



SATURDAY SNAP

THE WEEKEND SHOW



The **WEEKEND SHOW** with Ivan Lim

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Welcome once again to the Weekend Show. This week, my guest is percussionist Albert Louis, who was once a team-mate of Dollah Kassim and a band-mate of Anita Sarawak

# YOU'LL NEVER DRUM ALONE



Pictures: CIUA PUAY HOE

It is a pleasant surprise for me when I get a call from an old friend who has been following our adventures on the Weekend Show.

Albert Louis (left), formerly of the band Culture Vulture, is on the line.

"Ivan, do you remember me?"

Of course I do. Culture Vulture, drums, congas, bongos, Zhang Hwei-Mei, fusion music...

Yes, Albert, I remember you. How are you?

"Ivan, I'm a Liverpool fan. Now that's new."

"I also played football when I was younger, with people like Dollah Kassim, Samad Allaitchay ..."

Wow. My childhood heroes. In the many times I've met him, he'd never spoken a word about football.

What are you up to these days, musically?

"I'm working with Pertapis, the welfare organisation. I'm also a drum facilitator working with mental patients at the Institute of Mental Health and I do work for the Singapore Association for Mental Health."

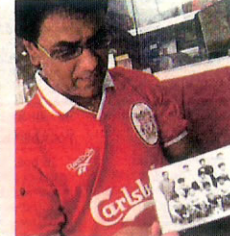
You mean you supply drums to these people?

"No, I have a programme called Drumming for Health which is part of the therapy for autistic children and mental patients."

Now that's interesting. Meet me at my place, I can teach you some percussion, maybe we can have a jamming session and I'll tell you more about it."

Albert Louis was playing at the club Fabrices, which was where Bar None used to be, when I met him a long time ago. His was a brand of Western music played on oriental instruments. Think Hotel California sung with tabla, sitar and bongos.

While it was a novelty that was criticised as a gimmicky con/fusion job when Albert started it years ago, a recognisable variant today



**BACKBEAT:** (Left) Albert tries to show me how to drum. (Above) Albert with photos of the Burnley United team with Dollah Kassim as team-mate.



**TAMBOURINE MAN:** Ronaldinho (above) can play percussion too. We're not sure if he's as good as Albert.

appears a lot in the art form broadly termed "world music".

But to his credit, Albert had been honest enough to describe himself as a culture then.

No sooner did I stumble into his flat through the ornate door when he sat me in front of a djembe, which is an African drum.

"Do this," he instructs me, tapping lightly on the drum. I follow in as steady a

rhythm as I can muster while his hands begin to fly across the drumhead in an enthralling, almost-hypnotic pattern. He controls the tempo, culminating in an exhilarating beat, then going into a diminuendo — a

calming, voiceless cadence.

"That's good," he declares.

"I've got no rhythm, really."

"You're okay," he insists.

"Now tell me, How did it start?"

"The music or the football?"

The music.

"You know, in a kampung, there's always someone strumming the guitar and the rest would gather round.

At that time the bongo was a popular thing. Our family was very poor then, so I fashioned my own bongo out of two tin cans and played it

until my hands became blistered.

"My dad saw the damage and got me a real one, and I've played percussion since."

"From there I joined a band in school and our band came in first in a contest organised by Nestle."

This was in primary school?

"No, secondary. St Joseph's Institution."

A very good school, indeed.

Yes. Later, I was in a local band called the October Cherries for a very short time. I learned a lot from the members who were professional musicians.

"In the 1980s, I was in Anita Sarawak's band and I toured with her in Europe and wherever she went. I was also in Zhang Hwei-Mei's (Ah-Mei) band for a few years in the late 1990s."

What made you stop?

"People come to watch the star, and you're really just part of the back-up to the star. It wasn't my scene. Eventually, it felt like I job, so I gave that up."

But you had a band didn't you? Culture Vulture?

"Yes, but we disbanded when our singer wanted to start a family."

And what is this Drumming for Health

programme that you're doing now?

