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Indonesian Hip-Hop Battle for Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study will discuss how hip-hop music in Indonesia struggles to find a place amid the onslaught of the world's massive pop music industry and the regional pop music industry. **Research method:** By using qualitative methods, as well as data collection techniques carried out through the process of observation, interviews, and literature study. This research provides an overview of how Indonesian Hip Hop with idealism can create its market and how the Hip Hop community in Indonesia makes a living on its autonomy. **Results and discussion:** Hip-hop was initially born as a subculture that tried to fight the practice of racism against black people with the spirit of resistance. Hip-hop then grew into a music genre to respond to political issues and portray the social realism of society. The development of Hip Hop has also spread to various countries globally, including Indonesia. Hip Hop then become part of the global music industry and is entering a golden age. **Implication:** The hip-hop music industry is slowly experiencing its twilight period after the birth of mainstream music hegemony. The independent music scene has become a counterculture to the supremacy of mainstream music. Independent musicians with a do-it-yourself spirit ethos have succeeded in creating their ecosystem.

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INTRODUCTION

Two decades ago, in the mid-2000s, astonishing news came up, saying that hip-hop was dead. The uproar "Hip-Hop is dead" spread by word of mouth. The escalation of information was disseminated to several underground music scenes in the country and

reached the ears of friends in the hip-hop scene. Like a thunderbolt in broad daylight, the hot ball of information that hip hop was dead was enough to make the hip-hop scene hot in that era. The hip-hop scene began to look for the origin of the news so that it would not become a wild ball. Ucok, the frontman of Homicide, one of the Indonesian hip-hop communities, admitted that he was behind the statement “Hip-hop was dead” (Yanko, 2021).

After finding out who the person behind the hip-hop statement was dead, various responses came out of the country's underground scene. There were multiple answers who firmly reject the message, but some people also agree with it. Of course, those who disagreed with that statement were in the hip-hop scene. The hip-hop scene questioned why the Homicide group harmed the hip-hop scene itself. Homicide was born from the punk-hardcore music scene. Therefore, the news that hip-hop was dead had the potential to ignite a fire of friction across the music scene. One of the most potent responses emerged from the east of the island of Java, namely Surabaya. The response was the release of a song titled Dobrak, created by the hip-hop unit X Calibour. The song contains his disagreement with the phrase “Hip-Hop is dead”. The rejection reflects in the rhymes of Dobrak's song. Hip Hop will not die.

A few months after the incident, the news disappeared on its own. It's no longer a hot topic in the underground music scene. Then in mid-2001, a new hip-hop group emerged in the Indonesian Hip-Hop scene. Many groups were born, including Calludra, X Calibour, Twin Sista, Nucleus, and Negative Brain. The names of these hip-hop units were taken from the compilation album War Rap, released by the indie label Troops Record. After the compilation album War Rap was born, the emergence of hip-hop groups in the scene was spread out from generation to generation. They were starting from the era of the Jahanam, Eyefeelsix, to the current age of Tuan 13 and friends. This phenomenon has become a topic of study that is quite interesting for us to discuss. How do the dynamics of the Indonesian hip-hop scene. Is hip-hop still alive or is hip-hop dead?

After three decades have passed, how has the Indonesian hip-hop scene existed lately? From the generation of the hip hop proclaimer Iwa K to the Z generation rapper Rich Brian. The hip-hop phenomenon has recently received massive exposure (Lainsyamputti, 2021). It captures several local rappers who have invaded the foreign scene, including Ramen Gyrl, Swerte, to Rich Brian. The last name is the rapper figure

who invaded the 2022 Coachella Festival in the United States. The world of the hip-hop music scene is getting louder and louder after these rappers have gone viral on mainstream media platforms. Iwa K, Yacko, Panji Pragiwaksono, J Flow, and swag rapper Young Lex. The sustainability of the scene ecosystem is even more alive after various kinds of music festivals are present. The life of the hip-hop industry in the country is widespread throughout the region.

