular music scene:

- that among the musical community, there are certainly collective recollections of their past participation in Singapore's English pop music scene, constituting a largely unsung heritage;
- that the state has ignored this heritage, but has instead engaged in a number of recent events which attempt to construct a history of English popular music in Singapore; and
- that among young Singaporeans, the target group of the Singapore state's efforts at instilling a sense of heritage and belonging, there is little sense of an English popular music heritage in Singapore, although with events such as *Retrospin* and its fringe activities a heritage may be invented.

These arguments will be developed more fully in subsequent sections.

## HERITAGE IN SINGAPORE

This section will briefly outline Singapore's cultural and political terrain and its particular history, as a prelude to the discussion of popular music as heritage. Questions of heritage and national identity were not high on the national agenda before 1965, while Singapore remained a colony. While political independence prompted public discourse on the need for and form of a national identity, little thought was given to the importance of heritage in such a construction. It was only in the 1980s and 1990s that official discourse turned to the need to understand and appreciate Singapore's rich cultural heritage, including the heritages of everyday peoples and everyday lives, as part of a larger nation-building project.

Evidence of the state's growing concern for heritage is perhaps most visible in its conservation of urban form, initiated in the 1980s. In 1986, for example, the Urban Redevelopment Authority publicly acknowledged the importance of the urban historical and architectural heritage when it revealed its Conservation Master Plan (*MND Annual Report* 1987, 35), followed closely by guidelines for

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conserving ethnic districts such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam, and the city's colonial heart, renamed the Civic and Cultural District. The authorities were also aware, however, that the built form was not the only form of heritage that should be of concern. The clearest indication of a willingness to engage with the question of heritage in its variety of forms came in 1988 when a National Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts was established and given the task of making recommendations to "encourage Singaporeans to be more widely informed, creative, refined in taste, gracious in lifestyle and appreciative of our collective heritage in the context of modern Singapore" (*Committee on Heritage Report* 1988). The Council in turn convened four committees to explore various aspects of culture and the arts in Singapore, one of which was the Committee on Heritage.

Within the space of seven months, the Committee had fulfilled the roles given in its terms of reference: "to assess the progress made in identifying, preserving and disseminating awareness of our heritage and suggest measures to improve such work", and "to identify factors and propose measures which will encourage Singaporeans to be more widely informed and appreciative of our multicultural heritage in the context of modern Singapore" (*Committee on Heritage Report* 1988, 12).

Heritage-related activities have gained prominence on the state's agenda, partly as a result of the recommendations of the Committee. A National Heritage Board was established in 1993, with seven major functions. These were to explore and present the heritage and nationhood of the people of Singapore in the context of their ancestral cultures; to promote public awareness, appreciation and understanding of the arts, culture and heritage; to promote the establishment and development of organisations concerned with the national heritage of Singapore; to provide a permanent repository of records of national or historical significance; to conduct records management programs for the government; to record, preserve and disseminate the history of Singapore; and to advise the government on matters relating to the national heritage of Singapore (*National Heritage Board Annual Report* 1993–94). Among the Board's activities were the establishment of three distinct component museums of the National Museum of Singapore in 1993—the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Singapore History Museum and the Singapore Art Museum—a vast effort given that Singapore had previously had only one fully-fledged museum (the National Museum).

Why has this interest in heritage developed in Singapore? The influence of globalisation has prompted nationalistic projects in Singapore as it has elsewhere. Indeed, the prominence given to the invention of heritage(s) in Singapore's national agenda in recent years is considered necessary as part of an attempt to construct national myths and national identities and hopefully, in the process, national loyalties. Such efforts are paralleled particularly in Third World countries

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(recent colonies) where the concern with a national past and the heritage it confers is a concern with independence—not so much political independence as *effective* independence. In other words, it provides a sense that people are bound as one and have a continuity of shared ideas and sentiments. In this sense, heritage has become more important than territory. In Singapore, this concern is abundantly clear in the language of the Committee on Heritage's report, as seen in the extracts below:

> . . . though Singapore's modern history is short, it contains a unique heritage which can *play a vital part in nation building* (p. 6, emphasis added);
>
> . . . with wider and deeper appreciation of our heritage, Singaporeans will face the future with a deeper sense of confidence and purpose *in building a nation of excellence on solid foundations* (p. 6, emphasis added);
>
> Properly treated, our heritage can contribute towards the building of a rich cultural identity. It is the substance of *social and psychological defence* (p. 26, emphasis added).

