

# **Riza Arshad**

**2nd November 1963 – 13th January 2017**



**An Appreciation**

## Introduction

I first heard of Riza while teaching an advanced English class. One of the students said that she was studying jazz piano with Riza, and she later gave me a copy of simakDialog's *Sampler Tape* produced the previous year. We met a month or so later at Pat Metheny's first appearance in Indonesia on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1995. I know Riza was there, but we didn't meet for another dozen years.

Because we shared an interest via a Yahoo group devoted to the 'Canterbury Scene' genre, I was contacted by NYC based Leonardo Pavkovic of MoonJune Records. He had released an album by the then incarnation of Soft Machine and wanted to bring them to Indonesia.

Their gigs didn't happen, but Leo did come to Jakarta in 2002 and we met. Largely because he had previously met Riza in New York when he was the sound engineer for the short tour of Iwan Hasan's Discus, while here he started to develop a personal network among local jazz musicians.

The first Indonesian album released on MoonJune Records, in 2007, was simakDialog's *Patahan*. That same year I was commissioned by Marshall Cavendish to rewrite *Culture Shock! Jakarta*. I asked Leo to contribute something for the music section.

*"Riza Arshad of simakDialog is definitely the greatest musician I have discovered in Indonesia and I know the best of him is still to come. He's an amazing pianist with a great touch and ECM sensibility."*

I have included in the following pages what Riza contributed to the 2011 edition of *Culture Shock*. By then, and until recently, I had been to some of his gigs, some of those he curated for Serambi Jazz, and others as part of the audience with him.

I write as a life long jazz fan, and have naturally taken an interest in jazz developments in Indonesia since I arrived here 30 years ago. Having written about them for Jakartass and various local print media, I cannot say that Riza was "the greatest musician", but I will say that I liked him as a man, a very approachable, humble and kind one.

I hope that is the impression you'll get from the following pages of reviews, interviews and other material from my archives, in chronological order.

Terry Collins, February 2017

## Riza Arshad R.I.P



**2nd November 1963 - 13th January 2017**

It is with great sadness that we have learned of the passing today of Riza Arshad, keyboardist extraordinaire, at the early age of 53.

Apart from his gifts as a musician, what shone through his life's work was his wide musical interests, and that his *"efforts [were] devoted for the growth of jazz in Indonesia."* He was the curator of Serambi Jazz at Goethe Haus in Jakarta, a bi-monthly gig *"featuring loads of talented musicians that have always dedicated their lives to music."*

Away from simakDialog, Riza recorded a number of albums which demonstrated his willingness to spread his musical wings.

Riza played accordion on Ubiet's *Kroncong Tenggara* ('07), around the same time that he was playing 'subtle fusion' with Trioscapes, with Arie Ayunir, the first drummer in simakDialog and Yance Manusama on bass.

Riza was a link with the early jazz generation - he felt honoured to have played with Bubi Chen - and was a mentor to the next.

There was W/H/A/T with Sandy Winarta, Sri Hanuraga, Riza Arshad and Indrawan Tjhin. *"I think it's natural and normal that we like to work with the young stars. They have high energy, high idealism and are amazing with their instruments."*

Later, in Tuslah with Sri Hanuraga, Elfa Zulham and Adra Karim, he was playing music of outstanding quality. Riza said that he was very happy playing with younger musicians because he felt they energised him.

IndoJazzia offers condolences to Riza's immediate family and his many friends who are immensely saddened by his premature passing.

Jazz is about community, not about individual celebrity status. Mentoring through the generations has been a notable feature of its current dynamism. For example: Jack Lesmana to Indra to Eva Celia; Benny Likumahuwa to Barry and Utha.

Riza Arshad says that he is particularly proud to have played with Bubi Chen. Riza also studied with Jack and Indra Lesmana; and in turn he has mentored pianists Joey Alexander, Sri Hanuraga, among others.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2015/06/indojazzia-is-going-places>

#### **fr. Sri Hanuraga** (14.1.17)

Yesterday I lost one of the most important people in my life. Riza Arshad was a hero, mentor, musical father and most importantly a best friend to me.

We first met in 1997 at the Emerson Lake & Palmer tribute concert; he had an accordion solo feature that night. I had just started playing piano back then and we started talking about music, and he gave me words of wisdom about it. I was hooked: from then on and I kept returning to his place.

It was in 2002 that he changed my life completely. I still remember the CD release concert of Simak Dialog's then new album, *Trance Mission*. A complete new array of sounds that I'd never heard before, a unique style of playing and composition; for me it is still the most successful marriage between Indonesian traditional music and jazz. I listened to this record for a couple of months, trying to figure out each note on the record. I just wanted to sound like him and I fell in love with jazz.

Aside from being such an outstanding musician, he was one of the purest and most sincere peoples I know. He helped open the way for many musicians in his and my generation without really taking any credit for it. You name it ... Pasar Jazz, Serambi jazz, Cafe Au Lait, ITB Jazz Aula Barat...a true unsung hero.

Rest In Peace Mas Ija; without you there would be no me.

Aga

## Interview with Riza Arshad

Apart from Anggun, it's not often that an Indonesian group or artist, let alone a progressive jazz group, has an album released on an international label. This month sees the international launch of simakDialog's fifth album, *Demimasa*, on MoonJune Records based in New York, who also released their fourth album, *Patahan*.

In simakDialog, Riza Arshad has the solid backing of the ubiquitous guitarist Tohpati with Adhithya Pratama on bass guitar. What adds the extra freer dimension to their music is the percussion triumvirate of Endang Ramdan, Erlan Suwardana and new member Emy Tata on Sundanese *kendang* percussion, tambourines, claps, toys and vocals.

Arshad's compositional approach opens up from a jazz-rock palette, but his Fender Rhodes electric piano is clearly influenced by the crisp ring and shimmer of Indonesian gamelan. He pushes his solos to continually higher levels, urging repeated climaxes as each piece steadily amasses intensity.

Arshad might begin in a contemplative mood, but it doesn't take him long to develop an insistent pulse. The percussionists soon enter, clattering out their organic patterns with roundly slapped skins, shakers, bells and handclaps.

Tohpati is also attracted to resonant trebly zones, journeying from acoustic delicacy to a subtly distorted friction. Another added element is the percussionists chanting along to emphasise their dense structures.

The result sounds both natural and fully integrated. This is a particular realm that couldn't be reached either by Western progressive musicians or a traditional gamelan ensemble. SimakDialog involves a unique combination of both spheres, without making the commercially tempting mistake of cultural dilution.

Last October I was invited to the launch of *Demi Masa* at Goethe Haus and later conducted the following interview with Riza via email and through a couple of meetings.

