Introduction

In 1755 King Alaungpaya, the founder of the last great Burmese monarchical dynasty, arrived at the small fishing village of Dagon. At the end of a long campaign to conquer and unify much of what we now know as Burma, he decided to found his new capital. He renamed the location Yan-gon, meaning "the end of strife." Standing in modern-day Yangon (also known as Rangoon), it is easy to imagine what Alaungpaya must have seen. Undoubtedly he raised his eyes to the glorious sight of the Shwedagon Pagoda, where devout Buddhists have venerated a shrine containing eight hairs from the head of Gautama Buddha for more than a millennium. He must have seen small family homes made of bamboo, and women carrying their produce to market in baskets balanced on their heads. He would have given alms to saffron-robed monks who wandered the streets at dawn, begging bowls in hand.

It is easy to picture the scene as it looked 250 years ago because, in many ways, the city still resembles the village where Alaungpaya rested. Nowadays, of course, the bamboo huts are interspersed with concrete and steel; there seems to be a new construction project on every major thoroughfare. Cars race past the open-air markets, and monks wear eyeglasses and ride public buses. But glimpses of the older Yangon are everywhere in the contemporary city.

We can still see some of what Alaungpaya saw, and we can still hear some of what he heard. The musical tradition that flourished in the courts of kings like Alaungpaya, known as the *Maha Gita*, continues to develop today as a vibrant and important part of Burmese life in the twenty-first century. The *Maha Gita* is a body of song texts written down some centuries ago; the melodies that accompany these texts have been passed down orally. The songs are accompanied by a variety of distinctively Burmese musical instruments, such as the *saung gauk* (harp) and the *pattala* (xylophone). The king's mighty instrumental ensemble, known as the *hsaing waing*, includes a set of pitched drums called the *pat waing*, tuned gongs; and the *hmay*, an aerophone with a particularly piercing sound.¹ Now, as then, singers and instrumentalists trained in the *Maha Gita* perform for Buddhist rituals and at weddings, and play an important part in public festivals. *Maha Gita* performers appear frequently in government-sponsored television shows, and young people study the tunes and techniques of the *thuchin kyi* (great songs) at Yangon's University of Culture.²
From our historical vantage point, we can also hear Burmese musical sounds that Alaungpaya could not have imagined. His dynasty ended, slowly and painfully, as the British colonized Burma in waves of invasion during the nineteenth century. English cultural products, including musical instruments, came to Burma with the colonists, and the resourceful Burmese adopted them for their own use. Through the twentieth century, Burmese musicians developed uniquely Burmese ways of playing the piano, the violin, and the guitar. The nomenclature evolved to reflect the change. Today, when Burmese musicians use a piano to play European classical music, they call it a piano, but when they use it to perform *thachin kyi*, they call it *sandaya* (just as, in the English-speaking world, a violin is called a fiddle when it is used to play bluegrass repertoire). In addition, they combined their own melodies and singing style with Western instruments (in the 1920s, the slide guitar, and later, electronic keyboards and guitars) to create a new style. This fusion genre is known as *kalabaw* or *mono*, after the single-track recording devices on which it was first recorded in mid-century. The moniker *mono* also serves to distinguish the fusion of traditional music with Western instrumentation from the third important genre of Burmese music, called *stereo*, which is the focus of this study.

*Stereo* (pronounced “sah-TEE-ree-oh”) musicians are unabashed admirers of Anglo-American pop music, and *stereo* aims to fit squarely within the Western pop and rock tradition. The term *stereo*, however, has become rather dated, and most Burmese people no longer use it. Because of this, and in deference to my
English-language readers, in this book I usually refer to stereo as "Burmese pop music," which is indeed widely popular in Burma. (The term "popular music" embraces many musical genres created during the twentieth century, including pop and rock and other genres such as rhythm and blues, disco, country, and soul.) Burmese pop music—like pop music around the globe—consists of short songs, recorded in a studio and performed live by (usually) solo singers accompanied by the rock instrumentarium: electronically amplified guitars, a drum kit, and a keyboard. These songs are always constructed using tonal harmonies and organized in verse-and-chorus form.

