



COVER STORY

Redefining the Groove

The local jazz music scene features a wealth of talented and skilled musicians and artistes who are dedicated to advancing the art form. In this article, we speak to three accomplished jazz practitioners about their personal journeys in jazz, their sources of inspiration and their thoughts on the current state of the genre.

Text: Chow Ee-Tan | Images: Courtesy of Respective Interviewees / iStockphoto

Jazz has always been a genre of music that is constantly evolving and pushing boundaries. Throughout its history, jazz has been shaped by a number of innovators and trailblazers who have left an indelible mark on the genre. Today, the local jazz music scene is brimming with talented and dedicated musicians carrying on the legacy of these pioneers. Three accomplished jazz practitioners who have made significant contributions to the art form share with us their personal journeys of jazz, their sources of inspiration and their thoughts on the state of jazz music today.

A PIONEER IN WORLD MUSIC

Since bursting into the scene in the 1970s, Lewis Pragasam has garnered international and critical acclaim as one of Asia's leading drum/percussion exponents and an innovator of world music.

Although primarily known as a jazz music proponent, Pragasam does not want to be pigeonholed as a jazz musician.

"I play jazz. I play rock. I have also played in pop concerts for foreign acts from China, Indonesia and the West. But for most of my life, I've been associated with the jazz circle," says the versatile

drummer who thrives on variety. And yes, jazz will always be his first love.

Growing up in Brickfields, Pragasam started playing the drums in a rock band in his youth and is self-taught all the way. He was curious about jazz as being a challenging genre. Then he was mesmerised by a record by the Mahavishnu Orchestra, a New York jazz fusion band in the 1970s started by English guitarist John McLaughlin. That was also when jazz began to bloom.

Pragasam considers the band's

drummer, Billy Cobham, as having the biggest influences on him, and he was ecstatic when, many years later, he would have the chance to play with Cobham doing double drumming in a concert in Kuala Lumpur.

In 1979, Pragasam founded the ASIABEAT project, which recordings and performances saw the merging of Asian and Western music styles. It defied categorisation in all its variants: cross-cultural, fusion or world music and had, at that time, broken the international arena.

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- Lewis Pragasam, percussionist





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A year later, ASIABEAT presented a concert that featured more than 60 musicians and all kinds of ethnic Asian instruments (gamelan, Chinese, Indian and Malay instruments) fused with a nine-piece band. This was the first time various musicians of different cultures performed together under one stage, and it caught the attention of some like-minded artistes and musicians who started to explore the possibilities of cross-cultural experimentations.

ASIABEAT has amassed a large following in Malaysia and become a new voice in the music industry. They have recorded 7 albums, featuring mainly original compositions.

Pragasam made a big name for himself in the 1980s, by collaborating with local and overseas artists, and playing in various music venues and music festivals. He went on to tour the USA in 1985 and has lived there as well as in Japan and Korea. But he is always proud to be Asian.

"I felt our musical culture in Asia was dying, and I wanted to revive it. I believe we can introduce jazz to the music audience with local flavours," he says. He has assimilated his vast experiences playing around the world and blended them into his own identity and culture as an Asian.

To him, jazz has to be fun and entertaining.

"The main concept of jazz is improvisation. That allows

musicians and singers the liberty and freedom to do their thing. You're given a structure or a template to work with and you can do what you like within it. You can play one song over again, and it can be different every time," he enthuses.

The local jazz audience has grown, and the whole industry is fast changing with the use of computer technology and even artificial intelligence. And this, to Pragasam, is something exciting.

He sees the importance in building awareness for the art form in order for jazz to flourish. There should be more music festivals and more awareness-driven projects to promote jazz. And he believes jazz music should be introduced in schools and colleges.

Last year, Pragasam created a project called 'Eco-Drum Jam' that he introduced during the 2022 Borneo Jazz Festival. It aims to create awareness about the environment by being creative in making music using waste materials such as plastic bottles, bamboo, cardboard boxes and all kinds of objects. He has also brought 'Eco-Drum Jam' to other venues and attracted the attention of many children.

While it is a good sign that there are more venues for jazz performances, he says musicians have an important role to play.

"Many jazz musicians are playing the same music over again. I feel jazz musicians should be writing their own music. You have to be original," he says.

Pragasam doesn't perform regularly these days, as his immediate passion is the 'Eco-Drum Jam' project to teach and inspire the younger generation. He feels it is important to be a good role model to the many young talents these days.

One who never slows down, he is working on a new album currently and is having fun creating music using new technology. He also discloses that he is working on writing his autobiography that talks about his life journey and, of course, jazz music.

JAZZ MUSIC IN HER BLOOD

Junji Delfino is fondly called 'Jazz Mamma' in the local jazz scene.

For more than three decades since adopting Malaysia as her home, Delfino has been singing and performing her varied jazz repertoire at venues ranging from hotels to jazz clubs as well as appearances at several jazz festivals, including the ASEAN Jazz Festival 2015, which she hosted and performed in.

