THE KIDS ARE UNITED (STILL)

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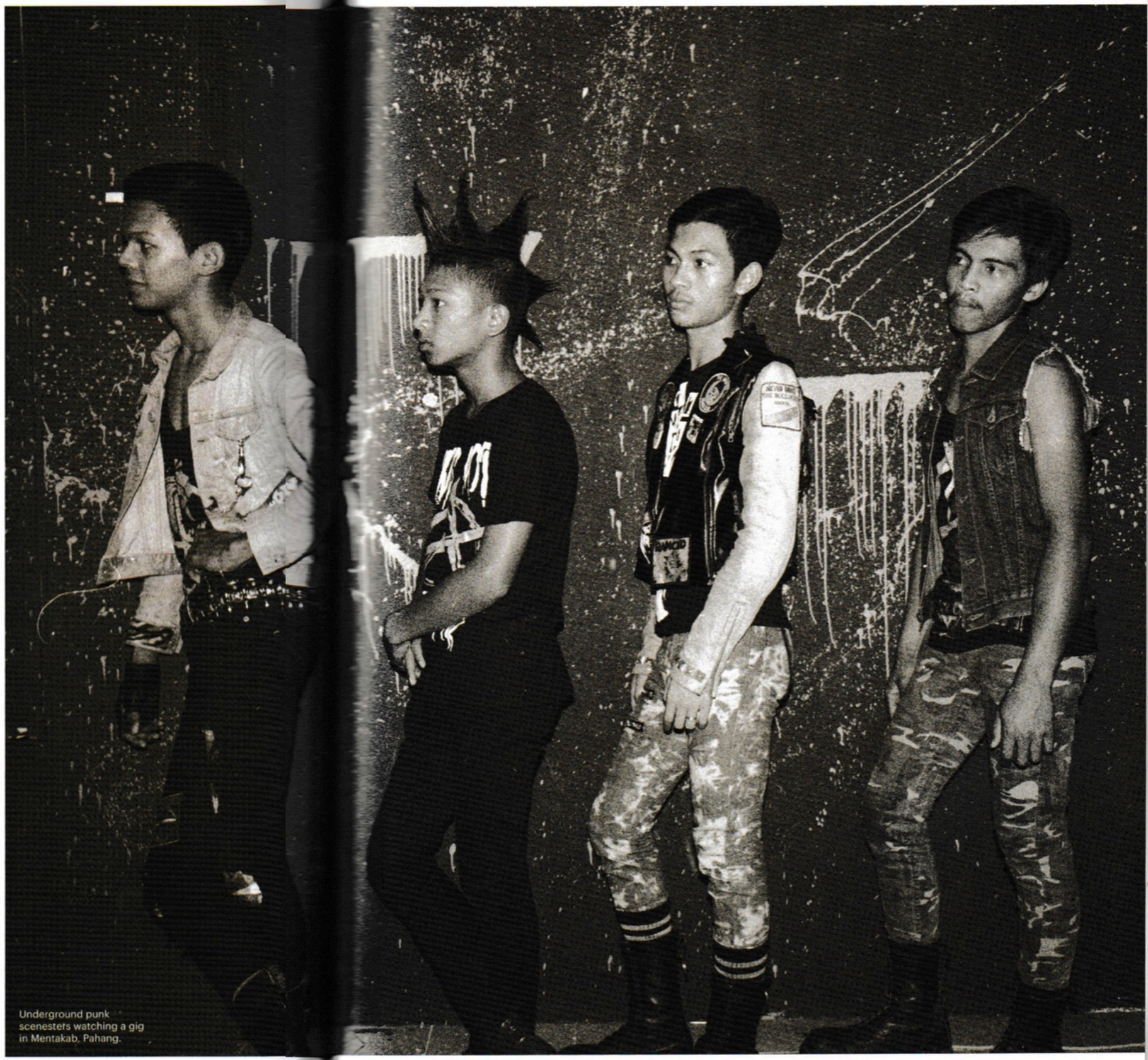
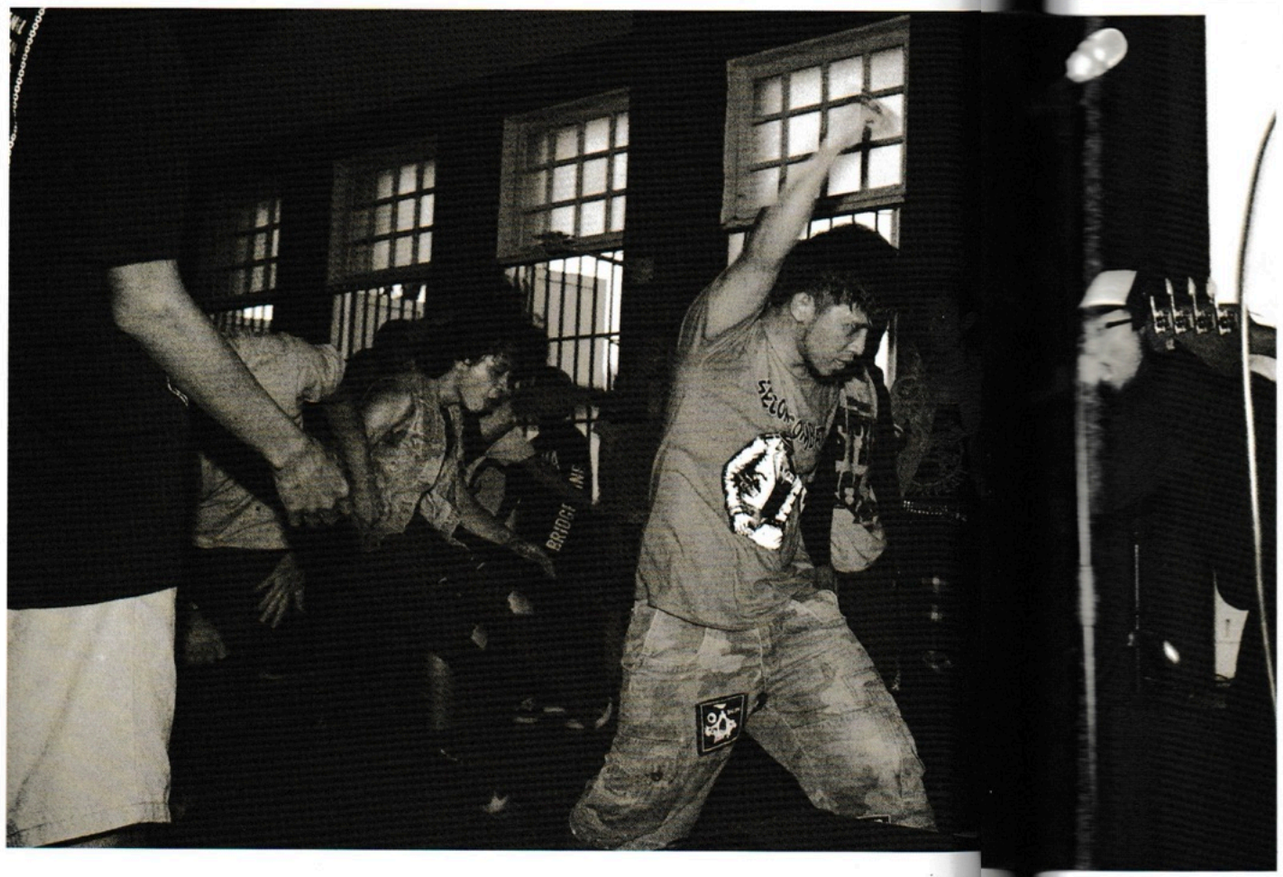
Most punks in the local underground music scene understand the drill. Form a band. Dress the part. Play loud music in a genre appreciated only by a niche audience. Tour the country playing small studio gigs. Get noticed for the wrong reasons. Get raided by the police on suspicion of drugs and alcohol. They might even accuse you of subversive or anti-religious activity, just to set an example. Acting on an isolated incident of alleged Quran-burning and animal sacrifice, the National Fatwa Council issued an edict in 2006 against "black metal culture", essentially a blanket denunciation of the underground punk scene. Still, the kids play on. Even in smaller East Coast towns across the country—where scrutiny of a Western-influenced lifestyle amongst predominantly Malay youth would surely be greater—the scene continues to thrive and there are more gigs than ever. What drives the punk movement there?



