TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITIES, INTERCULTURAL RHYTHMS: THE JOURNEY OF A DRUMMER IN MALAYSIAN POPULAR MUSIC, 1980S AND 1990S

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Abstract

Zahid Ahmad is one of Malaysia's most accomplished drummers. He experienced the transnational mobilities and success of Malaysia's popular music industry, recording and touring as a drummer with Sheila Majid and Zainal Abidin in Indonesia and Japan in the 1980s and 1990s. He recently published the book *Tuk Tak: Cerita Zahid Ahmad tentang muzik Malaysia* [*Tuk Tak: Zahid Ahmad's story about Malaysian music*] (2021) that details such experiences and his professional development as a musician in Malaysia's music industry. This article draws on narrative insights provided in his biography and examines key moments in Zahid's career; supporting and contributing to the live performances and recorded works of two Malaysian popular music icons. In reviewing the existing literature on interculturalism and race in Malaysia, this article applies a conceptual framework of musical mobility and interculturalism to analyse Malaysian popular music in the 1980s and 1990s. How might the concept of musical mobility be deployed to explain the unique transnational accomplishments of Malaysian popular music artists? What were the cultural conditions, collaborative musical relationships and creative processes that contributed to their local and transnational appeal? Zahid Ahmad's career as a professional musician, his transnational experience performing and his collaborations with musicians in Indonesia and Malaysia effectively set the stage for an intercultural approach to analyse the production of music that draws from the diverse rhythms and sounds of local, regional and global musical styles; ultimately contributing to the commercial success and creative flourishing of Malaysian music across borders in the 1980s and 1990s.

Keywords: Zahid Ahmad, Sheila Majid, Zainal Abidin, popular music; Malaysia; mobility; interculturalism

Introduction

Zahid Ahmad is one of Malaysia's most accomplished drummers. He experienced the transnational mobilities and success of Malaysia's popular music industry from the 1980s to 1990s, recording and touring as a drummer with Sheila Majid and Zainal Abidin in Indonesia and Japan. He recently published the book *Tuk Tak: Cerita Zahid Ahmad Tentang Muzik Malaysia* [*Tuk Tak: Zahid Ahmad's Story about Malaysian Music*] (2021) that details such experiences and his professional development as a musician in Malaysia's music industry. This article draws on the narrative insights provided in his biography and examines key moments in which Zahid supported and contributed to Sheila's and Zainal's live performances and recorded works. In reviewing the existing literature on interculturalism and race in Malaysia, this article applies a conceptual framework of musical mobility and interculturalism to analyse Malaysian popular music in the 1980s and 1990s. How might the concept of musical mobility be deployed to explain the unique transnational accomplishments of Malaysian popular music artists? What were the cultural conditions, collaborative musical relationships and creative processes that contributed to their local and transnational appeal?

In answering these questions, this article overviews Zahid's experience as a touring drummer for Sheila Majid's 1988 Indonesia tour and Zainal Abidin's festival tour in Japan in the 1990s. Following that, the intercultural influences, relationships and experiences that contributed to Zahid Ahmad's musical upbringing and professional development are explored. Finally, his collaborative experience as a recording studio sessionist for two landmark albums – Sheila Majid's *Emosi* (1986) and Zainal Abidin's *Hijau* (1991) – feature as important insights into the transnational success of Malaysian popular music during this era. Zahid Ahmad's career as a professional musician, his transnational experience performing and his collaborations with musicians in Indonesia and Malaysia effectively set the stage for an intercultural approach to analyse the production of music that draws from the diverse rhythms and sounds of local, regional and global musical styles; ultimately contributing to the commercial success and creative flourishing of Malaysian music across borders in the 1980s and 1990s.
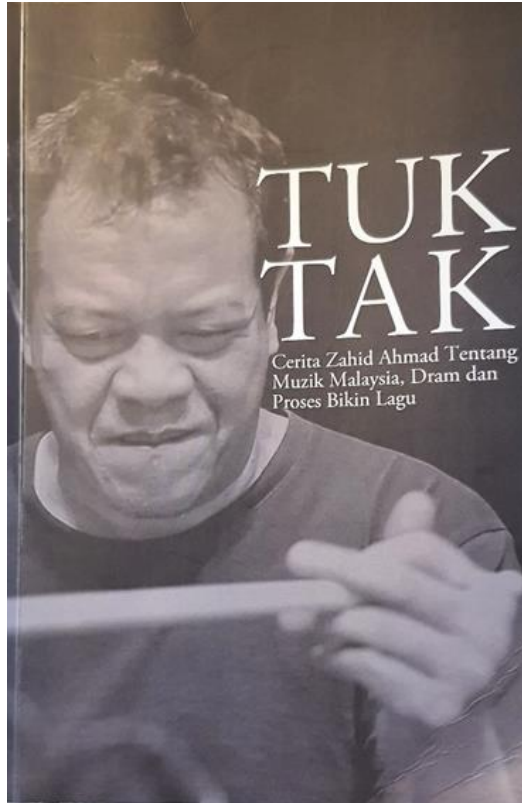
Figure 1: Zahid Ahmad's biography *Tuk Tak* (2021) published by Bukuku Press (Source: author's personal copy, photograph by author.)

Musical Mobility and Interculturalism in Malaysia

Music is inherently tied to the physical and social phenomena of movement and mobility. Sounds are formed of the physical movement of air in our atmosphere that are then received by human (and non-human) ears to be perceived by the brain. Music then, is formed of the explicit actions of humans in the organisation of sounds. Such sounds are comprised of various combinations of rhythm and pitch. Again, in relation to movement (read vibration), "the sensation of pitch is appropriately quantified by vibrational frequency" (Dostrovsky, Campbell, Bell, & Truesdell, 2001). Often, such sounds are physically produced from the bodies of humans themselves; commonly emanating from their voices in the form of singing to produce melodies or songs. Sounds are also produced by human hands; clapped together (or on other parts of the body) or to utilise other apparatus to produce a succession of organised sounds, known as beats, that can be structured into rhythms. Humans have also created specific objects for the creation of musical

sounds (both melodic and rhythmic) in the form of musical instruments such as stringed lutes, blown flutes, hand-struck membrane drums and metallic gongs. Thus, all the actions required in making music require some form of *movement*, whether through the sung vibrations of the human voice, or the striking of instruments with hands or objects such as sticks or mallets. The production of musical sounds also engages other human beings to move synchronously with such melodies and rhythms in the form of dance, the most visceral expression of musical mobility.

