

# #AllRoadsLeadtoRoute196: Remembering a Home of Metro Manila's Music Scene in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Monika E. Schoop  
Leuphana University Lüneburg  
*monika.schoop@leuphana.de*

Renato Aguila  
Independent Scholar  
*renpaul@gmail.com*

## Abstract

The Philippines underwent one of the world's strictest lockdowns to curb the spread of COVID-19, forcing Manila's iconic music venue Route 196 to shut down permanently. This article inquires into the individual and collective memory-making processes in the context of Route 196's online farewell show. Drawing on participant observation and an analysis of the show's social media content, we examine remembering Route 196 focusing on two key processes: narrative and experience. Building on memory studies' premise that to be made meaningful, experiences have to be narrativized (Rigney 2016), we first analyze the narrative construction of the venue as a "home" of Metro Manila's scene, demonstrating how it variably accommodates or marginalizes individual memories. Second, we probe the role of "lived experience" (Keightley/Pickering 2012) for memory-making. We argue that social media interaction generates new experiences of the venue, which take on particular importance given the persisting absence of live music.

KEYWORDS: memory, social media, narrative, experience, Philippines, COVID-19

## At the End of the Road

“Alas, we’re at the end of the road for Route 196”. On August 23, 2020 a Facebook post announced the closure of Manila’s iconic venue Route 196. Within a few days, the post had received over 8,000 responses, mostly crying and hugging emoticons. It had been shared over 4,000 times, and elicited over 500 comments, in many of which people shared their personal memories of the venue. Using the hashtag #AllRoadsLeadtoRoute196, pictures and videos of Route 196 circulated on Facebook and Instagram, along with numerous anecdotes. On August 26, the venue announced an online farewell show, inviting people to contribute pictures and videos to the event. It was obvious that, with the closure of Route 196, Metro Manila was losing not only a place that had been a central hub of the music scene for many years but also a place heavily charged with memories. The closure of Route (as many of its denizens call it) also made it into our timelines. We almost instantly resorted to Facebook chat and exchanged how we were saddened and shocked by the news. Since its inception in 2006, the Quezon City-based venue had been central to Metro Manila’s music scene.<sup>1</sup> It also holds personal significance for us. For Monika E. Schoop, Route had been a key field site of her ethnomusicological study on local independent music, and she had visited the venue numerous times between 2012 and 2018. For Renato Aguila, an arts and culture journalist and avid concert-goer, Route had also been a central spot since he first visited the venue in 2012. “At least we have the memories”. In retrospect, author 2’s words of comfort initiated this research project. Indeed, Route was one of the places that brought together our joint interest in Metro Manila’s music scene. Thus, it is safe to say that this research would not exist without our shared memories of Route 196.

In this article, we inquire into the diverse processes of remembering Route 196 after the announcement of its closure. We do so by looking at the farewell show and its connected social media content. The farewell show was organized by the Manila-based production outfit Red Ninja and took place on September 12, 2020. The online show of 7 hours and 51 minutes aired via the social media platform Facebook.<sup>2</sup> It comprised 16 musical performances (live as well as pre-recorded) and three episodes of podcasts run by musicians from Manila’s music scene (*Wake Up with Jim & Saab*, *Oh Flamingo! Radio*, and *For Me Lang Ha*). It further included 3D animations of the venue, a recurring segment entitled “What is Route 196 to you?” featuring video snippets where scene participants and Route 196 staff shared their memories of Route 196, slide shows, and video collages. Radio host Jam of the FM station Magic 89.9 hosted the show. In addition to the broadcast, the farewell show included interactive components in the form of meet and greets with artists via the video conferencing platform Zoom<sup>3</sup> and interaction on social media, especially the comment section of the Facebook live stream. The broadcast facilitated lively interaction between viewers in the comment section, resulting in a total of about 50,000 comments. The number of viewers ranged between 2,400 and 9,600. Since the venue itself only held a maximum of around 80 people, it was the best-attended show in the history of Route 196.

We situate our study in the growing field of studies on popular music and memory. Research has focused on popular music as a vehicle or resource of memory (Bijsterveld and van Dijck 2009; Pickering and Keightley 2015) as well as

on the centrality of memory for music scenes (Bennett 2014; Bennett and Rogers 2016). Others have highlighted the intersections of memory and cultural identity (Brandellero et al. 2014; Güran-Aydin and DeNora 2016; van der Hoeven 2015), of popular music, memory, and place (Cohen et al. 2015), memory and online heritage practices (Bennett and Strong 2018; Long and Collins 2016), or have engaged more broadly with questions concerning remembering and archiving popular music's past (Istvandity et al. 2019). Inquiring into remembering Route 196, we aim not only to build on these approaches but to expand them, fostering the dialogue between popular music studies and cultural memory studies.

Our inquiry draws on a theoretical framework derived from cultural memory studies. Examining processes of remembering, we pay close attention to memory as a practice rather than discrete artifacts, firmly rooting our approach in memory studies' turn to performativity (Rigney 2016: 68). Following Ann Rigney, we consider remembering as "an observable cultural practice (as distinct from a purely mental operation) which involves the public enactment of affective and cognitive relations to the past using whatever media and cultural forms are available and appropriate to the particular context" (ibid.: 68). We further base our research upon the premise that remembering has an individual as well as a collective dimension, which are intrinsically connected (Erll 2011: 99).<sup>4</sup> Red Ninja's call to contribute to the farewell show circulated after the announcement of the closure demonstrates the centrality of these two dimensions:

What is your favorite Route 196 memory? We want to know how Route 196 looks through your eyes and what event(s) you'll remember most. Share with us your favorite memories in photos and/or videos, and we'll stitch something to thank you and the rest of the community for keeping us going for 15 years. (Red Ninja 2020).

The show itself does not only invite individual memories but is framed as a collective act of remembrance.

