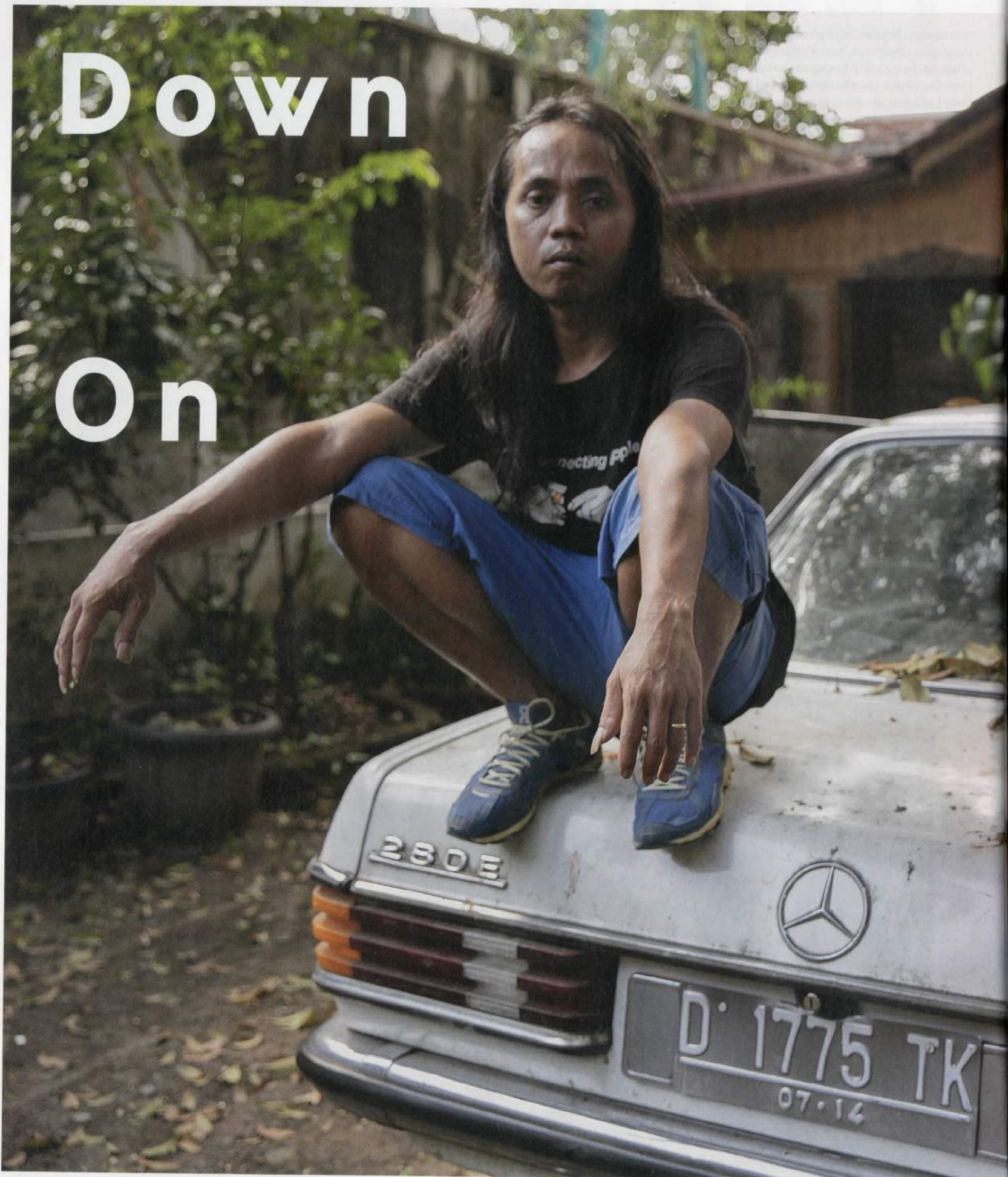


Down

On



Senyawa's Wukir Suryadi (left) and Rully Shabara in Jogjakarta, April 2018

Like twin spirits
possessed, Javanese
duo

Senyawa

crosswire the energy of
thrash metal with the raw
power of trance rituals.
Together and apart, the
pair are key nodes in
Indonesia's underground
scene. By **David Novak**.