It is important to note that the entire Burmese pop music industry is located in Yangon: virtually all recordings are made in studios in Yangon, and everyone who wishes to make a career in pop music must live in Yangon. Because the recordings eventually make their way to other large urban areas and even to small villages across the country, the music is understood to be "Burmese" pop rather than a solely Yangon-based genre; but the fact remains that Yangon is the cradle of this music.

Stereo music is now the dominant music on the airwaves in Yangon, and concerts given by the best-known artists attract thousands of ticket-holders. Photos of the beautiful young singers who perform in these shows appear weekly in tabloid-style journals. Hundreds of people make their livings working in the
Yangon-based industry. It is clear that the Burmese pop music scene is increasingly important in Burmese life generally. (Hip-hop, which has exploded in Burma during the past five years, is becoming important as well, but it is unfortunately outside the purview of this book.\(^9\) Hip-hop artists do have some links to the *stereo* music world in Yangon, but industries are independent of each other.) In this book I will discuss many of the salient aspects of the Burmese pop music scene. For now, it will suffice to make one important point: Burmese pop music cannot be dismissed as just another instance of cultural imperialism.

Cultural imperialism has been a favorite theory of scholars seeking to explain the ubiquity of Anglo-American pop music around the globe.\(^{10}\) National leaders, too, have deployed the term when expressing their hostility to Western pop music: Indonesia's Soekarno, for example, condemned the presence of rock music in his country as “cultural imperialism,”\(^{11}\) and spokesmen for the government of the People’s Republic of China railed against Mandopop as “spiritual pollution” from the West.\(^{12}\) Despite its widespread use, the term “cultural imperialism” is notoriously difficult to define. In his book of the same title, John Tomlinson spends nine pages explaining why he cannot provide a short and coherent definition of it.\(^{13}\)

Pop music scholar Keith Negus argues that whatever else we might say about it, cultural imperialism must be understood as the dominance of certain ownership structures, media technologies, and cultural products in a given market.\(^{14}\) Following Negus’s definition, I argue that the Burmese case cannot be dismissed as a straightforward imposition of American cultural values and products on a vulnerable foreign population. Quite the opposite, in fact: Burmese musicians, until very recently, have gone to great lengths to acquire Western-made recordings, instruments, and recording equipment. These products were not (legally) available in the early days of *stereo*, and even now must be smuggled into the country in defiance of international sanctions. None of the Big Four oligarchic recording companies—Sony Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group, Universal Music Group and the EMI Group—has ever had a corporate presence in Burma.

Why, then, the deep attraction to Anglo-American cultural products and to English pop songs in particular? During the colonial era, which lasted until 1947, British overlords promoted all things English to their subject population. They managed to convince at least some Burmese people that the English education system, the English language, and the British way of life were markedly superior to their Burmese analogs. Even today, it is possible to meet self-confident Burmese people (I met some of them during my research) who believe that their own society is somehow lacking in comparison to the West. So we must acknowledge that Burmese people are living with the legacy of an explicit cultural and military imperialism that predisposes some of them to valorize, among other things, Anglo-American pop music.

This aspect of the Burmese pop music scene has led Western journalists to describe the music, and its creators, as little more than the dregs of the American
rock and roll movement. Phil Zabriskie, for example, articulated this view in his 2002 *Time* magazine piece, as did Scott Carrier in a longer piece called “Rock the Junta.” In the view of these journalists, who usually stay in Yangon for only a few days and who do not speak Burmese, musicians are sad, uncreative figures who do nothing but imitate the great music of the West. Zabriskie describes Zaw Win Htut as a rocker who performs “watered-down Burmese covers of rock relics by the Eagles, Rod Stewart and the Beatles” and who “cannot afford to be ... idealistic.” And Carrier dismisses the whole city of Yangon with a sniff: “While there was a lot of rock and pop music being played all over town, most of it was just awful.” Perhaps it seems like tilting at windmills to take issue with these short articles. But this type of literature is virtually all that English-speaking international audiences ever read about Burmese pop musicians; therefore, it is important to scrutinize their accuracy.

