

Lokananta: Sounds of Crisis and Recovery from Indonesia's National Record Company

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Blog post published October 19, 2015 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/e1vsj-qms80>

Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Ethnographic, Music, Place And Space, Sound Studies, Alpha Omega Merchandise



Recommended citation

iancoss. (2015, October 19). Lokananta: Sounds of Crisis and Recovery from Indonesia's National Record Company. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/e1vsj-qms80>

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Entering from the front, Lokananta seems quiet. An art-deco façade gives way to a sleepy courtyard with a central fountain—the sound of splashing water mixes with stately *gamelan* music from a wall-mounted speaker—but there are signs of activity here in Indonesia's oldest record company. Head right into the duplication room and you hear the hiss-snap of an old tape-splicing machine at work, plus occasional bursts of guitar as a worker in a blue collared shirt tests out punk cassettes. Across the low campus of pastel yellow buildings, an engineer in the company's cavernous studio listens back to an upbeat shuffle from a recent session.

These sounds take on a special significance at Lokananta, because it is the nation's state-owned record company—the “Sound of Indonesia”—which after a brush with bankruptcy in the early 2000s, is now making a tentative comeback driven largely by renewed interest in analog music technology. It makes for an interesting scene: tattooed indie rockers and young tape sellers partnering with a company that for decades was part of the authoritarian government's Department of Information. Crisis and transition have a way of forging unusual partnerships, and Lokananta's current business configuration is a product of economic crisis.

I learned of Lokananta's winding path to recovery while doing ethnographic fieldwork in May 2015, when I visited the company, interviewed many of its employees, and met with some of the young musicians and entrepreneurs that are helping to keep it afloat. They helped me piece together this story of Lokananta's long history and uncertain future, a story that reflects many of the larger social changes unfolding across Indonesia during the company's sixty years of operation. From the ‘golden years’ to the ‘vacuum,’ crisis to recovery, I found that Lokananta continues to fulfill its mission of disseminating the sounds of the nation, but those sounds are different than before. More specifically, I argue that the fiscal crisis forced Lokananta to open itself to the new sounds and scenes that have emerged in contemporary Indonesia.

An Instrument that Plays Itself

Lokananta takes its name from a mythical gamelan ensemble that according to legend sounded without being struck (perhaps an echo of the long-running association between recorded sound and the [supernatural](#)?). When established in the city of Surakarta in 1956, Lokananta's mandate from the Sukarno government was to establish a national culture through sound, and at the same time mitigate the influence of the international music then dominating the airwaves. In Lokananta's early years, this meant manufacturing vinyl discs of recordings made throughout the archipelago, and then distributing those records back to the country's radio stations for broadcasting. Soon enough listeners began asking to buy records themselves, and in 1959 the state-owned company began selling to the general public. Besides recordings of regional songs, or *lagu daerah*, much of the music bearing Lokananta's seal was in the classical gamelan tradition of central Java and a style of sentimental song known as *kroncong*.

[Records being pressed at Lokananta. Tapes being produced at Lokananta.](#)



The company's output during those golden years—basically the 60s-80s—is well documented in a [discography](#) compiled by ethnomusicologist [Philip Yampolsky](#); I'm more interested in what has happened since then. By the 1990s, recorded music was neither mysterious nor scarce. Anyone with a tape deck could copy a cassette and pirated music was ubiquitous. Studios were downsizing and going digital, and Lokananta, with its large facility and staff, was struggling to remain viable even with government support. [Then came the Asian Financial Crisis and the fall of the 'New Order' regime in 1998.](#)

The Department of Information was liquidated during the political transition, meaning Lokananta lost all government funding. Most of the technical staff were shifted to the national radio broadcaster, RRI, while Lokananta shrank to a skeleton crew and for several years stopped almost all production. Employees who were there refer to this time as the "vacuum." The piano was sold, microphones disappeared, and for a time the record storage shed was rented out for indoor soccer. Lokananta went silent.

With the loss of public support and the traditional music market in decline, Indonesia's oldest record company needed new sources of revenue. Increasingly, that revenue has come from recording and duplicating albums by indie and underground artists, scenes that have actually blossomed in the aftermath of the repressive New Order regime.

Lokananta Riot

Just days before I arrived at Lokananta, a Balinese Rockabilly band called [The Hydrant](#) wrapped up a session there for their new album. The band's very presence at the studio says a lot about Lokananta's changing image in the Indonesian music world. When I later met with Adi, The Hydrant's bass player, he told me that until this year he'd never heard of Lokananta. Even as a lover of vintage recordings, he had no idea that his country boasted an old wood-paneled studio that is reportedly modeled on the famous Abbey Road in London. When he heard about that room from a friend in Jogjakarta, Adi and his band realized it was the perfect place to record an album 'live in the studio' just like their idols from the 50s and 60s (some of those [idols](#) were even released on the Lokananta label). According to Adi, the studio manager at Lokananta told him that The Hydrant was the first "riot and roll band" to record there, so the album became "Lokananta Riot."