Long before the ecosystem was alive, how did hip-hop music begin to cross thousands of kilometres from America to the Archipelago? Based on the literature obtained, there is no apparent source of how hip-hop was born in this country. Some say that hip-hop started with the breakdancing trend. In the early 1990s, young people were in the midst of the disco trend and the breakdance movement. Breakdancing or seizure dance is an element of hip-hop culture itself (Spady, 2013). However, some believe that hip-hop was brought by the "bourgeois." The bourgeoisie is young people who go to Uncle Sam's land for pursuing their studies. After completing their studies, they returned to their homeland carrying practical experiences (Noseworthy, 2018). The cultural experience is in the form of knowledge of hip-hop culture. They brought souvenirs in the form of boomboxes, cassettes, zines, and books about American hip-hop. From that second on, hip-hop spread to big cities. But what exactly is hip-hop itself?

The roots of hip-hop's growth stem from The Bronx in New York City. Hip-hop is an African-American subculture embraced by young Americans ("Contemporary Youth Culture: An International Encyclopedia," 2006). Hip-hop culture was born and grew in the late 1970s, precisely in the South Bronx, as a form of black protest media against the domination of American government power. American rulers marginalized Blacks (Rizky, 2017). At that time, the American government still adhered to the political ideology of apartheid. As a result, blacks were often marginalized and lived in suburban slums. Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five were the first groups to introduce hip hop. Grandmaster Flash's song's message is a line of rhymes about how black people obtain oppressed. Hip-hop was used as a hammer against the racist practices of that era. In addition to media resistance to racist forms of exercise, hip hop is applied to respond to developing hot issues, such as social realism, political conditions, or love. The spirit of resistance continued to be echoed until the era of the N.W.A Hip-hop unit, Public Enemy, to the Immortal Technique generation. Hip-hop

culture was born from the spirit of resistance. How do we see today's Hip-hop, especially in third-world countries like Indonesia?

RESEARCH METHOD

The researcher used qualitative method to conduct this study. Qualitative method was used in order to obtain deeper meaning about the happening phenomenon, in this case as a third-world country, how does the hip-hop scene in Indonesia look like. Qualitative method was also used to utilise the chance to get a lot of information about behaviour, point of view, and feeling from a group of people or an individual (Moleong, 2013). Particular hip-hop group was chosen for this research; Grimloc Record, formed by Ucok Homicide, a.k.a Morgue Vanguard. In this study, the researcher did not depend on one source of data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data collection techniques carried out through the process of observation, interviews, and literature study. In this study, the researcher used semi-structured interview to get better understanding and knowledge-producing from the topic that is discussed. In semi-structured interview, the researcher can get the deeper meaning in about certain phenomena that's been happening (Brinkmann, 2013).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Hip-Hop Ideology on the Capitalism World

As previously stated, it is unknown when hip-hop in Indonesia began. But many people agree that hip-hop music, especially rap, was introduced by the figure of Iwa K. Iwa Kusuma, the rapper's real name, who began his musical career in the mid-1989s. Before becoming a rapper, Iwa K was also a member of the Guest band. Iwa K's debut album as a solo rap singer was in 1993, with the release of the album "Ku Ingin Kembali." However, Iwa K's turning point was when he released an album, Topeng, with the famous single, "Bebas." The free song exploded in the market and catapulted Iwa K's name into the national music scene.

After Iwa K became known in the Indonesian music scene, new rappers or groups were born, especially in the hip-hop music industry. This phenomenon could be seen from the release of the compilation album "Pesta Rap 1" in 1995. The album released by the Musica Studio label gave birth to new retainers such as Blakumuh, Boyz Got No Brain, Syndicate 31, and Black Skin to the hip-hop unit Yogyakarta City. G- Tribes. The album sold well in the market to dominate the charts. For example, the

song "Cewe Matre" by the Black Skin group was popular on national radio stations. Then the hip hop unit Syndikat 31 became increasingly popular with the remake of the song "Kera Sakti" soundtrack, which graced national television in that era.

