



RISING ASIA
JOURNAL



RISING ASIA
FOUNDATION

Special Issue
Postwar Music in Vietnam and the Diaspora

RESEARCH ARTICLE

VINH PHU PHAM
Bard Early College, New York

PARIS BY NIGHT **And the Making of Vietnamese American Music**

ABSTRACT

For four decades, *Paris by Night*, a pre-recorded musical-variety show hosted predominantly in the United States has been a cultural pillar of Vietnamese families across the globe. From war-time music and love ballads to sketch comedy and singing competitions, the show, which has sold millions of copies worldwide, encapsulates both mainstream, diasporic-Vietnamese cultural identity and anti-communist political ideology. As of 2024, *Paris by Night* is still officially banned in Vietnam despite its prevailing popularity, as demonstrated by its accessibility in the black market. Contrary to the commonly held notion that the show is merely a residual cultural artifact of the Republic of Vietnam, I argue that attention ought to shift, towards how the show laid the foundation for what can be conceptualized as Vietnamese American music today. In taking samples from recorded shows from the 1990s to the present, I ma-



ke the case that both the producers and cast of the show have not only reproduced music from the Republic of Vietnam, but have also incorporated new forms and renovated genres by introducing elements from American popular music as well as other mainstream international music, to produce a platform that is uniquely Vietnamese American.

Keywords: Nhạc vàng, *Paris by Night*, Thúy Nga, Vietnamese American music, Vietnamese diaspora

Upon entering any Vietnamese grocery market in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s, customers would be immediately greeted with stacks of printed newspapers and a wall of home VHS tapes of musical entertainment from *Trung Tâm Asia*, *Vân Sơn*, *Làng Văn*, and Thúy Nga's *Paris by Night (PBN)*, all of which were launched in that period. Nestled between the perfume of familiar ingredients and the smiling faces of Vietnamese celebrities plastered on promotional posters of newly released tapes, a new cultural formation came into being. For many overseas Vietnamese during this period, the grocery stores and local restaurants acted as a distribution network for what would pragmatically be considered the foundation of Vietnamese American society, and more specifically, the fortuitous creation of Vietnamese American music. It is not a stretch to claim that there was perhaps not a single Vietnamese person who had not heard of *PBN*, the pre-recorded musical variety show, sometimes with live performances, which dominated Vietnamese media in the United States throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. This is especially true in communities throughout the United States that were far from the centers of Vietnamese American culture like San Jose, Houston, or Orange County in California, and so forth, where cultural products were relegated to



print and recorded media. Like so many other Vietnamese cultural products that have now seeped into the mainstream—*phở*, *bánh mì*, *cà phê sữa đá*, etc.—Vietnamese American music is irrefutably a child of the diaspora.

Born after the fall of Saigon, this music is the byproduct of South Vietnam before 1975. The post-1975 era underwent profound political change and turmoil, and whose displaced peoples were forced to encounter cultural negotiations as part of their diasporic condition. *PBN* stands out, I contend, as the most impactful, de facto musical laboratory for Vietnamese American artistic production amongst the different cultural actors such as artists, writers, composers, singers, actors, dancers, and even those grocery store merchants who contributed in the creation of this cultural movement as a cultural commodity. Beyond this, as Nhi Lieu has demonstrated, these videos were “arguably the most popular cultural products circulating throughout the Vietnamese diaspora” with an audience of nearly 2.5 million overseas Vietnamese and over 72 million through the gray market in Vietnam.¹ Building on the works of scholars like Caroline Valverde, who has affirmed that these “companies illustrate transnational culture flows and forms of collaboration between Vietnamese American and Vietnamese music makers,” in this chapter, I make the case that there can be no conception of Vietnamese American music as a cultural phenomenon without *PBN*.² Perhaps more controversially, I also argue Vietnamese American music

¹ Nhi T. Lieu, “Performing Culture in Diaspora: Assimilation and Hybridity in Paris by Night Videos and Vietnamese American Niche Media,” in *Alien Encounters* (New York: Duke University Press, 2020), 195, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822389835-010>

² Kieu Linh Caroline Valverde, “Making Vietnamese Music Transnational: Sounds of Home, Resistance and Change,” *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 29, <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.29.1.1g7nm7m4715140hv>



is, first and foremost, the music of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) that has undergone a process of Americanization. Similar to Nhi Lieu, I recognize that the Americanization is, in effect, a process of assimilation and hybridity for Vietnamese American identity, but I also highlight how this project of cultural preservation and renovation consequently produces the very possibility of the category of Vietnamese American music.³ Secondly, and as a result of the Americanizing process, contemporary representation of “authentic” music in Vietnam itself finds its roots through a double process of translation; starting from the initial imports of productions like those of *PBN*, to its now local reinterpretation of the overseas performances. In other words, I posit that the performance of authenticity in contemporary Vietnamese productions finds its aesthetic roots in overseas performances, which employs the political ethos of the RVN as its genesis and authentic cultural source. As I see it, because of all this, Vietnamese American music, akin to other diasporic media content, has historically always been transnational and culturally generative.

Categorizing Vietnamese Americanness

The cultural identity of migrant groups within the United States has always been a central issue in understanding the complex landscape that makes up the nation. For many, the oft used hyphen between, say, Vietnamese and American, is meant to indicate a hybrid identity in which national cultures are bounded by proximity, borrowing, and typically, mixing. Yet, categories like these are also ill-defined in their boundaries and characteristics as their referents are usually taken as self-evident or too analogically to the extent that, as an example, any national cultural

³ Lieu, “Performing Culture in Diaspora,” 195.

production or behavior stemming from beyond the United States should be recognized simply by the naming that very nation.

The reasons for this are many, but it serves to make the case that (1) nations are neither monolithic nor self-evident to the extent that shared cultural values are not always universal amongst a group of people of the same nation; (2) not all nations have access to legally defined and recognized territories to which they might refer; and (3) nationalist belongings can also develop and be defined by separation from a people's original territory or imagined homeland, as in the case with diasporic communities. In other words, and more relevant to the issues of this article, to say that something or someone is "Vietnamese-American" is an incomplete statement to the extent that only hints to a history or contact and cultural *métissage* without outlining the conditions that make it so. More importantly, given that there were not one but two Vietnams, the collapse of these differing identities for the sake of brevity in casual conversation neither elucidates more on *why* something is necessarily *Vietnamese* (which Vietnam are we talking about?), or *what* precisely makes it characteristically American. For the sake of this paper, Vietnamese American is understood as a very particular category referring to a set of cultural forces and products that were created and engendered by the Vietnamese diaspora. Implicitly, this means that the birth of Vietnamese American cultural production and sentimentality refers directly to the experience of both the departure from Vietnam and to the narrativized, collective memory of the RVN. In the case of Vietnamese American music, what makes the category definable is undoubtedly the history of national division, extended warfare, and the postwar exile. And while this category has grown over the years to include non-war related genres and styles, I want to make the case that, here, Vietnamese American music refers strictly to the

category that stemmed from a very particular set of social conditions, namely of Vietnamese diaspora and the cultural legacy of the RVN. What makes this music American, then, is not simply that it was made on American soil, but that it has gone through the process of Americanization by way of importing and incorporating American middle-class values to the musical performances, and through the re-recording and recontextualizing of RVN titles.

