



ON A HIGH NOTE
Junji Delfino, one
of Malaysia's top
jazz singers.

Let the Music Play

Rooted in the global jazz traditions yet shaped by Malaysia's multicultural heritage, the jazz scene in Kuala Lumpur is thriving as never before.

— by Charukesi Ramadurai

On a regular Friday night in Kuala Lumpur, Reza Salleh has just finished singing “Fly Me to the Moon” to thunderous applause at **Simply Jazz** (simplyjazz.tinboxgroup.my), a newish music venue in the upscale suburb of Mont Kiara. As he and his band The Frankie Sixes begin the next song, the audience roars in appreciation. “*Tepuk amai amai...*” I don’t follow the language, but I find my feet tapping in time to the melody. And I’m not alone: everyone in the room is swaying along to the peppy music. Par for the course, you say? Yes, except this is no regular jazz number — it’s a swing jazz rendition of a traditional Malaysian folk lullaby.

The Frankie Sixes are a fixture on the Kuala Lumpur jazz circuit, a scene that is as diverse as the city’s people, food, and culture. Shanghai jazz and Tamil jazz — not to mention more conventional styles — have all found a niche here. And at venues across town, other homegrown musicians like Junji Delfino, David Gomes, Julian Chan, Elvira Arul, and Michael Veerapen are likely belting out their own versions of jazz ditties.

Given its African-American roots, how did jazz make its way across the world to Malaysia and become entrenched in its mainstream music scene? “When radio first arrived here back in the 1940s and ’50s, Malaysians were introduced to a lot of new sounds like bossa nova and Latin American



rhythms,” says opera singer and theater artist Peter Ong. “Considering Malaysia’s unique cultural and societal fabric, we are used to welcoming different influences and making them our own if we like them, no matter where they come from.”

Ong points to Malaysia’s discography from pre-independence times, when classics such as “Besame Mucho” and “Rose, Rose, I Love You” were sung in Malay, Mandarin, or Tamil. “Crossovers have always happened in music here, way before crossovers were sexy,” he says.

And they’re still happening. Janet Lee, one of a musical trio known as The Shang Sisters, calls jazz a “mix-and-match music” that’s open to different influences, and therefore just right for a multicultural nation like Malaysia. One of the trio’s most popular numbers features the singers dressed in sparkly scarlet gowns, swinging and swaying to the trilingual “Rose, Rose, I Love You” nearly seven decades after renowned Malaysian singer and radio presenter Zainal Alam first sang it in four languages, including Tamil.

Another artist recasting old tunes from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia into a jazz format is Ida Mariana, whose *kebaya*-clad performances have given rise to the label “kebaya jazz.” “There are so

many beautiful melodies from the ’50s and ’60s that people are forgetting. I think jazzing them up adds some freshness and excitement; it brings old music to the here and now,” she says.

It’s a refrain I hear a lot when speaking to local musicians. Salleh, who started off as an indie singer-songwriter, says jazz gives him artistic freedom to tell stories that spring from local culture. The format also allows him to push the boundaries of what he can sing about in a formal venue, “because it doesn’t have to be something deep and philosophical, or based on heartbreak or whatever. It could just be about anything — and that became a songwriting exercise for me, infusing local stories into a jazz form.” Sure enough, the song that follows “Tepuk Amai Amai” in his set at Simply Jazz is about a man who has hurt the second toe on his left foot from dancing too much. And that wows the listeners just as much.

The Shang Sisters have also been known to bring

ALL THAT JAZZ
Above, from left: Sean Ghazi, a singer known for his jazzed-up versions of classic Malay songs, performing at Bobo KL, of which he is both co-owner and artistic director; a jazz session at Jao Tim.

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a local touch to beloved jazz standards — think “The Girl from Ipanema” blended with a Mandarin song about a girl in a sarong, sad and beautiful, walking toward the sea. Or a Taiwanese Hokkien song about sharing an umbrella with a loved one in the rain, mixed with Gene Kelly’s “Singin’ in the Rain.” Lee says Malaysians tend to know more than one language, and “meshing music from different parts of the world — they really get it.”

Salleh, who regularly performs with the Frankie Sixes at venues like **Brasserie Alma** (*brasseriealma.co*) and **Jazz Up9** (*fb.com/jazzup9.lounge*), admits that their music may be a “pop version of jazz.” But it does the job, dispelling the idea that jazz is complex and not for everyone. Mariana too describes her music as a “more palatable form of jazz,” which she uses to draw people in, rather than alienate them with the nuances of “pure jazz.” That being said, Junji Delfino, the uncrowned queen of Malaysian jazz, says her reference material comes from legends like Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen McRae, Nancy Wilson, Frank Sinatra, and Nat King Cole. It’s also worth noting that, in addition to performing popular music, artists such as Delfino, Lee, and Salleh have, in recent years, been recording and releasing original songs too.

For over a decade now, Delfino has also organized marathon concerts with multiple musicians to celebrate UNESCO’s International Jazz Day on April 30, using jazz as a vehicle for promoting “universal goodwill.” Indeed, there is a palpable sense of camaraderie in Malaysia’s jazz circuit that goes beyond the usual jam sessions and musical collaborations. Sean Ghazi, the artistic director at Kuala Lumpur’s premier music lounge, **Bobo KL** (*bobokl.com*), describes the city’s music scene as small but supportive, where most artists have likely worked with each other across “a variety of opportunities — corporate gigs, weddings and annual dinners, music showcases, and musicals.”

This spirit served them well during Malaysia’s stringent pandemic lockdowns, when they came together to keep the industry — and their own spirits — afloat with impromptu performances at any available space, from bookstores to bars and even once on a pedestrian overpass. Since then, the jazz scene has made a strong comeback, with new venues springing up to replace those that closed during Covid. Enthusiasts can also attend weekend pop-ups at cafés like **LaGula** (*instagram.com/lagulabytapir*) and weeknight jam sessions at **Bartolo Lisboa Bakehouse** (*instagram.com/bartolobakehouse*) in Central Market.

Ghazi, meanwhile, takes pride in transforming a conventional jazz lounge like Bobo KL into “a tiny national theater” that showcases a wide spectrum of genres, from Broadway to bossa nova to Chinese

MAKING MUSIC

Left, from top: Jao Tim, with its bare brick walls and art deco accents, occupies the upper floor of a 1910s shophouse in Kuala Lumpur’s Chinatown area; Janet Lee during a solo performance.



opera. “Music is very much a part of the Malaysian DNA,” he explains. “Our artists are coveted globally, and I feel that our home audiences are finally catching up to just how much talent there is at home.”

And new voices continue to emerge, supported by patrons like Jon Teo, owner of **Jao Tim** (*jaotim.com*) in the vibrant Chinatown neighborhood, who offer up their spaces for younger musicians to experiment. “My vision is to build something that’s very different from other venues in Malaysia,” Teo tells me. “Because if you don’t give a chance to new artists, they will never be able to grow.” 🎷