

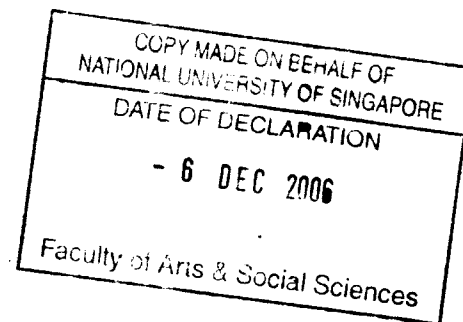
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Global Goes Local:
Popular Culture in Asia

4

Rocking East and West:
The USA in Malaysian Music
(An American Remix)

Eric C. Thompson



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Turn up the volume. Turn it way up loud. The cassette tape hisses through the speakers. Then ... Png! Bgn! Png! Bgn! A screeching, distorted guitar chases chaotically around a single chord until, doo-doo-doo, doo-doo-dee-da, it settles into a rhythm, which is at once shattered as drums and crashing cymbals burst in: DU-Ksh, Tksh, Tksh. For a moment all is cacophony. Then, guitar and drums come together, the guitar's driving rhythm propelled forward by the drums' solid, punishing beat. And into the fray, a thick, sweet female voice signals the lead singer's overture.

"Believe it, all your acts, Oh, / have consequences!" the husky voice intones in Malay, "Don't think that you can be free of the penalty. / Because you're so tough, / you look on all your victims as specks / ... Later, by the will of God, you'll be bruised as well." Rising to furious crescendos, screaming almost, above the amplified din of electric guitar and thundering drums, the singer's vengeful words carry on, "Love's no game for you to test your cunning. / There is a God, his law touches all. / Each has its maaaatch. Yeah ... Diamond cuts diamond!" Again, pounding drums provide the exclamation point. "Diamond cuts diamond!" as backup vocals wail.

Track 1: Heavy Metal Malaysian Style

Loud, raucous, biting, "P.P.P." (*Permata Permata Permata*, or Diamond Cuts Diamond) catapults the listener into the hard-edge rock music of Ella, the singer dubbed the undisputed "Queen of Rock" (*Ratu Rock*) by Malaysia's popular press, tabloids, and entertainment magazines.¹ The first track on Ella's 1994 album *Ella USA*, "P.P.P." recalls the no-holds-barred Malay heavy metal genre, on the strength of which Ella rose to fame in the late 1980s.² From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, Ella's career built from one success to the next. *Ella USA* became Malaysia's top-selling album of all time for a solo female artist, and one of the all-time best-sellers across all categories. The twelve tracks on the album wind their way through hard-edged rock 'n' roll, sentimental ballads, playful ditties, and exuberant anthems. The screaming

guitars, rapid-fire drums, and wailing vocals make no pretence of emulating some imagined tradition of indigenous Malay music. If anything, Malay heavy metal hurtles toward the future, never pausing long enough to glance back. If Malay rockers cast their gaze anywhere beyond the local scene for inspiration, they look outward across the oceans to London, New York, or Los Angeles. Yet while drawing on a rock 'n' roll genre that has its roots in musical traditions from Africa, America, and Europe, Ella's music and that of other contemporary Malaysian artists speaks to the experiences, emotions, and aspirations of Malaysia's youth. In a moment of connection, this music reaches out to its Malaysian audience and is embraced by it.

This essay, a narrative remix of *Ella USA*, cannot hope to reproduce that moment of connection. But a trip through the album, through a series of tracks paired with broader reflections, contextualizes that moment: the ebb and flow of global culture, the nooks and crannies of local meaning, and the people, places, and institutions that make that connection possible and poignant. The tracks laid down here are an American remix, a sampling from *Ella USA* that reflects my own tastes and interests. As a non-Malaysian, my fascination with the album stems as much from a jarring, cultural eye-opening as from the music itself (which I like very much). In my initial encounter with *Ella USA*, I realize now, I related to the album as a replica, an imitation of American rock 'n' roll. In this remix, I write against those reflexes through which Westerners have learned to see themselves reproduced in the work of others. Malaysian rock 'n' roll is not about mimicry, at least not any more than American, British, or other rock 'n' roll is.

At first glance, *Ella USA* seems to manifest the long reach of globalization and overwhelming affiliation with the United States. The album was produced by the major multinational recording company EMI, was recorded in Los Angeles, and credits musicians and a production team composed of Malaysians, Japanese, and Americans. Through the auspices and international reach of EMI, Ella teamed up with Japanese rock-star guitarist Kyoji Yamamoto, to write and produce all but a few of the songs on the album. Yamamoto lends his talents as lead or rhythm guitarist to nearly all the album's tracks. Visually, the album cover is saturated with Americana. Its artwork presents Ella in various poses, clad in jeans and leather jacket, seated in a classic red Chevy convertible against an urban skyline. The album title appears as a California vanity license plate reading "ELLA USA," with "FEB 94" tags (Figure 4.1). Much of the prerelease publicity for the album emphasized the fact that it had been produced in Los Angeles. It would appear that the artist (and her production company) intended to convey an almost unequivocal identification with American iconography.

But if Malaysian rock 'n' roll merely copies Western music, selling the "idea" of America, why is it an object of both desire and fear in Malaysia? "Authentic" American rock 'n' roll is widely available in Malaysia, yet local



Figure 4.1 Malaysian rock queen Ella, from the album art for *Ella USA*.

rock artists generally outsell those from the United States in the Malaysian market, especially if one considers only the Malay audience.³ Why does the “copy” appeal more to Malay youth than the “real thing?” But more than American or British music, Malaysian rock is clearly a source of discomfort and concern to Malaysian authorities. Ella’s concerts and music are routinely under scrutiny in the press, and her production company faces a variety of state-imposed restrictions, such as denial of permits and sometimes outright cancellation of concerts. These restrictions are far from unique to Ella: the Malaysian government controls all forms of media and entertainment, from music to theatre to film. But in the past decade, the authorities have been particularly restrictive toward rock, and more recently, rap music. So while the Malaysian television and radio airwaves are filled with “safe” pop stars, Ella, despite her immense popularity, appears relatively infrequently.