The Creation of Modern Vietnamese Music and Popular Music in the RVN

For centuries, Vietnam has had a rich musical tradition spanning folk songs sung in the fields, Chinese-style operas by theater troupes, and court music reserved for dynastic ceremonies. In the seventeenth century, Western music entered Vietnam through Catholic missionaries in the form of liturgical melodies, translated and sung in Vietnamese.⁴ And while this tradition continued to develop throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Western style music remained mostly within the Catholic community with little impact on the rest of Vietnamese society.⁵ It would not be until the first decades of the twentieth century that a new style of Vietnamese music, *cải lương* (renovate the theater) came onto the scene. By the 1930s, following this renovation and the Great Depression, Vietnamese audiences were beginning to be exposed to many more Western songs such as the likes of Josephine Baker and Maurice Chevalier, via sound motion pictures.⁶ It is important to note that the appearance of *cải lương* was part of the larger

⁴ Jason Gibbs, "The West's Songs, Our Songs: The Introduction and Adaptation of Western Popular Song in Vietnam before 1940," *Asian Music* 35, no. 1 (2003): 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.



tân nhạc (new music) movement which began in 1911 and, according to Eric Henry

is characterized by its creators as music based on procedures used in the West, but the term covers a broad spectrum of styles, including many which evolved from Southeast Asian and Chinese, as well as Western, sources. Its best singers use techniques, such as off-tone quavering and microtonal adornment, that cannot be represented on a Western five-line staff, and its instruments are just as likely to be monochords (*dan bau*), vertically held Chinese violins (*erhu*), or bamboo flutes as they are to be cellos or saxophones.⁷

While I will not cover it here, Jason Gibbs has described in detail how the process of Westernization was neither smooth nor without controversy, with French musicologist Jean Yves Claeys calling the adaptation of Western songs cultural “poison,” and Nam Chau, a well-known stage performer, rebutting by saying that the adaptation has positive role in the country’s development.⁸ Further, Wynn Wilcox, points out that this shift towards a renovated theater, which stems from the “*di phong dịch tục* (changing customs and habits) campaign...aimed at simplifying rituals to make them more in tune with modern sensibilities,” coincided directly with larger movements within Vietnamese theater, due to the

⁷ Eric Henry, “Tân Nhạc: Notes toward a Social History of Vietnamese Music in the Twentieth Century,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 135.

⁸ Gibbs, “The West’s Songs, Our Songs,” 68.



rise of local translation of French works and the co-existence of Western-influenced spoken dramas.⁹

The point I want to make here is that even prior to the departure of South Vietnamese refugees, musical performances in Vietnam had already been a critical point of cultural contention since the early decades of the twentieth century, a hybrid commodity balancing between the preservation of heritage and a desire toward aesthetic self-actualization. Moreover, the incorporation and adaptation of new forms with previous cultural performances of the 1930s were indeed part of a larger, modernizing trend in which Vietnamese culture as a whole was undergoing renovation, encompassing everything from literary form and musical genres, to gender norms and ideas of masculinity.¹⁰ One might very well say that modernity in Vietnam, not unlike elsewhere, was a violent process in which the very value of tradition was brought into question. In this sense, the relative position of renovated musical forms and staged performances, as both cultural commodities and externalized markers of modernity, were already an important discourse within the Vietnamese cultural-political sphere prior to the Second World War.

Jumping ahead several decades, Vietnamese music continued its Westernizing trajectory, infusing more Latin rhythm and European pop songs into the mainstream. Save for smaller developments such as the uneven appreciation of Northern music in the South, there would not be any radical differences until the country was split at the seventeenth

⁹ Wynn Wilcox, "Women, Westernization and the Origins of Modern Vietnamese Theatre," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2006): 211.

¹⁰ See Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin: Masculinity and Aesthetic Modernity in Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

parallel. From the 1950s onward, the two Vietnams would develop and concretize their own versions of nationalist music.

In the north, with its clear communist undertones, *nhạc đỏ*, literally “red music,” would become the default Communist Party-endorsed music as it was considered functional revolutionary music, “which strengthens man and serves society,” though the term came about to distinguish it from anything that was not categorically *nhạc vàng*.¹¹ A major part of the propaganda arm of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), *nhạc đỏ*, which originally began as *nhạc cách mạng* or *ca khúc cách mạng* (revolutionary music) was exclusively distributed through Dihavina, an abbreviation of *Đĩa hát Việt Nam* (Records of Vietnam), and was the DRV’s way of cultivating a music industry encompassing a variety of different styles under communist themes.¹² Unlike *nhạc vàng*, the “yellow music” of the RVN, *nhạc đỏ* is generally characterized by, though not limited to, *nhạc kháng chiến* (war music), *nhạc cách mạng* (revolutionary music), or *nhạc lính* (soldier’s music), which at the time was simply known as *ca khúc*.¹³ In the north, yellow music appeared as weak and romantic, full of bourgeois sentimentality, while in the south red music was seen as propagandistic and trite, lacking soul and originality. Although simplistic, this factious tendency meant that each side associated the other’s music as the music of the enemy.

Interestingly, through his research, Jason Gibbs has traced the development of *nhạc đỏ* by looking at “Cùng nhau đi Hồng binh” (“Together We Go Red Soldiers”), by Đinh Nhu, officially designated by

¹¹ Lonán Ó Briain, *Voices of Vietnam: A Century of Radio, Red Music, and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.



the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) as the first song of the revolution.¹⁴ Jointly published in 2001 by Youth Publishers and the Central Committee for Ideology and Culture of the Hồ Chí Minh Communist Youth Union (Đoàn Thanh niên Cộng sản Hồ Chí Minh), the collection, *100 Songs to Greet the Century*, is meant to trace the “progression of songs supporting Vietnam’s wars of resistance to build socialism.”¹⁵ While Gibbs’ findings do not support the VCP’s official narrative of this song’s provenance dating back to 1930, nor does Đinh Nhu as its writer, Gibbs does affirm that the song was indeed in existence by the mid- to late-1930s, and was a powerful instrument of propaganda to build morale among political prisoners.¹⁶ More important than the veracity of the song’s author, or when it was written, and even if it was written in Western musical notation, what stands out especially for the purpose of this chapter, which Gibbs poignantly observes, is that the “song’s placement and dating are almost talismanic in their affirmation of the parallel role of music with such pivotal events as the founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party in Hong Kong in early 1930 and the Nghệ-Tĩnh soviets later the same year.”¹⁷ In other words, as the figurative genesis of *nhạc đỏ*’s revolutionary origins, the song’s power lies not in the uncertain details, but rather its symbolic magnitude as the designated founding of a new musical form to signal Vietnam’s independent modern era. Here, music and nation play a co-constitutive role in legitimizing one another in producing what Gibbs refers to as an

¹⁴ Jason Gibbs, “‘Together We Go Red Soldiers’: The Revolution’s First Song,” *South East Asia Research* 19, no. 4 (2011): 737.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 737.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 752.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 738.



“imagined ancestry,” framing the founding of both party and country as an act of providence.¹⁸

Quite different in its social position to *nhạc đỏ*, *nhạc vàng*'s origins do not have an officially prescribed narrative either by the political or cultural agents of the RVN. Instead, its constitution as a broader category was a communist produced narrative. And unlike *nhạc xanh* (green music), the lesser-mentioned musical category generally thought of as “neutral, useless, [and] strange,” *nhạc vàng* is often placed in direct opposition to *nhạc đỏ*.¹⁹ More generally, *nhạc xanh* also refers to imported songs from other communist nations that were either less political or had no overt political meaning at all. To be clear, the fact that there was no official RVN narrative about the founding of *nhạc vàng* as its preferred designated cultural mode, does not mean that strict rules relating to this particular form of music did not exist. In other words, while the RVN had imposed restrictions on particular songs, this music, often called *tân nhạc* (“contemporary music”) or *nhạc thời trang* (“music of the time”), it never posed enough of a concern for broader policies regarding *nhạc vàng*'s diffusion. So, while *nhạc vàng* was completely banned in the north for its potential to demoralize the populace, it was only partially regulated in the south depending on the individual works, rather than by genres as a whole. However, Eric Henry points out that regardless of the bans, people continued to “cultivate *nhạc vàng* in private settings, because this music was the true voice of the perceptions and feelings of most Vietnamese people.”²⁰

¹⁸ Gibbs, “Together We Go Red Soldiers,” 750.

