



Chapter III:

Today's subculture: rise of a new underground

New structures create fresh interpretive styles

The subversive underground music that's always in a state of motion entered a new era of music production, style, and life. No longer bound to the same causes and time, the quest for new sounds begin. What first emerged in the underground after the 'pua chiwit' movement were thrash/metal bands like Dezember, Raucous, Heretic Angel, Macaroni, Surrender to Divinity, who countered their contemporaries with heavy distortion, growling vocals, and extreme styles- indicating Bangkok's ever evolving demands for alternative ways of life, and forms of music to go along with it.

The early metal bands started an underground that was faster, louder and angrier than anything ever produced in Bangkok. Images of darkness, death and pain incorporated their way into the sound and lyrics of this new subculture genre. These new underground bands appearing in the late '80s moved to a new direction, crude with growling vocals, violent with their ear aching guitar solos and antagonistic with dark lyrics. One can easily be dismissive of this metal phenomenon, amounting it to the copycat trend channeled through pirated import metal tapes- similar to what was

happening in the '80s with popular mainstream “luk kruung” music.¹ But upon closer examination, the evolution of this music underground leads us to a new group of voices reflecting social change.

Musical styles are not only carried through by expression but also form. Today's underground music encompasses all functions of music from the preservation of culture, to entertainment to political activeness in a more personal and dialectical manner. It is the many styles underground musicians choose to express themselves through that gauges how much relevance is being put on each of the functions.

Music takes along with it the fashion which is used to complement its expressive style. Just like music, fashion changes with ideologies. The ‘pua chiwit’ style sported simple jeans and t-shirt, and sometimes traditional garb, whereas the later metal bands were more extravagant with long, sometimes teased hair, steel toe boots, leather and picturesque clothes that matched their extravagant guitar playing and sound. Can this extravagance possibly parallel Bangkok's rapid economic growth development apparent in the '80s and early '90s?

Myers-Moro says the sounds of music also speak, albeit without words, sentiments of a new narrative. She argues that “...not only words but texture, instrumentation, performance context, etc. are features which have gained significance through social experiences,” (Myers-Moro, p93).

The ‘pua chiwit’ protest songs were delicate with forms of traditional Thai expressions, (Myers-Moro) peaceful with their American folk style acoustic guitar

1. ¹ Pirated tapes also brought in Western popular music of the 60s, 70s and 80s. Many bands plagiarized Western songs changing only the lyrics to Thai. Most notable was Nuvo's 1989 hit *gno gnom gnai*, a note for note rip off of the Bangles' 1988 hit Eternal Flame. “People either just didn't know or didn't care there were songs being ripped off,” said one informant.

strumming, and serious with their overtly political lyrics. Once the attributes and structure of this underground movement were diluted into the social boundaries of acceptance, they not only became impertinent to the causes and lives of the people it once spoke to, but also stagnant in terms of style.

Bangkok became a product of excessive development as the baht was firmly attached to the US dollar bringing in more credit loans and money transactions leading to more capital, rising businesses, finer luxury condo's, bigger shopping malls and the GNP growing at a rate unprecedented by any other country in the region. Between 1977 and 1996, the economy expanded at an average annual rate of 7.8 percent and the per capita income increased from 2,100 baht in 1961 to 68,000 baht in 1995, (Vorasirisunthorn 1996).

This period of development not only spawned a rise in the middle class sector that created an infrastructure for more mass consumerism, but also a space for those to get marginalized from mass consumerism. The new business infrastructure saturates the entertainment circuit with all its wealth leaving those who are particular about their popular music struggling for newer sources of cultural expression.

“I got into writing songs because it was fun to experiment,” says Pok of Stylish Nonsense, “you learn from experimentation and it's like getting to listen to new music.”

Heavy metal bands paved the way for louder and more distorted, noise oriented music to be numbed into the Thailand pirate tape circulation producing a new kind of music listening experience for people living in Bangkok. The cassette tapes “made music accessible to Thais on a totally new way and vividly reflect changing musical and social values,” (Wong 1995: 43).

