

Manila Sound of the Philippines: The “Bright Side” of the Martial Law Era

While the rest of the world indulged in flared pants, disco, and funk music in the 1970s up until the late 1980s, the Philippines was trying to survive one of the darkest chapters of the country’s history. In 1972, President Marcos declared Martial Law in the entire country in his attempts of protecting civilian life from Communist takeovers. However, it only created uproars from its citizens as Marcos became abusive and manipulative with his seemingly limitless power. Despite the dark time for many Filipinos, a new Filipino musical genre prevailed that helped numerous Filipinos get through difficult times, protest for government injustices, and fight against Marcos’ dictatorship and oppression. From this traumatizing time in Philippine history, Manila Sound was born.

Coined from the song “Manila” by the band Hotdog¹, Manila Sound is inspired by American disco, funk, and pop. According to Stanford Live, “Manila Sound mixed Filipino musicality, catchy melodies, and a laid-back style to create what some call the Golden Age of Pinoy music.”² It was not long until Manila Sound started to flood Filipino nightclubs and disco halls in the Philippines in the 1970s. With its influences on the Filipino people during the tumultuous time of the Martial Law Era, it is often considered “the bright side” of the time and has influenced most of the modern genres in the Philippines, including Original Pinoy Music (OPM), that is often characterized by Philippine pop songs³, particularly ballads, later in the 1990s.

¹ Garcia, Dennis. (1976). Hotdog [Recorded by Hotdog] on *Manila* [Single]. Manila, Metro Manila: Capitol Records.

² Manila Disco Fever: Stanford Live. (2019, August 17). Retrieved from <https://live.stanford.edu/calendar/april-2018/manila-disco-fever>

³ Music of the Philippines. (2019, July 30). Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_the_Philippines#Popular_music_\(original_Pilipino_music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_the_Philippines#Popular_music_(original_Pilipino_music))

Before the boom of the locality of Manila Sound, Filipinos only embraced things from an international outlet, including music. Dolly Pangan Specht, a local Filipina who grew up during the Martial Law Era, recollects her early memories of solely listening to American disco music at first. “In Filipino culture, for the longest time, there was such a colonial mentality. Part of society that were such snobs — and I will say, myself included — with things that were local,” Specht said. During the 1970s, there was a booming market on solely American and European music. According to an interview with Specht on KUOW.org, “the bands she remembers getting the most respect and support were European or American acts — Earth Wind and Fire, Donna Summer, and the Village People — or Filipino bands who mimicked them.”⁴ However, Manila Sound allowed Filipino bands to fit into the disco genre but with a Filipino flavor.

With the rise of Manila Sound came bands that helped localize disco with distinct Filipino sound. In the later period of Manila Sound, the disco mania dominated the country, which was led by groups like VST & Co. and The Boyfriends who were influenced by American music groups. VST & Co. could easily be named as one of the most iconic of bands that pioneered Manila Sound. VST & Co. soon began popularizing Philippine disco with their songs such as “Awitin Mo Isasayaw Ko”⁵ (which translates to “You Sing It and I’ll Dance To It”) and “Disco Fever”⁶. Roger Rigor, a singer of VST & Co. once said in an interview that, “Back then, original Filipino pop culture was like a little brother of American pop culture. Suddenly disco blasted into the scene with this different sound and we said: ‘Why can’t we have our own

⁴ NPR Staff, & Oregon Public Broadcasting. (2018, August 18). Burning It Down With The Manila Sound. Retrieved from <https://www.kuow.org/stories/burning-it-down-with-the-manila-sound>

⁵ De Leon, Joey. (1978). Awitin Ko Isasayaw Mo [Recorded by VST and Co]. on *VST* [Debut Album]. Manila, Metro Manila: Sunshine Records.

⁶De Leon, Joey. (1978). Disco Fever [Recorded by VST and Co]. on *VST* [Debut Album]. Manila, Metro Manila: Sunshine Records.

Filipino disco?’ We tried to aim at the moon—and it went even further than that.’⁷ VST & Co. consisted of 16 band members who covered composition, vocals, and instrumentation, such as bass, guitar, keyboard, horn, and percussion, of their music. With the blending of their voices and the different types of instrumentation used, it collectively created the feeling of uniquely Filipino disco music in their songs.