Many communities of human beings thus employ musical practices collectively for the purpose of rituals and entertainment. Music as a participatory practice and performing art is intrinsic and "universal" to human societies and cultures, or at the very least: "one of the many cultural artefacts whose forms and effects are consequences of social and cultural convention or the idiosyncratic choice of individuals (both creators and listeners, who will, of course, be re-creating the music as they listen)" (Blacking, 1977, p. 17).

This process of individuals and communities creating, re-creating, moving to/with music informs the overarching interest in analysing musical mobility. Specific musical forms and practices, understood as styles and genres of music, including instruments, are also subject to complex mobilities across space and place: "The *borrowing of materials* (instruments, scales, melodies, rhythmic or harmonic patterns, timbres, performance practices, etc.) *across field*s (nations, social groups, genres, historical periods, etc.) is a constant in musical development" (Van der Lee, 1998, p. 46).

With human actors involved in these processes of musical mobilities "across fields", it is thus important to contextualise the cultural considerations for an individual's experiences, decisions and relationships in making music. This is also tied to insights on "mobile music" and other forms of mobility facilitated by technologies for the circulation of music across time and space (Gopinath & Stanyek, 2014) The study presented here draws attention to a musical biography of a drummer, informed by a conceptualisation of musical mobility and interculturalism. Interculturalism offers an apt framework for conceptualising the musical processes, output and experiences of a Malaysian citizen and Southeast Asian musician interacting socially and creatively within, across and beyond national borders in the 1980s and 1990s.

Interculturalism is often compared to multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Cantle (2012) offers a conception of interculturalism to explain an increasingly globalised and super-diverse society of individuals whose "ethnic and and communal identities...seem irrelevant... through... constant interaction across cultural and national boundaries" (Cantle, 2012, cited in Modood, 2014, p.

303; also see Vertovec, 2007). Modood considers Cantle's interculturalism as a "a valuable complement to a communitarian" multiculturalism; a reformulation of cosmopolitanism (Modood, 2014, p. 303). In the context of Malaysia, however, cosmopolitanism is better suited to analyse the specific era of the 1950s and 1960s; a period of fledgling postcolonial national culture in-the-making (McGraw, 2009, pp. 35-59; Adil Johan, 2018; Adil Johan, 2019, pp. 474-90). This equation of interculturalism with cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism does align with considerations of Malaysia's early but established era of nationhood during which, the racialisation "of public life, especially after 1970" had "encouraged" minority groups "to eschew the hybrid" if not cosmopolitan, and choose between 'Indian', 'Chinese, 'Malay' and 'Other' racial identities (Mandal, 2007, pp. 48, 50). Such conditions reflect the power dynamics at play in explicitly dividing and categorising distinct ethnic groups; a means to which "race is mobilised" to assert a political social order in Malaysia, whereby the "racialised modalities of visibility and difference" in Malaysia effectively "render invisible the everyday entanglements of race that disrupt the neat categories of 'Malay', 'Chinese' and 'Indian' in the cultural sphere" (Gabriel, 2021, p. 614). Mandal (2007, p. 48) makes clear the distinction between "'race' as an essentialized and largely state-driven category", while "ethnicity" is regarded as "the outcome of the dynamic interplay of particular historical, cultural and linguistic processes".

The creative entanglements of such cultural processes are of particular importance in examining music and other performing and creative arts in Malaysia. The performance, production and consumption of music and other performing arts are among the many "everyday entanglements" experienced by Malaysian citizens" (Gabriel, 2021, p. 614). These creative interactions, I argue, are *intercultural* ones – especially in the specific cases of creative exchanges and relationships experienced by Malaysian musicians. Such intercultural everyday experiences in the creative work of popular musicians can be read as a "people-directed multiculturalism"; created, performed and consumed as "sites of cultural production and the performative interplay and negotiation between race as an expression of the people and race as an imposition on the people" (Gabriel, 2021, p. 614). Such negotiations of cultural, aesthetic and professional differences amongst musicians are intrinsic to the process of creating music.

Indeed, interculturalism is evident in musical practices globally. Nigerian composer Akin Euba wrote that all known musical expressions in the world today are intercultural, be it African traditional music, Asian, Middle Eastern or European classical music. Traditional music in Africa is a product of intra-cultural interaction among various ethnic groups within the continent as well as foreign

cultures such as those of Malaya (the Malay world), Arabia and Indonesia (Euba, 1989, p. 115, paraphrased by Sadoh, 2004, p. 636).

Such interactions in music seen from a global perspective may also be analysed more distinctly in the context of the nation-state. Interculturalism is particularly valuable in analysing the aesthetics and experiences of Malaysian popular music and its artists from the 1970s onwards, a period shortly after the racial riots (in West Malaysia) of 13 May 1969. Upon which, two national policies were implemented to address socio-economic and cultural disparities between citizens: The National Economic Policy (NEP) and the National Cultural Policy (NCP). Thus, Malaysian performing arts that were promoted by the government, following the implementation of the NCP, "emphasised the primacy of Islamic practices, traditional and folk genres of Malay music, and ultimately, the standardised use of the Malay (national) language" (Adil Johan, 2020, p. 194, citing Tan 1989/1990, pp. 141-4). This runs contrary to research on Malaysian music that has systematically revealed the "syncretic" qualities of both folk-traditional and popular music genres such as *ghazal* [love songs], *dondang sayang* [repartee singing], *lagu Melayu asli* [original Malay songs], *zapin*, *inang*, and *joget* [dance music], *boria* [comic skits and singing], *keroncong* [a vocal and instrumental genre] and *bangsawan* [Malay opera]" (Matusky & Tan, 2017, p. 6). Research on Malaysian popular music has also revealed the contribution of non-Malay musicians in adapting to new mass-media regulations due to the NCP's implementation, which involved a shift from singing in English to Malay for a majority-Malay audience (Pillai, 2013, p. 6). Studies have also uncovered the relevance of patriotic songs as a means of social cohesion among Malaysians of different backgrounds (Shazlin A. Hamzah, 2020, 2021; Shazlin A. Hamzah & Adil Johan, 2020). The music produced by Malay and non-Malay artists, groups, musicians, record producers, songwriters and lyricists during the 1970s and 1980s – who were often interacting together in the recording studio, dance clubs and concert stages – articulated how "popular music in Malaysia… (as) an intercultural expression… exemplifies reciprocal accommodations between minority and majority ethnocultural groups within a national space" (Adil Johan, 2020, p. 205). On a fundamental level, the diversity of popular music produced in Malaysia, by way of various languages and cultural styles, represent a new identity formation of Malaysian identities that are "in creative dialogue between the global and the local" (Tan, 2002, p. 16). Malaysian fusion or world beat music explored in this article further "express the multiple and overlapping identities of… musicians: identities of Malaysians of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, Southeast Asians, Asians and citizens of the globalised world" (Tan, 2002, p. 16). While Tan's (2002) insight is derived from an overview of a selection of artists and groups who were popular in