She started singing at the age of four, and by the age of ten, her father, himself a renowned Filipino jazz musician and composer, was

sneaking her into jazz clubs. It was here that Delfino became infused with jazz.

In 1985, she came as one of three singers from Manila to sing in a Top 40s pop band and was working closely with jazz pianist Michael Veerapen. At the end of that year, Veerapen and his partners opened All That Jazz, a jazz club in Petaling Jaya, and Delfino would go to Veerapen's house and sing jazz repertoire taken from *The Great American Song Book*. She married jazz pianist and musician David Gomes in 1987 and has lived in Malaysia since. She used to perform regularly with Gomes, but in later years, both have their own gigs.

"As a singer, sometimes you can't avoid singing songs outside the jazz genre, but my favourite is always jazz," says Delfino, who has performed in many parts of Malaysia, Singapore, Bangkok and even as far as San Francisco and Daly City in California. In more recent years, she has had stints in No Black Tie, Alexis and newer venues such as Bobo KL, Jao Tim and Simply Jazz at TREC.

Being exposed to jazz music at a very young age, Delfino cites Ella Fitzgerald as her favourite jazz singer who has the biggest influence on her. Then there are others like Eddie Gomez, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Nat King Cole and many other legendary jazz stars.

"The influences of these great jazz artists on me have been huge. I have absorbed their music and have taken what appeals to me so you can hear hints of their

influences when I sing," she says. "But I am not any of them. I am Junji, who has developed my own sound and style."

She says jazz is not easy to define as it can have many characteristics that are different in form, style and rhythm.

It's not a small feat for Delfino, who has no music education, to learn each song just by listening. Her repertoire consists of many

standard pieces of jazz and songs from musicals that are given a jazz twist. She does it so effortlessly with her mellow and sultry voice and her vocal prowess.

Some of her stellar performances have not gone unnoticed, earning her a few BOH Cameronian Arts Awards awards for Best Solo and Group Vocal Performer. Besides singing, her acting talents also have been



“Singing jazz is not that simple. You have to listen a lot to the music, and the music needs to get underneath your skin. You need to study, to understand a song really well, in order to be true to the music.”

- Junji Delfino, vocalist & actress

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noticed, and she has appeared in theatre, television and films, including the runaway hit *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Delfino reckons jazz is and will always be a niche market.

"Jazz is not for mass consumption, but it will always attract the right audience," she says. "Jazz is beautiful; it has complexity in simplicity. You can take it and change it anyway you like while retaining the foundation of that song. So, we may be singing a song from the yesteryears, but we are infusing new spirit into it, and it is always fresh."

She's happy to see a younger crowd coming to her shows due to the exposure on social media. The local jazz scene has had exponential growth in the last 10-15 years, and she is glad there are many more new venues as well as up-and-coming jazz singers.

"But for jazz, sometimes the line is blurry. Some may call me a purist, but I get annoyed when people say they are playing jazz but, in fact, they are doing something else. You are misinformed and causing your audience to be misinformed too," she says.

Her hope is that the government will recognise the importance of music and the arts and will give the industry more support.

HIS ART OF 'ROJAK JAZZ'

Malaysia would have lost a brilliant jazz musician if not for Tay Cher Siang's love for his homeland.

After he graduated from his studies in the United States, Tay was at a crossroads and considering between staying on in the US, exploring possibilities in China or Taiwan or coming back home.

"At the end, I saw the potential of making music in Malaysia that would let me develop my own path. Malaysia is my homeland, and if I (and my colleagues in music) don't work on nurturing the

music scene here, who is going to do that for us?"

It is ironic that Tay, today a pianist virtuoso, hated his piano lessons when young. But the seed of music appreciation had been sown, and he grew to like music, even classical music, which he was trained in. In his college days, he would play pop songs to entertain family and friends.

"One day, while walking down a street in Melaka, I was struck by the sound of 'Corcovado' sung by Astrud Gilberto. The foreign melody captivated me, and I couldn't shake it off. I bought the CD and couldn't stop listening to it. I knew I wanted to learn how to create music like that, with swing, groove, improvisation, great harmonies and group interplay."

He was fascinated by the resonant low tones of the double bass, the beautiful chord voicings of the piano and the swinging rhythm of jazz music.

"And how music was made by musicians who didn't have to play exactly as written but make things up along the way. Each instrument was on its own, but each of them contributed to make the best music they could together," he enthuses.

So, he attended a local music college that offered jazz courses and was playing in restaurants, cafés, hotel lounges and even in a casino. He then went to the United States to further his studies and obtained a Master's in Jazz Pedagogy. There he seized every opportunity to perform, to jam with other musicians and to write his own compositions. He also formed and directed a band and learn the





tricks of the trade from seasoned professionals.

