

Pinoy Artists Aim for the Pop Charts

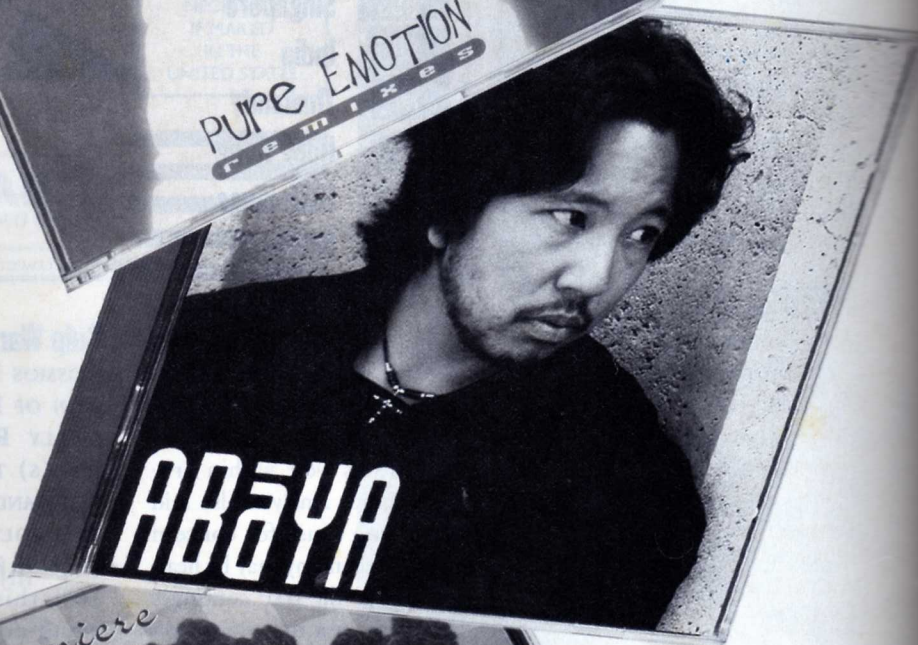
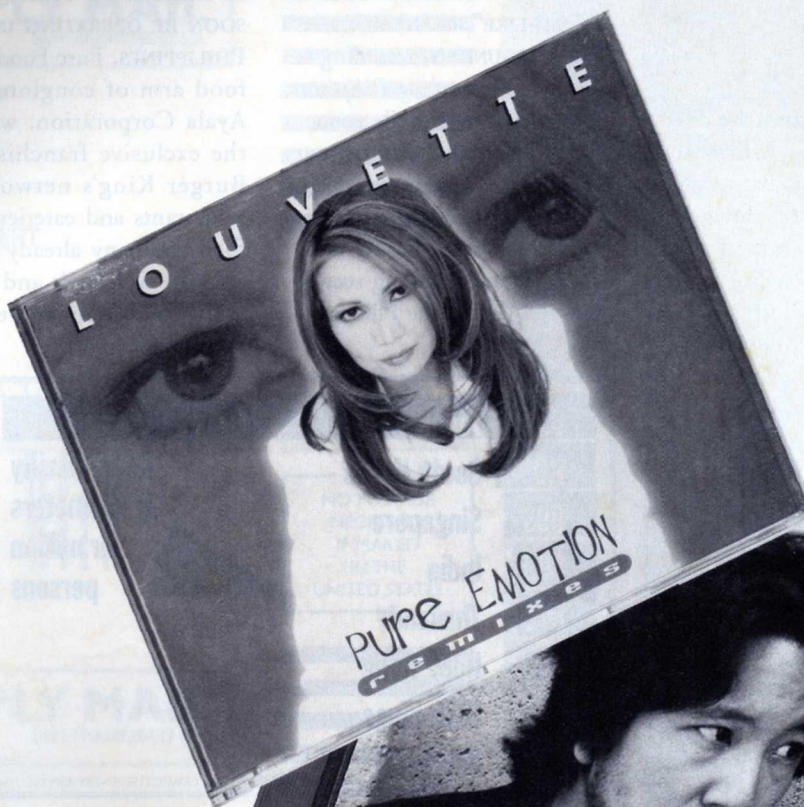
STOP

HEY

WHERE'S

THAT

SOUND?



What will it take to make a music-industry breakthrough?

b y r a c h e l l e q . a y u y a n g

“Actually, this is something really casual,”

says Alisha Floresca, 16. “Usually, we have more performance-type clothes.”

She’s referring to the jeans and belly-exposing T-shirts that she,

her sister Gigi and Leslye Maninang are wearing for a concert at

Los Medanos College in Pittsburg, California, where they’re performing

as the threesome Premiere.

“Like leather,” Gigi, 14, giggles.

Maninang, 17, adds, “At first we weren’t used to it, but when you looked around, all the other performers our age were wearing the same things, too. So it wasn’t something we weren’t totally uncomfortable with.”

They’re certainly mature beyond their age, able and poised enough to neutralize any questions about lost childhoods or children’s beauty pageants.

