Harmony all the way

Singer-composer Yunalis Zarai a.k.a. Yuna is leading the way for our artistes to create their success stories in the United States, writes Dennis Chua

MENTION a successful Malaysian artiste based in the United States and Yunalis Zarai a.k.a. Yuna comes to mind.

One of the most iconic independent musicians to emerge in local entertainment over the last decade, the 27-year-old graduate from Subang Jaya, Selangor is easily recognisable by her colourful tudung, radiant smile and sweet demeanour.

She most recently serenaded Americans at the 2014 Coachella Valley Music And Arts Festival in Indio, California, and has, since last year, been under the Verve Music Group of multiple Grammy-winning producer David Foster.

Her heartfelt songs, all of which she writes and composes, give listeners the same kind of vibe they get when appreciating the music of folk rock icons Joni Mitchell and Alanis Morissette, both of whom she cites as her influences.

Once a YouTube sensation, she began her career in 2006 performing at popular venues such as No Black Tie in Kuala Lumpur and Laundry Bar in The Curve, Petaling Jaya. One of her early exposures to international music festivals was at the Sunburst Music Festival in 2008.

The Universiti Teknologi Mara graduate, who owns a boutique I Am Jet Fuel in her hometown, writes songs based on life experiences. She played the piano until Grade Six and later learnt the guitar from her parents.

In 2006, Yuna released her debut English song Deeper Conversation, which led to heavy radio airplay and launched her singing career. She quickly followed up with another hit that same year, Dan Sebenarnya, and continued to amaze music listeners with her trademark husky vocals.

"I want to explore a variety of music styles," says Yuna who also cites Lenka, Bjork, Feist and Coldplay as her influences.

At the 2009 Voice Independent Music Awards, she took home Best Pop Vocals. A year later, she won Popular Female Artiste in Anugerah Bintang Popular Berita Harian 2009 and subsequently performed at The Actors Studio, Kuala Lumpur in Malam Nada Biru with fellow US-based singer and songwriter Najwa Mahiaddin.

Mainstream music recognition came in Anugerah Juara Lagu 2009 where she emerged first runner-up with Dan Sebenarnya. Yuna continued her meteoric rise in 2010 when she dominated the Shout! Awards on 8TV — she took home the Ultimate Shout! Award, Pop Star Award and Best New Act.

SPREADING HER WINGS INTERNATIONALLY

The owner of Yuna Room Records currently makes Los Angeles her second home, as it was her childhood dream to spread her music internationally. In 2011, she released the album Decorate and signed with the US-based Fader Label in New York, her ticket to breaking into the international market.

In the 18th Anugerah Indusi Muzik, she took home the Anugerah Kembara award for promoting Malaysian music internationally, and Best Vocal Performance (Female).

"I think I'm still a kid in the music industry, and from the bottom of my heart, I thank my loved ones, friends, fans and collaborators for making it happen," says the singer who was given the honour to perform at the prestigious Dewan Filharmonik Petronas on Sept 13, 2011.

Following her second album Terukir Di Bintang in 2012, she recorded the single Come As You Are with American hip-hop/R&B artiste Pharell Williams, and appeared on CBS' This Morning Show in New York hosted by Anthony Mason.

Other American talk shows Yuna appeared in were the Conan O'Brien Show and The Tonight Show With Jay Leno in 2013. On her experience working with American producers, she says: "People in the US are really professional and focused, they will keep hunting for what they specifically want from you and will not settle for anything less."

Her song Shine Your Way (which she performed with Owl City's Adam Young) was featured in the animated film The Croods by DreamWorks and was performed by contestants of American Idol that year.

Her latest album Nocturnal was released late last year in the US, with 11 new songs that blend soul, R&B, folk, electronic and traditional Malaysian sounds.

She advises aspiring musicians: "Be brave and passionate about your craft and always believe in the Malaysia Boleh spirit. The power of positive thinking is the force that lifts you higher and motivates you to achieve your dreams. Perseverance and passion always prevail."

MAKING WAVES ABROAD

Other YouTube sensations are singer-songwriters Zee Avi and Najwa Mahiaddin, who are both making a name for themselves in the US.

Sarawak-based Zee Avi, 28, known for her guitar and ukulele-playing skills, was born Izyan Alirahman. Currently signed under Brushfire Records in the US (partly owned by singer-songwriter Jack Johnson) which released her self-titled debut album in 2009, she performed her single Bitter Heart for on popular American talk show Last Call With Carson Daly.

Swell Window and Concrete Wall, two of her songs from her second album Ghostbird (2011), were fea-
featured on the hit US TV show *Gossip Girl*. She has opened for Jack Johnson’s concert and took part in renowned festivals including Lilith Fair in Ohio, New Jersey and Massachusetts and SXSW in Austin, Texas.

For Najwa, 27, the year marks a new beginning to her career after the release of her mini album *Aurora* last month. Currently based in New York, she recently released her single *Seri Mersing* which she produced under her label *Nada Biru Muzik*.

The Berklee College Of Music graduate made a name in 2011 with her debut album *Innocent Soul*, which spawned hits such as *Got to Go* and *How Long Must I Wait*.

Najwa now performs regularly in New York lounge circuits, with her recent gig taking place at Ella Lounge.