The changing musical and social values created a new environment. The new middle class created a distinct infrastructure to disseminate their personal tastes and ideologies. Live rock performances became widespread with clubs like Rock Pub, Metal Zone and others sprouting up with considerably larger sized amplifiers, speakers, and more expensive, custom made guitars compared to the 'pua chiwit' performers who in their time toured around campuses and villages with sometimes only bare minimum acoustics.

This new environment was somewhat of an evolution from yesterday's underground subculture (i.e. 'pua chiwit') as its functional expressive forms are reconstructed into updated ideals and utterances that suit present day historical contexts. Thailand has been able to reinterpret and realign outside influences into their own throughout history, and it only makes sense this pattern will continue. The later genres of music may seem as if it's moving away from what is considered traditionally Thai in terms of style, but the historical context in which the styles are created mounts credibility and ensures lineage to its Thainess and relevance to being Thai; thus liberating itself from parent identifications while at the same time maintaining their lineage of identity.

As Dr. Kasian Tejapira writes in his essay, "The Postmodernization of Thainess," "...Thainess becomes unanchored, uprooted, liberated or freed from the regime of reference to national or ethnic Thai commodities with the liberation of national identity as signifier from the control of specific national or ethnic commodity referents."

In other words, most of the bands today know little about classical Thai music, and much more about the formations of power chords and rock n' roll aesthetics that's now become world wide. But they're reconstructing those power chords and aesthetics

into something relating directly to them, hence localizing the global traits of rock n' roll. Although embraced by a minority, reconstructed forms and sounds are not always fully embraced by the mainstream due to its novelty and estrangement from the borders of social acceptance.

Examining the origins and the source of popular culture before it is considered popular culture, enables us to hear the dialectical struggle going on within a society. What's being taken in? What's being spit back out? It is the expression before the words and sounds become commodified, before it is tainted with hegemonic ideologies that are going to reveal to us a new generation of society's unheard voices.

A new beginning

Tul and Pump, singer and guitarist, respectively, of Bangkok's new funk rock band Apartment Khunpa, say their earliest influences in music were the heavy metal acts appearing in Bangkok during the early '90s. The Western born style of music known as heavy metal was adopted into Tul and Pump's formative years as "we were inspired by the metal pub's atmosphere and unsigned pub bands like [Heretic] Angel and Snow White," Tul says, "We looked at them and thought being rock stars would be cool, it inspired us to want to pick up guitars, grow out our hair and be cool like them."

Like whom? Why did they choose to listen and identify with what they did? Coming from middle class backgrounds, the 'new environment' created through metal was the most relevant logical point of reference to them at that time. The meanings derived from their years of buying foreign pirated tapes took form in these bands that were being born, living and publicly expressing themselves throughout Bangkok. This

new environment became a launching pad for a community seeking to think and live outside the boundaries of the dominant, popular mainstream.

The metal scene was just one of many components advancing Bangkok's music community. Gradually heavy metal music was engulfed by the natural hands of hegemony as heavy metal acts like Lam Morrison and Hi-Rock entered the realm of mass appeal with watered down lyrics, more ballads and flashier clothes. But all was not in vain. A forum for musically expressive styles apart from the conventional were unleashed through the advent of more music venues, a community with the receptiveness to what is deemed unacceptable, and a growing consumer culture for youths to pick up and make meaning out of.

The youths of society are usually the ones in the midst of trying to make sense of their surroundings in search for self identity before reaching their coming of age. Music becomes a productive outlet and reference to those who put an importance on music as we can see by the majority of the subjects interviewed claiming that "music is a release for them." The more people need or yearn to look for identity, the deeper they go taking in what's most relevant to them and for this generation of youths, it's the pop culture they grew up on. It is how and what these people are "releasing" through popular culture that hints to their cultural and dialectical struggle.

Popular culture provides a space apart from the structuralized institutions and familial values that are forced upon them, for which they can use to embark on their quest for a style and identity. Catherine Hesse-Swain recounts a story in her paper about Laos youths going to the length of renting out vans and driving to Thai radio stations along the border in order to take pictures with their favorite stars and DJ's. When a 13-year-old

goes on a journey outside the realm of their immediate environment of family and school like that it's inevitable some sort of lasting impact occurs.

