

## Interview with Yudi Yap: A Humanistic Vocalist and Songwriter on Music, Life, and Cultural Expression

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### INTRODUCTION

Yudi Yap, renowned as a charismatic vocalist, has been a time-honored household name in the Malaysian music scene, with a performing career spanning over a quarter of a century. Initially trained in Fine Arts, Yudi embarked on her musical journey during her student days with “Pertubuhan Muzik KITA” (激荡工作坊). In the 1990s, she served as the lead vocalist of the acclaimed trio “Alternative Music House” (另类音乐人) and also co-organized two editions of the influential campus songwriting competition, the “Halo Songwriting Contest” (海螺新韵奖). Since the early 2000s, Yudi has actively revived and interpreted classic songs from the Golden Era, earning widespread acclaim in performing arts circles, including performances in numerous Chinese and English musicals. She has spearheaded over ten nostalgic concert productions, including “Scent of Rose. Scent of Love” (玫瑰爱情香), “Good Old Tunes” (好老歌), “Lin Dai – The Star of Stars” (林黛. 绝代星海女皇), and “Modern Nanyang” (摩登南洋). In 2013, her concert “Kopisusu” (咖啡酥酥), deeply infused with Nanyang local flavor, resonated strongly with audiences, receiving eight nominations at the prestigious 11<sup>th</sup> Boh Cameronian Arts Awards, where Yudi won both “Best Solo Performance” and “Best Group Performance.” “Kopisusu” was also invited by the National Arts Council of Singapore as the opening performance for their annual “Silver Arts Festival” in 2014. Collaborating with the acclaimed artist Ah Niu, Yudi co-wrote numerous popular songs including “Peach Blossoms” (桃花朵朵开), “Lai Lai Song” (来来歌), and “The Swinging Hemline” (裙摆摇摇). Her original composition, “Strolling Underneath the Moonlight” (漫步月光下), won the Top 10 Songs of the Year at the Malaysia PWH Music Awards. Additionally, her song “Fa Hua” (髮花), the theme song for the TV drama “The Iron Lady” (女头家), received the Best Theme Song Award at the inaugural Golden Television Awards. Her classic track from the Alternative Music House era, “Mind Your Heart. Love Your Soul” (你要小心保护你的心), remains an iconic representation of her artistic identity. In 1992, representing Malaysia, Yudi participated in the “Sumitomo One World College Pop Festival” in Tokyo, winning the “Best Voice Award.” Starting in 2012, Yudi played a key role in the musical “Princess Wen Cheng

– The Light of Snowland” (文成公主-雪域上的光芒), performing at Singapore’s Esplanade Theatre in 2013 and touring in Xi’an, Busan, and Kuala Lumpur. Yudi has also been actively involved as a judge on numerous Malaysian TV music competitions, including NTV7’s “Who Will Win,” 8TV’s “Super Voice,” and Astro Classic Golden Melody Singing Contest over multiple seasons. Beyond singing, Yudi contributes as a writer, having authored music columns such as “Zhong Sheng Xuan Hua” (众声喧哗) in Sin Chew Daily (星洲日报), art columns in “New Tide” (新潮) magazine, and music articles in “Feng” (丰) magazine, frequently invited to publish pieces across various media outlets. From her early days with the “Pertubuhan Muzik KITA” to her classic performances, Yudi has released five solo albums including “Mind Your Heart. Love Your Soul” (你要小心保护你的心), “Shades of Passion” (情调), “Kopisusu” (咖啡酥酥), “Jalan Jalan” (惹兰), and “Then and Now” (那时·今日), as well as eight collaborative albums.

