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# A tuneful revolt rings out in Myanmar

Local punk band Side Effect is bringing politics to music in nation's long-censored and highly polarized society

By DANIEL COMBS | YANGON, JULY 8, 2018 1:18 PM (UTC+8)



Myanmar punk band Side Effect live in concert in December 2017. Photo: Unicorn Myo / Turning Tables

**A**t a recent concert in downtown Yangon, the Myanmar punk rock band Side Effect took the stage to wild applause from a crowd of several hundred.

Like all good rock groups, the four musicians wore all black and had

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The concert was part of a series called Voice of the Youth, a showcase for punk, heavy metal and rap music, traditionally underground genres that have been gaining popularity in the country.

Side Effect's music is overtly political. Unlike other popular groups in Myanmar, they didn't sing about chasing girls or partying at night clubs. Their songs were about the difficulty of making yourself heard and the hollowness of modern commercial culture.

Halfway through the set, the band's lead singer and songwriter, a 36-year-old who goes by Darko C, turned to the crowd and asked the young concertgoers to split into two groups.

Then he instructed them to yell at each other, with one side shouting "I hate you!" and the other in return "I love you!"

"What feels better?" he asked the crowd. Then he brought up a taboo subject: "This next song is about Meiktila."



Side Effect lead singer Darko C at a recent live performance. Photo: Facebook

It had been more than four years since the massacre in central Myanmar, where Buddhist rioters killed dozens of local Muslims in the small city of Meiktila. But in Myanmar's repressive climate of public dialogue, the event was almost never brought up in public.

"Meiktila is the word you never hear anymore," said one concertgoer, who asked to be called Judas. "It's the secret everyone knows about but is

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have become one of the few public spaces where it feels safe for local youth to express dissent.

“There is no youth identity here,” said Darko after the concert. “There is no chance for young people to express themselves in public. And without enthusiasm, these kids will have their dreams crushed. It’s not unusual to have your dreams crushed here. It’s our everyday life.”

In Side Effect’s tribute, the memory of the killings came alive in a heavy driving bass line and cascading electric guitar riffs.

In his lyrics, Darko railed against what he saw as the hypocrisy of the Buddhist rioters, and the feeling that there was no way to reverse the terror that had taken place.

*Are you a believer or a murderer  
or the devil crushing voiceless people?  
The smell of your hatred  
stinks when you spread your  
message in the air*

*Look what you’ve done*

The young people in the crowd thrashed and screamed to the angry music. When Darko crooned “We won’t forget this!” one man near the stage screamed into the night and tore at his shirt until the buttons went flying.

“It’s more than words. All of Myanmar feels this loss and sorrow,” the young man with the torn shirt said later. “This is the history that our idiot government doesn’t want us to know. But we remember.”

\* \* \*

Myanmar’s public dialogue has become increasingly fraught in the last two years.

When Aung San Suu Kyi’s political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), swept to power following November 2015 elections there was widespread optimism that the repressive restrictions on free speech that defined the country’s military-led authoritarian past would fade away.

Instead, journalists, dissidents and university students have found that the NLD, many of whose members were once imprisoned for speaking out against the government, has adopted an aggressive stance against free speech.

The government has not been shy about using sometimes obscure laws to prosecute groups and individuals that they see as tarnishing Myanmar’s image, and has frequently accused critical journalism as being “fake news” meant to harm the country.

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making a trip to Rakhine state to see firsthand what the state's Buddhist majority had done to the Rohingya, the singer Darko's reaction was to curse Myanmar's public discourse.



Rohingya refugees scuffle as they wait to receive aid in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh September 24, 2017. Photo: Reuters/Cathal McNaughton

"Just seeing these people, they are just human beings, just like you or me. Just like kids in Yangon. They listen to the same music. And I thought, 'Oh God, I've been lied to.' They are real people and they are being abused, and no one gives a fuck about them. So it really changed my mind, and that's when I started hating the local media."

According to the members of Side Effect, the failure of Myanmar's mainstream media to fairly represent minority views is why it is so important to create a safe space for young people to air their grievances. Under the band's de facto leadership, the punk rock scene in Myanmar has been transformed into a space for support and free expression.

"I began to look for our role in this whole thing," Darko explained. "We are artists. There must be something we can do about this. All you can do is be the best at what you are doing. The world will recognize you. You will have a voice. You can report what is happening."

Darko (who chose his name in part based on the loner title character of the 2001 film *Donnie Darko*), grew up in Yangon in the 1990s. It was a lonely time to be a rebel. The country's self-imposed isolation made it feel like people with alternative views were completely cut off from like-minded people abroad. But that feeling also produced a sense of camaraderie in the city's music-starved youth.

Darko and other rock music aficionados living in military-run Yangon had to wait for cassette tapes to filter over the border from Thailand, which they would listen to in tea shops, the only public areas with good Hi-Fi sound systems.

Darko and his friends would sit and sip their drinks and wait their turn to use the stereo. Only one tape could be played at a time, so they would





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the musician was, and make friends.

To Darko's displeasure, that camaraderie of shared artistic experience that had defined his youth in Yangon has mostly disappeared in Myanmar's modern culture.

