

THE PINOY MUSICIAN'S GATT FEEL

by Aurora Alarde-Regalado

Will foreign music flood the Philippine music market under the regime of the General Agreement on Tariffs and trade? And will Filipino music lovers--tempted by an unlimited feast of American and European music--start junking their Joey Ayala, After-Image, Eraserheads and Yano tapes?

No way, say the leaders of the Philippine recording industry, one of the few sectors confident of their ability to compete in a world with diminishing barriers to the flow of goods and services.

In the first place, GATT won't usher in anything new for the industry, according to Danilo Olivares, president of the Philippine Association of the Record Industry (PARI) and chairman of the Asian Music Industry Association.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a forlorn time for nationalists in general, American music ruled the Philippine airwaves. Success for a Filipino artist meant becoming known as the Elvis Presley or Perry Como or Joni James of the Philippines.

Now, Filipino music has made big strides. From a low 15 percent share of the local market, it has captured 40 percent and will soon get 50 percent, Olivares says, "because of better protection, better quality and better airplay." He is optimistic that in a world ruled by GATT, Filipino artists can become even more competitive in the home market.

This view is shared by Alvin de Vera, executive vice-president of Alpha Records, one of the few big recording companies devoted mainly to publishing Filipino music. He attributes the increased market share of Filipino music to several factors, such as improved market acceptance, the presence of more daring local producers, media support, and a more stratified market.

Of course, behind it all is the change in attitude towards Filipino music itself. "Ang mga estudyante kahit sa mga exclusive schools hindi na nahihiyang bumili ng Color it Red, Eraserheads, Yano, Rachel Alejandro," De Vera says.

He is hard put to explain how the shift in musical tastes happened, except to say that there are many cultural and sociological aspects to it. Whatever else caused the change, gone are the days when local music was associated with the *baduy* and the *masa*.

For Olivares, radio played an important role in shaping the musical taste of the buying and listening public. Recognizing the shift, record companies began investing in local music production as the market expanded, "not just for the bakya but also for the A and B market."

American and European music, however, continues to exert a powerful influence on the taste of Filipino record buyers. Many local artists seeking instant popularity still try to ape the style or music of the American or European singer or band currently the rage abroad.

For instance, Francis Magalona's "Ako ay Pilipino" and Andrew E's "Humanap Ka ng Panget" rode the wave of American rap music to make it to the top of the musical charts.

But they succeeded, not only because they had the foreign model down pat, but because they went beyond what they borrowed and blended it with elements of Filipino music.

In the past few years, a new phenomenon has appeared on the musical landscape. Artists who used to be associated with alternative or protest music have penetrated the mainstream, introducing ethnic rhythms and patterns into predominantly Western-influenced pop music. Some have achieved commercial successes beyond expectations. Joey Ayala, Grace Nono, Yano are only a few of those who have found a totally new expression of their own, and loyal audiences who appreciate it.

These are good times for local record producers, and they keep getting better. The Philippine record market is now worth P1.3 billion a year, estimates Olivares. The growth has been remarkable – from P400 million in 1989 and P700 million 1990.

Alpha Records says only four to five records become hits out of the 15 to 20 albums it produces every year. Despite the limited number of hits, it's apparent that the gains for Alpha far outweigh the costs, considering that it has been in the recording business since 1963.

This is an industry which has seen complete unknowns metamorphose into platinum record-holders in the span of a few months. Conservatism is no longer the name of the game. There are now more risk-takers, says de Vera.

"There are more daring producers who engage in production of local music," he adds. "And that's good because if you don't have people throwing in money into the business, you won't have too many products to build up the total population of music to choose from."

With the coming of GATT, record companies hope that the government will give them priority in the strengthening of the system of intellectual property protection – one of the requirements for membership in the World Trade Organization. "*Sana,*" De Vera says, "*mauna muna nating protektahan ang atin.*"

Local record producers and the people they are investing in - Filipino composers and performers - believe the country's accession into GATT will further accelerate the trend towards greater patronage of Filipino music.

With a more vigilant intellectual property protection system under GATT, local buyers and users of foreign music inevitably have to pay a higher bill. Senator Vicente "Tito" Sotto, in his speech rejecting GATT during the Senate vote on the agreement, raised the scenario of "disproportionate transfer of revenues" to foreign recording companies, where royalties to them go up to as high as 20 percent. He, of course, assumed that Filipinos would patronize foreign music with as much ardor as before.

Filipino musicians see it differently. As a result of the Agreement on Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs), "local and foreign music will now be subject to equal monitoring for collection of performance royalties," testified Danny Tan of KATHA before the Senate. For the first time, he pointed out, "Filipino compositions will be on an equal footing with foreign works."

Tan anticipates that there will be a definite shift in favor of local works, creating a demand which will spur the creative activities of Filipino artists.

For local composers, there is life after GATT. All that's needed is for them to accept the challenge.