Out of the bands and music participants interviewed, a pattern of development was found. First, all remember being exposed to music at early age from their parents, and started buying pirated tapes (usually hard rock and heavy metal tapes) as they were as cheap as 25 to 30 baht each. Second all started playing music because they wanted to imitate their heroes they were hearing and seeing around them. Third, playing music becomes a sort of "release" for these informants and later on there comes a point when all realized and wanted to create a unique style of their own. All agreed on the use of music as a personal form of expression about issues important to their lives, which can range from politics to philosophies to bubble gum, and it is in this final stage that underground music is born into society.

Do It Yourself

A passageway to productivity emerges with prosperity cultivating the times. The somewhat political stability and growing economy of the early/mid '90s has lead musicians to what I call an era of "Songs for Music." New bands with new sounds like the electro poppy band Kidnapper appearing in the mid '90s were able to sell over 30,000 CD's with minimal promotion indicating to us the nourishment alternative music received during these times.

With the 'pua chiwit' student revolution of the '70s three decades behind us, the message of today's Bangkok underground bands stray away from the political realm and into more introspective concerns. Bands are turning and taking a look at itself as the

times and traditions (especially today's music) of Thailand have become more "luk kruung" and constructed for mass consumerism under a concocted pop formula throughout the '80s and most of the '90s.

Monopolies within the dominant media infrastructure gave birth to record industries that limit production to the un-provokingly marketable forms of cultural expression. A DJ on Fat Radio who plays exclusively music that's not owned by major labels suggests that "the music industry in Thailand has brainwashed the minds of too many artists and musicians into believing the only way to be successful is to be pretty, poppy, and unoriginal." This infrastructure of economic expression controlled by the "ruling elites" marginalize certain musicians from not only freely expressing their music, but also from progressing Thailand's modern sensibilities.

Marginalization evokes the rebellious nature of subcultures to deal with current circumstances and issues that keep them peripheral to society. The roadblock to creative cultural expression kindled by capitalism and globalization issues hinders this subculture's sense of cultural identity which has led to the start of a "do it yourself" or DIY culture within the music community.

DIY is a coined term originating from the West. Initially the term gained some popularity during the punk movement of the late 1970s where anti-establishment, individualism and nihilism were the basis of the movement. Malcolm McLaren, manager of early punk pioneers, the Sex Pistols and the New York Dolls, had a vision to make a statement. McLaren is quoted in the book on the history of punk, *Please Kill Me*:

I tried to throw politics into the mill. There was the whole notion of the 'politics of boredom' and this whole idea of dressing the [New York] Dolls up in red vinyl and throwing them Mao's Red Book – I just loved fucking with that kind of pop-trash culture of Warhol, which was so goddamn Catholic and so boring and so pretentiously

American, where everything had to be a product, everything had to be disposable. I thought, fuck it. I'm gonna try and make the Dolls totally the opposite. I'm not going to make them disposable. I'm going to give them a serious political point of view, (McNeil and McCain 1996: 190).

The embodiment of 'disposable, pop-trash culture' in Bangkok was mainstream popular music where one hit wonders were ruling the charts and talent was based solely superficial qualities. The times were embellishing with excess development and disposable income but failed to offer substantial means of relating to the individual, ultimately provoking a sector of society to make something out of it.

Around 1994, contemporary music in Thailand had its first major encounter with reactionary bands festering within Bangkok's underground. It was the first wave of Thailand's "indie" music boom that gave the mainstream industry a glimpse of what's about to come. Bands like Sepia and Modern Dog helped spread the term "indie" and "underground" to the music scene in Thailand and tapped into uncharted realms of style and expression.

With Sepia's heavy guitar driven riffs and Modern Dog's Radiohead-influenced departure from the standard major label pop formula, Thailand was introduced to new sounds and new voices. Once bands that didn't fit into any major label category started to appear, "kids realised they could create something new themselves," says Pod of Modern Dog, "then a plethora of new bands came around and at the same time spawned a plethora of new 'indie' labels."

Pod's insight on people realizing they can "create something new themselves," is the focal point of DIY aesthetics. The principle code of DIY did not only appear within the music industry but also in the political arena.