¹⁹ Briain, *Voices of Vietnam*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.



Dominated mostly by bolero, rumba, and ballade, *nhạc vàng* is generally marked by performances with a slower tempo, and lyrically by more romantic and melancholic themes. Songs often describe war as a tragedy that destroys homes and families, as well as romance often leading to failed relationships or the death of lovers. One famous example by composer Anh Bằng is “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô” (“Home on the Outskirts”). Written in 1966 in bolero style, the song narrates the experience of a young man who falls in love with a woman in his neighborhood, however, before either of them can confess their love, he is drafted and leaves for the battlefield, declaring *Xa người em nhỏ lên đường tòng chinh* (Being far away from my love for enlistment).²¹ When he finally returns home, the young woman is no longer there, and upon asking a friend, he learns that she has also gone off to be a field medic: *Nàng nay là nữ cứu thương trên chiến trường*.²² The song ends with the young man speaking to the wind hoping they will one day meet again: *Chúng mình hai đứa sẽ còn gặp nhau* (The two of us will meet again).²³

The song is among the most popular and well-known of the genre, having been performed numerous times by different artists on video variety shows such as *PBN*, *Asia*, and *Vân Sơn*. These shows, which encompass comedy sketches, mini-lectures on Vietnamese history, fashion shows, and musical performances, serve a didactic as well as entertainment function. Thematically, their content is common to many other songs because they are about war, heartbreak, and the loss of loved ones. A slightly different but equally well-known example is “Trăng Tàn

²¹ Anh Bằng, “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô,” <https://nhac.vn/bai-hat/can-nha-ngoai-o-duong-thien-lam-sokkAjp>. Accessed January 11, 2024.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

Trên Hè Phố” (“The Moon Sets Over the Summer Street”) by composer Phạm Thế Mỹ, a known *cộng sản nằm vùng* (Communist in hiding). In this song, listeners are presented once more with a melancholic scenario where the war is the backdrop of an intimate scene between two old friends.²⁴ Written in 1965 and originally banned by the RVN Armed Forces Radio, the song narrates the meeting of two long-time friends, one a soldier and the other a musician, on an auspicious evening at a small diner: *Tôi lại gặp anh, Giờ đây nơi quán nhỏ* (I’ve seen you again, in a small restaurant).²⁵ The two reminisce about their youth. As they are about to depart, the song’s narrator wishes his friend victory in the war and asks his soldier friend to remember a poem he has written.²⁶ Personal sentiments prevailed over revolutionary contents found in *nhạc đỏ* and, therefore, led to the postwar DRV government’s broad prohibition of *nhạc vàng* over the first four decades after the war.

Nhạc Vàng (Yellow Music) in the Diaspora

Two songs that are prime examples of this type of music, “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô” (“Home on the Outskirts”) and “Trăng Tàn Trên Hè Phố” (“Fading Moon over the Streets”), are both well appreciated for their narrative quality, tonality, and overwhelming sense of loss of love and youth.²⁷ Across all Vietnamese music production companies in the United

²⁴ Phạm Thế Mỹ, “Trăng Tàn Trên Hè Phố,” <https://lyrics.vn/>. Accessed January 11, 2024.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Thôi mình chia tay, Rồi mai đây có về, Quà cho tôi anh nhớ chép bài thơ.” Ibid.

²⁷ As of 2014, both “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô” and “Trăng Tàn Trên Hè Phố” were still banned by the government from performances on the broadcast show *Solo Cùng Bolero* on Truyền hình Vĩnh Long (THVL1). See: “Solo Cùng Bolero,” Facebook, 2014,

States, both songs have been re-recorded a number of times, and have multiple music video renditions. For example, “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô” was famously re-recorded with musician Trường Vũ in 2000, and again with another favorite of Orange County listeners, musician Đan Nguyễn, in 2012.²⁸ In both pieces, place-setting is achieved through first-person narration—*Tôi ở ngoại ô* (I live in the suburbs); *Tôi lại gặp anh* (I see you again)— followed by situating the narrator’s relationship with the other character in the past, emphasizing how war had affected both people in the passage of time.²⁹ What is more interesting, however, is how subtly they interject messages for peace. In the original sheet music for “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô,” toward the second portion of the song, upon wishing the return of his lover, the narrator sings *Và yêu không bến bờ, Niềm tin là một ngày mai non nước chung một màu cờ* (love has no boundary, [I] believe that one day our homeland will have the same colored flag).³⁰ In post-1975 period, in order to pass censors, in some versions of this song the lyrics were changed from, *non nước chung một màu cờ* (our homeland will have the same colored flag”) to *non nước không còn hận sầu* (our homeland will no longer have conflict).³¹ While the change is subtle, the

https://www.facebook.com/solocungbolero/posts/%C4%91%C3%A2y-l%C3%A0-danh-s%C3%A1ch-c%C3%A1c-b%C3%A0i-h%C3%A1t-kh%C3%B4ng-%C4%91%C6%B0%E1%BB%A3c-ph%C3%A9p-bi%E1%BB%83u-di%E1%BB%85n-c%C3%A1c-b%E1%BA%A1n-nh%E1%BB%9B-tr%C3%A1nh-ch%E1%BB%8Dn-c%C3%A1/1511643655760753/?locale=vi_VN

²⁸ “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô,” Discogs, 2000, [https://www.discogs.com/release/12971596-Variou-s-Căn-Nhà-Ngoại-Ô.](https://www.discogs.com/release/12971596-Variou-s-Căn-Nhà-Ngoại-Ô.;); “Có Thế Thôi,” Discogs, 2012, <https://www.discogs.com/release/12024607-Đan-Nguyễn-Có-Thế-Thôi>

²⁹ Anh Bằng, “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô”; Phạm, “Trăng Tàn Trên Hè Phố.”

³⁰ Anh Bằng, “Sheet Nhạc Bài Căn Nhà Ngoại ô,” Hợp Âm Việt, <https://hopamviet.vn/sheet/song/can-nha-ngoai-o/W8IUoF86.html>. Accessed January 13, 2024.

³¹ Anh Bằng, “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô.”



shift between two different “colored flag[s]” to “no longer have conflict” moves away from the narrative of a fractured country to one of unity. In other words, despite remaining within the *nhạc lính* genre, the lyric change removes the specificity of the song about the Vietnam war and generalizes it to just a war.

In the context of the diaspora, the lyrics of both renditions that were previously mentioned with Trường Vũ and Đan Nguyên remained true to their original version from 1966, in audio and music video format. This might well be attributed to the fact that both the performers and their Vietnamese American audiences were familiar with the original lyrics, however it could also signal the residual desire for segments of the Vietnamese diaspora to keep to the memory of a separate identity. Although the political spectrum amongst Vietnamese Americans is broad, it is not heretical to claim that for many the conflict is still not over in the sense that the borders have not disappeared, but only shifted. For listeners in the Vietnamese diaspora, these songs carry a double meaning in the depiction of the loss of life and love. What were once hymns to the brutality of destruction and bereft lovers in a time of war, in the diaspora they became mimetically the loss of the homeland. And while the lyrics in “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô” do not say it explicitly, the implied flag of *non nước chung một màu cờ* does not refer to the current one of the VCP. In other words, “unification” in the song does not hold the same meaning to the diasporic audience. Instead, the idea of this “same colored flag” is carried over from its implied, original message premised on an imagined outcome in which the RVN would have won the war.

