An Interview with Ms Audrey Lim

CEO and Co-founder of Take Back the Nights

Audrey Lim   Image Credit: Audrey Lim

Culture Academy	Would you introduce yourself and what you do for our readers?
Audrey Lim	My name is Audrey Lim, I'm a producer-presenter and an advocate for the arts and entertainment scene. I'm also the CEO and co-founder of Take Back The Nights, a virtual music festival experience. We've taken the best bits of a music

festival - the live music; the visual art; the F&B options; the immersiveness; and the interactivity with friends, and we've built it into a video game format that is web-accessible.

All you need to experience the Take Back The Nights metaverse is an internet-enabled laptop or desktop - no other VR gear is required. Our first season, Light The Future, is a 4 part music festival experience. The final instalment of Take Back The Nights - Light The Future happens on 5 November 2021 and includes music acts like the writer and performer of this year's National Day song, Linying, and local music heroes, Plainsunset.

Culture Academy	Could you take us through the challenges you faced following the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, and how you've since co-set up Take Back the Nights and the subsequent evolution of its online programmes? How did you consolidate expertise from different fields to make the virtual concert happen?
Audrey Lim	Where do I begin! As a self-employed producer-presenter who hosts events, moderates panels and (in the before times) someone who used to sing regularly at bars and events, a massive income stream dried up once events were curtailed. The safety measures slowly crept into place as early as late February 2020, before the official circuit breaker kicked in, and I could see the writing on the wall. There was great urgency to find a solution that would allow creatives to keep creating and have audiences maintain that connection to live shows. The first iteration of Take Back The Nights, which was filmed in Q1 2020 right before Singapore went into lockdown, seemed to be entirely original at the time - we decided we would produce a livestream, make it broadcast quality, and link up with a registered music charity so audiences would feel extra secure paying for performances! As we all know now, in 2021, almost everyone alighted upon the same idea of livestreaming their craft (although quality varied), and so we didn't quite have the impact we were hoping for. Additionally, even though the team of volunteers I pulled together had, collectively, more than a century of experience in all aspects of music and entertainment (including running community radios, providing gear, producing shows, running music labels) and we had all individually worked with different councils and agencies before, we were not attractive enough to win a grant to kick us off. What we put together ended up being a true labour of love, where the volunteers who believed in the cause gave of their skills, their gear, their knowledge and their contacts, and the musicians and technicians who were not volunteers were paid out of my pocket. As a long-standing member of the music community with multifaceted ties to the industry as an erstwhile performer, music manager, drivetime radio DJ, music event host, and intellectual property law enthusiast, I remain awed at how many people came forward and made this first iteration of Take Back The Nights happen. It was a testimony to the will of the music community to care for itself.

	Growing from livestream to metaverse was an idea first tossed around by my co-founder Caspar Francis, who was, at the time, one of the team of volunteers. We've been learning things the hard way, by making mistakes and growing from them. There isn't a guidebook to the pandemic or significant precedent for putting together a music festival in a digital metaverse, and the local video game companies we reached out to were either unwilling or unable to be a part of the project. As a direct result, we ended up taking a very DIY approach, and had to expand our search to include consultant friends in the region. Too many times, we had to run up against an unforeseen problem, and then troubleshoot our way out by searching for collaborators in parallel fields and leaning on knowledge from the wider ASEAN network of game developers. We were also very lucky to have our friends from visual art collective Metamo Industries come on board to share not just their virtual art, which is installed larger than life all over the Take Back The Nights metaverse, but also their close links to the music community as a curator of one of our music festival instalments.
Culture Academy	This year's concert is uniquely VR and run on the Unreal Engine; entry to the event is free, although upgrades costs extra. Could you tell us about the differences between organising a VR event and a physical concert? How does it differ for artists and emcees?
Audrey Lim	There is a whole lot less paperwork, for a start! They're two entirely separate animals. There are some commonalities (for instance, you still need to hire equipment, programme artists and plot stages) but there are too many elements that distinguish the two. To pick just a simple differentiator: You need to deal with portaloos or otherwise ensure adequate facilities are provided for at a physical concert, and while you avoid that in a virtual concert, you're stuck dealing with finding a way to rent affordable and stable server space to accommodate your crowd. Any performing artist can attest to how having a live audience makes an enormous difference to the energy in the room when you're performing. It's the reason why live music shows are so electric, and why recorded music programmes almost always happen in front of a live studio audience. In going virtual as a performer, you're effectively cutting off a palpable part of the performance experience by playing to a cold studio or worse, performing alone to the blinking light on your webcam. It's unnerving, it's unwelcoming, it's uncomfortable. And yet, since 2020, we have seen our artists and emcees power through the pain, spending hours on YouTube and money they might not have purchasing and learning to use new lights, microphones, audio DAWs, cables and other gear in order to "pivot" online. It wasn't as simple as taking your craft in front of your laptop. It must be said, however, that things are arguably even worse for the

	entertainment eco-system that surrounds the performing artist. A musician can still put a camera on, and have hope that someone might not just watch their stream but might pay for the pleasure of doing so. To name three eco-system examples, an artist manager, a stage manager, and an audio engineer are all vital parts of making a music experience happen, and yet these groups were unable to make a direct "pivot" to showcase their skills online - how do you livestream the confidential process of negotiating an artist endorsement, or demonstrate yourself showcalling when there are no shows to call, or perfectly tune a live performance to a massive concert hall when you no longer have access to either live performances or concert halls? These less visible parts of the eco-system have suffered incredibly. Take Back The Nights made special efforts to hire within the eco-system as much as possible (for instance, one of our show directors was a music producer, and our live audio recording engineer is also an audio engineer as well as the frontman of his band) to try to uplift the music scene as a whole. We also programmed festival panel discussions featuring key industry insiders within the eco-system, ranging from music label owners and music managers, to PR experts and streaming pros.
Culture Academy	In an interview with The Peak magazine on 18 August this year, you observed that while there is Zoom or livestream fatigue, gaming, on the whole, experienced an uptick. Could you tell us more about this observation? For instance, could you share your thoughts on how gaming platforms might change the attitude and behaviour of concert-goers?
Audrey Lim	The pandemic forced a lot more people to become a lot more comfortable with the technology they had already welcomed into their homes. When physical interaction was impossible, that itch had to be scratched online, and that included the need to be entertained and to maintain social bonds with friends. Playing video games was a simple two-birds-one-stone solution for people who suddenly found themselves at home a lot more. While nothing will ever replace attending a music event in person, I believe hybrid events will be a necessary part of the future for the next 5 years at least. Large internationally successful games like Fortnite and Animal Crossings are already experimenting with mounting music concerts within their platforms. It's very encouraging and validating to know that Take Back The Nights appears to be on the right path.
Culture Academy	In the same interview, you've also expressed that it is an exciting time for Singapore music. What are some game-changing trends for Singapore music?
Audrey Lim	My favourite trend is the uptick in community - people in the music ecosystem appear to be a lot more willing to join hands than they were in the past, when everyone was too busy rushing from gig to gig. I moderate a specialised gig muso Telegram group with a few hundred members and am one of a few moderators of

an online Facebook group for the Singapore Creative and Cultural Community, which has almost 11,000 members. The spirit of wanting to help, to collaborate, to view each other as team mates instead of competitors has definitely been felt more in this last year than ever before.

I've also noticed a lot more cross-border collaborations than ever before. The size of Singapore's market means that staying entirely local is not always feasible, so this consistent cross-pollination via different platforms can only be beneficial to the scene, especially when borders reopen.