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A Rock Band in Bhutan: "Someone has to start doing it"



(Left to Right) Mipham Dorji, Dawa Drakpa, Sajan Sherpa, Ugay Tsheri

"When we went there [India Orange Festival] we had a 45 minute set list. We were playing covers, we had like two originals but all the songs were covers and all the Indian bands, they had all original music...so that was kind of eye-opening," The Baby Boomrs' singer and rhythm guitarist Mipham Dorji says with an embarrassed laugh over Skype from Thimphu, Bhutan. It is April 20th, eight days away from his band dropping their first original EP in a country where the radio waves are dominated by either Dzongkha music – traditional songs made for cultural festivals and Bollywood-like Bhutanese films – or Western covers.

The Baby Boomrs are arguably the only rock band in Bhutan and like other Bhutanese music acts, up until now, mostly perform covers. At Mojo Park, one of the only live music clubs in Thimphu, musicians, "play Western music and it's mostly covers, most of the time," Mipham says with agreements from his band-mates. Mipham, the newest member to the band, joined at a time when they were only playing songs from their idols - The Beatles, The Strokes, Pearl Jam. Mipham was the "lonely Blue's player" who jammed with the band when, as he says, "they never really made any originals." "Our musical tastes were similar. We kinda gelled," says Mipham, "after awhile, they invited me to the band."

They started to play music together and were invited to the Orange Festival in December. But after Mipham, singer and guitarist Dawa Drakpa, singer Ugay Tsheri, and drummer Sajan Sherpa performed songs such as "Rockin' Robin" the event organizer told them to write their own music, "we were lucky to be there, playing covers," says Dawa with a nervous laugh. This pushed them to start writing and with less than a week to go, they're about to release an original EP.



The Baby Boomrs accept blessings before their release show

"You'll get a mixed feeling, 'cause the songs are pretty diverse from one another," says Sajan about the EP. Two of the songs released before the show, "She Said" and "O! Moon", are a deviation from the high-pitched female and melodic male duet stereotypical of Bhutanese music. They also sound like two genres in themselves. "O! Moon" is garage band rock, with vocals dripping with longing and quick riffs, it's The Strokes circa 2001 (one of the band's musical influences). "She Said", on the other hand, is pure punk rock. It hits you from the beginning with energy, a bad-ass bass riff and an angsty lead vocal who is, "going to rock this joint until I burst to flames."

"The central theme, you know, love. Some social commentary, some universal stuff, nothing specific," Mipham says. "We have three singers in the band - me, Dawa, and Ugyen. We write our own lyrics, we bring in the tune and then we work on it." They aren't attempting to write the next rock ballad. They just write what sounds cool. "We don't overanalyze anything and say, 'Oh, this is the message we are trying to send,'" says Sajan it's "very casual, no message." (Bhutanese are stereotypically modest.)

The music, inspired by The Beatles, and their own take on rock-n-roll, is a break from Bhutan's regular music scene. "The musical market here is very, very focused on the Bhutanese genre, that's very popular, and the hip-hop scene seems to be coming up with the young kids," Mipham says, "I don't know really where we stand, yet," he admits.



(Left to Right) Sajan Sherpa, Ugya Tsheri, Mipham Dorji, Dawa Drakpa

"There's not much of an opportunity, here, unless you sing a Bhutanese song to use in a movie," Drakpa continues. Nevertheless, they persist. Mainly because of their commitment to rock-n-roll. "Why does everybody like rock-n-roll? It's a universal thing. It's very different

from what we have here. It's full of energy. Our music is a lot more subdued, it was different and at the time it was cool," Drakpa remembers with a giggle.

They all were drawn to Western music and consequentially, each other. "When I was in 9 standard, I met Dawa," says Ugay, a founding member of the band, "there was one school festival going on and Dawa and I performed there. It was The Beatles' song, "I Should Have Known." From then on I decided to jam up with Dawa and then he started a band."

Their namesake and first video were inspired by their heroes, The Beatles. Aine Carey produced their recording of the song and directed their video. Meditating with monks, spinning prayer wheels and re-creating the iconic walk across Abbey Road on the streets of Thimphu all while in Ghos (the traditional dress of the country) "to pay homage to our country," says Drukpa, the band sang "Can't Buy Me Love". The video peaked at 24k views - roughly a quarter of the population of



Dawa Drakpa jamming on the streets of Thimphu with a local dog

A small country, with little foreigners (because of strict government regulations designed to preserve Bhutanese culture and environment) equals a small music scene with little variation. "There's like song number one, and then you copy from that song number one, and then you make it song number two, and then some other artist copies from song number two, and make it song number three," says Ugay with a bit of exhaustion, "so that there's just a chain of one song going through all around, again and again."

That's why the band agrees that for the industry to diversify they need to, "get gigs outside, play with other bands outside, get more exposure," says Sajan, then they hope to "come back to Bhutan, give a new feel to Bhutanese music." They're not sure what will come of it but they hope it will be "something different", continues Sajan, "we hope it's something good, but we haven't figured it out yet."

With the release of their first EP, they think it's a start. To what? "Birth of a new genre", shouts Ugay; "Respected by the musical community around the world," says Mipham with a glimmer of hope. They all agree that exposure to new music and ideas is key to trailblazing a new music scene. But it is tough. Bhutan doesn't host many international bands, there aren't a ton of music programs (most of the bandmates are self-taught, graduates of the school of YouTube), instruments are imported and the radio plays mainly Dzongkha music mixed with the same handful of western songs (however, this is a common complaint by musical purists in any country).

"The music scene is growing. More bands are coming up," says Drakpa with a tinge of hope, "they are playing different songs." And with an original EP and new music video released and performed this past weekend, they are leading the way.

"Someone has to start doing it," says Ugyen, "everybody else will follow. It's already happening."

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