Malaysia during the 1990s – including one of the artists discussed here (Zainal Abidin) – this article focusses on the biographical narrative of an *instrumental* (in both senses of the word) musician who performed and recorded 'behind the scenes' of Malaysia's most iconic and internationally acclaimed artists from the 1980s and 1990s.

I argue here and demonstrate in the biography presented below how readings of musical mobility and interculturalism provide a suitable conceptual framework for understanding the interactive creative processes and relationships that are built on reconciliations and negotiations of cultural difference. Cultures (read races, religions) are not segregated, but actually in constant dialogue through human agents (read musicians); arguing, negotiating or sharing ideas in creative practice, while experiencing the possibility for inter-racial/-religious/-/ethnic/-cultural understanding. The creative interactions found in performing arts and music thus provide a powerful space of intercultural expression that can resolve differences of ethnicity, religion and nation-state identifications; a space where "transethnic solidarities" might emerge (Mandal, 2004). It is instructive to relate this to Hesmondhalgh's (2013) view that "music might valuably enhance... (human) interactions, and our ability to live with and towards others, to recognize them and to show concern for them". Such "interactions… towards others" are thus viewed as a musical mobility/movement in engaging with differences, creatively, to foster conditions of valuable human experience and engaging works of art. The following sections unpack these concepts of transnational mobilities and intercultural interactions in the trials and tribulations of a Malaysian musician who witnessed and actively contributed to the vibrant Malaysian popular music scene of the 1980s and 1990s.

Transnational Mobilities

Sheila Majid was one of the artists of Malaysia that best exemplified the aspirations of the nation's economic growth and reputation in the Southeast Asian and Asian region in the 1980s. Out of the five rapidly growing Southeast Asian economies – Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore – Malaysia had recorded the second highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in 1987 (Booth, 2019, p. 159, citing Bolt & Van Zanden, 2014). However, the music industry in Malaysia was not reflective of such economic achievement in its distribution of creative products (read artists) to neighbouring countries. Barendregt and Van Zanten (2002, p. 78) in their study of Indonesian popular music since 1998, note that Sheila Majid was only one of very few Malaysian artists that had found success in the Indonesian popular music market. However, there remains a paucity of detailed

research on Sheila Majid, let alone other Malaysian artists during the 1980s that were actively releasing records and performing for Indonesian audiences.

Zahid Ahmad notes that Sheila Majid's album *Emosi* [*Emotion*] (1986) was a turning point for the Malaysian popular music industry's entry into a much sought-after Indonesian market (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 69). Prior to this, it was perceived that Indonesian recording companies "looked down on Malaysian music", thus making it "difficult for Malaysian singers to penetrate Indonesia's market" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 69). According to Zahid, Sheila was the "first Malaysian artist that was able to have an Indonesian concert tour in 1988" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 69). As the drummer for the band that played for this tour, Zahid performed in Bali and across the island of Java in the cities of Bandung, Solo, Semarang, Malang, Jember and Yogyakarta; finally ending his journey in the capital city of Jakarta. While on tour, Sheila Majid's act was complemented by the Indonesian jazz fusion groups Krakatau, featuring the singer, Tri Utami; and Karimata, featuring the singer, Ruth Sahayana (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 70). Zahid would connect with Indonesian musicians such as keyboardist Dwiki Dharmawan from Krakatau and bassist Erwin Gutawa from Karimata, who would later record in Malaysia for Zainal Abidin's album, discussed in the following section (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 70). Zahid was particularly close with his counterpart in Krakatau, the drummer Gilang Ramadhan, who had just returned from his studies at the Percussion Institute of Technology (PIT) in Los Angeles (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 70). Overall, Sheila Majid was well-received by the Indonesian audience, and her song 'Antara Anyer dan Jakarta [Between Anyer and Jakarta]', written and composed by Indonesian Odie Agam, was a crowd-pleaser – even in the most intimidating cities, such as in Malang, which had the reputation for having a rowdy and sometimes violent audience (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 74). The success of this tour and Sheila Majid's hit song led to the recording of next album, *Warna* [*Colour*] (1988), in Jakarta, which included collaborations with Indonesian composer Indra Lesmana for the album's title track and 'Takkan Sendiri (Untuk Ibu dan Ayah) [Not Alone [For Mum and Dad])'. Zahid's exposure to Indonesian musicians and audiences made him realise, by comparison, the dearth of appreciation for music in Malaysia. He observed that "music fans in Indonesia are more mature and (place greater) value (in) art, in comparison to music fans in Malaysia" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 75). Such reflections would drive the creative vision and collaborative spirit in his future recordings and performances. Further to this, values of musical appreciation and professionalism would also be cemented during his travels in Japan.