One could read the promotion of safe pop stars and Ella’s relative absence from the airwaves as a simultaneous desire for and fear of “Westernization” or “Americanization” on the part of a nation at once attracted to global culture yet fearful of being overwhelmed by it. Prime Minister Mahathir has

quite consciously built an international reputation for standing up against the West and promoting “Asian values.” But any interpretation of Ella’s music as “Western” or “American” is quickly disrupted when the listener goes beyond the hard-edged rock instrumentation and listens closely to the lyrics of the song “Ala Amerika” (American Style).⁴ These lyrics prompt us to think about how Ella, her music, and her audience fit into a wider Malaysian context.

Track 2: Malaysian Rock – the East? the West?

Flipping the cassette over to the first song on side 2, the listener is again hit by a blast of pure rock ‘n’ roll. The drummer strikes two crisp opening blows, followed by a quick roll. The lead guitar sets into a driving rhythm with a solid backbeat accented by quick blasts from the keyboards. Bass and rhythm guitars join in and the whole band is soon rollicking along as Ella’s voice takes over:

“Ala Amerika” (American Style)

Semalam kau kata kau cinta

Hari ini sudah lain pula jadinya,

Kau kata kepadaku kita bercinta

Ala Amerika ...

Kita hidup dengan budaya

Jangan terpengaruh dengan

Cara mereka,

Barat dan Timur jauh berbeza ...

C/O

Fikir, renung,

Cerminlah dirimu,

Timur, Barat, mana pilihanmu,

Hidup sempurna kan lebih

Bermakna,

Jika Timur ...

Lupakan cinta ala Amerika ...

Hidup hanya sementara,

Beringatlah jangan kau leka,

Cinta ala-Amerika,

Yesterday you said you were in
love

Today it’s [another story]

You say to me that we are in
love

À la America [American style]

We live with culture,

Don’t be swayed by

Their ways,

West and East are far

different ...

(Chorus)

Think, reflect,

Take a look in the mirror,

East, West, which will you choose

A proper life, isn’t that more

Meaningful,

If [you’re from the] East ...

Forget about loving à la

America ...

Life is only temporary,

Remember don’t let things slide,

Love à la America,

Kelak akan memakan mu jua ...	In time to come, will eat you up too ...
Dengarkanlah nasihatku ini, Jangan terpengaruh dengan cara mereka, Sesal kemudian tak berguna ...	Listen to this advice of mine, Don't be influenced by their ways, Regrets later are useless ...

The artist seems to be sending contradictory messages. Through her choice of musical idiom, the persona she projects, and the album's cover art, Ella seems to embrace America unequivocally, or at least the idea of America. Yet, these lyrics paint her as a person "of the East" rejecting America and "the West." During the period this song and album appeared, I was engaged in a two-year period of fieldwork as an American anthropologist in Malaysia with an interest in issues of a changing "Malay" identity. Also having an interest in popular forms of expression, and being a fan of Ella's music, this song quickly came to my attention and presented me with a perplexing puzzle: What was "Ala Amerika" expressing and how might one read it as a cultural text?

"Ala Amerika" is perhaps the most intriguing song on the album for a Western listener, striking one with a mixture of paradox and irony. "Ala Amerika" rocks in a style associated with North American (or perhaps European) hard-edged rock 'n' roll, and its biting lyrics are in keeping with rock music's tradition of youthful rejection of authoritative ideology. Yet, the *target* of that rejection is the "West," the very culture that created rock 'n' roll in the first place. None of Ella's Malay fans with whom I talked about "Ala Amerika" found the lyrics ironic. The irony arises only when a Western listener projects the song onto his or her own cultural categories. If one believes that rock 'n' roll "belongs" to the West and that an Asian performer and the Malay language "belong" to the East, then "Ala Amerika" seems paradoxical because it confounds these cultural categories. But to leave it at that quirky misunderstanding would be to miss the more complex meaning that this song has in the context of today's Malaysia. "Ala Amerika" requires decoding for an audience unfamiliar with the prevailing idioms of contemporary Malay discourse.

"Ala Amerika" draws upon an East/West dichotomy prevalent in Malaysia today. Malaysian politicians, pundits, moralists, academics, and others invoke this East/West dichotomy regularly and reflexively. (For example, the long-ruling prime minister has built a reputation that portrays himself as a defender of the East and of Asian values.) In my own experience in Malaysia, almost everyone I met could clearly identify the contours and characteristics of East and West (*Timor dan Barat*) and the supposedly

essential differences between the two. Whether or not the people I met were aware of the West's positing of an Eastern "other" (that is, what Edward Said has called *orientalism*), Malaysia and other nations that are aware of their position as part of the "East" have played on this dichotomy in asserting their national (and other) identities.⁵ The East/West dichotomy as it appears in Malaysia in some ways mirrors, but is not the same as, the East/West dichotomy prevalent in mainstream American culture or in other societies that locate themselves in the "West."

To read the East/West dichotomies of Americans and Malaysians as mirror images of each other would ignore the facts of the West's economic, political, and cultural dominance. An American discourse on East and West enjoys privileges less available to those in Malaysia. Jingoistic fears notwithstanding (for example, of Japanese buying American baseball teams or Chinese buying US elections), Western East/West discourse has the relative luxury of keeping the East at bay, for the West encounters the East only at its margins.⁶ In contrast, Malaysia and other "Eastern" nations are awash with a "Western" presence far more immediate and pervasive. The most vulgar, manifest signs of Western culture (from popular music to television programming) invade the airwaves, while ubiquitous Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants dot Kuala Lumpur. The "West" is not a figure that may be thought of only in passing, or ghettoized in an Asian equivalent of Chinatowns. It is a conspicuous presence, difficult if not impossible to ignore.