Privatization policies were being implemented, public participation in drafting the National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) started with the 8th Plan (1996-2001), labour unions continued to grow and working class strikes were on the rise eventually leading to the Black May incident of 1992. The middle and working class revolt of 1992 was a milestone indicating this sector of society's "hands on" role in achieving change. As accounted by Ji Ungpakorn's essay, "The Tradition of Urban Working Class Struggle in Thailand":

One of the first acts of the 1991 Anan government, which came to office after General Suchinda staged his coup in February 1991, was to ban trade unions in the public sector and restrict the rights of private sector unions...Thousands surrounded Parliament and Suchinda's opening speech in Parliament was drowned by boos and jeering. Demonstrations occurred nightly with some interruptions until May 17, 1992 when the government attacked the demonstrators. For many nights the ordinary people of Bangkok fought back against heavily armed troops. They were not just fighting for parliamentary democracy but against and accumulation of inequality and injustice in Thai society...Suchinda was literally forced to his knees in front of the king and under the glare of television cameras. Once again, a mass uprising had beaten the military, (Ungpakorn 1995: 375-376).

Fundamental traits illustrating middle and working class strength are self confidence and political consciousness. In 1995 a public symposium for the drafting of the 8th NESDP was held. Bankers, businessmen, politicians, civil servants, slum dwellers, farmers and representatives of NGOs gathered to participate for the first time in the formation and objective planning process, (Janchitfah 1995).

The symposium was a step towards active public participation, however scepticism of its effectiveness is still questioned as the Bangkok Post quoted a farmer saying, "Our ideas are blocked, we have to either agree or disagree with the given choices. I am afraid that we will be only an object to be exploited in the development

process. Government officials will again plan everything for us,” (Janchitfah 1995) referring to a questionnaire participants were asked to fill out. Although the symposium’s effectiveness is questionable, it was well attended testifying to the existence of the many politically concerned voices of the working and middle class ready to mobilize and take action.

Whether it is in the political arena or the realm of entertainment, what all of this characterizes is a germinating DIY attitude and approach to circumstances of middle class society.

Tul says his attitude towards music changed when he heard “bands like Nirvana” playing four simple chords and were still able to carry a song with power, conveying a new message of individuality. As the heavy metal underground of his past became saturated with less appeal, it also became less relevant.

Loud, sometimes obnoxious but generally apathetic heavy metal bands like Guns n’ Roses, Slayer, Motley Crue, generally had no impression on the locale in terms of political and cultural relevance. But the impression it had was not purely superficial as its structure of inherent defiance was incepted as a model of rebellion. Metal was the embodiment of Western defiance taken at face value to counteract the soft spoken sounds of poppy, unoriginal popular music. Born out of a reaction to pop as opposed to a calculated response like the pro democracy and anti-war protest songs, its substance was of no real immediate significance.

The metal venues kept to their roots booking only the best recycled metal bands of the past. New bands now had no live outlet as they once again were shunned by the major labels along with the metal venues that have now joined the ranks of the socially

acceptable. But the seed has been planted in a new generation of music makers, each one evolving their own way in accordance to society's moving and developing environment. It might have something to do with coming of age, perspective changes, but ultimately what is implied is that their guitar heroes no longer conveyed the "coolness" they once aspired to.

"Metal stopped growing, there was nothing new for me to gain from it and I guess musical tastes follow our 'vai' (our time in life) because when I got older I wanted to think differently than others and found bands like Pavement and Dinosaur Jr who were not metal, but new," says Tat, guitarist for the pop punk band, the Darlings.

Structurally, metal was about timing and technique, and the new generation wanted to hear new musical expressions that conveyed emotions and opinions to what was around them. Tat says, "I like melody and art, abstract things that can't be calculated," indicating an urge to express and make sense of feelings in alternative ways than what was offered around him. Pump had a similar realization and said he stopped trying to master the finger tap and invent "difficult scales" prevalent in metal, and started about with a new approach to music.

This is not to discount metal as an unauthentic subculture. The metal referred to above were the ones already on major labels, the ones being heavily pirated and circulated, the ones already tainted through hegemony, as Tat acknowledges, "I was a kid back then and didn't know what real metal was as all I knew of it came from watching Mtv."