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### **Firstly, how come you played in bare feet at Goethe Institute?**

That is a traditional dress code, I first played barefoot back in 2002 in simakDialog's solo concert at Philharmonik Petronas' concert hall. I do this to try to catch the 'spirit' of the music. I can't imagine what would be my performance if I should dress any other way.

### **How did you become a jazz pianist rather than, say, a classical pianist.**

I started to play at 6: classical music was the 'tool' for my first encounter with the piano. I found it difficult to concentrate as I was quite a rebellious kind of boy. I liked watching fish - this was so distracting.

I quit my course but began to play again at the age of 10, but 'naturally' by copying my early influence of classical music. I created 'original' tunes and began to enjoy the beauty of composing and improvising.

### **How did your early music develop?**

Through my brother, Luke Arsyad, I got a lot of musical knowledge, mainly classical since we shared the same teacher, but also tons of 70's music especially those from art rock/classic rock genre (Yes, Genesis, ELP, Gentle Giant, the Who, Beatles etc.), and some jazz like Corea, Hancock, Davis, but not much.

I took a course of jazz music lessons for two and half years and then my brother asked me to join his art/rock band - Rara Ragadi. I was 15 years old at that time.

Through a friend, we were introduced to the guys in an Indonesian top rock band - God Bless (who have recently reformed), and through them we were introduced to a local record label guy named Slamet, the CEO of Duba Records. We recorded an album in 1978 which was released in 1979. The band only did a few shows as my brother and I started to work with another rock band - Godspell.

My brother moved to the US to pursue his studies and I enrolled in the art department of the Bandung Institute of Technology and joined the jazz community there and played some gigs. In 1983 I met my next jazz piano instructor to continue to study jazz music. After 8 months, I started another class of jazz studies, this time in Jakarta, so I had to travel back and forth between Bandung and Jakarta every week.

### **What was the influence on you of the first generation of Indonesian jazzers such as Jack Lesmana, Bill Saragih and Bubi Chen?**

Huge. I went to their shows quite a lot and had the opportunity to play with them years later. Being able to play and hang with them was such a milestone in my musical career.

I studied with Jack Lesmana and his son Indra and worked as their assistant in their school until it closed in December 1989.

Jack is famous for what he did to introduce jazz rock music in the early 70's in Jakarta. He sort of did what Miles (Davis) had done with jazz in the late 60's, being a huge influence on the later development of jazz and the music industry in this country.

Indra, incidentally, was a remarkable young jazz player, hailed by Leonard Feather, Downbeat magazine and Chick Corea for his amazing talent and he recorded a jazz album with Charlie Haden and Jack deJohnette at the age of 18.

As I became his student then good friends, at one point joining his band Reborn; his playing and ideas never let me down. His spirit inspires almost every jazz musician of my generation and the next and I have adopted his philosophy. Having determined my musical direction I have never taken the opportunity to become a good session player, as Tohpati has done.

### **When did you start recording your own music?**

After a period producing indie artists with my brother, including my first solo album in 1992, I formed my original band Dialogue with long time cohorts - drummer Arie Ayunir and Dewa Budjana.

In December 1992 I changed the personnel of my original band and its name to 'simakDialog' (Listen to the Conversation). With my experience working and producing artists with my brother I started to build sense of my musical identity. Playing in an entirely western mode was no longer a challenge to me, which is why I like to have a specific sound and colour in my music.

Although my brother passed away in 1997, I continue his exploration and dream of making our music widely heard everywhere anywhere in the globe.

### **Which western jazz pianists have influenced you the most?**

Hmm, difficult question, since every great player who I listen to is my number 1 star.

My most influential jazz pianists would be Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Thelonious Monk, Chick Corea, Marc Copeland, John Taylor and Lyle Mays, but my difficulty lies with choosing because I like players who are also composers.

Both aspects have a very important impact in developing my musical path. So, apart from those already named, other musical influences are Chopin, Debussy, Jan Garbarek, Coltrane or Ornette Coleman, Charlie Haden, I Wayan Sadre (trad/contemporary composer), Jack deJohnette, Alan Holdsworth, Bill Frisell, Terje Rypdal, Pat Metheny or any great rock guitarists.

### **Where do see your own musical direction heading?**

My first priority is still with simakDialog. Other than that, taking Serambi

Jazz as an example, my efforts are devoted for the growth of jazz in Indonesia.



**You are the curator of Serambi Jazz at Goethe Haus. How did that come about?**

They often invited me to play at their jazz events, but I couldn't always be available for them. Plus, I didn't think it would be good to feature me all the time. So, I offered them a new concept: a jazz concert every two months featuring loads of talented musicians that have always dedicated their lives to music.

The chairman of Goethe Haus is a big music fan and he agreed right away and asked me to find the musicians

I don't want to dominate the Indonesian jazz scene by holding this event too often. I would love it if Indonesians could have a lot of variation in what they can see. We want to complement other jazz events, such as JakJazz, Java Jazz or the many smaller jazz events held regularly, such as Komunitas Jajan Jazz, KlubJazz', Jazz Break Revival in Bandung, and so on. The more the merrier. We can see the development of Indonesia's jazz community through these many events.

**How do you select the musicians featured at Serambi Jazz?**

I decide based on who they are as musicians. They should be dedicated to Indonesian jazz development, in other words, someone who has decided to live their life as a jazz musician. I have a list of musicians who are very talented, but not yet widely known. Through Serambi Jazz events we hope we can introduce them so they get more appreciation.

**What Indonesian musicians are doing things you find interesting?**

I rarely listen to a particular music or stay focussed on a certain style or player but listen to anything good for my ears and heart.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2009/09/interview-with-riza-arshad/> (2.9.09)

## Riza Arshad on the current jazz scene

Jazz has long been my favourite music genre because I believe that it is one of the few art forms which are an honest reflection of 'soul' and, when improvised, collaborative empathy.

That so much of what currently gets labelled as 'jazz' is formulaic, appealing to the lowest common denominator by catering to commercial trends, is unfortunate. Of course, everyone is entitled to earn an income, but I am often disappointed when talents are seemingly wasted on 'background' muzak.

I asked Riza Arshad, the current 'guy' of Indonesia's jazz scene for his thoughts on this as a contribution to the second edition of *Culture Shock! Jakarta* to be published later this month.

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Jakarta has a number of jazz festivals, the biggest being JavaJazz. There is also JakJazz, and Jazz Goes to Campus which started in 1977; it's the oldest one in Indonesia and the third oldest in the world,

These festivals indulge jazz at its most marketable, so this has inspired other places around Indonesia to follow suit. and although people have started to accept jazz, not only as music but also as a 'lifestyle', this doesn't mean that the city has facilitated any aspect for the musicians.