These arguments are used in the conservation of heritage sites, for example, where it is sometimes claimed that blending new developments with the selective preservation of the city's older fabric will ensure the "unique character" of the city as a "distinctly Asian city of the 21st century" (*URA Annual Reports* 1984–85, 3, 9, 11), and that a distinctive place identity is particularly valuable as it is inextricably linked to the nation's quest for identity. In a similar vein, the Committee on Heritage warned of the loss of Singaporean identity among the young in an increasingly westernised society and advocated, *inter alia*, the conservation and marking out of historical sites and locations as the best form of psychological defence to bind Singaporeans to their country (*Straits Times* 16 December 1988). As Yeoh and Kong (1994) have argued in the context of Chinatown, for example, the conservation of the ethnic district as a repository of tradition, history and culture can be seen not only as a means of upgrading the built environment. Rather, by rendering heritage in material form, the conserved Chinatown landscape serves the sociopolitical purpose of binding Singaporeans to place, to the city, and ultimately and vicariously to the "nation".

The local interest in inventing heritage(s) is also propelled by economic concerns. The *Committee on Heritage Report* is again instructive. In identifying "categories of heritage", it highlights "economic heritage" as an important category, and defines it as "the values of our migrant predecessors who came to Singapore and their economic achievements in our environment . . . a record of their pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit in adapting to the uncertainties of a

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changing environment" (*Committee on Heritage Report* 1988, 28). Such economic heritage is important because

> We must learn from the pioneering spirit of enterprise of those who came before us so that we constantly renew work values and maintain the adaptiveness which underlies our economic success today (*Committee on Heritage Report* 1988, 8).

In other words, Singaporeans should inherit the work ethics and attitudes of their ancestors, and an awareness of the legacy of their forebears would be a step towards achieving that.

The Committee has also recommended that other aspects of Singapore's heritage be viewed as "national assets", with "monetary value as antiques and works of art" and as "a valuable tourism asset", "mak[ing] us different and interesting for visitors" (*Committee on Heritage Report* 1988, 30). This economic impetus for recognising the importance of heritage was precipitated by changes in the tourist industry in particular. A sharp fall in the rate of tourist arrivals in the early 1980s led to the formation of a Tourism Task Force which set out to identify the main problems and possible solutions. One of the Task Force's conclusions was that Singapore had "removed aspects of [its] Oriental mystique and charm . . . best symbolised in old buildings, traditional activities and bustling roadside activities" in its effort to construct a "modern metropolis" (Wong et al. 1984, 6). To woo tourists back to Singapore, the Report recommended *inter alia* that Chinatown and other historical sites should be conserved, reflecting a broader recognition that Singapore's heritage had tremendous potential to develop into a "heritage industry" supporting the "tourism industry".

## Why the interest in popular music heritage in Singapore?

In many ways, it is not difficult to understand why official interest in heritage in Singapore has grown in recent years. However, given that much official attention has hitherto focused on the heritage of built forms (see, for example, Kong and Yeoh 1994) and the heritage of national political and economic import, it is not immediately clear why interest has included popular music heritage, especially given some of the sensitivities associated with the popular music scene in the 1970s (see below). This section will address the question of why such interest has emerged.

The *Committee on Heritage Report,* in making recommendations for "heritage identification, collection, preservation and dissemination", defined five categories of heritage: nation-building heritage, economic heritage, multicultural

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heritage, heritage of the man-made [sic] environment, and natural environment heritage. While these categories acknowledge the heritages of everyday life, they are given far less emphasis than the heritage of events and achievements of national economic and political import. Where the heritages of everyday life are highlighted at all, it is only in relation to their role in the construction of national identities and the sense of nationhood, rather than simply for their value as lifestyles, habits or artifacts of ordinary people. I will discuss three of these categories of heritage here to illustrate my point.

Nation-building heritage, for example, derives from the historical events and experiences Singaporeans have lived through and which have shaped their lives, such as colonialism, the Japanese Occupation, the post-war struggle for independence and the struggle against communism. While this might enable an understanding of quotidian experiences within the specific historical contexts, the emphasis, as outlined by the Committee, is on the need to understand the political, legal and constitutional import of such events (*Committee on Heritage Report* 1988, 27).

Similarly, while the Committee acknowledges the contributions of Singapore's early migrants and their entrepreneurial and pioneering spirit through its understanding of the importance of "economic heritage", it does so with a view to underscoring the *national* import of such endeavour rather than to celebrate the substance of *individual* spirit. This insistence on transforming everyday heritages into "national heritage" is also evident in the treatment of Singapore's "multicultural heritage". While such heritage is said to be expressed in the "lifestyles, customs and traditions of the different ethnic communities" (*Committee on Heritage Report* 1988, 28), thus incorporating the ordinary and commonplace, the emphasis is on how this heritage "will contribute to the evolution of a composite **supra-communal identity**" (*Committee on Heritage Report* 1988, 28, emphasis in original).

Given the directions and emphases outlined by the Committee on Heritage, the question of why the National Archives, a state organisation, has become involved in questions of popular music heritage in Singapore arises. If there is any aspect of heritage that is ordinary and everyday, it is popular music. At the same time, it must be remembered that there was a period in the 1970s when western pop and rock music were deemed to have negative influences on youth, associated with decadent values and a drug culture (see below). Why then "recover" a "less than glorious" past? It is, however, possible to identify certain characteristics of popular music, particularly English popular music, that may have given rise to the interest in popular music heritage.