### THE INTERVIEW

HG<sup>1</sup>

*Firstly, thank you, Yudi, for making time out of your busy schedule for this interview. Could you introduce yourself to our audience? Where is your hometown, how did you embark on your musical journey, and how did you earn the affectionate nickname “The Nightingale of the South”?*

YY<sup>2</sup>

Hello, it’s a pleasure to participate in this interview! I hail from Bentong, a picturesque and culturally vibrant small town in the state of Pahang, Malaysia. Malaysia is a country renowned for its cultural diversity, consisting of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous peoples, resulting in a rich tapestry of languages and traditions. Growing up in a multilingual society, Malaysians typically speak several languages, including various Chinese dialects (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka), Malay, and English. This diverse linguistic background deeply influences my musical style, enabling me to perform songs in multiple languages.

Bentong is famous for its ginger, internationally recognized for its rich aroma and premium quality. It's also known for producing exceptional durians, particularly the Musang King, reputedly the best durian in the world. Growing up in this culturally rich environment naturally nurtured my interest in arts and music.

Reflecting on my musical journey, my initial focus wasn't music, but fine arts. I first studied Fine Arts in Kuala Lumpur. During the late 1980s, Malaysia saw a burgeoning wave of original songwriting, strongly influenced by students returning from Taiwan. This ignited a passionate movement for original music on campuses. My initial encounter with original music occurred at a performance event called "Ji Dang Zhi Ye" (A Night of Musical Excitement), coinciding with the establishment of "PertubuhanmuziKiTA Malaysia." Deeply inspired, a group of us began creating our own music.

While in college, I formed a music group called "Palette" with like-minded friends, mostly studying communications and commercial advertising. We wrote, played, and performed our own songs, gradually gaining experience on campus. After graduation, we continued creating music and independently funded our debut album, "Alternative Ballad Style." Despite financial constraints and having to seek support from family and friends, our passion for music carried us forward. This album, released in the early 1990s, marked my official entry into the music industry.

Throughout the 1990s, I primarily composed and performed original songs. In 2000, however, my musical direction shifted significantly. At the time, we hosted the "Halo Songwriting Contest" and operated a folk music café, which collaborated closely with the neighboring "Old China Café." During a Lantern Festival event, the café needed a classic oldies performance, and I was invited to perform. Taking a leap of faith, I dressed in a cheongsam and performed classic songs from old Shanghai and nostalgic era tunes. Surprisingly, the performance received immense praise, with audiences remarking that the cheongsam and vintage songs perfectly complemented each other. This experience opened the door to my career in classic oldies, eventually incorporating nostalgic Nanyang melodies.

The title "Nightingale of the South" was originally coined by a friend, a talented writer in the magazine industry renowned for his elegant writing and refined taste. After attending one of my performances, he poetically likened my voice to a nightingale gracefully soaring over southern lands, melodious, gentle, and filled with a unique Southeast Asian charm. Initially, I didn't pay much attention to the nickname, but in 2009, when I hosted a concert titled "Modern Nanyang" featuring classic Southeast Asian melodies, the nickname gained widespread recognition.

Malaysia's rich tapestry of cultures arises from its geographical location, bringing together Chinese, Malay, Indian, and various ethnic communities, creating a uniquely vibrant cultural atmosphere. Growing up in such an environment allowed me to naturally master multiple languages, enabling me to perform songs in Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, Malay, and English, across genres such as nostalgic Nanyang classics, Shanghai oldies, Hong Kong-era hits, and contemporary

pop songs. The multilingual environment in Malaysia equips us with exceptional language adaptability; many Malaysians effortlessly speak their mother tongues along with several other languages. Consequently, my musical style incorporates diverse cultural elements, enriching my performances. Perhaps this cross-cultural expression is precisely why my music resonates deeply with diverse audiences.