Unlike “Căn Nhà Ngoại Ô,” the lyrics of “Trăng Tàn Trên Hè Phố” (“Fading Moon over the Streets”) were not changed by the VCP/DRV after 1975. This is due, I suspect, to the fact that the original lyrics to the

song did not suggest two sides of the war. Here, rather than a call for a singular flag, the song instead closes out with the following bridge:

*Anh sống đời trai giữa núi đồi
 Tôi viết bài ca xây đời mới
 Bờ tre quê hương
 Cây súng anh gìn giữ
 Tôi hát vang giữa đời để người vui.*

[He lives a life between the hills and mountains
 While I write songs to build a new future
 The bamboo shores of our homeland
 He protects with a gun in his hands
 While I sing to keep people entertained].³²

Just as important for the RVN as it was for the DRV, it was believed to be necessary for peace and stability to be safeguarded by a strong military as well as by a guiding ideological principle. In this example, those essential principles are gestured at by the narrator writing songs to entertain people, and to build a nation. And while the two types of labor are not on par, they both represent important functions within the system in which both the DRV and the RVN operated. As demonstrated here, music is as crucial for entertainment (*hát vang giữa đời để người vui*) as for building a new country (*viết bài ca xây đời mới*).³³ In this view, it is comprehensible why the lyrics of “Trăng Tàn Trên Hè Phố” were not changed, despite being categorically considered *nhạc vàng*. It fits within

³² Phạm Thế Mỹ, “Trăng Tàn Trên Hè Phố.”

³³ *Ibid.*

the VCP's current narrative and understanding of music playing a crucial role within the process of nation building. Interestingly, regardless of the fact that many of the *nhạc vàng* composers were former military personnel, such as Phạm Duy who was a Việt Minh cadre and suffered in exile before his eventual return after 2005, the VCP government would ease restrictions on some of these songs, as long as certain changes were made, or if they could be ideologically reinterpreted to fit the party line, as in the examples above.³⁴

The Rise of Vietnamese American Music

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, Vietnamese overseas music, or *nhạc Việt kiều*, was the de facto music of Vietnamese Americans, and presumably of the diasporic Vietnamese people in the rest of the world. Unbeknownst to many Americans, what they often heard in restaurants and grocery stores was not, in fact, music directly imported from Vietnam, but rather a combination of re-interpretations of earlier songs and new additions recorded and produced primarily out of southern California by the Vietnamese diaspora. In her now oft cited and crucial research, *Songs of the Free, Songs of the Caged*, musicologist Adelaida Reyes has made a strong case for how the deployment of music has shaped this deeply political process of community building across different spans of diasporic centers from refugee camps to overseas settlement hubs.³⁵ Within this broad category of “overseas music,”

³⁴ According to Trần Quang Hải, by 2001, Phạm Duy was still arguably the most famous Vietnamese composer in exile with his songs written before 1975 representing a sizable portion of cassettes and CDs produced abroad. See Trần Quang Hải, “Vietnamese Music in Exile since 1975 and Musical Life in Vietnam since Perestroika,” *The World of Music* 43, no. 2/3 (2001): 103–112.

³⁵ Adelaida Reyes, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free: Music and the Vietnamese Refugee Experience* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1999).

however, was in fact a rich *mélange* of styles and genres that developed over the course of the twentieth century. From folk and jazz to Latin beats like Tango, Bolero, and Salsa with infusions of 1960s French pop and later American rock, it is strange indeed to think of this musical phenomenon as a singular, monolithic category.

At the same time, however, the existence of this separate but tenuous category was necessary in designating and defining a certain aesthetic sensibility or a specific political orientation, and importantly a detached place of origin that correlated to the experience of diaspora. In other words, *nhạc Việt kiều* or *nhạc hải ngoại* (overseas music) was a term that originated inside Vietnam after 1975 to distinguish between what is imported and what is local, rather than to categorically distinguish between musical genres, as would a musicologist. Put differently, the utility of this designated term aimed less towards capturing the epistemological underpinning of the orientation for this cultural product, and more towards a musical border meant to outline and highlight the cultural gap that was produced by the diaspora. This tendency to collapse categories for referential utility has also been noted by Alexander Cannon, who upon raising the question of musical genres to a friend in southern Vietnam, recognized that the drive for distinction was premised upon his own epistemological biases for their perceived meaning.³⁶ It was a designation that, depending on who you asked, could either mean high production value, a nostalgic aesthetic, a hybrid genre of Vietnamese folk and contemporary pop, an adaptation of American cultural norms, or if one was in accord with the party line, music that is rustic and counter revolutionary, and more importantly, music that was largely unvetted by the state. In my view, it is all these things and more.

³⁶ Alexander M. Cannon, "From Nameless to Nomenclature: Creating Music Genre in Southern Vietnam," *Asian Music* 47, no. 2 (2016): 139.

When refugees from the RVN came to the United States in 1975, they brought along an entire musical tradition from their homeland. Having lost their country and now finding themselves in a foreign cultural space, this nostalgic music “served to connect refugees and exiles to the homeland they thought they had lost.”³⁷ For Vietnamese youth born on American soil, the music of their parents and grandparents was a fixture of their upbringing, and would serve as a consistent reminder of their cultural heritage. Indeed, in the United States composers such as Nguyệt Ánh, Việt Dzũng, Châu Đình An, Huỳnh Công Anh, and Khúc Lan, contributed to the *Hung Ca* (heroic music) movement, often writing about nostalgia, political resistance, and defending the legacy of the homeland.³⁸ To that end, *Việt kiều* music, at least on the surface, was just as concerned about cultural preservation as it was about producing an American market, and a market they did produce. In this view, what marks the distinction between the externally categorized *Việt kiều* music and Vietnamese American music is the latter’s eventual shift from cultural preservation to cultural assimilation. Indeed, even though well-known composers like Phạm Duy, Duy Khánh, Lam Phương, etc. continued to write songs abroad, their thematic, styles, and lyrical content often referred to their status as refugees and their lost country.

For this reason, to many people in Vietnam and the diaspora, overseas music was often synonymous with *nhạc vàng*, referring to the popular music that was widely appreciated in the RVN, as opposed to the revolutionary music of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, despite the fact that companies like Thúy Nga have made concerted attempts to appeal to

³⁷ Valverde, “Making Vietnamese Music Transnational,” 31.

³⁸ Tran Quang Hai, “Vietnamese Music,” 108.

broader audiences by the adaptation to new genres, compositions, and styles of performances.³⁹ Elsewhere, I have made the argument that *nhạc vàng* is more than just a music of nostalgia, that beyond the initial tropes of lost homeland and the reminiscing of ill-fated love, it is also a genre that is capable of producing transnational ties among the Vietnamese diaspora.⁴⁰ Here, I stand by that perspective, and want to further posit that the capacity to produce transnational belonging was due in part to *nhạc vàng*'s ability to adapt and project a romanticized version of a bygone Vietnam. To this extent, whether one calls it *nhạc vàng*, *nhạc Việt kiều*, or *nhạc hải ngoại*, it is invariably in reference to a particular Americanized mediation of a starkly, southern Vietnamese tradition that has been concretized both by the Vietnamese diaspora and by Vietnamese people within Vietnam.