First of all, given the anxiety on the part of the state to anchor Singaporeans, particularly young Singaporeans, with a shared identity (Quah 1990), and given the recognition that heritage consciousness could help to achieve this, a shared cultural heritage that cuts across all barriers, especially class, ethnic and language

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differences, would appear to deserve some focus. Music cuts across all barriers and appeals to all, a point noted by Lily Tan, Director of National Archives, in her welcome address at the official opening of the exhibition of Singapore's English pop music heritage, *Retrospin: Sounds of Singapore 1950s–1990s.* Although she did not explicitly say so, Tan's view is anchored in the by now clichéd expression that music is a universal language and that popular music, by reaching out to a wider audience than classical music, fulfils this role particularly well. In Singapore, English popular music has the ability to transcend ethnic and language differences, as English is a shared working language common to all ethnic groups.

Tan went on to suggest, secondly, that popular music appeals to and belongs particularly to the young, "an expression of our youthful hopes and aspirations". This association of popular music with the young is particularly important in understanding the focus now given to popular music heritage, as the attempt to recover Singapore's heritage is primarily though not solely seen as a "means for *younger* Singaporeans to understand their roots" (*Committee on Heritage Report* 1993, 7, emphasis added). This focus on younger Singaporeans stems from the view that they, unlike their parents and grandparents, did not go through the difficult years of Singapore's early independence, of political instability, communal tensions and economic stagnation. Having grown up in affluent, stable Singapore, they may have a tendency to take things for granted. Apart from being "cultural amnesiacs" (Kwa 1993), they may not feel a sense of bonding and rootedness. The use of a cultural form that is familiar to and popular with the young can thus be interpreted as an attempt to develop an effective strategy for reaching out to the young on their own terms.

Thirdly, any attempt to explain official interest in popular music heritage in Singapore must consider why official attitudes to English popular music have changed since the 1970s. There was a view at that time that popular and rock music brought with it negative values and hedonistic practices, such as sexual promiscuity, irresponsibility and drug use. As a result, many clubs which were home to local bands were closed down (Phua and Kong 1996). This changed in the 1980s, when the government began to harness rock music for its own hegemonic purposes, using concerts organised by the police as a means of persuading young Singaporeans to stay away from those very negative values and practices that had earlier been associated with this form of music. I would argue that the current recovery of pop music heritage is an extension of the logic adopted in the Police Rock Concerts of the 1980s—that young people need to be communicated with through a medium with which they are comfortable.

This reclamation of a "questionable" past was, however, not a singular, undifferentiated view within the state apparatus. On the one hand, the officers of the National Archives who initiated the *Retrospin* exhibition and related activities

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adopted the view that to reach out to the general public and encourage interest in heritage made the recovery of "popular" cultural forms necessary. The policy makers at the National Heritage Board and the Ministry of Information and the Arts (the parent organisations of the National Archives), on the other hand, were not immediately convinced that it was "safe" to recall a past that was presumably fraught with less than desirable values. Following rounds of discussions (specific evidence of which was not made available for this study), permission was granted for the staging of *Retrospin*. Apart from the extension of the logic adopted in staging the Police Rock Concerts, I would suggest that both the concerts and the exhibition were eventually deemed acceptable because the past is thought to be sufficiently behind us—it is sufficiently "foreign", to use Lowenthal's (1985) word, that we are confident enough to highlight it, talk about it and relive some elements of it. In other words, we are speaking and thinking from a safe distance in the future, where the past is sufficiently removed and the "bad" values are unlikely to re-emerge. This recollection of the past is thus a partial reclamation—it invokes and celebrates certain (positive) elements, and acknowledges other (negative) ones without expressing any desire to or inviting any danger of going back to that part of the "undesirable" past.[1]

The fourth factor underlying the recognition now given to popular music heritage derives from the official view that a distinctively Singaporean identity can emerge from uniquely Singaporean cultural forms. One self-conscious and deliberate attempt to create such a unique cultural form is the bid to create a Singaporean national dress.[2] Music is another arena in which this has happened. For example, various state-led, state-organised events have attempted to encourage Singaporeans to produce distinctively Singaporean songs, or to participate in Singaporean song festivals. This move has also been evident in the works of individuals and groups working independently of the state's guiding hand—for example, in the music of English songwriters and performers such as Dick Lee (Kong 1996a) and Chinese performers such as the *xinyao* groups (Kong 1996b). Such evolving music gives rise to the question of whether there is a distinctive "Singapop", a new sound that is identified as uniquely Singaporean, a music that is a fusion of East and West, of local and global, influenced both by local cultural traditions and the music industry's transnational standards (Kong 1996a). It is this evolving music that the "heritage-makers" recognise as making an important contribution to the sense of national identity and which they seek to harness.