Photography by
Benjamin Butcher

The Str eet

The sounds pouring out of the monitors and into my ears are raw and powerful as hell: a beat that is both relentless and entrancing, a voice that is beyond a voice. I'm in the control room at the Jogja Audio School studio, checking out the early mixes of *Tabuh Langit Tanduk Jawa* (*Sky Drums On The Horns Of The Champion*) by Senyawa member Rully Shabara's new project Setabuhan. Two percussionists, one at each end of a huge skin-covered drum, blast out a complex interlocking matrix driving Shabara's distorted, wordless, panting breath in and out of the mix, first a noisy scrabbling submerged into the flow of beats, and then punching out in groaning operatic incantations and whisper-screams that echo in open space. Inspired by the trance-inducing balian rituals of Shabara's home island of Sulawesi, the visceral mass of sound evokes the technological possession of *Super* æ-era Boredoms, a remixed bootleg of *Einstürzende Neubauten*, or a close-miked field recording of a spirit possession ceremony gone wrong. Grinning at my awed expression, Shabara pushes my chair toward the mixing board. "Mess with it for a minute. See if you can open up the compression and get the drums to kick harder. I want it to be as intense as possible – to just fucking rip out of the speakers. It should make you feel like fighting."

The sound is as exciting and powerful as the city of Jogja itself, the bright core of a growing Indonesian network of experimental music. The city is home to Senyawa, Shabara's explosive duo with the equally prolific multi-instrumentalist Wukir Suryadi, who coaxes dark soundscapes and bone-crunching riffs from unique handmade instruments, including his iconic spear-like bambu wukir. Since their formation in 2010, Senyawa have catalysed a transnational audience through tours that stretch from Australia to Europe to North America and Japan. Their studio recordings construct a diverse soundscape of vocal and instrumental improvisations, and their magnetic live street performances have been documented in Vincent Moon's trippy short film *Calling The New Gods* (with a soundtrack newly issued on vinyl by Okraïna Records) as well as in breathless YouTube videos shot by awestruck audience members in clubs, concert halls and galleries.

With the energy of a teenage thrash metal band and the shamanistic tumult of a village exorcism, it's impossible to deny their volcanic effect. Senyawa can be counted among the most thrilling, edgy and original live performance units anywhere in the world.

For new audiences, who may have picked up on their early international releases on Morphine in 2015, or caught the pair at festivals such as Tusk and Unsound the following year, Senyawa might appear to have manifested from thin air. And for some time, the same was true for Indonesian audiences, who – at least until the group's spectacular headline-grabbing solo show at the Jakarta Arts Centre in December 2016 – had few opportunities to see Senyawa live, barring those lucky enough to stumble upon them in the back of an art gallery or at a hallucinatory guerrilla street performance. But as I slowly learned from checking

in on the group on tours from Singapore to Malaysia to Los Angeles and back to Java over the past two years, Shabara and Suryadi trace their musical roots deep into the weird alchemical mixtures of Indonesia's dynamic underground.

These days in Jogja (Jogjakarta or Yogyakarta in long form), Senyawa are one especially solid branch extending outward from a lively tangled thicket of extreme sounds and experimental art, including noise collectives and electronic media groups like Jogja Noise Bombing, Lifepatch, Yogyakarta Synth Ensemble, House Of Natural Fiber and Kenali Rangkai Pakai. In its dual role as both a college town and a historic centre for Javanese traditional arts, the city provided rich turf for growing an alternative culture scene since well before the turn of the millennium.

