

The Laptop Musician Syncing up Hong Kong
Charmaine Ng



At around seven o'clock in the evening, one might cross paths with Choi Sai-ho among a crowd of office workers rushing to get home after a long day of work on the MTR. He is camouflaged against them—dressed in an ironed blue shirt, dark jeans and polished shoes, he checks his watch for the time and squints to read the face through his thick-rimmed glasses. He blends completely into the mass of skinny, thirty-year-old businessmen, but unlike everyone else, Choi isn't in a hurry to get home for dinner. Instead, he is in a hurry to get to his latest gig in an underground dungeon.

“The first time I attended an electronic music concert was one by the Chemical Brothers who really ‘wow’ed me with their looks,” he says. “They were so cool. After the performance, I wondered if it was possible to make the type of music they played on my own—just using my own computer and software.”

The bag that Choi carries contained a laptop, yes, just like any typical office worker also on the MTR. But the laptop that has followed him throughout the years of his experimental venture wasn't used for checking emails. Open it up and the average person wouldn't be able to decipher the complicated music-making programs at all. Completely opposite from his appearance, he is someone else altogether: Choi Sai-ho is an electronic musician.

Born and bred in Hong Kong, Choi, who is 32 this year, followed the typical path of education and attended university after spending his childhood in local school. When he graduated with a master's degree from City University's School of Creative Media, he had no idea he would end up creating and playing music. In fact, he was heading in a different direction altogether. He was working to get a job in graphic design.

“I tried many things in university. Music was just one of them,” he says. “It wasn't until later that I thought, hey, maybe I can make a career out of it. Maybe I can try it and see what happens.”

Although becoming an electronic musician in Hong Kong requires no formal qualifications or training, Choi didn't go into the field completely inexperienced. Even though he had had no schooling in the subject apart from the compulsory primary school music lessons, he had played the violin outside of school during his childhood. Later on, he even formed a band with a group of friends.

"But that didn't work out in the end," he says. "The main problem with working in a group is that you need to have a common goal, you need to want to achieve the same things." He continued that for a while. All of the members were at different places of their lives, but the experience, though brief, was enough to reignite his interest in the music world.

Growing up in a time before accessing the internet became an everyday thing for the common citizen, the only music Choi could listen to was what was played on mainstream radio. He only ever heard the same singers dominating the scene and perhaps it was because of this that he tired quickly of Cantonese music, known colloquially as 'Cantopop'. He was constantly on the search for different types of sounds.

"I'm not saying that Cantopop isn't good," he straightens this out quickly. "I liked certain singers and songs. But I feel the quality has gotten worse with time. Teenagers used to listen to Cantopop in the 80s and 90s, but today's generation doesn't. They choose to look to other places for music, they like kpop, jpop and foreign singers."

Aphex Twin, Squarepusher and Venetian Snares, the musicians who Choi counted off as his favourites, are names that are virtually unheard of in Hong Kong. The 32 year old laughed but shook his head in a downhearted manner as he described the identical blank expressions of every person he has ever mentioned his inspirations to. Hardly anyone ever recognises the names.

"Sometimes if I mention DJ Shadow, who's more mainstream, I get a more satisfying reaction. But you can see how it is here. The industry for electronic music in Hong Kong is a disaster."

Yet Choi, knowing full well the "disaster" of a market for the genre in Hong Kong, was adamant he wanted to pursue a path in electronic music because it was something different, something special, to his ears. It was nothing like what he had heard growing up. To the outsider, it certainly seemed like a bad decision to make in a city that only cares about money, but surprisingly, unlike the common 'tiger mother's of Hong Kong, his parents were happy to let him do what he wanted.

Having performed globally, Choi has definitely had a taste of the electronic music scene elsewhere in the world. In every overseas location he has played in, including Switzerland, Germany and Brazil, he has been met with a more enthusiastic reaction from the audience. But he shrugs as he defends Hong Kong when comparing the different situations, concluding simply that he understands the culture of his hometown. The people here are just not as expressive because of the way they had been brought up.

“People always joke to me that when I perform to a Hong Kong audience, it must be like performing to a pile of bricks,” he laughs lightheartedly. “They take electronic music in with an attitude that’s for listening to classical music. Someone has even said to me that when I’m performing, it looks like I’m checking my emails on stage!”

Although electronic music has a small audience base locally, Choi is still insistent on staying in the city where he grew up. He was also determined not to switch to a more mainstream style because he found that where he was at allowed the most honest expression of himself. Being an awkward talker, electronic music is his voice. Plus, he adds, he is beginning to see a ray of hope—an improvement in the popularity of lesser-known music genres in the recent years.

“There is definitely more variety in the music scene nowadays. The audience is transforming. You can even see small indie bands like Chochukmo doing large scale adverts even though they’re singing English songs and not Cantopop.”

There is a pause.

“And I’ve always wanted to do something in Hong Kong. It’s a challenge but it’s my home. If I can achieve something here, then that’s the happiest thing for me, much more than if I make it big in other countries.”

It might not be easy making a living from being a full time electronic musician, but Choi showed—and still shows—that it isn’t impossible. Over the years, he has grown from a young boy with no musical background to a man who holds at least several gigs a year, at places ranging from small underground venues to large music festivals, like Clockenflap. He has also collaborated with many famous artists of different genres and has been approached by the government for public talks and music workshops. In 2013, he received the Award of Young Artist in Media Arts from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, which funded much of his second independently produced album, *Sync*.

So what’s in the future for the young star?

“I want to perform in Hong Kong’s biggest venues, like the Convention and Exhibition Centre. Oh, or even better, the AsiaWorld-Expo—but definitely not now!” He laughs as he imagines the situation. “Perhaps in the future. I don’t have a big audience now. It would be quite embarrassing!”

Image source: [Choi Sai Ho](#)