

Band Musicians in Macau

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Abstract

Researchers have documented the potential social benefits of popular music, such as empowering young people to cope with life challenges, providing a positive force for social change and enabling youths to connect with and express their indigenous cultures.

In Macau, growth of a native music industry has been constrained by a tiny population and limited local media, but recently there has been growing support for the work of local musicians in recognition of the potential social as well as commercial impacts of their work. At the same time, wider forces such as the Internet and the increased exposure to foreign music influences are affecting the development of popular indigenous music in Macau.

In order to investigate the impact of these factors on the growth of Macau's popular music industry and provide insights into the experiences and attitudes of young musicians, qualitative interviews were conducted with members of two of Macau's most popular indigenous bands – Black Sheep and Catalyser.

The research demonstrates the central and meaningful role of music in the lives of the interviewees and indicates that young musicians and bands in Macau continue to face a range of constraints and challenges. These include, for example, perceived inadequacies of formal music education and financial and other practical difficulties related to a career in music. The findings are expected to be of practical value to Macau and other countries wishing to develop and promote a local popular music industry.

Keywords: Macau, popular music, bands, qualitative, interviews.

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Introduction

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Background

Researchers have found evidence that playing and listening to popular music has important benefits for adolescents and youths, and can represent a positive force in social change. Engaging with music has been shown to be an effective psychological and emotional coping strategy for young people (Travis, 2012), and there is evidence that music can positively influence moods, promote mental health, and help youths to cope with concerns in areas such as love, sexuality, family issues and social change (Laiho, 2009; McFerran & Saarikallio, 2013; Thompson & Larson, 1994).

Schools play an important role in this process since many young people first develop an interest in music during their early education, particularly when learning to play an instrument or taking part in a performance. Participation in school music lessons is known to be positively associated not only with longer-term involvement with music (Pitts, 2008) but also with academic achievement and reasoning skills (Gouzouasis, Guhn, & Kishor, 2007; Forgeard, Winner, Norton, & Schlaug, 2008)

Music is also one of the main ways in which popular culture is manifested and transmitted, and in some contexts has been used by musicians and their followers to influence social and political change (Adegoke, 2011; Bonastre, 2011). By forming bands with other young people of similar backgrounds and musical tastes, musicians often create distinct identities based on “shared pathways” (Finnegan, as cited in Bennett, 2001), which also provide a sense of separateness from conventional social institutions such as the family, the workplace and school (Bennett, 2001). Within individual countries or geographical regions, music is often a means by which young people connect with and express their indigenous cultures in unique ways. Local bands often develop musical styles that reflect elements of traditional native music, while being influenced by pop, rock and other genres from different countries. Sometimes referred to in the literature as “transculturation” or the influence of local cultural traditions and global music industry standards (Wallis & Malm, 1987, as cited

in Kong, 1995), the resulting style can provide a strong focus of identity for local youth.

The development of a local popular music culture is in its early stages in Macau, and is being promoted and supported by commercial interests and the government alike. Macau's youth have in the past been mainly influenced by pop music from Hong Kong, Taiwan and other Asian countries, but a reported trend in "indigenouslyness" ("The rise of indigenouslyness in Hong Kong", 2013) in Macau is perhaps one factor driving the increasing popularity of local music bands and growing interest in Macau's popular music industry. In order to investigate this phenomenon from the perspective of young musicians themselves, and to identify the factors that are facilitating as well as constraining growth in this sector, the present study used qualitative interview methods to investigate the personal experiences of members of two of Macau's most popular indigenous bands – Black Sheep and Catalyser.

Research Participants

Black Sheep was formed in 2009 by a group of six musicians with diverse backgrounds. Its members are more experienced and older than those of Catalyst; the main Black Sheep interviewee also works as a guitar, bass and ukulele teacher. The band does not have a fixed music style; its members report that they experiment with a variety of different sounds, influenced largely by foreign bands.

Catalyser consists of five college students, four boys and one girl, who met at secondary school and initially formed a band to perform in the school's Christmas show. The band members have written their own lyrics since school days and have been highly successful in Macau music competitions, winning many awards in recent years. Their main influences include Cantonese pop and independent Hong Kong bands, but the band endeavours to incorporate these into its own unique style.

Two members of each band were interviewed for the study; the primary research findings set out below are supplemented with material from other cited sources.

Development of Interest in Music

The band members reported developing an interest in music from an early age, often as a result of involvement in school productions or shows. However, their responses indicated that formal music education in Macau's primary and secondary schools is not effectively promoting or nurturing musical skills among young people.

For example, members of both bands recounted that their school music lessons had been focused almost exclusively on singing; one noted that this was linked to the over-riding popularity in Macau of inter-school singing competitions (Concurso Escolar de Canto). The interviewees indicated that they learnt very little musical theory at school, and mentioned that some graduating students cannot read sheet music at all. One of the members of Black Sheep explained that lessons had been focused only on enabling students to pass examinations, and did not generally inspire students to become interested in music. This interviewee had been taught to play the saxophone in primary school, but explained that because this was not his preferred choice of instrument he later chose to take music lessons outside of school.

Members of both bands suggested that school music lessons should focus more on teaching music theory and should also be more tailored to the specific interests and talents of students.

The Role of Music in Band Members' Lives

The interviews revealed that music in general, as well as their own band, is very central to the personal lives of these young people, giving them a focus of identity and purpose, as well as the ability to overcome problems together. As one Black Sheep member said “No music, no life. No band, no life.” The Catalyst interviewees reported important psychological effects when playing, such as relaxation and relief from the stresses of everyday life. However, as highlighted by the Black Sheep interviewees, hard work, persistence and continual improvement are necessary to succeed in their chosen field and gain the trust and approval of others that are essential for securing engagements.

