

The Seventh Penang Island Jazz Festival was spread over four days in early December 2010. It may not yet be “seventh heaven” but it is something of a small miracle that this festival started, survived and has begun to flourish.

By James Lochhead

The miracle of Penang jazz

PENANG'S JAZZ FESTIVAL is a small miracle. I say “small miracle” partly because “jazz” is not the most user-friendly word in the dictionary, let alone Penangites' musical dictionary. Connotations come to mind of small, dingy, smoke-filled rooms, full of not many and probably rather odd people obsessed with a musical genre that no ordinary person could possibly understand. If you can hear anything at all over the insistent trumpet, the weird saxophonist and the cascading runs of the piano, you may catch vague mumblings of “Ellington”, “Miles”, “bop era” and “cool”.

This is a long way from an evening on the lawn of the Bayview Beach Resort with a few thousand people of all ages and backgrounds having a great time listening to jazz! But that is what the Penang Island Jazz Festival (PIJF) has been able to achieve, and more. It would be true to say that the obvious pool of people in Penang who would have automatically gone to a jazz festival in 2004 would have been relatively small, but with considerable perseverance and patience and strategic planning, the organisers have managed to break barriers and create an event that is increasingly valued and supported by both Penangites and visitors to Penang.

Floris Vermeulen of Electric Barbarian.



Left: Participants in the “Community Drum Circle” workshop at Bayview Beach Resort.

Below: Braving the rain on Day One of the festival.

Bottom: Kristoffer Lo of PELbO on the tuba.



Of course it is no coincidence that the inspiration for the PIJF came from a Penangite, indeed an erstwhile musician turned event organiser, whose passion for the music and for the event has been key in the establishment of PIJF and its longer-term sustainability. Paul Augustin, together with his small team, has gone well beyond the call of duty in investing in the festival and believing in it even when advisers were shaking their head and muttering something about stupidity and roads to bankruptcy.

PIJF now attracts top musicians and continues to showcase a fantastic array of jazz for a price that non-Penangites stare at in disbelief. RM60 for an evening of top class music, where you can mingle or sit within touching distance of artistes like Grammy-award nominee Tommy Emmanuel, whose music, one listener related, was so hauntingly beautiful that it made her cry. (Of course many Penangites, being Penangites, continue to moan that this is all too expensive: when will we ever learn to value things properly?) Each year Augustin gets more and more CDs sent to him from people all over the world who want to perform (last year alone he received well over 300). His programming over the past seven years has been interesting – first is a commitment to showcase home-grown talents and musicians, and second is to find a balance between more eclectic jazz and performers who would allow the audience greater accessibility. There may be some purists who would argue that acts like Tommy Emmanuel and Carefree, for example, “aren't really jazz”, but I think that misses the point of what the festival is trying to achieve. “It is about showcasing creativity”, said Augustin. “It is about inspiring local musicians and getting a platform for them”. PIJF is willing to take some chances in its efforts to draw in a newer and ever expanding audience, and, as an offshoot, to be able to raise the profile of Penang regionally and internationally.

The breadth of music that can be claimed as jazz, and the popularity of Penang as a venue for musicians from all parts of the globe, are indicated by the dazzling list of international performers who have graced PIJF, including Jojo Mayer, Randy Bernsen, Denise Minifield, Louis Soliano, Nah Youn Sun, Oli Rockberger, Steve Hackett, John Kaizan Neptune, Tran Manh Tuan and Saharadja. Then there are the top Malaysian musicians such as Andy Petersen, Lewis Prasagam, Greg Lyons, Paul Ponnudurai, John Thomas, Mr Gambus... the list goes on. Ethnic fusion groups such as Bob Aves/Grace Jono Jazz group and Sizhukong have also been featured, and of course top a *capella* groups Stouxsingers (who mesmerised the crowd this year with their extraordinary layering of vocal sounds as well as an exuberant stage act) and Idea of the North.

The main stage programme over two nights is of course only one part of the PIJF. There is an expanding number of events making up the festival, including the Fringe, the wonderful workshops, the big band event, the exhibitions, the displays and the charity dinner. There is also a series of countdown events in the two months leading up to the PIJF, involving different venues and musicians in Penang.





Above: Celso Machado holding a workshop on "Brazilian Guitar and Rhythms" at the Tropical Spice Gardens.

Right: Tommy Emmanuel, guitarist extraordinaire.

