

GET UP AND DANCE

A closer look at KK Jazz Fest

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The many months of aggressive promotion and a ceaseless string of fringe events leading up to the fourth Kota Kinabalu Jazz Festival (KKJF) have finally come to a close with the culmination of the two-day concert last weekend. Sutera Harbour Resort's covered tennis arena, the designated venue for the extravaganza, saw a crowd of almost 2,000 flowing in over two nights, an impressive feat considering the heavy rain that insisted on harassing festival-goers for at least half of the event.

KKJF has seen plenty of progression over its young existence, having explored a variety of venues to call home over its past editions, from a successful debut attempt held at Jesselton Point to a somewhat underwhelming second year at 1Borneo Hypermall's centre atrium. The massive floor space offered by the resort's tennis arena, paired with ample parking and its ability to mostly protect its inhabitants from the elements, have made it a very reasonable home for the festival for its third and fourth editions. And as the last festival has shown, it also looks great when dressed up with some lights and a bit of appropriate decor.

This year's lineup of performers stands for the festival's strongest representation of Malaysian talent to date. Out of the 10 artistes specifically highlighted as main acts, only two would be considered international: Mood Indigo from the UK and Organamix from Singapore and Thailand. KKJF's organisers have reasoned that the festival has always been about promoting local talent. The committee's Roger Wang shared that the amount of qualified local musicians has skyrocketed in recent years. In short, the organisers had a difficult time finding Sabahan acts to fill up the slots in its earlier years, but the stable of local talents has grown to a point where the supply greatly outweighs the demand.

The performers selected for KKJF 2010 were generally quite deserving, with two young groups, Fingerstyle and Kidz, culled from the Sabah Jazz Talent Search. A number of surprise acts also managed to make their way into the concert, including local singer and songwriter Rene Barrow, Malaysian music veteran Dayang Noraini, recording jazz artiste Atilia Haron, and even a performance from Wang, who also happens to be a talented finger-style guitarist. A pair of performers, however, truly shone this year.

Murmurings of appreciation and respect had already been making the rounds when Penang's Island Jazz Connection was confirmed as part of the lineup, and Wilson Quah's band certainly did not disappoint, offering an incredibly vibrant set of classics and covers that seemed to have left a lasting impression on the audience. The real surprise came out of the Sabah RTM Combo, an immensely talented bunch of youths who entertained with both strong instrumental pieces and a number of very vocally-competent songs.

The festival has seen its fair share of criticism over the years, with many questioning the event's atmosphere. Defying the norms seen in other festivals around the region, KKJF provides plenty of seating, so much, in fact, as to take up almost three quarters of the entire arena space. Atilia Haron expressed it best with an invitation to the crowd that almost rang as something of a plea. "Get up and dance, it's a festival!" she said during her performance on the festival's first night, making a quick and clever observation on the concert's setup. The crowd of 800 watching were seated comfortably and not, in fact, shaking their moneymakers to the tune of her set's admittedly very danceable music.

Some have remarked that Sabahans are still very accustomed to the concept of seated concerts, while others opined that the more cultured nature of jazz implies a more well-behaved setting that encourages quiet appreciation of the music. That's all very well for a concert, but not quite the right atmosphere that one would expect out of a proper festival. There's something so glorious and liberating about being able to mill about the grounds at your own leisure, where the only seating comes from the picnic blankets you've brought along and the dance floor isn't just limited to a restrictive space set right in front of the stage. It's the casual, carefree loitering that truly gives a music festival its character, and it's an aspect of KKJF that we hope its organisers will recognise and assertively work on bringing out in years to come.

The fourth Kota Kinabalu Jazz Festival has definitely been the biggest and most successful thus far, and it's made remarkable leaps in concretising its role as Sabah's biggest annual music event. As the Sabah RTM Combo's Moses de Silva puts it, the festival is the largest platform of its kind for local musicians, and can only bring good things for the community. Given enough time and a willingness to relax the rigidity of designated seating, the event looks to be well on its way to meeting its mates in the national festival circuit and eventually setting standards for future fetes in the state. For more information and updates on the Kota Kinabalu Jazz Festival 2011, bookmark www.kkjazzfest.com.