We still have to strive to present and express our ideas and musical ability just like our colleagues around the world. But unlike jazz musicians who live in the US, Europe, Australia and Japan, musicians here lack good jazz education. We have no more than three 'reliable' institutions which provide decent knowledge of this music.

Programs like Serambi Jazz (*curated by Riza - J*) were created to raise the value of the music performed by dedicated and idealistic jazz musicians. Other small gatherings, in 'Jazz at Café Au Lait' or Indra Lesmana's studio where jazz musicians frequently gather to jam and express their creativity, also help maintain the greater values of this music.

Another movement, world jazz, presents jazz with local/ethnic values. Even though there isn't much in Jakarta, in cities such as Bandung, Solo and Jogja, this is a new trend. Some festivals are related to this.

This demonstrates that jazz lovers around the globe have their own ways of presenting jazz as a very moderate and democratic 21st century cultural product.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2010/08/riza-arshad-on-the-current-jazz-scene/> (5.8.10)

**Note:** Leonardo Pavkovic asked me to edit the following interview for a Russian magazine.

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**Interview with Riza Arshad (19.2.14)**

**Hello Riza! Your art and that of your colleagues has opened the music of Indonesia as a new dimension for jazz and prog-rock fans in post-Soviet countries. How did you come to that style of music?**

That comes from my teenage years when I learned piano and music theory at various private courses. In addition, my mom and elder brother, Iwan 'Luke' Arshad (also a musician), had a big influence on my music direction.

**Who were your favorites at the start of your professional career? I**

listened to bands like Yes, Genesis, ELP, King Crimson and a few others, and I still listen to them. I also listened to jazz-rock music especially those who were in the beginning of jazz rock era like all those came from 'Miles Davis's school' - Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett and some ECM label artists.

**simakDialog was born 20 years ago. Please tell us something about the history of the group and about your partners.**

My old musician friend, drummer Arie Ayunir and I formed sD in 1993. We included bass player Indro Hardjodikoro - who is Tohpati's close friend from when they were in the same band, 'Halmahera'. Having watched one of Tohpati's impressive performances, I gave him a call the next day inviting him to join simakDialog. Tohpati and I are now the only original band members.

**I see from the albums released by MoonJune Records, the personnel of simakDialog is fairly constant. Are you also good friends with your musicians outside the studio and gigs?**

Since we all have our own projects and gigs, we are not in constant communication outside the band. That's why we, especially the percussion section and I, have a weekly base meeting for rehearsal or just to discuss some 'new thing'. While Tohpati and I only occasionally communicate outside the band; it's during the writing and production stages that we have more intense communications.

**Leonardo Pavkovic has told us about the first time he met you. It will be interesting to hear your version of this story.**

I met Leonardo back in the year 2000 when I was working as a sound engineer for a short US tour of an amazing Indonesian prog band called 'Discus'. Despite my main job as a sound engineer, my plan was to introduce my music to any US agent and label. Leonardo helped Discus

to play at the Knitting Factory, NY. I also visited his 'spacey' office in New York when he still used the name 'Noanoa Music'. He's a dedicated, hard working type of person who very often bravely takes chances. This is very important because there are not many people like this in the music industry nowadays

**I have only listened to the simakDialog albums on MoonJune. Can you tell us something about the three earlier albums?**

The first two albums, *Lukisan* ('96) and *Baur* ('99), were based on the 'regular' jazz quartet format (piano/synth, electric bass, electric guitar and drums) and I think with an obvious ECM orientation type of music. After those two, in 2002 we released the third album, *Trance Mission*, to mark a significant transition in our rhythm department. That was the beginning of our use of Sundanese 'kendang' as the main percussion backbone of our music.

**What is the difference between Sundanese kendang and kendangs from other parts of Indonesia?**

The Sunda region is the western part of Java, and its kendang is commonly used in traditional groups across the island. Although not really different to any kendang from other islands such as Bali and Sumatra, what makes this instrument stand out is the way it is played. In Sundanese tradition, the kendang has a big role in the ensemble. There are many variants of traditional rhythmic patterns across Indonesia, but what makes Sundanese different is the propulsive force, the drive you hear in simakDialog's music.

**What is the influence of gamelan on your art as a composer?**

Most of all, it's the way the music is created with its polyrhythms.

**It seems to me, that in *Patahan* your keyboards and Tohpati's guitar were the base of the group's sound, but in *Demi Masa* and *The 6th Story*, your last two albums, only keyboards are on the foreground. Is that right?**

It could be because of the recording process, which is mostly done live in the studio. Since *Trance Mission*, because of his busy schedule Tohpati has been the only guy in the band to do overdubs. Most of the time during the session we flow and every moment is created in real time, which makes us 'subconsciously shorten' his improv part. That's natural.

*Patahan* is a recording of a concert we gave in 2005 in Jakarta, so we could give Tohpati more space.

**Why are there no vocal parts on your latest album, *The 6th Story*?**

We treat the voice as an instrument. Unfortunately we didn't think it was necessary in any composition on the album.

### **Do you prefer studio work or concert tours?**

Basically we love both - the two have different amazing stories. But playing in front of people is like having an intense personal conversation with them - that's beautiful!

### **How was your first USA tour in September 2013 and do you plan more international tours in the near future?**

Definitely great! We'd love to do more and look forward to it. We are planning some tours, possibly to parts of Asia, to the USA and to Brazil.

### **I wish you every success and for more interesting music from you and simakDialog! Thank you for the interview.**

Likewise, thank you very much for the nice warm interview, and all the best to you as well.



### **simakDialog in Concert**

Following up on **an invite** which arrived as a comment in my blog, four of us went to the Goethe Institute to see (and obviously hear) simakDialog (SD) in concert on Friday. 'Er Indoors and I discussed the last gig we'd been to and realised that it must have been over 12 years ago, before Our Kid came along, and he was twelve on Thursday, so it was his first gig.

Anticipating traffic jams, we arrived at 7 for the 8 o'clock start, which wasn't in fact until 8.30. But no matter, having paid for our tickets and bought a copy of the new album, *Demi Masa*, we got some refreshments and grabbed empty chairs at a table occupied by a handsome young couple, and got talking. Three of us had been to the Pat Metheny concert in Jakarta on October 22nd 1995, thirteen years ago.

JH and I commented on the distinct lack of publicity for Metheny, then already a major sell out artist throughout the world, and wondered why the tennis arena at Senayan was only about a quarter full with about 500 in the audience. The young man then told us about a flourishing scene in Indonesia of bands who try to replicate Metheny numbers - note for note? - at gigs. I didn't know that, and if I hadn't been sent the invite, I wouldn't have known about the sD gig we were at.

