Chapter 1
Bayan Ko and Other Songs: The Soundtrack of Philippine Political Activism

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ABSTRACT

Using historical and content analysis, this book chapter examines the role of music in the political awakening of Filipinos through the years. Researchers are mainly interested in popular music and anchor the study on concepts of popular culture and the process of meaning making. This study therefore recognizes the intersection of music as a universal element of popular culture and politics. It argues that politicized music in the Philippines is a contested site where meanings are negotiated and where music of colonizers or a despotic ruler collides with songs of protest or resistance. While samples of the songs that defined various historical periods are analyzed, focus is on the anthems of the student protest movement of the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties that led to the People Power Revolution. Attention is given to the message and why the lyrics not only resonated but also galvanized Filipinos to action.

INTRODUCTION

Filipinos love to sing. Just consider the popularity of the karaoke, singing contests and musical variety shows and you will agree that the love of music is in the Filipino DNA. From the timeless kundiman (love song) and other indigenous music to the revolutionary and protest songs as well as the ubiquitous Western tunes, Philippine musical genres are as diverse as the language groups in the archipelago.

Centuries of colonial struggle generated songs that ignited and sustained the revolution against Spain and the United States. Certainly, political activism eloquently and oftentimes poignantly expressed through songs continued in later decades. For instance, radical agrarian and labor movements in the 1930s used music to recruit, organize and boost morale (Rodel, 2002).

This book chapter invites readers to embark on a musical journey that chronicles the Filipino fight for freedom against oppression, poverty and social injustice, where words and music ceased to celebrate and rejoice and instead became potent instruments of resistance, political education and social indictment (Caparas, 2004). While samples of the songs that defined various historical periods are discussed, focus is on the anthems of the student protest movement of the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties that led to the People Power Revolution, which eventually toppled the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship. Particular attention is given to the message and why the lyrics not only resonated but also galvanized Filipinos to action.

Using historical and qualitative textual analysis, this chapter hopes to illuminate the role of music in the political awakening of Filipinos through the years. The researchers are mainly interested in popular music and anchor the study on concepts of popular culture and the process of meaning making. Fernandez (1981) contends that from a Philippine standpoint, popular culture is a powerful discourse that can serve strategic value development and social consciousness objectives. According to Lockard (1996) “Popular culture affects people’s imaginative pictures of the world, molding perception of reality including that of politics; hence it involves political socialization (the acquisition of images and ideas about the political world and the individual citizen’s role in it)” (pp.150-151).

The study on which this chapter is based upon, therefore, recognizes the intersection of music, as a universal element of popular culture, and politics. By examining the relationship between protest music and politics, this study ventures into a rather neglected scholarly territory especially in the Philippines where music is a rare topic of research (Concepcion, 2015). This is where this initial peek into the role of Philippine songs in many of the country’s political struggles and the message in these songs might make its modest contribution.

**Theoretical Bases and Research Method**

Research for this chapter is fittingly situated in the cultural studies realm because of its interdisciplinary nature and the intellectual-political traditions of culture theory. According to Johnson (1987) culture involves power and is “neither an autonomous nor an externally determined field, but a site of social differences and struggles” (p. 39). There are several cultural and post-colonial theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1997), Althusser (2001), Appadurai (1996) and Hall (1980) that view culture inseparably from politics.

The two principal theoretical approaches that dominate the study of popular culture are the Birmingham and Frankfurt Schools. The latter views mass mediated cultural products as nothing but commodities that are mechanized and standardized to serve corporate interests in capitalist societies and desensitize citizens from political challenges. The Frankfurt School theorists saw, therefore, the importance of what they called the ‘culture industries’ as “mediators of political reality” and “agents of socialization” in contemporary societies. Constantino (1985) in apparent agreement with the Frankfurt School noted that these standardized cultural merchandise distort but entertain and insulate people from sociopolitical realities. The result is the perpetuation of “authoritarianism, conformity, cooptation and escapism” (Lockard, 1996, p.151).

Adorno’s (1941) work on popular music is a relevant example of the Frankfurt tradition. Adorno basically said that music already contains the tensions and tendencies of bourgeois culture and society.

The British Cultural Studies or Birmingham School, on the other hand, subscribes to the idea that popular culture is a contested space where people create their own meanings hence limiting to some