As a drummer for Sheila Majid and Zainal Abidin, Zahid finds it hard to remember detailed experiences of performing in Japan due to "too many

performances there", playing at least once a year since the late 1980s to 1990s (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 85). Sheila Majid was especially popular in Japan, "releasing Japanese-produced versions of her hit song(s)… ('Sinaran [Radiant]')… in Japanese" as well as her consequent "1990 hit album *Lagenda*", which "was… released as a compact disc (CD) in Japan (Planet Earth, TOCP-6172, 1990)" (Augustin & Adil Johan, 2021, p. 196). At the time, Japan's music industry adopted an "*open door policy*" that "encouraged the entry of many artists from Southeast Asia" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 85). For instance, Zainal Abidin was invited to many music festivals in Japan during the 1990s, notably, the 1992 WOMAD (World of Music, Arts and Dance) Festival in Yokohama and the Shirataka Music Festival, Yamagata in 1995 (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 85). Zainal Abidin also performed in smaller, prestigious venues. Following the Shirataka Music Festival, he performed at the intimate and legendary Club Quattro in Shibuya, Tokyo. Instead of taking a flight offered by the Japanese promotion agency, Zainal opted for a bullet train ride from Yamagata to Tokyo for his Club Quattro performance (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 87). While there, Zahid relates the exclusive experience of being backstage in the club's green room, signing his name alongside "signatures of Led Zeppelin, ACDC and Michael Jackson" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 87). In supporting the transnational success of Sheila Majid and Zainal Abidin, Zahid experienced the unique mobilities of a touring musician at the peak of his career in the regional and global stage. The narrative outlined thus far has considered people and place as agents and contexts of musical mobility. The following section explores these aspects further, narrating Zahid's personal journey in music via personal relationships and collaborative processes of making music in the context of an intercultural Malaysia.

Intercultural Rhythms

From Johor Bahru to Kuala Lumpur

Zahid Ahmad was born in 1966 in Johor Bahru, the state of Johor, Malaysia. He spent his formative teenage years growing up in Skudai, a suburban township near Johor Bahru. He notes a very musical life since his childhood, with early exposure to the traditional-folk music of Malay ghazal performances in his neighbourhood (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, pp. 5, 7-8). Ghazal music was a unique mix of Middle Eastern, South Asian and Portuguese music, sung in Malay. Its instrumentation of diverse cultural origins includes "a violin, a guitar a *gambus* or *oud*, tambourine, maracas, two tabla, and one harmonium" with "Malay *rebana* or *gendang*… sometimes used to supplement or replace the second tabla" (Chopyak, 1986, pp. 118-9). In Matusky and Tan's (2017) categorisation of ghazal as a form of social popular music and ensemble, they discuss two theories on the music's

origins and introduction to the Malay world. The first posits that ghazal was "brought into the Malay Archipelago by Indian traders in the nineteenth crentury and developed in the Riau-Lingga Sultanate by the Malay nobility who lived there (Matusky & Tan, 2017, pp. 329-30, citing Abdullah bin Mohamed, 1974, pp. 28-9). The music practice was then transported by Malay rulers from "Telok Belanga in Singapore to Johor Bahru in the Malay Peninsula", upon which it flourished under the Johor Sultan's establishment of "new cities such as Muar, Batu Pahat and Endau" (Matusky & Tan, 2017, p. 330). The second theory places the entry of ghazal to the Malay Peninsula through travelling "Parsi theatre [*wayang Parsi*]" troupes from India into Johor during "the early twentieth century" (Matusky & Tan, 2017, p. 30, citing Adibah Amin, 1979, p. 59). Johor elites and nobility were taken by the style of music and its use of Indian harmonium (pumped organ) and tabla drums, further adapting the "ghazal melodies to lyrics from traditional (Malay) *pantun* verses, and musical instruments such as the gambus and the violin" (Matusky & Tan, 2017, p. 30). While intrinsic to Zahid's sense of musical-cultural belonging in his home-state of Johor, ghazal is embedded to a fluid history of intercultural exchange and inter-regional mobility across time and space. Such would also be reflected in Zahid's long-standing career as a Malaysian musician in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, ghazal was not the only musical influence rooted to Zahid's identity. While growing up in Johor in the 1970s, teenagers were immersed in the ubiqitous sounds of rock. Zahid would frequent the vibrant spaces of jamming studios (rehearsal spaces), specifically B Sound Studio, located on the second floor of Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak (KOMTAR), as well as the nearby music retailer, Merrytime Music Store (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, pp. 12-3). B Sound Studio formed the breeding grounds of Malaysia's top rock groups such as Lefthanded and Search; the former of which was led by Zahid's eldest brother, Yazit Ahmad who also played drums. Zahid would also be exposed to the sounds of Anglo-American rock, punk and progressive rock at Merrytime Music Store, noting "Rare Earth, Sex Pistols, Boomtown Rats, Level 42, The Police" and "Rush" as his favourite groups at the time (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 13). While acknowledging the pervasive sounds of "Deep Purple, Kiss" and "Uriah Heep", he emphasises his markedly *adventurous* taste in comparison to his peers, preferring the progressive rock of Rush, Emerson, Lake & Palmer (ELP) as well as jazz fusion musicians such as violinist Jerry Goodman of the Mahavishnu Orchestra (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, pp. 15-6). The most infuential Malay rock band during the 1970s was the Singaporean group, Sweet Charity, and Zahid relates his deep fascination and intense observation of the group's drummer, Rahman Sarbani during their live performances in Johor Bahru (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, pp. 17-8). Zahid notes the

complex musical mobilities that could be heard in Sweet Charity's hit song, 'Kamelia' (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, pp. 17), which was explained in a recent book on popular music in the Nusantara (Malay archipelago):

> Rock… across the Singapore–Malaysia–Indonesia border would be a prominent popular music articulation from the 1970s until the 1990s. No other group than Singaporean-based Sweet Charity, fronted by Ramli Sarip, would exemplify this tripartite connection better. The group's hit song 'Kamelia' released in the album *Pelarian* [*Refugee*] was a rendition of an Indonesian…song 'Camelia 2'(written by singer-songwriter Ebiet G. Ade)... However, the band performed the song in the 'heavier' manner of a guitar-bass-drums rock band while also initiating the recording with an extended instrumental introduction strikingly similar to the opening section of Dee Dee Bridgewater's version of Elton John's 'Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word'… The Singaporean band Sweet Charity, regarded as pioneers of the thriving Malay rock scene in the Malay Peninsula, was also a huge infuence on consequent Malay bands such as Wings, Lefhanded, and Search. (Adil Johan & Santaella, 2021, pp. 14-5)

