

Rendra explores the dark terrains of human emotions in his new single, *Faceless*.

By CHESTER CHIN
entertainment@thestar.com.my

RENDRA Zawawi is incredibly ballsy when it comes to his music. At a time when the airwaves are dominated by electro-house sonics and cantering dance beats, the local singer-songwriter decides to reinvent himself by diving deeper into the aphotic depths of indie music.

In his latest single *Faceless*, the musician explores the contours and confines of life while adding a sumptuous orchestral twist. The reinvention here does not seem very pragmatic in nature. Most people would deem his new musical direction risky, but for the musician, it's really about breaking conventions and keeping things fresh.

"I guess I've always been a daredevil in certain ways. I love breaking the norms, even when the odds are against me. I am a fan of big epic sounds. The fatter and the meatier, the better! So yes, what you hear is basically me being the current me.

"Plus, there's just something about string instruments that express mellowness and sadness. For me, manipulating those emotions in my arrangements gives a personal satisfaction," says the 27-year-old singer.

With double-edged lyrics and a melancholic undercurrent, *Faceless* is gloomy at best. In other words, it's not the usual breezy offering that is paraded on the radio.

"The song contains bits and pieces of what I've gone through in life. It just happens that I drew a lot of 'dark undercurrent' creativity from that phase of my life. People often ask me why I'm such a happy-go-lucky guy while my songs are all intense and dramatic. I suppose I take all that out of my songs.

Breaking the norms



"My inspirations come from things that I go through in life, be they primary experiences or a secondary ones. Sometimes, it can come from an obscure event. Like when I see something random, I'd relate that metaphorically to something personal in my life, or my surroundings," says the Kuala Lumpur-based musician.

Indeed, Rendra's muses come from a myriad of experiences. From the gentle rustling of leaves to being overtaken by a national car on the highway, his music is disguised behind, for lack of better words, sombre poetry.

However, Rendra decides to explore the dark terrains of human emotions in *Faceless*. In the track, he sings about distrust and hypocrites, depressing subjects for someone with an otherwise comfortable background.

For the uninitiated, Rendra is the son of prolific veteran singer-songwriter Dr Wan Zawawi.

"Initially it was difficult and confusing. I tried avoiding questions or anything that would lead to people finding out because I didn't want any attention or unintentional favours from people in the scene.

"I just wanted to prove my own worth without the help of my dad," Rendra shares.

And the emo rocker did just that - strike out on his own.

Since breaking into the music scene, Rendra has performed solo gigs in various events like KL Sing Song 2008 and Rock The World 2010 in Kuala Lumpur.



'I am a fan of big epic sounds. The fatter and the meatier, the better!' says Rendra Zawawi.

His international performances include a mini music tour in Kyoto and Osaka, Japan, and as the opening act for singer M. Nasir at Ireland's prestigious Ambassador Theatre in Dublin.

A true performing artiste, he enjoys the raw unedited sound and random bloopers that come with live performances.

"For me, the joy of playing live comes from the appreciation and acknowledgement of the crowd, which every artiste out there would agree is priceless," he shares.

Not one to rest on his laurels, the singer is currently pursuing a dual major course in contemporary writ-

ing, and production and songwriting at the renowned Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts.

"When I first started in the music scene, I was a total theory newbie. It was really hard for me to convey ideas to my jamming peers. At one point, I even told my drummer to play a certain passage as if he was being chased by a group of zombies along Petaling Street!

"Now that I have taken the leap to study and pursue music full time, I can finally express my true self," he says.

He may be abroad at the moment, but the musician is still very much in touch with the music

scene back home. He's even adopting a polyanna's perspective.

"I believe our music scene is growing. There's more appreciation towards the local scene these days, and that alone provides a healthy platform for young talents to showcase themselves, especially in the indie scene.

"You see a lot more local indie artists and bands crossing to the mainstream, and that indicates that listeners are now more flexible in their preferences," he offers.

That said, he would like to see the industry provide more platforms for younger generations to express themselves musically, and a centralisation of music education to further inculcate the growth of new talents.

"I would like music to continue bringing all of us together regardless of our differences and backgrounds. This was shown by a very close friend of mine, the late Alda Evan Tan, who for the love of his music, has helped shaped the local indie music scene.

"He has shown me that music is a love shared by all, one that brings people together for a common cause," the singer shares.

Tan, who played bass for artistes and bands such as Joe Flizzow and Car Crash Hearts, passed away last month following complications from pneumonia.

