

Cross Border Showcase

Sara Loh

Independent Artist

saracyloh@gmail.com

The Weekend Sessions, an online platform for independent music in South East Asia kicked off Cross Border Showcase – their first effort at bridging the musical gap between neighbours – for the very first time, in Penang. They came with a goal to provide two-way exposure. For Southeast Asian bands, Penang, a boutique centre for the arts undergoing an artistic revival seemed like the right place to gain new audiences; and for the monochromatically-attired, beanie-wearing and batik bag-clad audience who came out in the rain, this was a rare opportunity to discover new music from somewhat familiar territories.



Namely, the music of *Dirgahayu*, *Two Million Thanks*, *Pandai Besi* and *MonoloQue*. Those aren't words that necessarily make sense, or that can be strung together in one sentence. But, those are the names of four Southeast Asian bands that wowed music lovers on a gloomy Friday evening in the Hin Bus Depot, George Town, Penang.

The Hin Bus Depot was partly enclosed and partly outdoor. The enclosed space served as an art exhibition space, whereas the outdoor enclosure housed pillars that demarcated structures from the past that had been torn down during the depot's renovation. It was in the furthest corner of the outdoor enclosure that a performance stage was tucked into. On one side, it was backed by Times Square and Sunway Hotel, and on the other, it was fronted by Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak (KOMTAR). In addition, soon after the gig began, the prying eyes of pajama-clad old uncles and aunties began to peep out from their shop houses, which backed the performance space. The unintentional yet tasteful spatial clash was a wonderful backdrop for the night's sonic landscape – not quite foreign, not quite local; not quite past, not quite present.

The first band, *Dirgahayu's* sound was robust and energetic, punctuated by unexpected transitions. Their progressive riffs and fluctuating rhythms were a good way to get the crowd excited and on their feet. All the way from Thailand, the next band, *Two Million Thanks* serenaded the crowd with just enough playfulness and warmth in their folksong-influenced vocal introductions to complement their energetic rhythms and beats. These introductions were sung *a capella*, alternately in parts and in unison. It was unfortunate that evening showers abruptly interrupted their set just as the crowd was almost ready to celebrate the night of Southeast Asian independent music.

There was a brief moment of pandemonium as the rain refused to halt, but the loyal crowd, either hypnotised by the previous two bands, or committed to make the most out of their RM30 entrance fee, waited patiently. In fact, as the rain intensified, the anticipation for the next band too intensified.

When they finally came on stage, *Pandai Besi*, possibly the highlight of the night, was firstly a nice relief from the all-male lineups of the previous bands. Their entire ensemble consisted of the standard six-piece band, with the addition of a flautist cum trumpeter and two female vocalists that made all the difference. Secondly, their lush sound had hints of Javanese traditional music, namely alternated clapping and *gamelan* scale-inspired melodies. This was hardly a surprise as the group hailed from Java, and even recorded their debut album at Lokananta Studio, the recording studio which was home to many a great *gamelan* recording session. Thirdly, they were performers first and foremost, who adapted their surroundings into their performance. For example, it was a nice touch when the vocalists raised their hands, almost in prayer, as they sang quite appropriately, *Hujan jangan marah* (Oh rain, don't be angry). A short disclaimer, *Pandai Besi* is actually a newly formed band which was born out of an experiment by *Efek Rumah Kaca*, one of the oldest indie rock bands in Indonesia, to reinvent their own music into an edgier, more psychedelic and immense sound.

Pandai Besi seemed like a tough act to follow, but the next band, *MonoloQue*, an alternative rock band with traditional Malaysian and *nusantara* influences, were not to be eclipsed. The band lead, Loque, was a *Butterfingers* guitarist and lead songwriter. *MonoloQue* began as an outlet for this Berklee College of Music graduate to experiment and expand his own potential. Self-proclaimed to be influenced by early Malaysian pop by the likes of R. Azmi, Saloma and P. Ramlee, *MonoloQue* quite successfully resolved the archetypal conflict between traditional and contemporary. That night, they wove together rock and roll with Indian-influenced beats, traditional Malay scales, and call and response melodies reminiscent of *orang asli* rituals. Loque also donned a Malay *tanjak* (Malay headwear, customarily worn by men for weddings and other ceremonies), perhaps as testimony to these influences.

The concert which was meant to last three-hours, ended up going on into the early hours of the next day. Nevertheless, there were no complaints, just endless curiosity. At the end of the day, the sounds of these bands that fuse present with past, foreign with local, may no longer be novel in the independent music realm, but the coming together of

so many Southeast Asian independent sound makers that utilise similar methods is. Whether this musical identity pivot is a growing trend in Southeast Asian indie, or whether it is other influences, sharing music is definitely one platform through which Southeast Asians are able to explore these reasons, and find their feet, together.



Photo 1 Performance space at the Hin Co. Bus Depot, Penang.
Photographer: Sara Loh.