MusicSG – A digital music archive from the National Library, Singapore.

1st Author

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Abstract

This paper will explore MusicSG, a portal developed by the National Library Board of Singapore. MusicSG is a digital archive collecting and providing access to music composed or published by Singaporeans; music produced or published in Singapore; and music related to Singapore.

In particular, the paper will look at the development, management and promotion of the MusicSG archive and highlight some of the challenges and learning points related to a project of this nature which dealt with music resources, a collection in multiple formats that is diverse and complicated on many fronts.

The initial objective of MusicSG was to archive popular and traditional ASEAN music. However, in November 2010, the direction of MusicSG shifted to be that of a digital archive of recorded music from Singapore.

From 2013 to 2014, the MusicSG project team embarked on revitalising the portal. Through the many collaborative efforts with industry and content owners, the project team successfully expanded the digital archive with new and unique content, revamping the website and undertaking a series of outreach and promotional efforts to raise awareness of the portal and the wealth of resources from NLB

With the launch of this digital archive, NLB and MusicSG have not only brought together a suite of content on Singapore music, but have also raised the awareness of Singapore music and provided resources for research and discovery, whilst contributing to NLB's initiative to preserve Singapore's artistic heritage and legacy.

Keywords: Singapore music, MusicSG, copyrights, archive, access, digital resources

1. INTRODUCTION

MusicSG is a digital archive project set up to digitise, archive and provide access to all forms of published Singapore musical works. It assembles a collection of music composed or published by Singaporeans, music produced or published in Singapore, and music related to Singapore.

Prior to the launch of MusicSG, there was no known music archive of Singapore music that was readily accessible to the public.

The early beginnings of MusicSG started in 2006, when the National Library Board, Singapore (NLB) was approached to initiate discussions on the possibility of a music archive in Singapore. This idea was originally sparked by The ARChive of Contemporary Music (ARC) – a non-profit organisation which had concerns over the safe-keeping of its archives. The initial intent was to focus on popular and traditional ASEAN music. Prior to its launch in November 2010, the direction for MusicSG shifted to be that of a digital archive on recorded music from Singapore. This was a result of various rights issues.

2. CONTENT HIGHLIGHTS

The MusicSG archive has a broad collection of recorded works spanning from the 1950s to the present with over 20 genres of music including music from Singapore national campaigns (eg: the Courtesy Campaign), local musicals, xin yao (*translation: Singapore songs*; refers to Chinese songs about life within the country), rock, pop, classical music and more. There is music by local artists including X' Ho, Dick Lee, Iskandar Ismail, Liang Wern Fook, The Quests, Corrinne May, Boh Chit Hee, Pan Xiuqiong and P. Ramlee amongst many others. Some famous tunes include Stand Up for Singapore, a perennial National Day favourite; tracks from musicals such as Beauty World, and Campaign singalongs like Make Courtesy Our Way of Life also make up the colourful, kaleidoscopic collection. Popular favourites include tunes by 1960s rock bands such as The Quests and The Cyclones, and music by contemporary stars such as Tanya Chua and Corrinne May. The archive is further complemented by scores (see Figure 1) and lyrics of some of these tunes.

MusicSG's collection is built primarily by music contributions received from the public and music industry players, who share and deposit their published works to the music archive. Intellectual property copyrights are cleared before the National Library can provide access to the music resources.

Figure 1: Image of score titled 'Dayung Sampan' a folk tune

MusicSG also houses several meaningful local compositions that reflect Singapore's short but eventful history. For example, the Malay folk song "Chan Mali Chan," similarly sung in other countries including Malaysia and Indonesia, reminds us of Singapore's historical beginnings in the Malay archipelago.

Other highlights in the MusicSG collection include the 1967 recording of Singapore's National Anthem, which was performed just 2 years after Singapore celebrated its Independence. There are some tracks from pre-independent Singapore such as 胶林我们的母亲 (*translation: rubber jungle our mother*), the earliest work recorded in MusicSG, composed by Boh Chit Hee in 1956.

As of October 2014, the archive has built up a total of more than 13,000 music resources including tracks, scores, lyrics, biographies, videos, infographics and more.

2.1 Highlights of 2013

The late local music legend and Cultural Medallion Recipient Iskandar Ismail was one of the most significant donors who contributed to MusicSG. The Cultural Medallion recognises individuals whose artistic excellence as well as contribution and commitment to the arts have enriched and made a distinction to Singapore's arts and cultural landscape (National Arts Council, 2015).

Approximately 260 of Iskandar's scores have been digitised and uploaded onto MusicSG, including many handwritten scores of his arrangements of familiar National Day Parade (NDP) tunes (eg. Medley of National Songs for NDP 1994), and those of local musicals (eg. Various scenes of Mortal Sins the musical). Scores of past Cultural Medallion winners like Leong Yoon Pin, Alex Abisheganaden and Kam Kee Yong can also be accessed in the portal.

In addition, MusicSG conducted video interviews with thirteen Independent (Indie) Singaporean artists including local veterans Jack & Rai, West Grand Boulevard, and The Sam Willows amongst others. This would enable MusicSG to enhance its collection of content with the launch of the Indie music genre, and in the process, cultivate new audiences for the website by drawing viewership from the existing fan-base of these artists.

