# THE INDIE ROCK MUSIC SCENE IN KUALA LUMPUR BEFORE 2015

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**Abstract**

This paper is to give an overview about a specific way doing and consuming music in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur. The time frame of observation is short and defined from 2009 to 2014. In this period, many changes in public life occurred, which were connected to an increasing pressure on artists who were not complying to mainstream media demands. This overview is based on a long-lasting cooperation and a steady flow of information between musicians, organizers, and the researcher. The consequences of giving this short are a list of questions and insights into the dynamics of musical expression among specific audiences and their musical idols.

**Keywords**: Indie Rock, Malaysia, subculture, urban music

## INTRODUCTION INTO THE LOCAL INDIE ROCK SCENE

Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia is a city where music of many cultures can be found. In the early 20th century, Bangsawan musicians adopted Western musical instruments playing Anglo American Music (Matusky & Tan, 2004) and other musical genres migrated to Malaya from Arabian and Indian cultures. Western popular music is practiced by many self-learning pop musicians and caters to wide audiences and listeners. Music of the British Invasion, Classic Rock, R&B, Disco, Pop, and Hip Hop have established their presence with globally mainstreamed music listeners in the city of Kuala Lumpur.

Since the late 1990s, Indie Rock music business with an Alternative Rock music concept is gaining awareness in the popular music industry of Malaysia. At present, local Indie Rock music and its culture has exposed in local Indie Rock concerts such as Rockaway' (Livescape, 2012), an independent rock music festival staging local and foreign bands since 2009, and 'Rock the World' (Rock The World, 2008), another local Indie Rock music festival stage yearly since 2000. There are other smaller concerts that are not held yearly such as: KL Independent Band Fest (LifeinKL.com, 2009), DIGIMusicLive Concert (DIGI, 2009), Indie youth fest' (fest, 2011). Exposing themselves and performing at music clubs, event gigs, and being winners of local and regional award shows such as Voice Independent Music Awards 'VIMA' (Themes, 2011), Anugerah Industri Musik (AIM, 2011), Shout Awards (8TV, 2010) and MTV World Stage Awards (MTV World Stage, 2012) many local Indie Rock musicians now display images and identities differ to their previous underground era.

Local Indie Rock music is now supported musically by labels independent from media record companies with interest in creating a regional Indie music community distributing resources and supporting an open platform for options of writing and producing music in directions apart from global mainstream. This has resulted in the situation that local Indie Rock solo artists and bands are writing more songs texts in English language and producing music for the local and foreign market that was once dominated by globally mainstreamed local rock and pop music styles.

## MUSICAL IDEOLOGY

According to Eagleton (1991), the term ideology is a vast concept ,with a whole range of useful meanings‘, and is impossible to compress the ,wealth of its meanings into a single comprehensive definition‘, but for the purpose of this study its definition will be limited to: 'forms of thought motivated

by social interests' and 'a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class' (Ibid: 1). The alternative ideology of Indie Rock music partially overlaps into the mainstream popular music ideology in terms of verbal texts, group identities, social ideologies and products (Brown & Volgsten, 2006). Where mainstream popular music is mostly created as entertainment products suited for the general masses, alternative Indie Rock music reserves itself to be a product raising personal and social issues.

From interviews with Rithan, Meng, Anthony Yap, and Azway, it can be concluded that presently in Kuala Lumpur, Indie Rock artists have elements of an urban middle class working mentality and attitude, possessing awareness of their immediate living conditions which are triggered by societal, economic, cultural, political and global changes which can be found in lyrical contents of many songs. It can be further understood that the songs, especially the text messages, act as social vehicles assisting the individual to bond physically, mentally or both, with other individuals that realized the same social and cultural meanings expressed musically, thus forming groups with identities related to a similar ideology. These groups gather during the artistes' appearances; listen to their favorite songs, socialize or have a sense of belonging to the group or/and identity to share with others.

Social and individual conflicts, poverty, love, alienation, marginalization, and environmental problems are generally ideological issues experienced by the listeners which are highlighted in Indie Rock song texts. The musical value of the song can be seen in:

- the manner of delivery,

- musical accompaniment,

- what the artiste believes in,

- and the content of the lyrics.

As stated in an interview with Rithan (2011, accessible: ARCPA 01322)[1] Indie Rock music works similarly to a trusted voice of the community which has its own identity and personality, unlike artists who compose or perform commercially to suit the trend of the market regardless of the community to which they socially belong.

## GIGGING SCENE

It is understood economically by club owners that the justified standard of a good performance by the musicians is having the capacity to lure in a good spending crowd, and have the ability to make the customers happy with their performances.