## HG

*I noticed an intriguing phrase on your Facebook profile: "歌我昇平@摩登南洋" (Singing My Harmony @ Modern Nanyang). This immediately reminded me of the Chinese idiom "歌舞升平" (songs and dances celebrating peace and prosperity). Your variation, however, seems to emphasize the individual and collective spirit within the times, creating a vibrant artistic energy. Could you elaborate on whether there is an underlying sense of local identity or "local consciousness" embedded here? Additionally, can you tell us more about the concept of "Modern Nanyang" and the characteristics of classic Nanyang-era music?*

## YY

The phrase "歌我昇平" (Singing My Harmony) on my Facebook profile holds deep significance. It indeed references the traditional idiom "歌舞升平", but I've intentionally shifted its focus toward the individual ("我", self) and harmony ("昇平"). Here, "我" symbolizes personal growth throughout my musical journey, encompassing artistic improvement and inner cultivation. As performers, our responsibility extends beyond merely entertaining our audience; each performance is an opportunity to surpass ourselves and achieve deeper levels of artistic expression.

To me, refining one's musical craft and inner self-development should progress hand-in-hand. Thus, "昇平" conveys a philosophy of achieving balance: "昇" denotes elevation or progress, while "平" symbolizes inner peace and harmony. Music is not just an external display but an internal spiritual journey. Every time I step onto the stage, I don't just perform a song; I deeply experience and reflect upon the emotions, cultures, and spirits encapsulated within the music. The interaction between performer and artwork shapes us mutually, influencing our inner worlds profoundly. My aspiration is not simply to sing, but through music, to experience life's profound truths and achieve genuine harmony—both artistically and spiritually.

The concept of "Modern Nanyang" formally emerged during my 2009 concert of the same name. "Modern" symbolizes contemporary perspectives, while "Nanyang" specifically references our unique regional culture. Combined, "Modern Nanyang" signifies reinterpreting classic songs rich in Nanyang characteristics through a contemporary lens.

Nanyang culture is distinctive, deeply shaped by the history of Chinese migration, and interwoven with Malay, Indian, and Western colonial cultural influences. This cultural blend creates a unique aesthetic. Nanyang music reflects this fusion, showcasing Eastern elegance complemented by

Western musical elements, expressed distinctively through melodies, arrangements, and performances.

Through “Modern Nanyang,” my goal is to revitalize classic Nanyang-era songs, allowing them to shine anew on contemporary stages. This is both a tribute to historical culture and a creative reimagining. By integrating modern performance styles, musical arrangements, and costume designs, I seek to connect these classic songs with contemporary tastes, introducing younger generations to the unique charm of Nanyang music.

Classic Nanyang-era music, also known as Nanyang oldies, primarily refers to Chinese songs popular among Southeast Asian Chinese communities from the 1930s through the 1980s. These songs typically feature:

1. Beautiful melodies and poetic lyrics: Many Nanyang oldies boast literary lyrics rich in poetic rhythm and subtle emotional expressions.
2. Fusion of multiple musical styles: Reflecting the region’s diverse culture, these songs blend elements from Shanghai-era music, Cantonese pop, Malay folk songs, and Indonesian Kroncong, creating a distinctly Southeast Asian charm intertwined with Eastern elegance.
3. Unique performing styles: Nanyang-era songs are often performed with the lyrical expressiveness characteristic of Chinese music, yet infused with Southeast Asia’s lively rhythms. Ethnic instruments are also frequently incorporated, enriching their overall distinctive appeal.

Given that classic Nanyang-era songs embody the memories and sentiments of Southeast Asian Chinese culture, my interpretations strive not only to faithfully capture their original essence but also to infuse them with contemporary resonance, ensuring their continued appreciation and transmission.

“Singing My Harmony” and “Modern Nanyang” are inherently interconnected. On one hand, I aim to continually elevate my musical skills alongside personal growth. On the other, I seek to contemporarily present classic Nanyang songs, allowing these culturally and historically rich works to remain vibrant and relevant. Music is more than mere performance—it is a cultural legacy and ongoing creation. This dual pursuit embodies my continuous artistic and spiritual journey.