So we discussed how annoying it is that rather than having had notice in the Jakarta Post of forthcoming gigs, we are only able to read reviews after the event of those we wish we'd been at.

By the way, we asked the young man, what do you do?

*"I write reviews of gigs for the Jakarta Post,"* he told us.

Ho hum, ha ha.

The gig was advertised through an internet forum; in other words, by invite to those in the know. This is further evidence of the slow decline of the established media - and blogs.

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### **"archipelago rhythm and life"**

The Goethe Institute holds about 300 folk and the seats were just about comfortable, but I had to take care to sit behind another tall guy, so Our Kid could have at least a partial view of the stage on which were a baby grand piano, a Fender electric piano, a few monitors and, to our right, three sets of assorted drums and gamelan pans.

The sound quality for the first two or three numbers was adequate for a church hall, but seemed to have been sorted out after half an hour. Either that, or our ears had attuned, because what we were hearing was different; although I rarely wish to pigeonhole my musical tastes, it is usual to trace echoes of familiarity.

And this is my attempt.

Riza Arshad, the leader and composer, played the keyboards, but mainly the Rhodes, as he allowed the others to be at the forefront, particularly guitarist Tohpati. He filled out the overall sound and sometimes sat back and enjoyed the interplay of the others. Apart from when he was soloing, head down totally within himself, his body language was one of relaxed confidence, highlighted by his bare feet.

Tohpati Aryo Hutomo rarely smiled and I'm not sure he even looked at the audience. Unusually for a 'lead' guitarist, he sat throughout. Much of his playing was as a rhythm guitarist adding to the grooves set up by the

percussionists, but when counterpointing I could detect echoes, but not necessarily influences, of Phil Miller (*In Cahoots*), Terje Rypdal, Bill Frisell, and Pat Metheny, his original influence. For me, at times he was sublimely, gorbliney gobsmacking and I want to hear him as leader of his own group.

Adhitya Pratama on bass, stood unsmiling, virtually immobile, and proved an immaculate timekeeper, providing a solid unobtrusive underpinning throughout.

The three crosslegged percussionists with their tabla-like percussion offered a quite thrilling alternative to the more 'traditional' drummer. Endang Ramdan played a large Sundanese *kendang* (bass drum from west Java) as did Erlan Swardana, who also played a smaller *kethuk*.

Dressed in white, they sandwiched Cucu Kurnia who played a *kanrang*, a *kendang* from the Bugis capital, Makassar, *ceng ceng*, which I think was a set of gamelan gongs hit with a muffled hammer. Many of their sequences of grooves were interspersed with rhythmic sequences of hand clapping.

They were totally in sync, even when they interplayed with each other and Tohpati. That much of the music was riffs and grooves allowed a great variation and a less devotional audience might well have whooped and hollered along with them. Strangely but happily, the most effective and charming audience response came from a babe in arms behind us who, as the first piece ended and before the eager clappers let rip, let out a beautiful sigh of 'yeah'.

Dave Lumenta offered 'soundscapes' which I often found intrusive, except on the occasions that he sent waves of wind between the left and right speakers.

Riza opened one number on the acoustic baby grand, and I could then appreciate the comment Leonardo Pavkovic, of MoonJune Records, made when I interviewed him about Indonesian music for *Culture Shock-Jakarta*: *Riza Arshad is an amazing pianist with great touch and ECM sensibility.*

*I have noticed that Indonesian jazz and prog musicians tend to have smooth jazz affinities, maybe they believe it is a safe way to do the music, while I am asking Riza to abandon the safe way of expressing himself and to experiment more.*

And that's what we heard on Friday, a challenging 'west meet southeast' mixture. Riza and his colleagues have not yet produced the classic fusion of Indonesia 'ethnic' music with western instrumentation, but

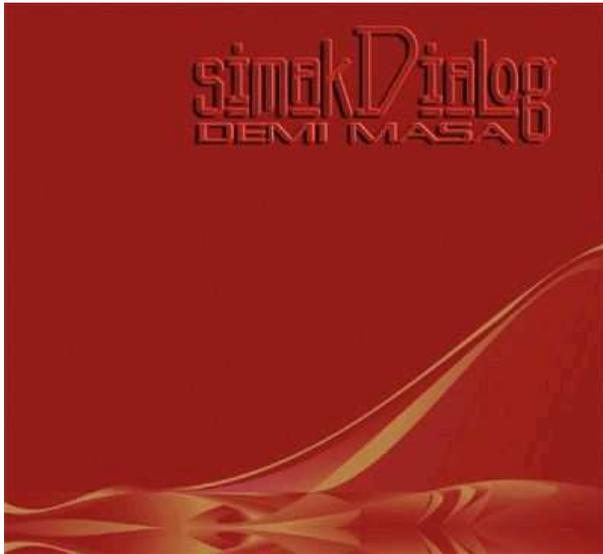
listeners unafraid to explore this path with them will be well rewarded with their latest album.

### **Cavils**

The gig was too long at two and a half hours and there was little need for the Pat Metheny themed pieces to close the show. Furthermore, the hall was so cold from the air-conditioning and we were so stiff from the barely padded seats that we could barely stir ourselves at the end.

And Our Kid wondered why none of the songs had singers.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2008/10/simak-dialog-in-concert/> (19.10.08)



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### **Living Vicariously**

This week there's an evening of keroncong jazz at Salihara, the launch of an album, *Kroncong Tenggara*, with Nyak Ina Raseuki (Ubiet), the Acehnese vocalist and ethnomusicologist.

I asked Riza Arshad about the gestation of *keroncong* jazz, an intriguing concept, yet one that makes a lot of sense.

The small *keroncong* guitar is derived from the Portuguese *braguinha*, sharing its root with the Hawaiian ukulele. Keroncong music is believed to have originated in the 16th century among the communities of freed Portuguese slaves in Batavia.

Keroncong ((pronounced 'kronchong') is now considered old-fashioned

folk music by most Indonesian youth, although efforts have been made since the 1960s to modernise the genre by adding electric guitars, keyboards [including accordions] and drums.

Riza told me that it has taken years to bring it to fruition but he was unsure about recording it. I mention this because I love the immediacy of jazz. Studio productions can be rather antiseptic, sterile – exceptions being those recorded 'live', without loads of multi-tracking and overdubs.

One of my favourite jazz reviewers, John Fordham of the Guardian, argues that it is time to let jazz fans record shows, but I disagree.

I've long thought that the best memories are private. After all, those we supposedly share are subject to our personal perceptions and may well be diametrically different to how others experience them. Being in the moment enhances us, and I really do not understand folk who view everything through a lens.

