

## **Foo Fighter: An Interview with Dennis Foo**

Entrepreneur Dennis Foo is one of the most influential and enduring personalities in Singapore's live entertainment scene. He was the force behind pioneering nightlife group Europa, which shook up sleepy Changi Village in the early 1980s, a time when the country had only just started to lift restrictions on live music and entertainers performed mainly to foreign tourists in downtown hotels. At its peak in the late-1990s, Europa Holdings had 10 pubs and bars all over the island before Foo sold the chain in 2001. His subsequent live music venues include the mid-1980s mega-nightspots Peppermint Park and Atlantis and St James Power Station, which was the biggest nightlife complex of the 2000s.

This edited transcript draws from two interviews conducted with Foo in October 2021 and April 2022 as part of the research for the Esplanade exhibition *Home Grooves: A History of Singapore's Live Music Venues*.

### **How did you get into the nightlife business?**

It all happened by accident. My father was in F&B, and he used to operate cafes, bakeries and coffee shops. He passed on exactly a year after Europa Lounge and Restaurant opened, so his last words to me were, "Take care of this business." At that time, Europa was a coffeehouse, or a place where you would get Western food. I couldn't see myself hanging around at a cash register behind the bar, so I wanted to do something about it. I thought we could introduce live music. Customers were encouraging, and I remembered that at Europa's official opening in 1979, when my father was still alive, we had a two-piece band. So I felt it fit quite well.

But in those days, almost all live entertainment was in hotel lobby lounges. It was very difficult to get a live entertainment licence, so I had to find excuses. Every time there was a festive celebration like Christmas or New Year's, I would apply for a one-week licence, and I got it. And then we only played music for one week. So I continued to apply. To apply, I had to be at the public entertainment licensing unit in person. I think I was the face that showed up most often because I didn't have a full licence. So after about a year and a half, in 1982, the lady there must have been tired of seeing my face and she gave me a full year licence.

And then, the trouble with me is that I don't stop. I push the boundaries. We had an open space outside Europa, because it was a corner unit. So I made my case to HDB. I said, there's no obstruction. People who walk this way would probably walk to Europa. So I applied for a licence to operate a beer garden, and that's how Europa Changi started.

### **What was the cultural environment like at that time? What kept you going?**

At that time, it was just about wanting to do something musical. The turning point came when I went to see my classmate, who was a great guitarist and singer, at a bar called Treetops Bar in Holiday Inn, which is across the Grand Hyatt now. His brother worked there. I went there for a drink, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. One day, I approached them and said, "Would you like to play at Changi Point?" And they didn't say yes, but they didn't say no either. I remember two things that made them decide [in my favour]. At the time, they were playing a very simple keyboard but dreamed of playing on a baby grand piano. So I said, "Okay, I'll get it for you." [A grand piano] was very expensive in those days. I bought a secondhand [grand piano] for \$4,500. The other thing was the keyboard. It was a Roland keyboard, which was called the king of synthesizers. I bought it for \$8,500. They were so happy; these are the things that motivate [musicians], because it allows them to create sounds they can't imagine.

While we're talking about instruments, I used to have a friend who owned a small electronics shop at Shaw Towers; I used to spend my afternoons there. We were fiddling with a SM58 microphone, which was the standard microphone. He had an antenna that was at least one-and-a-half feet long, which we attached to the microphone. Then, we got a radio tuner. It sounded damn good, and I was so happy. That was breakthrough technology for our time. So we used it in the venue and people were happy because the artist could go down to the floor and talk to the audience.

At that time, I had a great ambition. Do you remember Anita Sarawak? Her forte was not just good singing and performance, but also her wit and interaction with the audience. I thought, if one day Anita Sarawak would perform in Changi Village, that would be great. So, I got to know her after I opened Peppermint Park, and I told her manager, "I have this [cordless] microphone. If she is willing to perform there, I will let her try out the microphone." She did. So I told all the regulars in Europa Changi, that Anita Sarawak was coming that Saturday. Nobody believed me. So I said, "If she doesn't turn up, drinks are on the house." That night we had to clear all the tables because everyone was on their feet, and Anita performed with the cordless mic. You cannot get the effect you want with the cordless microphone in a dimly lit lounge or bar, so we reinvented the lights, [to what] today [you call] the pin spot and photo spot. That was what technology could do in the early days. Of course, now it's everywhere.