The Boyfriends is another Philippine musical group that helped lead the Manila Sound and are known to be a reflection of the band Bee Gees sound due to their pop and disco nature. The Boyfriends, along with other groups, sparked the disco mania that swept the Philippines in the later period of Manila Sound. Released in 1978, “Sumayaw Sumunod”⁸ (which translates to “Dance, Follow”) trademarks their disco take on Filipino music with Tagalog lyrics. The lyrics of “Sumayaw Sumunod” reflects on the new music that is supposed to symbolize the current state of the Philippines during the Martial Law Era. Many Filipinos were frustrated and often scared of the changing times under Marcos’ reign. However, the message of the song implies that new music should be enjoyed to dance in conjunction with the beautiful weather and the new music of today. “Sumayaw Sumonod” had repetitive catchy melodies that were light-hearted and were meant to serve as an escape from the harsh realities of Marcos’ dictatorship. Additionally, “Sumayaw Sumonod” truly captures the sound similar to the Bee Gees, particularly with the soft blending vocals similar to “Night Fever” by the Bee Gees.⁹

Aside from the disco jams that were brought my Manila Sound, the genre also encouraged many Filipinos to not let Martial Law stop them from living their lives like the rest

⁷Manila Disco Fever: Stanford Live. (2019, August 17). Retrieved from <https://live.stanford.edu/calendar/april-2018/manila-disco-fever>

⁸Boyfriends (1978). Sumayaw Sumunodr [Recorded by Boyfriend]. on *With Love*. Manila, Metro Manila: Canary Records.

⁹ Bee Gees (1977). Night Fever [Recorded by Bee Gees]. on *Saturday Night Fever*. Miami, FL: RSO Records.

of the world. With its America disco roots, Manila Sound also attributed its style with Western disco outfits such as flared jeans, colorful and loose button-up shirts, and long hair and Filipinos participated in such a fashionable fad of the 70s and 80s. The style also influenced some of the songs from Manila Sound. The song “Bongga Ka Day” by Hotdog¹⁰ narrates the story of a socialite who married a wealthy man. Everyone in her neighborhood was surprised as she started to succumb to the luxuries and trends of the rich by wearing high-end designer brands like Gucci. As silly as the topic of the song is, “Bongga Ka Day” symbolizes the abilities of Filipinos to still keep up with the trends of the West, not just in music but also in fashion and lifestyle.

Lastly, Manila Sound gained its popularity during the Martial Law Era as a sense of comfort and a familiar face during these challenging times. Manila Sound originated from the song “Manila” by Hotdog¹¹ which could be argued as the song that ultimately birthed the genre. The Garcia Brothers, who make up the band Hotdog, gained inspiration of creating a song about the city from Tony Bennett’s hit, “I Left My Heart In San Francisco”¹² and Frank Sinatra’s “New York”.¹³ “We decided to write a song about Manila because nobody had written about it at the time,” says Hotdog’s lead guitarist, Rene Garcia. “Fortunately, it’s the one song that will never be replaced...that’s our pride and joy.”¹⁴ Throughout the song, the band highlights the reels of

¹⁰ Hotdog (1979). *Bongga Ka Day* [Recorded by Hotdog]. On *Hotdog Greatest Hits*. Manila, Metro Manila: Capitol Records.

¹¹ Garcia, Dennis. (1976). Hotdog [Recorded by Hotdog] on *Manila* [Single]. Manila, Metro Manila: Capitol Records.

¹² Cory, George. (1953). *I Left My Heart in San Francisco* [Recorded by Tonny Bennett] on *Columbia*. Brooklyn, New York: Columbia Records

¹³ Minnelli, Liza (1977). *New York, New York* [Popularized by Frank Sinatra] on *Trilogy: Past, Present, Future* [Single]. New York, New York.

¹⁴ GMA News Online. (1970, January 01). *The Manila Sound: 8 things you didn't know about the Hotdog band*. Retrieved from <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/publicaffairs/iwitness/368281/the-manila-sound-8-things-you-didn-t-know-about-the-hotdog-band/story/>

living and being in the Philippine capital and how regardless of how many times one leaves, one will keep coming back to Manila. With the familiar face of Manila, it provided comfort and familiarity to Filipinos during a time when they could not recognize their own country, but “Manila” by Hotdog brought Filipinos back to a sense of pride and nostalgia with the city’s quirky features and chaotic yet lovable energy. Notably, this is also one of the few songs that popularized the fusion English and Tagalog or “Taglish” lyrics in a song. It was not until the early 1970s that Filipino music began to be written using local languages and the use of “Taglish” became more mainstream in Manila Sound.¹⁵

Overall, Manila Sound’s impact on the Filipinos during the Martial Law Era reflects on the happy and resilient nature of the country during Marcos’ oppressive regime. The genre is a testament of crafting a pre-existing genre of American disco and turn it distinctly Filipino with its laid back lyrics and catchy melodies. As the “bright side” of the Martial Law Era, it brought light and optimism back in the lives of many Filipinos in the 1970s and 1980s. Manila Sound also paved its way to create a music market for Filipino bands to rise such as VST & Co and the Boyfriends. Back in an era dominated by the Bee Gees and Earth Wind and Fire, Filipinos only looked to the West for music. However, with the creation of Manila Sound, Filipinos now felt that they have a music of their own and also identified with their way of life.

Lines: 90

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¹⁵One Music PH. (2016, June 23). Manila Sound: The Bright Side Of The Martial Law Era. Retrieved from <https://www.onemusic.ph/news/in-spite-of-martial-law-manila-sound-shone-1052>

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