Our inquiry is further informed by two key concepts closely connected to memory: narrative and experience. As Rigney (2016: 70) states, it is through narrativization, through "the application of models of storytelling" that experiences are made meaningful. The narrativization of experiences is of central importance to our discussion, as it turns the cognitive processes of individual memory, which are in themselves not accessible to the researcher, into observable cultural practices (ibid.: 68). Narrated experience, or—as Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering (2012: 25) put it, "mediated" or "assimilated" experience—can be distinguished from "immediate" or "lived experience". In this article, we argue that Route 196 is not only remembered through the narrativized experiences, but that the lived experience of participating in the farewell show is of central importance for remembering Route 196.

Based on these assumptions, we trace the unfolding of the two main stories told in the context of the show: Route 196 as "home", and "the Route 196 experience". Our examination centers on two distinct yet complementary foci. We first analyze the narrativization of past experiences of Route 196 and demonstrate how the process gives rise to central tropes, most notably home. Critically reflecting on these processes, we show how these variably accommodate or marginalize individual

memories and contribute to the construction of scene identity. In a second step, we inquire into the farewell show as an instance of remembering through lived experience. We show that Route 196 is remembered through a (re-)creation of Route 196 experiences by musicians, organizers, and the audience. Drawing on the notion that “remembering is a creative process” (Keightley and Pickering 2012: 41) we show that it is not just a one-to-one replication of experiences. Rather, it is a creative re-working and (re-)creation of Route 196 memories, which facilitates remembering through lived experience and generates new memorable experiences of the venue.

Building on the premise that memory is always made from a present perspective and that “[v]ersions of the past change with every recall, in accordance with the changed present situation” (Erll 2011: 8), our discussion pays close attention to the context in which the remembering occurs: the COVID-19 pandemic and the connected persisting absence of live music and dramatic changes in the country’s music industries. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on scenes, and live music in particular, has been widely noted (for example McGuinness 2020; Mouillot 2022; Nelligan and Nelligan 2021; Roberts and Whiting 2021; Rothschild et al. 2020). It is especially severe in the Philippines and its capital region, Metro Manila, which has undergone one of the world’s strictest lockdowns (Caruncho 2020). As Route 196 co-owner Nicole Sarmiento explained, the lack of income and any chance to reopen were responsible for the closure of the venue, which did not yield profit even before the pandemic (Red Ninja 2020). By focusing on how people remember the venue after its closure, we thus also aim shed light on the Metro Manila music scene in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methodology

We inquire into processes of remembering Route 196 with the help of online ethnography (Hine 2017). Participant observation took place in the context of the farewell show, encompassing the broadcast of the show as well as the connected social media interaction. Our role can be described as one of passive to moderate participation, switching between the role of a “pure observer” to “moderate participation”, occasionally interacting with people in the field (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011: 23). Participant observation enabled us to document memory making as it unfolded, using fieldnotes and screenshots. We transcribed the video’s content and extracted all 45,616 publicly available Facebook comments. Complying with ethical standards of online ethnography, our analysis did not consider private posts or conversations (Eynon et al. 2017) and chose not to include user names. We further conducted a semi-structured interview with the members of Red Ninja Productions: Nicole Sarmiento, Kat Romero, April Hernandez, and Terrence Nigel. Our approach benefits from the fact that we have been familiar with the scene for many years, and at the same time bring in different yet complementary perspectives: as a cultural insider (Renato) and outsider (Monika).

The data collected was subject to inductive coding with the help of the software MAXQDA and inspected through the lens of narrative analysis (Andrews et al. 2008). As Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, and Maria Tamboukou (ibid.: 1-2) state, “By focusing on narrative, we are able to investigate not just how stories are

structured and the ways in which they work, but also who produces them and by what means; the mechanisms by which they are consumed; and how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted". Our approach acknowledges the co-constructing of narratives that goes beyond the expression of internal states, and considers stories to be dialogically constructed (Bakhtin 1981 in Andrews et al. 2008: 5). Most importantly, we conceptualize narrative as going beyond the written text (ibid.). In addition to speech and writing, it encompasses manifold auditory and visual materials/practices, such as music and sound, the use of emoticons, dress, and visualizations of place. This approach enabled us to identify and examine the two main stories told by the farewell show: remembering Route 196 as home, and the experience of attending a gig at Route 196.

## Remembering a Home of the Scene

Actually, the first thing I thought about when you announced that you were closing is, how would other musicians starting out... where would they play after the pandemic? Route 196 has been a big part of my life, especially my own, personally. Route 196 became my second home, and actually, until now, I wouldn't know how to write about what happened with Route 196 closing. That's it. I wouldn't be Bel Certeza if it weren't for Route 196. Thank you for being our second home. Not just myself, but for most of us who are part of the scene (Route 196 2020: 0.55.47–0.56.41).<sup>5</sup>

The video statement of Bel Certeza<sup>6</sup> depicts a key figure of the Manila recording and live music industry. Her account of her initial reaction to the closure in many ways reflects the first main narrative of the farewell show: Route 196 as home. Her video statement emphasizes the central role of the venue for her personal and professional biography and the scene in general. By describing herself as part of the scene, Certeza takes a broader perspective, highlighting Route's importance for the scene and its musicians. Like Certeza, musicians and other scene members stress Route's meaning as "home" for the Manila music scene throughout the farewell show. It only takes a few minutes into the show for the narrative to take shape. Central to its establishment are the "What is Route 196 to you?" sections, which Certeza's statement is also part of. The sections comprise photo slideshows and video collages. Many of the materials had been submitted in response to Red Ninja's invitation to share memories, others had been assembled by Kat Romero, who was responsible for sourcing and selecting the images and videos to be included (Red Ninja 2020). It is in the first "What is Route 196 to you?" (Route 196 2020: 0.06.35–0.09.40) segment that Route is referred to as "home" for the first time. In the second segment, the theme of "home" is eventually established. In the video collage, participants comment on what Route means to them. It is striking that "home" appears a total of 17 times, while all other words are only mentioned once (except for home court and *tugtugan* ("playing"), each mentioned twice).





artists specifically, it is a place to grow, and provides a “safe space” where new musical material can be tested. As a central home for the scene, Route is where many of today’s popular artists “grew up”—and where audiences could watch and discover new and upcoming artists. The narrative of Route 196 as a home undoubtedly draws on key characteristics of small live music venues as “spaces of belonging, community, sociality and cultural exchange” (Whiting 2023: 20) and “hotbeds of talent and creativity” (*ibid.*: 5).

