

MUSIC INTERVIEW

THE AZ GUIDE TO A DIY EUROPEAN TOUR

You aren't considered a true blue indie musician until you have released albums with handmade cover art personally glued on one by one, and gone on a 29-day tour across Europe all planned out on your own, and at your own expense. Improvised acoustic fingerstyle guitarist Az Samad has been there and back, and this month, he shares with us his recent trip to Europe, and how he puts the Indie 'I' in D-I-Y.

— Celeste Goh

TAKE YOUR TIME TO PLAN.

There are no "tour packages" when it comes to something like this. We did consider using a booking agent, but we decided to do it ourselves and see how far we could go with it. We took a year to come up with our itinerary. We started out by listing down all the musician friends in Europe we have met over years at workshops and shows. There were a lot of emails back and forth, as well as some calls overseas via Skype. It's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, or reading a mystery novel; you're never quite sure what's going to happen because there are all these blank spaces to fill in. The most important thing is to have an anchor gig, and you then plan your other gigs around it. Mine was this annual Residential Acoustic Guitar Workshop organised by a friend of mine, Thomas Leeb, over at Turracher

Höhe in Austria. This one-week boot camp workshop has been going on for nine years, and Leeb and I have always toyed with the idea of me coming over and teaching the students. This year, there are two sessions, and the first sold out immediately with up to 45 people in one class.

GET PLENTY OF HELP FROM FRIENDS.

I think it makes a big difference when you have someone local, someone who has lived there all their lives, helping you do bookings for the gigs, and getting people to come see the shows. Not unlike how we ourselves would help our foreign friends when they come over, and we would book shows for them at No Black Tie and Six Strings. Our friend and fellow musician Richard Moss from Blackburn booked us a couple of shows and even a recording session

at a studio, whereas our friend from Ireland Mickey Murphy even managed to get our shows listed in the local newspapers, and one guy even showed up to cover the gig!

WORK HARD AND SAVE UP.

It took us one year to plan and save up for this self-funded tour. After deciding that I am doing this tour, I started teaching more students, practically every day of the week. Besides staying with friends throughout the journey has offset the cost, we also managed to get an incredible deal from Malaysian Airlines when we booked our flights ahead of time. We probably only spent about RM1,300 one way!

BE PREPARED.

I believe that before you go on tour, you should at least have something to show for the audience you are about to play



for and meet. At least have an album or EP released, have your website up and going, and visible links to your YouTube videos and demos. If not, you won't get the full value of going on tour. Before you ship yourself off to tour Europe, you have to have the prerequisites. You have to be seen good at what you're doing, and not just hiding in your room. You have to have a plan. You have to already be good in your craft, because if you're not, those people far away have no reason to book you to go all the way there.

TRY NOT TO FALL SICK DURING THE TOUR.

For reasons unbeknownst to me, I hurt the muscles around my knee a few weeks before going on tour, and unfortunately, it was aggravated aboard some of my flights. At Amsterdam, I was in pain! We had to go around looking for painkillers and ice packs, and the B&B guys were even kind enough to loan me a brace for my knee (laughs). Besides that, I fell sick when we were in Brighton, during the earlier days of the tour. We had a meal in Lewes, and I got food poisoning! Initially, we wanted to catch a comedy show that night, and we had plans to check out the famous Brighton Marine Palace and Pier, which was just down the road. Alas, that entire day was burnt, because I just couldn't get out of bed. I couldn't even walk, and I kept throwing up!

PERFORM AT LITTLE CAFES AND PUBS.

We had two shows in Blackburn with Richard Moss. One was this quaint little vegetarian café called Sprout Café. It's located above a toy store, and that night, it was a proper sit down dinner with a 3-course vegetarian menu. The place was packed, and people were actually listening to us instead of just treating us as background music. Also, the food there was delicious, and they even serve my favourite drink, Fentimans Curiosity Cola, which is basically an organically brewed cola drink. The other gig was at Number 39 – Hopstar Brewery Tap in Darwen. It's funny because when we started out the first set, there were these hecklers in the crowd just being a buzzkill, but by the second set, we noticed that they were all gone. Apparently, the bar owner enjoyed the show so much, he basically told the hecklers to leave if they weren't going to shut up (laughs)!



