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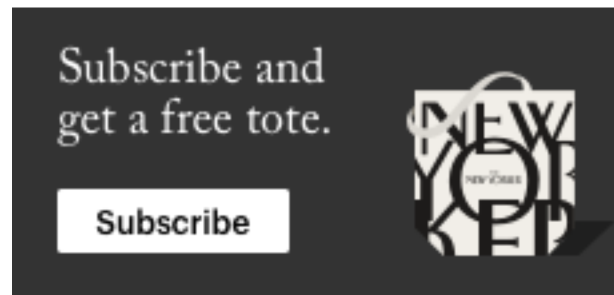

Cultural Comment

Listening to George Michael in Taiwan

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BSA

For a young person in Taiwan in the late eighties and early nineties, George Michael's songs about personal freedom felt tailor-made for the post-Cold War world.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROB VERHORST / REDFERNS / GETTY

International Community Radio Taiwan—I.C.R.T. for short—began airing in 1979, shortly after the United States, pressured by China, broke formal diplomatic ties with the island. For the previous two decades, the station had broadcast music and news for American military personnel, as part of the Armed Forces Network. Like many such stations that were established in the fifties, during the Cold War fight for hearts and minds, its audience would often include locals, like my mom and her siblings, who were enamored of the exotic sounds of a faraway culture.

Today, the station still bears traces of this past, mixing hits from America—full of the raucous, textured possibilities of democratic culture—with local news reporting. By the time I began listening, in the nineteen-eighties, both the news and the music had gotten a bit saccharine, the programming full of d.j.s who spoke polished, impossibly upbeat English. But it remained a station for American expats curious about the Top Forty power ballads and soft-rock hits from back home, and locals who aspired to a future somewhere else.

Another way to think about I.C.R.T. is that the station has long offered a vision of America at its most peaceable and friendly. Nostalgia works in a few ways. You can pine for an unrecoverable past, which ultimately amounts to an attempt to recapture past ignorant bliss. Or you can see the possibilities of that past as transitory, nobody's to own, as a spirit to be admired and distributed, shared among a wider swath of the world. I never thought about America as much as when I was away from it—trying to translate "Huh?" and "Uh-huh" to the Taiwanese kids I played basketball with, or carefully studying whatever pop charts or box scores I could find. So I listened to I.C.R.T. a lot, imbibing a version of the American past that was always rising, fixed to the fortunes of another day.

I was in Taiwan the past couple weeks, and it wasn't until the trip was almost over, when I heard I.C.R.T. in the car, that I realized I hadn't listened to any music the whole time. I was busy doing other things, like eating a lot of noodles. It was Christmas Eve and a d.j. on I.C.R.T. was playing a block of holiday music by artists I only recognized by name. He played Pentatonix, whose recently released "A Pentatonix Christmas" CD was selling out fast in Taiwan, and talked up America's burgeoning arena a-cappella scene. All of this was news to me. There wasn't a shred of anxiety in his voice, no jokes about a "War on Christmas" or how awful a year it had been or the arbitrariness of the Gregorian calendar. None of the resignation I heard elsewhere, from relatives, about how America's President-elect had recklessly played Taiwan as a cudgel against the mainland. It was just good vibes and the unbearably clean sound of five young Texans harmonizing their hearts out.

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to imagine using a language that is not your own. One of the most astonishing things I saw last year was "Mommy," a film by the twenty-nine-year-old artist Maggie Lee. In the seventies, Lee's parents immigrated to America from Taiwan, eventually settling in suburban New Jersey, where they ran a Chinese restaurant. When Lee and her sister were very young, their father left the family to pursue dreams of becoming a stage magician. Lee made "Mommy" in the wake of her mother's sudden death, a few years back, lovingly reconstructing their life together through old photos, scans of personal ephemera, and home videos. That Lee tells this story with a hectic energy—through a series of personally significant, teen angst-signifying vernaculars—makes it all the more wrenching. The soundtrack careens between old voice mails and pop-punk, Lee's whispered confessions and hyperdrive dance music. Text floats across the screen and cut-and-paste images cascade and pile atop one another, like a nineties GeoCities Web page slowly gaining consciousness. It makes "Mommy" less maudlin but more intimate. These were the worlds where Lee came to understand

herself as a teen-ager, and now she's using them to understand what she was escaping from, too.

At the core of "Mommy" is a love that is almost unbearably desperate, as Lee imagines the idiosyncrasies and aspirational aphorisms that stay with you, even as you move across the world, even as that new world overtakes you and makes you someone else. In one of the most devastating scenes, we hear a conversation between Lee and her mother, who is growing skeptical about her daughter's art-school dreams. Meanwhile, we see a stream of snapshots from a party, the kind that probably far exceeds what her Taiwanese immigrant mom could have imagined a wild night out in the big city must look like. "You have to do exactly what is right," Lee's mother tells her, clinging to a dream that hard work and following the rules will be the newcomer's salvation—that there is a right way.

I was about to leave Taiwan when I heard that George Michael had passed away, which felt oddly appropriate. His music always reminded me of the summers and winter breaks I spent there in the late eighties and early nineties; it was a constant presence on I.C.R.T. Wham! had been the first Western pop act to play a concert in China, and "Careless Whisper" seemed to be the blueprint for an entire generation of Asian pop music. I remember my dad buying "Faith" at a basement cassette-tape stall in Taipei; I remember the I.C.R.T. d.j.s never lingering too long on what any of Michael's songs were about.

For some reason, Michael's music made sense to me in Taiwan in a way that it hadn't in America, even though I knew he was British. Maybe I recognized something between words and feeling, something that couldn't be translated. I couldn't put into words why his sense of yearning verged toward an impossible despair, why it looked like a campy costume when he dressed up as an old-time American rocker in the video for "Faith," why I found the lyrics to "Monkey" peculiar and troubling. It was clear to many then, and even more so now, what was hidden in plain sight: the allegories for expectation and disappointment, a business that prohibited him from being

his true self, the awareness that the songs were his but the way that they would circulate in the world was not. It's easy to feel foolish about all this in retrospect, especially reading about how he helped so many people understand themselves, during a much more fraught era for sexual identity. At the time, I just sensed difference.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Ninety Years of Christmas in New York City

This has been a year, though, when we've been reminded that culture abides by no definitive reading. What's deplorable to one becomes an organizing principle for another. And that's how culture should work. Yet the harm comes when we insist on a single version of the story, an archetypal way of being, a right way to see things—for there is no language capable of representing us all. It felt like one of those cosmic coincidences that Michael's "Listen Without Prejudice, Vol. 1" arrived in 1990, just as a new, post-Cold War order was coming into focus. I was too young or naïve to really understand what this new world portended, or that "Freedom! '90" was about a very specific and personal kind of liberation, rather than a soundtrack for watching the CNN news crawl (which felt like a part of this seamless, interconnected new future, too). Nonetheless, "Freedom! '90" became a language for understanding a new world, especially those final two minutes, when Michael slides to the side of the stage. That funky drum loop, the fact that it just went on and on, as though leaving some room for any of us listening to join in and tell our own story.