Focusing upon two examples: the performances of Reese Lansangan and Ben&Ben, we will now examine how the story of Route as Home is narrated verbally, musically, and visually.

## Reese Lansangan: Home as a Safe Space

Singer-songwriter Reese Lansangan has been active in the Manila music scene since 2009—first with her duo Reese and Vica, and since 2015 as a solo artist. Lansangan had been a regular performer at Route 196. It is not just her long-standing personal history with the venue that makes her contribution to the farewell show worth a closer look. Her live performance reveals how the venue’s construction as home emerges in dialogue with the recounting of personal memories and her music, highlighting, in particular, Route’s significance as a safe space. Lansangan’s song “Home” is of special importance in this context. “Home” was originally a commissioned love song written for a wedding. As a central part of Lansangan’s repertoire, the song features in her performance in the farewell show. Our analysis shows that the song substantially contributes to the central narrative of Route as Home and that the show at the same time facilitates a new reading of the song.

Prior to playing the song, Lansangan reflects on her personal experiences and perceptions of the venue. In introducing her first song, “*Exploration No. 5*”, Lansangan recalls her first gig at the venue. The singer-songwriter recounts how she was at first sceptical about playing in a bar, but upon entering Route 196, she was quickly proven wrong: “I felt comfortable immediately *kasi* (“because”) I felt like, well this is a place that I, [...] could identify with and I, I really felt at home immediately” (Route 196 2020: 4.42.45–4.42.46). Looking back, Lansangan stressed that the fact that Route helped her “blossom into an artist” and allowed her “to explore and grow” (*ibid.*: 4.43.17–4.43.43). Before playing “Autopilot”, her second song, she continues the narrative construction of Route as Home, connecting it to the theme of friendship: “And this second song is related to the people that I meet in Route, *and sa mga friends ko, maraming marami akong friends na na-meet dahil sa labas ng Route* (“and to my friends--I have many, many friends that I have met because of hanging out outside of Route”)” (*ibid.*: 4.50.11–4.50.23). Further establishing friendship as a central theme, Lansangan elaborates on car rides home, sharing her memories of how people offered to take her home because “they want to see their friends safe” (*ibid.*: 4.51.40–4.51.42), before dedicating the song to the people she met at Route.

By the time Lansangan introduces “Home”, her third song on the setlist, she has made her close connection to the venue apparent, laying the foundation for reframing the song as a tribute to Route 196. In her introduction, Lansangan explicitly gives this reading:

[...] this next song is super obvious because of what it means, I guess, symbolically, this song is expected to show up in [...] this setlist because Route 196... I consider, one of the great homes of many artists, especially me. And a home is where you feel safe and where you feel comfortable, where you feel like you can try things that you won't be judged for it. You won't be condemned for it. And we know that even the people in this community, the audience, the *kuyas* ("brothers") and *ates* ("sisters") behind Route, the owners and the bands themselves, they collectively make Route a home and a safe space. (ibid.: 4.56.59-4.57.53).

At this point, Lansangan refers to the idea of Route as a safe space, which allowed her to hone her skills as an artist. The notion of home as a safe space, however, is not only articulated in Lansangan's spiel. It resonates with the song's lyrics, and especially in its chorus:

My bones are safe  
And my heart can rest  
Knowing it belongs to you, you  
My world is changed  
And it's cradled by  
The comfort that is you.

As Simon Frith states, the meaning of music is not inherent in the text but is a social process (1998: 250). Reframing the song in the context of the farewell show creates a new layer of meaning. "*Home*" no longer points to a romantic relationship and the comfort provided by it but to the music venue as a safe space. The comment section reveals that the song's performance gave rise to readings of Route 196 as home for the audience, who actively took part in its construction, as the following examples show:

Every friday night and saturday night, *route ang bahay ko*  
("Route is my home")

So many artists' world is changed, thank you for being their HOME before the rest of the world appreciated their music. *Salamat, Route 196* ❤️👉 *balik kang*  
("Thank you Route, come back")

*Salamat route196 sa pagbibigay tahanan sa ating mga local music artists*  
("Thank you Route196 for giving a home to our local music artists")  
(Route 196 2020)

In line with these sentiments, Lansangan restated the notion of the venue as a home and safe space after finishing the song:

"And again, I would like to reiterate that *naging bahay namin na talaga ang Route 196* ("Route 196 became our home") and I'm sure that this doesn't only go for artists, but even you guys who watch gigs, I know that you, you feel comfortable" (Route 196 2020: 5.05.02-5.05.18).



Setting her spiels in dialogue with her music, Lansangan's performance establishes the narrative of Route as a home and a safe space, which embraces artists and audiences alike.

## Ben&Ben: A Homecoming

The performance of Ben&Ben provides a particularly compelling example for examining how communicating a shared past with Route 196 contributes to the narrative of the venue as a home to emerging artists. Ben&Ben, formerly The Benjamins (2015-16), was founded in 2015 as a duo by twins Paolo and Miguel Benjamin Guico. The group released their debut EP in December 2016 with Warner Music Philippines. In 2017 they expanded the line-up to nine members. In their first years, the band played shows in Metro Manila's small music venues, among them Route. Due to the quickly growing success, the band started to attract larger audiences that that place could not hold. By 2018, the band had started its transition to larger venues.

In their performance (Route 196 2020: 5.57.45-6.35.32), the band refers to their past, which is inextricably connected with Route 196, through the musical and visual dimensions of the performance. First, the band established a connection through their setlist. The songs "*Leaves*", "*Ride Home*", "*Susi*", "*Kathang Isip*", and "*Dahilan*" are all taken from the self-titled EP *Ben&Ben*, released in December 2016. They point to a time when the band was starting out and regularly used to play at Route, especially in 2017. As one viewer says in the comment section, the songs fall into the group's "Classic Route 196 setlist" (Route 196 2020).