Jay from System Suckers said he followed up on the metal and found heavier sounds that explored different techniques and new aesthetics. Each of their journeys into

music resulted in the emergence of various styles. It wasn't only Jay, Tat, Tul and Pump, but a whole array of youths in that generation who were inspired and influenced by this form of defiant music to seek and explore their individual style. Pok of Stylish Nonsense, who never listened to Western music before reaching high school, was introduced to the foreign genre when he started playing keyboards in a band who often gave him tapes of songs to cover. June of Bear Garden after being exposed to a variety of music ranging from Sunthanarporn to Iron Maiden was also inspired to pick up a bass and start "telling our own unique stories." The list of people and bands inspired by the defiance of metal tapes goes on to include a wide spectrum of today's underground music makers. These were the formative years for today's underground bands.

The inception of metal via pirated tapes opened up a doorway to music subcultures around the world, which meant more exposure to unconventional music for youths to interpret and develop. The present state of globalization and reconstructions of foreign influences make possible- and more apparent- the concept of style surfing, making today's music more about personal expression than ever before.

"As commodity production, exchange and creative appropriation intensify, signs become free floating, traveling towards the point at which they become irrevocably divorced from their original cultural contexts," (Muggleton 2000: 43). This leaves the "free floating" signs ready to be interpreted and used in any way by any citizen in the world that comes into contact with it.

"There's so much music to choose from and the music you enjoy has meaning because you were the one who searched it, found it, followed up on it, and made meaning out of it," says Pok.

The search for individual stylistic expression generated from metal's insurgence against the norm opened up many crossroads for these musicians to choose and follow from. Pok says "I learned and enjoyed a lot from music. And writing or experimenting with new songs is like growing with new knowledge."

This desire plus new doorways to different styles enabled Pok to further his music and identity. For him it was the British rock and DJ scene ranging from the likes of the Charlatans, Blur, and Suede to DJ Shadow and Money Mark that influences his music, but it's his life in Bangkok that inspires him, "People say you gotta be born in Western countries to write songs like they do (laughs) but it doesn't matter, we can do how we do it here. If we do the best we can for ourselves it should be good for Bangkok too," says Pok.

In 1996 Plahn, a Thai metal band just getting started was playing covers of metal bands which eventually led lead singer Fha Suratskool itching to see something original – and Thai. Plahn's sound got progressively heavier as they began writing original songs. Now, Fha says he's driven to create a Metal identity for Asia and "create something of my own," (Silliphant and Apanich 2002).

With the days of cover and tribute shows on the wane, the issue of originality in lyrics and language remains. Many bands sing in Thai, though there's a generally professed desire to sing in English.

Thanit 'Joe' Deathguy, singer, bassist and songwriter for Deathguy, sees his singing in English as a means of conveying concepts he couldn't get out in Thai, which he feels lacks ability to convey meaning. "I've always wanted to create songs with levels

that the Thai language can't convey. Thai vocabulary's too straightforward, and I want to convey ideas with words that are 'out of this world'."

Fha's sings in English on Plahn's latest release because he believes it's the key to reaching an international audience: he wants foreign listeners to understand where he's coming from and what he's thinking. "This genre of music originated in English. In order to have more people abroad understand our thoughts, we have to write our songs in English," says Fha. Reaching audiences overseas is crucial in a global music community that thrives on word of mouth and tapes being sent overseas. (Silliphant and Apanich 2002)

The subculture community draws a lot from musical influences that are "outside of this world" as Joe puts it, and it's those very outside influences that aids the local scene into a new direction, helping it become something fresh and new while at the same time keeping it relevant to the local culture.

The various styles and genres of music particular to Bangkok range through a complete spectrum of cultural attitudes and perspectives from one extreme to the other. Although close in age and from similar surroundings, the sounds of Apartment Khunpa and System Suckers are as different from one another as apples and oranges. Jay inspired to musicianship for similar reasons as Tul and Pump, "I saw a performance and thought it was the coolest thing in the world to see a band rock out to songs they wrote themselves." But his professed style is more in tune with the harsher sounding melodies of thrash rock, a reflection of his perception of today's "declining" society. The first sentiments about Bangkok was his account of being ordained and seeing monks disobeying their precepts by drinking, smoking, gambling and sleeping their time away behind temple walls.

