

## 'Authentic' Fakesong: The Sing Singapore Campaign

*Every two years, in the euphoric aftermath of National Day celebrations in August, individual soloists and choral groups congregate in a large hall to sing to an assembly of a few thousand cheering fans. With glitter in their hair and feet tapping out choreographed sequences, they belt out catchy tunes bearing lyrics about building 'nation strong and free' ('We are Singapore'), or 'One People, One Nation, One Singapore'. The televised gala night is the climax of the song festival/competition known as Sing Singapore, conceived in 1988 by the Ministry of Information and the Arts to 'promote singing as a way of life, and develop a strong sense of belonging to Singapore': concert or propaganda?*

*By Shzr Ee Tan*

The festival boasts its own entourage of sing-offs: song books, tapes, CDs, CD-ROMs, Guess-the-Winner contests, music videos, and roadshows, leading to cries from music industry specialists and cultural practitioners of 'nationalist overkill' and 'cheese'. Literal depictions of Singapore culture and (multi-) national identity are found in songs like 'Stand Up For Singapore', 'Five Star Arising', and 'We Are Singapore'. Videos that accompany these songs feature nostalgic scenes of old Chinatown nestling against the financial district, smiling youths congregating by Housing Board flats, and token representatives of the official Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO) racial groups. The overtones of propaganda here are clear and the organisers have right from its inception in 1988, been unabashed and transparent about their motives. But, planned around National Day, the flag-waving tones are little different from the American Fourth of July or European VE Day patriotic celebrations.

Sing Singapore aims to forge national unity, to 'develop a strong sense of belonging to Singapore through group singing' (National Arts Council 1988). The campaign is positioned as part of the large Total Defence Campaign, an exhortation to take 'into account Singapore's unique position as an island state devoid of natural resources, with a multi-racial population and highly dependent on global trading or economic survival' (*Straits Times*, 1 July 1995). The

*Business Times* (1 August 1987) illustrated the ideology behind singing.

'Music is an exercise in harmony. A government is made of people...but it becomes a government only when these different people believe in, and find, the harmony of a common ground... Singing is an act of affirmation... Every word, when sincere... become emotive reiterations of a being in harmony with all else.'

The transparency of Sing Singapore's blend of musical propaganda can be better understood within the larger framework of the country's internal cultural politics, in which the maintenance of a peaceful balance within its once-immigrant multi-cultural society (77 per cent Chinese, 14.2 per cent Malay, 7.1 per cent Indian, and 1.2 per cent Other) has been crucial to internal stability. Nonetheless, a casual sweep through the three Sing Singapore albums reveals that out of fifty-one tracks, only ten are in Malay, eight in Mandarin, and two in Tamil. Most of the non-English songs are either credited as 'anonymous folksongs', or are pop songs previously disseminated in the market; many feature non-nationalistic lyrics about flora, fauna, friendship, and love. In contrast, the majority of English-language songs are newly composed, with lyrics dealing with nation building, defence, solidarity and unity, hardships overcome, and the ubiquitous multi-culturalism.

In 1993, in line with the agenda of new nation building, ordinary Singaporeans were urged to contribute their own songs to the National Song Search. Tradition, as it were, was deliberately being invented, and no one was ashamed to admit it. This suggests that, over its thirteen-year history, the campaign aims have subtly changed, merging the promotion of local talent and adding Las Vegas-style showmanship. Initially, the contest was not a talent quest, and target participants were the grass-roots masses, most notable students; 10,000 choristers from 194 groups had taken part by 1990. In 1994, local celebrity footballers attended as guest artists, attracting huge crowds of screaming fans. By then, the chairman of the National Arts Council, Tommy Koh, declared: 'We want to literally fill the city with the sound of music...Not everyone is gifted, but everyone can participate'. Local pop singers Jimmy Ye and Kit Chan were roped in to push the campaign along. In 1996, official directives dictated that song themes 'can be on love, life, family, the environment or even world peace', although it was preferable that they also had a 'local flavour'. In 1998, the theme song, 'Home', produced by established pop singer Dick Lee and sung by Kit Chan, was promoted by campaign director Bernard Tan: 'It is not your ordinary patriotic song. Such songs are important, but people don't sing them all the time. 'Home', on the contrary, is something sentimental. It is about the warmth and comfort of living in Singapore' (*Straits Times*, 4 July 1998). And, in 2000, filmmaker Eric Khoo produced alternately sentimental and funky MTV-style videos for new theme songs and remixes of the oldies 'Stand Up for Singapore' and 'Count On Me'.

### **TOO successful by half?**

If the objectives have blurred, much the same might be said of its results. In its inauguration year of 1988, the novelty and newness of the campaign were reasons for success. But no less important was the fact that the primary target group was students in schools, where dissemination of the songs via an efficient education system and the enforcement of mass singing lessons proved particularly easy. A few sceptics already existed. One saw a distinction between

'National songs foisted on you from above' as opposed to 'Singapore Songs arising from grassroots'; others saw a problem of identity, when there was no existing history of Singaporean music. The first executive producer of the campaign, jazz pianist Jeremy Monteiro, laughed that it was 'easier looking for the Dodo bird. At least it existed' (*Straits Times*, 6 August 1989). As a campaign that sought to promote local talent and catapult local singers into the limelight, Sing Singapore might not have worked well, but as it got big stars to endorse, produce, and sing songs, it gained public success, organising sell-out concerts for cheering crowds.