Where once concert goers would announce their presence by waving aloft cigarette lighters, now they hold up their mobile phones cum digital cameras cum remote controls cum MP3 players cum computers cum whatever is the latest unnecessary fad.

These folk are missing the point of a live gig, the reality of a shared physical experience, and all that means in thought and emotion.

So, if Riza can record the show, I'll be happy. If he cannot, then no matter! I'll have been there.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2010/02/living-vicariously/> (5.2.10)

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## **Jakarta Saw and Sore**

### **Saw**

Last night, Our Kid and I went to Gedung Kesenian (the Jakarta Arts House) for a concert by simakDialog. Having seen them before at their launch of *Demi Masa*, we were keen to hear them again.

Riza Arshad had emailed me to say that they were "*going to play a selection of music from various albums. Our next will expectedly be released in the end of this year or early next.*"

In many ways, the music was familiar, not least because I did have the last two albums and played them before setting out for the evening.

The group was minus Dave Lumenta whose contributions at the Goethe Haus gig had "*offered 'soundscapes' which I often found intrusive.*" But soundscapes there were and sublimely so. Whether they came from the

wizardry of ace guitarist Tohpati or Riza's array of electronic keyboards, or both, I'm not sure. It matters not as the intros to familiar tracks were sublimely atmospheric leading into updated Indonesian traditional music, with its fiendishly intricate stop/start rhythms.

What I love about simakDialog's music is the groove generated by the percussionists, who I presume were Endang Ramdan, Erlan Swardana and Cucu Kurnia - we didn't catch their names - on their array of traditional Indonesian instruments. Emy Tata's set of gamelan gongs hit with a muffled hammer (*ceng ceng*) was described by Riza as "*metal toys*".

Their synchronicity, although sometimes subtle, also enabled a powerful groove which got me imagining a ride on an express train. At times I rollicked along and then found myself gazing out of the window as either Riza riffed and soloed or Tohpati reached for sounds unlike any other guitarist I've heard live or on record.

My overall impression of the music was that the group has enhanced their telepathic intimacy and as part of what Riza described to me afterwards as their ongoing creative process, are continuing to push the boundaries of Indonesian music. They are truly a world-class group.

At two hours, this gig was half an hour shorter than the previous one, and no bad thing for that.

However, and for the sake of balance there should always be a 'however', I do have some caveats.

I would have liked to have heard some acoustic piano added to the mix, whether electronically generated or not. As I type this, I'm listening to *Trance Mission*, their third album from 2002 which I had bought pre-gig from the stall in the lobby. By then, sD had moved way beyond their initial Pat Metheny Group influence and had a recognisable direction, albeit with a pared down sound compared to what was to come.

The audience was sparse, especially for such a gig which was part of a festival to commemorate Jakarta's 483rd 'birthday'. A couple of weeks ago I went to an evening of Balinese gamelan which was much better attended, perhaps because it was organised by Jakarta's Balinese community under the patronage of former President Megawati's younger brother Guruh.

Following the final pre-performance gong last night we heard the instructions to not eat or drink, to take photos and to switch off electronic devices. And then there was an absolute silence in the auditorium for five minutes. No-one even dared cough. It was almost eerie.

## Sore

Then, as soon as the curtains parted and the auditorium lights dimmed, on went the lights of handheld phones. Focussing on the group was difficult as our eyes were inevitably drawn to the panels of white light in front of us. I was so distracted that I mentally rehearsed such lines as "*If you don't switch off your effing phone I'm going to shove it down your expletive-deleted throat.*"

What I did say, in surprisingly fluent Indonesian to the lass immediately in front was that I'd paid good money to see the group and I didn't want to see her phone. She cringed and cowered down in her seat, as did her similarly distracted boyfriend, and their phones stayed switched off.

I hope they enjoyed the show as much as we did.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2010/06/jakarta-saw-and-sore/> (20.6.10)



## simakDialog Gig

*Music melts all the separate parts of our bodies together.*

- Anaïs Nin

We were comfortable with each other, discussing ants and leeches, which we were informed have thirteen brains, and other aspects of life and everything. We'd already eaten and quaffed enough Bintang and red wine at Ya 'Udah, so I told friends that we ought to make sure that we'd arrive reasonably early for the Indonesian launch of simakDialog's sixth album, *The 6th Story*.

I was really looking forward to this as I already heard some of the album last year, albeit still at the production stage, when I spent an evening with group leader Riza Arshad and Leonardo Pavkovic who will release the album internationally in August on his MoonJune Records.

I thought that this being Friday night, the end of the working week, that

the gig at Goethe Haus would be sold out. After all, with the price of admission being just Rp.50,000, which included a copy of the CD, and that the rain storm had passed fairly quickly, making the effort to arrive in sufficient time to grab seats was important.

Nearly five years ago, two of us had been to the launch of simakDialog's last album, *Demi Masa*, and the 301 seater hall was packed.

We'd also all recently been to a gig there featuring the sD leader Riza Arshad, the group's percussion section of Endang Ramdan and Erlan Suwardana playing *kendang* and Cucu Kurnia with his 'metal toys', with German guitarist Kai Brückner and his compatriot Paul Kleber on bass. There had been quite a reasonable attendance for a Thursday evening, so my hopes were high.

It seemed that my foresight was confirmed when we found a full car park and limited space on the road outside. However, sadly, I was wrong: the cars were there for students attending German lessons and, if we'd wished, we could all have sat alone in a row apiece.

Which I did.

Following a short introductory speech, which included as the reasons for the low turnout the usual excuses for not being anywhere in Jakarta - rain and traffic, we settled down to what, in my view, became the best simakDialog gig I've been to.

The majority of the tracks on the last three sD albums released on MoonJune, and indeed the new one, feature Riza mainly playing a Fender Rhodes with but a few snatches of acoustic piano. I hadn't felt, yet had wanted, that sensibility, the transcendental flow and feel which epitomises ECM recordings and concerts.

The first tunes played were *Stepping In* and *Lain Parantina*, the first two tracks on the new CD, and I noticed three key differences from before. Firstly, Riza was playing an acoustic grand piano, with no sign of electric keyboards. The, although he sat almost with his back to us, he wasn't taking a back seat: he was able to observe, conduct almost, the rest of the group.

And he wasn't barefoot; he had eschewed what he told me some time ago was "*a traditional dress code. I do this to try to catch the 'spirit' of the music. I can't imagine what would be my performance if I should dress any other way.*"

"*More confident*" would be my answer. I couldn't say that I heard echoes of his cited early influences, such as Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock and Keith Jarrett. No, his playing was 'his' in that 'solo' passages were

sufficiently strong and fluent to make me wonder what a solo piano album recorded with few takes would be like. He had that sought for transcendental flow, and I marvelled at what I was hearing.