In this book I argue that the assessment of Zabriskie and Carrier is too simplistic. Yes, Burmese musicians do work hard to learn and reproduce the Western rock and pop traditions, but they do not do so because their airwaves, retail shops, and concert stages are being overtaken by Hollywood-based multinationals. And while they do prize English-language pop songs, they do not do so simply because their grandparents were the colonial subjects of Britain. Rather, these musicians exercise agency and considerable ingenuity in their pursuit of “international music” (as they frequently call it). In many cases, they have done so in defiance of their own government.

In 1962, after a short-lived era of independence and parliamentary democracy in Burma, a group of generals overthrew the elected government and installed their leader, General Ne Win, as the supreme ruler of the country. Ne Win established the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as the only legal political party and launched the Burmese Way to Socialism, the ideology that shaped the country for most of the next three decades. One of the most important features of this policy was the extreme isolation it imposed on Burma. In the interests of creating a self-sufficient socialist economy, the new military government severely restricted trade with other countries and access to foreign goods. Within months, almost all foreigners were expelled from the country, and tourist visits were limited to seven days. At the same time, the junta promoted its own narrow vision of “Burmese culture,” modeled on Ne Win’s understanding of the former kings of Burma. The BSPP rejected most forms of Western culture as “decadent,” and Ne Win reserved a special hatred for American rock and pop music.

It was during the early part of the BSPP era that young Burmese grew their hair long, built their own electric guitars, and listened to clandestinely obtained recordings of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Since pop music was not allowed on government radio—only *thanchin kyi* and *mono* were acceptable—they had to circulate their music via friends and family. They relied on the few of their peers who were allowed to travel abroad (mostly to Eastern European socialist
countries) to obtain recordings and musical instruction books. They cultivated friendships with the few Western diplomats they met in order to obtain precious foreign-made instruments and recording equipment. And their music-making moved into the open in 1973 when the BSPP co-opted their new stereo style in order to promote a government referendum. Since that time, the Burmese regime has tolerated pop music and even exploited it for its own purposes.

The BSPP was succeeded in 1988 by a government first known as the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and later as the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council). This government, like the BSPP, was a military dictatorship that repeatedly showed its utter disregard for its citizens’ wishes and needs. For example, in 1989 the SLORC changed the name of the country to the Union of Myanmar. This move was vigorously protested by the National League for Democracy, the political party that received the lion’s share of the popular vote in elections in 1990—but which was never allowed to assume power. (Note that in this book I refer to the country as Burma, out of respect for the NLD’s position, except when I refer to government ministries or publications that use the word Myanmar.) All of the events discussed in this book took place during the SPDC era, which ended on March 30, 2011, when the SPDC was formally dissolved. The fraudulent election of 2010 brought a supposedly new and democratic government to power. However, the new government is dominated by the Union Solidarity and Development Party, a group that is almost indistinguishable from the former SPDC. As this book went to press, Burma was still, in effect, controlled by a corrupt and unjust military junta.

Burma’s successive military governments have distinguished themselves by their willingness to murder citizens who speak in opposition to them. Notoriously, the BSPP massacred university students demonstrating for democratic rights in 1962 and 1974, and citizens at large who marched for democracy in 1988. The SPDC, for its part, jailed thousands of opposition leaders, including the elected head of state, Aung San Suu Kyi. This regime sponsored a mob which murdered prodemocracy supporters (at the Depayin Massacre of 2003) and sent soldiers to abduct and kill Buddhist monks during the short-lived Saffron Revolution of September 2007. Although the SPDC was not as isolationist as was the BSPP, and in fact worked hard to increase tourism in Burma, it remained suspicious of any force which might draw the loyalty of its citizens—for example, rock stars on stage in front of thousands of screaming fans. It continued to censor pop music rigorously, and it made no bones about banning or even jailing entertainers who might promote any kind of change (say, free and fair elections) that would threaten their dominance.