Discussion of East and West takes on particular contours in Malaysia and in the Malay language. In "Ala Amerika," Islam, sexuality, and identity appear as three key dimensions of this discourse. All Malays in Malaysia, including Ella, are Muslim, not only as a matter of custom and history, but also by definition as prescribed in the national constitution. Although freedom of religion is guaranteed, Malaysia is officially an Islamic state. While many non-Malay Muslims live in Malaysia, a close association holds between the Malay identity and Islam. That Malay/Muslim identity is obvious in many of Ella's lyrics where she explicitly or implicitly invokes God. In an American context, these invocations might mark her or her music as conspicuously religious. But in Malaysia, with its more prevalent public discourse on religion, such invocations are relatively unremarkable. Ella nevertheless chooses her words with care, as they do position her within Malaysia's weighty religious dialogue. Most prominently, her references to God use the general, Malay word "Tuhan," rather than the explicitly Islamic "Allah." (The "Ala" in "Ala Amerika" has nothing to do with "Allah"; it is French, as in "à la mode.") Ella and other lyricists who most commonly use "Tuhan" rather than "Allah" in Malay popular music engage a general religious sentiment among their Malay audience, while skirting the potential hazards of a more explicitly Islamic dialogue. Malay heavy metal

rockers are under enough scrutiny from defenders of the faith as it is, without risking further criticism for misusing the name of God.

"Ala Amerika" says little directly about God, but the song intimates a discourse on religion and values in at least two ways. Islamic themes with which Malay Muslims are familiar appear in the lyrics: "Life is only temporary," "Don't let things slide," and "Regrets later are useless." Such reminders that we must face the future consequences of our acts resonate with Islamic views of this life and the hereafter that are frequently heard in mosque sermons and everyday conversation. The appeal to the "East" in "Ala Amerika" also calls attention to values. Islam and the East can be alternately conflated and differentiated in a Malay context. At one level, reference to "Eastern" values denotes those associated primarily with Islam. At another, the "East" invokes a wider realm of ideas, inclusive of Confucian, Hindu, Japanese, and other traditions.

Discussion of values in Malaysia, whether framed as Islamic, Eastern, or Asian, often converges on the issue of sexuality, a second theme of the East/West dichotomy deployed in "Ala Amerika." In a rapidly changing world, Malaysians, and especially Malay/Muslim women, must negotiate a difficult terrain of sexual sanctions and possibilities. In "Ala Amerika," Ella invokes the East/West dichotomy and an Islamic idiom, not in a general condemnation of all that might be associated with America, but rather in a specific rebuke of a lover who has deployed the idea of love *à la America* as an excuse to be unfaithful. By inference, the lover has coupled the positive image of America as progressive and modern with the common notion of American-style freewheeling sex. The singer reproaches her lover for exploiting the idea of an American-style love in order to justify a fickle attitude toward their relationship.

Through these common idioms and themes, situated in an exchange between a woman and an unfaithful man, the song engages in a discourse over the construction and control of concepts of East and West. More broadly, by playing on the East/West dichotomy and Islamic idioms, the artist asserts her own identity and position within the Malay-Muslim world. The "Western" music and "Eastern" lyrics, rather than contradicting one another, combine to assert Ella's position as a Malay female rock 'n' roller in control not only of her future but also of her tradition.

As "Ala Amerika" shows, the "West," and especially the United States, carries a particular symbolic weight and meaning in contemporary Malaysian discourse. This is a discourse that only local artists can tap into successfully; being Malaysian, they can and do play on the specific appeal of "Western" music for a local audience, blending it with particular Malaysian rhythms, idioms, and language. At the same time, the idea of the "West" can place such artists in a precarious relationship with individuals and groups within Malaysia who feel themselves engaged in a cultural war against the "West."

All of these forces swirl within and around Ella's music. The next track of our remix further positions Ella as a Malaysian individual and icon.

Track 3: Ella and Malaysia's Music Scene

A sharp drum beat is met instantly by electric guitar. The two instruments ricochet back and forth, grabbing the lead from each other, before Ella's voice charges in:

"Itulah Saya" (That's Me)

Umpama burung terbang tinggi di atas awan, Bebas mencari segala apa jua tujuan Tak kira masa, siang, malam dan juga bahaya. Ku lakukan apa saja yang ku anggap berharga ...	Like a bird flying high above the clouds, Free to pursue anything, whatever its direction Not a care for the time, day, night nor for danger. I do whatever I find rewarding ...
Aku akan cuba Takkan kecewa ...	I will try Won't be denied ...
Biar mereka, berkata apa, Semua biasa, Daripada ku mengalah, Lebih baik ku berusaha, Kan ku buktikan, A Ha ...	Let them, say whatever, That's the way it is, If I'm going to fail, Better that I've tried, I'll show them, A Ha ...

That's Ella, an icon of Malay heavy metal. Brash, opinionated, with a mind and direction of her own, she is at once unique and very much a product of her time, place, and generation. Born in Penang in 1966, Norzila Aminuddin grew up on the outskirts of the industrial port town of Klang (in an area described by her sister as half-village, half-city). Norzila, who later took the stage name Ella, loved singing from an early age, and eagerly entered school music contests. As with others of her generation, she came of age in an era when first radios and then television sets became common household items. During this period, beginning with Beatles-inspired "yeah yeah yeah" pop, Anglo-American popular music came to be a predominant influence in the Malaysian music scene. This was accompanied by a waning of both earlier Indic influences and indigenous musical forms.⁷ Many young Malays lost interest in music considered "traditional," such as that performed at weddings with flutes and the *kompang* (a small, flat drum).⁸ Disposable income soared between the 1960s and 1990s, and with it the ability to purchase cassettes and, more recently, CDs. At the same time, multinational

recording companies increasingly dominated the Malaysian market.⁹ For Ella and music fans of her generation or younger, pop and rock music, distributed mainly by cassette and performed live, has been a mainstay of everyday culture throughout their lives.