Through this collaboration, MusicSG created a series of video profiles of these selected Indie artists, who were subsequently invited to perform gigs at the Esplanade public library as

part of the archive's outreach effort. Branded as MusicSG Studios, the outreach activities were well received by the public and helped raise greater awareness of the archive. In addition, research articles, infographics and photographs related to personalities, organisations and performance venues have been added to the portal, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of content on the site.

As part of the project's objective to have a more user-friendly and aesthetically pleasing layout, MusicSG embarked on a website makeover (see Figure 2) in 2013 in an effort to encourage continuous discovery of the site's content. Social sharing capabilities, streaming capabilities and improved search functions were added. In addition, its responsive web design enables the site to be rendered on different screens and platforms. More content formats were also able to be displayed.

Figure 2: Home page of MusicSG

With the revamping of the MusicSG website as well as exciting new content included into the archive, MusicSG was re-launched on 26 September 2014 at the National Library, Singapore in a bid to promote greater publicity of the site. Following the official launch, popular local artists The Analog Girl, Jack and Rai, ShiGGa Shay and Nicodemus Lee from迷路兵 performed at a public concert at the National Library's Plaza.

3. OUTREACH AND PROMOTION

Much of Singapore's early music was recorded on formats such as vinyls and Digital Audio Tape (DAT). These are now rendered obsolete by newer formats such as cassettes and Compact Discs (CDs). Not only are these obsolete formats a rarity in music stores they also face a threat of degrading in quality over time. Most, if not all, of such content are in private collections now, and are not readily available off the shelves of local music stores.

In light of these circumstances, MusicSG has explored various means to promote the website and expand its collection. Public donation drives were a useful means of promoting awareness of the archive. These encouraged the public to come forward with their private

collection of such early recordings from 1950s and contribute to the digital archive. Two such drives were held from 2009 to 2010.

NLB and the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in the spirit of a long term strategic partnership that will draw on each other's expertise and resources, to develop and make accessible the MusicSG archive. An organisation created for protecting and promoting the copyright interests of composers, authors and publishers of musical works and lyrics, COMPASS has a wide collection of registered works of varying genres, and represents an estimated 1000 local members in administering the public performance, broadcast, diffusion and reproduction rights on their behalf. Through its reciprocal agreements with other affiliated societies worldwide, COMPASS also represents almost all copyright musical works in the world (Composers and Authors Society of Singapore, 2015).

The MOU also aims to create awareness of MusicSG and is a call for action to COMPASS members to come forward to donate their published works to NLB's music depository. Outreach activities were also held at the annual COMPASS Awards Ceremony, as well as during the 2011 Singapore Heritage Festival.

To attract newer and younger audiences, an 'Indie Music' mini-exhibition was held at the Library@Esplanade in June 2013 and April 2014. The Library@Esplanade is a niche library in the performing arts specialising in the areas of Music, Dance, Theatre and Film. These outreach activities, featuring write-ups on both the Indie music genre and local Indie artists, was launched to greater publicise MusicSG. It also served as a teaser leading up to the launch of the new Indie music genre on the website, later that same year. Apart from reaching out to the general public, it also enabled the NLB to tap on the respective artists' existing fanbase and their 'eyeballs' to increase viewership of MusicSG.

A MusicSG Indie Bands giveaway was also held in June 2013 and two vinyls sponsored by local musician, the Analog Girl, were given away in a contest on the Library@Esplanade's facebook page.

Other successful strategies include the above mentioned MusicSG studios, a series of free fortnightly performances by local Indie musicians to complement and lead up to MusicSG Reloaded, the official launch to celebrate the improved website and release of new content.

4. CHALLENGES FACED

There were challenges faced in the course of this project but these have also brought about learning points. As NLB had to work with an external service provider to help produce the video profiles of the thirteen Indie artists, getting the right vendor with relevant experience and ability to work on music content was an important concern. For example, the project team looked for vendors with experience in dealing with musicians, and who were able to pick up with the nuances in musical style for each of these artists. This would be critical to making a profile video that captured the essence of the artist's work, made all the more difficult by its intangible nature. Moreover, videography expertise was not readily available inhouse, hence necessitating a vendor's services.

The project team was charting new territories with the launch of a new genre of music on the site. There were many unknowns and several issues cropped up, specifically those pertaining to the industry including rights management. As a result, the team had to adapt to the situation and re-scope the work to be done.

Furthermore, to archive local music, rights had to be cleared with multiple parties including but not limited to the composer, lyricist and publisher. This process was more com-

plicated when it came to providing access to music tracks belonging to big recording companies. As such, there are many factors to consider in terms of copyrights and cost when it comes to archiving local music.

5. CONCLUSION

Every country's musical heritage deserves to be documented, preserved and made accessible to future generations to come. Singapore is not unique and it is fortunate that the National Library was able to develop the MusicSG portal.

MusicSG strives to be a reliable source of reference material to those wanting to learn more about Singapore's musical heritage and to be a partner recognised for championing local music talents, By bringing together a suite of content on Singapore music, NLB and MusicSG aim to raise the awareness of Singapore music and provide resources for research and discovery, whilst contributing to NLB's initiative to preserve Singapore's artistic heritage and legacy.

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