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Arts

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Everyman's musicfest

While English music festivals are the big draws, a coterie of non-English music promoters have had growing success with smaller festivals, braving the challenges of costs and mainstream appeal, reports CHRISTOPHER LIM

A CURSORY glance at the number of gigs happening every week might suggest that Singapore's music scene has never been richer, and music festivals seem to dot the entertainment calendar year-round, but that's only the case if you count gigs in English, which account for the lion's share of the scene here.



Sea change: Ocean Butterflies banks on home-grown artists, who helped the company pull off a sold-out 25th Anniversary concert in June at MAX Pavilion featuring stars of Singapore's Xinyao Chinese folk music movement. Los Tarantos (above) organised Singapore's first Flamenco festival last year, Flamenco Cantata, and that was successful enough for it to go on as a festival at VivoCity with more mainstream public appeal

involve English acts,' says Mr Kang. 'To trend-set a Chinese music festival such as Under the Stars, we had to excite the masses on the concept of indie music in order to extend a crossover appeal to the mass market,' he adds, explaining that he wanted to make Chinese pop audiences feel like they were crossing into an intrepid new genre.

Prohibitive costs

'Most Chinese listeners are not familiar with thematic outdoor festivals, as they are more used to indoor, air-conditioned and formal seating concerts,' Mr Kang says, referring to the Singapore Indoor Stadium and The MAX Pavilion, which are the main venues for Chinese concert here, although Under the Stars was held at the Hard Rock Hotel at Resorts World Sentosa, with a line-up of six artists like Crowd Lu and Peggy Hsu who drew a crowd of 1,800.

'Chinese music consumers are also generally more reserved compared to English ones, and tend to be more cautious in spending on festivals that require them to stand or move around in a more informal manner,' Mr Kang adds.

Rock Records has organised several Chinese gigs featuring line-ups of multiple artists this year, but managing director Ngiam Kwang Hwa prefers a stricter definition of what constitutes a festival, and doesn't even feel that his own events fall within the definition.

'Both the Rock 30 Singapore Concert and B3 Singapore Concert are not considered music festivals - they are joint concerts,' says Mr Ngiam. 'The definition of a music festival is one that consists of a series of artist performances stretched over a period of time - one whole day or more - and also includes other music events such as music seminars, and also food and beverages stalls for concertgoers,' he asserts.

'If it is a two- or three-hour gig, it is not considered a music festival. Based on that, Singapore has not had a purely Chinese music festival yet,' Mr Ngiam argues, drawing a line between the scale of Chinese music

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SINGAPORE BUSINESS AWARDS

events here and the drastically larger English ones that have been held here in the past, such as SingFest and F1 Rocks.

'This is because the cost of setting up a music festival is very high. Without the support and sponsorship of big corporations or funding from the Government, organisers who want to set up a music festival will end up making huge monetary losses,' he says, pointing to the financial bottom line as the factor limiting the scale of local Chinese gigs.

'Unfortunately, English music concerts are more highly regarded in Singapore, and with enough financial support, they are able to invite big-name international artists to perform in such music festivals, hence attracting huge crowds,' Mr Ngiam says.

Regardless of where you want to draw the line at what constitutes a true festival, however, Rock Records' events have had noticeable scale. Rock 30, held in January, comprised 17 groups of performers, including big names like Mayday, Wakin Chau and Wu Bai, and sold out 8,000 seats at the Indoor Stadium, for example. And while B3 was smaller, featuring just Ding Dang, Yen J and MP Magic Power, it still sold a respectable 80 per cent of the 3,000-capacity MAX Pavilion. It doesn't matter, therefore, whether you call them one-night festivals or joint concerts - the point is that these sorts of concerts are rising in popularity here.

Demonstrating the validity of the multi-artist approach was Unusual Entertainment's LOUD Festival last month, which featured Chinese performers. The headliner was Taiwanese singer-songwriter Jay Chou, indubitably the biggest pop star in the Chinese music world. Chou easily sells out multiple-night solo performances in Singapore within minutes of tickets going on sale, and many fans undoubtedly bought tickets to LOUD just to see him, so it was gutsy of Unusual to stick him into a line-up of less famous artists.

'The festival format allows an artist to be more impromptu in their performances,' says an Unusual spokeswoman, extolling the benefits of a joint concert versus a single-artist affair. There's also the perception of good value for money, which is always a strong selling point with Singaporeans. 'An audience is able to sample a variety of artists and different genres of music in one single night for one ticket price,' she adds.

Despite these upsides, the spokeswoman echoes Rock Records' Mr Ngiam's point about cost considerations when she notes that Taiwan and Hong Kong have several Chinese music festivals that don't tour here because of that wouldn't be commercially viable.

Cost aside, the silver lining is that the increasing number of gig venues here makes it viable - infrastructurally, at least - to do festivals here. 'There is room for more non-English music festivals here, especially with the availability of more outdoor venues such as Gardens-by-the-Bay,' says Unusual's spokeswoman.

