

CB: Welcome to Cafe OTO and the Senyawa evening. My name is Clive Bell and this is Rully and Wukir – they are Senyawa. This your first time in Cafe OTO?

R: Second time

CB: Oh ok. And you're in the middle of a tour? A lengthy one?

R: Quite a lot of different places this time. In Europe.

CB: And lots of time of in between?

R: Yeah, we had a few days off in Berlin, yeah that's it so far. We played Paris, Budapest, Berlin and Newcastle last night. Then Amsterdam, Krakow and Brussels

CB: Tell me about Newcastle last night?

W: It's good there

R: Yeah

CB: What are Newcastle people like?

R: We didn't play Newcastle, we played Gateshead. It's very important apparently for them that Newcastle and Gateshead are different, which I respect. A long history of...yeah. It was very special, very fancy place in an iconic venue that they normally have classical music in, but this time they had experimental music festival. Very good approach.

CB: Nice response from the audience?

R: Yes. And it was the first time we play in the north of England, so they felt special it was the first time

CB: Good, good so you've had a good time. Rully told me though that you've run out of the Kretek cigarette, so if anyone has anyone those please talk to the band later. Yeah. Now, the name of the band means a kind of 'mixture' of things?

R: Well it literally means a chemical compound, like in the alchemy table, if you mix oxygen and something else, it will create senyawa. Yeah, so it's like that. Literally, it's what it means. Which is a very good concept for the music that we are doing because it's exactly that, we're mixing different elements to create a reaction – something new, something, er, a senyawa. You know? That is why the cover of one of our first LP's from 2013 was this clove, and the title was 'Acaraki'. Acaraki means the science of mixing herbs you know, and a clove is like a spice, a strong suit for Indonesia and one of the reasons why the Dutch came, or the Portuguese came and colonised Indonesia was

because of the cloves. I think it's very strong as a band to have this kind of image, so yeah.

CB: Mmm, this is the clove plant on here. Your music is not just mixing traditional musics, it's like your own completely new thing isn't it? But there is traditional stuff going on in the background. So, can we talk a little bit about that? Rully first maybe, as you're mainly singing and you come from Sulawesi? Now, Sulawesi is East of Borneo, it's a massive kind of island, quite a straight shaped island.

R: First, if you talk about traditional music of Indonesia, it's an entirely different universe. The music is so diverse that it is impossible to say that gamelan is the music of Indonesia because there are so many other things that you may not have ever heard. From Sumatra all the way to Papua, the kinds of music are so different. Sulawesi is an island that has very strong vocal traditions, so they sing in groups, communal singing, random singing and very good melodies, strong voices as well, so if you go from the west of Indonesia which is the Sumatra the music is mainly influenced by Arabic music, Melayu music, so a lot of melody, a lot of harmony, a lot of playing with words, a lot of flute – so a lot of melodies as well. You have a lot of Islamic music influence, so a lot of Rabana you know. As you move to Java, the music becomes abstract. So in Java the music had more space, more sophistication maybe than gamelan for example, it's very abstract. As you move to Kalimantan you get a lot of strings, you know, I don't know where that comes from.

CB: The Portuguese

R: Yeah, probably yeah. And then, when you move to Bali everything goes faster. You know, the more you go to the east, the music goes faster. And further east like Papua, it becomes more percussive. So you can see all this diversity in our, in Senyawa. So, Senyawa music, you cannot say "oh, you are influenced by Java music". Not really, because all these things...

CB: I'd love to hear more about this singing in Sulawesi? You've got groups of singers, is that men's groups, women's groups?

R: Many things. There is er, we call it dance actually, the Rego dance. But in that dance we sing as well. People gather in circles and they sing, but er, some – it's very weird some got high [sings high]

CB: Is that yodeling? Cause I've noticed you do some yodeling.

R: Yeah kind of but it's not exactly the same. Also, there's communal singing called er, Dero, also a dance actually because they sing in circles, and they hold hands together and then they sing, but that I think is influenced by Portuguese that particular one.

