

The Jazz Scene in Malaysia

By Stephen Ng



KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 20 (Bernama) -- Since Jazz reached the shores of Malaysia more than 40 years ago, the Afro-American music commanded a steady following among a wide section of society.

The musical genre, rooted in blue notes, syncopation, swing, call and response, polyrhythms and improvisation, has brought together people from diverse backgrounds and age groups.

Take for example, the 56-year-old retired academician Datuk Dr Sabree Salleh who teams up with the 63-year-old Sulaiman Hashim a.k.a Tik, formerly an RTM Orchestra musician, to perform jazz.

THE BIG NAMES IN LOCAL JAZZ SCENE

According to the doyen of jazz radio programmes in Malaysia, Alan Zechariah, the local jazz scene had evolved over the years.

"It is a genre well loved by the young and old alike," he said in an interview broadcast live over Traxxfm 90.3 from Bangkok Jazz, a jazz hangout in Kuala Lumpur, during the re-launch of the Jazz Selecta radio programme.

The new Jazz Selecta launched by the Traxxfm 90.3, hosted by deejays Jezza and Maya, goes on air every Tuesday night from 10pm to 1am.

As one of the pioneers to introduce jazz on radio back in the early sixties, Zechariah recalled names like the late Jimmy Boyle a.k.a. Penang Boy who used to be a pianist and composer with RTM; Datuk Ahmad Merican, the radio-turned-TV producer who played jazz guitar; Datuk Johari Salleh, who helmed the RTM Orchestra; Syed Alwi, a well-known playwright-songwriter in the 60s; and local musicians Alfonso Soliano and his brother Tony Soliano who later married singer Julie Sudiro.



The grandfather of Jazz radio programmes, Mr. Alan Zechariah

A music reviewer in 1959 had described Jimmy Boyle as the "Malayan musician in a class by himself". His jazz technique was described as excellent and his musical integrity was 100 percent.

"Jazz has been in the repertoire of RTM Orchestra since Johari's time," Zechariah said, referring to the nation's foremost music conductor. "Datuk Dol Ramli, the former director-general of the Broadcasting Department, was also the driving force behind jazz in RTM Orchestra."

PRESENT NAMES IN JAZZ



Leonard Tan rendering a classic piece of jazz.

Today, young people like Shelley Leong and Leonard Tan are fast emerging in the local jazz scene.

Tan literally crossed over to jazz from jingles, while Leong is taking jazz seriously by pursuing her studies in jazz vocals and songwriting at Berklee College of Music in the United States.

"I've always wanted to pursue further ever since I fell in love with jazz in Australia eight years ago. I love the

interpretation and improvisational elements in jazz. To me jazz is an art form, both reckless and thoughtful at the same time," Leong enthused.

To her, the obvious choice was Berklee, the home for jazz education that boasts of alumni such as Diana Krall, Pat Metheny and Arif Mardin. "My mentor, Lisa Thorson, who is a leading jazz vocalist in Boston, continues to push me towards a higher standard in the vocal department.

"From a songwriting perspective, jazz gives me extra colour to work with - it's harmony and rhythm."

Of late, even Francissca Peter is returning to the jazz scene with her "Fran & Friends" brand of "swinging and sultry jazz grooves" performed at The Cotton Club Jazzaurant, also in Kuala Lumpur.

MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE

According to Sabree, the former dean of Universiti Institut Teknologi Mara's (UiTM) Faculty of Sports Science, music exposure was greater these days.

There are now music departments in Universiti Putra Malaysia, UiTM, Universiti Sains



Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and local private colleges like ICOM, Yamaha and UCSI School of Music.

"However, more needs to be done to develop music in Malaysia," lamented Sulaiman who has spent a considerable period of his career with the RTM Orchestra (17 years), before moving to DBKL Orchestra (eight years) and the MBSA Orchestra (13 years).

"Music is not taught as a subject in schools like in the west. By the time they finish high school, they would have picked up classical music.

"The government should make music a subject in schools," he said.

It was sad, he added, that child prodigy Razak Rahman's jazz album was not selling well due to the lack of appreciation in the local music scene.

"Unless the Ministry of Education introduces music as a subject in schools, people in Malaysia will not appreciate music from young."

IF ANYTHING, JAZZ IS UNIVERSAL

Jazz, though an Afro-American genre is universal music. In the local scene, jazz aficionados look beyond race and culture when they "jam" together.

"No matter what race or background, people can appreciate music. It is universal," said Sulaiman.

"Look, three of the musicians in my band 'The Shades of Gray' are Chinese, I am a Malay and my singer, Daphne Equio Dayot, is a Filipino.

"We practise once a week every Thursday night and learn at least two to three new songs. In fact, many of the jazz artistes today are Malays," he added.

Vincent Seetho, 64, a former RTM technical crew now playing saxophone and clarinet on Alan



Alan Zechariah with Patrick Thanary and Mary Ann

Zechariah's Z Band, said: "In China, the Shanghai Jazz group is trying to incorporate jazz into old Chinese songs. It doesn't matter what race you are, it is all about pouring out feelings into jazz."



Traxx fm and Jazz Selecta host, DJ Jezza, who is a Malaysian Indian, is a big fan of jazz. "I've told my fans that when I retire one day, I want go back to my hometown Seremban and start my jazz mamak stall," he said.

So long live Jazz!

-- BERNAMA