Facing page
Djavan at
Muziekgebouw

This page
Haarlem,
Netherlands;
IUR-fm; Lowden
Factory visit;



would be performing onstage, and all of a sudden, a train would just go roaring by above our heads and the entire theatre would shake. And the audience loved it! It's the charm of it all, I suppose. It's definitely something I've never done before. In fact, I even ended one song right before a train zoomed past; I just treated it as part of my performance (laughs).

HAVE AN INTIMATE CONCERT AT A STRANGER'S HOUSE.

When we were in the Netherlands, we decided to meet up with a writer friend whom we have met previously at the Georgetown Literary Festival. She suggested a house concert with a crowd of only about 20-strong, and I agreed to it. Personally, it's a special thing, to perform acoustically. There were no amps around, and the audience were all huddled up at your feet, and listening attentively to you as you play. I first performed in their back garden, and when it grew darker, we moved inside, and I sat by the piano with this big guitar neon sign, which they got from a defunct restaurant above it. It was all very rock and roll and funky! They especially loved my P Ramlee medley, and we even got a standing ovation after that (laughs). Besides that, our friend's niece and nephew also performed and they had the most amazing vocals. There was also this a capella group there. They were all elderly, but yet they sang with so much heart, and so much soul. I thought that was the best concert of the tour.

MAKE TIME FOR ACTIVITIES THAT INSPIRES YOUR MUSIC.

We didn't want to play a gig for every single day during the tour. We also wanted to experience the cities, and soak in the culture. When we first arrived in London, while getting



over jetlag, we went to see Matilda the Musical. We also managed to catch Elvis Costello and the free jazz Shibusashirazu Orchestra from Japan live. But the most exciting moment for me on this tour was when we visited the Lowden Guitars manufacturer, where my guitar was made, in Downpatrick, Northern Ireland. We met the founder George Lowden, and his son, Johnny, brought us on a tour around their little workshop, and told us all about the craftsmanship of their guitars. Heck, they even remembered my guitar! That's because they only produce about 30 guitars a week. So, my guitar got to go home, and it sounded the best there in the UK, because the humidity is at the right for the wood of the guitars. They set up my guitar for free, and I performed a free show for them.

KNOW THAT IT TAKES TIME.

If you want to build a long career, you have to accept the fact that you won't just launch an EP and you'll be touring Europe the following year. I mean, you can, but you'll lose a lot of money, and



not get much out of it. You need time to plan things gradually, and you build it up. Sometimes, you may get lucky and big things happen to you consecutively. That's a testament when you look at Yuna or Zee Avi. You see all these big success and you hope things could be that instant. And sometimes, we tend to quit before we figure things out. Unfortunately, for most people, it takes longer. If you're not in that demographic, you have to go the long way round, and build everything step by step, and be alright when releasing an album doesn't necessarily mean selling a lot, or getting booked all the time. I mean, being a musician anywhere, it's just hard. But that's just how it is, for everything in life actually. But it's harder for musicians because you don't always have someone breathing down your neck, constantly asking you on your work progress. You have to create an environment, where you have your own personal deadlines.

from left to right
Recording
studio ; Austria;
Brighton
Open Mic;
Performance at
Amplified Bar in
Newry, Northern
Ireland



No one is going to ask you, "Hey, when are you going to create that EP that is going to lead you to your fifth album that will win you a Grammy?" You don't know whether it's going to happen. No one knows that. But if you want it bad enough, and you have a lot of drive, you'll figure out how to make it work. You're not accountable to anyone but yourself.

BUT MAKE IT HAPPEN ANYWAY.

At every show, there are new friends to meet, and there will always be a new audience to build up. I believe that musicians should travel around, play a few gigs here, go to a few festivals there, and just meet new people, because you'll never know which next friend you make might help you do something big for your career. For me, I saw it when I was planning this tour, and got help from friends like Richard, Mickey and Matteo. It's easy to give excuses when things don't work. If it's impossible to tour Europe in the time being, tour locally first then! People always complain that there's no touring circuit here. Well, of course not! You have to build your own circuit and find out where you can perform. No one is going to hire an indie musician, or come up and tell you for no apparent reason, "Hey, I'm going to bring you on a tour!" It's not going to happen! If these gigs don't exist, make them exist – create them. People think that because it doesn't exist, so it can't exist. We have to change that mindset instead to: "If it doesn't exist, how can we make it exist?" Local musicians have to get out of this mindset that Malaysia is their only market. Your market could be somewhere else in the world, and you have to be open to it. And when it does, you have to be ready to take it.