In this book I contest the notion that Burmese pop music is nothing more than the outworking of either Western cultural imperialism or local military totalitarianism. While both of these historical forces have deeply affected the development of Burmese pop, neither can claim to be its raison d’être. As the history of the genre shows, reality is more complex, and more interesting.

A Brief History of Pop Music in Burma

In 1903, the Gramophone Company made the first recordings of Burmese music, and by 1910 more than five hundred recordings had been released. These early recordings captured the classical music of the Maha Gita tradition. The engines of the industry, however, were located outside the country: for the first few decades, Burmese recording companies pressed their 78 LPs in Calcutta. The first recording studio inside Burma was built in 1952, and pressing plants appeared in the 1960s. Before the 1962 military coup, at least eighty different recording companies specialized in recording various genres of Burmese music. The A-1 recording company, for example, made its mark by specializing in recordings of kalabaung (or mono) songs. Kalabaung, as we have seen, represents a fusion of local and Western traditions. During the early twentieth century, prosperous Burmese in Yangon also enjoyed music that was imported intact from outside. American big band jazz was particularly popular; some of the greats performed in Burma in the 1950s and in the wake of their shows, jazz nightclubs sprang up to serve audiences who wanted to continue to enjoy jazz. The last of these nightclubs closed in the 1970s. By that time “fusion between Western styles and Burmese modern traditional music slowed significantly.” The balance tipped in favor of foreign music that was closely imitated, rather than transformed, by Burmese musicians.

Burmese pop music got started in the early 1960s, when young Burmese people became enamored of electrified or amplified music. In fact, several of the older musicians interviewed for this book remembered the 1960s as a turning point, because “electronic music” became available then. The most compelling manifestation of this new kind of music was American rock and roll, always performed by ensembles centered on the electric guitar. The style was particularly popular on the campus of Rangoon (now Yangon) University, where young men strummed their guitars and sang outside women’s dorms in the evenings. The first few Yangon-based rock bands were cover bands dedicated to reproducing Anglo-American hits. They were composed of entrepreneurial young men whose families had enough resources to purchase instruments—and the patience to listen to hours of practicing.

During this era, aspiring teenagers were supported in their quest to master American rock by the Burma Broadcasting Service. The BBS, which had been established by the British colonial regime, was maintained after independence in largely the same format. Importantly, it required that all programming be in English. Young rock bands were given the chance to play for a national audience—and even earn an honorarium—during the BBS’s amateur talent hour. Their repertoire fit the bill because it consisted entirely of “English songs” (cover songs). A member of one of the most successful bands of this era, the Playboys, recalled performing Elvis, Cliff Richard, and Beatles songs for the BBS as a teenager: “We could play five songs in forty-five minutes, and we got forty-five kyat to cover our transportation costs.” He pointed out that the BBS
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was extremely helpful to young pop musicians because it had close ties to the Voice of America. Because of this connection, his band and others like them had access to the American-produced records they wanted to cover. He estimated that his band got about 90 percent of their records from the BBS.

As Burmese musicians mastered the performance techniques and the repertory of Western pop music, they began writing Burmese lyrics for the American and British melodies they liked so much. This kind of composition, called *copy thachin*, remains important in Burma today. In 1967, university student U Htun Naung wrote what is now identified as Burma's first *own tune* (original) pop song, "Mommy I Want a Girlfriend." The melody, rhythm, and harmony, as well as the lyrics, were all of his own creation. He recorded this song on equipment he kept in his dorm room at Rangoon University. By 1969, copies of this song were delighting fans all over Burma. And in 1971, when entrepreneur U Ba Thein opened the country's first *stereo* recording studio, *stereo* music (named after the dual-track tape recorder featured in the studio) took off. Local pop musicians were then able to create professional-quality recordings and sell them to fans.