There is, then, a 'straight' interpretation of the well-attended events and healthy sales of the Sing Singapore tapes, CDs, and VCDs: commercially, Sing Singapore is a viable entertainment offering. But, while a sizeable part of the population buy into the campaign at face value, a growing group hails the campaign for a quite different reason: irony. An anonymous sarcastic take on what might be considered already a 'fakesong', 'Count On Me Singapore', illustrates my point. This circulated in the late 1980s in the banking and financial sector, and more widely amongst the masses later (see page 39).

Today there is a 'Cool to be uncool' attitude in the holding of National Day parties, where guests wave flags and croon along boisterously to blatantly nationalistic songs for irony or literalism's sake. The celebration of the artificiality of manufactured culture has become a culture in itself. As rock-chick-turned Sing Singapore face Tanya Chua concedes, the last things she ever thought she would get involved in was a government project: 'A lot of young people wouldn't dare to touch something that has to do with the authorities. But for them, opening up and giving us an opportunity like this, I think it's really cool' (*Straits Times*, 10 May 2000). The Post-modern Singaporean's situation is a sensible toeing of the party line, actually believing in ideology but, at the same time, being aware of its contrivance. So, Sing Singapore is the manufacture and consumption of Singapore culture and identity.

Writing about an intercultural theatre project in his *Consumed in Singapore: The Intercultural Spectacle of Lear* (National University of Singapore, 2000), Rustom Barucha comments that the danger lies in Singaporeans not only consuming *Lear* as a product, but also in the fact

that they are being consumed by it. The same might be said of the Sing Singapore campaign. Its many healthy - sometimes self-mocking - consumers might argue that the totally acceptable process of being consumed is no less harmful than the simple act of singing a song.

#### **SING SINGAPORE VERSION:**

We have a vision for tomorrow  
Just believe, just believe  
We have a goal for Singapore  
We can achieve, we can achieve  
You and me, we'll do our part  
Stand together, heart to heart  
We're going to show the world what  
Singapore can be  
We can achieve, we can achieve

There is something down the road that  
We can strive for  
We're told no dream's too bold that  
We can't try for  
There's a spirit in the air  
It's a feeling we all share  
We're going to build a better life  
For you and me  
We can achieve, we can achieve

Count on me Singapore (x2)  
Count on me to give my best and more  
Count on me Singapore

#### **ANONYMOUS TAKE:**

We have a revision of pay tomorrow  
Just release, just release  
We have a poorer Singapore  
We won't receive, we won't receive  
You and me, we have a part  
With our CFP [pension], for a start  
We have to show the world that we take less  
money  
We won't receive, we won't receive

There is nothing down the road that we can look  
for  
We are told the dream that we could never try  
for  
There's a spirit in the air  
The Seven Month feeling we all share  
We're gonna build a better after-life  
For you and me  
We were deceived, we were deceived

Count money Singapore (x2)  
Count on me to give my salary and more  
Count money Singapore

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**Shrz Ee Tan, MA** holds BA and MA degrees from the University of London. She currently works for *'The Straits Times'* in Singapore.

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In this day and age, every performing arts group, from national ballets and theatres to the tinniest community troupe, has a web site, many of which dazzle the surfer with excellent graphics. Relatively few, however, provide the prospective on-line culture junkie with long-term schedules of their up-coming shows and events. Here are a handful that buck this unfortunate trend:

**Ballet Philippines**

[www.ballet.com.ph](http://www.ballet.com.ph)

A highly informative, user-friendly site, this is the place to go for any tidbit on one of the premier dance companies of Southeast Asia. Their 33<sup>rd</sup> season kicks off in July and their scheduled listings go all the way up to spring, 2003. It's difficult to imagine a more comprehensive performing arts site.



**Kakiseni - A Foot in the Malaysian Arts Scene!**

[www.kakiseni.com](http://www.kakiseni.com)

While it may not win any design awards, this site's admirable aim of being all things to Malaysian arts is worth a mention and a visit. Listing mostly immediate events, there are a few more long-term postings, as well as updates on auditions and some entertaining articles thrown in for good measure. Postings are always welcome and there seems to be no better place to begin discovering Malaysia's rich cultural scene. Although heavily slanted towards Malaysian arts, there should be something for everyone here.

**Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay**

[www.esplanade.com.sg](http://www.esplanade.com.sg)



A major part of Singapore's emerging arts scene, Esplanade promises to set a new standard in multi-purpose performing arts viewing. Situated on the city-state's picturesque waterfront, this swanky venue will feature large indoor and outdoor theatres, smaller stages, recital halls, an art gallery and even a shopping centre. The venue's first major event will be the Grand Opening on October 12, 2002. Future performances to be listed soon.