The wave called hip-hop did not stop there. The spiral of escalation was followed by the release of "Pesta Rap 2". The album "Pesta Rap 2" added legitimacy to hip-hop music and was accepted by listeners in that era. Hip-hop unit Sweet Martabak, Sound da Clain, Pumpkins Hardcore Crew, Paper Clip, and Vanda. The last name is a figure that people know as a disc Jockey. It can be assumed that the hip-hop music industry in the mid-1990s had a vibrant ecosystem and was full of audiences. The release of the cassette sold well, and several Hip Hop units went viral in the mainstream media. The mid-1990s can be said to be the golden era for the country's hip-hop music scene. However, even the generation of the hip-hop scene didn't stop there. In the 2000s, the newest generation emerged: the Neo generation, Saykoji, 8ball, Fade 2 Black, and Young Lex and Rich Brian. However, this generation did not give birth to a compilation album but a solo career.

Medio 1990 to 2000 was undeniably the golden age of the country's hip-hop industry. However the golden peak of hip-hop music did not last long. There were quite a few factors that make hip-hop lose its fangs. First, new generation hip-hop songs tend to be monotonous. There was nothing fresh contained in the music or the rhyming stanza. Hip-hop songs in the recent era only have only dealt with the themes of romance, drugs, and body objectification. The songs and rhymes are far from the spirit of hip hop when they were born on this earth, far from the heart of resistance and progress (Polfuß, 2022). It is inevitable that when the quality of his musical works decreases, his interest in rap music decreases.

Hip-hop's twilight turned into a nadir. Hip-hop that was initially suspended in motion walked towards its vortex. The waves of the hip-hop music industry were blown away by the waves of Malaysian music. In the mid-2000s, Malay pop music groups were born—for example, ST 12 and Radja, a group that pioneered the Malay pop spirit. Since then, the music industry was dominated by Malay pop, shifting dangdut to hip-hop. Malay bands surround Indonesia from west to east. Our society was starting to have a Malay pop fever, which could be seen in many radio stations playing Malay songs (Weintraub, 2011). Even those songs dominated the music charts. Many young people requested various themes from the band. National television was filled with the

faces of Malay groups every minute. Even the physical release of their album sold well, like boiled peanuts at the night market. Their albums sold millions of copies, even to the point of being hijacked. What's interesting is that pirated cassettes are selling well because there are so many fans. Yes, the wave of Malay music is enough to impact the decline of the glory of hip-hop music (Putra & Irwansyah, 2019).

The guns of hip-hop music are not only due to the dominance of Malay music, but other factors undermine it. That factor was the record label industry in that era. Record labels at that time only signed groups worth 'selling'. Sold in quotation marks, they sell well in the market and generate rupiah in the bank. Most of the country's record labels sign bands from pop to Malay because it has been proven to create enormous profits, from physical releases to ring-back tones. The hegemony of major record labels such as Trinity Optima Production, Warner Music, Musica Studio, and Sony Music Indonesia are dominated by pop to Malay music genres. Musica Studio, which has released an album with the hip hop genre, has no longer looked at the hip hop industry. As a result, there is no more room for romantic musicians, who incidentally do not "sell" the music industry market. It is undeniable that romantic musicians tend to have diverse and non-mainstream works. Not like pop musicians to Malay who only talk about the theme of love, heartbreak to infidelity. It can be said that the music industry of that era looked similar, and the premise tended to dwell on the theme of romance, seeming whiny and sad.

The hegemony of the major record labels of that era was also one of the factors supporting the erosion of the Indonesian hip-hop industry. Local rappers no longer had the space or opportunity to record their best music on major labels. Hip-hop musicians seem to be neglected and no longer a priority. Even if there are rap musicians who do the recording, his work is certainly not far from love. Investors no longer see a potential market and generate profits. It could not be lied to if the music industry was co-opted by the supremacy of capital, which thought it was only limited to rupiah with a minimal quality. It can even be said that the pop and Malay industries were the sources of the capitalists' cash cows at that time, perhaps even today.

Hip-hop is going through a dark period. Therefore, what was said by Ucok Homicide at that time was true: Hip-hop was dead. Hip-hop is flexing, bling-bling, and cling-cling. The era of hip-hop has been uprooted from its spiritual roots. Hip-hop no longer understands the social realism of its people.

Hip-Hop from Community to Label Agency

The hegemony of significant labels is undeniable in the country's music industry. Major brands are supported by investors who make the pop and Malaysian industries massive in various lines. The supremacy of significant capital makes them dominate our music industry today. What will happen to independent musicians if mainstream investors control the music industry? We need to highlight their actions and how to live in the middle of the mainstream music world. So, what is the independent path musicians take to continue to create music and spread their work? It is interesting for us to study the existence and journey of independent musicians.