Thus, intercultural mobilities were also embedded as part of Zahid's musical 'upbringing' and exposure in the urban musical spaces of Johor Bahru. As observed later, Zahid's complex convergences of local, regional and global music influences would also be translated into his mobilities as a touring musician beyond Malaysia's borders. However, before that he would embark on a turning point in his life that would see him migrate from the comfort and familiarity of his 'home-city', Johor Bahru, to the challenges of beginning a music career in the bustling capital city of Kuala Lumpur. His wanderlust was inspired by his elder brother's move to the city to form (what would be) Malaysia's most acclaimed rock band, Search. However, his first forays into Kuala Lumpur were marked with many hurdles before making the right connections. He survived with a few stints playing live music, including replacing his brother as a drummer in an early iteration of the group Search at the Red Rooster club (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 41). Then, he was offered to play drums in a "Top 40" band that had a six-month contract to perform in Kuala Lumpur International Hotel located in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur. While playing there, he would network with many of Kuala Lumpur's top musicians such as Nasser Abu Kassim, Lewis Pragasam and Tom Annuar (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 42). At the end of his hotel contract, at Tom Annuar's invitation, he moved into a *Rumah Pemuzik* [Musicians' House], addressed No. 3 Robson Road (now Persiaran Syed Putra) off Syed Putra Road,

one of the major arteries leading into Kuala Lumpur from the townships of Klang, Shah Alam and Petaling Jaya (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 44). He would practise with rigour, individually and collectively with the other musicians living in the house (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 45-6). Eventually, Tom Annuar would alert Zahid about a call to audition as a jazz drummer for Malaysia's top jazz pianist, Michael Veerapen.

All That Jazz

One of the most formative relationships discussed in Zahid Ahmad's biography is the one between the author and Michael Veerapen, one of the first Berklee College of Music trained jazz pianists and leading jingle-producers of Malaysia in the 1980s and 1990s. Upon responding to the audition call, Zahid was hired to play in Veerapen's jazz group that performed in the lounge of Hilton Hotel, Petaling Jaya (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, pp. 47-9). Thus began Zahid's training and future expertise as a jazz drummer and recording studio sessionist. Through this engagement, Zahid was offered an opportunity by the group's guitarist Thomas Ham to record for a Chinese-language artist's album (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 49). After a period of playing paid engagements as a jazz drummer and sessionist, Zahid was invited to play in a new jazz club started by Veerapen called All That Jazz, established in c.1985 to 1986 (Veerapen, personal communication, 10 April 2022). The club, located in SS2, Petaling Jaya, witnessed performances by Malaysia's top artists and musicians including "Sheila Majid, Francissca Peter, Khatijah Ibrahim, Julie Sudiro…(,) Zain Azman" and Paul Ponnudorai (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 51). Zahid highlights the novelty and importance of the venue at the time during the 1980s and 1990s:

> Many local singers and musicians were always jostling to have gigs there. At the time, there were not many jazz clubs in Malaysia. All That Jazz was of particular interest to aficionados and jazz fans… All That Jazz always organized jam sessions on Sundays. From these sessions, I was able to get to know the musicians on a deeper level. That is, I could determine the good from the bad musicians. (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 51)

> *Ramai penyanyi dan pemuzik tempatan selalu berebut nak bikin gig di sana. Oleh kerana waktu itu tak banyak kelab Jazz di Malaysia. All That Jazz menjadi tumpuan khusus aficionado dan peminat Jazz… All That Jazz selalu anjurkan jam session setiap hari Ahad. Dari sini, aku dapat mengenali pemuzik dengan lebih mendalam. Maksudnya, aku dapat belajar*

mengenal pasti pemuzik yang baik dan yang buruk. (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 51)

Indeed, Zahid had personally faced both good and bad experiences during his foray at All That Jazz. He would frequently play with a group led by Veerapen (piano), with Ah Wah (bass), Salvador Guerzo (saxophone) and Julie Sudiro (vocals). All That Jazz was a space for Zahid to hone his skills as a jazz drummer through frequent rehearsals and performances. He notes that his daily routine there involved nothing but "practise, practise and practise!" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 51). Veerapen was instrumental in developing Zahid's mastery of jazz drumming and improvisation, which included teaching him how to read musical notation and sing solfège (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 51). In fact, Zahid notes that he was perhaps the only young Malay (drummer) at the time who was playing jazz professionaly:

> There were no young Malays who could play jazz that were well-known at the time… Many musicians who were adept at jazz originated from the Philippines. Among them, the (members of the) Soliano family were the best. Of the music that was popular amongst the locals (Malays) there were two: reggae and blues. (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 52)

> *Manalah ada budak Melayu yang boleh main* Jazz *yang dikenali waktu itu…Ramai pemuzik yang bagus bermain* Jazz, *berasal dari Filipina. Antaranya, keluarga Soliano yang sangat hebat. Muzik yang popular di kalangan orang tempatan itu dua:* Reggae *dan* Blues. (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 52)

Thus, Zahid views himself as a novelty in the Malay-Malaysian community of musicians, and that was a point of pride in his budding achievements; and he often credits this to Veerapen, who he acknowledges affectionately as an elder brother (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 124). Notably, Veerapen is considered ethnically as 'Chindian'; one of mixed parentage, with a Hokkien mother and Tamil father (Pharamond, 2021; also see Pue & Nidzam Sulaiman, 2013; Chandran, 2017). However, despite such positive intercultural exchange and sense of kinship – that between a rock-trained Malay-Malaysian musician and American jazz-trained Chindian-Malaysian – there were also unexpected conflicts that arose, possibly speaking more to music-aesthetic differences than ethnic-cultural ones:

There were also bitter memories from the time I was working with Michael Veerapen.

