

# Does PNG have Popular Culture? Perspectives on Commercial Music in Port Moresby

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## Introduction

Over the last four months I have been collecting data on the recording industry in Port Moresby, as part of my fieldwork toward a PhD in ethnomusicology. I still have many months of fieldwork ahead of me, so this paper is not intended as a presentation of my research results, as any attempts to discuss or predict them here would inevitably be incomplete. Instead, this paper outlines the basis for research on music industry technology and cultural identity, and discusses why the recording industry in Port Moresby is a relevant and significant case study. I will begin by introducing the discipline of ethnomusicology from which this study draws its fundamental methods, and discuss how the study of popular music in particular, is a valuable means to investigate broader questions concerning popular culture and identity. I will explain some fundamental theories concerning popular music by summarising theories of Popular Culture and Mass Culture. I will also discuss how the term 'tradition' has been applied in studies of non-western popular music, arguing that an ambiguity, resulting from the over-use of this term both as theory and description, complicates the application of the above theories. I will conclude by considering how these theories may or may not apply to the music industry in Port Moresby, particularly with reference to how they relate to the construction and representation of cultural identity.

## The Discipline of Ethnomusicology

There is still much debate concerning what defines ethnomusicology. However, for the purpose of this paper I will define ethnomusicology simply as the study of music and culture. This separates it from conventional musicology (that is, the study of Western Art or 'Classical' music), which has traditionally overlooked the cultural and social contexts in which music is performed and listened to. Ethnomusicology on the other hand, is concerned primarily with the cultural and social contexts through which music is created, performed and consumed. In short, ethnomusicology is about people and music<sup>1</sup>.

Unlike conventional musicology, ethnomusicological studies are not limited by musical style, genre, era, or the specific locations of the music. However, studies in ethnomusicology have had a tendency to examine music of non-western cultures. A growing subject of study is the impact western music has on non-western cultures, and in particular, focuses on meanings the new musical forms might have to the cultures that appropriate them. Much of this research has focused on popular music in

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about definitions of ethnomusicology, consult Merriam 1964, Nettle 2005, Myers 1992

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developing countries, which are typically seen as acculturated or ‘hybrid’ musical forms that contain both western characteristics and non-western or indigenous characteristics (Nettle 1992). Studies of popular music in non-western cultures have also looked at how indigenous, or traditional, ideas are expressed through popular music. These studies differentiate between the form of the music<sup>2</sup>, which exhibits predominantly western characteristics, and the function, or use<sup>3</sup> of the music (which is also referred to as the meanings inferred from the music), which may have origins in traditional culture. These studies have examined how the functions or use of traditional music change with the introduction of new musical forms.

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### Research Overview: Music Industry, Technology and Identity

My own research is concerned with the social function of commercial music in a developing urban context, in particular, its capacity to construct and represent cultural identity. In order to investigate this, I am studying how the music industry, and in particular, ‘globalised’ music technologies, influences contemporary notions of cultural identity in Port Moresby. To explain this further, I will discuss three related areas; music technology, the industry, and how these two influence and effect how music represents and constructs cultural identity.

Music technology refers to the equipment used to produce commercial music. My research focuses on how the use of digital recording technologies that are found all over the globe, impacts on how cultural identity is represented through music. These technologies are understood to be music industry technologies (Malm 1992). Their production is a result of a wider system, which represents economic and commercial ideologies. In another words, the industry is the commercially oriented system through which the technologies are acquired and put to use. Therefore, my study is limited to commercial music.

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These two concepts, industry and technology, are best understood as being interrelated. The economic system that drives industry is understood to have been introduced to countries such as PNG, at around the same time as music industry technologies, so it is difficult to differentiate the effects of the technologies from the effects of the organizational and economic developments that characterise the industry (Malm 1992). Ethnomusicologist Krister Malm argues that research in this area should focus on the interaction between people and music industry technologies, and describe this interaction, in order to ascertain how these technologies impact culture (Malm 1992).