On stage, they strut their stuff like nobody’s business to the delight of the largely high-school age crowd and let their soulful, harmonizing sound take over and pour like honey.

If they evoke the popular R&B funk girl-group En Vogue, nearly twice their age, it’s no surprise. Like the African American act, Premiere was discovered by producers Denzil Foster and Thomas McElroy and was the first recruit to a new label, Alien Records. The Foster/McElroy team, which also helped launch Madonna, Tony Toni Tone, Club Nouveau and Regina Belle, is charting the group’s climb to music business success.

Premiere typifies the Filipino recording artists who want a piece of the pie in the American music industry. They’ve proven their talent and mettle in every genre, from R&B, rap and pop to alternative and jazz, doing gigs and putting in the rehearsals and studio time while juggling jobs and sometimes even families. But rather than float to the top, they seem to be stranded at the bottom. Collectively, they’re American music’s best-kept secret.

“He said, ‘I don’t know who that singer is, but he’s got a lot on the ball.’ Well, I told him, ‘I appreciate that because that’s me,’” relates San Francisco-based musician Craig Abaya, who recalls getting rave reviews from a Bay Area dee-

jay for a song he penned and recorded, called “Touch Me.” “Then he told me, ‘You’re writing a great story. Now write a great novel.’”

Abaya is passionate about his art and determined to maintain its integrity as he begins his music career. “For one, there are concessions I won’t make if I won’t enjoy what I do,” he declares. “This is really hard. A lot of people hate the marketing end. I can understand you can be a fantastic artist. But it’s the music *business*. A lot of it is to just be true.”

He looks up to alternative mainstream band Counting Crows for the quality of their lyrics. However, his self-named band, Abaya, has been compared to such groups as the Gin Blossoms and Crowded House.

“They sound like ...” seems to be a common take on Filipino American music. Says Richard Fowler, president of the fledgling Seattle, Washington-based Butterfly Records that backs the Filipina R&B vocalist, Louvette (*Filipinas*, April 1997): “One of the big deejays who was playing Louvette on his radio station was quoted in the *Gavin Report* that he was getting a lot of calls that she sounded like Janet Jackson on certain tracks. Others say they got calls that she sounds like Gloria Estefan.”

Ah-ha! Could *that* be the barrier preventing Filipino American acts from moving swiftly through the ranks of American mainstream music? That they’re excellent artists, but they tend to sound like somebody else?

More than satisfying general music tastes or plugging into tried-and-true formulas, could the solution be the creation of an entirely new sound that defines Filipino Americans and, at the same time, appeals to the mainstream?

Multi-Awarded:
Eleanor Academia
reaped in the
awards last year—
the California
Achievement Award,
the Mayor's Award
for Excellence
in Music by
Los Angeles Mayor
Richard Riordan
and Artist of the
Year by the
Los Angeles
Asian Pacific
American Heritage
Committee.



Mission-Oriented:
Ella del Rosario,
the former lead
singer of the
band Hotdog
during the '70s
and '80s in
the Philippines,
will present
the "Manila
Sound" at
a reception
in the Holiday
Inn in Milpitas,
California
on June 14.



Emoting:
Hoping
to make inroads
in club music,
former 1978
Miss Philippines-
World Louvette
recently released
a CD of 10
dance club
tracks of
"Pure Emotion"
from her debut
album of songs
she penned
herself.



Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine blazed to the top in the late '80s with a spicy sound that's not only distinctly Cuban, but also expressive of sizzling Miami Latino culture. It sold records and paved the way for Estefan's solo career.

Ella del Rosario believes she has the original Filipino sound. "Filipino Americans desperately need music to call their own," she argues. "We need our own Selená" (the late star of Tejano music). Dubbed "Manila Sound," which, incidentally, is the name of her Union City, California-based production company, the music is a throwback to the 1970s and '80s in the Philippines, when she and a group of friends from such exclusive schools as Assumption College and De La Salle University got together as the band Hotdog. The group produced such hits as "Pers Lab" (First Love) and "Ikaw ang Miss Universe ng Buhay Ko" (You're the Miss Universe of My Life), whose lyrics were mainly in Taglish.

According to del Rosario, the music united Filipinos from all classes and regions because it captured *pusong Pinoy* (the Pinoy heart). Fil-Am youths are the listeners she's trying to impress by introducing them to such Filipino traits as *malambing* (affectionate) and values such as love of family and respect for elders. In the process, she hopes to bridge the gap between the "transplanted Pinoy" and "the born-in-the-U.S.A. Filipino."

"I'm just putting some more fish in the pond," she explains.

No one is biting yet. Del Rosario adds that she called a meeting with such mainstream Filipino American-owned labels as Classified Records but was turned down.

Now may not be the time. The idea of bringing Filipinos together under one umbrella sound has yet to take hold because, as music innovator Eleanor Academia (*Filipinas*, June 1993) points out, there really isn't "a coffeehouse where all these Filipinos and Filipino Americans converge and are going after this sound."