In 1973, Sai Htee Saing and his band The Wild Ones made history as the first to commit to performing nothing but *own tunes*. In 1976, the Yin Mar Music Store opened in downtown Yangon. This was the first store devoted entirely to stocking foreign-made recordings, and it served (and still serves) as a mecca for young Burmese who want to learn how to play and sing pop music. Inspired by recordings acquired at Yin Mar, Sai Htee Saing's increasingly large number of peers created, performed, and recorded *copy thachin* and *own tunes* through the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s, a handful of bands (including Iron Cross, The Wild Ones, and Emperor) recorded between thirty and fifty albums per year, usually serving as backup ensembles for a rotating cast of singers. (This pattern persists today, as I discuss at length in this book.) During this era, the Burmese pop scene even produced a handful of all-female bands. Together, these pop music bands became the entertainment of choice for many parties, weddings, and professional functions. And Burmese pop musicians continued to work in tourist venues, impressing foreigners with their note-perfect renditions of English hit songs.

By the close of the 1990s, live performances for large Burmese audiences had grown rare, in part because of the government's reluctance to allow large crowds to congregate. On January 27, 2001, Zaw Win Htut and a handful of other famous Burmese singers performed at the first "big show" of the new millennium. At this show, the Emperor band accompanied a handful of different singers, each of whom contributed a few songs. This concert serves as a convenient marker for the beginning of the contemporary era of Burmese pop music history. Importantly, it fits the marketing model for Burmese pop that developed in the 1980s. Now virtually all live shows feature one band backing multiple
soloists, and so-called group albums (which include a variety of songs performed by a variety of artists) are the best-selling kind of recordings in the country.

Burma’s first call-in radio station, Yangon City FM, began broadcasting on January 1, 2002.25 This station plays mostly pop music and has been important in the dissemination of Burmese pop to a wider audience in recent years. In addition, consumers are now able to purchase VCD (video compact disc) recordings of their favorite songs. VCDs—the most popular version of modern pop recordings—include audio, video of the performers, and lyrics scrolling across the screen. For this reason they are also known as “karaoke” CDs (one of my friends laughingly calls them “three-in-one”26). In 2007, Myawaddy TV, a government-run television station, premiered a song contest modeled on American Idol. The show, called Melody World, was an immediate success and went on to a second season. And in March of 2008, Mandalay FM (another call-in radio station modeled on Yangon City FM) started broadcasting in both Mandalay and Yangon.

As these examples show, the current era is one of dramatic expansion. However, it is also marked by deep uncertainty. Many of the full-time professionals who work in the Burmese pop music scene worry that their industry is in grave danger. Piracy is rampant, and it is driving profits down so far that some careers have already been lost. Other industry insiders are struggling financially and are pessimistic about the future. Nevertheless, Burmese pop musicians persist in their efforts to create meaningful and commercially successful music.

They say that their music, or more precisely their musical activities, come “from the heart.” When they use this expression, in English or in Burmese, they mean the same that English-speakers do when they use it: their decisions are based on their emotions, and their musical efforts are the logical outcome of their own feelings. Singers say that their singing comes from their hearts; audio engineers say that their editing decisions come from their hearts; and even producers say that music producing is a reflection of what is in their hearts.27 Interestingly, composers say that emotion is so important to the process of composing that it makes a significant difference in the amount of time it takes to compose a song. If Burmese pop music composers feel very deeply, they say that they can compose a song in a matter of hours—otherwise, it may take weeks or months.28

Albin Zak writes that American pop musicians make exactly the same claim.29 When asked, they aver that “there are no rules,” because all of their artistic decisions are based on intuition or emotion. Yet the fact remains that their industry has developed conventional practices that guide musicians, whether they are aware of this or not. The same is true in Burma: the work and lives of pop musicians there are marked by norms and patterns. My goal in this book is to delineate these norms and patterns without implying that the real people involved in them are ever entirely predictable. I aim here to reveal the heart of the Burmese pop music industry, as I learned about it through observation, participation, and conversation.
Conducting Research in Burma