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Ethnomusicological studies on the impact of music industry technologies have typically focused on the impact of western culture on non-western ‘traditional’ cultures (Malm 1992; Nettle 1992). The study of music technology provides a physical element to music as a tangible form of knowledge. Let us consider the guitar a for example. Without the knowledge of how to use this object in order to make music, a guitar is simply a hollow block of wood with strings attached. However, the guitar did not diffuse around the world merely as an object; it was accompanied by knowledge that impacted on the culture that appropriated it. This knowledge is usually in the form of techniques, tunings and repertoire, but it also may be in the

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<sup>2</sup> By ‘form’ I am referring to the music itself, made up of melody, rhythm, harmony and lyrics

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the terms ‘function’ and ‘use’, consult Merriam 1964

form of perceptions of what music is, effecting how music functions as part of culture and society. Therefore the 'music objects' technologies have the ability to change how a culture conceptualises their own organization of sounds, touching on one of the fundamental questions specific to ethnomusicology<sup>4</sup>. In Papua New Guinea, some research has touched briefly on this topic while documenting 'traditional' music in isolated communities (Crowdy and Feld 2002), or transcribing regionally developed stringband styles (Crowdy 2001; Crowdy 2005). Norlie Miskaram provides a preliminary report on the diffusion of stringed instruments in Papua New Guinea, while acknowledging that ideas too, have accompanied these instruments (Miskaram 1996). Crowdy takes this topic further, by examining in detail the physiology of performance of these instruments in order to investigate the musical elements, and physical logistics behind guitar styles and tunings that have developed unique regional variations (Crowdy 2005). Both of these studies acknowledge that the diffusion of guitar technology has dramatically changed the musical cultures in PNG.

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These studies provide a relevant foundation for popular music research in PNG. However, they only focus on the guitar and ukulele, and we could be mistaken to believe that these instruments are the only technologies that drive the musical phenomena known as stringband. It is possible however, that the guitar was not the sole catalyst for the development of this style, and also that it was not the sole catalyst for changes in how music is perceived and organised by Papua New Guineans. Instead, the guitar must be considered as only one part of a process that includes many other elements, including human interaction, and other technology. Don Niles and Michael Webb provide a timeline of this interaction (Webb and Niles 1987), stating that guitars and ukulele became common in villages around the central coast after 1945. However, contact with western people and their musics, date back to the 1870's. Also, *peroveta*<sup>5</sup> song styles pre-dated the stringband by almost 50 years (Niles 2000). Radio and gramophones pre-date guitars and ukulele by several decades. Therefore, when investigating the recording industry technologies that are impacting musical culture today, I must acknowledge that musical culture in PNG has already undergone considerable change, none of which can be attributed to a single event or technology. Developments in musical culture therefore can be seen as part of a long-standing trajectory of cultural change.

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The third aspect of my study is how the music industry and technology influence and effect how music represents and constructs cultural identity. This has been the subject of a sizable quantity of literature (Stokes 1994; Frith 1996; Mitchell 1996; Mitchell 2001; Hawkans 2002; Connel and Gibson 2003)(Stokes 1994; Frith 1996; Mitchell 1996; Mitchell 2001; Hawkans 2002; Connel and Gibson 2003), and is described as a process of signification through the conscious and un-conscious construction of 'ethnic boundaries' (Stokes 1994). Specific musical, instrumental or textual characteristics that define what is unique about this music signify these ethnic boundaries. These symbols are interpreted by both the creators, and listeners of music through a process of self-identification, which is described by ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes as a complex flow of associations constructed through recognition of shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal (Stokes 1994). For example, these signifiers of shared characteristics are the elements of the music

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the music as organized sound see Blacking 1974

<sup>5</sup> Also known as 'Prophet Songs', see Niles 2000

which enable Papua New Guineans to identify a certain guitar playing style with the Central Province, and particular beats with Sepik. These different genres are identifiable only by these characteristics, which make them different from music from other areas. These differences are subsequently connected to geographic places, which are important concepts in cultural identity, particularly in Papua New Guinea. As with any commercial music industry around the globe, the relationship between, music, identity and place is mediated through the music industry, and the technologies used to make music.

The technologies found in Port Moresby, such as guitars, drums, and mass-produced Japanese synthesiser keyboards are found all over the globe (Malm 1992). These instruments make essentially the same timbre, and produce music using the same 12 tones, no matter where they are played, which is basically a result of the technology's limitations. So essentially, the music industry technology commonplace in PNG produces the same sounds as the technology on the other side of the world. What are different in every context however, are the cultural and social functions these sounds have. I believe Port Moresby is the ideal place to study this phenomenon, even though it has only one large record label that controls distribution and manufacturing. Port Moresby music industry is undergoing a digital revolution, where relatively affordable digital recording technologies are becoming commonplace. Port Moresby currently has at least twenty small digital recording studios that are all producing commercial music. This drastically increases musicians' access to recording technology, which dramatically increases the regularity with which commercial music is produced. For example, I estimate that PNG produces 300-400 commercial recordings a year, which is a phenomenal number for a country of this size and demographic.