One thing about Michael is that he is a very disciplined person in practising music. I would assume that Michael is a conventional jazz musician – perhaps because of his formal education in music… During rehearsals and evening performances at All That Jazz, I tried to improvise in my drumming by inserting Malay rhythms while playing swing and bebop… One day, during a performance at All That Jazz, Michael was able to 'catch' my experiment; he suddenly stopped playing and stood up in front of the audience. He shouted while glaring at me, "WHAT THE **** ARE YOU PLAYING?!"… At the time, the club was packed with audience members. It fell silent. They were quiet and staring at me. My face turned red. Just imagine my embarassment! . (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 52)

[A]da juga kenangan pahit ketika bekerja dengan Michael Veerapan (sic). Satu perkara tentang Michael adalah, dia seorang yang sangat berdisiplin dengan latihan muzik. Aku beranggapan, Michael seorang pemuzik Jazz konvensional – mungkin kerana pendidikan formalnya dalam bidang muzik… Sewaktu latihan dan persembahan waktu malam di All That Jazz, aku cuba nak improvise *permainan dram dengan memasukkan ritma Melayu ketika main* swing *dan* bebop… *Satu hari, ketika persembahan sedang berjalan di All That Jazz, Michael dapat 'menangkap' eksperimen aku; tiba-tiba dia berhenti bermain dan bangun di hadapan penonton. Dia menjerit sambil menunding ke arah aku:* "WHAT THE **** ARE YOU PLAYING?!"… *Ketika itu, kelab penuh dengan pengunjung. Sunyi. Mereka semua terdiam, semuanya merenung aku. Muka aku merah padam. Kau bayangkanlah, betapa malunya aku ketika itu!* . (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 52)

Zahid further stated that he had one of two choices to make in the heat of the moment; to "throw his sticks" at Veerapen or "remain silent" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 52). Fortunately, he chose the latter, realising the opportunity that he had at the time to "pursue knowledge and become a phenomenal drummer" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 53). While there was a wealth of knowledge being learnt by Zahid during his time with Veerapen at All That Jazz, it is evident that the exchange of knowledge was only flowing in one direction. Zahid was on the 'receiving end' of American jazz knowledge from Veerapen. While a fruitful experience, Zahid's early exposure to Malay music and experimental progressive rock was never fully realised in All That Jazz. Such would only be explored in parallel to his career on

the jazz stage, as a sessionist in the recording studio and as a touring drummer for Sheila Majid and Zainal Abidin; both of whom were produced by Roslan Aziz.

In the Studio: Emosi and Hijau

Aside from performing live shows, Zahid was steadily getting work as a sessionist for major record labels "WEA (Warner Music Malaysia), EMI, BMG", and "Polygram" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 62). He first met Roslan Aziz, who was a sound engineer at Booty Boys Studios in Taman Melawati, Kuala Lumpur (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 59). At the time, Booty Boys Studios recorded some of the most popular Malay artists, including "S. M. Salim, Raja Ema" and "Noor Kumalasari" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 60). Zahid and Roslan became fast friends and the latter would share his plans to "chart a new direction" for Malaysia's music industry (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 60). Zahid would become a partner in Roslan's new company, Roslan Aziz Productions (RAP) which produced, recorded and managed performances for the rising star, Sheila Majid. Sheila's album *Emosi* (1986) was a hit in Indonesia before gaining popularity in Malaysia, and it is believed to have made a lasting impact on Indonesia's music industry (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, pp. 65-6). Out of the 11-track album, Zahid plays drums on the hit song 'Antara Anyer dan Jakarta [Between Anyer and Jakarta]', 'Di Dalam Emosi Ini [Within This Emotion]' and 'Di Suatu Persimpangan [At a Crossroads]'. The album contains a wealth of jazz, pop and R&B influences, sung entirely in Malay. Zahid opines that one of the most novel tracks on the album, *Persis Kekasihku* [*My Lover's Persistence*] composed and arranged by Michael Veerapan, was particularly appealing to Indonesians at the time because of its use of programmed drum machine rhythms and sampled orchestral hits played on a Fairlight synthesiser performed by Veerapen (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 66). Here, an instance of intercultural rhythms and musical mobilities are present in the translation of global pop sounds via Malaysia's cosmopolitan network of popular music talent for Indonesian listeners. Such was reflective of the unique conditions of Kuala Lumpur's music scene and industry by the mid-1980s, of which Zahid Ahmad was an active participant. The success of Sheila Majid's album under RAP paved the way for another unique and landmark album – Zainal Abidin's *Hijau* [*Green*](1991).

Drawing on the world beat trend of global popular music at the time, *Hijau* represented the vibrant mobilities, transnational interactions, intercultural music milieu of Malaysia in the late 1980s and 1990s. Under Roslan Aziz's creative vision and discerning ears as a producer and sound engineer, the album was an unexpected commercial success in Malaysia and consequently cemented an international reputation for RAP and its artists to perform and sell records abroad,

particularly in Indonesia and Japan (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 82). Nine of the ten songs in the album were composed and written by Mukhlis Nor, who wrote the hit title track of the album in the mid-1980s, while studying for a degree in landscape architecture at Louisana State University (Azim Idris, 2021). Mac Chew, the music director and one of the keyboardists for the album shared that the pre-production for the album's title track "was done in (the town of) Kuching when he and Roslan visited Sarawak (in East Malaysia) to record the rock band Ekamatra" (Azim Idris, 2021). Thus, even prior to the album's release, conditions of transnational and inter-regional mobility had underscored the production of the album. Zahid and Roslan however, would spend long periods 'grounded' to the recording studio to perfect the album.