### **Peppermint Park was on a much bigger scale than Europa Changi. How did that happen?**

One of my schoolmates had a cousin who worked for Parkway Parade (the shopping mall in Marine Parade) as an executive director. They created a venue on the fourth level of Parkway that was meant to be a small cinema. But at that time the cinema scene wasn't doing too well, so they eventually decided to do away with that.

This guy who worked for Parkway approached me and said, "Can you do anything with this space?" I thought about it, and then something struck me. I remembered during my honeymoon in 1980, I went to Pirates of the Caribbean (a ride in Disneyland). It was indoors but I still saw stars, the moon, and of course the pirate ship and all. I realised that the space in Parkway had a very high ceiling, so I wondered what it would be like if the place felt like it was outdoors. He thought it was worth a try.

He studied in the States, so he was well connected. He talked to a guy called Daniel Flannery, who was one of the designers for Pirates of the Caribbean. When they said it could be done, I was very excited and we started preparing. But it was 1984 when we opened.

With Peppermint Park, I was going from a small provision store to jumping into a supermarket. I didn't really know how to operate other than the broad strokes; it was just an artistic manifestation of our desires. I wanted to capture trees, so we got artificial trees made. In those days they were rare and people hardly saw them, but they looked real. Of course, they're all over the place today. Then, I wanted cricket sounds and birdsong. So I had to go and tape cricket sounds, go to the [Jurong] Bird Park and record the birds. There were no digital synthesisers to create the effect. And then how should we position the speakers? The sound could not just come from one direction. I had to go to a car hi-fi shop and look for a guy to put 11 speakers all over the ceiling, just to deliver that sound. You can call it passion [laughs]. We got carried away, but we wanted to finish the job.

### **What about the programming? What sort of bands did you put in these venues?**

If everything I discussed earlier was the hardware, the music part would be the software. I'll go back to Europa. (The resident band) Adam, Adil and Ben became such a hit that Europa Changi was packed all the time and I did very well there. But after a while I wanted quantity as well as quality so I got two bands. We had a rock band called Hard Attack, who were very good. So those two complemented each other and the music just went on.

At Peppermint Park, where the venue had such a large scale and size, I went crazy and took three bands. There was a group called the Louis Tan Trio performing at the Hilton [hotel]. Louis Tan was a well-known jazz drummer. The keyboardist was Iskandar Ismail. I used to hang around there to get to know them, and when [Iskandar] saw the concept of Peppermint Park he really liked it. He said he wanted to form a band for it. So he created a band called Hang Loose (with vocalist Kaye Hamid). They were only there for about three years, but they were very, very good. After that, I brought Tania over from [Pebbles Bar at the Singapura] Forum, so they came to perform for us. The third band was a foreign band. If you go back to the history of Filipino bands [in Singapore], the first and the best was a band at the Rainbow [lounge] called Something Special. Seeing them was an eye-opener for me—they literally mesmerised me. The keyboard player was a lady named Babes Conde (now a Singapore-based vocal coach). They were fantastic, so I wanted them to be the other band.

The musicians and I became friends rather than employees and employer. In those days, I thought the band was bigger than me, the [venue] operator. Adam, Adil and Ben, they were my boss, until the company grew too big, when we needed a system. I needed an entertainment manager and an assistant general manager to be in charge of entertainment. Kuo Po (singer, saxophonist and vocal coach) took the role at one point in Europa. The relationship was very important—the relationship makes them go above the self, and if a musician is not happy, you and the audience can feel it. At the end of the day, it's the audience that makes the band.

### **How did Atlantis come about? What happened to it and Peppermint Park?**

Peppermint Park was crowded, but the trouble was that couples went there because it was a very nice place for a date, and then they nursed a drink all night. Everybody thought we were doing very well, but the bottom line wasn't fantastic, because the turnover of drinks was not too high. Then we were offered this place in Orchard (on Cuscaden Road), where the Singapore Tourism Board is now, which used to be called the Cultural Theatre. We converted it into Atlantis and worked with the same designer, Daniel Flannery, to create a nightclub with an underwater theme.