Billy Koh, co-founder of local label Ocean Butterflies, agrees. 'There's of course a market for non-English music festivals in Singapore, especial with the increasing number of new immigrants coming from China,' he says. 'The only challenge is whether they can match the offers from mega-artists, compared to the huge fees that those artists are paid in China,' Mr Koh adds.

Fees become less of an issue when you deal with home-grown artists, which is part of how Ocean Butterflies puts together its sold-out 25th Anniversary concert in June at MAX Pavilion that featured stars of Singapore's Xinyao Chinese folk music movement along with the label's newer stars such as JJ Lin.

Although Singapore's population is predominantly ethnically Chinese, non-English music gigs here extend far beyond Chinese concerts, and range from Spanish to Japanese; Korean to Bahasa.

One way of getting around the limited appeal of non-English music is to incorporate a dance element, and that's precisely what Flamenco club Los Tarantos did with Flamenco Cantata last October at Chijmes, and with the VivoCity Flamenco Festival in June.

Los Tarantos is helmed by internationally acclaimed Flamenco dancer Antonio Vargas, who has been based here for more than five years, with his wife Daphne.

Mr Vargas says that the market for non-English music festivals is much larger than it was five years ago, and that there is greater awareness and enthusiasm for Flamenco in particular. 'Through increasing globalisation, travel to Spain, our efforts at arts education in schools, and more exposure to Flamenco here and overseas, there is now a greater audience for Flamenco, not only from the expat community but also from locals, so the market is growing,' Mr Vargas says.

Los Tarantos organised Singapore's first Flamenco festival last year, Flamenco Cantata, and that was successful enough for it to go on as a festival at VivoCity with more mainstream public appeal. Next year, Mr Vargas intends to do a Flamenco festival between September and November to showcase theatrical works that feature both Singapore-based artists as well as Flamenco guests from Spain.

'Our reason for the festival, apart from bringing some overseas stars here, is to promote the local music and dance talent in Singapore,' says Mr Vargas.

He adds that a great way to bridge language gaps is to offer programme booklets with explanations. Los Tarantos has also used a bilingual approach in some projects, such as its version of The House of Bernanda Alba, where the dancers speak in English instead of the original English so that the story sounds coherent to a Singapore audience.

'However the Flamenco songs are in Spanish but to make it accessible, we have translated the lyrics of the songs in the programmes,' says Mr Vargas.

Another way of getting around having to appeal to a smaller non-English music festival fan base is to organise hybrid concerts that have English acts but include those that perform in other languages.

Multilingual UpToTheSky Festival, for example, debuts next Saturday at Old School, and in addition to English acts like Mogwai and local artists The Great Spy Experiment and Bani Haykal, there will be Indonesian bands performing in Bahasa - Sore, The Trees And The Wild and The White Shoes And The Company - Cambodian band Space Project performing in Khmer, Thai outfit Little Fox playing in Thai, and Taiwan's Orange Grass performing in Mandarin.

'We really believe that the regional indie music scene needs to have a larger space in South-east Asia,' says Marie Berst, marketing director for the festival's organiser, Figure8 Agency. 'There are many exceptional bands, making great music, but getting too little local attention. That's why the festival's line-up is mostly from South-east Asia, to highlight the regional potential.

Big-scale multilingual concept

Figure8 targets attendance of 1,500 for UpToTheSky, which will last for about 12 hours, and the key to the festival's success will be community support.

'There are strong foreign communities in Singapore that are following their local heartthrobs, and a lot of curious people - students, creative, arty people - who want to take risks to discover new sounds and new bands,' says Ms Berst.

Taking the multilingual concept on to an even larger scale is tomorrow's Sundown Festival, which hopes to attract 7,000 people to the Marina Promenade for a show that will span Korean pop, Japanese rock and Taiwanese pop.

The line-up will comprise Japanese rockers ViViD, Korean outfit Teen Top, and Taiwanese artists Jing, S.H.E and Show Luo. With an overall festival budget in the region of a million dollars, it promises to be quite a show.

'Singapore has seen a growing group of music fans that have shown an affinity toward Asian music - this began with Cantopop in the 1990s and Mandopop in the 2000s,' says Sundown Festival programming director, Samantha Chan. 'In recent times, the trend has seen music lovers become more receptive to music from Japan and Korea instead of just to music coming from Hong Kong and Taiwan.'

That's why the Sundown Festival's scope encompasses Asia as a whole and collectively celebrates Asian music, culture and food, with future plans to add bands from more Asian countries.

'Music appreciation is now more fluid and there is no fan that has an affinity for only one genre of music,' says Ms Chan. 'Instead, fans are drawn towards good music in general, and their appreciation will not be restricted by band origin,' she adds.

Hopefully, a combination of all these approaches - varied line-ups, savvily paced programmes, carefully chosen venues and language-bridging schemes - will result in non-English music festivals and joint concerts taking a bigger bite of the music pie each year. Adventurous sponsors will be key to making all of these ventures commercially viable, but as long as there are committed artists and festival organisers who are determined to stay the course, there's no reason the scene shouldn't grow.



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