

Pop Music in Paradise

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Judy, Sohan and Estelle-make up one of the top groups of Sri Lanka.

We Sri Lankans have never been reticent about our love for music. And pop music is certainly no stranger to our country. Apart from the international stuff that's played incessantly over the radio, we have our own hybridized forms of "pop", one of the greatest favourites being "baila" music. Introduced originally as "Kapparingha" music by the Portuguese colonialists of the 16th Century, this vigorous and rhythmic form of entertainment has been handed down through the generations, acquiring along its way a generous dash of Hindi elements from India combined with the amplified buzz of rock'n roll from the West, baila has become a widely popular and much requested form of music at parties and other social events.

All bailas have a distinct, infectious dance beat. Sung in Sinhala, the lyrics are ... well, irreverently humorous. (Often with a few stock English phrases thrown-in for "colour".) Though of late, serious social themes have begun to permeate the carefree words of modern bailas. The proliferation of transistor radios and audio-cassettes has helped to establish the popularity of this music throughout the island. You can hear it almost anywhere. In crowded public buses, tea boutiques and shops. Always played at ear-shattering volume. Scorned by the intelligentsia, disdained by the would-be guardians of "culture", the appeal of baila is always on the rise.

Not all practitioners of this music rely on amplification. In fact some of its best exponents are small brass bands. Such ensembles were to be seen many years ago solemnly marching behind a hearse, providing dignified marshal music to many a funeral cortege as it wound its sleepy way to a cemetery. A great attraction to passersby and a somewhat lesser one to the road-bound traffic. Alas, people no longer hire such musicians for funerals. However, the remnants of these groups find their services in great demand towards the close of the school cricket season in

March. This is the time of the “big match”, the annual cricket encounter that takes place between traditionally rival schools. No big match worthy of its name is complete without several such brass bands competing against each other. The venue of the match is packed with school boys young and old. Alleged cricket lovers all. A carnival atmosphere abounds with spectators dressed in smart clothes, vociferously cheering their favourites on the pitch. And, of course, there’s music – especially baila music – played at breakneck speed by the brass bands. Aided in no small measure by generous swigs of arrack (the fiery local coconut liquor) they whip the crowds into a frenzy of clapping and dancing. Energy and endurance taking precedence over musical skill as the roll-call of requests is endless. Besides the competition from rival bands, playing just yards away is intense.

If you’ve ever been to one of the many resort hotels that dot the coastal areas of the south, the chances are, you would have encountered a Sri Lankan “folk” group. Such musicians are to be found, strolling amidst the lunchtime diners clad in colourful batik sarongs and shirts. Crowned with large cartwheel straw hats, they serenade hungry tourists and guests with music played on acoustical guitars accompanied by a handful of percussion instruments. Singing rather charming and gentle ballads of village damsels, fishermen, blacksmith it is curious fact that all such intrinsically native groups christen themselves with pseudo-spanish nom de plumes like La Bambas or La Ceylonians.

Equally intriguing are the local pop bands that provide backing music for Sinhala and Tamil singers on TV. These 1 programmes are sponsored by trade organizations that range from jewellers to instant food manufacturers. Enormously popular with the Sri Lankan public, the bands on these programmes display a dress code that’s usually more spectacular than the music they play. Wildly flared trousers, sequinned overcoats, shirts with mutton-chop sleeves and a cascade of frills that run down the front, surmounted by a bowtie that resembles a medium-sized vampire bat feasting on the luckless guitarist’s throat.

The musicians themselves exhibit an apathetic lack of movement (perhaps overcome by the effort of dressing up!). They stand stock still, frozen in attitudes of furious concentration, playing their instruments with an overawed intensity that’s unintentionally hilarious. The title “Super” usually precedes the names of these ensembles. Hence a variety superstars, supersonics glitter with quiet fortitude behind the famous singers they play for. The widespread availability of Japanese electronic organs, programmed with computerized rhythms and synthesized sounds, has given rise to a new sub-species of pop musician: the one man band.

Such musicians seem to be replacing the familiar cocktail lounge pianists once present in Sri Lankan hotels. These high-tech Liberace's lurk behind their instruments twiddling an array of colourful knobs with one hand, pressing various keys with the other, churning out an endless stream of current and not so current hits. They make frequent appearances on 1V and can be found playing at weddings and parties as well. However, the initial novelty of their instrument soon wears out to become a somewhat monotonous musical mulch that deadens the senses. Western pop has its own enthusiasts, particularly among the young urbanized teenagers in Colombo and cosmopolitan areas. Everyone generally knows what's on the British and American Top 10, and Western-oriented pop musicians make a career of imitating the records made by their famous brethren on the international music scene. They earn their living by playing at dances and discotheques of the big hotels in Colombo and tourist resorts. Some are so good at what they do, they find work in countries as diverse as Hong Kong, Switzerland and Dubai. Back in Colombo, however, it's the Christmas season that provides these musicians with opportunities for big bucks. Every five-star hotel competes with its rivals to host the most elaborate (and expensive) dance. The best bands are snapped up for large sums of money, while lesser known musical beings are hired by more modest establishments. The last decade or so has seen an attempt being made by our local pop musicians to write, record and perform their own music, often of a very high standard – welcome alternative to the slavish imitations they are forced to affect. However, intermittent air play and lack of adequate exposure leaves these musicians with an uphill struggle to get their self-penned material accepted by the public. Hopefully such barriers will eventually be breached. And Sri Lankans could find themselves on the international charts competing with the best from the West. Meanwhile the music goes on. From the poshest hotel to the meanest street corner. Enjoyed by everyone. No matter what the circumstances – good or bad. In the words of a popular Lankan phrase, “Nava gillunath band chune”, or the band plays on, even though the ship is sinking. But excuse me, they're playing my favourite song on the radio, and I've just got to listen. •