

Nova Ruth: stages of collaboration

Written by Ali Crosby |

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Nova and Grey in the show Hypnotica - Credit: Miguel-Edwards/Nova Ruth

An interview by Ali Crosby

As a young woman living in Malang, East Java, Nova decided to become a hip hop artist and use music to fight for social and environmental justice. Looking around her, there weren't a whole lot of mentors, as this was a pretty unique path. Nova's roots are musical, and singing has always been part of her life. But her combination of local culture and language with global genres is unprecedented.

Nova's father is Totok Tewel, a Javanese rock music legend. While she spent periods of her life resisting his influence, choosing very different musical genres with which to experiment, his music has always been part of her life.

In 2000, she began rapping as one half of the band Twin Sista, who were represented in Perang Rap Compilation (2002), Poetry Battle #1 as part of Les Printemps Des Poètes (2007), Gang Festival (2008) and Ilmu Festival (2010).

Nova now collaborates in the global electronic group Filastine, with Spanish American artist Grey, whom she met in 2008 on a stop in Indonesia on the way to an Australian tour. They are sought-after performers, travelling between Europe, Java, America, and sometimes Australia.



Nova on the bullhorn - Credit: Miguel-Edwards/Nova Ruth

Despite her jet-setting, Nova has never left her local roots. As a solo act, as well as with Filastine, she regularly performs at activist events and festivals, such as the Festival Mata Air (/festival-mata-air)(2009, 2011, 2014, 2016). At such events, she appeals to large and diverse audiences by remixing the romance of Javanese folk music with the audio-visual poetry of contemporary electronic music.

In 2012, Nova and Filastine released a video clip of the song 'Genjer-Genjer,' banned after 1965 for its associations with the Indonesian Communist Party (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_XS_2Hni8w (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_XS_2Hni8w)). The translation of this video from Javanese to Indonesian to English demonstrates the importance to young people in Indonesia today of reconsidering the way history has been written in their country.

I first met Nova when she came to Sydney for the Gang Festival, an artist exchange that began in 2005. We then worked together at EngageMedia and remained friends. We made this interview in a mix of Indonesian and English emails over June and July.

Are you a feminist? Can you talk about what being a Javanese feminist means?

Yes. Because I want gender equality, but I prefer not to label myself. It's not easy, for example, when I was 19, I went out a lot to make music and came back home really late. The neighbourhood talked about me and judged my family because a young woman is not supposed

to get home too late. Also the guys who were still up and on the street would whistle when I passed them. Not feeling secure is part of gender inequality. But, I also like to cook and I cook more than my partner and never consider that as un-feminist, while it is clearly a form of gender inequality too. The typical Javanese role of women is 'dapur, sumur, kasur', which means that a woman looks after the kitchen, the well, and the bed. Although there are a lot of myths about women's strength and intelligence, like the story of Rara Jonggrang (the princess who overcomes heartbreak) or Ken Dedes (the first queen of Singhasari), I think every Javanese woman should realise the strength given by their ancestors.

Can you describe the way your music circulates?

It always circulates in an underground way. But the underground music scene isn't as small as you might think. The songs I wrote from Twin Sista to Filastine all have a certain activism, which is environmental and social justice activism, which means my listeners mostly are artists or activists or both. My music is not really easy to digest musically, especially the music I make with Filastine. Before I joined Grey, I thought his music was from the future and I still think this sometimes. As part of Twin Sista, I took part in big public festivals, sometimes on the main stage, but most of the time we are at the 'other' music stage because Filastine's music is not so easy to describe in a program. We also play in warehouses and squats.



Nova singing with Grey in Lisbon - Credit: Miguel-Edwards/Nova Ruth

Online distribution is probably the only way we can really circulate our music nowadays. Yes, of course, we still try various physical mediums including vinyl, CD and cassette, but people don't really buy music anymore, not even on the internet! We think the conventional way to share music needs a revolution. That's why Filastine is trying another form, this year by releasing four video singles in the series *Abandon*.

Why is performance still important?