Finally, the attempt by the National Archives to make itself more popular and accessible to the public by participating in this revival of a popular cultural form must be acknowledged, given that one of its missions is to promote public awareness of culture and heritage. This parallels the recent efforts of the National Heritage Board and the Singapore History Museum (SHM). Since *Retrospin*, other

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exhibitions with mass appeal have been organised by the SHM, including an extremely popular exhibition of children's toys through the years and another on the underworld of secret societies. This interest in making culture and heritage more accessible has less to do with the need to become more self-financing (since there are government subsidies) than with ideology building. The lack of a specific need to worry about financial independence at this stage is borne out by the fact that *Retrospin*, for example, was staged purely within its allocated budget and did not need to seek external sponsorship. Because of this financial independence (the music business would have been an obvious source of additional finance), there was also little representation by or lobbying from outside the state in the actual writing of history (see below).

Given the above background and context, the remainder of this paper will address the issue of whether there is indeed a popular music heritage in Singapore. Using the conceptual notions of memory, history and heritage outlined above, I will examine the extent to which there are memories and histories of popular music in Singapore. To do so, I will draw on ethnographic, archival and oral history material from the National Archives and Oral History Unit of Singapore, as well as observations at the *Retrospin* exhibition, the National Archives' exhibition on English popular music in Singapore which was held in September 1996.[3] In exploring my view that the past becomes a people's heritage only if it is perceived to be relevant to this people's living reality, I conducted a survey by questionnaire of 200 undergraduates/students in their late teens and early twenties[4] in August/September 1996. The questions included were designed to seek information about how much young Singaporeans knew of Singapore's past music scene and to what extent they felt that there was an English popular music culture that they could identify as their own.[5] With a view to understanding the consumption of culture, interviews were also conducted with twenty young Singaporeans who had visited *Retrospin*.[6]

## ENGLISH POPULAR MUSIC HERITAGE IN SINGAPORE?

### Personal and Collective Memories

In preparation for *Retrospin* and as part of its larger oral history project on the development of popular music in Singapore, the National Archives conducted oral history interviews with a number of local musicians and singers, broadcasters and disc jockeys, show promoters and music fans.

Two characteristics are most evident from the interviews. The first is the individuality of personal recollections. It is not my intention here to analyse the nature of these rich personal pasts, except to emphasise that they reflect the

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particularity of personal experiences. For example, there was the fear, nervousness and disappointments of first performances:

> . . . I was scared stiff and shivering. He wanted me to do a folk song called Scarlet Ribbons. When I performed that song in Chin Hoo Stadium in Kuala Lumpur, I had a stone thrown at me. It did not hit me but it hit my guitar. I was nervous, scared and I wanted to pack up and go. No way was I going to perform to people who boo and throw stones . . . When I went up to Penang, I faced a more mature audience. I went down quite well with the audience and this made up for my disappointment (Interview with Henry Suriya of *Naomi and the Boys*, 3 August 1995).

There was also the experience of idol worship, for example

> They will just go screaming. They will come to your house and knock on your door. They want to stay with you, live with you, elope with you and things like that. Bring you to their parents and say, "I met this guy" or they'll say to you, "I want you to meet my parents". Some of the parents even said, "Why don't you marry my daughter?" They looked up to us. We were the local heroes in the music scene here (Interview with William David, Elvis impersonator, 27 June 1995).

Such recollections are necessarily unique to individuals and clearly stay with them as identity markers, but they remain fragmentary and are coherent only in the life histories of these individuals.

The other distinguishing characteristic of the interviews was the collective nature of some of the recollections. For example, several interviewees independently recalled the importance of Rediffusion (Singapore's first cable radio network) in the promotion of local talent if not local music. Some remembered performance venues and what were thought to be the "in" places, others spoke about meeting places of musicians, such as a local drinks (*sarabat*) stall and a fast food joint near the old (at the time, only) university campus, and the camaraderie amongst musicians. While these memories resided within and among the musicians in unstructured and even semi-coherent ways, they clearly served as sources of group identity, constituting collective memory as a living heritage among the musical community itself. The oral history material therefore revealed a palpable sense of heritage, rich in local detail and comprising the raw material of common identity and belonging. This, however, is not acknowledged as "Singaporeans' heritage" by the state, which attempts instead to invent its own version of English popular music heritage by selecting elements of the musical past, reducing the fragmentation of memory, and introducing structure

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and coherence; in effect, writing its own history of English popular music in Singapore.

## The Writing of History

From the idiosyncratic and ad hoc recollections of individuals and a systematic accumulation of documentary sources—such as newspaper reports and magazine articles—the National Archives set about "writing" the history of English music in Singapore. From the fragmentary images, a coherent structure was developed, in which two strands are emphasised: the development of local talent, and the movement towards "local content". It is essentially a celebratory history of local sounds, which in its partial focus neglects other possible histories. For example, the history as portrayed in *Retrospin* is not a history of evolving tastes in English music among Singaporeans. It is thus not about the alternating "fates" of jazz, rock and roll, heavy metal and so forth. Neither is it the history of the recording industry, nor the workings of its various arms. There is also little sense of the struggles of individuals and groups to establish themselves. It is a celebratory history, and thus is but one version of history. The Archives is of course not alone in participating in partial constructions. All constructions of history are necessarily partial. Rather than to criticise the Archives' efforts, my intention is to illustrate that the writing of history is necessarily ideological.