Apartment Khunpa on the other hand had only optimistic opinions to express about the state of Bangkok. About the recent zoning law issue aimed to have bars and clubs outside their allotted zones close at midnight, Pump is convinced that “the government probably researched this well and there’s probably a reason for the zonings that benefit more people than we think.” This attributes to their free flowing, blues based, funk grooved style of rock.

June of Bear Garden comments that “Things in society seem to be free [in Bangkok], but they’re not, and you’re trapped to what society wants you to be.” Bear Garden’s experimental pop songs investigate the world of pop with electronic sounds unconventional to the world of pop- a possible expression indicating their want to be freed from restriction of the pop formula. “We’re living in a time transition of analogue to digital, that’s why we are the way we are,” says June of Bear Garden.

Although all were products of Bangkok’s encounter with heavy metal’s defiant, subcultural nature, their interpretations range in style and perspectives. The new generations of musicians are taking in a broader scope of musical influences which is why today’s modern Bangkok music scene is so diverse in sound and style.

More kids are turned on to making music as it became more accessible to today’s youths both logistically and stylistically. Metal riffs and guitar laden solos of top musicianship no longer intimidated the average skilled music lover. “People are realizing that musicianship is nothing without making music with attitude and sincerity,” says Tul.

Similarly Tat admits, “I wanted to play music when I was a kid, and was intimidated by the heavy metal guitar heroes because I thought, ‘I can never play like that’. It was when I discovered simple punk bands that inspired me and made me think,

‘hey, I can do that’ so I started playing the guitar.” Almost instantly new ideologies were replacing the no longer relevant heavy metal environment, creating a new environment, a new subculture, a new underground.

The idea that music can be rough and unrefined, as long as there’s heart and attitude, gave birth to bands starting up and new narratives being made. The arena of making music expands to include those music fans with limited musicianship. Coupled with equipment and technology becoming financially obtainable and exposure to more innovations through education abroad and faster means of communication to other parts of the world, contributions to the emergence of new musical styles and narratives conducive to DIY were formulated.

A whole new infrastructure is being created from outside the boundaries of polity, becoming almost self-sufficient from popular culture and the dominant infrastructure itself. With the confidence of making their own music, the DIY aesthetic expanded to the organizational level outside the reaches of the mainstream infrastructure. Shows started to be organized, fanzines are being made, record labels being created, and even radio shows being aired. What this creates is a whole new youth culture that’s made by and for those who want the subculture to thrive with a life that’s got particular meaning outside the boundaries of the mainstream social norm.

By 1997, the first wave of indie mania spontaneously combusted, engulfed by the flames of hegemony. According to Yuthana “Ted” Boonaom of Fat Radio being labelled alternative music in the mid ‘90s was a double-edged sword. It was all about being different, strange and straying from the mainstream. Everything different then became a commercial hit and the longing for strange new sounds suffered with saturation. Being

“alternative” and DIY was now the high fashion as it was stripped of its ideals and mass produced.

“There was no quality control back then, any new kind of sound made it under the label of being alternative,” Ted says. The alternative scene diffused into popularity and bands like Modern Dog became a household band. And so one by one the plethora of small labels that emerged went under as the alternative craze reached the mainstream.

Hegemony has hit again, but the DIY infrastructure has already been put into place. This DIY space lying outside the social boundaries become a foundation for those ready to take into their own hands the task of “reinterpreting” musical innovations. Self sufficiency has been created through increasing DIY magazines, concerts, parties, and recordings. Production and creation outside the hegemonic infrastructure proved to be possible and vigorous standing point for those outside of the borders of social acceptance. A sense of community is now in place as these bands and the people who listen to them create their own infrastructure. Even as styles change and are in constant motion, the DIY foundation remains a fixed subculture readily poised against the mainstream.

. “The majors turned ‘hip with the times’ and started to notice music genres they’ve never before paid attention too,” Ted says, “that was the biggest impact the first indie boom made.” Grammy started picking up bands like Y Not 7 and Paradox, making mainstream music expand with the diversity of the indie scene. Diffusion reached to change the definition of the term “indie,” as major labels manipulate their original ideologies to a more marketable position.