## HG

*When we listen to your performances, we feel your songs not only evoke nostalgia but also radiate a rich multicultural charm, nourishing our hearts. I vividly remember the first time I encountered your music—it was during the APCMN Symposium (Harmony in Diversity, Celebrating Differences through Music) held in July 2023 at Universiti Putra Malaysia. Amid numerous academic pre-sentations, your talk and performance stood out, especially when you sang your original composition “Oldies in Me” (我的老唱盘). Upon hearing this song, I was immediately drawn into its vivid storytelling, feeling as if the elegant beauties of bygone eras gracefully approached from within the melody. Particularly at the song’s end, as everyone*

*sang along to the refrain “La-la-la, la-la-la-la,” I felt like itself was an endless Nanyang melody, bridging the past and present, awakening my inner curiosity and reflective spirit. Could you please share your creative process behind “Oldies in Me,” and the stories that inspired this unforgettable piece?*

## YY

“Oldies in Me” (我的老唱盘) represents the intersection of music and time, crafted over a span of ten years. It was only during the pandemic, while producing my fifth solo album, that I decided to officially record it. This song is not merely my tribute to Nanyang classics but also encapsulates musical history from Shanghai, Hong Kong, to Nanyang. Southeast Asian Chinese communities have deep emotional ties with music, with classic songs passed down through generations—songs our parents sang, our grandparents hummed, and which children learned naturally. Thus, “Oldies in Me” transcends being merely a song; it embodies collective memories spanning generations.

A unique aspect of this song is the inclusion of 27 legendary singers and actors from Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Nanyang. Each name carries its own historical narrative:

- Shanghai Stars
  - Li Xianglan (李香兰) – originally Yoshiko Yamaguchi, legendary international singer, best known for “Fragrance of the Night” (夜来香).
  - Bai Guang (白光) – famous for her magnetic voice, renowned for “If Without You” (如果没有你).
  - Zhou Xuan (周璇) – celebrated as the “Golden Voice,” famous for “The Wandering Songstress” (天涯歌女) and “Song of Four Seasons” (四季歌).
  - Yao Li (姚莉) – known as the “Silver Voice,” a foundational figure in Hong Kong Chinese pop music.
  - Gong Qiuxia (龚秋霞) – known for her gentle, expressive singing, famous for “Autumn Remembrance” (秋的怀念).
  - Wu Yingyin (吴莺音) – called the “Beauty of the Song World,” famous for “The Moon Sends My Longing to You from a Thousand Miles Away” (明月千里寄相思).
  - Hu Die (胡蝶) – legendary figure in both music and film, closely associated with the golden era of Shanghai cinema.
  - Zhang Fan (张帆), Ye Feng (叶枫), Bai Hong (白虹), Li Lihua (李丽华), and Ouyang Feiyin (欧阳飞莺) – their voices symbolize the golden era of Shanghai’s Chinese music.
  - Chen Yunshang (陈云裳) – an iconic figure in both music and film, contributing to Shanghai’s golden cultural era.
  - Rebecca Pan (潘迪华) – iconic jazz singer, dubbed the “Queen of Hong Kong Jazz.”
  - Zhang Lu (张露) – known for her relaxed and fluent singing style, famous for “Give Me a Kiss” (给我一个吻).



- Hong Kong Icons
  - Grace Chang (葛兰) – 1950s movie star, famous for “Winter Jasmine” (迎春花).
  - Tsui Ping (崔萍) – acclaimed for romantic ballads, best known for “Lover’s Tears” (情人的眼泪).
  - Tsin Ting (静婷), Gu Mei (顾媚), Liu Yun (刘韵), and Mona Fong (方逸华) – representatives of Hong Kong’s Chinese music from the 1950s to the 1960s.
  - Linda Lin Dai (林黛) and Ivy Ling Po (凌波) – legendary figures both in music and film.
- Nanyang Legends
  - Poon Sow Keng (潘秀琼) – a prominent figure in Southeast Asian Chinese music, famous for “Lover’s Tears” (情人的眼泪).
  - Chong Set Png (庄雪芳) – one of the iconic female singers in Nanyang Chinese music.
  - Rose Chan – an influential figure in Nanyang entertainment culture, beyond singing.
  - Wu Mei Ling (巫美玲) – legendary name representing an important chapter in Nanyang entertainment.

