Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia’s Most Popular Music


Reviewed by Lawrence Ross, PhD.

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Dangdut Stories is ethnomusicologist Andrew Weintraub’s "social and musical history of Indonesia’s most popular music," dangdut, and the most thorough look at the subject to date. It is a well-balanced scholarly work, providing close readings of the genre’s complex relationships with contemporary Indonesian society, its writing is readable and accessible to general audiences. It weaves its way through a variety of perspectives on popular music, media, religion, sexuality, and culture—amplely representing them with examples and analyses of music, lyrics, song style, and form—and thus should be of interest to a broad array of disciplines.

Chapter 1 begins with three vignettes of contemporary dangdut shown in contrasting styles and settings: (1) a slick commercial dangdut television program, (2) a well-known performer entertaining at a political campaign rally, and (3) an "eroticized" performance in an off-the-beaten-track locale. The three encapsulate a central argument of this book: that dangdut has been a significant medium for articulating ethnic, class, gender, and national identities in a modern and transforming Indonesia. Weintraub interprets changes in music, text, and presentation styles of recording and performing in Indonesian social and political environments through "stories" that focus mostly on individuals and their contributions to dangdut. His solid research methods draw from interviews with significant performers, producers, and patrons, and from song transcriptions, old and new publications, and his participant observations. The book’s seven main chapters provide a chronology of important stages prior to and during dangdut’s revolution in urban and rural areas in the 1970s, through its commercial and political successes in the ’80s and ’90s, and to more recent religious and ethnic discourses that accompanied liberalization in media and politics beginning in the late ’90s.

Dangdut Stories contributes to a growing body of literature concerned with complex and contested discourses related to Malayan identity. Chapter 2 explores how—for dangdut—"Melayu" constitutes a principal wellspring for the genre’s stylistic admixture and stresses performance aspects as well as political and ethnic genealogy locally and in the region. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Malayan music ensembles, particularly the orkes Malayu popular dance bands in North Sumatra and Java (like the bangsawan, ronggeng, and phaal pati troupes in Malaya), were influential in shaping dangdut’s repertoire, in which elements of Melayu, Middle-Eastern, Indian, and Western cultures were united in a "flexible and constantly evolving framework." Weintraub shows how dangdut appeared later along that historical continuum, at a point when musical and lyrical styles were changing in popular music. His examples illustrate how traditional asli song repertoire, sung to four-line pantun verses, moved toward a narrative lyrical style, with new musical aesthetics characterized by up-tempo dances, complex musical forms, and elements culled from Indian film, Western pop, rock, and Latin American music.

Chapter 3 focuses on musical and stylistic borrowings from Indian film music, looking at performers who shaped proto-dangdut in 1950s and ’60s Jakarta and Surabaya by imitating songs, dances, costumes, and body movements of Indian film stars. Their "translated" songs featured Melayu lyrics to Indian melodies, accompanied by an up-tempo, syncopated chalet rhythm (approximating the sound of Indian tabla drums, although with no exact analog in India), and interspersed with solo flute or plucked string interludes. These appropriations were contextualized as a newly independent Indonesia’s embrace of Indian and Middle Eastern culture, and rejection of the West, until a political realignment in the mid-1960s under President Suharto’s New Order facilitated the return of American-style pop music.

Chapter 4 examines three "intertextual levels" (82) through which dangdut relates to Indonesian society at large (the rakyat); (2) dangdut as the rakyat; and (3) dangdut’s role in the rakyat. Dangdut as the rakyat shows how the media situates the genre discursively among "socially marginalized neighborhoods," portraying it as their "blood, soul, and voice." Dangdut for the rakyat is exemplified here through a profile of dangdut pioneer and star (and orkes Melayu alumni, actor, activist, and Islamic preacher) Rharga Jrama, whose songs address moral behavior, love, society, politics, and everyday life. Dangdut as the rakyat discusses how media portrayals of dangdut as unsophisticated helped "middle classes and elites solidify their own social class positions" (109).

Juxtaposing an exploitative commercial industry with a public that exercises its agency in interpreting and transforming song meaning, chapter 5 looks at dangdut’s expansion in the commercial sphere, and the "aesthetic" and "narrative of excess" (126) communicated through its lyrics, dances, and video imagery. Weintraub explores dangdut’s relationship to Indonesia’s payola-infested airwaves (for example, the appearance of television dramas based on dangdut themes), and its function as a tool for political rhetoric. He shows how the underclass roots of dangdut were toned down to make it more appealing to middle class and elite audiences, resulting in songs that were more like pop Indonesia: less didactic and generally focused on male-female relationships. In chapter 6 he shows how, by the 1990s, dangdut had become a national music: "profitable," "regulated," "Jakarta-centric," "glamorous," "respectable and subdued" (150), with a broad appeal across social classes and ethnic communities, and expressed as numerous styles (such as pop dangdut,rock dangdut, and disco dangdut).

Chapter 7 focuses on a 2003-04 controversy surrounding popular female dangdut singer Inda Darastra, whose sexualized performance style—"including a trademark gyrating ‘drift dance,’ passionate vociferations, and suggestive texts"—stimulated a lively debate among emergent liberal and Islamic voices in post-New Order Indonesia. Weintraub relates Iru’s story to a long tradition of powerful, yet often suppressed, sexualized women in Indonesian performing arts. He attributes her early success to the new, widely circulated, and regulated video disc medium, and ties her subsequent decline to reasserted state control over cultural production in the wake of an anti-pornography law.

Chapter 8 looks at facets of ethnic expression in dangdut in the post-Suharto era, including the spicing up of mainstream lyrics, melodies, and instrumentation with ethnic markers (a "nationalized regionality"), as well as local musicians’ new do-it-yourself approach to production in dangdut spread to the geographically hinterlands to be reworked by ethnic communities to their own aesthetic tastes (a "regionalized nationality"). Considering the extent of dangdut’s reach in Indonesia’s myriad cultures, the limits focus here on groups from Java and Sumatra was a minor disappointment, but Weintraub’s conclusion acknowledges a need for further research in dangdut’s regional and international manifestations.

In sum, Weintraub’s Dangdut Stories is an exceptional achievement. It is a significant, well-researched, and methodical work
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of ethnomusicology, and a thoughtfully written history of a topic that is meaningful to millions of people.

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