All this indicates an important aspect of the PIJF. It does not intend to be a "one-off one-weekend a year" festival where musicians are imported and audiences pay and go away, with nothing to do but wait for next year to happen. Unlike the hugely expensive Penang World Music Festival that arrived out of nowhere and departed in almost the same fashion (but with rumours of a return?), the PIJF is committed to building both musicianship and musical appreciation among Penangites, as well as organising skills including stage management. Through the ongoing work of the Penang Jazz Community (a group of people committed to building jazz musicianship and jazz appreciation in Penang) and others such as Wilson Quah and Prof Razif "Jeep" Mohd at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), a coherent year-round programme is available to Penangites who want to play jazz as well as those who want to listen and learn.

Whether it is through involvement at the "First Sunday of the Month" series of afternoon talks and evening jazz jams at G Hotel, a key promoter of jazz on this island, or visiting Bagan, 32, Hard Rock, G Spot and other venues presenting jazz, or going to Little Penang Street Market to hear both older and newer players, or patronising the Jazz Heritage and Charity Concerts that are fast becoming part of the annual calendar – there is plenty of room to hear, play and have fun with jazz in Penang. Musicians young and old can access these opportunities at a level which suits them: and by building up their confidence, skills and repertoire, can aim, for example, to perform at the Fringe one day (last year four Fringe stages were operating at G Hotel, Park Royal, Hard Rock and the Bayview Beach Resort, and the performances showcased some 200 musicians, the majority of them local).

In terms of the festival, the next graduation is then to the main stage. Here, Penang acts have been consistently showcased, from the nostalgia of the Island Palm Beach Boys to Wilson Quah's Penang Areca Jazz Ensemble, and last year's "first": showcasing the Penang Philharmonic (the re-named PESSOC) playing jazz standards with Ray Rozells and James Boyle to help.



The PIJF is committed to building both musicianship and musical appreciation among Penangites, as well as organising skills including stage management.

This step-laddering for local creativity is a crucial part of PIJF. But another small miracle is how PIJF has become integrally connected to the regional and international jazz circuit. Each year jazz organisers from all over the world attend the festival. This year, London Jazz Festival organiser John Cumming and the hugely influential Indonesian journalist/jazz community networker Agus experienced PIJF, as have JJ of Korea, Peter Lee of Hong Kong, and people like Anatanas Gustys and Kirsi Lajunen from the European jazz organisers' network. This networking undertaken so successfully by the PIJF has not only opened doors for Penang to enjoy a very happy profile as a jazz venue but has helped Penang and Malaysian musicians to be featured at many regional and international jazz festivals. Recently, Penang-based Oceans of Fire with Dasha Logan performed at the huge Jarasum Jazz Festival in Korea. It was at this festival too that the influence of PIJF also secured the only "outsider" booth for Penang Global Tourism (PGT), an amazing gift, and one which gave PGT the unique opportunity to profile Penang and its attractions (not least its musical heritage) to some 150,000 people.

Augustin and others are very conscious that Penang does indeed have a rich and important musical heritage, which is why he enlisted the Penang State Museum to showcase an exhibition on "Penang's Popular Music of the 1940s and 1950s." Plans to develop this documentation are advanced to ensure that this heritage becomes visible and an inspiration to present and future generations. Of course this history is very much part of the backdrop to the existence of the festival.

Those involved in the PIJF and other jazz activities are committed to the "whole deal". There is the commitment to Penang, to helping present a local, regional and international profile of Penang that is creative, inspiring and attractive to investors and tourists alike. There is the commitment to building skills on many different levels, part of the development of a creative culture that may well hold the key to Penang's economic sustainability. This year a photography competition – Jazz in Penang – was added to the mix, inspired by world renowned jazz photographer William Ellis's 2009 attendance and workshop.

It is clear that Augustin is in it for the long-term, and this offers a security to supporters and sponsors alike, including Mercedes Benz, Oris, Red FM, IJM Land, Ambank, Starbucks, Roland, Heineken, JS Music, LBS Music World, and Guitar Store, as well as a number of embassies, and hotel venues like G Hotel, Hard Rock, Park Royal, and the main venue, Bayview Beach Resort.



There are certainly many lessons for other festivals to learn and imitate, not least in planning a long-term strategy which highlights how creativity in Penang will benefit and be built. It is also positive to see how the Penang's state government is at last beginning to get more involved through PGT, although there is still plenty of scope for further support and promotion.

James Lochhead has been involved in many different aspects of Penang life, political, cultural, social and otherwise, for the last 30 years.



Above: A capella group Stouxiingers show off their vocal skills.

Below: Monica Akihary of Boi Akih dazzles the crowd as she sings in Haruku.