The album was recorded in two phases, over the course of three years in Scat Studios, Damansara Heights, which was owned by Michael Veerapen. In the first phase, Roslan and Zahid completed four songs: 'Inayah', 'Manis [Sweet]', 'Telaga [Well]' and 'Baba'; and in the second phase they re-recorded the first four and added 'Senang-Senang [Easy]', 'Insaf [Penitent]', 'Hijau', 'Damai IV [Peace IV]' and 'Debu-Debu Liar [Wild Dust]' (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 81). An additional song, 'Ikhlas Tapi Jauh' (composed by Amir Yusoff and Mukhlis Nor) that is in the album is not mentioned in Zahid's biography. In the first phase, they were experimenting with percussive sounds through the "synthesis" and "sampling" of sounds from congas, bongos and timbales (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 80). This would involve a time-consuming process of recording said percussive sounds and mapping it onto a sampling machine, that would then allow for the manipulation and reproduction of the sampled sounds (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 80). Zahid also shared how they would work on incomplete musical materials composed by their collaborators. Mac Chew, the music director and one of the keyboardists for the album, shared a rough idea for a song with song with a "shuffle" rhythm in a 6/8 compound meter, much like the rhythm found in the Malay popular social dance music style, joget (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 80). This would be developed into the album's opening track 'Senang-Senang', which effectively perfected the songwriting and production process that was implemented in the second phase of the production (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 80). Thus, during the second (and final) phase of the album's production after an extended break, Roslan and Zahid applied a clearer sense of creative direction, diligently and tirelessly recording five new songs, and re-recording the initial four songs from the first phase (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 80).
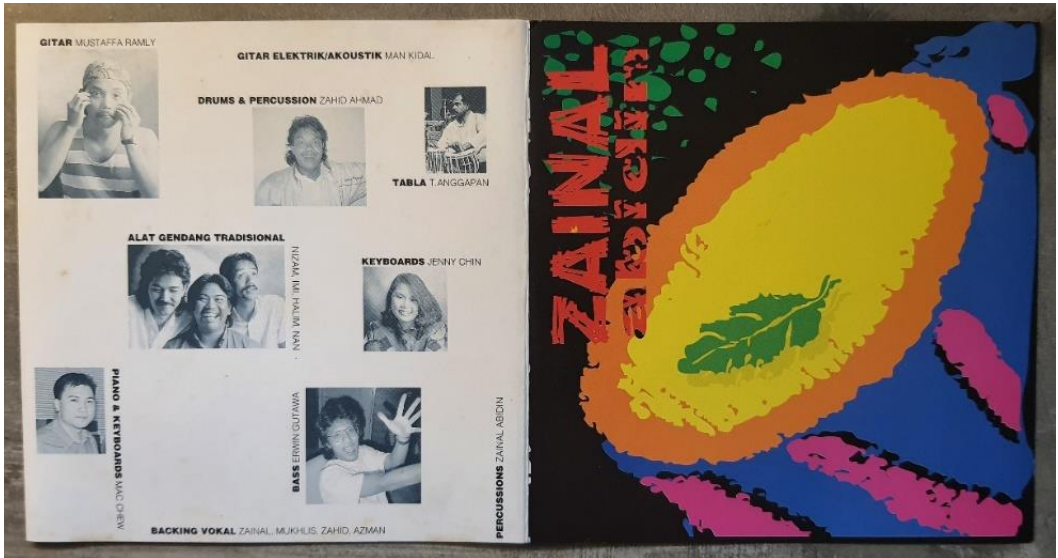
**Figure 2: Compact disc album sleeve of Zainal Abidin's Hijau featuring the core musicians (left) and the front album sleeve design (right)
(Source: author's personal collection, photograph by author.)**

Unlike any album recorded in Malaysia at the time, it featured a long list of collaborators and contributors that took on roles in production, management, marketing, musical direction, arrangement and recording. It involved numerous musicians playing a variety of instruments. The core group of musicians recorded are Zahid Ahmad (drums and percussion), Erwin Gutawa (bass guitar); Mac Chew (piano and keyboards), Jenny Chin (keyboards), Mustaffa Ramly (guitar), Man Kidal (electric and acoustic guitars), T. Anggapan (tabla) and a group of traditional Malay percussionists credited as Nizam, Imi, Halim and Nan (listed in the album sleeve of Zainal Abidin, *Hijau*, 1991, WEA 90121-74403-2, Compact Disc) . Further to that, select tracks on the album feature the guest musicians: Jayasaree (sitar), Chye Jit Chuan (yangqin), Stephen Eastham (santoor), Michael Veerapen (piano), Fauzi Marzuki (guitar), Amir Yusoff (guitar), Mat Shah (baritone saxophone), Razak Rahman (alto sax), Jimmy (tenor saxophone) and Norman (bass). It was an intercultural effort, involving a diverse cast of musicians from different ethnic *and* musical backgrounds. This was necessary toward achieving the creative vision to produce a uniquely Malaysian world beat sound that would appeal to a local and global audience.
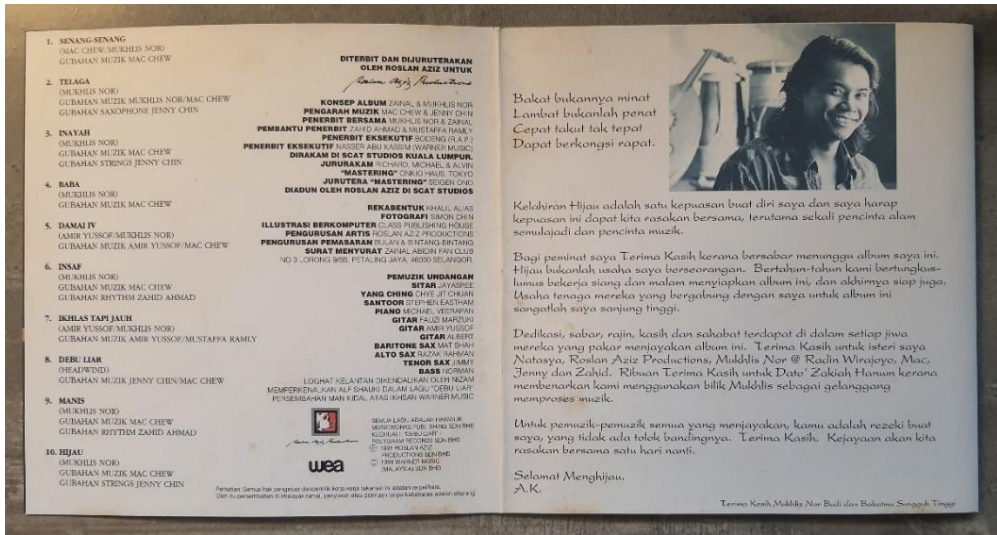
Figure 3: Compact disc album sleeve of Zainal Abidin's Hijau with track listing and list of production personnel (left) with Zainal Abidin's acknowledgements (right)
(Source: author's personal collection, photograph by author.)