### 'Tradition' in Popular Music Literature

There has already been a small amount of research done on popular music in PNG. I will touch on some of this, but will focus mainly on what I perceive to be an ambiguity in the terminology that defines what is popular music and what is not. The small number of scholars who have researched popular music in PNG, have privileged just a few aspects of popular music. Their subjects can be divided into two categories; one concerns the processes relating to the creation of popular music, such as the historical development of the music industry, although this only focuses on the industry in Rabaul (Webb 1995; Webb 1997; Crowdy and Hayward 1999), and the other concerns the meanings inferred through the consumption of popular music. Studies of the later topic focus on lyrical meanings of songs, particularly those in Tok Pisin<sup>6</sup> (Webb 1993). While the literature concerning popular music in PNG clearly distinguishes itself from 'traditional' music scholarship, there is little discussion concerning what is 'popular', and subsequently, what is not. Some studies draw heavily upon theories common to the study of popular music, such as Linnekin's theory on cultural innovation and authenticity (Linnekin 1992), but focus on genres and bands that are not considered 'popular', based on commercial criteria, and in some cases, have been referred to as 'PNG art music', such as the PNG contemporary genre (Crowdy 1999; Crowdy 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Tok Pisin isn, a form of Pidgin English, and is the most commonly spoken language in Papua New Guinea.

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While the term 'popular music' is applied in various circumstances, so too is the word 'tradition'. For example, in some instances the stringband genre is referred to as fulfilling 'traditional' functions (Crowdy 2005 p.110), while in other cases, it is stated that bands such as Taraban clearly distinguish between the contemporary and 'traditional' styles they perform. This is a matter of terminology, as the use of the word 'tradition' here, clearly means different things. Ethnomusicologist Helen Myers describes this situation, which is not limited to literature on PNG, stating that 'tradition means everything, and therefore means nothing' (Myers 1992). What Myers is suggesting, is that when people talk about 'traditional' music they are usually talking about a certain kind of music, from a certain era, or music that exhibits certain characteristics that define the form of the music as 'traditional'. However, when ethnomusicologists speak of a 'tradition' they are referring to any activity that has its origins somewhere in the past; a 'tradition' is defined by ethnomusicologists as something that is repeated over time (Malm 1992). A musical tradition therefore is a trajectory of musical activity. I propose that the ambiguity between 'traditional music' and 'musical tradition' can be reduced by referring to repeated musical activities not as tradition, but instead, as trajectories of musical culture. Therefore, it becomes possible to discuss traditional ideas or musical signifiers that are imbued within musical forms that do not appear to exhibit 'authentic' traditional elements. 'Tradition' therefore can be used to describe concepts and ideas, and musical forms, while 'trajectory' can describe the process of musical adaptations and change. Through the differentiation of these two terms, we can therefore discuss how traditions too have been subject to change and adaptations over time. With this definition clarified, I will now turn to some basic definitions of 'popular music' that are pivotal to my research.

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## Popular Culture Theory

The study of popular music is the study of commercial music in popular culture. In order to research this, we must also define what popular culture is, and understand how this relates to the commercialisation of music. Popular culture is understood to have its origins in the west in the 1920s, and is characterised by the rise of the mass media, and the commercialisation of leisure (Strinati 2004)(ref1), which coincided with the rise of the commercial music industry. Because of its origins this may not seem immediately relevant to PNG. However, I will define how popular culture is related to commercial music production, and return later to how this may apply in PNG.

Studies of popular culture can be split into three related themes. The first of these concerns the definition and origins of popular culture. Debates in this area concern the basis of popular culture; either as an autonomous voice that emerges from the people, or as a phenomena that is imposed from above as a form of social control. Popular culture is commonly conceptualised as either coming up from the people 'below' or down from elites 'up high' – or, as an interaction between the two. A second theme concerns the influence of commercialisation and industrialisation on popular culture. Debates of this nature question the notion that profitability can supersede ideas of intellectual and artistic integrity. In this critique, the market place becomes the defining agent of popularity. Discussions on this aspect have questioned the ultimate benefactor of popular culture, the market or consumer, and have questioned the impact this has on artistic quality (Strinati 2004). (ref1) The third area concerns the ideological role of popular culture. Discussions of this aspect question if

popular culture fulfils the role of public indoctrination, or if it represents rebellion against the prevailing social order. In another words, the ideological role of popular culture questions if popular culture expresses a resistance to those in power and the dominant way of thinking, or if popular culture serves to reinforce existing power structures. (ref1)