The particular social context of Burmese pop music has not, until now, been explored in depth, either by scholars of popular music or by contributors to Burma studies. By writing this book, I hope in some small way to contribute to both of those disciplines. The newspaper articles by Carrier and Zabriskie, mentioned above, represent two of only a handful of scholarly and journalistic treatments of pop music in Burma. No extended study, based on the statements and behaviors of Burmese pop musicians themselves, has previously been conducted.

In colonial times, English-language anthropological study of Burma focused on the amazing ethnic diversity in the country. In fact, one of the field's most enduringly influential books is Edmund Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structures.* Today, the government claims that there are 135 different "national races" in the country, including the majority Burmans (also known as the Myanmar people). Although no accurate census has been conducted since the 1930s, the consensus is that ethnic minority groups, like the Kachin, Chin, Karen, Shan, and others comprise about 30 percent of the total population of about 50 million. Members of these groups play a disproportionately important role in the pop music industry, as I explain in detail later. Out of respect for my informants' preferences, I usually refer to ethnic minority groups, or national races, as *tain-yin-tha.*

Much of the more recent research on Burma has focused on political histories. Recent important contributions to the field continue this focus, with scholars examining the pressing question of Burma's political future in light of its past. Two books which treat this theme, and which are based on interviews conducted with Burmese people, have been published recently. However, most of the outstanding work in Burma studies does not privilege the voices of Burmese people themselves.

This book does privilege Burmese voices. From 2007 to 2009, I spent nearly six months living in Yangon, interacting with people in the center and on the fringes of the pop music industry on a nearly daily basis. I attended concerts and rehearsals, music classes, recording sessions, and religious services. I purchased music, and I even contributed in a small way to the production of music (by playing the keyboards for one track on one recording, as I describe in chapter 3). But my main research method was the interview. I conducted seventy-seven interviews, most of them lasting approximately two hours, with people from across the industry. I interviewed some of the highest-paid, most recognizable performers in the country, as well as young people struggling to break into the music business. In addition, I interviewed composers, producers, audio engineers, concert promoters, radio station management personnel, and others, such as music teachers, whose work is more tangential to the industry. Many of the assertions I make in this book are based on these interviews.
And I include my interviewees' first-person statements at every juncture. I do so because I believe, along with Robert Walser, that "ultimately, musical analysis can be considered credible only if it helps explain the significance of musical activities in particular social contexts."

One aspect of the Burmese pop music industry is not explored in detail in this book: the perspectives and contributions of fans. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, making any kind of broad claims about consumer reception of Burmese pop music would require a significant data sample. In Burma there are no fan clubs or similar organizations, so there is no obvious way to collect data about preferences and trends. Even sales numbers are hard to verify, as I explain in chapter 4. Of course, during my time in Yangon, I met many people who could be described as fans of pop music, and I did learn about the music industry from them. However, formal interviews in Burma are difficult, since people can easily fall under suspicion if it becomes known that they are having significant conversations with foreigners. Therefore, I limited my formal (quotable) interviews to industry insiders, all of whom gave their oral or written consent to be interviewed, and most of whom were promised confidentiality. Only a handful of interviewees are identified by their real names in this book; all of the others have been given pseudonyms. The pseudonyms are a mix of Burmese names and English names (usually a first name only), as is typical in any cross-section of the population in Yangon.