There are many such commercial clubs and pubs in Kuala Lumpur as shown in figure 1, e.g. 'The Library' (1), 'Beach Club' (2), 'Zouk Club'(3) and 'Changkat Clubs' There, performances are mostly consumed as an entertainment product rather than a platform for the musicians to voice out their ideologies. The named venues serve a mentality of hyper reality and create simulations of developed countries' entertainment environment and are designed to attract the local and foreign youths residing in the city of Kuala Lumpur that mainly want to be entertained without any further commitment.

Underground gig venues, which are different from purely commercial clubs and pubs, are places where local Indie bands perform, sell their CDs, and expose themselves to a dedicated audience. These venues are equipped with simple set ups; a stage, basic music equipment such as sound system, drums, amplifiers for the guitar and bass, and microphones for vocals. Or it can just be an empty stage with or without any music equipment. These venues attract the alternative crowd with interest in varieties of Indie genres. According to Azway (2011, accessible: ARCPA 01305, 0:08:20-0:08:55), gigs are usually divided into two types of performances:

1. an acoustic performance involving one or two performers and

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[1] ARCPA stands for Audiovisual Resource Centre for the Performing Arts and is the unique ID of this small scale AV-Archive at the Music Department of Putra University, Malaysia. The files are publicly accessible under these Code Numbers.

2. involving a band of more than three members which is sometimes called a full force set up.
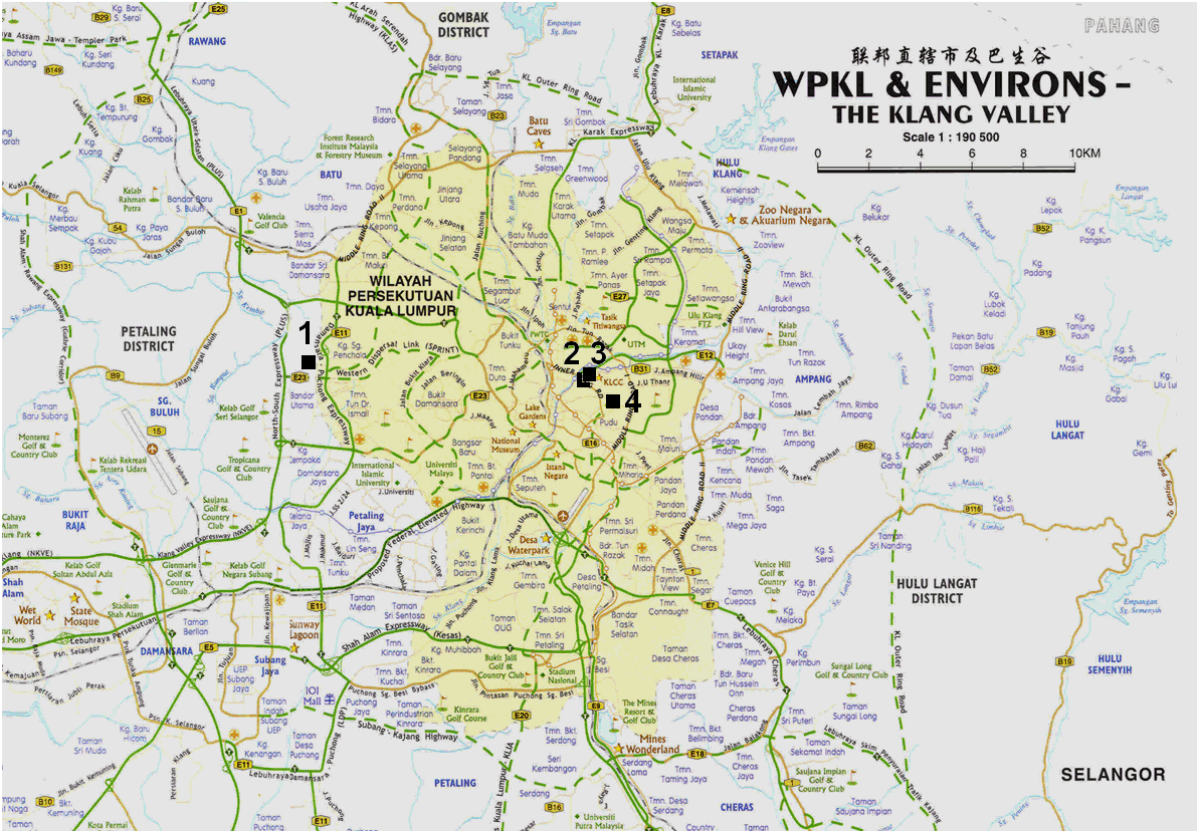


**Figure 1: Locations of entertainment clubs in Kuala Lumpur. (Open source, modified by Frank Ong).**

Azway further explains on the Kuala Lumpur underground Indie Rock scene is limited and the real underground venues5 are 'Rumah Api' located at Ampang and 'BTNK' in Pandan Indah (both shown in Figure 2) operating in Kuala Lumpur, and the closing down of the major venues such as Orange, Paul's Place, One Café, and Dopper Kafe has affected much presence of the local Indie Rock music scene. Local underground venues are for Indie music performances. These are social venues for the alternative music culture, entrance is cheaper than to jazz clubs and discos around the city.