Peppermint Park cost us \$1.4 million, which would be enough to buy a GCB (good class bungalow) in those days. Atlantis cost us \$2.86 million, which would be two GCBs. So we had no idea or numbers, and just went in blind, and it was completed. But then the recession came (from 1985-1986). Nine months later, Atlantis closed, followed by Peppermint Park. It was a lesson learned. Atlantis' construction cost was very high, and the concept was a repeat of Peppermint Park.

### **So what would you say was needed to run a venue in those days?**

First of all, you had to have a passion for it. You did not need to be a musician—I'm not a musician—but there had to be some aspect of it that fascinated you. And you needed to have an impetus, a drive to achieve certain things, in your blood. You could not be passive and go with the flow—you needed to set big frontiers.

Secondly, you needed to know how to market. These days, the marketing format is very different from the past. [In the 1980s and '90s], you got one big newspaper article, and that was it; after that, people came. Today you can have all the social media. There is a lot of noise out there, so you need to know how to position and streamline.

Then, obviously, you had to build a community. You had to be up front to interact with the people—your audience, your customer base—so that you knew what they wanted and what their complaints were. In that way, it limited you in terms of scalability unless you could build very strong brands. In fact, that is what Europa did. I had an episode when Adam, Adil and Ben's contract ended and I could not renew it as I was outbid by a competitor. So I learned from that day onwards not just to build bands but to build brands as well. When you had a brand, people knew you provided good music and entertainment, so they would come for the brand and you wouldn't disappoint them with your selection criteria, the atmosphere you created and things like that. Then the interaction with the band itself was very important. You had to be connected with them, because they were your ambassadors and spoke for the business.

### **How did the 1980s move away from the restrictions against live entertainment in the previous decade? What changes did you see in the larger social climate?**

Getting a longer-term licence for Europa was the start; I was one of the lucky ones, because I went down the right path by starting small. Then there was an entertainment tax, which was lifted sometime in the late 1980s. Around 1986, I was called for a meeting with the Ministry of Culture. I was there with two other guys, who were both show promoters. The ministry wanted to promote entertainment in Singapore, so I suggested one thing besides the relaxation of rules. At that time, we only had the [Singapore Badminton Hall] for live concerts, so I suggested an indoor stadium to bring in international artists. The [Singapore] Indoor Stadium, designed by Japanese architect Kenzō Tange, opened in 1989. It set the stage for a lot of international acts to perform here. Eventually, I became a show promoter. I brought in several artists; I did John Denver at the Indoor Stadium, and Richard Clayderman.

### **So how did the nightlife scene evolve through the decades? Did the competition among venues grow?**

In the '80s, I don't think there was much competition, because there were not many players. It was always Goh Poh Seng (the writer, doctor and owner of Rainbow lounge), me and Peter Bader (a Swiss national who owned Top Ten at Orchard Towers) later on. Then the recession hit, and all of us got his, in our own ways.

In the '90s, the scene was shaken up as the market developed. More players came into the market, like Jimmy Yuen, who opened Yesterday's, Where Else and Discovery, which are all big clubs.

I like to think of it from the audience's standpoint, so I always tell this story. If I went to Changi Village in the '80s, I would see most of the customers drinking fruit punch. I used to sell a lot of fruit punch. They would come in on Saturday night for dates, and the guy would drink beer. If I saw a girl drinking beer, I would say, 'Wah, how come this girl drink beer?' And then if I saw one drinking stout, I would salute. In the '90s, there was a big change. Sometime in the early '90s, I remember Europa Ridley was at the ANA Hotel, and I saw two girls coming in with a jug of beer during happy hour. Then after happy hour, which was at 10 o'clock, a bottle of vodka came out. Two girls drinking. The market doubled overnight. And when the girls were drinking, the guys had to drink more, right? [laughs] So since we had all this revenue coming in, entrepreneurs were looking for more spaces and bands. In return,

the musicians or aspiring musicians felt there was a good future, and they started improving their skills and performance.

