

Art Fazil: The guy who did his own thing¹

By Stephanie Ho, written on 26 February 2014

Singer-songwriter Art Fazil is often regarded as Singapore's Bob Dylan. Like Dylan, he is known for writing "protest songs" which he sings while playing the acoustic guitar and harmonica.² Art writes in both Malay and English and has written many songs for Malay artistes. His own albums have been critical successes.

Art Fazil had once said that he was "A Rebellious Teenager", and it was from that phrase that he derived his name "Art". It was in his teen years that Art became involved in music. At the age of 12, he learnt to play the guitar from his void deck "brudders" (brothers). His musical influences at the time were rock groups such as Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin and Sweet Charity.³

By 16, Art started writing his own songs – both in Malay and English, something he would continue to do throughout his music career. Fluent in both languages, Art feels that his Malay songs speak to the Malay community while his English songs have a more universal appeal.⁴

In 1986, just after completing his 'A'-levels, Art sent a demo of his songs to Jimmy Wee at WEA records. Although Wee liked his songs, he felt that Art's singing was not up to par. Art refused Wee's proposal to use his songs for other singers and left the office. On his way out, he happened to bump into Ramli Sarip from the group Sweet Charity.⁵

"Ramli Sarip! I had to talk to him and the only thing I could think of was: Would you like to listen to a couple of my songs?" Art recalled of the incident. Ramli eventually decided to record one of Art's songs, *Orang Kota*, and a partnership developed between them. In the early 1990s, Art even went on tour with Ramli Sarip as a guest performer and back-up musician.⁶ Subsequently, Art also wrote Malay songs for other artistes such as Lovehunters and Ella.⁷

Rausyanfikir

In 1991, Art got together with his friends Mohd Khair Mohd Yasin and Esham Jamil to form a group, *Rausyanfikir*. The group's name is a Persian term for "thinker". The group's debut album was released in 1992 to much acclaim. *The Straits Times* described it as "a mine of songwriting talents, intelligent lyrics and strong vocals, packed solid in a debut album".⁸ The album sold more than 25,000 copies in Malaysia and Singapore.⁹

¹ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2011, May 23). 8 questions with Art Fazil. *The Straits Times*.

² Toh, C. (2010, August 5). Top 10 essential Singapore albums. *TODAY (Singapore)*.

³ Lim, S. (1992, February 26). Young at Art. *The Straits Times*.

⁴ Woon, W. J. (1993, May 30). For the sake of Art. *The Straits Times*.

⁵ Lim, S. (1992, February 26). Young at Art. *The Straits Times*.

⁶ Lim, S. (1992, February 26). Young at Art. *The Straits Times*.

⁷ Woon, W. J. (1993, May 30). For the sake of Art. *The Straits Times*.

⁸ Bachtiar, I. (1992, April 10). Rousing Rausyanfikir. *The Straits Times*.

⁹ Anuar Othman. (1993, October 4). Rock trio target album at thinking listeners. *The Straits Times*.

The group's second album *Ruauhan Fikiran* was released in 1994 and aimed to bring across serious messages with catchy tunes. Art said, "We want our listeners to be thinking listeners. Our lyrics are meant to be pondered. We don't intend to change the world, but if the people reacted by making this a better place to live in, we believe we have succeeded in our mission."¹⁰ The album did well, and one of the singles *Dikir Fikir Fikir* won a COMPASS award for best local Malay song.

The group subsequently stopped recording due to the death of Esham Jamil in 1997.¹¹ It was only in 2011 that Art and Mohd Khair re-grouped and released an album – *Revolusion Rausyanfikir* – a compilation of their previous hits with two new tracks.¹²

Going solo

In 1992, Art made his debut as a solo artiste at the Acoustic Vibrations concert held at the Substation. Although a last-minute addition to the line-up, he impressed the audience with his uniquely Singapore songs such as *1964* about the racial riots and *Full Moon over Marina Bay* about the Marina kids and other troubles of youth. Jimmy Wee was in the audience and noting the improvement in his singing, signed up Art as an artiste for Pony Canyon.¹³¹⁴

The next year, Art's self-titled English debut album of 12 original folk-pop songs was released. The songs were mainly acoustic guitar-driven songs reflecting influences from Bob Dylan folk songs and Mat rock ballads.¹⁵ Two of its singles, *Sometimes when I feel blue* and *Everybody Else*, did well on the local radio charts. *Sometimes when I feel blue* went on to win a COMPASS award for best local English song.

Based in London

Despite the relative success of his album, Art packed his bags and decided to go to London in 1995. He said, "London was the hub of music, where all the greatest bands in the world converged. I was young and as an ardent music fan, I naturally wanted to be at the centre of the buzz...Also, I was very keen to explore how much I can achieve as a musician, doing my own music".¹⁶

Although he had few friends in London, Arts soon settled in and made a name playing the acoustic club circuit. He played in clubs such as The Rock Garden, Mean Fiddler, The Troubadour, The World's End and Bungies. In 1997, Art won the Edinburgh Fringe Festival songwriter's competition for his compositions *Monsoon Rain* and *Karma Train*. This was despite being the only non-British among the participants.¹⁷ In 2000, he won a COMPASS scholarship to pursue a Postgraduate diploma in continuing professional development with the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.¹⁸

¹⁰ Anuar Othman. (1993, October 4). Rock trio target album at thinking listeners. *The Straits Times*.