Underground punk scenesters watching a gig in Mentakab, Pahang.

A singer shares his microphone with a few gig-goers.



Yon, lead singer of Mediomad getting the crowd at Elephant Army Studio pumped up with an energetic performance.

YON WANTS TO OFFER AN APOLOGY.

We're in Mentakab, Pahang, for *Patin Ganas Vol. 1*, the name of the underground music gig we both drove for several hours to attend one Saturday evening in late September. Me, from Kuala Lumpur as a spectator; Yon and his skacore band from Kuantan, Mediomad, which was going to be one of the acts. *"Saya nak minta maaf atas insiden baru-baru ini,"* (I want to apologise for the recent incidents.) He's referring to the so-called red-shirt rally. *"Bagi saya, malulah. Kita kat Kuantan, sangat against benda macam itulah."* (It's embarrassing. In Kuantan, we're against things like that.) I understood the intention, but the gesture didn't seem necessary, as he wasn't personally responsible for the actions of others.

But the evening was far from being about making apologies. The gig attracted close to 100 scenesters—mostly local Mentakab kids—with quite a few dressed in ways that would make mothers cringe: spiked-up hair, studded belts, black eyeliner and vests with skull patches; and, in spite of our perennially hot and humid climate, some turned up in army boots and long-sleeved, army-inspired puffed jackets. Loud music blaring through the closed windows of the studio caused heads to turn in the passing cars, a few quite clearly unnerved by the strangely-clad youth in their quiet small, quiet town, where the only other thing going on that night was a large *pasar malam* a few streets away. "Regular people will always judge us from appearances. Most will view us negatively," Yon muses. Mediomad's band members themselves, however, were dressed simply (t-shirt and jeans; *tudung* for the girls.) *"Sebab kita nampak sangat. Kami lagi suka tonjolkan. This is our real self."* (Because we don't hide it. We want to show who we are.)

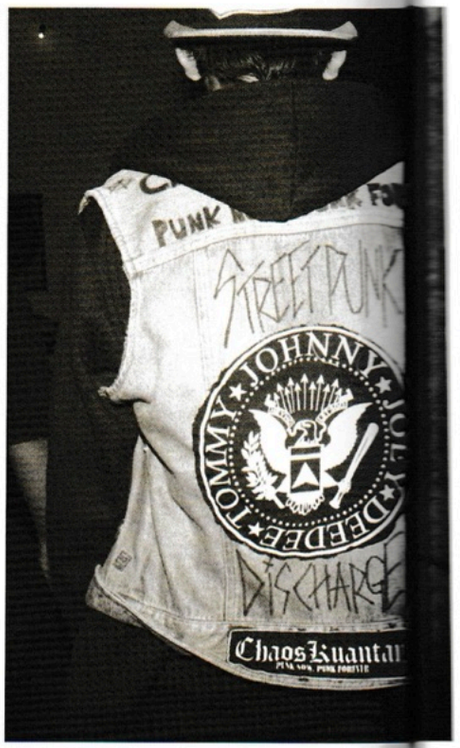
Tonjolkan. The implication seemed to be that being unabashed about showing you're different meant you were asking for trouble. I confirm this by asking gig-goers. "Hardcore music is seen as criminal," says Din, a 25-year-old technician who is Mentakab-born but lives in KL. There was a period in the late '90s to mid 2000s when they couldn't even do a show without getting raided by the police and thrown into lockup. Being well educated and coming from a middle-class background hasn't done much to curb negative stereotypes—they've become so widespread that everyone believes them now. But fashion and music, Din asserts, is not a crime. "I'm not involved in criminal acts and I don't bother anyone. And for those of us who have been subjected to this [discrimination], we say to those people—go f**k yourself."

Interestingly enough, no one brought up religion until I did, and the response was unequivocal no matter whom I asked: a passion for underground music should have no connection to the strength of one's religious faith. In fact, I was hanging out with a subset of the underground scene—straight-edged scenesters who not only believed that gigs should have zero tolerance for racism, sexism, violence and, for

good measure, fascism, but should also be free from drugs and alcohol. When the organisers of *Patin Ganas Vol. 1* called a break during the show, it was to observe evening prayers. The underlying cause of the underground scene's publicity woes then, didn't appear to be an overzealous religious edict, but the eternal clash between new and old, local culture versus global culture—in this case, a more traditional population loyal to P Ramlee, *dangdut* and Siti Nurhaliza, failing, or perhaps refusing to understand the appeal of robust melodies and ethos of the Sex Pistols, Operation Ivy and Fugazi, to a legion of younger scenesters. Unless we become a closed-door, North Korean-like regimented society, modern global culture is invariably picked up and interwoven into our local societal fabric. Even back in the late '70s, when the Western punk scene began creeping onto our shores.