I have been asked by many people how I managed to conduct research for this book. The truth is that it was rather straightforward. I first became interested in Burma in the late 1990s, while living in my native Canada, where I met some Burmese refugees. In late 2001, I traveled to the Thai-Burma border to do humanitarian work in refugee camps there. Subsequently, while a PhD student at Cornell University, I published an article about Karen young people dancing in the Mae Khong Kha refugee camp. Later, I conducted fieldwork among the Chin population of Indianapolis, Indiana, which resulted in another article about music among Burmese people outside of Burma. In June 2007, I got on a plane and flew to Yangon, ready to research music-making inside the country. Within two weeks I had met a number of amateur musicians and had been invited to teach at a church-sponsored music camp. When I returned to Yangon in December of that year, my contacts quickly led to interviews with significant public figures in the pop music industry.

Of course, I understand why I have been asked so often about my research methods. It is logical to wonder how any foreigner could conduct extensive interviews—that is, engage in illegal activity—in one of the world’s most notoriously repressive states. In fact, this very question has spawned a small but significant literature of the "I-bravely-went-to-Burma-and-talked-to-regular-people-and-heroically-emerged-to-tell-the-tale" variety. Books and articles in this genre paint the country as a hellish police state, and then glorify the author for having the nerve to spend time there.
One example is particularly germane, because the author, Manny Brand, writes about his attempt to research music education. The title of his chapter gives a fair indication of his perspective: "Hopelessness and Despair in Yangon, Myanmar." Brand spent a week in Yangon attempting to "find a music teacher, one who could tell me about teaching in such an isolated, regimented and discouraging place." Brand recounts a cloak-and-dagger tale: he was questioned by threatening government officials, received a surreptitiously passed note directing him to a secret music school, and finally interviewed a music teacher who told him, "Living here means: no job, no personal development, no integrity, no truth, no pride, no momentum, no goals, no happiness and certainly no freedom. It means waking up every morning with fear—fear of repression, fear of arrest, fear of torture and fear of prison. . . . Now, I teach music lessons, but I am afraid to perform anymore. All my musician friends are afraid." My own experience was, in many ways, the polar opposite of Brand's. For example, I interviewed a teacher at the State High School for Fine Arts that Brand tried to visit. Unlike him, I was not interrogated by menacing officials as a result. I also visited three other privately run music schools, none of which was an underground operation hiding from military intelligence. And although the teachers and students at those schools were honest about the challenges they face as citizens of Burma, they did not express existential hopelessness and despair. Certainly I neither heard nor perceived that all Burmese musicians are constantly afraid. Rather, I came away from this project profoundly impressed by, and grateful for, the consistent hospitality at the heart of Burmese society. I was able to write this book because dozens of Burmese people—Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims—invited me into their homes, offices, and recording studios. They listened patiently to my efforts to express myself in Burmese, gave me copies of their recordings for analysis, and generously answered my many questions. In fact, my sojourn in Burma stands out in my memory as a time when I was surrounded by welcoming, friendly people. This book represents my best effort to do justice to their ideas and experiences.

In chapter 1, I describe some of the creators of Burmese pop music and outline the career path that musicians typically follow. I examine the degree of autonomy that musicians enjoy in relation to their colleagues, their fans, and the Burmese regime.

In chapter 2, I describe the music that these musicians create. This chapter looks at the issues of innovation and of imitating the Western model. I analyze three examples of fusion music created by Burmese pop musicians, but I also investigate why it is that so many of them spend so much time focusing on imitation rather than innovation.

In chapter 3, I describe the learning and rehearsal culture created by these musicians. I discuss their ideas about talent, showing that these beliefs affect their perceptions about rehearsing, for example. Furthermore, I argue that
these beliefs intersect with their religious beliefs, so the current learning and rehearsal culture will likely resist significant change.

In chapter 4, I turn from the creators of music to the distribution side of the industry. Using sociologist Richard A. Peterson’s production perspective, I examine six facets of the distribution of pop music in Yangon. I argue that a close look at Burma’s pop music industry forces us to reconsider Peterson’s own theories about cultural production.

In chapter 5, I take on the exercise of state power in Burma, as manifest in the censorship system. I look at controllers of music (censors) and delineate the relationship that exists between them and their putative subjects, the musicians.