In recounting the Archives' historical construction below, I hope to illustrate that the institution is guided by a desire to invent a heritage for Singaporeans by emphasising "local" contributions and talents. *Retrospin* begins by tracing the beginnings of Singapore's English music activities to western influence. Until the 1950s, English music in Singapore was basically music that had been directly imported from the West: western music performed in churches by the British colonials; live music by foreign bands, mainly Filipino and Goanese, who performed in hotels and local cinemas, making music to accompany western silent movies; the lively music scene fostered by Eurasians, through, for example, the many dances and balls organised under the auspices of the Eurasian Association and Girls' Sports Club; and private musical societies such as the Singapore Musical Society which played light classical music and then jazz. By the 1940s and 1950s, the introduction of the gramophone, radio transmission and especially Rediffusion, a cable radio network, brought music into private homes, popularising western music. At the same time, cinemas brought to Singapore famous movies with popular songs such as *Singing in the Rain.* This western dominance persisted during the 1950s with the emergence of many record shops which made western music more accessible.

Although there was little to suggest a truly local music scene in the 1950s, there were local musicians who made a name for themselves playing in combo bands

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in some of the popular hotels such as the Adelphi, Seaview Hotel and Hotel de l'Europe, to audiences consisting largely of European (especially British) residents, middle-class English-educated Chinese and Eurasians. Two of the more well-known were Ahmad Jaafar and Gerry Soliano.

*Retrospin* identified the 1960s as the watershed decade during which local English popular music was born, both in terms of the emergence of local performers and the growth of original local compositions. This was largely triggered by the first pop concert by Cliff Richard and the Shadows in 1961, which inspired many imitators. The Quests were by far the most successful local imitators of the Shadows, the Cyclones of the Beatles, Rahim Hamid of Nat King Cole, Wilson David of Elvis Presley, and Patricia Pestana of Connie Francis. These performers and others went on to produce vinyl records that were marketed in Singapore and regionally, and indeed some did extremely well. The Crescendos' first record, Mr Twister, for example, sold more than the Connie Francis version, and was tenth in Philips' International Top Ten. The Crescendos were also the first group to record in English on an international label, which convinced international labels to sign on other local acts, paving the way for other groups such as the most prolific songwriting group, Naomi and the Boys. *Retrospin* was at pains to highlight local groups that had distinguished themselves in particular ways, such as the first Rhythm and Blues Band (Straydogs), and the first group to record original compositions (the Quests). In short, *Retrospin* celebrated the 1960s as a period of tremendous youthful energy with a lively pop music scene, emphasising the growth of local groups and the production of original compositions.

This liveliness changed in 1973 when the government clamped down on drugs, which they associated with nightspots, particularly those with "live" music and dancing. The music industry took a nosedive as groups disbanded, moved overseas, or separated into smaller groups to perform in hotel lounges. While there were some recording debuts, such as October Cherries and Rubberban, they had few supporters, and local recordings ground to a halt. By the late 1970s, there was a serious lack of original songs.

In the 1980s, rock music again became acceptable, largely because of the boost provided by the police force. In particular, from 1985, the police staged annual Police and Friends Concerts which attracted huge numbers of young people. This was the authorities' way of establishing a link between the police and youth, and with a captive audience, the police took the opportunity to promote their message about the dangers of glue sniffing and drugs. As such endorsements continued, the club scene was encouraged and the number of discos and clubs grew, providing opportunities for young amateur bands playing all kinds of music, from experimental and original music to Top 40 hits. Interest in finding a new sound also emerged with alternative bands playing New Wave music, and

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other artists and songwriters such as Dick Lee and Mark Chan looking for a unique Singapore sound within western mediums in their compositions (see Kong 1996a). *Retrospin* took exhibition-goers into the 1990s on this high note, suggesting that the resurgence of musical activity in the 1980s had persisted into the 1990s.

If heritage were simply history, the state's attempt at creating a popular music heritage in Singapore would certainly have succeeded. Yet, in the same way that Hewison (1987) argued that heritage is not history, I wish to argue that history is not heritage. Heritage is not just a constructed version of the past, but the past living on in the present (Kwok 1993, 3). Histories become heritages only if they are perceived and lived as such. As Kwok argues,

> A living tradition or heritage embodies a living reality, a living idea or a set of ideas, a living set of values or practices—living, because *it continues to speak meaningfully to our lives in the present, to our way of life* (emphasis added) (Kwok 1993, 18).