Without Youtube or peer-to-peer sharing, scenesters of the earlier decades got their influences from listening to the radio DJ John Peel on the BBC World Service or from friends who brought cassette tapes and magazines back after spending time abroad in places like London—dubbing and photocopying were the dissemination methods of the day. By the late '80's, a variety of genres were available, and different cliques were formed around genres: skinheads hung out with skinheads and punk rockers with punk rockers. Grindcore, industrial and trashmetal? There were audiences for those too, giving rise to a new underground punk scene that was reacting against mainstream Malay rock bands—the likes of Wings, Search, XPDC and their peers. Bands began to be more savvy in creating fanzines, setting gig dates and recording demos, most of which had "really bad quality, because we recorded them on cassette decks," said Francis Wolf, a punk rock scenester whose band Spunky Funggy had a distribution deal with EMI in the '90s and was the first local underground band to go on an independent tour outside Malaysia. "It was a different time then," Wolf recalls when we arranged to chat over coffee in Petaling Jaya. Wolf is in his early forties, sports a toned-down punk haircut and yes, he is Malay by ethnicity but won't use his real name because he's "already incriminated his family enough." Back then, Wolf remembers it was much smaller, with shows held mainly in KL and Ipoh. "Every year, there were just about two main shows. Each show would only have 8-12 acts and you were competing with 40-50 other bands from all over the country for a spot." So, proving yourself as a band with credo was how you landed gigs. You'd visit the studios of other bands and jam there, where other bands would see you play. If you were good, they might even have wanted to know who you were. Once you'd played at enough studio gigs, it was time to record a demo. Mail it off to an influential 'zine and hope for a good review. Then, you'd get your show. Now, Wolf notes that shows are a dime a dozen, but fewer people attend each gig. "The scene now feels more fragmented."

Yet, the ubiquity of gigs indicates a high level of passion and demand amongst the active scenesters. Youtube, Bandcamp, Soundcloud, Facebook and Twitter make it easy for bands to be discovered by new audiences. Cheaper methods of producing merchandise and EPs with better sound quality enable bands to be autonomous, keeping in line with the do-it-yourself principles of the underground scene. Part of the punk scene's allure is that it's empowering, but a lot of people, according to Wolf, misunderstand the spirit as much as they misunderstand the fashion and the music. They think, "We are too hard line". Wolf belongs to the generation that believes strongly that their music stands with punk ethics, and performing just "for the music" isn't always enough. "No, no," Wolf says. "If it's just for the music, then play alone *lah*!" There's a reason why the underground scene has guidelines—to empower those without a voice. No racism. No fascism. No sexism. Transsexual bands that would never be accepted in the mainstream. Wolf also points out the girl bands. Guys in the mainstream might look at them and only think about getting laid, but a girl band in the underground scene—they'd want to know what your music is about. And the bands that write racist lyrics. "If your lyrics go against my principles, why would my band wanna play with your band?"

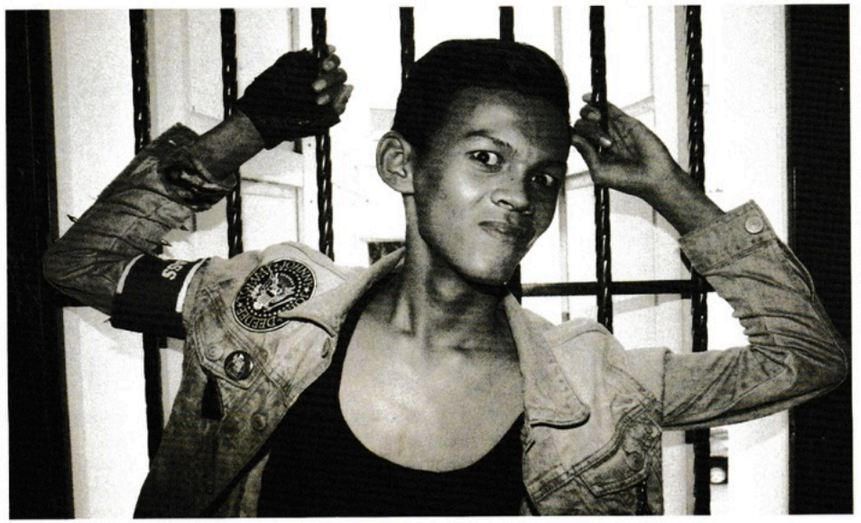


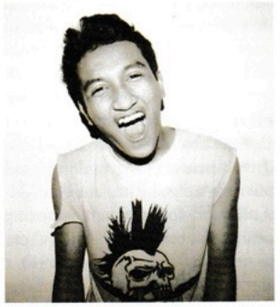
EVEN IN SMALLER EAST COAST TOWNS ACROSS THE COUNTRY—WHERE SCRUTINY OF A WESTERN-INFLUENCED LIFESTYLE AMONGST PREDOMINANTLY MALAY YOUTH WOULD SURELY BE GREATER—THE SCENE CONTINUES TO THRIVE AND THERE ARE MORE GIGS THAN EVER.