“We sit them [indie bands] down and educate them about the marketing aspects of song writing so they can see who their target is and how we can make the most of it,”

Wichian Rerkpaisan EVP Music Division of Genie Records, Mad Catz and Artist Management Co. Ltd., says, “we understand these indie people have ideas of their own, but so do we, and to make it work we have to both compromise a little.”

When Thailand’s “alternative/indie” radio station, 104.5 FM Fat Radio, started in 1999-2000, Ted found a way to use the media in the least hegemonic way possible. Having learned from mistakes of the past and with more people and bands working together, the second wave of this indie movement hopes to make mainstream music a bit smarter by beefing up pop music to a level that’s all about heart and soul rather than dollars and cents. Ted proclaims, “I have a strong feeling this time we won’t burn out again.” But history tends to repeat itself and it’s the capitalist forces that still have a stronghold on the output of cultural expression.

Thailand’s leading “alternative” radio station, Fat Radio, may have made mainstream music a bit smarter, expanding people’s appreciation for original music, but as it is now working within the confines of social acceptance, the ideologies and aesthetics of the underground become thin. The music Fat Radio pushes are still mainly just pop songs, albeit better pop songs from Thailand’s earlier years of music, but pop songs nonetheless. Fat’s “indie pop” has to some become monotonous, thus again sparking a period of experimentation and the quest for more bands, more friends and a larger, more diverse underground music community

Today’s Bangkok music makers influenced by pirated foreign tapes, surrounded by skyscrapers sprouting up from the ground and a crash that put Bangkok into a major recession, gives them a unique framework of characteristics of which they work within. The underlying ideas that drive Bangkok’s local music scene come from a wide array of

people, each with their own mindsets and perspectives, all united under the same goal of making music in Thailand (or at least Bangkok) become something more definitive and innovative.

Who they are and what they do

Apart from bands, event organizers in Bangkok are seeing new faces indicating a new space that's being created for and by these new voices in society. With more event organizers on the rise, this space is gradually developing into a niche, a home for the attitudes of new musical expressions to take form.

The lack of real venues for original music created a need and demand within the music community and it didn't take long for the community to take on such demands. In 1997 About Café, a café and public art space came into existence embracing and supporting Bangkok's local art and music scene. About Café puts more of an emphasis on the art community with exhibitions every month and their Super Channel project (www.superchannel.org), but in between their daily events and exhibitions About Café gave the music community a steady venue for local underground musicians to showcase their work. The series of monthly concerts About Café held lasted for a short while, but what it evoked was the realization that forums can be created without direct contact to the existing infrastructure of the corporate music industry.

A small scene started to develop as underground bands and their followers came into contact with each other. Bands like Dub Brainer, who in 2003 put out a four song EP on Hualumpong Riddim, and Ari Ja who were later to break up but reform as Apartment Khunpa with new members and a new sound all had their beginnings within the space

that About Café helped pioneer into the future of Bangkok's underground music community. This space later expanded as more bands and like minded enthusiasts took matters into their own hands developing what would ultimately become an infrastructure for networking and the growth of a new, present, modern day phenomenon that is the Bangkok underground music community.

The space expanded with more organizers of parties and underground concerts appearing onto the scene. Demonic, Noise Pop, So On, Dude Sweet, Rehab are all names of recent ongoing concert series and parties that perpetuate and cater to the conduciveness of minimally publicized events that showcase local, unsigned musicians in an environment that accommodates their individual tastes and needs. Each event caters to a more specific genre of tastes and styles, but can all be categorized as underground because they all work without backing support from corporate institutions.

Although there are underground musical events happening in Bangkok, there is no consistent venue providing the organizers' with the "right" hosting environment, for example a place where one can regularly count on for a live musical event from bands or DJs outside major record labels, a place where aspiring bands can look forward to having their first show at, a center of polarization.

To reconcile, organizers go out of their way searching for the right venue for a show and usually end up shifting around Bangkok from one venue to another. The initial and hardest task is to find a venue that will allow and tolerate a group of niche entertainers for the night.