"I use drums as a means of therapy. Drumming helps extend the attention span of autistic children. It also helps mental patients focus and de-stress."

How did this new gig of yours come about?

"I was working with Pertapis, the Muslim welfare organisation, playing in their homes for the elderly and orphans, and there I met a woman who was a drum facilitator and I underwent a course with her to make use of drums for therapy."

You used what you learnt then to...

"From the course and with my own knowledge of percussion, I read up more on the subject and developed my own method."

"Drumming is fun, therapeutic and a form of exercise."

Exercise?

"Yes. Your hands have to move, your body starts moving, your legs start tapping, that physical activity becomes exercise. You are not very aware of the movement but your body is working."

Tell me a bit about the patients you work with.

"I call them trainees. There is a misconception

about mental patients which I hope to do my part to correct. Mental patients are normal people like you and me, but with an illness. It's just that for them, the medication is more expensive."

I run a course for them at Pelangi Village, which is the centre for the Singapore Association of Mental Health. Drumming helps these trainees to focus and build up their self-esteem."

Give me an instance of how this therapy has worked.

"I was with this autistic child who wouldn't come near the drums at first. After a while, he came nearer, started playing with it and opened up. I could see a character change almost immediately. The administrator, who was observing, said he had never seen this happening with that child before."

This happens a lot with the people I work with. You can see their characters changing as they open up and respond to the beat of the drums."

Speaking of change, I suspect I know something hasn't — your loyalty to Liverpool.

"Of course! I became a Liverpool fan in 1974. They were the winning

team then, and of course I followed them because of that. But eventually I got hooked and have followed them until now.

"Back then, I would buy Shoot magazine to follow what was happening, and if you're lucky, you get to watch the European Cup Final live once a year."

Now there's The New Paper, ESPN...

What do you think of the current team?

"I think they're getting better, and eventually they'll get it right. Not this season but things are looking up."

They don't have the billions that Chelsea have, but they're okay. And Chelsea, they'll have different problems. Right now everyone is happy, but for how long? Let's see when they cope. But seriously, there are good things coming."

Like (tonight's) match against Chelsea, perhaps?

"Yes!"

Do you think Liverpool will do well tonight?

"Chelsea have a very strong midfield. Liverpool must watch Duff and Robben, but even then I don't think Chelsea will win it. I think the best they'll manage is a draw."

My heart will tell you that Liverpool will win, but my head says it will be a draw. And there will be goals, definitely."

You tell me you played soccer competitively, with the likes of Dollah Kassim, Samad ...

"I played with Dollah and Samad in Burnley United. We won the Singapore Youth Championships then. Mohamed Noh and Kim Song, were in the second team at that time."

Why didn't you play for the national team?

"I had to quit when I was 21 because I needed my foot to play the base drum. My family was very poor then."

Tell me about the

playing standards of your team-mates. Was it a surprise to you that they made it to the national team?

"I wasn't surprised at all because they were all really good. The footballing standard now is getting better but for a long time they could never match the standards of the players in the 1970s."

Dollah, S Rajagopal...their technique was there, they were so sound. Their control was so good. Now you see the boys ballooning the ball so often, I'm not sure whether it's because of the way they make the ball or the way they train."

What was the secret of Dollah and company? What made them so good?

"They enjoyed being with the ball. Take Dollah, for instance. I saw him playing with the ball in his house. And that's after playing something like six days a week, in the mornings and after school."

"We really loved being with the ball. If you have a club, you have club training. If not we put two pairs of shoes to make goalposts and fancy. Nobody talked about play boots, no-one bothered about hairstyles. We had no distractions."

The current Singapore team are improving. But with better technology, more qualified coaches, I don't know why they are not doing as well as in the 70s. I suspect it is because of distractions."

Perhaps you should put them through your drumming programme to help them focus.

"Ha ha. You'll get soccer players now coming up in their cars and bikes to training, talking about that nice new exhaust pipe, that extractor ... in my time, nobody came in cars. We took a bus to training and it was to get to the ball."

"We never talked about how good the bus ride was!"