After she left high school in the early 1980s, Ella's singing career began with performances in small clubs and lounges around Kuala Lumpur.¹⁰ By mid-decade, heavy metal groups and a heavy metal aesthetic gained ascendancy in the Malay music scene, with groups such as Kembara beginning to bring heavy metal sounds into Malaysia's popular music.¹¹ Kembara was led by M. Nasir, an artist whose talents range from singing and songwriting to producing, acting, and filmmaking. He would later appear as a producer and songwriter for Ella and many other Malaysian musicians. Though M. Nasir's own music turned away from loud, distorted hard rock and toward a more folksy sound, by the latter half of the 1980s, Malay heavy metal groups had assumed a dominant position in the nation's rock 'n' roll scene. At the end of the decade, albums by the heavy metal bands Wings (*Fenomena*, 1989) and Search (*Teori Domino*, 1990), both produced by M. Nasir, reigned over the domestic rock world. Both of these groups headlined vocalist frontmen: Amy of Search and Awie of Wings. Their screaming, wailing vocals featured prominently on the albums, backed by thrashing drums, screeching, distorted electric guitars, and whining synthesizers.

Influenced both by local groups and foreign heavy metal bands, Ella became the foremost female rocker in a predominantly male business. In the mid-1980s, she teamed up with a local rock group to form Ella and the Boys, which signed with the local label Warnada Records after showcasing their talent at a national Battle of the Bands competition.¹² Ella and the Boys released two albums with Warnada, *Dua Insan Bercinta* (Two Souls in Love) in 1986 and *Anak Merdeka* (Child of Independence) in 1987, before Ella broke away to launch a solo career. She signed with the multinational WEA (Warner Music) label and released her first solo album, *Pengemis Cinta* (Love's Beggar), in 1989. This album and the two that followed it, *Putri Kota* (Princess of the City) in 1990 and *Identiti* (Identity) in 1991, all sold over 100,000 copies, a sales level considered extremely high in the Malaysian market.¹³ Ella then moved from Warner to EMI (Malaysia) and in 1992 released the album *30110*, which has sold over 335,000 copies to date. This extraordinary success was followed by the even more successful *Ella USA* in 1994.

The music scene in Malaysia reflects the diversity and divisions in Malaysian society.¹⁴ Browsing in a local music shop, one encounters a broad variety of available music: Malay, Chinese, Indian, English, pop, rock, *dangdut*, classical, jazz, and so on. Different segments of the Malaysian population favour different musical genres and forms. Most foreign English-language groups find their main audience primarily, though not exclusively, among the urban population. Local and foreign Chinese and

Indian musicians are popular mainly among listeners of like ethnic and linguistic heritage. Indonesian *dangdut*, a genre sometimes likened to reggae, appeals mainly to Malays. Some performers, especially those who receive heavy exposure on television entertainment programs, appeal to a broader "Malaysian" audience. Ella and other local hard rock or heavy metal performers, who are mainly Malay and sing in the Malay language, find their largest audience among the young Malay population.

Among Malays, a further distinction is made between the *kampung*, or village, audience and the urban audience. This distinction, which holds not just with regard to music but in broader Malaysian popular discourse as well, signifies a class difference as much as it does a geographic one. It is reflected in the audience for heavy metal *kampung* music, which includes not only rural Malay youth, but also urban working-class youths dwelling in the apartment blocks and squatter settlements of Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia's other cities. Artists, producers, and managers are well aware of these social divisions and distinctions, and take them into account in the creative process. Ella, Search, Wings, and other popular rock 'n' rollers have attempted with varying degrees of success to broaden the appeal of their music to a middle-class "urban" audience, while maintaining their working-class *kampung* base. *Ella USA*, and other albums such as Awie's solo work *Tragedi Oktober*, owe much of their success not just to their traditional young, rural, and working-class Malay audience but to other urban and ethnic segments of the population as well. To achieve such crossover success, Malay heavy metal musicians and producers employ a variety of song styles, mixes, and playlists on their tapes and CDs.

Track 4: Playing to a Malaysian Audience

A hushed velvety guitar and keyboard usher in our next track. Drums provide a delicate, trickling beat, like a quiet stream. As if from far away, Ella's voice arrives in sweet, measured harmony:

"Menanti" (Awaiting)

Apa benar, cintaku ada,
Andai benar, mana buktinya.

Is it true, that I am loved,
Suppose it is true, then
where's the proof.

Suluhlah untukmu, yang hampir
Berputus asa, mencarinya ...

A flame for you, that's nearly
Extinguished hope, searching ...

Berikanlah sinar yang nyata,
Biar mudah ku memengangnya,
Tak rela dilanda, kecewa bagai

Give me a clear beam of light,
One that's easy for me to hold,
I'm not willing to endure,
rejection as

Gelora, lebih lama ... Sehingga tiada ...	A storm, any more ... Until there are no ...
Tangisan, tangisan, Oh ... Oh ... Tersenyum, tersenyum, menanti ... Kasihmu, sayangmu, Merangsang semula, Perasaan, keinsananku...	Tears, tears, Oh ... Oh ... Smile, smile, awaiting ... Your love, your affection, To ignite again, My feelings, my soul ...

One of a number of “slow songs” on *Ella USA*, “Menanti” (Awaiting) appears second in the playlist after the hard-rocking “P.P.P.” on the original cassette release of *Ella USA*. On the CD release, the order is reversed, giving the CD a rather different feel. The reversal illustrates a careful marketing strategy aimed at broadening Ella’s appeal beyond her *kampung* base and toward a larger Malaysian audience. The CD targets a wealthier, urban audience to which the “slower” songs are thought to appeal. The cassette, on the other hand, is more likely to be purchased by Ella’s core *kampung* crowd, who are enamoured of her aggressive, hard-rocking style. The raucous first track of the cassette, “P.P.P.,” is unlikely to disappoint them.

Many artists and producers of Malay-language albums strive to bridge the “urban” and *kampung* cultures/audiences. For popular singers considered “urban” or “cosmopolitan,” this means employing “indigenous” forms such as non-Western instrumentation or scales (e.g., “Indian” scales as heard in sitar music, the “Quranic” scale used in Islamic calls to prayer, or the “Javanese” scale found in gamelan music) or “traditional” images in the artwork. The CD *Wanita* (Woman) by the jazz-influenced pop singer Sheila Majid, for example, is inscribed with an image of a shadow puppet. A photograph on the back of Majid’s *Ratu* (Queen) CD depicts the singer combing her hair wearing a laced blouse and sarong while sitting in a traditional Malay house; the drums and bells on the opening track recall traditional instrumentation in Southeast Asian music. Similarly, the albums of popular musician Zainal Abidin feature extensive and calculated reference, both visually and musically, to “indigenous” culture.

