



Legong dance performance, Bedulu, Bali, 1930s

Bali 1928 Vol II: Tembang Kuna – Songs From An Earlier Time

Various

World Arbiter Enhanced CD

Bali 1928 Vol III: Lotring And The Sources Of Gamelan Tradition

Various

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Aficionados and scholars of 78 rpm era Southeast Asian musics have been entertained recently by the Indonesian selections of Dust-To-Digital's majestic *Longing For The Past* compilation, but World Arbiter's unearthing of the earliest commercial recordings to have been released in Bali from the late 1920s is an even more miraculous discovery. This decade long project to gain access to Odeon/Beka recordings has netted a total of 111 sides, the vast majority of which have been lying unheard in disparate archives, personal and institutional, and they are

being restored and published across five thematic volumes.

The focus of the recently released *Bali 1928 Vol II* is the vocal genres of tembang, kidung, and kakawin, rare forms virtually unheard in the West. These are sung poems employing overlapping levels of language, from common Balinese to classical Kawi, in fascinating interplay. Topics range from the passionate to the tragic, the philosophical to the comedic. The microtonal vocalese in these grooves offers some of the most haunting sounds ever captured on record – modern ears attuned to simpler five tone gamelan varieties will be astonished at the seven toned treatments by the elders here which add extra layers of estrangement to and from the fleeting vocal lines. Through the hazy gauze of the 80 year old recordings you find brilliant tonal shards sounding extraterrestrial even to native ears, as attested in the accompanying notes.

The two female vocalists give particularly devastating performances. Behold the ethereal tones of the suling bamboo flute dovetailing Ni Dayu Madé Rai's hypnotising voice in her songs of flirtation. Dig deeper and find Ni Lemon's eerie treatments of the Wargasari ritual offerings, almost unbearable in their intense emotional display: *"It's so hard to eat and sleep/With such troubled mind/Burdened by longing/ Full of anguish"*.

By restoring and disseminating the recordings this World Arbiter project aims to repatriate the music to Bali and the communities from which it sprang. Ethnomusicologist Edward Herbst's admirable research and documentation has local as much as international audiences in mind. Each physical release is an enhanced audio CD with exhaustive notes, rare photographs and video files. Online documentation is given both in English and Indonesian, and Herbst and his team have gone back to Bali to seek out elder artists and descendants of the participants of the late 1920s sessions to share, reflect and reconstruct this precious cultural heritage.

The recordings benefited from the guidance of Walter Spies, the Russian born German artist who had relocated to Bali, who facilitated these first recordings of a transitional period of the country's musical history, and generously opened doors for succeeding waves of visitors from the West, foremost among them the composer Colin McPhee. The latter had an epiphany upon hearing the 1928 sides and visited Bali to investigate for himself in 1931. The discoveries of McPhee's eight year sojourn would obsess him for much of his life, culminating in the posthumous and pioneering study *Music In Bali* (1966).

The third volume features the influential innovator and polymath I Wayan Lotring's complete pre-war 78s. Lotring was one of McPhee's main informants in the 1930s, and his status as a modernist composer, musician drummer/dance expert, and (above all) teacher, remains today – initiates will know of Lotring from the wonderful 1972 Jacques Brunet recordings released on Ocora. His liberating extensions of

traditional gamelan forms are surveyed here: semar pegulingan, the enchanting gamelan of the love god for the royal court's repose; palégongan, with repertoire based on the gambuh classical dance drama, accompanied by suling, some up to a metre in length; the magic dance drama calonarang depicting the mythological Barong and the demon queen Rangda in their eternal struggle between good and evil; gender wayang for all-night shadow play with microcosmic representations of Balinese world-view.

The compositions feature diverse tonal and rhythmic modalities with delicious interlocking heaps of shimmering gongs and wide intervallic leaps. Lotring's importance was in transforming the base ingredients of gamelan, elevating the status of the composing musician in this generally anonymous musical milieu, where the gamelan as mothership overrides nominal notions of individualistic display.

Unfortunately, Lotring's unique transformations of older forms didn't take hold among the shifting winds of postwar gamelan stylings, which increasingly became gong kebyar-centric. This flashier yet simpler style with its dazzling dynamic moves took the rest of the 20th century by storm and has remained the mainstream form of Balinese gamelan. Although Lotring continued to teach for the rest of his days, his village gamelan laid mostly dormant, and his marginality became more apparent with McPhee's departure from Bali.

It's intriguing to speculate what might have happened if he had received the continued patronage of McPhee, or subsequent Western interests in gamelan had coalesced sooner. As it is, we have these tantalising three minute kernels that World Arbiter has painstakingly presented, a fascinating, if obscured window into enchanting soundscapes to immerse in. These are organic musics before classicist codification of the postwar years, and the increasing commodification of dominant musical cultures. They are cyclical musical expressions of life affirming rituals, where multi-hued (dis)sonance is celebrated, variegated yet environment specific.

Phong Tran