A key word on the sleeve notes of simakDialog's albums is 'soundscapes'. Riza added these, quite subtly, to the intro of the third piece, *One Has To Be*, from both *Baur* ('96) and *Patahan*. Other pieces played from previous albums were *Worth Seeing*, also from *Patahan*, and *All In A Day* from *Trance Mission* (2002), the album in which Riza began to incorporate 'ethno-percussion'.

It was a different Tohpati too. This time round, the ace guitarist, with his own releases on MoonJune, didn't leave me "*sublimely, gorblimey gobsmacking*" as before. He sat still, generally looking down as he focussed on his 'sounds' which were rarely stand alone solos. When he did let rip, I had to wonder just where he'd dragged his inspiration from; there was little trace of his power trio, Bertiga.

This was something else, a demonstration of absolute mastery of his instrument and its effects and a confirmation that, as Leonardo says, he has a "*rightful place among the highest echelon of today's guitar giants.*"

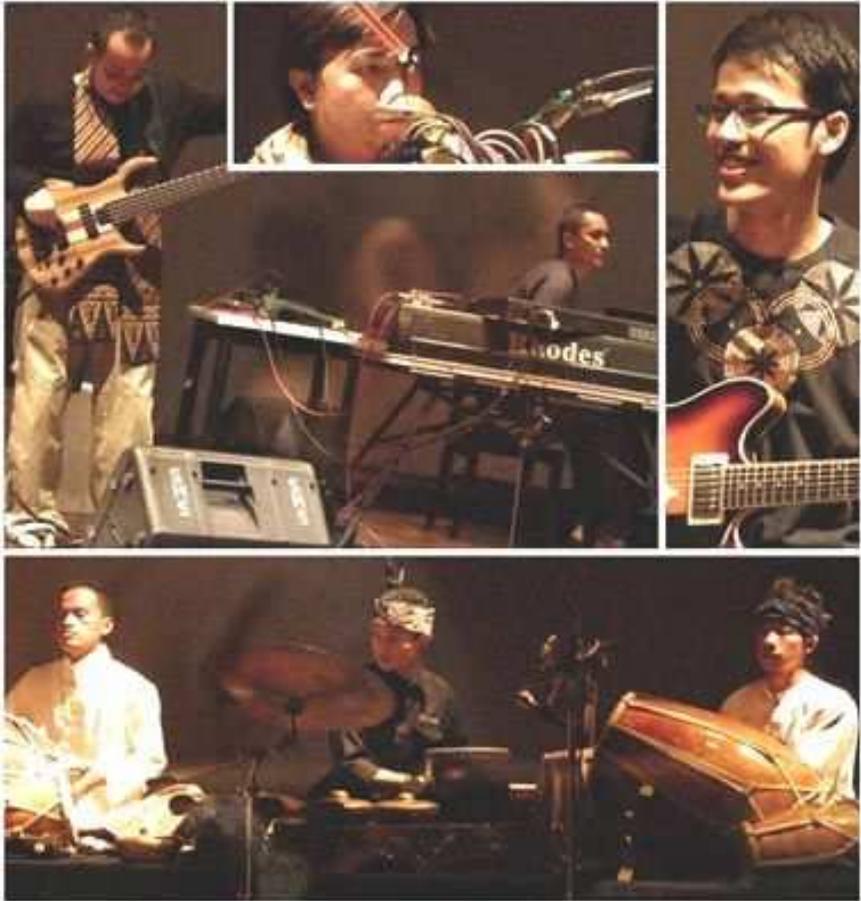
To his right stood, perennial cohort, the bassist Adhitya Pratama, who quietly and virtually immobile underpinned the grooves.

On the other side of them sat the three percussionists, crosslegged on floor mats. Endang Ramdan played on sD's *Patahan* in 2007 and Erlan Suwardana joined for *Demi Masa* (2008). Both play *kendang* drums struck melodically and rhythmically with both hands and a foot. A new recruit is Cucu Kurnia who has 'metal toys', one of which is a cymbal.

When the three 'competed', they were the crowd pleasers. Perhaps because there was such a low audience turnout, the group wasn't out to impress us. It was obvious that this is a group of friends who enjoy each other's company and have fun sharing musical games, the sharing of challenges. The obvious joy the whole group had in being in tune with each other was infectious.

And so this was a night to remember. Catch them if you can.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2013/05/simakdialog-gig-17-5-13/>



### **Tuslah at Java Jazz**

There were several MoonJune groups at Java Jazz. We'd already seen the sets of Dewa Budjana and Tohpati, but we were particularly keen to catch Riza's latest group, Tuslah.

Finding the stage was to prove complicated, so meeting a long-term expat friend was fortunate because he knew that the venue was on the 6th floor of the main building, one of the many stages which didn't feature on the maps!

The security man noted our press passes and let us into the sound check. The first thing I noticed was that the instrumentation was somewhat unique: piano, Hammond organ, a set of drums and synths.

And what we were to hear was to prove not just unique, but also exceptional, or 'innovative' as I was to describe it to Riza afterwards.

But first, Paul Dankmeir, executive director of JavaJazz, presented an award to Riza for his outstanding contribution to the Festival over the past 10 years.



I'd also suggest that it was merited for his wider mentoring and curatorship within the local jazz scene.

And then the gig began as the "one and only" Sri 'Aga' Hanuraga (piano), Adra Karim at the Hammond organ and Elfa Zulham on drums were introduced by Riza.

Adra and Elfa are both members of the Tomorrow People Ensemble, a group deserving of international exposure.

The first number opened with a distorted recording of Soekarno giving his Proclamation speech, which Aga offered a syncopated beat to, later joined by Elfa's drums. The atmosphere was worrying as the story unfolded, and when the Hammond joined it became tempestuous, warlike even.

This was atypical 'ethnic-world jazz', yet it was a distinctly Indonesian tale bringing to my mind the events of May '98 which lead to Suharto's forced abdication.

The second number was more straight-ahead jazz, but as good as any I've heard in many gigs. Riza's synths reminded me of Pat Metheny's full blast guitar wailings.

The third number was *At A Glance* by Sri. My notes don't record whether it was this one which opened with him reading sheet music and playing a nigh on impossible shower of notes thus demonstrating a hand-eye coordination way more attuned than we mere mortals can aspire to.