CB: So you grew up hearing this, is it ceremonial music? Yep. So were you joining in sometimes?

R: Yeah, when I was a kid it happened everywhere.

CB: Everybody does it. And then later did you listen to rock bands?

R: Of course. Yeah, which I liked better than the traditional music when I was young. I liked Iron Maiden more than anything else. I liked Slayer, everything. For teenagers that age, that would be my, you know, my music yeah. So even if I've stopped listening to them anymore, I don't listen to that kind of music anymore, it's already in me, or in us you know. You cannot just erase that influence because it's already part of you, so when you make your music right now, that is also your tradition.

CB: Yeah, yeah. Do you still go back to those bands sometimes?

R: Yeah, occasionally on YouTube. YouTube! [laughs]

CB: Ok. So, Wukir –

W: I think the influence every day, in the morning we already eat rice, something always with rice in the morning.

CB: Is it breakfast?

W: Yeah, breakfast. And then lunch still rice. And dinner, still with rice [laughs] Yeah, every day we do like that. Normal.

R: Unconscious.

W: Unconsciously

R: So, he didn't really realise that all of this becomes 'influence'. Influences him. Because we all have our memory hidden in the past that we unconsciously keep coming back to

W: [Speaks Indonesian]

R: He says, sometimes we do things without even realising that maybe our ancestors liked to do that and that's why we're doing it, but we don't realise.

W: [Speaks Indonesian]

R: He can speak English, but now he's stopped speaking English! [laughs]

W: I think it's er, [Rully] he is a very good translator [laughs]

CB: Now, Wukir, you play an instrument that you built yourself. Maybe some of you know what this is, it's like a very large bamboo instrument surrounded by strings. And I think you've got some metal strings, and also some bamboo strings. Are there other types of strings?

W: No

CB: [laughs] Ok, I read that on your website. Yeah [laughs] alright, two types of strings, and it's amplified. And when I first saw it I thought this looks like a, a valiha from Madagascar which is a circular zither, but it turns out it's a little more complicated than that isn't it? A lot of things have gone into you inventing this instrument. Can you tell me, I know there's some other string instruments in Indonesia which – like the sitar maybe – that influenced this one?

W: Ok. The influence is maybe all the regional instruments like the sitar, or rebab or [unheard] yeah, like they use skin from bamboo, you know, for strings, and then they just take the skin from bamboo...I try a modification making the new instrument, er... the important thing is not just the physical instrument but the long process because – ok, in Indonesia, if you're not in university of music, if you're making something then it's very difficult to get the place for presentation you know. And then, I grew up in the community of theatre, I started working for a music theatre from when I was twelve, and then until I was 16, and then I moved to a different city and I started building an instrument for the director to make the sounds he needed.

CB: I know you worked for a famous theatre master for several years

W: Not working, but learning. Ok, we come back about the getting room for presentation. That's why I used amplification because when I finished the artwork, the instrument I needed to present to the public. And because it was hard to present to the public I went into the punk community, metal community and tried to play together with them. Before I used a pickup I used microphones and that always had a problem. After that I used a used a guitar amp.

CB: I understand that when you're playing you're plucking the strings, it's something like playing the guitar, but you're also doing drumming. What's going on there?

W: Oh, that's the skin. The skin from bamboo making the sounds like a drum

CB: Oh ok, so the bamboo tube itself is cut to make bamboo strings, and when you hit those it sounds like drumming.

W: Yeah, and you can play them like guitar.

R: Other traditional instruments they hit it with a stick, but this one is played like a guitar.

CB: Ok, so you can copy some traditional drumming techniques even though it's not a drum.

W: I can copy too like traditional percussion; the notation you know? I can copy 5 people playing together with one [imitates sound] If they play ramana like [imitates sounds] I can play the same.

CB: You were part of something in Australia called – was it the Instrument Project?