When I lived in Jogja to study music in 1993–93, during the long dictatorship of Suharto's New Order regime, alternative media were suppressed. Underground subcultures were there if you squinted, but only as a public secret at the fringes of social life. But as the country stumbled blinking out of the long dictatorship and into a new era of economic and social change at the end of the 1990s, grass roots networks exploded across the country, especially in Java. From Bandung to Jakarta to Jogja, Solo and Surabaya, organisers brought local independent performance scenes, as well as DIY publishing and merch (called *distro* in local parlance), to the foreground of popular culture, binding together a generation of Indonesian youth in the politics of punk. And over the last 20 years, Indonesia has boasted the largest subcultures of metal, hardcore, grindcore and punk in the world, as well as recent surges in more pop based indie and shoegaze bands. But more experimental approaches tended to circulate mostly in Java and Bali, mainly as academic projects in art schools and on the margins of galleries as performance art.

Neither member of Senyawa was born in Jogja but migrated there, like many young people, to tap into its creative resources. When Shabara arrived from Sulawesi as a high schooler in the late 1990s, "there was no scene. No one knew where to play, so we just played at punk gigs, metal gigs, hardcore gigs... and no one liked us really," he laughs. We're talking over Skype in April. The situation he describes began to shift in the 2000s as digital infrastructure brought net cafes and mobile phones into daily life, bringing Indonesians onto the internet en masse, in contact with each other, and a world of new media resources.

Music fans had heard Sepultura and Sonic Youth; now they passed around bootleg mixes of Captain Beefheart, Merzbow and Sleep. "I was listening to stuff like Melt Banana and Boredoms when I was in college," recalls Shabara. "One guy [local curator Aji Wartono] had a big collection of pirated CDs, and basically all the Jogja musicians copied from him, and this stuff got copied over and over again – then we'd go to the internet cafe and download more stuff!"

The rise of Indonesian digital culture meant that organisers could begin to take the DIY circuit online as an open access media network, and connect the

dots of the microscenes spreading out across the archipelago. Artist and longtime scene organiser Woto Wibowo (aka Wok The Rock) generated a crucial node with his open culture netlabel Yes No Wave, which, since its formation in 2007, released all of Shabara and Suryadi's recordings as free downloads, alongside many of Jogja's core underground acts such as Frau, Punkasila and the noise rock band Seek Sick Six. Wibowo is also responsible for putting Senyawa together at his Yes No Klub, an itinerant performance series held at ad hoc spaces around the city.