"Nowadays it's more about separation," he complained. "Everyone just puts on their headphones and they don't give a shit about what other people listening to, or what other people like. They just shut off from their surroundings and stay in their own room."



Side Effect's lead singer Darko C is bidding to reach across cultural divides through music. Photo: Facebook

Building a space for mutual understanding has become Side Effect's new mission. Starting in 2014, the band began partnering with a Danish nongovernmental organization known as "Turning Tables" to host concerts and songwriting workshops across Myanmar.

Music is used as a vehicle to connect with marginalized youth and facilitate social dialogue in remote parts of the country. One of Darko's goals for the program is to create a space where identity can be expressed as something other than ethnicity or religion – a difficult proposition in a country that has been torn apart by ethnic conflict for the past 70 years.

Referring to the sectarian violence that has plagued Myanmar's western Rakhine state in recent years, Darko said: "You don't choose where you come from. But a Rohingya and a Rakhine poet can have a deep connection."

A common love of music is supposed to act as the glue in these workshops. But sometimes the bond can also be a common hatred. When Turning Tables went to war-torn Kachin state, local musicians, who just saw them as another ethnic majority Burmese group, were initially distrustful.

"So I know most of them hate the Burmese [Myanmar] military," Darko recalled. "And of course, we do too. So our message was: 'You can say



That message has gotten through to some other young rebellious musicians. Ja Som, an ethnic Kachin woman who leads the metal band The Myth, now regularly performs at Turning Tables' concerts, including the annual Music Freedom Day event held in March.

In a video produced by the NGO, the young singer explained the importance of free expression for a female artist:

"For me, music is that you can express your feelings, your beliefs, and your rights...Through music you can freely express everything...So, especially as a woman, I have to fight for what I believe and stand for what I believe."

\* \* \*

In mid-March this year, Darko and Side Effect led a workshop for young local musicians in the seaside town of Mawlamyine, in southeastern Myanmar.

For one week, the professional musicians worked with local youth to build communication skills and record songs. Then, on the last night, they hosted a free concert with some of the biggest names in Myanmar's rap, punk and heavy metal scenes.



Myanmar punk band Side Effect playing at a recent concert. Photo: Daniel Combs

The night of the concert, close to 1,000 young people filtered into downtown Mawlamyine. The energy was electric. Groups from across the region came into the city to get a glimpse of musicians that they would ordinarily have had to travel days to see.

Most of the fans wore whatever clothes showed loyalty to their particular scene. The hip-hop kids were mostly outfitted in NBA jerseys and flat brimmed caps.



woman wore a shirt that said “Problem Child” in lettering made to resemble blood.

But mostly the concert felt like a small town festival that happened to have really angry music blaring out of 15-foot high speaker walls.

Occasionally, toothless skinny old men in longyis would shamble through the back part of the crowd, looking somewhat lost. One bald guy standing in the crowd tapped his feet to the rap song being performed. He said that he was 70 years old and had never seen anything like this before. When asked if he liked the music, he shook his head.

“It sounds like garbage. There’s no appreciation for the classics anymore. And look at all these strange clothes.” But he kept smiling, his legs moving to the beat.

There was group of scantily dressed transgender women that showed up halfway through the show. They mostly huddled together in a knot of colorful sequins, laughing loudly.

The women said that they came from small towns scattered all over the area but stayed in touch on Facebook. When they heard about the concert, they planned to come to the show together. “It’s one of the few times a year where we can be ourselves openly. This is a place where we can be true to ourselves and still make friends.”

At the concert, some of Myanmar’s social rules seemed to break down, which was exactly Darko’s goal. The singer frequently referred to the progress made in other countries’ music scenes when he talked about his hope for Myanmar.

But there is something unique to the local scene that could never be replicated outside of the country. Punk, rap and heavy metal were born in the West. To this day, the music provides an outlet for young people to rebel against authority.

But in New York or Berlin or Tokyo, those angry youths are rebelling against a system that is generally open and free, even if it has its problems. In Myanmar, something else is happening: the young rebels are questioning a society that is decidedly not open and free.

In many ways, mainstream Myanmar celebrates its lack of openness. Outside views can be ridiculed and condemned. The specter of authoritarian history, and its attendant campaign against free information, still clouds every aspect of social dialogue.

At their concerts, Myanmar’s punks are creating a mini- ecosystem of progressive freedoms inside a repressive nationalist state.

\* \* \*



A Myanmar punk fan checks his smartphone in Mandalay. Photo: iStock/Getty Images

At the end of every show, Side Effect plays “The Change”, their most well-known song. It is a bouncy anthem with lots of long wailing “oh-oh-ohs” and audience clapping.

Anywhere else, the lyrics might sound a tad cheesy and melodramatic, but in Myanmar the song has taken on a darker significance. Darko wrote in 2013, a few months before the Meikhtila massacre, at the height of Myanmar’s transition when it seemed like everything was changing for the better.

“It makes me happy to play it,” Darko said. “To remember that moment, full of hope, thinking that we could make a difference. It’s a good feeling.”

*Hey, can you hear me saying  
That I've been always waiting  
To be the one to make a real change  
That's my dream*

*I'm not hiding, man  
But we've been living in a  
place where even dreams  
have been traded  
for fucking gold*



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