The musicians who do not have space in the realm of significant labels do not just stand still. They are looking for ways to continue to work and spread their restless spirit. Independent musicians started creating movements in the underground scene. The move resulted in small gigs and wrote zines to compilation albums. The action of the scene in that era tends to be collective. They "joint" to create a campaign and grow the music scene below. The indie movement carries the spirit of do-it-yourself in every act. Collective ideology and the nature of do-it-yourself are the sparks of resistance to the mainstream world. The massive cooperative movement finally made the indie scene ogled by many people and became crowded. The underground movement that creates an independent music ecosystem is alive and well in these areas.

The massive underground movement began to poison several big cities, such as Bandung, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and Malang. The action passed in the form of media such as photocopies of zines to compilation albums (Martin-Iverson, 2012). The musicians in the area began to be interested in the independent concept. Independent refers to the process of creating a work. Music that is independently produced and distributed by musicians or record labels (Prakoso, 2013). Independent path as an alternative media to convey creative ideas without any intervention from any party. The indie track can be said to be an answer and resistance to mainstream music in Indonesia. Resistance is a protest against the quality of music in Indonesia or another alternative to producing and publishing their works (Prakoso 2013).

The quality of the music created by indie musicians is also not inferior. Instead, they tend to be better and bring up new ideas. Full of a unique premise and proves that indie musicians do not care about market demands. Indie musicians have been established to date with their idealism without intervention from any party. The indie

path has become the embers of a concrete enough resistance to fight the hegemony of mainstream Indonesian music. The ideology of the indie path can also be self-critical for musicians so that they can consistently create do-it-yourself works (Lestari, 2019).

The process to get to an independent pathway ecosystem is quite long and many pillars keep it growing and alive until this moment. The pillars are the birth of a new musician, the rolling of gigs to the consistency of record labels (Aryandari, 2021). These pillars keep the indie music ecosystem alive from upstream to downstream. They also keep the indie scene consistent and we can see their presence to this very moment. However, without denying the role of other pillars, the record label is the most crucial pillar of its existence. It can be an estuary for musicians to record and distribute their musical works, the forefront for musicians to focus on the creative process, and provide some insights about their business segments (Putra & Irwansyah, 2019).

One example of an independent record label used as a reference is Grimloc Record. It was born and grew up consistent with his idealism. Grimloc became an oasis during the dry underground music industry that seemed sluggish. Lately, Grimloc regularly releases albums from several bands under its umbrella, from hip hop and punk to hardcore genres. Grimloc can be a role model for other record labels to run the business of the indie label industry. It's interesting to review how Grimloc was created and revived its ecosystem.

Grimloc Record is an indie label formed by Ucok Homicide, a.k.a Morgue Vanguard. According to Ucok, the beginning of the journey to establish the indie label Grimloc was assisted by the figure of Gaya Eyefeelsix. The beginning of Grimloc's work can be traced back to the era of Harder Records. Harder Records is an independent record label that existed around the 1990s. Ucok is one of the figures behind the scenes, helping to release albums from Balcony, Decay to Full of Hate. When Ucok released the Homicide album *Illsurrekshun* in 2007, it was the beginning of Grimloc Record. As quoted from the Superlive page, Ucok Homicide said that the main reason for establishing a label began with the need to release an album for his music group. This background continues to grow, releasing albums from his group of colleagues. Ucok, whose real name is Herry Sutresna, admitted that his desire to build a record label was based on the intention of preserving musical traditions in the city of Bandung.

In the year of 2011, Grimloc Records released their debut album, hip hop unit Eyefeelsix's, "Pain Per Hate". That moment was the turning point for Grimloc and they were more serious about managing the label. Grimloc Record with its idealism and their concept is to release an album that focuses on the music scene colleagues in Bandung and its surroundings. Bandung musicians make 99% of the albums released by Grimloc Record. According to him, he is not pretentiously exclusive, but he only understands and understands the music scene around Bandung.