These places attracted mostly teenagers and young adults with an age between fifteen and twenty-five. One of the most serious problems underground venues had to face was consuming alcohol and drugs by demographically underaged before arriving at the premises of the underground gig venues, making the venues 'hotspots for the cops'(Azway, 2011, ARCPA 01305, 0:04:55-0:05:30).

Currently, most Indie Rock artists or musicians performing in club gigs are hired by different clubs or cafés for a short period of time of the week within the Klang Valley. Such venues like 'The Laundry' and 'Lust KL' are more selective when hiring local Indie Rock artists or musicians. These venues, which also hire artists or musicians of different genres on other evenings of the week, are business enterprises that provide featured performers or general entertainment. The venues are more obviously commercial in nature and cater to a mixed crowd of different social classes instead of the apparently pure alternative crowd from underground clubs.
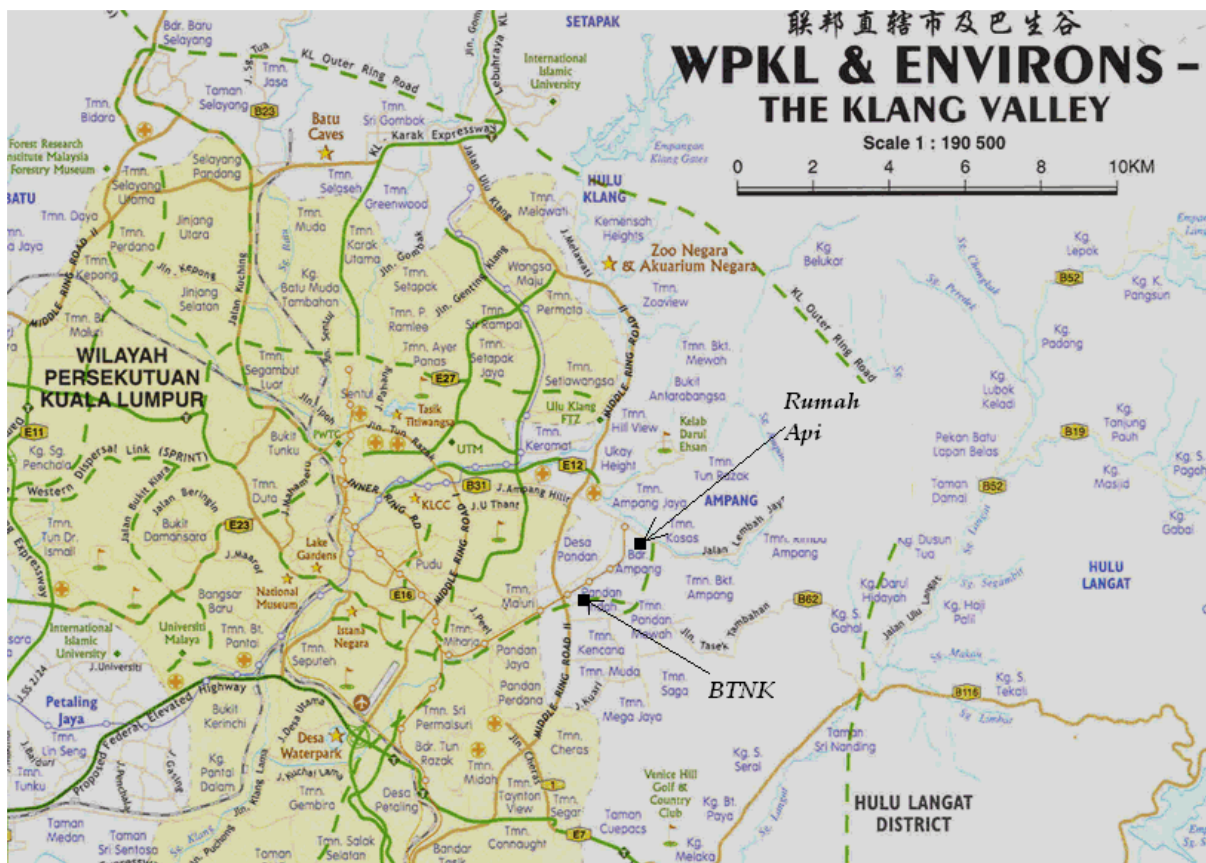
**Figure 2: Location of Underground clubs in Kuala Lumpur: 1) Rumah Api, 2) 'BTNK'. (Open source, modified by Frank Ong).**

