

## **Tribal music for the masses**

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Let's face it – traditional music isn't the most popular genre with young Malaysians. There are a million other genres they'd listen to these days before they go for traditional stuff.

A group of five young university students, however, are hoping to change that mindset, and help a few tribal villages along the way.

SonarTribal is a project initiated by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) students Aduce Azman, Sufyan Kamarol Zaman, Fandy Julim, Abdul Muhaimin and Hafizi Asmuni, who recently won a RM1,000 grant from the DiGi Startup Weekend competition to help get their social venture started.

The idea is to help give Sarawakian tribal music greater exposure by fusing it with modern sounds, and at the same time encourage rural communities to keep playing their music by providing proper music education, and helping them record and sell their music.

“We decided to fuse contemporary sounds and tribal music because we wanted to make tribal sounds more ‘listenable’ for everybody,” said project leader Aduce, himself a musician from Sarawak.

“At the same time, we want to discover rural talents, educate them, record their sounds, give them exposure online, create some hype by inviting them to play in town, and sell their material.”

It has only been three months since their project took off, but they've already unearthed a tribal music group from a village in Sarawak and are in the middle of helping them record an album.

“We're doing everything for them completely free of charge,” said Sufyan, the chief finance officer of SonarTribal. “Unimas allowed us to use their recording studio, and all the producers and engineers, who are friends of Aduce, offered to help without charging anything.”

The guys hope the album sales will help give the village some extra income, and that the experience of working in the studio will improve the quality of local tribal music.

“(Going into the studio) was a bit of a shock for them, because they had never been in one before. But they were very excited, and it was a good experience for them,” said Sufyan.

Adruce, the youngest member of SonarTribal at 22 added: “We’re increasing the technical and theoretical skills (of local traditional music groups), hence upgrading the quality of our ethnic music.”

It hasn’t been a one-way street, though. The guys, who are all from different states in Malaysia, have also learned a lot from the tribal musicians.

Sufyan is from Negri Sembilan and had only dabbled a little in music before the project started. “It’s not hard to learn if you are really interested. They have their own notation system,” he said.

The guys have posted a few of their own tracks on YouTube and music-sharing site SoundCloud which feature the sape – a traditional Orang Ulu lute instrument – played alongside guitars.

The tracks highlight the exotic, haunting melodic lines produced by the sape, which are complemented beautifully by a background of warm guitar rhythms.

Adruce believes ethnic Sarawakian music can be combined with any modern genres, as long as it “feels right”.

“The most important part of Sarawakian tribal music is that it is expressed in extremes. When you want to apply a happy kind of tune, it sounds extremely happy; but when you want to apply a sad tune, it sounds very depressing and eerie,” he explained.

The guys haven’t faced any objections so far from local tribal musicians for mixing their traditional music with modern sounds, but they have hit an unlikely obstacle – exams.

“We’ve stopped recording for a while because we’re all taking our final exams now. But after this, we plan to go to more kampungs, find more talents, and do more music education programmes,” said Sufyan.

As the SonarTribal guys continue to work on improving the quality of tribal music bringing it to the masses, they also hope that the young people of Malaysia will give it a chance.

Sufyan noted: “Young people should learn to appreciate ethnic music because without it, you wouldn’t have modern music.

“As we were learning Sarawakian tribal music, we noticed so many similar elements in modern music. A lot of the melodies sounded familiar! So the instruments might be different, but music is always the same.”

\* Follow @sonartribal on Twitter for updates and Like their page on Facebook (SonarTribal). You can also check out their music via their Facebook page.

Extracted from rage.