It could speak to us in a social and emotional way, acting as our anchor and sense of self, as the musical practitioners discussed in the previous section illustrated, but it could also be meaningful because of its economic benefits—as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995, 369) argues, because it becomes a "value-added industry", a current mode of cultural production with recourse to the past. In the next section, I will show how the English popular music history that the state has constructed is not uniformly interpreted by young Singaporeans as part of their heritage, although efforts to construct a history do represent a step in the direction of inventing heritages for people.

## The Invention of Heritage

The question of whether the state's version of English popular music history in Singapore is also embraced by young Singaporeans as their heritage needs to be considered in more detail, bearing in mind my earlier concerns about what constitutes heritage. If heritage requires a knowledge or a collective memory of the past, a perception that this past belongs to a people by the people in question, and a relevance to this people's living reality, how well does Singapore's English music measure up on each of these counts?

Knowledge of Singapore's past music scene is poor among young Singaporeans, as shown by the questionnaire survey data. Only 9 per cent of respondents could name a local band of the 1960s; only 5 per cent correctly identified the primary cause of the demise of the music scene in Singapore in the 1970s; and only 13 per cent could name the cable radio station that popularised music in Singapore.

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**Table 1:** *Knowledge and Perceptions of Singapore's Past and Present English Music Scene*

| Knowledge and Perceptions | % |
|---|---|
| Perception that there is an English pop music heritage from the past | 20 |
| Perception that there is an English pop music culture today to be handed down | 44 |
| Able to name one local band from the 1960s | 9 |
| Able to name one local band from the 1990s | 52 |
| Able to name one performer from the 1960s | 13 |
| Able to name one performer from the 1990s | 83 |

Only 20 per cent of respondents felt that there was indeed a popular music culture from the past that had been handed down and that formed part of their heritage (Table 1). This is in contrast to 44 per cent of respondents who felt that there was now an evolving English popular music culture which could constitute the heritage of future generations of Singaporeans. This higher figure corresponds to a higher proportion of respondents who could name local songwriters/performers and bands from the 1990s. In contrast to the low figure of 9 per cent who could name a local band of the 1960s, 52 per cent of respondents could name a local band of the 1990s. Similarly, in contrast to the 13 per cent who could name a local performer of the 1960s, 83 per cent could name at least one from the 1990s. Clearly, for younger Singaporeans in contemporary Singapore, there is little English popular music of the past that speaks meaningfully to their lives today. In large part, this is because they know very little about this past.

What then of the National Archives' efforts? I would argue that the construction of history and the attempt to disseminate this history is a small but important first step towards the invention of heritage. It is a small step because visiting a museum exhibition is not yet a popular activity among Singaporeans, and attempts to reach out to Singaporeans via this medium necessarily reach only a small group. According to the 1990 census, only 0.7 per cent of the population visited the museum in the seven days preceding the survey (Ho and Chua 1996, 11).[7] This is also borne out by my survey in which only 18 per cent of respondents were aware that there was such an exhibition at the National Museum, and none had visited it. However, interest is strong, as indicated by the fact that 65 per cent expressed interest in visiting it.

While representing but a small step towards the invention of heritage, the exhibition was nevertheless an effective first step. This is supported by the views expressed by visitors to the exhibition whom I interviewed. All interviewees expressed the view that their knowledge of the English music scene of the past had increased as a result of the exhibition. Linda,[8] a 20-year-old student, pointed out that the

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exhibition had opened her eyes to many facts about musical activities in Singapore that she had not been aware of, such as the fact that there were many bands in Singapore in the 1960s, and that they had tried to produce original compositions.

While the importance and success of efforts such as *Retrospin* in enhancing people's awareness of the past is indisputable, what is less clear is how far it succeeds in instilling a perception that this past belongs to them, and how this past is relevant to their living reality. Interviewees were divided on this issue. Rashid, a 26-year-old editorial assistant and part-time guitarist in a band, and Yong, a 35-year-old teacher, expressed the view that the exhibition revealed to them that Singaporeans had "already been trying to establish a tradition" (Yong) in the past, and that Singaporeans "are as good and as creative as other people [foreigners/westerners]" (Rashid). The underlying pride and sense of "ownership" of the "Singaporean" past suggest that there is a nascent sense of pride in an emerging heritage. Seen in this light, the past becomes relevant to people such as Yong and Rashid because it is a way of anchoring their identity as "creative Singaporeans". For them, the history of Singapore's English popular music constructed via *Retrospin* is thus translated into a shared heritage because such music is seen to contribute to the development of a supra-community identity and a sense of local pride. History, in other words, has become heritage because it has gained symbolic capital.

On the other hand, others expressed the view that while there had been attempts at original compositions in the past, there was little that distinguished these sounds from those emanating from the West. Indeed, it was argued that in style, lyrics, stage presence and appearance there had been a lack of local distinctiveness among past music-makers. This disqualified them from any claims to anchoring a heritage.