Conversely, heavy metal rockers like Ella, Wings, and Search, who are seen locally as more *kampung* and thus more “indigenous,” tend to reference “cosmopolitan” or “Western” forms. Ella, for example, has appeared almost exclusively in leather jacket and blue jeans on albums over the course of her decade-long career. And even the “Eastern-inspired” clothing worn by the members of Wings on their 1995 release *Bazooka Penaka* (Like a Bazooka) employs a neo-hippie (complete with peace signs and love beads) rather than indigenous style – an extraordinary example of the circles and cycles of twentieth-century cultural transmission.

While the music of heavy metal rockers like Ella, Search, and Wings seldom refers to indigenous or traditional forms, it does share certain stylistic elements that give it a distinctive sound compared to heavy metal or hard rock coming out of the United States or England. In many Malay heavy metal songs, for example, the words of the lyrics are drawn out in a plaintive reverberation, a vocal style that seems particular to Malay rock music and that Lockard traces to an indigenous style of singing.¹⁵

Malay heavy metal is also distinguished by its very simple rhythms and chords – a raw style that seems to be one key to its popularity. It is music the audience can easily reproduce and sing along to. During my stay in rural Malaysia and while visiting acquaintances living in squatter settlements around Kuala Lumpur and Penang, I often found myself sitting late into the night with a small group of young men who would pass around a guitar or two while playing and singing a range of Malay, and some Western, music.¹⁶ Among the most popular were songs of the heavy metal variety. This raw, simple style also dovetails with the feeling expressed by many heavy metal fans that this music allows them to *melepaskan perasaan* – to express themselves and release their feelings. By comparison, the more complicated and intricate pop music of Sheila Majid or Zainal Abidin would be difficult for most amateur guitarists to reproduce, and appeals to a more contemplative, less gut-level, emotional register.

Although Ella, Awie, and some other heavy metal rockers have had success in crossing over to urban and non-Malay audiences, when they extend their musical style to include “slower” songs, they risk weakening support from their Malay *kampung* fan base, where their popularity remains strongest. Some listeners feel this has happened with the group Wings and its lead singer Amy. While I was shopping for Malay heavy metal cassettes at one store, a young clerk enthusiastically engaged me in a discussion of the genre. With a “rugged” look betraying his affinity for the rocker style – long curly hair, dirty T-shirt, and jeans – the clerk spoke excitedly of the effect that Malay heavy metal groups, especially Search, had had on him. They had, he said, opened his whole life to a new world of music and feeling. He was less enthusiastic about Wings. Although the group is popular, he felt their music had lost its edge over the years and didn’t grip him as other heavy metal did. Fans like him often repeated the importance of this kind of connection to the music, of seeing their own experiences and emotions reflected in it. One such emotional connection is found in our next track – a musing on youth and love in today’s Malaysia.

Track 5: Love, Sex, and the Party Line

Ella’s voice lilts along, crisp and playful, accompanied by twelve-string guitar:

"Mungkin" (Maybe)	
Ku berjalan, seorang diri	I walk along, by myself
Memakai pakaian yang ku gemari	Wearing clothes that I enjoy
Tak sedari, dari tadi	Not aware, that just now
Ada pemuda sedang memerhati	There's a young man watching me
Terus dia, mendekati	Straight away he, approaches
Sampai aku jadi oh, naik ngeri	Until I become oh, alarmed
Ku bertanya oh mengapa	I ask oh why
Dia hanya tersenyum, dan tertawa	He only smiles, and laughs
Dari pandangan matanya	From the look in his eye
Yang sayu itu, ku mengerti	So wistful, I understand
Tutur budi bahasa yang memikat	The clever words that pluck
Hati, ku senangi	My heart, I'm charmed
Ku jatuh hati	My heart skips.
Oh sungguh ... oh sungguh	Oh truly ... oh truly
Berdebar hatiku memandangnya	My heart beats to see you
Oh sungguh ... oh sungguh	Oh truly ... oh truly
Mungkin dia jua pun begitu	Maybe he also [feels that way]
Mungkin	Maybe
Aku bingung ... aku rindu ...	I'm confused ... I fret ...
Tak percaya ini jadi padaku	Don't believe this could happen to me
Ku tertawa, ku naik gila	I laugh, I'm going mad
Mungkinkah aku telah jatuh cinta.	Maybe I've already fallen in love.

"Mungkin" (Maybe) may be an innocuous little ditty. It describes a girl who steps out for a stroll wearing her favourite clothes, perhaps those she thinks show off something of her character or charm. She then suddenly falls into an unexpected encounter with a mysterious young man, who captivates her with his clever words. The girl struggles with a mixture of fear and attraction. Should she flee this young Romeo, or fall for him and see where it takes her? And what is he feeling? Does he share her sentiments, or is he just playing with her? "Maybe" has all the hallmarks of a simple love song, including a playful melody with a nice tempo, but even silly love songs are not the same everywhere.

Beneath the surface, "Maybe" suggests social interaction fraught with danger. It is not unusual for the amorous interests of young people to come into conflict with the mores and expectations of their elders, nor surprising that young women more often bear the brunt of social surveillance and scrutiny than young men. Young Malay women are under particular pressure

to conform, not to a single standard but to multiple standards of modesty and beauty. Since at least the 1970s, notions of modesty and dress among Malays have been under multiple and contradictory influences, from Islamic head-covering to Levis 501 button-fly jeans, not infrequently worn by the same woman at the same time. From the opening lyrics, the singer of "Maybe" subtly asserts her prerogative to wear whatever clothes she chooses.