Clockwise
Punk fashion: denim vests with band patches and logos; Mediomad band members at home in Kuantan with Mahaini A Hanifah, from L-R: Musmayadi Abdul Rahman, Mohd Norhakim Masod (Akim), Zulhaimi, Mariam Masod (Mayam), and Mohd Norshafiq Masod (Yon); village neighbourhoods around Kuantan.

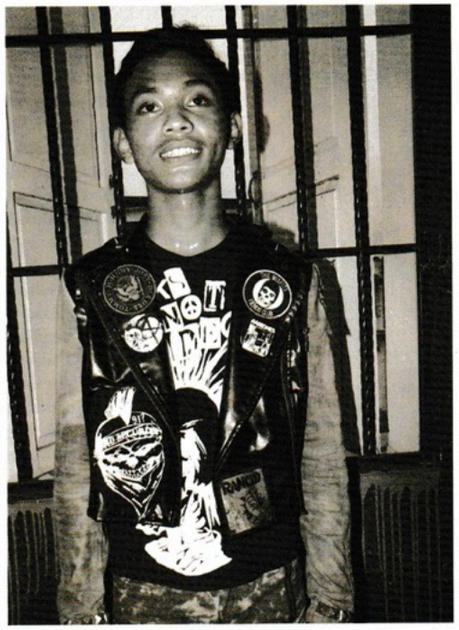
I had been mulling over Yon's apology when I first met him in Mentakab, but now understood why he felt compelled to issue one. I went to visit him at home in Kuantan to meet with his mother the weekend after *Patin Ganas*. Yon had described her as the strict parent who went from opposing his involvement in punk, to becoming Mediomad's biggest supporter. Yon, now 30, had become drawn to the underground subculture when he was 14, where he met others who were keen to discuss issues, ideas and politics. Involvement in the underground scene has clearly been worth all the time and energy he has invested, despite opposition from his mother. His father did not seem to have strong objections, but "my mother was a real extremist back then," laughs Yon. Her stance towards his interest in the underground scene was at first an unwavering rejection. To her, this music was clearly a negative influence. "When I brought a guitar home, she'd break it." She also hated his spiked punk hair and late nights out. Yon's mother considers herself religious, but not pious. It wasn't that she thought of the music as anti-Islam, but her son was neglecting school in favour of playing gigs with his punk friends. Could he be doing drugs? She couldn't have been sure. She would have done anything to make him stop, but he just kept going.

It took Kelantanese-born Mahaini A Hanifah, a 59-year-old lecturer at a nursing school in Kuantan a good six or seven years to finally accept her son's interest in alternative music. Yon readily admits that in his teenage years, he was naïve about his desire to be part of a counter-culture movement without fully understanding *what* he was trying to counter, but it informed his persistence in encouraging his mother understand that he and his friends weren't aimless youth—he wasn't just persuading her to accept skacore music, he was also trying to help her

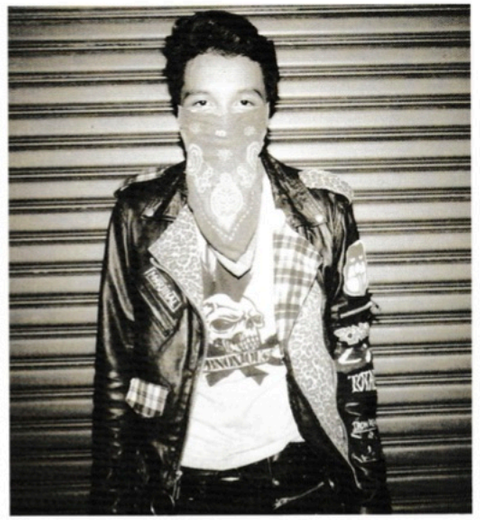




BY THE LATE '80S, A VARIETY OF GENRES WERE AVAILABLE, AND DIFFERENT CLIQUES WERE FORMED AROUND GENRES: SKINHEADS HUNG OUT WITH SKINHEADS AND PUNK ROCKERS WITH PUNK ROCKERS. GRINDCORE, INDUSTRIAL AND TRASHMETAL? THERE WERE AUDIENCES FOR THOSE TOO.