Ever an idealist, Rendra hopes that the local music scene will make waves in the international arena.

"Ultimately, I would love to see our music scene grow into something that would attract international interests, to have them sit astounded and say, 'These Malaysians are amazing!'"

■ Head over to Rendra Zawawi's website (rendrazawawi.com/#music/) to listen to his music.

By PIYA SINHA-ROY

FOR years, movie stars have looked for challenging roles in low-budget dramas made outside Hollywood's studios. But in recent months, they have taken their acts to edgy music videos from independent bands to explore their dark sides.

Last month, *Transformers* actor Shia LaBeouf caused a stir by appearing nude in a music video for Icelandic folk band Sigur Ros. In the same week, *Harry Potter* actor Daniel Radcliffe played a drunkard in a Slow Club video, and in March, *Prince Of Persia* star Jake Gyllenhaal turned homicidal for The Shoes.

Well-known actors appearing in music videos goes back to the early days of MTV with Vincent Price in Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, but that was when music videos attracted millions to television. Now, YouTube and other video websites are capturing the eyeballs, offering creative outlets for stars and building reputations for cutting-edge bands.

"Short of doing a feature film, this is a way (for actors) to work with directors, and perhaps make an impression on them for a lengthier professional collaboration," Keith Caulfield, *Billboard* magazine's associate director of charts, said.

For LaBeouf and Sigur Ros, the collaboration came about through director Alma Har'el, one of 12

Edgy A-listers in indie videos



Shia LaBeouf in a scene from the Sigur Ros's *Fjögur Planó* music video.

filmmakers selected by the band to create videos for tracks off its album *Valtari*.

The video shows LaBeouf, 26, in a dysfunctional relationship with a woman and includes violence, drug use and nudity. It has amassed more than two million views since its June 18 release.

Actor Radcliffe also made headlines playing a tormented drunk for British indie band Slow Club's music video *The Beginners*, a topic that may have deeper meaning for the actor, who in February revealed

his own struggles with alcohol to British magazine *Heat*.

Slow Club singer Rebecca Taylor said the actor worked closely with the video's director, and she called his performance "arresting".

"We were all anxious to make it a good video, a good performance and something that enhances the song. We didn't want having somebody as high profile as Daniel to just be the concept," Taylor said.

Both Radcliffe and LaBeouf were unavailable for comment, but Gyllenhaal did reply in an e-mail

about his involvement in the video for *Time To Dance* from French indie band The Shoes. "I did the video because it exists alone, by itself. Like a question mark at the end of a sentence," Gyllenhaal wrote.

In the video, directed by British filmmaker Daniel Wolfe, Gyllenhaal, 31, plays a homicidal fencer who stabs and beats people to death. The Shoes dreamed up the concept with Wolfe, who then called in Gyllenhaal.

"We needed a great actor to do it as we didn't want (gratuitous) violence in our video. We wanted this as a piece of art and not a buzz video," said band member Guillaume Briere.

Briere said that for Gyllenhaal, the video was a "really different experience from what he is doing normally" and a chance for him to show people "how good he is" as an actor.

In the past, celebrity cameo appearances in videos were mainly reserved for established music artists who could rope in high-profile actors and directors for big-budget videos that, in turn, were expected to boost album sales.

Eddie Murphy played a pharaoh in Michael Jackson's *Remember The Time*, Christopher Walken danced in Fatboy Slim's *Weapon Of Choice*, and *Clueless* actress Alicia Silverstone became a household name after starring in three Aerosmith videos.

But even on MTV, the format is no longer as relevant as it once was, and YouTube and other websites are offering artists a vast platform to reach fans, leading to a resurgence of music videos online from the likes of Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber.

"Videos could be arguably more influential now because anyone can see them at any time, but the problem is getting that video in front of someone who wouldn't have normally watched it," said Caulfield.

While harnessing Hollywood star power is one proven way for indie bands to get videos seen, the collaborations don't always translate to high record sales over long periods of time.

The Shoes' *Time To Dance* has sold 2,000 downloads in the United States since its release in March, according to Nielsen SoundScan, but roughly one-half of those came in the week the video was released.

For Slow Club, working with Radcliffe has boosted the reach of the *Beginners* video, amassing more than 347,000 views since June 19, but the band isn't banking on it for long-term success.

"It's been great to reach more people. It always is. But it's not like we sat around drinking Moet and feeling like we've 'made it' now," said Taylor. "We are pretty laid back about where we are and where we reach." - Reuters