Echoing Azway's statement, Ming also expresses dissatisfaction of the limited performance venues for Indie Rock music in Kuala Lumpur (Ming, 2011, accessible: 01320, 0:17:28-0:17:58). He further promoted that 'Live' houses are currently very popular with Indie Rock artists in Japan and Hong Kong and implied the same being true for Kuala Lumpur. It seems that there are only two live houses in Kuala Lumpur and these venues are usually rented by organizers to stage events or music performances. These two live houses are, as can be concluded, 'KL Life Center' situated at Jalan Sultan Ismail, Kuala Lumpur, and 'The Blackbox' at Solaris Dutamas, Jalan Dutamas, Kuala Lumpur. These venues have hosted a variety of live show events including local Indie Rock shows since 2009.

## CYBERSPACE IN LOCAL USE

The alternative media, blogs, and websites are sources where members of the local Indie Rock culture exchange information and communicate ideas. Here, the internet is used as a social tool creating alternative means of socializing, doing business, and exposure of a specific ideology and culture. It provides the connection for cultural exchange, educational and information updates. This is also the main source for self-learning and gathering of new musical and cultural techniques and thoughts.

The local Indie Rock community sets up blogs, websites, and joins social networks like 'facebook' and 'twitter' of their favorite artists. If chosen to do so, the artists can be directly connected with their fans, keep them updated on their gig dates and provide other personal information. This creates a closer relationship eliminating social class limitations between the artist and the masses, which assist the fans in understanding the artists' music and provide independent music companies and artists an alternative solution in doing business.

Local websites that solely promotes Indie Rock music concerts and activities are quite rare. There are a few that allow visitors to gain updated information on upcoming events and general information of the local Indie scene. **Junk Gigorama** is a local website that focuses on upcoming concerts and shows

around Klang Valley. The creators of Junk Gigorama are interested in what is happening musically in the South East Asia region. The website supports also mainstream popular despite alternative music live concerts and shows. It allows visitors to be connected to its social media network 'Facebook', 'Tweeter' and 'Gigorama' for instant alerts and receiving immediate updates. The website is credited to Bluedots Sdn. Bhd in Petaling Jaya and can be accessed by logging on to http://junk.gigorama.net/. **Malayapark.com**, a website supporting the local Indie Rock and Indie Pop music communicates in a mixture of the Malay and English language. At the bottom of the webpage, it provides a long list of local Indie Rock, and Pop artists and their youtube links. By observing the youtube links referred in the website, there are solo artists and bands that are made up of different races residing in Malaysia and it seems that the multicultural exchange of language and social acceptance is shared through the choice of Indie Rock music artists of this website. At the bottom of the page it is stated that the website is designed by 'Joe' and it is part of the 'Malaysian Underground Community Resources'. It can be accessed by logging on to http://malayapark. com/wp/.

Local Indie Rock artist websites mainly provide a local platform where the local Indie Rock community can get information and interact with the artists. This provides a direct interaction between the fans and, possibly more importantly, anyone who wants to gain access to the artists. The **'Rithan Deja Voodoo Spells'** facebook is the official social media website for the band 'Deja Voodoo Spells'. The top part of the page displays an old Ibanez Jem 7D guitar belonging to the guitarist of the band. The cover of the band's third album title 'Dangerous Knowledge' is also displayed as a thumbnail on the page. The site can be accessed through https://www.facebook.com/rithandvs. Another band **'Love Me Butch'** also uses facebook to provide people an opportunity to comment on and communicate with the band and among their fans. Both bands use 'Tweeter', 'My Space' and 'Youtube' as their promotional and communicational tool; 'Love Me Butch'–Facebook is accessible through https://www.facebook.com/lovemebutch. Many other Indie Rock artists also use such social media sites to promote their products and themselves to an audience they want to face directly in contrast to mainstreamed popular music, where audiences are kept rather anonymously and in a distance.


## SHORT SUMMARY ON THE INDIE ROCK MUSIC SCENE IN KUALA LUMPUR

The local Kuala Lumpur Indie Rock music scene is growing with a community supporting its own music and culture. They practice online communication and are connected to their own scene. The Indie Rock music community projects itself with an international identity through collaborating and associating itself with the international and regional scene. More performing venues and gigs are needed for musical exposure and for the local Indie Rock artists to grow and sustain themselves.

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