But it was the fourth number, *Changes* by Adra, which boggled me, and sent us all away from our cameras which we'd been using, anxious for future memories of unfamiliar sounds. Adra's instrument produced sounds which the likes of funk organists such as Jimmy Smith, Jimmy McGriff and Georgie Fame could not have dreamt of. Chatting with Adra later, he told me that he'd been influenced by Balinese gong kebyar.

Thus the ethereal echoing oscillations ... Aga simultaneously playing the keys and strings of his piano, and the faster, louder explosive charge into ... a march ... an express train which carried us along.

Riza told me that he was really happy to have young really talented musicians in his group, and so were we.

I'd somehow missed Tuslah's four previous gigs, but anticipate with eagerness their next. And, for the rest of the jazz world, watch out for their yet-to-be-recorded album.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2014/03/moonjune-at-javajazz-2014/> (28.2.14)



## **Tuslah - Again**

If you've lived in Jakarta for a few years or visited often, you'll understand why things are never quite as they appear.

As far as history will relate, Thursday August 21st 2014 was a very special day in Jakarta. It was the day that the narcissistic Let.Gen.(ret. - forcibly) Prabowo Subianto lost his 'case' in the Constitutional Court alleging systemic electoral fraud which had given Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo the country's presidency by a margin of some eight million votes (c.6%).

Coincidentally, it was exactly 16 years ago that Prabowo was dismissed from the army for "insubordination", which many of us consider a minor offence compared to the allegations of his involvement in human rights abuses in Papua, East Timor and Jakarta in May '98.

For the past two or three weeks, Prabowo and his corrupt crony politicians had demonstrated that they would not go quietly, promising mayhem in the streets by 'disappointed' supporters (who they couldn't control) and further mayhem in Parliament where according to the parliamentary elections held in April the "permanent" Red and White coalition has a majority of seats.

Come the day, and the police, with army backup, mobilised some 27,000 troops, backed up with water cannon and tear gas, cordoned off the area in central Jakarta which houses the Court and many government departments. Facing them were paramilitary thugs, and those of the masses prepared to take to the streets for a packed lunch and a crisp banknote.



All this was carried live on TV and it was natural that there was widespread paranoia throughout the city.

So was the Tuslah gig going to go ahead? After all, Goethe Haus, the venue, is well within the rampaging reach of an ugly mob. I'd arranged to meet up with a few folk. One of them works for an American NGO and with his colleagues was advised to go home early.

'Er Indoors, who spent much of the day watching events unfold, wasn't too keen on letting Our Lad and I make trip up to town, but, hey, I'd already seen Tuslah and I just had to see them again, . Don't worry, luv, I said, we'll go up by train and thereby bypass any mayhem.

We waited for nigh on an hour for our train, and arrived at Ya 'Usual after our Australian friend with American bosses. He'd taken an *ojek* (motorcycle taxi) and got there in record time: the streets were empty ...

in rush hour?!? And so was Ya 'Usual, the emptiest I've seen in it the more than a dozen years that I've been frequenting the place.

We strolled around the corner to Goethe Haus, met a couple more friends, sat in a row of seats and waited beyond the expected start time.

Out came the MC and Riza Arshad and informed the reasonably sized audience that the group hadn't done a soundcheck. When they'd arrived at Goethe Haus, the gates were shut, the regular German classes had been cancelled, and the presumption had been that the gig would be too.

But they'd managed to get their gear on stage, but it looked much like my office, with essential but extraneous bags and stuff not tidied away.

So, Riza suggested to us that they could come back the following week - erm, yes, we thought - or they could play three numbers to get their sound right, and then have a break, and then play some more. That met with our approval.

And so to the first number which I think was called *No Trains*, written by Adra Karim who was playing his Hammond organ with its open back towards us so we could see its innards: wires, valves (?) and pedals.

Riza lead on the synth as a hard bop groove emerged and I tried to submerge myself into the music. First though, I had to castigate the four lasses in front of us who immediately opened their pads and phones in order to let all in the hall and the sundry online know that they were among us.

I accepted a muttered 'sorry' and began to scribble notes as thoughts floated by. In deciphering them now, I realise that I can't say what numbers were played because each number had passages which demanded concentration.

Elfa Zulham on drums was in a world of his own, never flashy, head cocked to his right, eyes shut rarely watching the others yet in total synch with all that was happening elsewhere on the stage.

Sri Hanugara demonstrated once again that he can conjure magic from an acoustic piano, whether its pounding, thumping a beat, placing something (I know not what) on the strings so that the sound of a harpsichord drifted out, or dancing a truly astonishing Sundanese melody or bringing forth the trance-like passage of gamelan, his thin arms proved all powerful.

And Adra Karim being the Hammond proved that there is untapped potential in the instrument. At times he was the absent bass player, at others he wheezed and spluttered, and at no time did he echo any of the many Hammond players who have gone before, be they 'stars' like

Jimmy Smith, or British beat and blues players in the 60s.

Then there was Riza on the synth; his solos were fluid, rising above and through the rhythmic underpinning all. And when he could, he'd watch and obviously enjoy the others playing, because that's where Tuslah are best: in the playground, on the swings, roundabouts and seesaws.

Three keyboards and a set of drums: each player going their own way, four differences, sometimes all at once, then perhaps Aga and Adra bouncing off each other. At times I didn't know who to watch or listen to, and what I'm attempting to describe here shouldn't make sense, but it did. One of my notes says that I want to hear *Minor Importance* by Riza, again but from a different angle.

Tuslah's music as I've attempted to describe it, may sound like organised chaos. Riandy Kurniawan of Jazzuality says that they "*combine the element of classic, jazz, blues, funk and rock which are going to appear through original compositions and new arrangements*"

But perhaps the wife of my Australian friend said it best after the show: "*It's like eating olives: an acquired taste, but great once you've got it.*"

The use of a synth and Hammond organ harks back to the 60's and 70's, yet this is music is obviously of the now, and I dare venture to say that it's of the future. There can be no group which sounds like this.

When the group took their 'pre-agreed' break for a 'soundcheck', the MC bounced back on stage had another conversation with the group. The name Tuslah is derived from two Dutch words, *toetsen* (keys) and *slagwerk* (drums).

Adra commented that otherwise they would have been called the Riza Arshad Quartet.

Well, he may have been the architect of the group, but he's happy to give free rein to his cohorts.

I later asked Adra if they had telepathic communication to combine so completely while retaining their very individual voices.

"*We're really good friends,*" he said.