This connection to the band's past and the venue is also visually established. Since their early days, the band members have employed a well-conceived visual concept, which has undergone substantial changes over time. During the time the band played at Route 196, the band members used to sport dark clothes. In their contribution to the farewell show, Ben&Ben revived their old outfits and visually connected to the time when Route provided them with a platform for their music. As the line of their song "*Ride Home*" suggests: In the farewell show, Ben&Ben are "coming home" to Route.



FIGURE 2. Ben&Ben performing.<sup>9</sup>

The comment section illustrates that the performance was recognized as an act of remembering and even evoked individual memories of watching the band perform in that time period:

i remember the first time watching u guys on route wayback 2017!!

Those days na sa Route pa tumutugtog ang Ben&Ben.  
 ("Those days in Route, when Ben&Ben still played there")

*Yung outfit nila* Route circa 2017 🥹🥹🥹, Their old versions uwuuu.  
 ("Their outfit")  
 (Route 196 2020)

The fact that audience members described the musical and visual performance of the band as “memory capsules” and “time capsules” points to music’s ability to serve as a mnemonic trigger or “vehicle for reminiscence” (Bijsterveld and van Dijck 2009: 107). The performance was designed to send its spectators back in time. In Tia DeNora’s (1999: 49) words, “the past ‘comes alive’ to its soundtrack”. Ben&Ben’s set tells the story of Route 196 as a place that provided one of today’s most successful Philippine music acts with a home before they rose to fame. It is a place that supported the artists when they were not yet successful – and, as one commenter humorously put it, “there were more Ben&Ben band members than audience members” (Route 196 2020).

The performance of Ben&Ben shows how musical as well as visual aspects can contribute to the narrative construction of Route 196 as home. While it is perhaps the most striking example, the narrative of the venue as a home to emerging artists is a common thread throughout the farewell show. It surfaces in musicians’ choices of songs played at Route 196 for the first time, in Jam’s announcements stating that

“Route 196 was home to so many of our local greats” (Route 196 2020, 4:39:36-4:39:40), as well as in musicians' anecdotes, recounting how Route 196 gave rise to their personal and artistic growth.

## Remembering and forgetting as scene making

Throughout the farewell show, Route is constructed as a home for the scene. This narrative gains particular salience in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic. The pandemic's effect on the music scene is especially severe in the Philippines. Amid the rising number of COVID-19 cases, Metro Manila was placed under community quarantine on March 12, 2020, followed by the implementation of a strict lockdown (enhanced community quarantine) on March 16, 2020 (Baclig 2021). While the measures were partially and temporarily relaxed in response to dropping numbers of cases, they were not fully lifted before 2022.<sup>8</sup> The music scene has been severely affected by the measures (Caruncho 2020). Venues have remained closed throughout the whole period and are, as musician April Hernandez (Red Ninja 2020) points out, facing “an uncertain future”. The forced closures led numerous venues to shut down permanently. The fate of Route 196 accordingly stands for larger developments in the scene. Considering the importance of small venues for live music culture (Whiting 2003), and given that these venues are central to Manila's music scene (Schoop 2017: 26-28), the pandemic poses a serious threat.

As Andy Bennett and Ian Rogers (2016: 4) state, scenes are “a means by which individuals build and articulate shared investments in music, both spatially and temporally”. Scenes are “inscribed with memory and emotion and affect” (ibid. 2016: 5). Against this backdrop, the farewell show and its practice of remembering a pre-pandemic musical past offer common points of reference. Collective memory is central to identity formation (J. Assmann 1995, Erll 2011), and in this instance to the formation of scene identity. Since our persistence as human beings as well as our transformation through time is closely tied to how we narrate and remember (cf. Ricoeur 1992), remembering Route 196 as a home of the scene in the online context can thus be regarded as an act of scene making. While the narrative can be read as an expression of a nostalgic longing (Keightley and Pickering 2006) for the pre-pandemic music scene, this longing not only dwells in the past but has an effect in the present. It articulates scene identity and helps to keep it alive.

The farewell show's dominant narrative can also be critically examined. The narrative analysis allows us to uncover hierarchies in remembering Route 196: Which voices are prominent? Who remains inaudible? A closer look reveals striking differences between the show and the comment section: memories shared in the video of the farewell show are much more centered around home than in the comment section, where the theme mostly appears in response to Lansangan's performance or its mentions in the podcasts. Identifying the different memory agents reveals that scene hierarchies are reflected in the practices of remembering. In its conception as mainly a combination of live performances and podcasts, the video of the farewell show foregrounds musicians' experiences. It is mostly those belonging to the inner circle of the scene who take part in the remembering in the context of the broadcast. While the “What is Route 196 to you?” sections are slightly more inclusive, even Red Ninja's open invitation to contribute to the farewell show had its limitations, most likely appealing to those who have been to the venue and

hold personal memories in the form of photographs and videos. Home appears to be a more prominent theme among those who are part of the inner circle of the scene, and it is this inner circle that is given a voice through the video of the farewell show. Memories do not simply circulate via media as neutral carriers (Erll 2011: 114). The video format here shapes its mnemonic content.

The narrative analysis also raises the question: Which themes are sidelined or even suppressed? Our examination reveals that the focus on home and associated positive notions of safe space, friendship, and community goes along with the exclusion or marginalization of negative memories and potentially controversial issues. There are very few instances in which negative memories were shared. Exceptions are singer and podcaster Saab Magalona's recall of a mysterious tear gas incident at a poetry reading (Route 196 2020: 2.56.19-2.56.53), and singer-songwriter Johnoy Danao's vague hint of negative memories (ibid.: 4.14.57-4.15.09). However, the existence of negative experiences cannot be denied. As attendees of numerous Route 196 concerts, we are both familiar with instances where people felt they were excluded or did not belong. Neither addressed in the video of the farewell show nor in the Facebook comment section, these experiences seem to have slipped from collective memory. Forgetting – whether active or passive, intentional or unintentional – is intrinsically connected to memory. As Erll (2011: 9) points out, they are in fact “two sides – or different processes – of the same coin, that is, memory”. Forgetting is the very condition for remembering and remembering is necessarily selective. At this point, memory's contribution to identity formation is again central, as “things are remembered which correspond to the self-image and the interests of the group” (ibid.: 17). With a view to music scenes, Bennett and Rogers state that texts, music, and images are selectively channelled and rearticulated to represent a shared past (2016: 39). The emphasis on Route 196 as a home speaks to the music scene's self-image as a welcoming and inclusive place. It reflects how the scene – and especially its inner circle – would like to see itself. This leads to the silencing and marginalization of memories that threaten the unifying narrative. We believe that framing the show as an act of remembrance itself contributes to the selectiveness. The farewell show is a goodbye to a home of the scene – and in an obituary, one does not speak ill of the dead.