As the lyrics move to her encounter with the young man, the singer travels into even more dangerous territory in terms of a wider social discourse that was taking place at the time that *Ella USA* was released. In 1994, the phenomenon known by the neologism *bohsia* became a hot topic of discussion and hand-wringing in Malaysia, in sites from academic journals to family dinner tables. While an imprecise term, *bohsia* generally referred to young, mainly Malay girls or women who would allow themselves to be enticed into sexual encounters with young men, sometimes for free and sometimes for monetary or other compensation. The Malay press seized upon the *bohsia* phenomenon, and at the height of *bohsia* mania, in October 1994 alone, there were 257 *bohsia*-related stories in two major Malay language newspapers, more than four articles a day in each paper!¹⁷

"Maybe" appeared before the *bohsia* epidemic surfaced explicitly in Malaysia, though after much press and public attention to the subject of *lepak*, or loitering, to which *bohsia* was closely related. Thus, Ella neither consciously nor unconsciously intended a link between her song and the *bohsia* phenomenon. But "Maybe" may still be read as a revealing counterpoint to the official (newspaper and government) discourse on *bohsia*. Throughout late 1994, the Malay press expounded on the need to strengthen surveillance and supervision of young women, including rounding up young women at discos and other more or less subtle policing actions. *Bohsia* as presented in the newspapers and elsewhere was always seen from the viewpoint of authority figures and described as a phenomenon akin to prostitution. Emotions, apart from male lust, rarely entered the picture. *Bohsia* was portrayed similarly in Malaysian popular music, in songs such as "Bohsia" by the reggae star Poe, known for his topical songs, and in "Awaz" by the celebrated rap group KRU. These songs, by male groups and musicians, reflected the official condemnatory view of *bohsia*, with cautionary lyrics directed at young women.

By contrast, while never directly referencing *bohsia*, "Maybe" explores the subject of male-female encounters from a young woman's viewpoint. Ella's lyrics convey the subjective experience of a woman, walking on her own, as she is approached by a charming young man. Her emotions race from alarm, to confusion, and then to love (or at least a crush) and hope that it is reciprocal. This is a confused, unsure love, but it is strongly and genuinely felt. In "Maybe," Ella boldly, if unintentionally, subverts the negative *bohsia* image, focusing instead on the more positive possibility of love and romance,

and at another level, on the freedom of a young woman to move about on her own and choose to wear the clothes she likes.

It may be that relating “Maybe” to wider social issues reads too much into the song. Perhaps it is just a silly love song, and as Paul McCartney asked in his famous musical rejoinder to John Lennon, “What’s wrong with that, I’d like to know.” But in Malaysia, artists are often constrained to write about only the innocuous and inconsequential, a situation that Ella and others feel acutely. Ella’s frustration was clear in conversations I had with her in 1998. She bemoaned the conditions under which Malay songs can only be about “love, love, love” and must avoid other topics. Any song that directly addressed *bohsia*, or, more generally, the position of young women under family and government surveillance, had to adhere to the “official” line or run the risk of censorship. Even a song on the less politically charged subject of traffic stops, Poe’s pop reggae tune “Saman” (Summons), was banned in 1994 by the Ministry of Information. Ella’s songs infrequently address social themes, at least explicitly. On our next track, she sings about the authority of school and family, but rather than railing directly against it, she turns the tension in the lyrics inward to the anxiety felt by a student facing exams and hoping to please her teacher and father.

Track 6: Popular Harmony and Authoritarian Discord

Rocking drums and guitar lead the way for hard-voiced vocals, which pound out recollections from the past:

“Risau” (Worry)	
Zaman persekolahan, kini masih ku terbayang,	School days, I still remember,
Buku menjadi teman, guru menjadipedoman.	Books became friends, the teacher a guide.
Teman sekelasku, ada yang asberkepala batu,	Classmates, some were dumb stones,
Guru menjadi buntu, masalah selalu ...	Teacher at wit’s end, always troubled ...
Ada yang kena berdiri di atas bangku,	Some were forced to stand on the bench,
Ada pula dirotan guru.	Others got caned by the teacher.
Oh dia, menajar tak berhenti-henti	Oh he, taught and taught without stopping
Temanku, asyik dengan kepala sendiri,	My friends, all impressed with their own cleverness,

Oh risau ...

Ujian akan tiba,
Tapi aku masih leka,
Masih selamba saja,
Bagai tiada apa-apa ...

Amanah ayah kepada ku,
Lulus ujian itu penentu ...

Oh risau, ujian tidak lama
lagi,
Oh risau, syarat ayah perlu
dipenuhi,
Oh risau ...

Oh anxiety ...

The test is coming,
But I’m still lingering,
Still just shameless,
As if nothing’s happening ...

Father’s trust in me,
Passing the test would assure it ...

Oh anxiety, the test’s not far off,
Oh anxiety, father’s demands must
be met,
Oh anxiety ...

As in many other countries, the Malaysian school system is organized around a series of national exams. These exams determine a young person’s future, from advancement to prestigious boarding school admissions and university scholarships, to occupational opportunities, and even the amount of pay received at work. Not surprisingly, students and their families worry intensely about the outcomes of these exams. Parents try to provide a range of help to their children, from paying for extra lessons after school to obtaining special charms from spiritual practitioners. Teachers, too, focus on these tests, since school principals evaluate teachers and the Ministry of Education evaluates schools based on the outcomes. “Risau” (Worry) speaks to the anxiety these tests breed in students, an anxiety the song’s singer expresses in the form of a desire to please the authority figures of her father and teachers. But at another level, “Worry” is also suggestive of the adversarial and subordinate position that Malay heavy metal rockers often find themselves in vis-à-vis figures of authority in Malaysia.