W: Yeah, oh yeah.

CB: Rod Cooper in Australia, encouraging people to invent instruments.

W: Yeah, and artists from Australia come to Indonesia and then 6–8 people, Indonesian artists – not just musicians – they work together and try to make something together. After 3 weeks of building something we do an exhibition in Indonesia, and then we go to Australia to do that again

CB: So, Senyawa come from Jogjakarta in the island of Java, and this is a kind of cultural centre isn't it? There are all kinds of cultural activities going on there. I know it's very big for puppet theatre for example, shadow puppets, people go to study that. So, tell me about Wok the Rock.

R: [laughs]

CB: He's an important figure.

R: For us, yes. Because when Wukir was just finishing his bamboo instrument he travelled across Java to present the instrument, and then he came to Jogja and he wanted to release the album so he contacted Wok. He owns this label called Yes No Wave Music which you can download legally music from Indonesia, good music, and so Wukir wanted to release it there. And then Wok also has a festival called Yes No Club, it's a very small DIY concert so Wukir played there, and say "yeah, Rully you have to meet this guy and you have to make something with him." So I came to the show and Wukir played and I was like "Yes!" This is what I needed you know, and then Wok invited me to go up onstage and improvise with him. Yeah, we clicked right away, and only 4 days after that we did a recording together for the album. The EP that we recorded there was titled 'Senyawa', so we didn't have a name back then, it was just project for fun, but we had that name. And then hen a few months after we had an international gig in Australia, and they put the name – you know, it's supposed to be Rully and Wukir, something like that, but they said 'Senyawa', so it was like, ok Senyawa! So it's like the name taking over, it's very nice.

CB: It's so much less trouble if someone forces you to take a name

R: [laughs]

CB: So you guys kind of met onstage

R: Before we were properly introduced to each other, yeah.

CB: You started playing immediately. And is that kind of improvisation still important in what you do?

R: When we compose songs, mostly we start with improvisations. Now we don't have much time to do rehearsals or compose new music because we're touring a lot, so what we do is we say "ok, let's improvise", and we'll provide a slot for improvisation and then "ah, that was nice, let's do that again tomorrow." So slowly we make shapes. And also it's a gate to all the possibilities. So for me, improvisation is really important, and collaborations because by doing those we know something else that we won't find otherwise. If we compose we know the limits of ourselves you know so, but if we improvise or collaborate we can add to what we know – "ah ok, apparently I can sing like this!" So I just added to my register, and slowly slowly it becomes...

CB: Ok ok. So I know when you're singing, sometimes you're making up your own language, other times you're singing actual composed lines. Is there a political side to your lyrics or your music?

R: Well, not intentionally. All the lyrics in Senyawa are based on this theme that I was talking to you about earlier, between nature and the human being. And the relationship is very interesting, because sometimes it can be really fragile, sometimes it can be really strong and beautiful and sometimes it can be destructive so there are so many possibilities to explore in this relationship. So all the songs are about this, and when mixed properly it becomes Senyawa, you know, so if nature and human, if their relationship is really good then it is called senyawa. The bamboo represents nature; my voice represents human being so I don't want to make lyrics outside of that theme.

CB: Yeah. I'd like to mention the film by Vincent Moon which is called "Calling the New Gods". It's a very nice film where Vincent followed these guys around Jogjakarta from morning to night, and they're pushing the amplifier down the street and performing in different places including a striking scene on a massive rubbish tip. Can you tell me more about that?

R: It's just a normal rubbish – what do you call it? Rubbish?

CB: Rubbish tip.

R: Rubbish tip in Indonesia, it's all like that. So you find in every city they have one that looks like that. Just piles of rubbish everywhere because there's very bad waste management in Indonesia. You don't have something like here, it's very good you know, in Indonesia, people collect rubbish and they just put it in one place, and I don't know what they do after that.

CB: There's hundreds of people in the video, and cows.