The focus on home further leads to the exclusion of controversial themes that might cause rifts in the music scene. Most notable is the almost entire exclusion of politics in a strict sense. None of the artists, except Ebe Dancel, addressed the political situation in the Philippines, which was at that time characterized by widespread human rights violations of the authoritarian Duterte administration. In the comment section, political themes were addressed only during the performances of Ebe Dancel and Bullet Dumas, who are known for their political stance. Comments, however, were comparably few. Posts criticized Duterte, especially for the government's failures to halt the pandemic, called for an academic freeze in the light of the pandemic, made fun of the government's endeavors to pile up a white beach in Manila Bay, constituting a potential environmental and health hazard, and critically addressed historical revisionism concerning the Marcos dictatorship. Given that the closure of Route 196 is connected to the government's failed measures to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, comments linking the two aspects were surprisingly rare. It is also striking that there are no discernible efforts to oppose the closure and maintain the

venue. As Andy Bennett and Catherine Strong (2018) have shown, social media can provide spaces for activism to preserve popular music heritage. This, however does not apply to the farewell show, suggesting a lack of awareness of popular music as a cultural heritage worth preserving.

The predominant absence of politics cannot be traced back to the imposing of constraints from the side of the organizers, as Sarmiento points out:

All artists have different branding and different ways that they want their fans to look at them. So we wanted to make sure that that would've been kept. So that they wouldn't be too invaded by their fans. Especially since they were at home [...]. So we just, we wanted them to be in a safe space. (Red Ninja 2020).

The extension of Route 196 as a safe space into the private sphere accordingly contributes to the absence of politics.

The critical examination of remembering and forgetting as acts of scene making cautions us to look beyond the dominant narrative. It reminds us that the story of Route 196 as home is highly selective. After all, the scene is not as inclusive as it strives to be. It is riddled with class boundaries (Schoop 2017: 38-40), as well as personal and political conflicts that have led to exclusion in the past and are likely to do so in the future.

## Remembering the Route 196 Experience

A 3D animation of the exterior of the venue Route 196 rotates. The sound of chatter and laughter fills the air. The voices are barely intelligible. A few word fragments in Tagalog come to the fore. We could be inside the venue, in between a set of performances, or outside on the patio. Suddenly, the animation and chatter disappear. We hear the sound of footsteps on the sidewalk and suddenly find ourselves in a Minecraft animation. Taking on a first-person perspective, we walk down the sidewalk. The street is on the left, hedges and concrete walls with iron bars at the top are on our right. A light appears in the distance, getting closer and closer as we move towards it. It is Route's iconic marquee. Today, it does not announce the bands of the night, but reads "THANK YOU ROUTE 196". Suddenly we take a sharp right turn and are inside the venue. The sound of chatter and laughter sets in again. The animation takes us past the bar, directly in front of the stage. Just like in the venue's offline counterpart, the words "Play with heart, drink with care" are written on the wall of the stage. The animation zooms out. We see the marquee and the outside of the club from a bird's eye view before we land outside of the venue. Then, the voice of radio host Jam greets us.

*"Heto na eh, heto na eh, heto na mga netizens"* ("Here it is, here it is, here it is, netizens"). Welcome to *One for the Road*. One farewell show. One last time with the place we're all gonna miss. The show is starting in a few minutes. Are you ready? No? Then get ready, because we are about to virtually transport you to Route 196" (Route 196 2020: 0.01.33–0.01.59).

The farewell show is about to start.

The beginning of the farewell show already points to the second main narrative of the farewell show: the story of what it was like to attend a gig at the venue—the

Route 196 experience. While “live music memories” have been addressed in popular music studies, such as Kenny Forbes’ inquiry into remembering the Glasgow Apollo (2015), we go beyond an examination of individual accounts recounted with a notable time lag. Instead, the show provides a unique opportunity to observe memory in the making.

The concept of experience is key to examining these processes of remembering. Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering distinguish between two types of experience. Experience in the sense of *Erfahrung* denotes the “mediated” or “assimilated” experience. It refers to “the point where experience is evaluated and the process through which we learn from accumulated experience in our biographical journey” (Keightley and Pickering 2012: 26). Experience in the sense of *Erlebnis*, that is the “immediate” or “lived experience”, refers to “a subject’s immersion in the flow of action and interaction with others, and to our immediate observation of and feelings about the various encounters and situations we find ourselves in [...]” (ibid.: 25).

In the following section, we will go beyond viewing remembering as a narration of past experiences. Instead, we will show that the show provides a platform for lived experience, in which attending a Route 196 gig can be re-lived and experienced anew. To do so, we will first inquire into the organizers’ strategies for creating experiences connected to Route before focusing on the audience interaction and the unfolding Route experience in the comment section.

## Recreating an Experience through Sight and Sound

The beginning of the broadcast takes the audience inside Route 196 and is symptomatic of the way the farewell show is designed to convey an experience. The organizers deliberately placed the focus on experience, as April Hernandez explained:

Actually, I think it all boils down to the concept that we wanted to emulate what you would usually experience being in Route 196. So when you’re in Route 196, it’s not all just about live performances, watching a band, like sitting down and meeting a new person or like having a conversation with somebody or a group of people. So we wanted to format the farewell show like how you would have an experience in Route. So that’s why there’s also like podcasts in between and sharing of the memories, ‘cause usually those are the stuff that you talk about when you’re in Route 196. (Red Ninja 2020)

The organizers pay particular attention to the re-creation of Route 196 as it was before the pandemic. The visual representations of the venue and the sound collage are the perhaps most striking examples. The show features a 3D Minecraft animation of the walk to and inside the venue by Tep Espiritu (Route 196 2020: 0.00.55-0.05.01), and a recurring rotating 3D animation of the venue by Paul Bry (for example 0.00.00-0.00.54). Both animations had been created as tributes to Route 196 before the announcement of its closure. Employed in a new context, they now serve as signifiers and visual memorializations of place.





