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Assignment 1

The Popular Culture of Singapore in the 1960s

The popular culture of Singapore in the 1960s had a lot of Western influences regarding music, entertainment, and venues. In an interview that took place from November 1995 to February 1996, Ms. Ruzita Zaki interviewed Mr. Vernon Cornelius, an individual who grew up in Singapore in a music-centered environment with lots of British personal influences. Cornelius describes in the interview the differences between the two major venues at the time and the popular culture trends then, as well as highlighting the possible reasons for why the entertainment industry started booming in Singapore in the 1960s.

In the late 1950s, there were two major performance halls in Singapore: Happy World Stadium and the Badminton World Stadium. Though Happy World Stadium was one of the first few places to stage pop music in Singapore, it seems that the Badminton World Stadium had a bigger impact on the popular culture of the country by soon establishing its presence as a "regular show place for all types, all kinds of [music and entertainment]." Having been both an audience and performer himself at the Badminton Hall, Cornelius reflects on the rise in popularity of the venue by pointing out its ease of access for many of the locals and the ability to purchase tickets much earlier than the actual performance, compared to how for Happy World, a customer would have to buy both a ticket to enter Happy World and a ticket for the concert when they enter. Though this concept of buying tickets long before the actual show may seem like a normal procedure for most of the concerts and music festivals these days, even the act of advertising their own band and putting posters around town was foreign for these Singaporeans, like Cornelius, at the time.

Another interesting trend that could be observed in popular culture during the 1960s was how many of the bands that performed at Badminton Hall did covers of popular songs, mostly Western songs, and less of their own original songs. Bands such as The Checkmates and The Crescendos rose to fame through performances of well-known cover songs. On the other hand, Cornelius and many of the locals considered The Quests kings because they not only did covers of songs but were one of the very few bands in Singapore at that time to release original songs, making them stand out against the other bands that were considered somewhat high-end.

By 1964 and 1965, with the increase in attention towards music and popular culture, the crowd shifted from going to see local artists play at Badminton Hall to sitting in the comfortable seats with better sound systems at the National Theatre. There were no longer music concerts but more variety shows due to the promoters, who saw a profit in that field. In a time where television was not a common household item, shows that had a Western style to them, such as cowboy serials and a pop music show produced by Vernon Martinus, were adored by the community. The preferences of the Singaporeans for Western-style music and entertainment shows signifies the influence that Western culture had on this Asian island country.

The most interesting part of the interview was the last part of the reel, where Cornelius talks about how an enthusiastic audience is essential for the entertainment industry to succeed. Even though that is a concept that marketers talk about all the time these days, it was surprising to hear that from a person who experienced that phenomenon back in the 1950s and 1960s, when the entertainment industry was just starting. This appreciation for the audience and consumers and the hunger to gain more popularity are perhaps the reasons why the entertainment industry grew at a rapid pace in Singapore over the past 50 years.

To further understand the issues that I have raised in this paper, I would like to consult historical articles and writings from other parts of the entertainment industry, such as movies and amusement parks like Happy World. Then, I would like to further develop my analysis by comparing it to Singapore's entertainment industry now, while touching on the famous nightlife that draws tourists from around the world every year.

Works Cited

Vernon, Christopher. "Performing Arts in Singapore (Music)." Interview by Ruzita Zaki. *OralHistory Interviews*. National Archives of Singapore, n.d. Web.