Tay's band WVC (West Virginia Connection) was formed in 2007 and consisted of two of his classmates from the United States. They recorded a self-funded first album and toured China and Malaysia. Over the years, the band acquired new members and morphed into a Malaysian jazz ensemble.

He has been touring extensively with WVC and also with multi-national band Unit Asia to many countries in Asia, Europe and in the United States. A total of nine albums were released throughout the years, with original compositions and arrangements. Tay is also active in producing recordings with artists in the region and has worked on films (including *Crazy Rich Asians*), commercials, theatre plays

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- Tay Cher Siang, jazz pianist, composer, arranger and producer

and musicals. Tay is currently the chairman of the organising committee of the annual Malaysian Jazz Piano Festival.

“I like to call my music ‘Rojak Jazz’. In our society, jazz is pretty much ‘Rojak’,” he laughs.

“I learned the blues, the rhythm changes, the American songs, etc, but I am making them the way I see fit. I jazz up Malayan

tunes, Hindi film songs, Shanghai classics, Teresa Teng’s melodies, etc. I also wrote music based on Shakespeare’s sonnets, Song and Tang dynasties poems, Japanese poems and so on,” he says.

Tay reckons that young people today are interested in various forms of jazz. There seems to be an increase in live venues featuring jazz performances and some of them have flourished over the years.

“But I don’t think jazz will ever become mainstream. Jazz originated from New Orleans, a port city that is a melting pot of cultures and influences. It is a music rooted in the African-American experience but is accepting and internalising many other types of music and changing as time goes by,” says Tay.

He says, globally, jazz has always thrived on exclusiveness and been enjoyed by insiders all over the world. “That being said, I feel Malaysians are appreciating and enjoying jazz more than ever. People are willing to spend on live music, jazz albums, seminars, talks and merchandise,” he says.

The multi-talented musician enjoys every aspect of his art—playing, composing, arranging, recording, music directing and teaching.

“For me all these endeavours balance my life and mutually benefit my crafts. They teach me to see clearly how I play; while playing informs my compositions, arranging lets me think about how to teach and how to direct a band, etc. “I count my blessings that I get to do all these and really enjoy them,” he concludes. 📷

JAZZ FESTIVALS AROUND THE WORLD

JAZZ MUSIC HAS BEEN ENJOYED AND CELEBRATED AROUND THE GLOBE FOR OVER A CENTURY, AND TODAY THERE ARE A MULTITUDE OF JAZZ FESTIVALS HELD IN COUNTRIES ACROSS EVERY CONTINENT.

MONTREUX JAZZ FESTIVAL (SWITZERLAND)

Montreux Jazz Festival, held annually in Switzerland since 1967, is one of the most renowned jazz festivals in the world. It has featured many legendary jazz musicians such as Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, and Nina Simone. The festival takes place in the charming town of Montreux, located on the shores of Lake Geneva, and offers a diverse lineup of jazz, blues, and rock acts, as well as up-and-coming artists.

NEWPORT JAZZ FESTIVAL (USA)

The Newport Jazz Festival, held in Newport, Rhode Island, USA, is another famous jazz festival with a long history. Founded in 1954, it has hosted some of the biggest names in jazz, such as Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Duke Ellington. The festival takes place in the summer and features outdoor and indoor performances as well as workshops and educational events.

MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL (CANADA)

Montreal International Jazz Festival, held in Montreal, Canada, is another major jazz festival that takes place in the summer. It features over 3,000 artists from around 30 countries and has been running since 1980. The festival is one of the largest jazz festivals in the world and offers a wide range of musical styles, including traditional jazz, blues, and fusion.

UMBRIA JAZZ FESTIVAL (ITALY)

Umbria Jazz Festival, held annually in Perugia, Italy, is one of the most important jazz festivals in Europe. It has been running since 1973 and features a lineup of jazz, blues, and world music acts, as well as educational events, workshops, and masterclasses.

TOKYO JAZZ FESTIVAL (JAPAN)

Tokyo Jazz Festival, held annually in Tokyo, Japan, is one of the most important jazz festivals in Asia. It features a diverse lineup of jazz, blues, and world music acts and has been running since 1990.

BORNEO JAZZ FESTIVAL (MALAYSIA)

The Borneo Jazz Festival is an annual music festival that celebrates the vibrant jazz scene in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Held in the scenic coastal city of Miri, the festival brings together an eclectic mix of local and international jazz musicians to perform and showcase their talent to a diverse audience of jazz enthusiasts.

LONDON JAZZ FESTIVAL (UK)

London Jazz Festival, held annually in London, UK, is a major event that has been running since 1992. It features a diverse lineup of jazz, blues, and world music acts, as well as educational events, workshops, and masterclasses.

MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL (AUSTRALIA)

Melbourne International Jazz Festival, held annually in Melbourne, Australia, is one of the most important jazz festivals in the southern hemisphere. It features a diverse lineup of jazz, blues, and world music acts as well as educational events, workshops, and masterclasses. It has been running since 1990.