



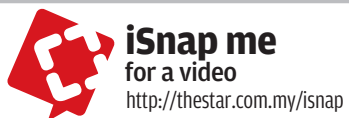
The audience inside the Theatre participating in an *angklung* tutorial led by staff from the Sarawak Cultural Village.



A workshop session in the Theatre demonstrating guitar traditions from Norway to France to Africa.



The Korean hourglass drum being played alongside percussion instruments from all corners of the globe.



Heart of the festival

The workshops at the Rainforest World Music Festival offered unique jam sessions, an educational experience and unexpected enjoyment.

By PEIN LEE

FOR 15 years, the Rainforest World Music Festival in Kuching, Sarawak, has mesmerised audiences from around the world. It has even been listed as one of *Songlines* magazine's top 25 music festivals in the world.

This year's festival was no exception, and being the "anniversary" edition, it was clear that standards have been maintained and the concept solidified. The highlights, no doubt, were the concerts featuring 16 acts from all corners of the globe, spread over three nights. Held last weekend, the festival featured bands from Brazil, Burkina Faso, Congo, South Korea and Mongolia, among others. One of the headlining acts was none other than Malaysian singer Zee Avi, a Sarawakian who is now undertaking a successful music career in the United States.

There is another side to the festival that the insiders and long-time veterans have always been privy to. This side is not often publicised, as attention is almost always centred around the main concerts, and of course, the grand finale. Listen carefully to the crowds during the day, and they are quite often circumnavigating the Sarawak Cultural Village – the site of the festival – in search of the coveted workshops.

These workshops are small intimate sessions held between 2pm and 5pm daily. They are spread over three venues at the festival site, each offering a unique ambience and setting. From the Dewan Lagenda, reminiscent of a kampung multi-purpose hall, to an Iban Longhouse, to a formal auditorium setting in the



Sharing her experience: Malaysia's own Zee Avi telling the story of her musical journey during her workshop session on Day One of the festival. Beside her is her band's musical director, an accomplished sape player and guitarist.

Theatre. Among many world music enthusiasts, the workshops are considered the heart of the festival.

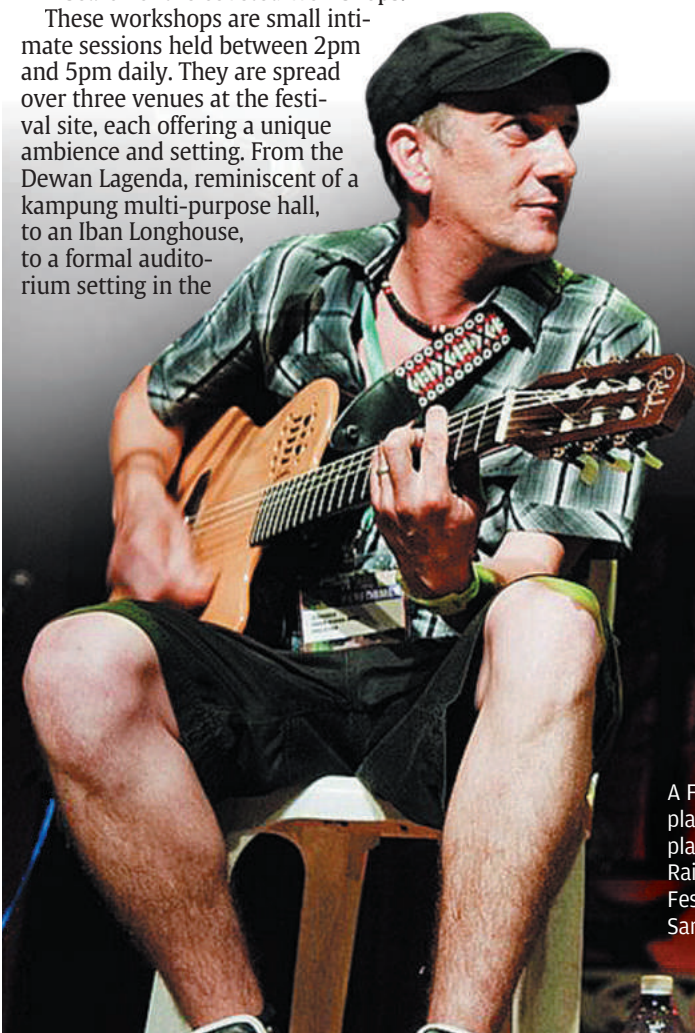
These workshops draw the audience into interacting with the world musicians. Music fans are able to inspect and view the exotic instruments up close; sometimes they are even invited to participate and play with the musicians. At the same time, players are thrown together in unexpected mixes, with Mongolian throat-singing combined with Korean zither playing alongside French gypsy guitar and Malaysian drums. The musicians themselves value these sessions as they are exposed to styles of playing they would never otherwise come across. It can certainly be enthralling when a unique combination yields a jam session of complexity and unexpected musical enjoyment.

They are not mere jam sessions, but truly educational experiences. Musicians take time to explain their instruments and musical traditions. This allows the audience to better appreciate the main event concerts and to expand their musical horizons.

The most popular sessions at the festival seem to be the dance workshops. This year, there were dances ranging from traditional ethnic Sarawakian tribal dances to Congolese performances to the Punjabi bhangra. Audiences stomped their feet, waved their hands and imitated eagles and owls during various workshop sessions. And in the evening, when called upon to raise the energy of the concerts, the audience would competently dance and move along with the acts, in a truly global celebration of music and goodwill.

An unexpected side-effect to these workshops can lead to something truly wondrous that most festival goers would not be privy to. Inspired by their workshop-mates, the various band members would gather around the poolside at the One Hotel Santubong, which has hosted the festival secretariat, members of the media, and the musicians themselves over the last decade or so for the festival.

Each night, impromptu jam sessions take place after the conclusion of the concerts, sometimes lasting into the wee hours of the morning. One musician said it was a good way to use time that would otherwise be dulled by jetlag and boredom, but in reality, these sessions are spontaneous explosions of creativity. The only way to experience these jams would be to book oneself into the same resort (make sure you do this early) and be in the real heart of the festival!



A French gypsy guitarist playing alongside a percussion player from the Congo at the Rainforest World Music Festival 2012. – PEIN LEE/Sarawak Tourism Board