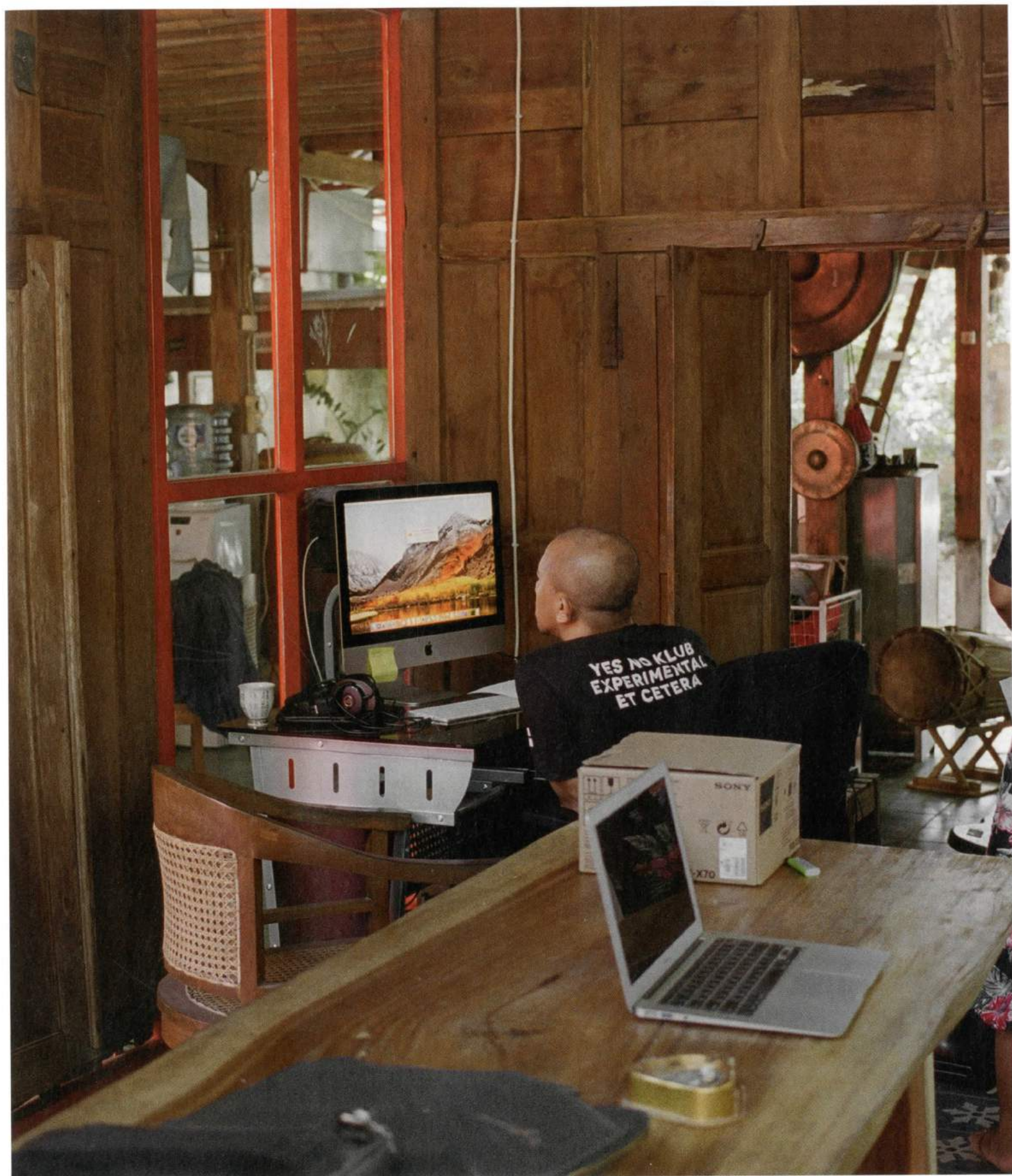
"Wukir got up on stage with his instrument and started to play," Wok told me, "and I immediately texted Rully: 'Drop what you are doing and get down here right now! If you don't come it'll be the biggest mistake of your life.' Rully arrived on his motorcycle a few minutes later. I pointed to the stage and said, 'Go join him.'"

The two recorded their first album a few days later. Wok dubbed the release *Senyawa*, an Indonesian word that refers both to a chemical compound and a syncretic mixture of elemental forms. The name stuck, and Senyawa became a staple at Wok's monthly shows, where they developed a unique sound and began to attract visiting collaborators to Jogja, including Japanese guitar improv great Kazuhisa Uchihashi and Arrington De Dionyso's Indo-post-punk outfit Malaikat Dan Singa. In 2011, curator Kristi Monfries brought Senyawa to Australia for their first overseas tour and things have been nonstop since, with stints at Mona Foma, WOMAD, Unsound, Europalia and the Asian Meeting Festival exposing the group to new audiences in Europe and across East and South East Asia.

Along the way, Senyawa brought new (or perhaps truly old?) influences to Jogja's experimental scene, drawn from the raw intensity of traditional cultural performances. Like most Indonesians living outside of big cities, Shabara and Suryadi had grown up seeing kuda lumping (also known as *jathilan*), a wild improvisatory possession ritual that brings young dancers into trances in villages across Java, shouting, spasming violently, whipping one another and, according to some accounts, even eating glass. Musicians bang away on cheap and broken iron gongs and drumsets, pounding out a hypnotic accompaniment.

"It's very raw and brutal," adds Shabara gleefully, "and it's not like experimental music, or popular forms from elsewhere. It's more punk than punk. It's *our* music: this is what we were listening to as kids on the streets."