Based on these ideals, Grimloc Record has a strong concept. The primary purpose of the establishment of Grimloc is not to dominate the market but to become a place to share pleasure in the form of music. This idealism has made Grimloc produce phenomenal albums such as SSSLOTHHH - Phenomenon (2013), Taring - Nazar Palagan (2014), Morgue Vanguard x Still - Fateh (2014), Eyefeelsick - Immortality (2013), Flukeminimix - Between Spaces into Space (2015). Until now, after a decade of existence, Grimloc is concretely consistent with its silent idealism.

Grimloc's Record in turning the wheels of its business is also fascinating to discuss. Grimloc is a record label that considers a business plan from upstream to downstream. From the recording process and artwork to the distribution of their concepts as a whole. As a result, Grimloc's music albums are always in a good quality and get good attention in the market. Grimloc albums are pretty rare, they are hunted by collectors. The album *Mesin Tempur* (Combat Machine), Koil to rapper Krowbar was sold in the market. In addition, Grimloc also runs a merchandising business. Income from the merchandise sector has made Grimloc more sustainable to this day. Merchandise that was released was also selling well. Grimloc Record's business method is reasonably successful in the current underground music scene. Their merchandise is trusted and bought by Indonesian music lovers, not only the Bandung region.

Grimloc Record not only lives by its ideals but is also progressive. It is quite advanced if you look at its work practices—Grimloc Record's journey process symbiotic relationships with communities outside the realm of music. The work practice is tied to socio-political activity, particularly for those dealing with urban issues. However, it also pays attention to the marginalized, such as laborers and the urban poor. Fundamental work practices are like initiating music gigs that intersect with the issues currently experienced by urban people—from land grabbing to eviction

cases. Communalism from Grimloc and other communities is often involved in the Street Library movement, the Dago Against Movement, Wadas Melawan and is active in the Coastal Land Farmers Association (PPLP) Kulonprogo. A movement to support people whose livelihoods have been injured by the authorities.

Grimloc's communalism belongs to musicians who are concretely involved in addressing social issues that are developing in the country. For them, community nodes are essential to building so that their existence will last a long time. They struggle to provide political understanding so that citizens can be empowered and strengthen their collective solidarity. According to Aris Setyawan, a musician and ethnomusicologist, Grimloc's position brings fresh air to the country's music industry; apart from releasing a music album, Grimloc dares to take a stand on socio-political issues. Grimloc's no longer stuck in the Hip Hop pattern but has expanded into genres ranging from metal to post-rock. Grimloc Record can be a reference for Indonesian musicians to create their ecosystem and spread their political work practices.

CONCLUSION

To this day, mainstream music is co-opted by groups that present themes not far from matters of love—in contradiction with indie music, which gave birth to the premise of fresh and innovative ideas. The independent music path can be applied as a resistance movement against the supremacy of capital. Indie music should be a tool to fight the hegemony of the mainstream, which calls for flexing, bling-bling, and cling-cling. Mainstream people who are comfortable living in ivory towers are not sensitive to the reality of today's society.

In the hegemony of mainstream music to major labels, independent musicians should take a role in providing an understanding that music is not just a business and a commodity. Music media can naturally play a role in raising social issues in society. With the spirit of do-it-yourself, independent music should provide intelligence and requirements for meaning. Indie music should be a vehicle for political understanding in an apathetic and apolitical society. An independent spirit should become an ideology to regulate the autonomy of one's own life without depending on anyone.

Grimloc Record is a form of concrete evidence. Grimloc can fight the hegemony of the mainstream music market and people and has proven to be able to create its market. They can counterculture the dominance of mainstream music with their do-it-yourself ethos. A decade on, Grimloc is proving that the cooperative movement can

be the answer to today's musicians' anxieties. With communal nodes, we can create our ecosystem. According to Ucok, Grimloc's goal is to be a space of joy and a form of celebration for those they love, namely music. Grimloc can be a form of self-criticism against the Indonesian music industry today. So new labels will be born that will make the independent music ecosystem more solid and colourful.

An independent record label whose existence can last for more than a decade describes the label as having a slick ideology. Live by what it believes in and believes during an increasingly stale industrial disruption. "Long Live with a Little Bit of Autonomy."

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