

LIVING LIFE WITH THE COOL JAZZ CAT

Piano man Michael Veerapen is at the helm
for the fourth edition of a jazz fest, writes

Subhadra Devan

FROM concerts to clinics, featuring almost the who's who of Malaysian jazz, the 4th Malaysian Jazz Piano Festival seems to have something for every music fan. The brainchild of jazz maestro Michael Veerapen, the event is a way for him to pay back to the music community.

"I stood on the shoulders of those who went before me. This is my way of expressing my gratitude to them," says Veerapen, one of Southeast Asian region's most respected jazz musicians as well as being a composer, arranger, musical director and producer.

He says last year's festival, also held at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, saw positive feedback and led to some changes in the format of the event. For one, it will include more members of the Malaysian jazz music scene and not just pianists.

"The festival this year will see a clinic that covers the fundamentals of harmony, chord construction, diatonic chord progressions, etc."

There are four clinics this time around. John O, of Paper Plane Pursuit, will be conducting one on how to make your home recordings sound great while Toro Cheng will be teaching the Fundamentals of Harmony.

John Oomien is the lead vocalist of the pop band while Cheng is an adjunct lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia and UCSI University.

Other clinics include Fusion Jazz Improvisation by Edvard Læe and Improvisation for Beginners by Ch'ng Wee.

Veerapen, even before graduating from the prestigious Berklee College of Music in 1982, had already made a name for himself as an up-and-coming pianist having worked with some of the more popular bands who were at the forefront of the band era in the 1970s.

He was mentored by the likes of the great Alfonso Soliano when he was starting

out, says the Seremban-born artiste, and thus the range of experienced musicians involved in this jazz festival. This fourth edition will offer concerts like Tomorrow, Here Today (on Jan 13) which shines the spotlight on the star pianists of tomorrow; the popular Twos and Threes (Jan 14), which will see two and three pianists at the same time, and Ensembles (Jan 15) where all the top jazz musicians in the country will perform.

The performers include WVC Trio + 1 members Tay Cher Siang, pianist-composer and saxophonist Julian Chan as well as guitarist Az Samad who will share the stage with virtuoso percussionists Steve Nanda and John Thomas, plus singer Samantha De Lune, among others.

Says Tay: "Even though we still call this Malaysian Jazz Piano Festival, this year we have invited other instrumentalists to join us - saxophonist Julian Chan, guitarist Az Samad and vocalist Razlan will be forum guests, for the first-ever jazz forum for this festival.

"Their input regarding some concepts and ideas would be enlightening and beneficial to the participants. Not to mention they will be performing in the concerts as well. "We are also featuring up-and-coming young practitioners of jazz in Malaysia. They will present their music and original compositions in the first night (Jan 13) of the concert series.

"There are six young performers taking up the torch - past year winners from the festival Lim Lee Peng and Melvin Goh, Borneo wunderkind Alton Wong, pianists

Grace Leong, Low Sim Ee and Tenju Indra.

"Jazz tends to be a masculine world but this year we are happy to see three young women step up to the challenge to shine." Tay, a composer and lecturer, is frequently invited by local and foreign artistes to perform at various venues in the country, garnering a following from music enthusiasts. Tay's main creative outlets are

his own bands WVC and Unit Asia, a multinational jazz group.

WVC Trio's Tay Cher Siang will be moderating a forum with jazz luminaries Julian Chan, Az Samad, and Razlan Saharudin.

The festival also sees the 3rd Malaysian Jazz Piano Competition, on Jan 14, which will feature a new component where finalists will be given an original piece the

day before their performance and must demonstrate their skills in adapting it into a compelling performance.

On the trials and tribulations of being a musician, with no steady income, Veerapen says: "I think that there will always be work and income for good musicians who are dedicated, hardworking, pleasant to work with, reliable, punctual and always prepared beforehand. These are the same attributes that will work for anyone and not just musicians alone.

"In that respect, we have seen more and more highly skilled and schooled musicians coming into the scene who are doing well. Festivals like ours hope to foster a continuous improvement in the standard of Malaysian music so that Malaysian audiences will always be as supportive of

Malaysian musicians as they have always been."

Tay has enjoyed his career so far as a pianist, musician, educator, and producer. "Truly, the income might not be steady but with some financial knowledge and acumen, my family and I still live comfortably within my income. So, personally I don't think it is such a big problem. "As for the younger generation, I would say that job prospects are even better now and I am happy to say that some of my students and young musicians friends are living quite well, doing what they love and excel at, and making a living."

The great trumpeter Louis Armstrong once said, "What we play is life", a quote

given new fame when referenced by US President Barack Obama at a Poetry Jam event at the White House in May, 2009.

So what does jazz mean to Tay and Veerapen?

"This might sound cliché," says Tay, "but jazz music is not just my career, my hobby but my way of life."

"Just like playing the music, we improvise, finding the best ways to go around the music, telling stories, based on our accumulated wisdom throughout the years, making mistakes, learning from our mistakes and moving on, and hopefully come out of it a better improviser, a better musician, a better person."

Says Veerapen: "I love jazz. From the time I heard Oscar Peterson playing the piano when I was a kid, I was smitten and I can't imagine life without it."

Peterson was a Canadian musician, dubbed the "Maharaja of the keyboard" by Duke Ellington, another jazz great. "For me, it's a genre of music that is on the one

hand extremely difficult and one could spend your whole life studying it and yet only scratch the surface of it, and yet it can reward the beginner in the most satisfying way as well," continues Veerapen, adding: "It is about freedom and yet it is also about rules and hard work."

"It is also something shared with fellow musicians in a way that words can't describe. It is about life itself."

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The 4th Malaysian Jazz Piano Festival

When Jan 13-15

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Tay Cher Siang,
composer and
keyboardist



Julian Chan,
saxophonist



Michael
Veerapen