The Locus of Vietnamese Cultural Production and the Role of *Paris by Night*

On his work on the legacy of RVN music in Vietnam in the 1990s, Philip Taylor describes the local scene in the towns and cities of southern Vietnam, as follows:

In the cafes, bars, and restaurants found in great profusion in the southern cities could be heard the luxuriant sounds of the musical

³⁹ Nhi Lieu has commented on how *Paris by Night* has tried to adapt its performances to fit the image of family entertainment by incorporating both traditional music and performances of contemporary American music by Vietnamese singers. Though seemingly distinct, this juxtaposition was indeed an intentional attempt to bridge the younger and older generations. See, Nhi T. Lieu, "Performing Culture in Diaspora," 198.

⁴⁰ See Vinh Phu Pham, "Rhizomatic Transnationalism: Nhạc Vàng and the Legacy of Republicanism in Overseas Vietnamese Communities," in *Republican Vietnam, 1963–1975: War, Society, Diaspora*, ed., Trinh M. Luu and Tuong Vu (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), 203–223.

outpouring of the 1955–1975 Republican era...[in] urban areas one was more likely than not to hear the slick Orange Country Sound of hits from the Republican era and the post-1975 diaspora, tunes that had been re-recorded in California and smuggled back to Vietnam in the suitcases of overseas Vietnamese (Việt kiều). Indeed, much of the music that could be heard in southern Vietnam in the 1990s consisted of re-recordings and rearrangements of Republican era music.⁴¹

From personal experience growing up in Vietnam during this time, I had truly believed that most Vietnamese music was sad. Save for children's songs, or celebratory songs about the arrival of Spring such as, “Xuân đã về,” or songs celebrating cities and towns, like the popular “Sài Gòn,” generally referred to as “Sài Gòn đẹp lắm” (“Most beautiful Saigon”), most of the songs that could often be heard exuded an overwhelming sadness and longing. Indeed, as noted by Taylor, while the songs were luxuriant and felt “Vietnamese” to the extent that they were made by and for Vietnamese people, there was something about the quality of the recordings and the production of the music videos that made it clear these products were foreign, even to an eight-year-old child.

After my family emigrated to the United States in 1998, this perception did not change. Instead, it became more acute when, all of a sudden, at the turn of the century there seemed to be even more songs and music videos being produced and circulated by competing labels. In every cluster of Vietnamese-owned businesses, which typically include

⁴¹ Philip Taylor, “Music as a ‘Neocolonial Poison’ in Postwar Southern Vietnam,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (2000): 100–101.



groceries stores, nail salons, restaurants, and record stores one could find *nhạc vàng* tapes and CDs being sold, or played over the shops' loudspeakers. Of course, not all of it was old music, as right next to these newer renditions of pre-1975 classics there were emerging Vietnamese rap and pop artists like Khanh Nhỏ, Thai Viet G, Trish Thùy Trang (typically known as Trish), and Minh Tuyết. It became clear around this time that Vietnamese American music production was now very American. Not only were the shows produced in the United States often with Vietnamese American singers performing songs in English, the owners also hired American dancers, designers, directors, and musicians. Put differently, by the late 1990s, Vietnamese American music which was originally meant to entertain the newly arrived Vietnamese now also served as a cultural hotspot for the newer generation, fully embracing its own hybrid existence and of its now acculturated listeners.

This *mélange* between old and new is best exemplified by an after-performance interview between the writer and Master of Ceremonies, Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, and the recently arrived singer, Như Quỳnh, who had just finished her performance in *Paris by Night 38: In Toronto*. Như Quỳnh, who arrived in California in 1994 through the Humanitarian Operation (HO) Program, originally had an artist contract with music recording company Trung Tâm Asia. However, after their work relationship turned sour with the artist and the production house suing one another, Như Quỳnh began working for PBN's parent company, Thúy Nga, with "Hoa tím ngày xưa" ("Purple Flower of the Past") by Thanh Sơn as her debut performance.⁴² Wearing a purple Áo dài with gold embroidery, Như Quỳnh's performance of a song about a

⁴² Thuy Nga, "Như Quỳnh - Hoa Tím Người Xưa - Paris by Night 38," YouTube, August 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD78zWek1kQ>

former love, where a woman's smile is compared to a flower, could best be described as an ode to traditional Vietnamese femininity. After the performance, Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, who is tasked with introducing this singer to Thúy Nga's audience, asks her about her departure from Vietnam, her dreams of becoming a singer, and her ambitions of producing her own record company.⁴³ Slight awkwardness aside, none of the commentary or questions appear out of the ordinary, however as they conclude their banter, the host wishes her success in her career with the advice that she should never cut her hair, and asks whether the audience agrees, to which the audience responds with a round of applause.⁴⁴



Figure 1. *Paris by Night* co-host Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn interviewing Như Quỳnh in *Paris by Night 38* (1996). Screenshot by Guest Editor Tuan Hoang. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD78zWek1kQ>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Though a seemingly innocent comment about Như Quỳnh's long hair, this scenario in which a well-established MC comments on a "newly-arrived" singer's physical attribute, often associated with traditional Vietnamese femininity, signals to the audience a reaffirmation of shared cultural norms: as if to say, *here is a woman who embodies true Vietnamese aesthetic values*, and *PBN* by extension is a space where such values are recognized and promoted. This exchange is particularly interesting given that after this brief interview, the rest of *PBN 38* included performances of "Jailhouse Rock" by Tommy Ngô, "Copacabana" by Nguyễn Cao Kỳ Duyên, Tommy Ngô, and Lê Toàn, and "I Need a Hero" by Lynda Trang Đài. In other words, the producers had to play a delicate balancing act between the transmission of older cultural values while also keeping up with contemporary trends in American music, albeit slightly belatedly.

At the time, southern California was the main hub of Vietnamese American food, broadcast and print news, literature, politics, and most if not all Vietnamese music. The sizable population of refugees, who by the 1990s were already multi-generational, had been steadily Americanized and were spending more and more money on their own ethnic cultural products; a major shift from the reliance on earlier dubbed TV series from Hong Kong or Taiwan. In places like Little Saigon in Westminster, California, the local population represented the immediate market for all Vietnamese oriented musical production.

This came as no surprise as one of the main music companies, Thúy Nga Productions, which existed before 1975 and which had restarted in France, had relocated to southern California in 1995.⁴⁵ The owner, To Van Lai, who was a former music professor from Saigon,

⁴⁵ Valverde, "Making Vietnamese Music Transnational," 31.



named the company after his wife.⁴⁶ And in 1983, with the assistance of Jean Pierre Barry, founder of Euromedia Television (now Euromedia Group), they produced the first live showing and recording of *PBN* in Paris. For Tô Văn Lai, this venture was originally conceived to specifically target the *Việt kiều* market in France, offering leisure and distraction for those who felt alienated from their host countries.⁴⁷ The name *Paris by Night* is a direct gesture to a buoyant spirit. From 1989 onward, in addition to their audio cassettes, the company began producing music videos in the form of videocassettes and later DVDs, which proved to be the right business decision, as by the early 1990s there were about a million Vietnamese people in the United States, and by the early 2000s the number rose to two million.⁴⁸ Although the company is by far one of the most successful, Thúy Nga's decision to move mirrored other companies at the time, which found a small but expanding profit margin for this niche media market. As Caroline Valverde explains, in 1995 "over thirty music-related companies occupied the four-square-mile area of Westminster and Garden Grove of southern California."⁴⁹

Indeed, it cannot be overstated how significant this area in southern California was to the diasporic music industry at the time, and to *PBN* in particular. According to Nhi Lieu, the ethnic enclave Little Saigon "not only brought new possibilities for imagining community, but it also resurrected the old capital in a new physical space, complete with cultural institutions to foster this imagined community."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Lieu, "Performing Culture in Diaspora," 199.