Wukir Suryadi spent his early life playing in the street. Born in Malang in East Java, he left his family at 12 years old to live in a renegade theatre community, composing sound effects for plays with stones, metal sheets and other random junk. After apprenticing with avant garde poet Rendra, he moved to Jakarta to join the infamous street performance scene surrounding the Blok M market and red light district. Suryadi travelled around the city and the country for a decade as a one man unit called Ambience Experiment,



accompanying guerrilla theatre shows, putting out cassettes with grindcore and weird folk bands such as Error Scream and Bendera Hitam Setengah Tiang (translating as Flying A Black Flag At Half-Mast), breaking open guitar pedals and microphones, and using bamboo and other natural materials to build his own unique instruments. "We played anywhere," recalls Suryadi, "in fields, in the streets, in houses, in theatres, for religious ceremonies – it wasn't ever just music by itself, we always worked with other artist communities."

Over the past decade, Suryadi has continued travelling and developing art collaborations, participating in workshops and creating instruments and sound installations at STEIM in Amsterdam, and Australia's National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne.

When I visit his studio in the South Jogja neighbourhood of Bantul in autumn 2017, I found Suryadi working on an installation for the Jakarta Biennale, an enormous instrument featuring huge strips of brass, to be stretched across a wall as audiences bounced rubber balls across their surface to create dark gong-like noises. Friends wandered freely in and out of the compound, smoking, relaxing and chatting as we looked over the materials for the project, a clutter of bamboo and bronze.

For Suryadi, getting back to this kind of hands-on work after long tours overseas is essential. "If we never stop going with Senyawa, we don't have time to prepare anything new," he declares. "We need time to rest, rehearse and learn again." Talking and eating late into the night under a lightbulb glow and surrounded by his in-progress works, Suryadi contemplated new ways to open room for creative self-knowledge. "I want to get back to the way it was before the internet, to a more natural space where I can focus on what I want to do. It's important for me to make something not just because people need it, but for myself, for my heart, for my spirituality."

He recently returned to his East Javanese roots through the Malang based Potro Joyo (meaning something like Righteous Behaviour), which invokes the spiritual power of the East Javanese mountains Bromo and Semeru, masked dance traditions and syncretic Hindu-animist thought. His SoundCloud page posts the group's 2017 debut recording under the tag "Religion & Spirituality", but even a short listen to the track "Uluk Uluk" quickly dispels the notion that this is an unadulterated form of traditional ritual. A rapid-fire burst of Malangan language prayer is filtered, robot-like, through a ring modulator; distorted bamboo strings mix with rattling guitar to create an ominous undulating drone, punctuated by blasts of screeching noise; uncanny voices chant guttural mantras and bury screams in clouds of reverb beneath the stereo field. For Suryadi, Potro Joyo were as much about reconnecting with hometown friends in Malang as opening up new spaces for art and life. "Before making the album," he says, "we spent a few weeks talking about life first. You know, music is not just for hearing, it's not just a sound. It's more spiritual. Music is life – it needs to be open."

Last year, he began releasing music by friends and collaborators on his Tilis label. "We're thinking about how to reconnect music with real life, the best way to live as musicians." Despite such lofty goals, he keeps his tongue planted in his cheek: the label's name is silit (asshole) spelled backwards. "It's like, if people can't fart for a year... their assholes get stopped up and they end up at the hospital. Keeping on with music is essential to staying alive."

Shabara, too, is constantly issuing new work when Senyawa are off tour. He is best known in Jogja as the frontman for Zoo, his longrunning experimental rock band. But Zoo is more like a life-encompassing vision than a band. Talking to Shabara about Zoo is like listening to a military strategist discuss ways to lay waste to a city, and then to a priest, a scholar, and an architect about rebuilding society from the ashes up. Since their inception in 2006, Zoo have been releasing a series of themed albums imagining a world moving through developmental epochs, beginning with language, architecture and religion and following these with science, nations and migration, and then war and colonisation.