For me, since I joined Filastine, performance has become a complex process, and it's fun. We call it an 'audio visual project'. It involves a year of two of us working together, with the help of a video mapping and animation professional (Videocratz), to make a whole series of performance videos (I edited some videos as well, so I am learning new skills), rearranging the songs and adapting them to live performance. The stage set up and sound testing for each performance is a whole day of work, especially when there's a demand for complex projector mapping. However, performance still provides us with an opportunity to travel and live in many places.

There is also a satisfaction in being able to share our thoughts through audio and visual media, and getting direct feedback is very important. Not only is it a good feeling to get a direct compliment, but more importantly, to have valuable criticism. We also worry about traveling from one end of the world to another and creating a bigger carbon footprint. No matter how much we like to perform, we still have a policy to reject a gig offer from another part of the world if we have already planned a tour in one continent for several months. We think about these things, and we weigh up the value of performance.

Why are songs like Genjer Genjer still important? Can you talk about 1965?

I liked it because it's good and catchy, but my friends' reaction made me curious, they got goosebumps. It reminded them of the torture scene in the government propaganda movie G30SPKI. When I was a child, I thought that movie was horrible, so when it was on TV, I went to my paternal grandparents' house, which was only 30 metres away from my maternal grandparents' house where I lived. My grandfather there didn't like to watch TV. But once I got interested in song, the more information I found, the more I liked to sing it. The songwriter was trying to write about feeling grateful for a wild plant growing in a rice field during the Japanese occupation.

This is what I always say when I get this question: 'I want my country to be big. But to be a big country, we need to admit our mistakes in the past'. I came from a military family. Yes, my grandpa was a good guy but of course he was one of the million guys that had to follow orders in 1965.

Our family house was beside the communist party headquarter of the neighbourhood. My childhood was full of stories of how our family at the time of the massacres got threats from unknown people that we suspected to be communist party members every night. My grandma

and aunty were armed to protect the family without my grandpa. My mom was six years old and still remembers the feeling of being threatened. Our well was poisoned too. I also knew that a few of our communist neighbours were protected by my grandpa because they were friends. So I wonder what kind of people made us hate each other?



A Filastine train yard session with Nova and Miguel-Edwards - Credit: Miguel-Edwards/Nova Ruth

I'm sad that such a beautiful song, that was meant to be positive, was banned because it was popular at the wrong time. I'm sad that the writer then went missing in '65 and now most of us know where 'they' took him. It's not only because it's a good song, but it's a form of responsibility for me to sing it, in the hope that someday Indonesia can be 'bigger' than today.

What is your proudest musical moment?

I don't remember what I sang or how old I was, but I remember being really tiny and being on stage in my kampung, Glintung, in East Java. My grandma was there, and started to cry when I sang.

Can you talk about your collaboration with Filastine?

It started in 2009. It's not so easy to meet even one person in this huge world that can understand me musically, who has the same perspective in life and who is so easy to travel with. I connect with what Grey is doing creatively because we both care about the same thing. We both write songs about environmental and social justice. He also has similar taste in music. I mean he really likes Javanese gamelan and old dangdut!

Can you tell us about your coffee shop?

My coffee shop, Legipait (bitter sweet), is a love project, just like my music. I started it because I like coffee and hoped that it could be self-managed, so then the space created for art and culture in Malang would be okay when I leave it. It's in the heart of Malang and it is very, very tiny, but very busy. I would love to spend more time in Malang and develop it more so it can be more profitable and contribute more to the art and culture scene there. But for now I can't. That's the best I can do. I want to stay away as much as I can from large scale capitalism. I want to try my own little version of capitalism, to fund the activities that I want to see in Malang, in both art and culture.

Legipait has been running for 5 years. A lot of people said it was the trigger for the birth of many small cafes in Malang. I'm very happy to hear that, especially if those cafes are supporting local artists. Malang has almost no public space, and that was one of the reasons why I made this café. Live music is very important to us.

And what can we expect in your future?

My plan in the future with Filastine is to tour on a Pinisi boat, a special sailing boat from Makassar that is designed to be a stage and that is solar-powered if there's no wind. We will be stopping at Indonesian's ports and collaborating with local artists. I also dream of having land close to Malang to build a small guest house that can also function as an artist residency. There I will be planting my own coffee for Legipait as well as food for my daily life. That's how I imagine my 'adult' life.

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