⁴⁷ Valverde, "Making Vietnamese Music Transnational," 31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Moreover, “the increased use of multimedia technology, refugees’ upward mobility, and the social, cultural, and commercial development of Little Saigon in Orange County, California, contributed to making *Paris by Night* videos a huge success.”⁵¹ In other words, the socioeconomic development of the refugees, coupled with a demarcated physical space they could now call home, meant cultural institutions like Thúy Nga were now commercially viable and primed for further expansion. Finally, producers and consumers were geographically located within the space, which was essential for live shows produced by PBN and its competitors.

Life in their new home, regardless of their recent economic advancement, did not come without estrangement. The composer, Hoàng Linh Duy, even wrote a song about the main street in Little Saigon in Westminster, California, entitled, “Chiều Trên Phố Bolsa” (“Evening on Bolsa”) which has been famously interpreted and performed by beloved musician Thanh Thúy and Duy Khánh. In the song, the narrator strolls on Bolsa Avenue, where they feel strange and out of body (*chân quen, hồn vẫn lạ*) while reminiscing about the old Saigon: *Đây Bolsa, đây Sài-Gòn nhỏ!, Đây Sài-Gòn lớn ... Thủ Đô xưa* (Here’s Bolsa, here’s Little Saigon! Where is Big Saigon... The old Capital?)⁵² The new physical space of Little Saigon represents, on the one hand, an easily reachable market for product distribution, and on the other, a politically, tenuously-unified reference point from which the “true” homeland can be further mythologized. Cultural accumulation, in this sense, aids to clarify a vision of authenticity, as opposed to replacing what was once lost.

⁵⁰ Lieu, “Performing Culture in Diaspora,” 199.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Duy Linh Hoàng, “Chiều Trên Phố Bolsa,” <https://www.nhaccuatui.com/bai-hat/chieu-tren-pho-bolsa-thanh-thuy.ReOAWU6Gbj.html>. Accessed January 15, 2024.



Figure 2. CD cover of the album *Chiều Trên Phố Bolsa* (Afternoon on Bolsa Boulevard, 1994), whose title song was sung by Duy Khánh. From the website “Cover Nhạc Việt.” cdnhacviet.blogspot.com/2012/02/cali-music-cd-001-duy-khanh-chieu-tren.html

This music would eventually find its way back into Vietnam through the black market. And while the official ban was still in place for many titles even through the early 2000s, especially the songs that were more explicit about the war, “Paris By Night videos and other tapes and CDs from the overseas Vietnamese community could be found openly in the shops of Sai Gon and covertly in Ha Noi.”⁵³ The influx not only produced harsh competition for local production companies in Vietnam, which were under stricter censorship and which were more limited in their

⁵³ Valverde, “Making Vietnamese Music Transnational,” 35.

resources, it also highlighted an uneven dynamic unique to Vietnam's diaspora, wherein the image of cultural authenticity now came through these foreign cultural commodities. Until the mid-1990s, *Việt kiều* music and *PBN* shows were widely popular in Saigon, with locals claiming that the overseas community had the best singers and more professional performances.⁵⁴ Moreover, locals also thought that the production of the *PBN* shows appeared more glamorous and modern as compared to the unsophisticated look of Vietnamese productions.⁵⁵

According to Lieu, Thúy Nga's "videos gave Vietnamese viewers variety entertainment updated and translated through the most recent trends in mainstream American culture, film, television, and fashion while assuring viewers that these translations were compatible with "authentic" Vietnamese culture."⁵⁶ She also points out that, in addition to the videos slowly beginning to alter musical tastes and preferences among migrants, these "glamorous images began to replace the overt voices of political dissent."⁵⁷ Moreover, Thúy Nga's desire to retain its authentic and daring appeal by updating its musical direction and performances, also reflected the audiences' shift toward American ideals of social entertainment. Here, Lieu explains:

Sold as commodities of cultural preservation, as well as leisure and relaxation, these videos granted many Vietnamese people pleasure and forms of escapism, but they also functioned ideologically to promote a successful, middle-class, and assimilated image...With a focus on the contemporary

⁵⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Lieu, "Performing Culture in Diaspora," 201.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Vietnamese diasporic experience, Paris by Night videos began to shift the themes of their titles away from the political. More frequently, producers began organizing musical arrangements around prosaic themes with titles such as *Tinh Ca* (Songs of Love), *Tien* (Money), *Anh Den Mau* (Stage Lighting), and *Vao Ha* (Holiday). Additionally, Paris by Night began incorporating ao dai fashion shows featuring Vietnamese designers.⁵⁸

From this observation, it is clear that whatever authenticity *PBN* might have constructed and conveyed to both its overseas audience and to those in Vietnam, it did so through a successful conjoining of Vietnamese cultural aesthetics via wearing *áo dài*, or *nhạc vàng*, or through the propagation of a prosperous Vietnamese community resulting from middle-class ascension and values built around consumerism. The movement from war themes to fashion shows and the promotion of musical tours did not lessen *PBN*'s political implication, rather it only sharpened the consumerist image of the Americanized and acculturated Vietnamese person.

One prime example is a comedy skit from from *PBN* 63, entitled “Lộng Giả Thành Chân” (“The Pretender Revealed”). Running a little under thirty minutes, the skit tells the story of two roommates in Southern California looking for a third roommate to split their expenses.⁵⁹ One of the roommates, Chanel, played by Trúc Lam, is dressed in a Chanel track-suit and talks constantly about working out to stay in shape, while her roommate, played by Hồng Đào, searches

⁵⁸ Ibid., 201-202.

⁵⁹ Thuy Nga, “Hài Kịch ‘Lộng Giả Thành Chân’ | Thúy Nga PBN 63 | Hồng Đào, Quang Minh,” YouTube, September 3, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5muKchrYXw>

through a Vietnamese newspaper (*Viet Tide*) to find potential matches.⁶⁰ Over chatter about the layoffs and the changing economy, the two women meet a potential gay roommate, played by Quang Minh who is later revealed to not be gay at all, but rather a lying womanizer who has abandoned his pregnant wife in search of other women to prey upon. Here, the name Chanel, which she changed from her Vietnamese name after receiving her U.S. citizenship, is meant as a joke about materialist consumption and excess, while the faux-gay character is meant to poke fun at the new-found cosmopolitanism of Southern California, allowing for non-normative forms of cohabitation even within the conservative Vietnamese circles of Westminster. Of course, while Quang Minh's character is ultimately revealed, what is clear is that humor for this skit is derived from the premise of economic reality. In other words, homophobic jokes aside, the scenario in which the characters find themselves relies on the audience's acceptance of this newfound reality of eccentric figures who must reconcile between the familial, financial, and sexual landscape of their time. Released in 2002, this skit might be considered transgressive by some viewers for its queer tinge, while also considered rather conventional by others for its insistence on predictable middle-class norms and issues. And as required by middle-class, romantic comedy narrative arcs and sensibilities, the skit ends in cheerful resolution.

In addition to these comedic skits that glorified middle-class norms, *PBN* would also continually return to the refugee narrative to remind its audience of its, and consequently, their own origins. Such is the case with the medley, "Chuyện Tình Thời Chinh Chiến" ("Love in the Time of War") in *PBN 88*, entitled, *Paris by Night 88: Lam Phương - Đường*

⁶⁰ Ibid.