## Mass Culture Theory

All these themes in some way theoretically link popular culture with the theory of mass culture. In short, mass culture defines the broad social organization of post industrial urban societies (Strinati 2004)(ref2). Mass culture critiques of post-industrial societies have argued that urbanised peoples 'traditional', or 'original' systems of value and organization have been destabilised. The consequence is referred to by Strinati (2004) as atomisation (ref2(Strinati 2004)). Atomised people are perceived as being relatively anonymous to each other, and can only relate to each other like atoms in a compound. Atomised people therefore lack morally coherent relationships with each other. This analogy emphasises that in terms of an entire urban population, people's relationships with each other are highly impersonal. Atomisation has occurred as a direct consequence of urbanisation, as urban centres weaken meaningful social organizations, such as family and village systems. Because of this breakdown of traditional social systems, atomised people lack moral order, and therefore must turn to 'fake moralities' to give meaning to their social existence (Strinati 2004)(REF2). These 'fake moralities' are found in mass culture; that is, the commodities of popular culture, one of which is popular music.

One particular aspect of mass culture theory that has been important to the study of commercial music is mass culture's homogenisation tendency. This refers to cultural homogenisation, but also can be seen directly in the limited choice consumers have, resulting in the homogenisation of musical styles and genres. This process can be explained in accordance with basic economic principles. It is more profitable to sell a small range of identical products to a large number of consumers, as manufacturing costs are minimized. In music, this means that ideally, music of a small number of artists would be sold to a large number of people. Atomised individuals are the ideal consumers of commercially produced music because they can be manipulated into purchasing a certain kind of music, and specifically, a certain album by a certain artist.

This theory is used to explain the practices of commercial music industries worldwide, which attempt to do precisely this. The global commercial music industry produces a very small number of albums in proportion to the size of the market. Even though there seems to be a massive range of choice of music available, from different artists from different genres, the reality is that the majority of records sold globally are by a small number of artists. Even when you include reggae stars, rock stars, hip hop stars, techno stars, and stars from other peripheral musical genres, the reality is that even if this group of commercially successful artists consists of several hundred globally, it is still minuscule in relation to the size of the marketplace, which potentially consists of billions of people. Also taken into consideration is the way the global music industry is corporately organised. The global music industry is dominated by only five corporations. This oligopoly, is not run by musicians, but is run by businessmen who have a legal obligation- to get the maximum returns for shareholders (Frith 2001). (Shukur 2001, Frith ???).

Popular music therefore is defined by its commercial orientation. Popular music is a “commodified” product that is produced in order to turn a profit. Popular music’s fundamental social functions must therefore be considered in terms of mass cultural theory. Popular music, according to mass culture theory provides the moralities, that is, the meanings a market of atomised people require. These meanings associated with mass culture commodities are commonly discussed in terms of identities. Identity is the moral fabric that connects individual humans to groups of humans. Therefore, Mass Culture theory suggests that individuals personally relate to the signifiers of ‘otherness’ to define group identity, which in turn, provides a socially meaningful existence. Music provides important access to these signifiers. Therefore commercial music has the capacity to provide a fundamental want of an atomised citizen.

### Considerations for Popular Music Research in Port Moresby

With the above theories described, it is now appropriate to reflect on the popular music industry situation in Papua New Guinea, and question if these theories can be used to investigate the social function of popular music in Port Moresby. As described, popular music is driven by commercial principles. However, these theories have evolved from studies of western societies and music industries. However, what exists in Papua New Guinea is an economic system that has its origins in a different historical and cultural context. Papua New Guinea is a modernising country, with a relatively short history of contact with western culture and ideals. However, its popular music industry is still driven by commercial motivations, and therefore theoretical definitions of what is ‘popular music’ in the west, and what ‘popular music’ is in Papua New Guinea are the same for this study. This raises the question to what extent is the social function of popular music in Papua New Guinea consistent with mass culture theories?