Another view which emerged, albeit among a small number of interviewees, discounted the existence of a popular music heritage because of a feeling that heritage is associated with "high culture", carrying with it prestige and status value. This idea parallels Bourdieu's (1984) notion of "cultural capital". Bourdieu argued that people enjoy, understand and appreciate certain forms of cultural production only if they have the cultural competence necessary to recognise such cultural production. This cultural competence is acquired through various forms of socialisation, such as family upbringing, education and specialised training. A person who has this cultural competence has access to cultural capital. To show that one has this cultural competence, it is necessary to engage in a process of conspicuous consumption of cultural productions. The more one consumes, the more one is in fact investing in cultural capital. In many societies, the ability to appreciate forms of high culture such as ballet, opera and theatre contributes to cultural competence, and attendance at such cultural performances becomes more about status affirmation than cultural competence. The view that some interviewees put forward is anchored in precisely this argument that heritage implies high cultural heritage, and should require a certain cultural competence.

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Thus, as long as the ability to understand and appreciate popular music is deemed commonplace, requiring no special cultural competence, the consumption of popular music will not be a status symbol. As a consequence, any attempt to emphasise its importance beyond the everyday and the ordinary and to elevate it to the status of an asset in nation-building is unlikely to strike any chords with such people. For them, going to a Michael Jackson concert would not allow them to lay claim to cultural competence nor to claim engagement in a process of cultural capital investment. Needless to say, going to the performance of a struggling local band that is known only to a small group of people is even more unlikely to be seen by these interviewees as cultural capital investment.

There is not uniform agreement, however, that popular music does not provide for cultural capital. Two divergent views emerged. Some interviewees expressed confusion about the "cultural status" of popular music. The fact that *Retrospin* was held in the National Museum, which was associated in their minds with exhibitions of more "dignified" and less "ordinary" and "everyday" events, led some interviewees to elevate the "cultural status" of popular music. The fact that the National Archives was "even" organising a forum to discuss the issue of popular music heritage, and that academics such as myself were seriously interested in studying the phenomenon further cast confusion on their hitherto clear-cut notions of "heritage". Spatially and socially, popular music was being given an air of respectability! In this sense, if in no other, the National Archives' efforts represent an important step towards the invention of heritage.

A second way in which popular music lays claim to symbolic capital is when the equation of high culture with cultural capital is rejected. Some interviewees expressed their celebration of subcultural capital (see Thornton 1997), taking pride precisely in their knowledge and enjoyment of "underground" groups (see Phua and Kong 1996). Capital, in this instance, is accumulated precisely because of its distance from high culture. For these interviewees then, there is little difficulty in acknowledging the *possibility* of popular music as a form of heritage, even if they might not actually recognise the existence of a distinctive English popular music in Singapore which they acknowledge as their heritage.

## CONCLUSION

My consideration of popular music in Singapore has prompted me to tease apart notions of "memory", "history" and "heritage". While related, they must remain conceptually distinct. *Memory* is often personal and hence idiosyncratic. It is borne of experience or shared through narratives. It is important as an anchor and a point of reference as we carry out our daily lives. *History*, on the other hand, is necessarily constructed—it is deliberately written as a "text" for specific purposes

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such as nation-building and identity construction. When the past is collectively remembered, and collectively recognised as "belonging" to a people, it becomes *heritage*. The importance of history, through its translation into heritage, is evident, for example when its present relevance is in binding multifarious groups through shared pasts. For this reason, it is often in the interests of particular groups to attempt to construct history and invent heritage. At a conceptual level, my empirical discussion thus underscores the point that heritage is often invented, and that inventing heritage is frequently a very modern goal-oriented enterprise.

In the context of Singapore, our sense of *history* has often been anchored in a "national" history, constructed from official records, of colonialism and the Japanese Occupation, of the struggle for independence and the ejection from Malaya (see, for example, Turnbull 1989). Our personal *memories*, however, are anchored in ordinary peoples and everyday events. The exercise of inventing heritage is an important one because it could serve to bridge the disjuncture between what Singaporeans know as their national *history* on the one hand, and their social and personal *memories*, the fragmentary past that they recollect, on the other. Singaporeans are constantly told to know "their" history, a history of national events, but their personal and social memories of everyday lives and everyday peoples are relegated to informality and remain imperfect fragments of individual recollection. Yet often it is these fragments of memories that hold personal meaning for people, and contribute to their sense of belonging and locatedness. Rather than leaving these fragmentary memories to individuals, the National Archives' various efforts at constructing social histories and inventing heritages, including popular music history and heritage, represent attempts to transform (indeed elevate) personal recollections and social memories.

It may be appropriate here to return to one of my original questions: for whose ends do certain cultural forms become part of a country's heritage? Why has the National Archives attempted to invent an English-language popular music heritage? The answer lies in the state's assumptions and political motivations. It is a state that wishes to reach out to a young populace that is believed to have a scant sense of belonging and which is most likely to vote with its feet rather than stay to confront a crisis. Concomitantly, it is a state that believes this young electorate needs to be courted (Perry, Kong and Yeoh 1997). However, it is a state that must also begin to acknowledge that if there are only weak collective memories in the chosen cultural area, as my empirical discussion indicates, the state's efforts at inventing English popular music heritage through the writing of a history are unlikely to be very successful. It is not an easy exercise for a subcultural, popular form to be revived by the state. In other words, the potential for control over the definitions of history and heritage "from above" is far from absolute.