Về Quê Hương (“The Road Back to my Homeland”).⁶¹ In this performance, which includes six songs by Lam Phương—“Ngày Tạm Biệt” (“Farewell day), “Khóc Thầm” (“Crying Silently”), “Chiều Hoang Vắng” (“Desolate Evening”), “Con Tàu Định Mệnh” (“The Fateful Ship”), “Mất” (“Lost”), and “Vĩnh Biệt Người Tình” (“Farewell to My Lover”)—piece together the story of two lovers from the moment they fall in love as schoolchildren to the fall of Saigon and then to the male lover escaping abroad, and finally the female lover dying at sea trying to do the same. Toward the end of “Chiều Hoang Vắng” the background music halts and loudspeakers tell the civilians on stage to find cover. As Như Quỳnh stumbles and falls on stage amongst the crowd, there are soundbites of helicopters and babies crying, while the back screen projection shows a chaotic Saigon. The bulk of the performance is carried out by Như Quỳnh and Thế Sơn. However, during “Con Tàu Định Mệnh,” following the aforementioned scene where Thế Sơn is now at sea, he is joined by several other performers. As they sing in unison, the stage fills up with more and more bodies of children and the camera carefully closes in on their sad, teary faces.⁶² During the last song, as Như Quỳnh’s character drowns at sea and she is lifted up by dancers representing ocean waves and spirits, tears fall from her eyes, and the camera zooms out, showing an affected audience with tears in their eyes as well. Released in 2007, this was by far one of the most well-received songs by Như Quỳnh and Thế Sơn which highlights both the political orientation of the producers and their audience, as well as their attachment to the memories of the RVN. Here, the performance produces an affective community by

⁶¹ Thuy Nga, “Như Quỳnh & Thế Sơn - Nhạc Kịch ‘Chuyện Tình Thời Chinh Chiến’ (Lam Phương) PBN 88,” YouTube, October 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HD-efguEbKo>

⁶² Ibid.

reminding them of their shared experience of diaspora. Even if most audience members might not have been a boat person themselves, this performance links their presence to this very American viewing experience to an imagined shared narrative of escape, expulsion, and collective trauma.

To the VCP, this influx of overseas music and performance was perceived no differently than Western propaganda, which would corrode moral values. And as a consequence, the enactment of the “social evils” campaign in 2000, under order number 09/2000/CT-TTg of the VCP, resulted in the confiscation of 120,194 tapes, 84,054 CDS, 30 tons of printed materials, 690 video recorders, and so forth.⁶³ This crackdown on foreign music imports would also coincide with the rising popularity of Vietnamese music produced in Vietnam, and by the early 2000s, records from Vietnam could be easily found next to those produced in the United States in Vietnamese American record stores. Valverde observes:

By 1999, while browsing through music stores of Phuc Loc Tho shopping center...I discovered that music from Viet Nam occupied nearly the same number of stalls as their Viet Kieu counterparts. By 2001 when I visited music shops, Viet Kieu and Vietnamese music products, from CDs to videos to karaoke discs, were displayed next to each other. The lines are marred more everyday as to what is music coming from Viet Nam and what comes from the Vietnamese American community.⁶⁴

Soon afterwards, overseas Vietnamese performers would begin to do shows in Vietnam, and Vietnamese music and performers from Vietnam

⁶³ Valverde, “Making Vietnamese Music Transnational,” 36.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

would continue to pop-up more within the United States, turning the once unilateral producer and consumer market dynamic into a more evenly-shared cultural ecosystem. While others have already written about this turn or shift, what I want to focus on is how this reverberation of cultural performances and objects are not wholly reducible to a market reorientation. In other words, the shift from being a mere consumer market for *Việt kiều* music to outcompeting it, to me, has wider implications about the absorption of American ideals than was previously believed. More crucially, with the rise of musical productions in Vietnam that mirror the live stage productions in Little Saigon, cultural authenticity becomes even more profuse and contingent. As an example, a search on YouTube for “nhạc bolero” (bolero music) would show a long list of results showing Vietnam-based interpretations of *nhạc vàng*, where singers replicate the *PBN* aesthetics by performing on a well-lit stage in traditional *áo dài* or sometimes in an RVN soldier’s uniform.⁶⁵

One particular Vietnam-based channel called Nam Việt Trữ Tình 2, produced by the company Nam Viet Media that boasts almost 400,000 subscribers, has over 300 videos uploaded of performers singing on stage.⁶⁶ Often, videos are posted every couple of days, and the featured image of the videos would include a male and female singer, or a group of performers, mirroring those of *PBN* performances. The duration of the videos generally ranges from ninety minutes to two hours, and will often include performers in the background holding instruments giving the illusion of live performances, not unlike the overseas counterparts.

⁶⁵ *Nhạc vàng* in Vietnam is more commonly referred to as bolero as performers and producers seek to bypass regulations that deter them from using the RVN image.

⁶⁶ “Nam Việt Trữ Tình 2,” <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXzrGqyPeysA4xWIDcdgipg>. Accessed January 15, 2024.



A different example is a video uploaded on January 9, 2024, entitled *Liên Khúc Song Ca Trữ Tình Bolero Hay Nhất Hiện Nay - Liên Khúc Ca Nhạc Trữ Tình Bolero* (Best Romantic Bolero Duet Medley - Romantic Bolero Music Medley), whose roster includes some of the most well-known love songs of *nhạc vàng* and over forty Vietnamese singers.⁶⁷ In the opening song of the same video, where singers Lưu Ánh Loan and Nhật Duy perform “*Nửa đêm ngoài phố*” (“Midnight out on the Street”) written by composer Trúc Phương in 1960, the performers are located on top of a wooden bridge over water on a dark stage representing midnight.⁶⁸ In front of them are brightly lit letter signs spelling out the words *một thời ký ức* (“memories of a time”) while in the distant back corner performers gesture at playing instruments over a pre-recorded track.⁶⁹ Noticeably different from earlier Vietnamese-based productions, this performance replicates the more glamorous and coordinated aesthetics of *PBN* and other overseas companies entirely. Even the words “*một thời ký ức*” are meant to bring viewers back to another time and place. The performance demonstrates a notably higher production value, and the performers themselves are dressed in a regal dress and suits, with full make-up.

Different from the *PBN* shows, however, these performances do not have a host, nor are they variety shows to the extent that they offer different types of acts. There are no emcees to narrate the cultural value of each song, or to give context about the composer or its provenance. Instead, the video functions more accurately as a compilation with

⁶⁷ Nam Việt Trữ Tình 2, “*Liên Khúc Song Ca Trữ Tình Bolero Hay Nhất Hiện Nay - Liên Khúc Ca Nhạc Trữ Tình Bolero*,” January 9, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7YrF3Uzt4s>

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

thematic similarities, rather than a consciously curated show. Consequently, from the arrangement of the performances to the gestures of live performance, the production almost successfully replicates the concretized forms of *Việt kiều* performances on *PBN*. However, in getting rid of the narrative elements that contextualize the songs, as well as other acts such as short skits which are integral segments to the *PBN* shows, the video empties out the thematic arrangements that characterize the overseas shows. Even with the performers' make-up, there is a notable difference, perhaps class-inflected, between the overseas versus Vietnamese standards of beauty.

Unlike the Americanized performers of *PBN* who proudly show deeper contouring and brighter highlights, suggestive of more dynamism and angled lighting, the performers in this video are uniformly airbrushed and powdered to a near-alabaster. The point here is not that one is better than the other, but rather that any form of representation within this niche media market is invariably ideologically tinged with elements of its origins. Where there were once undertones of tension between different political regimes, these have now been replaced by a re-branded and re-interpreted localized consumerist identity. In *PBN*, upward mobility was exemplified by branded advertising and fashion shows, whereas in this video, mobility and wealth are displayed through an elevated production value, as well as the core aesthetics of imported shows and the white skin of its on-stage performers.