This trend of young bands recording live at Lokananta got its start in 2012, when Indonesian R&B singer [Glenn Fredly](#) and the indie pop group White Shoes and the Couples Company both completed projects there. For these artists, recording in the company's vintage studio served to emphasize their connection with Indonesia's national music history, and also to draw attention to Lokananta's important role in that history. In fact, the album that White Shoes recorded, *Menyanyikan Lagu2 Daerah*, was entirely based on the style of regional folk songs (*lagu daerah*) that Lokananta distributed in its early years.

https://youtu.be/_FTvyC663RU

But the big name acts that are drawn to Lokananta's studio don't necessarily manufacture their albums there, even though Lokananta was originally and primarily a record *factory*, not a studio. The 7" vinyl records of *Menyanyikan Lagu2 Daerah*, for example, had to be pressed overseas because Lokananta's record fabricating machines—the country's first—were sold for scrap metal in the 1980s. Cassette production, however, has not stopped, even if it is down from the days when the company could pump out tens of thousands of tapes a month. In those days, neighborhood kids would fly kites with the discarded magnetic tape. And like the recording end of business, Lokananta's duplication services are now reaching a whole new clientele.

Rather than churn out playful *kroncong* tapes, today Lokananta acts as more of a boutique producer, specializing in small runs of indie releases by bands with names like Deluded, Homicide, and [Working Class Symphony](#). These bands are not drawn to Lokananta so much by its history and legacy, but for very practical reasons that again can be traced back to the company's near collapse in the early 2000s.

Many of the new cassettes produced at Lokananta pass through the hands of two local entrepreneurs: Rochmad Indrianto and Tamtomo Widhiandono. Indrianto, who goes by Anto, is only 25. Over the whirl of tape duplicators, he explained to me that unless you want them copied one by one on a home tape deck, Lokananta is the only place to do a short run of cassettes—as few as 20-50 copies. The quality is good, and because Lokananta is right there in Surakarta, the turnaround is fast and the prices low. When Anto and Tamtomo started working with Lokananta in

2014, the company's only output was re-releases of old recordings. The two young entrepreneurs, and the cassette revival they were part of, could not have come at a better time. That year they placed several duplication orders for their label and online store [Alpha Omega Merchandise](#), and also helped to organize a Record Store Day event at Lokananta with vendors, speakers, and live performances in the studio:

2015 RECORD STORE DAY SOLO

**Sunday
April 26, 2015
10 AM - 9 PM
At Lokananta
(Jl. A. Yani No.379, Solo)**

LIVE PERFORM
Automatic Soloensis
Fisip Meraung
Old Scenario
Senja Dalam Prosa
Pathetic Waltz
Rintik Hujan
The Sign Of Doom
Dj Vegatron

BOOTH
Demajors - Solo
Unleash Records
Solonesia
Anthem (yk)
Warhead (yk)
Traxtor Merch
Intestinal Vomit
Rambo Wadon Records
Meraung Merch
Sinkkink Records
Alpha Omega Records
Tapestry
Thief Shop (yk)
Etc.

DIALOG RINGAN
PENDOKUMENTASIAN KARYA OLEH
Krisna Bhaskara
(Pengamat Skeno Musik Lokal)
Tomi Hermawan
(Solo Radio)
Firman Prasetyo
(Rambo Wadon Records)
Tamtomo Widhiandono
(Alpha Omega Records)
Irfan Fauzi
(Unleash Records)
Tjatoer Solonesia
Danang Rusdiyanto
(Tapestry)
Miftah C. Zubir
(Lokananta)

Bersamaan Launching
STUDIO RECORDING & STUDIO REGULER
(Start 1 PM - at Studio Lokananta)

**FREE ENTRY
NO AGE LIMIT**

Logos: GRILLDAYS, EAST BREATH, RAMBO WADON RECORDS, 92.9 FM, now alliance

Once word got around the local scene, more tape orders started coming in. Lokananta was not easy to work with directly—it had no online order form or Instagram account—so Anto and Tamtomo became the middlemen. They told me that this year they are handling at least eight to ten orders a month. Thanks to that business, for the first time ever Lokananta now generates more than half of its revenue from tape duplication services. This turn of events feels appropriate in a way: the very independent music scene that both [contributed to](#) and benefited from the end of the New Order regime is now helping to prop up an institution left stranded by that government's collapse.



The Sound of Indonesia

Many people and projects have claimed to [capture](#) the sound of a [nation](#). No doubt Lokananta comes up as short as the rest. Yet, I'm struck by the way this one state-owned recording company and its meandering story do reflect so much of the tumult of Indonesia's last sixty years. Lokananta has always been what the moment called for: a pressing plant for regional folk records, a studio for mass-produced gamelan recordings, an archive, and an indie cassette workshop. In each adaptation you can hear the political, cultural, and technological changes at work. You can sense the shifts in government censorship, which limited the import and reproduction of foreign sounds, and the sounds of critique and dissent that followed. You can see the shift from vinyl—which most Indonesians could only access via radio broadcasts—to the cassette, the medium that finally made recorded music readily available to the general public. And since Lokananta's crisis at the turn of the millennium, you can hear the sounds of an industry in transition: a growing and uncensored independent music scene, and a renewed search for a national identity in the sounds and technologies of the past.

The 'Sound of Indonesia' that Lokananta offers in its current output must be understood as part of the institution's response to crisis—brought on by both a changing music market and the sudden loss of government support. In this state, Lokananta's sound cannot be curated by producers or culture ministers; it is dictated by necessity, and in that struggle to survive the company has had to open itself up in new ways. Looking through old photos in Lokananta's archive, I saw a lot of official state pageantry and choreographed presentations—administrators in suits and workers with ID badges. Right now, however, Lokananta is a place where someone can walk in off the street with a home-recorded cassette and get it duplicated, where an up-and-coming band can book a recording session, where an avant-garde composer can put on a noise concert, or where a few



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