FIGURE 3. Minecraft animation by Tep Espiritu.<sup>10</sup>



FIGURE 4. 3D animation by Paul Bry.<sup>11</sup>

Similar connections are established through the use of background images in the performances, as Hernandez demonstrates:

We had this visual of the stage, just a simple still image of how the stage would look like without the lights, just how Route would be. And then, when the bands came on and played, it's still the background of the Route stage. As well as the podcasts. The background was the mural outside to like simulate conversations outside. (ibid.: 2020)

Accordingly, the focus is not only on depicting the venue's interior but also on its outside. Other visual references to the exterior of Route 196 include the iconic marquee announcing the line-up, which could be seen from the highway, and the virtual replica of the blackboard, which also features the weekly line-up. That blackboard also circulated around social media at that time.



FIGURE 5. The blackboard with the line up on Instagram.<sup>12</sup>

The sound collage (0.00.00-0.05.01; 1.54.03-1.57.53; 2.49.20-2.49.36; 4.36.08-4.36.19) was intended to reflect the atmosphere of Route 196. In the interview, the organizers reflected on its creation and showed how they wanted to recreate the atmosphere of the venue by adding lines typically heard at Route 196 to a rather generic sound file:

APRIL HERNANDEZ: We were just having a zoom meeting like this. And it was like what if we put this...

NICOLE SARMIENTO: I'm gonna start recording now.

APRIL HERNANDEZ: Yeah, we were like, what if we just put like random one-liner stuff that you would usually hear in Route over the like crowd chatter and I was just like, you know, put them, splices of the lines over the chatter. So that's how it came about. Like we were literally in a meeting at like 2:33 in the morning and I was like you know what guys, come on let's record the meeting.

(Red Ninja 2020)

Most prominently, the collage included references to vendors selling *chicharron* ("fried pork rind") and *balut* ("boiled fertilized duck egg"), which Route regulars

will be familiar with. Route 196's soundscape was convincingly recreated, as Sarmiento (ibid.) remarked, "people really thought it was like white noise from Route". The collage also shows the central importance of the outdoor space as a place for encounters. It can be read as an auditory representation of community and friendship, showing how the two central narratives intersect.

With regard to the auditory dimension, perhaps most evidently, the line-up also contributes to the Route 196 experience. It is a reflection of Route's history – albeit through Red Ninja's perspective, which is a selective one. Nicole Sarmiento explained how the organizers curated the show, starting from the setlist of the Red Ninja anniversary show that was cancelled due to the pandemic, inviting older bands that "grew up in Route 196", as well as younger bands. "It was just really the people who we as Route 196 goers would normally see in the bar", Sarmiento (ibid.) stressed. It is evident that the organizing team aimed to recreate the experience of attending a gig at Route 196. However, remembering Route 196 through the (re)creation of the Route 196 experience went well beyond the organizers' intentions and strategies.

## Remembering through lived experience

We now direct our attention to the audience's (re)enactment of the Route 196 experience in the online space. Acknowledging that "[a] memory is not a straightforward analogue of past experience and remembering is not the mere repetition of it at a different time" (Keightley and Pickering 2012: 75), we show that remembering Route 196 goes beyond a re-creation of past experiences. Instead, our analysis identifies a process of imaginative synthesis in which the commenters creatively imagine the story of the gig moving along. Experiences are narrated, and fragmented memories are (re-)assembled into a coherent narrative. Numerous experiences constitutive of attending a gig at Route 196 can be identified in the comment section (Route 196 2020). In the following, we will first examine these constituents. Assuming that "remembering is a creative process" (ibid.: 41), we will then reflect on how participation gives rise to lived experience, which contributes to current and future remembering.

A central component of the Route 196 experience is the active engagement with music. "Singing along" is widespread in the form of typing of lyrics, as for example audience interaction to Clara Benin's performance suggests. Here, the audience "sings" or rather types along with the chorus: "PARALLEL UNIVERSEEEEE <3 ILY CLARAAAA", or "HELPLESSLY, I RELAPSE!!!!". In addition, physical interaction in the form of jumping, moshing, headbanging, dancing, swaying to the beat are recreated in the online space, as comments such as "*Mosh na*" ("mosh now"), "*\*headbangs\**", or "Online moshpit" demonstrate. The interaction of the audience speaks to the important role of imagination in the process. Comments such as "*sorry sa natapunan ko ng beer sa moshpit*" ("sorry, I spilt beer in the moshpit"), or "*nagtulakan sa harap ng stage*" ("pushed in front of the stage") reveal that people imaginatively turn the online space into what they experienced or would experience at Route 196. Other comments, such as "Singing along with my kiddo", or "ANYONE ELSE DANCING IN THEIR ROOM RN??" indicate that spectators might actually be carrying out these activities in the offline space and point to the performative and bodily enactment of memory (Connerton 1989: 72-104).

Although the audience does not share the same physical space, and despite the fact that some musical performances were pre-recorded, we argue that the audience here creates an experience of liveness. In his book *Liveness in Modern Music*, Paul Sanden (2013: 6) notes, “The perception of liveness in a particular musical experience, [...] amounts to the perception of performance—not necessarily actual performance, but some characteristic that resonates with a particular musician’s concept of performance”. The enactment draws on the audience’s memories of what it was like to attend a gig at Route, which is (re)enacted in the online space.

