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Manila's bars are full of hardworking house bands.

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MANILA — Wearing sparkly black outfits, Beth and Grace are belting out a Lady Gaga hit in a windowless room at the back of a restaurant in Manila.

The room has been decorated to look like a nightclub, but it is not yet midday and the only people in the audience are the venue's owner, Jackson Gan, and a cameraman.

The girls hope they will soon be far away from the Philippines.

A hotel in Bahrain is interested in hiring their band, Fire and Rain, and they are making the video to try to seal the deal.

"It's a good opportunity for us," says Beth. "I don't know much about Bahrain, but I've heard it's a nice place."

"Actually, I would go anywhere," she adds after a moment's thought.

Versatile and cheap

Beth and Grace are just the latest singers to take advantage of the international demand for cheap house bands.

It is a market which, according to Mr. Gan, Filipinos are uniquely placed to fill.

They speak good English, they are prepared to work for what — by international standards — is a fairly cheap wage, and they are versatile in what they can sing, he says.

The world tour starts here

Mr. Gan's company, First Champion, sends hundreds of bands abroad every month, and there

are several other Manila-based recruiters like him.

Five years ago, the largest market was definitely Japan. But demand there has been declining, while it is still growing in the Middle East.

Groups are also sent to China, Russia and even as far away as Brazil, although the most popular destination is the United States or a season on a Caribbean cruise ship.

According to government figures, about 3,000 Filipino performing artists were officially hired overseas in 2009, but in reality there are likely to be far more than that working in hotel lobbies, bars and shopping centers around the world.

Talent pool

It is not hard to find where the recruitment companies get their bands. Every evening, the bars of Manila Bay are full of groups singing their hearts out.

On our visit to Calle Cinco bar, an eight-member band named Soundwave is the first act of the night. They sing a mixture of current chart hits, although they can apparently sing soul, jazz and hard rock as well.

Laurie, one of the lead singers, says she gets paid just 300 pesos (\$6; £4) a night to sing at Calle Cinco — so it is not hard to see why a foreign job looks so attractive.

“Abroad we’d get \$500 (£315) a month as a minimum, but here we get just enough for food and transport. How can you live like that?” she says.

Musicians and singers are just a tiny part of a huge exodus of Filipinos who find they can earn

far more overseas than they ever would at home.

About nine million Filipinos work abroad — and the money they send back to the Philippines makes up more than 12 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product.

The head of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, Jennifer Manalili, says these overseas workers are the “heroes of the Philippine economy.”

The big break?

Of course, unlike many other overseas jobs, the music industry also offers the slight possibility of being “discovered” — with all the fame and fortune that entails.

In the Philippines, where singing comes second nature — even the president was persuaded to sing on the night of his inauguration — artists who make it big abroad are hero-worshipped back home.

The ultimate story for many low-budget singers is that of Arnel Pineda, who used to work in a cover band singing tracks popularized by the U.S. band Journey.

The members of Journey were so impressed with Pineda's performance, which they noticed in a video on YouTube, that when a space came up for a lead singer, they asked him to join them.

But in the bars of Manila Bay, most singers and musicians are under no illusions about their prospects.

“I know I will never be famous,” says Laurie. “I just want to do this while I'm still young enough, then I'll go back to my home province and maybe open up a business.”

In fact, unlike those in the West, these bands do not cultivate a unique image or specialize in a particular style of music. Most see their careers in terms of hard economics.

They may have originally formed as groups of friends growing up together in the countryside, but the final make-up of the groups that go abroad is determined by people like Mr. Gan, to fit the requirements of a particular client.

Smaller hotels and bars want two or three-member bands, singing to synthesized music, while shopping malls and larger hotels tend to want bigger bands with a rhythm section, as well as vocalists.

Soundwave, for example, have been told they need a ninth member if they have a chance of being booked by a hotel in Dubai.

But they are willing to accept this — in fact they are willing to go anywhere and sing anything — so they can earn enough money for their families back home.