"It started out as a normal punk band," says Shabara, "but slowly I injected this idea of building up a civilisation, one album at a time." The language project includes scrolls of religious lyrics written in the invented Kawagaka language. "We hold workshops where I give people the scrolls and the Kawagaka-Indonesian dictionary and they translate it back to Indonesian, and I look to see whether it matches with the original meaning," explains Shabara. "If there's a difference, that's the point. they will make the wrong translation, and then *that* will be published, and they will end up making their own religions... Just like the actual Bible! It's not the translations that matter, it's the translators."

Shabara's other projects similarly draw the general public into participation and performance, such as the spontaneous improvisation ensemble Raung Jagat (Roar Of The Universe), who use a collective improvisation technique reminiscent of Butch Morris's and Otomo Yoshihide's conduction-style orchestras. Raung Jagat ensembles are composed of ad hoc groups, with participants who may never have performed before. The technique, says Shabara, can work with any group, from older people to children. "It's not about making good compositions, about good singing," he expands. "It's about knowing yourself, knowing your own voice and that should tell you more."

The new drum based group Setabuhan, on the other hand, is accompanied by open combat. "I wanted to reach out to the general public with something really raw and visceral," says Shabara. "Something with the effect of heavy techno, but made with pure muscle."

He hired martial artists to perform as they played, but soon began to invite the audience onstage for a kind of improvised fight club. "You can feel the tension," he says, "of people saying to themselves, 'Oh, maybe.... maybe I should go!' There's this sensation in the room, as they all think about it. Even if they do nothing, the urge is there. But usually someone

comes right up and starts scanning the audience to challenge someone, and the fighting is real."

While Shabara and Suryadi are pleased with the ecstatic overseas reception of Senyawa, both remain measured about its impact on their creative lives. "I got back from the last tour," says Suryadi, "and I wondered why do people go so crazy about Senyawa? Maybe they have problems with their own history of music and they need something new? What's wrong with the world that we want so much from music?"

Shabara is more pragmatic: "First things first: we need to get paid properly, like everyone else. Come on, you have to pay us at least the same amount as Sunn O))), 'Oh but it's far away!' Yeah, you're inviting a band from Indonesia. Of course it's far away!" he laughs. "After that, I just want to hear that it's interesting and the music is good, not just, 'wow! Indonesians can make something like this?' Well, we were doing this years ago, actually. And we are still doing it. We just didn't have the infrastructure to support and promote it. So the West never 'discovered' Senyawa. All this 'weird Indonesian stuff' they are finding out about – yes, it's already there."

Senyawa plan on digging deeper into the diverse possibilities of an Indonesian network with a tour to more remote cities. "We couldn't have done this five years ago," declares Shabara, "when these places just barely had consistent internet – not to mention water and food – so of course, when you look online it seems like it's all Java, Java, Java. But now we can connect with what's actually going on out there, and we are finding these traditional performers even more openminded than people from DIY punk scenes. Will we get inspired by something out there? I bet we will."

"We've played so many shows overseas," adds Suryadi, "I want to know what it feels like when Indonesian audiences watch Senyawa."

In the meantime, Senyawa are working on a new album recorded in the midst of a recent tour to Australia, when the duo took a couple of days off from accompanying the Dancenorth/Lucy Guerin dance troupe to lay down a new session in a local studio in Canberra. The recording has been mixed and mastered and should be released on Tilis by the end of the year. "It's different. It's more.... normal, I guess?" reports Shabara. "Wukir just played a regular electric guitar – well, not *regular*," he laughs. "It's an electric guitar he made himself. But it's more lyrical, and heavy, of course, still heavy: we're keeping it all about the connection with tanah [earth, soil]."

There's no question that Senyawa are grounded in something very special, a sonic terrain perhaps unique to their unlikely compound mixture of influences, from metal to ritual. But even as their music spreads its tendrils out into a global experimental network, Senyawa's local roots run deep. "Even if we are small as a fingernail," says Suryadi, "we are still a part of Indonesian culture." □ Senyawa's *Calling The New Gods* is released by Okraina. Setabuhan's *Tabuh Langit Tanduk Jawara* is released by Yes No. David Novak's *Japanoise: Music At The Edge Of Circulation* is published by Duke University Press