The expression of sentiment further constitutes an essential part of the Route 196 experience. Comments such as “ANG SAAAAD 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄” (“sad”), “ANG LUNGKOT LUNGKOT :((((” (“very sad”), or “im getting goosebumps damn 🙄🙄🙄” attest the evocation and expression of emotions in response to the music and the closing of the venue. Interaction among the audience revolves around the handing out of and reaching for tissue paper, as in “*May tissue po sa gilid sa mga may gusto thanks*” (“There are tissues on the side for those who want”) and “*Paabot po ng tissue for next song sana*” (“Please reach for a tissue for the next song”). Comments such as “*Ang nostalgic huhuhu*” (“It’s nostalgic”) show that longings for the pre-pandemic music scene are voiced as well. Expressions of emotion and sentiment are further visible in the widespread use of emoticons, including crying and sad faces, and hearts of different colors and sizes.<sup>13</sup>

Another key constituent of the Route 196 experience is the reenactment of the sensory perception of attending a gig. Many comments refer to the extreme temperature inside the venue. Comments such as “*Init sa loob pre. Tagaktak na pawis ko. Palit muna, labas muna ko. Di na ko makahinga*” (“It is hot inside. I am already sweating. I’ll go out first. I cannot breathe anymore”) or “*Route, di na namin dama yung aircon*” (“We cannot feel the aircon now”) point to the heat, the failing air conditioning units, and the resulting sweat. Often addressed in conjunction with the temperature are the crowdedness and narrowness of the space, as in “omg i can feel the crowd”. This goes so far as to include blocked sight by tall people or those filming with their cell phones. Lastly, the sensory perception encompasses encountering noise: the sound of the bands inside the venue, the chatter of voices outside and the street noise of the busy highway next to the venue.

Interaction between the commenters further revolved around the experience of friendship and community, resonating with the narrative of Route 196 as home and the venue as a meeting place, central in the formation of collective identities (Whiting 2023: 8). It is visible in comments such as “Will always be thankful for the people I met in Route 🥰,” “I always go to gigs alone... *pero* (“but”) I never felt lonely!”, or “Friendships built outside of Route 🥰🥰”. The experience of friendship and community is closely connected to a spatial aspect of the venue: the patio, also referred to as “*sa labas*” (“outside”). It is particularly the outdoor space that is credited as a place to meet gig buddies and find friends; it is a place where people enjoy hanging out, drinking, and smoking. In the comments, hanging out outside is recreated in the online setting, as in “*yosi muna tayo sa labas?*” (“Shall we smoke outside first?”) The inside and outside of the venue are perceived as separate but complementary spheres, as is aptly reflected in the comment “*Kwentuhan sa labas Tugtugan sa loob!*” (“Stories outside, playing inside”).



The commenters also engage in lively interaction concerning food and drinks. They frequently refer to the venue's signature dishes including *sisig* (a sizzling chopped pork dish), devilled chicken and tofu (battered fried chicken or tofu in a spicy glaze), and the signature pizza Margherita. Comments like *"Paorder po ng Pizza sa table 6"* ("An order for pizza for table 6 please") are frequent. Similarly, commenters place orders for popular drinks, including beer (especially Pale and Red Horse), *alak* ("alcohol"), *barik* ("wine"), iced tea, or simply stationary water in the comment section. *"Ice cold redhorse pls"* or *"🍷 Cheers"* show how people reimagine the drinking experience. Commenters suggest splitting pizzas, going outside in order to have drinks, or ask others for beer stubs, which were usually handed out after paying the door charge. Practices once common offline are humorously transported into the online space. When commenters impatiently inquire what happened to their orders as in *"kuya pa-follow up po ng pizzaaaaaa"* ("Brother, I would like to follow up on the pizza"), others refer to large number of "customers," which are viewers of the online stream, as in *"Wait lang po, ma'am. 2300 po kasi customers 😊"* ("Please be patient ma'am, because we have 2,300 customers"). Concerning food and drinks, a seemingly external aspect becomes part of the Route 196 experience: the neighboring fast food restaurant. For many, paying a visit to McDonald's is a vital part of the Route experience. Especially towards the end of the show comments like *"Tara McDo"* ("Let's go to McDo") are prominent, again showing how people strive to (re)create the experience of a gig night.

Lastly, the way to and from the venue becomes part of the experience. This includes challenges such as encountering heavy traffic: *"Shet sorry nalate ako traffic"* ("shit, I'm late, traffic"), or recalling the complicated commute to the venue, *"Friday night after work sakay na mrt baba ng santolan station then alay lakad hanggang route minsan jeep"* ("I ride the MRT to Santolan and then walk to Route or sometimes take the jeep"). Posts also address difficulties finding parking. Route 196 regulars are familiar with announcements asking owners to move their cars as a consequence of illegal parking. These were recreated in the comment section, as in *"yung white corolla daw po sa labas pakilipat pwesto"* ("Please kindly move the white corolla outside"). At the end of the show conversations revolve around booking and sharing rides, such as *"May jeep pa cubao sino sasabay?"* ("Who will take the jeep to Cubao?"), or *"tawag na ako angkas"* ("I will now call a motorbike rideshare").

Our inquiry shows that the different components of the Route 196 experience are shaped by individual and collective memories of attending gigs at the venue. These memories are profoundly shaped by what Sam Whiting describes as the "vibe" of a venue: navigating and immersing oneself in the space, interactions with the crowd, the energy of the performance, the atmosphere and sensory experiences, all of which facilitate a "lingering feeling of connection" (Whiting 2023: 4). The audience weaves memory fragments into the coherent narrative of attending a gig at Route from arrival to departure and it creatively recreates these experiences in the online space. (Re-)enacting the Route experience itself becomes an act of remembering. In line with Paddy Scannell's observation that "Experience is shared and shareable" (2016: 97), we argue that these (re-)enactments of the Route experience make these experiences accessible also to those who have not been able to visit the venue, facilitating new lived experiences of the place. *"Yung dream*

*ko makapunta sa route 196 hindi na natupad* 😞😞” (“My dream of being able to go to Route never came true”). Throughout the show, commenters state that they had not been to Route yet, mostly because they live outside of Metro Manila or are too young to attend a show. Many regret the missed opportunities. Various commenters post that the farewell show is their first gig at Route. Facilitating the lived experience of attending a gig at Route, the farewell show's audience interaction provides a way to take part in the Route experience, as a comment during Lansangan's performance aptly illustrates: “bye to the memories i never had the chance to experience. :( thank you R196 for being the home of quality pinoy indie music :(“. As the story of the gig unfolds in the comment section, it accommodates those who have never been to the venue, extending the temporal as well as geographical boundaries of the scene. This lived experience of attending a gig at Route can again be subject to future reengagement. Remembering Route through lived experience is thus likely to have an impact on how that place—and more broadly the pre-pandemic music scene—is remembered in the future.