¹¹ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2011, May 23). 8 questions with ... Art Fazil. *The Straits Times*.

¹² Fatimah Rahmat. (2011, November 24). Rausyanfikir is back! *Sungguh.com*. Retrieved from http://sungguh.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=406:rausyanfikir-is-back&Itemid=55

¹³ Lim, S. (1992, January 21). Folk power. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁴ Lim, S. (1992, February 26). Young at Art. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁵ Woon, W. J. (1993, May 30). For the sake of Art. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁶ Tan, K. Y. (2009, August 16). Art to believe. *The New Paper*.

¹⁷ COMPASS. (1997, September). *COMPASS News*, p. 4.

¹⁸ COMPASS. (2000). *COMPASS Annual Report*, p. 22.

Art's second solo album, *Nur*, was also released in 2000. Unlike his debut, *Nur* was a Malay album. Art said, "*Nur* began with a longing to record songs in the Malay language. It is like after being away for some time, one misses a favourite local dish and longs to taste it once again. Such was my feeling prior to making this album". The album was a critical success and in 2001, Art was nominated for six awards at the Anugerah Planet Muzik. He eventually won 3 awards: Best New Male Artiste, Best Local Artiste and Best Local Album.¹⁹

Even though he was based in London, Art made frequent trips back to Singapore to perform in gigs and visit friends and family. In 2004, he staged a concert *kembara seni* – literally translated as "journey through art" – at the Substation.²⁰

While based in London, Art also tried to promote Malay music and culture there by organising the first London Malay festival in 2005. "The festival should be an eye-opener in seeing how Malay roots stretch from countries like the Philippines, Madagascar, South Africa right through to the Polynesian islands," said Art.²¹

Based in Malaysia

In 2009, Art released his second Malay album *Syair Melayu* (Malay Poems) comprising of traditional folk tunes Art had grown up with.²² Of the album, Art said, "After years of playing songs in English, I wanted to re-explore the music of my roots. *Syair Melayu* was my going back to ground zero, these are the songs that taught me how to sing. I learnt to speak when growing up by learning some of them."²³

That year, Art relocated to Malaysia to run his own recording company Moro Records. On the decision to leave London, Art said that he had reached a point where he had enough. He said, "I was playing the same gigs in the same clubs in London. It was getting repetitive, I wanted to try something else".²⁴ Since then Art has continued performing, composing as well as producing music.

Quote

*"All my songs are meaningful to me as they express my thoughts and feelings at that particular moment of my life. But what is more interesting is that the songs, once I released in an album, they become part of someone else's life too. That's the magic of music. That's the reason why I keep writing and playing music."*²⁵

Awards

- 1995 COMPASS award for Best local English Pop Song – *Sometimes when I feel blue*
- 1997 COMPASS award for Best local Malay composition – *Fikir Fikir*
- 2001 *Anugerah Planet Muzik* – Best New Male Artiste, Best Local Artiste and Best Local Album

¹⁹ Jad Mahidin. (2001, January 25). Art focus. *The Malay Mail*.

²⁰ Neo, C. C. (2004, May 27). Art's back for a journey. *The Straits Times*.

²¹ Fawziah Selamat. (2005, September 4). Taste of Malay life in London. *The New Paper*.

²² Tan, K. Y. (2009, August 16). Art to believe. *The New Paper*.

²³ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2011, May 23). 8 questions with ... Art Fazil. *The Straits Times*.

²⁴ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2011, May 23). 8 questions with ... Art Fazil. *The Straits Times*.

²⁵ Emielza. (2011, May 12). Art Fazil: Music is magic and magic is music. *Sungguh.com*. Retrieved from http://sungguh.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=292:art-fazil-music-is-magic-and-magic-is-music&Itemid=55

Albums and singles²⁶

- 1992 *Rausyanfikir* (Pony Canyon)
1993 Art Fazil (Pony Canyon)
1994 *Rausyanfikir Rusuhan Fikiran* (Sakina Productions/BMG)
2000 Nur (Soul Library)
2002 Mercy Relief single 'Song For the World' (Mercy Relief)
2007 *Raya Nusantara*, single for Hari Raya Album (Life Records)
2009 *Syair Melayu* (Nusantara World Music/Life Records)
2011 *Revolusion Rausyanfikir* (CD & DVD) Nusantara World Music / Life Records
2013 Special Collector's Edition CD – Art Fazil

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- Tan, K. Y. (2009, August 16). Art to believe. *The New Paper*.

²⁶ Art Fazil Music. *About*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Art-Fazil-Music/11771070900>

Toh, C. (2010, August 5). Top 10 essential Singapore albums. *TODAY (Singapore)*.

Woon, W. J. (1993, May 30). For the sake of Art. *The Straits Times*.