This situation is compounded by the fact that official discourse on culture and heritage has not always been consistent with this effort to "elevate" a subcultural

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form into a national heritage. This is symptomatic of a larger condition: that official discourse on culture and heritage itself has not always been consistent or systematic. As indicated above, only two decades ago the state was adamant in its condemnation of popular music as decadent. One decade ago, popular music was appropriated for state ends, to reach out to youth and to battle those same negative practices previously thought to be associated with popular music. Today, it is heralded as Singaporeans' heritage. To engage with this lack of a coherent or consistent position on popular music necessitates the recognition that the official discourse may yet shift as circumstances change.

Given the context of Singapore's development and the nature of Singapore society and leadership, two conditions will be necessary for official efforts at inventing a popular music heritage to continue. The first is that it continues to be of social and political importance—in binding multifarious peoples through a common "language"/"medium"/"sound". The second is that it becomes of economic importance, whereby local popular music spawns a healthy industry, tied in with local consumption, tourist and overseas dollars. In other words, it is in the integration of the cultural with the political and the economic that the enduring presence of this cultural form as heritage is likely.

One final issue remains to be addressed, to bring the reader back to my introductory words about heritage as a global phenomenon. Given the proliferation of literature on heritage issues in Australia, the UK and North America, the question of how the case of Singapore recasts our understanding of the global heritage phenomenon arises. In some ways, the Singapore case diverges in that, here, the state is ironically drawing on the "semi-local" (at best) and "non-local" (at worst) to generate local attachments among the young. It assumes that the identification and promotion of a music tradition that is generically non-Singaporean will help to bond young Singaporeans to a shared identity in Singapore. This paradox suggests a particularly urgent impulse to cut across class, and probably more emphatically, ethnic differences, within Singapore. It explains the focus on English-language popular music rather than Chinese-language (Mandarin and Cantonese) music which is equally, if not more, popular. Therefore, through the Singapore focus on the state's reclamation of a form of popular culture, one that was previously treated as subversive to national cultural goals, a somewhat different slant has been cast on the heritage, globalisation and modernity literature.

## NOTES

[1]This parallels Chua's (1995) argument about popular nostalgia for the *kampung* (village). Although the relaxed social life associated with *kampung* life is often invoked, it does not represent a desire to go back to the other reality of *kampung* life, i.e., its material disadvantages.

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[2]Because Singaporean Chinese women cannot claim the *cheongsam* of Hong Kong and China, Singaporean Malay women cannot claim the *baju kurung* of Malaysia and Indonesia, and Singaporean Indian women cannot claim the *sari* of India as national costumes, Singaporeans attending international functions have always felt the need for a national dress to call their own.
[3]The National Archives is a statutory board under the purview of the Ministry of Information and the Arts and has the tasks of collecting the records of individuals, institutions and government departments; and documenting, preserving and disseminating information on the history of Singapore. In translating its terms of reference, the Archives had previously been recognised more for its focus on events of national import in a political sense—for example, the Japanese Occupation of Singapore during World War II—or on sites and buildings that had contributed to "nation-building", such as educational institutions. While it has begun to show some interest in everyday life, as with an exhibition on *kampung* (village) life, popular culture has only recently formed part of its purview.
[4]The young cohort of Singaporeans was selected because the state's exercise of raising heritage consciousness is directed primarily at them. The sample of 200 was randomly selected, with questionnaires administered to undergraduates from one university and students from one polytechnic entering canteens in different parts of campus, thus capturing students with diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Students who go on to tertiary education constitute around 60 per cent of any one cohort of students who commence their primary school education. Thus, apart from providing a ready sample which could be tapped, the questionnaire was also administered to tertiary students because they constitute a majority of their cohort.
[5]The questionnaire comprised a range of questions about different aspects of heritage in Singapore and the extent to which they are known, recognised and acknowledged. Apart from questions pertaining to English music heritage, the results of which are reported in this paper, other questions focused on urban built heritage (monuments and historical districts), literary heritage and artistic heritage, the findings of which are reported elsewhere.
[6]I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty visitors to the exhibition, identified as they emerged from the exhibition hall. These interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 39, and included both males and females. Interviews were either conducted on the spot, or interviewees were contacted subsequently for appointments. Each interview lasted between half an hour and an hour and a half.
[7]Although it is entirely possible and quite likely that this figure would be higher if the time frame of "the last seven days" was relaxed, the figure is unlikely to increase so dramatically as to distort the basic fact that museum-going is not a particularly popular activity among Singaporeans.
[8]Pseudonyms are used throughout.

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