## Conclusion

In its farewell show, Route 196 is remembered as a home of the Metro Manila music scene. Music, sound, and visuals contribute to the narrative construction of the venue as a home, and connected notions. The narrative takes on particular importance in the light of the COVID 19 pandemic. With clubs closed, social media provides a gathering place for the scene and a platform for the articulation of a shared past and a common identity. Remembering the venue's past contributes to keeping the scene alive in times when scenes and live music are under severe threat. The lived experience of taking part in the social media interaction allows even those lacking first-hand past experience to become part of the process. This, however, comes with the side effect of silencing those memories that could challenge a unifying identity. Remembering Route in and through its farewell show is thus at the same time highly selective and inclusive. Our study also points to a general lack of recognition of popular music as cultural heritage worth preserving. This is symptomatic of the broader deficiency in comprehensive historiography and archiving of popular music within the Philippine context. It remains to be seen what implications these modes of remembering have for the scene and the writing of its histories in the future. How will Route and other the casualties of the pandemic be remembered? And to what extent can social media events and collective memory-making contribute to keeping the scene alive in the long run? Will they eventually contribute to valuing local popular music as cultural heritage and spark more engagements with local popular music historiography?

On a Sunday afternoon in mid-March 2022, Renato attended one of the first in-person gigs in Manila since the pandemic started. Unlike the farewell show, it was a hybrid event, where around 50 people watched the performances in a music studio and those who were not there could catch it on Discord, Facebook, and Zoom. One of the main acts was Reese Lansangan. When she played her first song, “What Is This Feeling”, it was for many in the audience truly cathartic and moving to hear its opening notes. Her choice of the final song, however, makes the whole



story of this study come full circle. She played “*Home*”, and for the first time in a long while, one could hear voices sing along to the chorus:

My bones are safe  
And my heart can rest  
Knowing it belongs to you, you  
My world is changed  
And it's cradled by  
The comfort that is you.

If the future of Manila’s music scene relies upon new types of events and forms of memory-making, it might be possible to say, as Bel Certeza and the many commenters on Facebook watching Route 196’s farewell show frequently did: this is not goodbye.

## Epilogue

We would like to close with a personal note. Who we are is constructed by the narratives we shape, as Paul Ricoeur has pointed out in his two major works, the three-volume *Time and Narrative* (1982) and his Gifford Lectures, mostly published as *Oneself as Another* (1992). What was unpacked so far in this article is how others have remembered Route 196, or rather, how others want us to remember Route. In watching the show and in dialogue with its organizers, we realized how our encounters with Route also shaped us personally. Looking back Monika recalls her first memory of Route 196, attending a film shoot for the movie *Ang Nawawala* back in 2012. It was a key moment for her research but also for establishing friendships and ties to the Metro Manila music scene that last up to the present day

Renato’s last memory of Route speaks to an even deeper impact. His memory of Route was being there for the last time on a Friday night before leaving for a three-year stay in the U.S. It was a bittersweet night, where among very few familiar faces from the scene was a long-time friend and gig organizer who, as usual, bought him what turned out to be one last beer. The venue and its complex of memories and experiences, both positive and negative, shaped him in three ways. First, it made him aware of the power of community and how it can be harnessed to remember and make sense of its common life. Second, it allowed him to view popular music from an interdisciplinary lens, bringing in insights from philosophical and religious studies. Finally, reflecting on the Route 196 experience brought him to the realization that a Philippine popular music archive would help to document these and other similar experiences and the wider music world in which they are situated. It is an effort that can help continue retelling stories such as those of Route 196 in a time in which he fears that they are being forgotten, as with many things in his native land.

## Endnotes

1. Live music became an integral part of the venue shortly after it was founded by Monica Barretto, Geth Savellano, Eric Enriquez, Allan Madrilejos, and JP Balboa. In 2013, management changed and Kevin Yu, Jugs Juguetta (both from the band Itchyworms), Saul Ulanday, Tedmark Cruz (both from the band Sponge Cola) and Waco Mapua took over. Nicole Sarmiento joined in 2016 (Henares 2020, Goño/Guevara 2020, Red Ninja 2020).
2. <https://www.facebook.com/Route196Rocks>. Accessed 16 March 2022.
3. The meetings could be booked prior to the show for a fee. While each of us took part in two meet and greets, we chose not to include these in our analysis due to the private setting.
4. While the individual level refers to the cognitive dimension of the individual, the collective level refers to memory's social and medial dimensions. These two levels can be distinguished for analytical purposes; however, they are intrinsically connected. Individual remembering always takes place in and is shaped by the socio-cultural context, as noted by Maurice Halbwachs in his seminal book *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925). On the other hand, there would be no collective dimension without individuals who are doing the remembering.
5. All translations by Renato Aguila.
6. Certeza started out in the music scene as a videographer and gradually became a central player in the scene and music industry, as founder of the music platform Indie Manila, concert organizer, band manager, and A&R and label head at Island Records Philippines.
7. Illustration by the authors.
8. As of the time of this writing (March 2022), most of these restrictions have been lifted in Manila, except for a mask mandate.
9. Route 196 2020: 6.17.10
10. Route 196 2020: 0.01:15
11. Route 196 2020: 0.00.29
12. <https://www.instagram.com/route196rocks/>. Accessed 16 March 2022.
13. At this point it is evident that the online space makes the emotional engagement even more visible, as people hardly comment on their emotional states while attending an offline gig.

## Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without Red Ninja Productions. We thank Iris Erquiza and Corinna Naeve for assisting us with the transcriptions, and Sidney König for his valuable feedback on the first draft of this article.

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