While (or because) Ella’s music speaks to Malay desires and aspirations, some national and religious leaders have treated it as socially dangerous. The Ministry of Information, various Islamic Affairs departments, and other official agencies closely monitor all major media in Malaysia. Not infrequently, the government bans various artists, songs, and productions from radio and television, and withholds or cancels permits for concerts. Because her own work often lies at the fringes of acceptable expression in Malaysia, Ella is acutely conscious of the pressures and self-censorship brought on by the scrutiny of governmental bodies and conservative elements within Malaysian society. As an artist, she feels unable to “say anything” through her music for fear of being banned. During our conversations, she complained of having to be circumspect in everything she says, does, writes, and sings; otherwise

the cries of “Ban Ella! Ban Ella!” could go up. As it is, the government has banned a handful of her songs from air play, and in the mid-1990s a concert series was cancelled on the grounds that it was sponsored by a cigarette manufacturer.¹⁸

The “danger” Ella’s music poses is closely related to the appeal it has for Malay youth. It pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable, especially for young unmarried women, and clashes with prevalent religious morality. It troubles the “East/West” dichotomy as it appears in Malaysia. And it unsettles essentialized identities – for example, the identification of rock ‘n’ roll with the “West” and the association of female emancipation with sexual immorality – whose boundaries the authorities seek to reinforce and police. The contextual meanings embedded in Ella’s music draw the attention of both fans and detractors.

But while Ella’s music and persona are troubling to some, she is also very much a part and product of her country today. The overall tenor of *Ella USA* resonates with a broad, historically specific spirit of late twentieth-century Malaysia. The rock anthems scattered throughout the album shout with youthful exuberance. They speak to adversity and frustration, but at the same time always look forward to a brighter future. The spirit of the album embodies the nation of Malaysia as it finds itself at the beginning of the century. Malaysia is a young country, only four decades removed from British colonialism. Malaysians are keenly aware of their position as members of the so-called Third World, but they know as well that theirs is a nation on the move. The release of *Ella USA* came near the end of a decade of staggering economic growth, and the country is actively pursuing the prime minister’s grand “Vision 2020,” which foresees Malaysia as a “fully developed nation” by the second decade of the twenty-first century. Ella’s album expresses sentiments in tune with the spirit of a young nation afflicted by a sense of inadequacy but filled with aspirations for the future. The last two tracks of our remix exemplify this spirit, though in slightly different registers.

Track 7: Music of and for Malaysia

A soft piano plays lightly over the beginning of the next track. Ella’s voice drifts in gently at first, then strains toward an emphatic crescendo, carrying the music with it.

“Esok, Lusa, Selamanya” (Tomorrow, the Next Day, Forever)	
Malangnya oh nasibmu ...	Wretched oh your fate ...
Ditakdirkan begitu ...	Such a destiny ...
Dan setengahnya	And for all that
mengasihanimu	pitying you
tak berdaya membantumu.	is no help.

Walau apa pun jua ...	Whatever may come ...
Kau masih punya masa ...	You still have time ...
Berdikari menguasai diri,	Stand on your feet, empower yourself,
Kau takkan ditepi ...	You won’t be pushed aside ...
Hari hari seterusnya ...	Day by day on through ...
Kau melangkahakan kaki ...	You move step by step ...
Tabahkan lah segala ...	Boldly facing all ...
Cobaan dan dugaan dunia ...	The world’s tests and trials ...

Esok, lusa, selamanya ...	Tomorrow, the next day, forever ...
Tuhan saja menentunya ...	Only God determines ...
Apa jua rintangannya ...	Whatever the obstacle ...
Jangan kau berputus asa ...	Don’t you give up hope ...
Hingga kau berjaya ...	‘Til you prevail ...

Biar dirimu dikeji,	Though you are scorned,
Biar juga dicaci,	Though you are mocked,
Siapa tahu suatu hari nanti,	Who knows, one day,
Kau akan dipuji ...	You will be admired ...

Repeat verse and chorus

Berdoalah ...	Pray ...
Ku jua berdoa ...	I too will pray ...

“Esok, Lusa, Selamanya” (Tomorrow, the Next Day, Forever) recounts a world of obstacles and trials. The subject of this song may be scorned and pitied today, but ultimately, with divine intervention and great effort, will prevail and be admired. The mixture of religious faith and self-confidence recalls songs elsewhere on the album, and echoes the recurring theme of facing an uncertain future with hope and confidence. Shifting between major and minor scales, the song tacks back and forth between despair and hope. While elsewhere on the album Ella’s voice surges forward to propel righteous rock anthems, on this track it soars inspirationally.

Like the lyrics of other tracks reviewed in this essay, those of “Tomorrow, the Next Day, Forever” may sound familiar, or even banal, to an outside observer. Seen in the Malaysian context, however, they take on a particular significance. The subject of “Tomorrow, the Next Day, Forever” could easily be an individual, but Ella’s Malaysian audience would be unlikely to miss the resonance these words have as well with the struggles and challenges that Malaysia faces as a nation.

The final track of this American remix, also the final track of the original cassette playlist, voices just such an explicitly Malaysian national sentiment. While highly personalized, this inspiring anthem reflects the passions of a young nation as much as it does those of a young artist and audience.

Track 8: Unique, Superb, Authentic

Quick drum strikes followed by a slow, steady beat and haunting guitar usher in *Ella USA*'s final track. Ella's voice enters languidly, accompanied by a lone electric guitar, plucking out single notes:

"Gemilang" (Shining)

Terjaga ku dari tidur yang lena,
Melangkah malas menuju jendela,
Kabus menyelubungi subuh,
Mengimbas segala kenangan
yang lalu ...

Awaking from a deep sleep,
I step listlessly to the window,
A mist covers the dawn,
I glimpse reflections of
the past ...

Lautan luas telah ku renangi,
Segala onak ranjau yang berduri,
Tak kenal dan tak ku peduli,
Ku terus mencuba kecap
hingga kini ...

The wide ocean I have swum,
All the waves striking like thorns,
Not conceited and not caring,
I continue trying to succeed
up to today ...

Bersama-sama tempuhi segala
Walau jalan masih jauh
Hanya kau dan aku yang tahu ...

Together enduring all
Though the road is still long
Only you and I know ...

Saat gemilang yang aku nantikan,
Hampir menjelma didepan mata ku ...

The shining moment that I await,
Almost appearing before my
eyes ...