R: Yes

CB: All over this tip. And then you perform there.

R: Yes, it smells really bad but it's a good image [laughs]

CB: What are you singing about on the..

R: That one was about, if I'm not mistaken, about the colour blue. Basically about the sky was blue, the sea was blue – a lot of blue before, but now it's grey. So you know what that means. I think perfect for the image.

CB: And the film as a whole – did you make that in one day?

R: One day. One one day.

CB: Pretty hard work

W: 5 o'clock we started, until 8 o'clock.

R: No 'crew'. And you know what Vincent Moon is doing right now? He's doing live edited of films that he's made so editing and sound editing as well live. So Berlin and Venice we played together for the first time while he was playing Senyawa in the background. Very spiritual experience for him and for us.

CB: So tell me about the 7" solos Wukir?

W: So for the solo I recorded in Frankfurt because I have a residency there of a month, and I was building instruments there. The idea for the instrument is a response to a German collection, and then I made the instrument and made the recording.

CB: So you're responding to objects?

W: I responded to a hat and a comb. Now the instrument is still in Germany.

CB: And your solo Rully?

R: So Morphine records had an idea, why don't you guys release the solo album at the same time? So I had an idea to make a series, so this one is the first one and it's just the voice. Not so much modulation, it's just pure. Then it'll get more sophisticated...It's like ok, this is what they sound like alone. So people who listen to the previous album will try and connect.

CB: And I heard you have a new project with is it Rabih Beaini in Berlin?

W: We're still trying to see what's good.

R: Yeah, it's completely different, techno beats, electronic music so yeah. We did really good in Budapest and Venice. But it's different, techno beats and Senyawa, improvisation as well. I hope we can try to make it, it's still changing.

CB: Rhythmically it's so different, techno and Senyawa so where do the rhythms come from.

R: In Senyawa?

CB: Yes.

R: Well er, rhythm in Indonesia is very common – especially the monotonous rhythms to bring out the trance. Mainly used for trance. So for us, why not use it because trance experience is the ultimate experience if you want to enjoy art, and music especially so, and that's what people are doing all over the world. When people listen to rituals or ceremony which involve music they normally go into a trance. Why? Because there is a certain honesty is not only the playing but also the listening. It's not decided by the duration, it's not decided by the repertoire – it's all decided by the moment so when you see ceremonies with music they don't say "ok, come at 8 o'clock and we'll finish at 8.30", it's not like that. You go and there are instruments there, people playing music and you just play. There is no "ok, after 4 bars of intro you come in with the flute", nothing like that. So all of that, that's what makes the trance because it's not about expressing music with your brain which is mostly what the Western music academics are doing with classical music, progressive music – they want music to progress, they want music to be better, you know, always be better! But, with this, when you enjoy the music, why? It's very complicated. You know, the structure. It's also a good way to enjoy music by analysing it. But what if you don't analyse it? Yeah, so "Oh, I saw this music, I loved it!" "Why did you like it?" "I don't know, I felt like trance! I don't know what they're saying, I cannot remember the structure at all but I enjoyed it." I think that's also good.

CB: Talking about trance, I think that if you go into a trance you *really* go into a trance

R: Yes.

CB: because it's part of the culture, maybe you learn to go into a trance. Whereas I think I can't go into a trance in that way.

R & W: [Together] You can!

R: You can if you allow yourself

CB: Ah, ok. [laughs] There's just something about Sussex that stops me.

R: I just need a whip

CB: A whip? Yeah that would probably do it.

W: Wait...er. We have an important person here from Senyawa. Her name is Kristi Monfries. She takes care of Senyawa work. She was the first person to bring us out of Indonesia. She got us a gig at Melbourne Jazz festival in 2011. When we played there, we played right before Faust and some good names. From that one festival we got 3 festivals, so we owe her that much.

CB: Did you meet Faust?

R: I saw them.

CB: It might be nice if you played with Faust.