The first point to recognize here is that there is not one global ma-mass or popular cu-culture. Mass cu-culture defines popular culture as a market for mass culture commodities. Papua New Guinea, along with other developing countries, does not provide a unified marketplace for culturally homogenised products. Cultural diversity still very much characterises the social makeup of Papua New Guinea, including its urban centres. Also, Papua New Guinea’s urban centres, such as Port Moresby, have a migrant population that is relatively new, and it would be difficult to argue that their residents are atomised to the extent that mass culture characterises urban subjects. It would appear that people’s social relationships are in fact well defined, and manifest in various forms, for example, through the wantok system.<sup>7</sup> However, because of urbanisation, people are dislocated from the origin of these social systems, and therefore the process of urbanisation alone is enough to have some effect on these social systems. From my observations it would appear that people are using commercial music in order to connect with the places they are unable to connect with physically. For example, the marketing strategies of local record producers is centred around the concept of selling music from one area, to people who identify with that same area. People buy music from “their place”, therefore reinforcing their relationship to place, and thus reinforcing their cultural identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Wantok is the Tok Pisin word for ‘one-talk’; a colloquial term referring to those of the same language or kin group. For more information see Goddard 2005

In Port Moresby, with the exception of the Motu and Koitabu, people identify with places that are outside of Port Moresby, even if they were born in Port Moresby and have never lived in the place that they identify with. In the four months of my field research, not once has anyone told me they are from Port Moresby, in fact the terms ‘Morsby-an’ ‘Moresby-ite’ or ‘Moresby-er’ don’t really exist. The city of Port Moresby therefore may not be an important place in terms of cultural identity. Instead it appears cultural identity is defined by the rural places people have genealogical connections with. As seen in the regionally developed stringband traditions, music has the capacity to signify rural places through specific melodic and rhythmic characteristics (Crowdy 2005). Consuming or creating music from a specific place is one way to connect with that place. People, who are from a place they have never actually lived in, can “live” their cultural identity through producing or consuming music that signifies their “place”.

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The fact that this musical form is ~~commodified~~commoditised links Papua New Guinea popular music to the theories of mass culture and popular culture previously discussed. Also the fact that this music is commercial music that is created and consumed in an economic system driven by profit must therefore be taken into consideration. It is too early in my research to draw conclusions on this subject. However, one hypothesis could explain the propensity for music in Papua New Guinea’s to signify rural identities, as the way through which people access the ‘moral fabric’ as atomisation theory describes. This would mean that popular music in Papua New Guinea shares the same underlying social function of popular music elsewhere, and that this function is defined by its position as popular culture. However, this is without consideration of the cultural meanings, as opposed to social function, that the music may have to listeners and producers, and therefore ignores the prospect that the musical form is part of a long trajectory of musical culture, and that it may contain important cultural meanings that may, or may not have roots in traditional culture. (Goddard 2005)

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This raises a pivotal question; do people make or listen to music that signifies their “place”, and therefore signifying their identity, because it reinforces a social fabric that urbanisation has destabilised? Or does popular music in PNG fulfil other more complex functions that have roots in a cultural or social system that has yet to be destabilised?

The latter question would emphasise popular music as being part of a trajectory of musical culture and not merely a substitute for morality. If this latter question is the case, then I would need to focus on music that is context specific, because due to the diversity of musical cultures in Port Moresby, these values may not be universally understood and identifiable. For example, if popular songs from Aroma contained traditional ideas, but the song’s form was not traditional, these ideas might only be identifiable by people who already have some knowledge of those ideas. In this situation, the music’s meanings would only be interpreted inside one cultural context, and therefore, the cultural function of this music would not immediately appear to be compatible with popular music’s social function in accordance with mass culture theories.

Another aspect for consideration is the impact of recently introduced musical forms. For example, international R&B music, although being a marginal musical form in

PNG, appears to be gaining popularity. This new music may signify a move away from reinforcing relationships to “place”, as on initial observation, R&B rarely contains the signifiers of “place” that lokol genre has. Demographics of music creation and consumption may also play a major role in the way identity is constructed and represented through music. For example the R&B genre is typically enjoyed by urban youth. Listening to international R&B may be a way for these young people to construct identities that are less concerned with traditional links to village and “place”. It might be, that the way young urban youth use this music to construct their identity represents a move toward a ‘mass culture’ society.

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In conclusion, popular music in Port Moresby could potentially represent both a trajectory of older musical culture, and a move toward mass cultural ideals. Scholars acknowledge that cultural identities are not something that materialise overnight, but are something that are formed over time; that is, through a trajectory of cultural change. My research examines an aspect of this trajectory by looking at commercial music in Port Moresby. By examining the use of globalised recording technologies, through which local meanings are produced through global sounds, and how this impacts cultural identity, I anticipate being able to ascertain the universality of popular culture and mass culture theories, and develop a greater understanding of the way musical trajectories adapt and change.

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