Then we entered the 2000s. In the '90s, I was the founding president of the Association of Entertainment Organisations. It was supposed to be the organisation that championed the cause for nightlife. We had all these nightclubs that wanted to join, and the people behind them were all of a particular breed and type. In the 2000s, a new breed of venue operators came up. Today's operators are really different—lawyers, CFOs, engineers. People who have done well in the financial circle go to some nice bar and enjoy themselves, and they think: how nice would it be if I owned this bar? The key thing about them is that they believe they can do better than the people who are already in the market. And some of them have already done better, because they can see things we can't. They can structure the business in a way that we may take a while to learn.

**Coming into the '90s and 2000s, you have these arts centres like The Substation and later Esplanade, which also did live music. So how did that influence the scene?**

The only difference I see is that as a non-profit organisation, you are not distributing dividends. That means you're not driven by profit and are coming from a holistic standpoint, where it's not just for money. Maybe that is the draw for the musician. And then people come out from there, like Edward Chia of Timbre. He was the vice-president when we started the Singapore Nightlife Business Association. He started out in The Substation with his partner. His partner is a musician, but he's an entrepreneur. To be fair, I would call him more of a social entrepreneur. They're the new breed. And they do things very differently; they are young and in their 30s, and they can connect with the younger groups, whether they are musicians, artists, or even staff.

**So on the theme of generational shifts, when you started venues in the 2000s, what was it like?**

In the 2000s, I started with Devils Bar. It was already there as a cafe [at Orchard Parade Hotel] owned by [the retailer] F.J. Benjamin. I left Europa because of the Raffles Town Club saga<sup>1</sup>, and then Frank Benjamin needed a change in the cafe, so all I did was rename it to Devils Bar. Everyone thinks people like us in the business are kind of devils (laughs), so I think Devils suits just fine. We took over, with different people in different positions; we put in a good band. They had a restaurant, which was not sustainable, so I changed that to a dancehall.

But St James Power Station was another matter altogether. I think the concept [of many clubs in one complex] had never been tried anywhere else in the world by a single operator. So I was approached by the chairman of Mapletree, whom I know. He was also the former chairman of the Tourism Board. He asked me what I could do with it (a conserved former power station). So I drew out roughly what it could be as a nightlife destination, and we eventually struck a deal. By then, after two decades in the business, I had paid some tuition fees, so I roughly knew what the business was about. If I have 10 outlets across Singapore, I wouldn't want every outlet to be the same, because Singapore is too small. So what if all my 10 different outlets came into one place? Would they complement each other? They did. It was like building many outlets all over the island.

One of the only changes I made was that if you bought one bottle at any outlet, the next time you came back, you could draw out the balance from any other outlet. You got variety. The

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2001, [Foo had to sell Europa Holdings](#) after a lawsuit by the Raffles Town Club over ownership and other matters. He was a shareholder of the club.

second thing was door charge—I have a marketing thing called one stamp, all access. You got access to every club with only one door charge. We had a Latin club, Cantopop, pop music, jazz, and a dance club, so you created all the different facets of entertainment.

There are other ways the nightlife scene grew. At one point, there were a lot of Filipino bands coming into Singapore. But today, our local bands are just as good across different genres, including Mandopop, which itself has grown in a different dimension. It started with Cantopop, which only had one venue playing it, and my partner recognised its potential. Because I speak Cantonese, I appreciate Cantonese music and I connected with them. There was [the singer] William Scorpion, who became the highest paid among all the solo singers. Those singers could really entertain the audience. And those audiences were real drinkers—Dragonfly (the Cantopop bar) was the most lucrative outlet in St James.

**Could you share a memory or highlight of your venues that you'll always remember?**

Just to set the record straight, I'm not really a party animal. I'm a drinker, but I go home and I don't sleep in the bar. So my memorable occasions are not grand parties. The only one I remember was New Year's Eve of 2006; I was at the St James Gallery Bar on the second level. At the stroke of midnight, I could see my four main outlets: The Powerhouse, the dance club; Movidia, the Latin bar; the Boiler Room, where they played pop and rock music; and the Dragonfly. I could see all the balloons coming down and falling everywhere and all four outlets—that was momentous for me.

***Home Grooves: A History of Singapore's Live Music Venues* is an exhibition at the Esplanade Concourse. It is free of charge and runs until 18 August 2023.**