All of the interviewees demonstrated a strong commitment to continually improving their musical abilities, and regularly rehearse for long hours. For Black Sheep, who regularly perform in public, each performance requires at least eight hours rehearsal time. The Catalyst band members are still full-time students, but have worked as part-time tutors to pay for their own instruments and rent a band room. They report spending at least three evenings every week practicing their music for at least two hours, with longer rehearsal times when preparing for a performance. They clearly enjoy their practice times, explaining that they chat and have fun while rehearsing. Discussion of their favorite tracks indicate that the band are keen to experiment and be creative in combining a range of different influences in their music writing, with these influences achieved largely through performing in band shows and interacting with other musicians at home and in other countries. Following a Hong Kong trend, Catalyst occasionally performs on the street, a novel development for Macau.

Influences and Aspirations

The Catalyst interviewees indicated that in school their focus had been on rehearsing mainly for performances, but after they graduated music became more personal to them and their commitment to it also increased. An evolution in their music can be discerned; Catalyst became well-known within Macau largely because of their songs about social issues such as domestic violence, cruelty to animals and discrimination of the disabled (“The best band in Macau for two consecutive years”, 2015), but their lyrics now reflect a greater emphasis on more personal life experiences, drawing both on their own lives and those of their friends.

Members of both bands highlighted the importance of the Internet in exposing them to foreign musical influences and helping them to improve their musical skills. For the Black Sheep interviewees who have already participated in large concerts in Mainland China and interacted with other foreign band members there, the Internet was reported to be a particularly important source of information about the music of other bands, particularly those from other countries. Similarly, the Catalyst interviewees indicated that the Internet has been a major factor helping to drive the Band's progress. The main overseas music influences on Catalyst were reported to be pop artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan, whose advanced compositional techniques are revered by the

band, and the interviewees expressed a desire for more foreign artists to perform in Macau.

The interviewees observed that there are strong mutual influences between the pop styles of various Asian countries. Though it incorporates these influences, Macau pop music is also seen to have unique characteristics. Black Sheep referred to a new local music style called “M-Rock” which many local bands are now reportedly incorporating in their work. According to the Black Sheep guitarist interviewed, one of the main differentiating characteristics of Macanese pop music is its non-commercial focus, which is in stark contrast with the pop music of Hong Kong and Taiwan and largely reflects the difficulty of achieving profitability within Macau’s small market. The reported benefit to musicians is the ability to be creative in their work and not constrained by market demands. The Catalyst vocalist similarly emphasized the importance to the band of creating music that is meaningful to them, rather than tailored to consumer preferences. Somewhat in contrast to this, though, the Catalyst interviewees also expressed a desire to release a CD, which they perceive to be an important tool in promoting the band both within Macau and overseas, and securing more engagements.

In contrast with the Internet, local media in Macau is not seen as important for promoting the music of the bands as this is rarely used by young people to find out about pop music trends.

Challenges of being a Musician in Macau

Despite their obvious love for music and performing, the interviewees indicated that they feel constrained from pursuing music as a professional career within Macau because of the challenges of a limited market and inadequate government support. Indeed, as one mentioned, the size of the local population and potential market is just too small to enable people to survive as full-time musicians in Macau, and most choose this field for the love of music rather than the incentive of making money. Despite this, one noted that the increasing affluence of the Macanese population and their interest in attending performances are important factors helping to drive the growth of Macau’s indigenous pop industry.

The participants acknowledged that the Macau government is now actively promoting the local music industry by providing subsidized accommodation for rehearsals and performances, and by organizing band competitions and international music festivals to help boost Macau’s pop music industry. Despite these initiatives, they report that many underground bands in Macau lack adequate hardware or software to create their music, and do not have space or appropriate facilities available for recording or rehearsing. Both of the bands interviewed reported that non-affordable rents for band rooms had been a barrier in their own progress. For Catalyst, rapidly increasing rents had prevented them from continuing to rent a band room, but they had been fortunate to be provided with a room by their management company. It was also mentioned that many band studios are in inconvenient locations where disturbance to neighbors is a frequent concern of the musicians, and the environment is generally not conducive to learning and performing music. The ideal environment for their work, according to these interviewee, would include a suitable rehearsal room, high quality recording

facilities and a ready audience, as well as more Government sponsorship of local bands and opportunities to perform in public.

The band members highlighted the importance in their own experiences of having access to family support, both financial and in other ways such as finding premises for the band members to rehearse in. For some of the interviewees, this support had been received even though their family members did not initially understand their interest in pop music and the purpose of forming a band.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates the central and meaningful role of music in the lives of the interviewees and highlights the ways in which the development of popular indigenous music in Macau is being both shaped and constrained by wider social forces including the education system, government and the exposure to foreign music influences largely via the Internet.

It indicates that young musicians and bands in Macau continue to face a range of constraints and challenges, which unless addressed may inhibit the formation of indigenous bands and the growth in popularity of native popular music in Macau.

In particular, the findings highlighted two main challenges. First, the perceived inadequacies of formal music education at schools in Macau, which meant that the band members interviewed for this study had to pursue their musical interests and knowledge through other avenues and in their own time. There is strong evidence from research conducted internationally that music education in school is associated with a range of benefits, related not only to the development of musical skills and abilities but strong academic performance in general.

Second, the interviewees reported financial and other practical difficulties that they perceived to be hindering their pursuit of a career in music. Although there have been recent efforts on the part of the Macau Government and other stakeholders to provide financial and practical support to young musicians, these research findings indicate that the current provision of support may prove to be inadequate for promoting a popular music industry within Macau.

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