Indeed, given that the previously imported *PBN* music came along with an Americanized aesthetic signaling a hybrid cultural identity, music from Vietnam that was produced after this shift re-interpreted those same aesthetics for overseas consumption. With it, the aesthetic and claim to authenticity also had to be recalibrated to fit within the new



dynamic, wherein the linkage between the Little Saigon and *nhạc vàng* had to be re-territorialized. For the first time, Vietnamese Americans had to contend with the possibility that cultural authenticity was not exclusive to their previously dominant position as producers, but instead of a shared cultural sphere in which, ironically, people in Vietnam also played a part.

In his research, Y Thien Nguyen has demonstrated how the remaking of south Vietnamese anti-communism was achieved in the United States through the technologies of community policing and popular theatrical productions.⁷⁰ Following this line of thought, I claim that if Vietnamese American identity and culture owes their grounding, even if in part, to south Vietnamese anti-communism, which is held together by the aggregation and dissemination of such socio-political discourses and the circulation of cultural commodities, then both Vietnamese American identity and the development of *PBN*, as the accompanying musical content to that identity, must be seen through the same lens of a technics of social cohesion and production. In other words, as one of the central anchors of Vietnamese American cultural life, *PBN* does not act as a passive channel through which ideas about what “true” Vietnamese-ness entails travel. Instead, it stands as the active motor and musical referent propelling toward a cultural reservoir from which the diasporic community can nourish and legitimize itself. Here, the cultural focal point afforded by *PBN* produces a double process of legitimization by removing the locus of “true” Vietnamese culture from inside Vietnam to its home abroad, affirming once again that authenticity lies not just symbolically, and in many cases actively politically aligned with the United States, but rather its very material

⁷⁰ Y Thien Nguyen, “(Re) Making the South Vietnamese Past in America,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2018): 68.

conditions, from production to distribution actually requires it to pass through American soil, infused undoubtedly with American cultural norms.

In other words, the stakes of upholding the integrity of this re-interpreted music goes far beyond the replication of cultural forms and norms, more concretely it is also simultaneously about securing the image of authenticity as what was brought over and later developed by the diasporic community. In a sense, the anti-communist and political content is precisely what makes these musical performances authentic to the eyes of the *Việt kiều*. Moreover, the newly exported re-interpretations from Vietnam, should they remain without such anti-communist subtexts, will not be able to claim authenticity even if they are now filmed inside Vietnam. Cultural authenticity in the case of Vietnamese music production, therefore, must wrestle with the idea of locality as both significant and insignificant for a diasporic community. While Vietnamese singers are often sought-out and welcomed amongst the Vietnamese American audiences for their authentic appeal, much like how Như Quỳnh was during her introduction to *PBN*, the same might not apply to cultural products coming from Vietnam, especially for renditions of RVN titles.

Conclusion

It is important to re-cast again the question of *what exactly constitutes Vietnamese American music?* If it is understood singularly as the total sums of its parts, i.e. Vietnamese music is infused with American melodic and rhythmic sensibilities, then the efforts of ethnomusicologists in the past decades will have been for naught. Even for famed ethnomusicologists like Adelaida Reyes, the framework of conceptualizing world music had to be shifted from in-situ to broader considerations that accounted



for forced migration, and it is only through the opening of this category, I posit, that it is possible to conceive of Vietnamese American music.⁷¹ In this article, I have argued that any conception of Vietnamese American music must consider its origins in the RVN—that is, there is no such thing as Vietnamese American music up until now that is not, at least implicitly, music that results directly from the refugee experience.

Indeed, the conditions of being refugees and of forced displacement produced a different socio-political landscape which forced the community's music to be overtly politicized. However, as time moved on and as the community built and accrued more social and financial capital, this once anticommunist music was aestheticized and absorbed by Vietnamese listeners. Vietnamese American music then, was undoubtedly not just an import from the RVN, but it was a development catapulted by the absorption of American middle-class values into the musical performances and its method of distribution. This explains why even once Vietnamese production companies started to out-produce Vietnamese American labels, they were not able to replicate an aesthetic of “authenticity,” and thus categorically were *not* Vietnamese American even if some of the videos are consumed and possibly enjoyed by Vietnamese Americans. To be clear, the claim here is not that PBN constitutes authenticity, but rather it established an aesthetic standard by which newer performances are judged, and often fail to meet. Because of this, I affirm that to think of Vietnamese American music, we are speaking very specifically about refugee music (*nhạc vàng, nhạc Việt kiều, nhạc hải ngoại*) that was produced by companies like PBN. Although many of the songs were written before 1975, it is their movement,

⁷¹ Ioannis Christidis, “Adelaida Reyes: Pioneer in the Field of Music and Forced Migration –A Review of Her Theoretical and Methodological Contribution,” *Music & Minorities* 1 (January 1, 2021): 4.

distribution, recontextualization, and adaptation with American standards and sensibilities that makes it what it is. PBN did not just update, rebrand, and make it easy for the distribution of *nhạc vàng*, it also took this music of the RVN, provided the skeleton for a niche category, and made it a transnational commodity within the larger United States' musical ethnic buffet.

In closing, though my concern in this paper was strictly about the category of Vietnamese American music and the role of PBN, it also opens up the question of *how it is possible to categorize what are otherwise transnational cultural products?* In the decades following the war, it has always been taken for granted that Vietnamese people of the diaspora were separate from Vietnamese people in Vietnam. As such, it was much easier to produce categories to indicate the provenance of cultural products. Since the 1990s, however, ease in restrictions on trade and travel have produced new networks and affiliations in the academic, social, and cultural space to the extent that such categories are no longer easily defined nor were they stable and monolithic to begin with. Inasmuch, perhaps the demarcation of something like Vietnamese American may no longer hold any critical utility unless expressly in reference to this very particular moment of cultural contact between the Vietnamese diaspora on American soil. Moreover, for scholars and cultural producers working on the history of Vietnam, it begs the reassessment of former assumptions of what properly constitutes either some mythical notion of an inherent *Vietnameseness* and consequently of Americanness in general. Here, I believe the knee-jerk response driving toward hybridity cannot adequately answer the question raised by this inquiry. Rather, perhaps it is through this very process of historicizing these “hybrid categories that any ideals of either *Vietnameseness* or Americanness might reveal themselves. Further, and potentially more



significant, the aim of such inquiries ought not to seek to whom something (cultural products) belongs. Rather, and counter intuitively, inquiries should be about how such cultural productions, stemming from a unique set of conditions, produce a sense of belonging through their adaptation and proliferation.

Note on the Author

Vinh Phu Pham is an artist, literary scholar, and critic based in New York City. His writing covers Vietnamese contemporary art, the musical legacies of the Republic of Vietnam, and Asian American literature in diaspora. He has a background in 19th-century Spanish Peninsular literature, the literature of the Spanish Philippines, and Vietnamese Francophone literature. Currently, he serves as an assistant professor of World Literature at the Bard High School Early College Queens campus, a member of the Bard Early College. Among his publications is “Rhizomatic Transnationalism: Nhạc Vàng and the Legacy of Republicanism in Overseas Vietnamese Communities,” in *Republican Vietnam, 1963–1975: War, Society, Diaspora*, eds. Trinh M. Luu and Tuong Vu (Honolulu, Hawai’i: University of Hawai’i Press, 2023).