The initial idea for the album emerged from discussions between Zahid and Roslan about being "fed-up" with the Malay(sian) record industry at the time, which was inundated with "Pop Hindustan ala Ahmad Nawab, Dangdut" and "Rock" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 78). Ahmad Nawab is the dominant record producer of the Malay music industry in Malaysia, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. He is also credited as being the composer for the theme song of the Malaysia Truly Asia global advertising campaign in the 1990s (Shazlin A. Hamzah, & Shamsul A. B, 2020; Shazlin A. Hamzah, 2021). However, Roslan and Zahid, prior to Ahmad Nawab's composition of 'Malaysia Truly Asia', had already envisioned a repertoire that featured a uniquely "Malay sensibility" with "Nusantara nuances" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 77). They began working on the album in 1988, and during this process they referred to Paul Simon's *Rhythm of the Saints* (1990) album and the music of Peter Gabiel (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 77). They were also drawing inspiration from "artists originating from Africa such as Papa Wemba and Youssou N'Dour", including the " Qawwali sufi music of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan" (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 78). As listed above, the album incorporated an eclectic mix of various 'Western' and 'Eastern' instruments and musicians. Aside from Erwin Gutawa from Indonesia, Zahid also mentions the inclusion of non-Malaysian musicians on the album (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 81). However, the national origins of the sessionists are not clearly stated in his biography or the

album sleeve. Instead, Zahid highlights the use of the santoor, a plucked zither of Middle-Eastern origin, in the song 'Baba' that sounds similar to the Chinese guzheng (Zahid Ahmad, 2021, p. 81). Here, an intercultural sonic ambiguity is present, whereby a Malaysian audience would easily mistake the santoor for guzheng, linking the latter to the multiethnic schema of the country.

Thus, *Hijau*, as a monumental collaborative creative work, exemplified the global currents of world beat music that were sparked by the commercial success of Anglo-American artists such as Peter Gabriel and Paul Simon. While such artists are usually critiqued for reproducing unequal postcolonial power dynamics; a world beat album produced in a developing nation-state requires a nuanced reading and shift of perspective. As observed in Louis Meintjes' seminal ethnomusicological article on Paul Simon's *Graceland* (1986) album, Zainal Abidin's *Hijau* represents one perspective of musical collaboration in how "the way styles are intertwined… in the composition, production, and promotional processes" (Meintjes, 1990, p. 37). Political ambiguities are also present in viewing the production process and creative output as an "idea of collaboration presented by the music" as "understood differently by various interpreters" (Meintjes, 1990, p. 37). This article turns its focus away from public/consumer interpretations of such music toward the personal narrative of an individual musician that worked 'behind the scenes' of major popular music icons in Malaysia. In doing so, it refers to the public importance of these icons' major works as consumed by the public but shifts that attention to the previously unseen and unheard intimate interactions and experiences of the musician as a producer and collaborator. While music-making in Malaysia is underscored by a racialised context of social interaction, Zahid Ahmad's personal background, professional engagements and personal interactions and entanglements with his peers and mentors highlight how such politically determined social differences are easily dissolved through intercultural experiences and processes of music-making. The musical encounters experienced by Zahid Ahmad's journey abound with instances of creative interplay and intercultural engagements that revealed a fluid navigation and negotiation between the differences and contestations inherent in Malaysia's racialised social schema.

Conclusion

Malaysian popular music in the 1980s and 1990s articulated the intense mobilities and intercultural collaborations of its artists, drawing simultaneously from local and regional musical references, while also aspiring to be heard on the global stage. The global trend of world beat popularised by Anglo-American artists at the time provided an unexpected opportunity for path-breaking Malaysian musicians

and producers to chart a renewed direction in Malaysian music. While much research on popular music in the region tends to focus on artists and stars, this author saw a different opportunity in the recent publication of a Malaysian musician's biography (Zahid Ahmad, 2021). As one of Malaysia's most accomplished professional drummers, Zahid Ahmad lived through this commercialised period of transnational mobility and collaborative exchange, underscored by the economic aspirations of a developing nation-state that was also embedded to a complex and contested political history of racialised identities. The socially entangled intercultural interactions between musicians in Kuala Lumpur at the time, emerged from personalised expressions of global (read Western or Anglo-African-American) styles of music (rock, jazz, R&B) with more implicit expressions of being rooted to non-Western regional practices (ghazal, joget). Zahid exemplified the creative citizen that embraced such dynamic cultural contestation to his professional advantage. He was born a child exposed to Johor ghazal and grew into a teenager enveloped by British, Canadian and American progressive rock and fusion. He would then migrate to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, initially struggling as a rock drummer, to eventually finding a jazz pianist mentor in Michael Veerapen and a sound engineer-producer comrade in Roslan Aziz. These relationships cemented a professional career in jazz performance and studio session recording. Zahid then supported and contributed to the success of two major icons in Malaysian popular music – Sheila Majid and Zainal Abidin – who thrived in local, regional and international stages; a success owed to the regional and global demand for aesthetic expressions of the intercultural musical exchange/entanglement described above. Thus, the perspective offered by Zahid's personal narrative and experience in these conditions reveal deeper issues about the intrinsic notion of mobility and collaboration in Malaysian music. Zahid's transnational exposure to performing and interacting with a diverse range of musicians in Indonesia and Malaysia inculcated an intercultural approach to producing music, drawing from the diverse rhythms and sounds of local, regional and global musical styles, which ultimately contributed to the flourishing of Malaysian music across Southeast Asian and greater Asian borders in the 1980s and 1990s.

This paper offers a biographical snapshot of one of many accomplished musicians who contribute creatively 'behind the scenes' in Malaysian popular music. Within the ambit of Malaysian studies on music, however, this paper only addresses interculturalism limited to a focus on urban, West Malaysian interactions. Thus, further research needs to expand on the growing body of studies on East Malaysian popular music (Jerome, Ting, & John Perry, 2022; Lim & Mantle Hood, 2021; Lim, 2021; Ellorin, 2021; Hanafi Hussin, John Baptist, &

Pugh-Kitingan, 2018) and indigenous music (Zawawi Ibrahim, 2021; Chan, 2018; Tan, 2014) to reveal further nuances about the mobility of music across fluid borders and marginalised communities. As a preliminary step in uncovering the stories and sounds of transnational interculturalism and musical mobility, it is recommended that research in this vein be explored further and broadened in scope to include a wider range of artist biographies from across Southeast Asia. Readers and potential contributors for this journal, in particular, are urged to consider adding to the chorus of such perspectives about inter-Southeast Asian connections found in the performing arts and popular culture of the region.

Acknowledgements

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