On that note, I should end, but I still want more. Their first album is being edited, and I really hope that it gets an international release because this is one Indonesian group which has the potential to captivate audiences at festivals the world over. Furthermore, because their internal dynamics deserve to be seen as well as listened to they deserve a live DVD.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2014/08/tuslah-again/> (14.8.14)



Note: the gig was filmed and is on YouTube: 'Tuslah at Serambi'

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### **Tusla @America**

This was to be my third Tuslah set of the year, but @America, where Jakartans get to experience Homeland Security culture for free. Due to the sub-arctic temperature @America I had a bout of flu following the gig by IKYWMC two weeks previously, so I'd packed a sweater brought out from England 25 years ago and not needed to wear since. I had also suggested that the four guys of Tuslah, who'd been at Goethe Haus the night before, should also be prepared. They were to thank me later.

I made a point of not being late. I wasn't; this was the venue at 6.30, the advertised starting time.



I peered around at the "latest technology", first seen three years ago, in order to understand a bit more about American culture.



Then came the introductions, and a mini speech by Mr. Abraham from the US Embassy who informed the by now healthy sized audience that "*Jazz has a history in the role of American diplomacy.*"

While I pondered this, he went on to extol the creativity of Thelonius Monk, "*the pianist who helped instigate bebop, then stood outside it. His compositions were, on the surface, jagged and ungainly. But they also followed their own internal logic: splinters of dissonance turning into tunes that hesitated, then veered off at unexpected angles.*"

I'd been enjoying the selection of Monk's music being played over the internal sound system while waiting, and knew that Tuslah were the ideal interpreters.

**fr. my barely legible notes written in the dark:** twists, turns, shifts, forever surprising, from twiddly to hard funk, cinema organ swells > ambient, all interwoven.

*Ruby My Dear:* Almost classical (Debussy?) intro from Sri H.> underlying menace builds fr. drums & synth

*'Round Midnight:* (arranged by Reza and Aga): delicate piano, shades of Satie. familiar melody emerges from organ, a lovely duet. > into subtle funk > synth melody . piano ... rain gently falls.

A totally original interpretation, really lovely.

*Four In One:* a distracting film of a firework display behind the band. Yet the drive, particularly from Aga lead to loud applause for his solo, then Adra's, and even Elfa's drum solo.

Note: I'm not a fan of drum solos, but by this time the firework display served as a tribute, an integral part of the show.



*Pannonica*: This started with Aga vamping at the piano to the repetition of a few phrases from an interview (Monk?) on the backscreen. A few scenes were repeated, and I particularly liked the one when a cat appeared to jump off the window sill onto Adra's head. This number featured the Italian guitarist Alessandro Florio. Riza sat this one out, and we got 'less' Tuslah, and a 'straighter' take.

My final note scribbled as I listened was that **we need four ears in order to focus on the four voices** of what, in my considered opinion, is currently the best live band in the country.

Having had the mandatory photo taken of the musicians + Mr. Abraham standing behind the @america logo, I trust this is a sign of a few gigs soon Stateside.

Those of us in Indonesia will now have to wait until November 23rd to catch Tuslah at Ngayogjazz 2014.

See you there?

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2014/10/a-tale-of-1-1-gigs/> (20.10.14)

## Tuslah at Ngayogjazz

After Tuslah's gig @America I 'promised' them that I'd be at their next one, at Ngayogjazz on the outskirts of Yogya, a city I hadn't been to for - erm ...time flies - twelve years? That was far too long, and so our family set plans and bookings in motion

Tuslah arrived almost immediately, Sri Hanuraga sporting a new haircut and Riza Arshad with a nose mask below his chin. I asked him if he still felt jetlagged having only a day or so ago arrived back from eight days of well-received simakDialog gigs in the USA. He said that he was ok but tended to "drift off".

Their set was familiar to me, yet different, but not just because the set list had changed. This is a dynamic group; in order to 'get' their music, one has to listen and observe the interplay between the equal partners. They don't play to an audience but for themselves, and that is the essential ingredient of jazz.

It's worth repeating what the wife of my Australian friend said after Tuslah's Jakarta gig in August: "*Tuslah's music is like eating olives: an acquired taste, but great once you've got it.*"

From where we sat at the back of the small 'arena', we observed several folk who didn't 'get it', but as I informed one departing group of western tourists, they were 'captured' on the video recording of the set.

"Oh, that camera?"



The scheduled forty-five minutes were soon up and it was time for an interview with the two 'TV presenters'. This went on for nearly as long - thirty five minutes, but as Ngayogjazz is essentially community-based, one cannot complain. The villagers and we guests now know that Tuslah is a combination of much hard work.

With thirty years in the business, and now celebrating twenty years with simakDialog and a live DVD and CD about to be released internationally on MoonJune, Riza is a senior in Indonesia's jazz scene. Adra, Elfa and Aga have fairly recently completed degrees in jazz at European universities, so they bring a different perspective to Tuslah's music.

Chatting with Sri 'Aga' Hanuraga afterwards, I asked if they'd had time to rehearse, and he said that they'd had a brief run through of the numbers, but seemed to have forgotten some of them. However, there were no such problems once they'd taken the stage.

For me, there was a particular moment of pleasure when I told him of how my father played stride piano - "*Oh, I love stride*", and that a treasured memory is of seeing Errol Garner live nearly - gulp - fifty years ago. "*Wow .... my favourite*", and Aga then 'channelled' a couple of bars of Errol, left hand striding, and right hand tinkling away. Effusive thanks, Aga.

Ngayogjazz's village setting added a pleasant domesticity: the estimated 15,000 attendees behaved respectfully, as good guests should.

fr. <http://jakartass.net/2014/11/ngayogjazz-2014/> (26.11.14)



Riza and TC. 13.7.14

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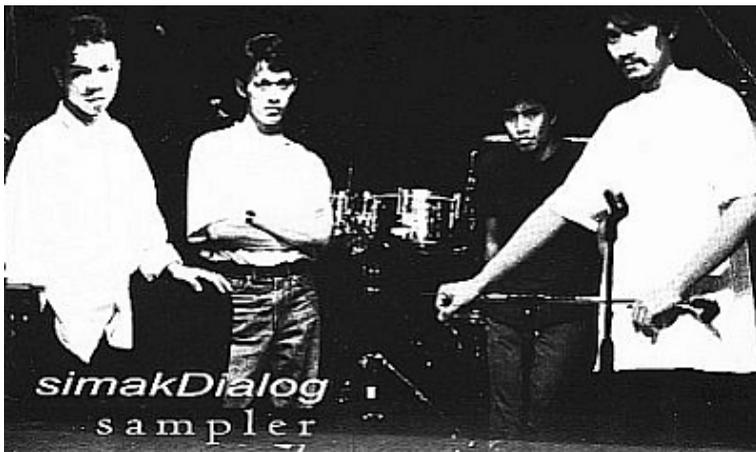
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\* Released by MoonJune Records





**Kota Tua Jazz 6.12.14**