Ku percaya saatkan tiba,
Hanya menunggu tika dan masa ...

I believe that moment will come,
Only waiting for the point and
time ...

Bersama-sama tempuhi segala,
Saat gemilang akan tiba,
Kan kita kecap bersama ...

Together enduring all,
That shining moment will come,
And we will reach it together ...

Sungguh aku berjanji,
Dengan diriku sendiri,
Untukku mengenggami,
Ikhlas, sabar, benar ...

Truly I promise,
To myself,
That I will seize it,
Sincere, patient, true ...

"Gemilang" (Shining) echoes themes similar to those of "Tomorrow, the Next Day, Forever": striving forward, overcoming obstacles, reaching for an elusive shining moment. But in this song, rather than sympathizing with another, the singer reflects on her own story with a steady determination and no remorse. Standing at her window at the dawn of a new day, she sees both the ordeals of the past and a shining triumphant future that flickers like apparitions in the mist. Not alone, she invites her audience to make the journey with her. The hoped-for future is not yet at hand. The road is long and difficult. But together, we can reach our destination.

"Shining" was one of the most popular songs from *Ella USA*. As with our previous track, the hard journey and hoped-for future can be read as personal endeavours, but this popular song from the country's most popular album is also an anthem for a generation, resonating with Malaysia's national aspirations. But what is a specifically Malaysian rock anthem doing on an album with the title *Ella USA*?

Here we must unravel a final enigma of the album's title. To the uninitiated, the initials of the title appear transparent. Displayed on the California licence plate of a red Chevy convertible against a modern urban skyline, and on an album produced in Los Angeles, what else could "USA" stand for but "United States of America?" Yes, Ella says, the album was produced in L.A. because there she had access to the state-of-the-art recording equipment that would produce the highest quality sound; throughout her career, she points out, she has always aspired to excellence. She is quick to disclose, however, as her real fans well know, that the "USA" in the album's title stands for something quite different. Ella sees the automatic reading of "USA" as a reference to America as a presumption on the part of those who would see her as entirely consumed by and mimicking "Western" rock 'n' roll. The double meaning of "USA" is a purposeful bit of play on Ella's part, of course, and works both ironically and as a secret the singer shares with her fans. "USA" really stands for "Unik Sugoi Asli," a mixture of words derived from English, Japanese, and Malay meaning "Unique Superb Authentic." The very combination symbolizes the global flow of culture involved in the album's production. *Unik* is a common Malay word. Like so many words in contemporary Malay, it has roots in English, but has been fully assimilated into everyday Malay lingo and appears in Malay-language dictionaries. Ella's musical partner on the album, Kyoji Yamamoto, suggested the second word, *sugoi*, a common Japanese exclamation of amazement and appreciation. And *asli* returns us to the Malay word for original or authentic.

Together, "Unik Sugoi Asli" captures the true spirit of this album far better than a reference to America does. "USA" as "United States of America" may match the album's outward appearance, but Ella's true Malaysian fans,

the audience she is reaching out to, know that beneath the surface appearance lies a "Unique, Superb, Authentic" album. This unique, superb authenticity does not derive from the music's difference from Western rock 'n' roll, nor from its likeness to traditional Malaysian forms. Rather, it is located in the moment of connection between the artist and her audience, and in the Malaysian milieu they share, which gives the music and lyrics particular meanings and sentiments. Somewhere, in the swirl of global pop culture, local contexts, anxieties, and desires, a listener slips a cassette out of its case and into a player, flips through the worn pages of a tiny booklet of lyrics, and follows the music through righteous rock 'n' roll, playful verses, and plaintive ballads. As the tape winds toward its end, Ella's voice strains in promise: *Saat gemilang akan datang, kan kita kecapai bersama* "That shining moment will come, and we will reach it together." In that moment, the connection is made.

Notes

- 1 Marina Abdul Ghani, "Breaking into the Realm of Male Rockers," *Malay Mail*, 23 June 1998.
- 2 The musicians of this genre are primarily Malay, though some bands include non-Malay members. The lyrics are almost exclusively in Malay.
- 3 Malaysia's substantial Chinese and Indian communities, which account for close to half the country's population, buy disproportionately large amount of the cassettes and CDs by non-Malaysian groups sold in Malaysia.
- 4 Lockard notes that while it is an open question whether lyrics, as opposed to other elements, are central to the appeal of popular music, "one Malaysian study suggests that 64% of respondents considered lyrics important in their enjoyment of a popular song." Craig A. Lockard, "Reflections of Change: Sociopolitical Commentary and Criticism in Malaysian Popular Music since 1950," *Crossroads* 6, 1 (1991): 5. The study referred to is Ching Lai Hock, "Messages from the Heart? An Exploratory Study for Songs" (BA thesis, University of Malaya, 1985), 24-37.
- 5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), 376.
- 6 This is true even though globalization, with its increasing flow of cultural ideas, commodities, and migrant communities, has made the "East" a much more prominent presence in the "West" than it once was. See Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- 7 For a broader survey of Malaysian music, especially from the 1950s through the 1980s, see Lockard "Reflections of Change," 1-111.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 30-4.
- 10 "Ella Then ..." Beta Interactive Services, <www.jaring.my/music/ellathen.htm> (1996, website no longer available).
- 11 Lockard, "Reflections of Change."
- 12 Marina, "Breaking into the Realm of Male Rockers."
- 13 Lockard, "Reflections of Change," 39.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 14-15.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 16 Such scenes also appear in Malay literature and television. For example, a short story from Bung Negara's *K.L. Capers* centres on youths playing the Search song "Isabella," and

a comedy sketch from the popular television program *Scenario* shows residents playing guitar in a squatter settlement.

- 17 Eric C. Thompson, "Lazy Boys and Loose Girls: Malaysian Images of Wayward Youth" (paper presented at the "Genders, Bodies, Borders Conference," University of Michigan, 24-6 October 1997).
- 18 Sporting events seem much more able to get around these recent tighter laws than do musicians, especially heavy metal, rap, and other groups that appeal to working-class audiences.