Kowlat, the proprietor of I-Taste restaurant on Satorn Soi 8 experimented by holding the third Noise Pop event, a concert series showcasing underground rock based

bands, on July 5, 2003. “It was an interesting event but it was a nuisance for our regular eating customers and people were afraid to come in,” Kowlat says, a loss for the restaurant, especially since it was also a Saturday night.

Admittedly the organizers of Noise Pop agreed that I-Taste’s setting was cumbersome as it wasn’t set up to be a concert venue. One of I-Taste’s lighting fixtures hanging from the ceiling shattered and nearly landed on top of one of the performers during sound check. The vibrations from the drum kit and distorted guitar sounds loosened the fixture causing a bit of anxiety on the organizers. Despite the fear of a repeat accident, the organizers and proprietor decided not to cancel the show and considerably lowered the decibel level and the night transpired without a problem.

Not all establishments are as open minded and experimental as Kowlat, as they all want to be compensated in return for the usage of their space. The organizers of Noise Pop learned from their experiences and took new approaches to finding venues. Considerable time is spent scoping out viable settings for their shows and they found out it was easier to choose a location with little patronage so that can have more of a leverage with the proprietor. First thing to do is persuade owners to allow usage of their space by guaranteeing increased bar sales from the event’s draw of people and then take control of the space by rearranging it to accommodate their needs.

“At first we didn’t know what to expect,” Asoke Bar owner Saw says about Noise Pop, “but each time they come they bring in a decent bar sale and also some interesting music.”

In the middle of the business district of Asoke, Asoke Bar (ironically located next to the GMM Grammy Building) has been known to host a number of different concerts

and parties. Other than Noise Pop #5 on December 14, 2003, Asoke Bar has hosted Bangkok's pop punk band the Darling's CD release party, the third Panda Records showcase featuring four bands from Panda, one of Bangkok's independently run record labels (www.pandarecords.com), some Dude Sweet parties (www.dudesweet.org) and some electro-clash Rehab parties (www.rehabisfab.com).

"I see it as they [the event organizers] help us out as much as we help them out," Saw says, "We're always open to new things and after doing so more people begin to recognize our bar as such a place."

The underground grows with more output as more events and places for people with underground musical interests to interact become available. Whether it be in the form of more bands, more organizers, more websites, fanzines, or even record labels, more exposure increases the probability for a greater number of people taking an interest in underground music.

Evidence of this growing underground is apparent as a new concert series dubbed, the Rocket Club Party has recently surfaced setting up shows in different venues around Bangkok. The first Rocket Club Party was held in late March 2004 featuring the Darlings and a ska-punk band, Adulterer. The next one is scheduled for late May 2004 with a jazzy punk rock band from Malaysia called Man Under Zero Effort headlining.

"I've been to a lot of shows and got to know many people in bands," says one of the Rocket Club Party organizers, "and I figured the best way to see more and meet more bands was to set up our own shows."

The future of music subcultures have been fortified by this expanding subcultural space. There is no denying from the continual advancements within this sector of society

that a growing subcultural community is permanently among us. Even if today's styles and sounds become stagnant for whatever reason in the upcoming years, the infrastructure for subcultural development is now resolutely in place. People won't stop using this space but will only use it in context of a different society. This subcultural infrastructure steadfastly guarantees the ongoing counter tendencies in the cycle of hegemony as we will see constant change in style as we see constant change in time.

The people involved in subcultures are the ones who live close to it. The people who feel a need to work against it, the people who are left without reaping the benefits of the mainstream, the people like Tul, 27, of Apartment Khunpa- the singer by night and a sound engineer and freelance songwriter during the day; Tat, 28, of the Darlings- a writer for BK Magazine; Stirling, 28, of Eastbound Donwers- magazine developer; Chai, 23, of Brand New Sunset- steward for Thai Airways; Jay, 25, of System Suckers- university student and t-shirt stall owner at Chatuchak Weekend Market; Pok, 28, of Stylish Nonsense- producer for Small Room Records; June, 28, of Bear Garden- a designer of children's clothing, and the list goes on. The point is, a subculture exists for and consists of anyone who cares enough to do something about it.