"It hasn't developed to the point of maturity where people can identify it as something," says Academia, the first Filipino American to land a recording

contract with a major label (Epic/Sony), "and you can't get to that point until the artists know who they are and have figured out what they want to do and what they want to say. They're not at that stage yet in terms of numbers."

Actually, Filipino Americans who want to become artists may be gunning for financial success, which isn't always guaranteed, more than they're willing to make the commitment and sacrifices one must devote to one's art. At the very least, being a *starving artist* is a turn-off.

"Kai's objective right now is multi-platinum records," proclaims Brandon Cruz, president of HB Records and impresario of the Filipino male pop R&B group Kai. "What I think is going to make a huge difference in their success is these six young men are completely, 100 percent committed to the project. They go above and beyond—be it Filipino or established artists—to get the job done right."

Cruz invested close to \$40,000 for top-notch producers and promoters and is currently negotiating with the major recording companies to back the project.

According to Cruz, the marketing strategy is simple, one that's taken from a page of Berry Gordy's life. Gordy, the former Motown boss, with his stable of African American acts from the 1950s to the '80s, cultivated and brought the urban R&B and soul sounds into popular music. The synergy created crossover appeal because it became clear that African Americans weren't the only ones buying the music. "I think we need to capture the love and support of our own community and then expand out from that," Cruz explains.

Kai has a distinct sound, says Cruz. "Have you ever heard Errol sing?" he asks. "Errol Viray and Andre Silva are the two leads. They've got a unique quality to their voices. They're not trying to sound black or white. They're just trying to be real. They're not necessarily trying to say they're Filipino, either."

If the value of an elusive Fil-Am sound has yet to be proved, the distinct Fil-Am *look* is already working for some singers. While some Fil-Am recording artists may not wear their Filipino identity on their sleeves, some promoters are getting a lot of mileage out of it.

Premiere's striking good looks make them stand out. "The first thing that attracts people are their looks," notes Wanda Croudy, the group's manager at the African American-owned Y! Entertainment. "They're very, very attractive."

"(The producers) liked that fact that we're Filipino," proclaim the girls in unison. "It's something different."

Ed Mabasa, national director of retail marketing for Classified Records, believes the same appeal is evident in the label's major talent Jocelyn Enriquez (*Filipinas*, June 1994), who's making waves in free-style club music. "People are actually trippin' off how she looks," Mabasa says. "When was the last time you saw an Asian female on MTV? I don't even recall."

Cruz admits that, as a selling point, he too will promote Kai's Filipino identity as a means of separating them from the rest of the artists in a field where there are relatively few Filipinos.

For some Fil-Am musicians, being up front about their identity isn't important because it has no bearing on their music. This may explain why Fil-Ams who gained mainstream recognition in American music don't make a big deal about being Filipino. Kirk Hammett, who's a quarter Filipino and took Asian American studies at San Francisco State University, has been the heavy metal band Metallica's lead guitarist since 1983.

Joey Santiago, a Pinoy and the lead guitarist of the alternative band the Pixies during its heyday, was described in a 1990 *Rolling Stone* article "as the lifeblood of the Pixies' sound" and "someone who embodies what the band is all about: The Stones have Keith Richards, the Who had Keith Moon and the Pixies have Joey Santiago." But as one of the band members pointed out, "Ever talk to Joey? He *really* doesn't have anything to say."

Even Academia, who burst into the scene in 1987 with a cutting-edge sound that was backed by percussion instruments indigenous to the southern Philippines, isn't too keen on being stuck with the label "Filipino sound."

"I'd rather be viewed as an artist who does what she does very well and have the listener experience that as art," she says. "And because of my ancestry one can say, 'Oh, she's of Filipino ancestry, and perhaps that's a Filipino sound and she's expressing the totality of what she is.'"

It's certainly an issue Fil-Am musicians are thinking about. "I might not have any knowledge whatsoever of ancient music or any music that may be out in the mountains," says Neil Rosario, a 28-year-old Chicago-based musician, "but I do have a predisposition because I'm raised Filipino. So if anything, that has informed me."

Who knows whether Rosario's vocals simply contributes to the monochromatic, stripped-down style of his Chicago-based alternative band, the Dolomites, or reveals something innately Filipino.

As he and other struggling Fil-Am musical talents come closer to defining their sounds, perhaps they'll arrive at the same place. Perhaps, it's that jamming coffee-house Academia is talking about. Only time will tell if the idea of a distinct Filipino sound is just a pipe dream. ■



High Hopes: Kai, which has opened for such mainstream acts as All 4 One and Sheryl Crow, has a busy schedule fully stocked with performances this year, including a San Jose concert headlined by hip-hop sensations Blackstreet and Bone Thugs N' Harmony.



Don't Call Them Babes: Premiere juggles schoolwork and concert dates. "Somethin' About You," the group's first release from their debut album "Premier," is getting airplay in the San Francisco Bay Area.



Artist at Heart: Craig Abaya hasn't decided on a title for his band's first album. Initially called "A Boy's Life," it was changed from "The Fine Art of Politics" to "Between the Extremes." It's a work in progress.