Portraits of underground scenesters at Elephant Army Studio in Mentakab and at Darksky Lounge in Kuantan.



understand underground philosophy. The first time she relented and came to a show was in 2008, five years after Mediomad was formed. A few hundred people attended, and that performance was a turning point for Mahaini. "I think he's fated to do it," says Mahaini. "He had no formal musical knowledge, but I saw how passionate he was about it. So I said, why not support them?" Yon's younger brother, 25-year-old Akim, plays lead guitar and when their 22-year-old sister Mayam, completed her studies, Mahaini told her that she could join the band if she wanted.

Sitting with the family at their one-storey corner home in Taman Kepadang Makmur, a housing development surrounded by zinc-roofed *kampung* houses and homestays, we share an early dinner of spaghetti bolognese with the family, including the band's bassist, Didi and drummer, Apek. The band is hosting a gig that night at Darksky Lounge, the name of the rented studio space that they maintain to hold gigs and practice their own material. When asked about his mother's involvement with the band, Yon acknowledges that he's happy to have her approval after years of trying, but teases her for being "kepoh" and wanting to be involved in every gig, including those that took them overseas to Indonesia and Singapore. Mahaini laughs cheerfully in response. In terms of small-town, East Coast mothers who actively support their children's underground music endeavours, Mahaini is probably one of the rare few. Yon's sister Mayam points out that Mahaini's involvement has benefitted the band. She acts like a manager, helping to book shows, making hotel arrangements for visiting foreign bands and acting as a backup in case of police raids. "The police tend to get suspicious of large gatherings. It feels more secure that she knows what we're up to. She can back us up," says Mayam.

Meeting her now, it's hard to believe that Mahaini was ever against the underground scene. Her outrage is genuine as Mayam tells me about the time when they were raided by the police at their old studio premises. Just like in the recent raids at Rumah Api in KL, authorities assumed the worst. "The police brought their Black Maria and hauled

THERE'S A REASON WHY THE UNDERGROUND SCENE HAS GUIDELINES—TO EMPOWER THOSE WITHOUT A VOICE: NO RACISM; NO FASCISM; NO SEXISM.

Clockwise
Mahaini A Hanifah cooks an early meal for her children, Yon, Akim and Mayam before they leave for the evening to host a studio gig at Darksky Lounge; Zulhaimi (Apek) is Mediomad's drummer; Mahaini serves spaghetti for dinner; Yon explains how he pretended not to listen to his mother during the early days of playing skacore music; Mayam hangs out in the kitchen with one of her cats.

everyone off to get urine tests. Guess what? Everyone passed, which shocked the police, who thought we were doing drugs. My brother negotiated to have the police send us all home, after the inconvenience we endured." Relatives have questioned why Mahaini lets them "do this music", and she simply tells them it's their passion; their hobby. "To say that it's anything but a hobby is difficult," says Yon. "It's definitely not a business—we have our day jobs and not many people would listen to heavy underground music. But for those who enjoy our music, it's an honour to perform for them. I've been involved in the scene for 16 years, and who knows where this will go? Maybe when skacore becomes popular, then I'll stop playing."

As he says this, I'm transported back to the weekend in Mentakab, watching Mediomad strut their stuff to a fervent audience. Up until now, the guys have been moving to an underground sequence; arms flailing upwards, legs in a skiing motion—less pogo and more whirling dervish. When Mediomad begins their set, a group of scenesters link arms in a line and step forward till they are face-to-face with the band. Yon scream-sings into his mic, sharing the spotlight with the linked-armed gig-goers. Two ceiling fans are spinning at top speed, but it's not enough to quell the damp, sweaty stench from the predominantly male audience in the studio. The three girls present just stand by with arms folded and backs against the wall; there's a fourth one sitting in the corner, her year-old baby boy miraculously not crying as he clings to her.

Then there's us; me, awkwardly standing in front of the refrigerator full of mineral water and grape juice boxes, and the freelance photographer, who is English, taking shots of gig-goers. The two of us stand out like sore thumbs in this crowd, but no one's really paying us any attention—they're just jamming to the music. And it's all right.