In “Oldies in Me,” these legendary figures serve as cultural symbols connecting the musical histories of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Nanyang, preserving collective memories of the Southeast Asian Chinese.

“Oldies in Me” narrates not only my musical journey but also the evolution of popular Chinese music from the 1930s through the 1960s:

1. Shanghai Era (1930s-40s): Modern Chinese popular music originated during this period, with the rise of film scores and a vibrant nightlife scene, producing timeless classics that defined the genre.
2. Hong Kong Era (1950s-60s): With a migration of Shanghai musicians, Hong Kong emerged as the new hub for Chinese popular music, continuing the traditions of Shanghai while introducing new influences and styles.
3. Nanyang Era (1927-70s): Beginning in the late 1920s, Southeast Asian Chinese communities began adopting and merging traditional Chinese musical elements with local Southeast Asian cultures. This fusion evolved throughout the 1950s-70s, forming a distinctive Nanyang Chinese music style that became emblematic of the region’s unique cultural blend.

Nanyang music uniquely blends multilingual and multicultural elements, often mixing Mandarin, Malay, and English songs on the same album, reflecting natural cultural integration.

Nostalgia deeply characterizes Southeast Asian Chinese communities, and music remains a direct conduit for expressing such sentiment. Our emotional connection to these classic songs maybe even deeper than listeners in Hong Kong or mainland China, as these melodies continually accompany our lives, forming shared generational memories. The audience’s humming of “La-la-la, la-la-la-la” symbolizes the emotional resonance “Oldies in Me” seeks to convey, bridging past and present, connecting cultures and eras.

During my musical career, I was fortunate to meet several legendary figures

1. Bai Guang’s husband, whom I met in Malaysia, designed her gravesite with piano keys to symbolize her lifelong dedication to music after her passing.
2. I met Yao Li in Malaysia during Hong Kong’s 1990s resurgence of classic singers and captured a cherished photograph with her.
3. I met Tsin Ting in Kuala Lumpur, where she had a close-up meeting with global fans.
4. In Wu Mei Ling’s later years, she quietly lived in a nursing home, her voice unchanged as she effortlessly sang “Midnight Kisses” (午夜香吻).

These experiences profoundly deepened my appreciation of musical heritage and the enduring power of music to transcend time. Thus, “Oldies in Me” is more than a song; it’s an encapsulation of cultural heritage, chronicling the evolution and influence of Chinese music across Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Nanyang. My hope is that this song not only evokes historical appreciation but also inspires renewed interest in Nanyang classics, ensuring their vibrancy continues in contemporary cultural memory.

## HG

*Indeed, Yudi, your songs uniquely embody a profound blend of history, memory, and emotion, encapsulating the essence of local culture and deeply touching our hearts. As an international student from Taiyuan, Shanxi, China, I believe music transcends boundaries. I recall hearing the song “Proclaiming My Love for You in the Name of Malaysian Weather” (用马来西亚的天气来说爱你) when I was very young. Later, during my middle school years, Ah Niu’s “Peach Blossoms” (桃花朵朵开) played everywhere in the streets. Back then, I would line up at the school cafeteria during lunchtime, and this song felt like an official signal that lunch was ready. When I arrived too early and the cafeteria hadn’t yet started serving, the song wouldn’t play. However, once the first lyrics— “I’m waiting here for your return, waiting for you to see the peach blossoms bloom...” —echoed through the speakers, even the lunch lady’s serving spoon would rhythmically rise and fall in sync with the music. Now, having traveled thousands of miles to study in Malaysia, encountering this song again in such a personal way and meeting its lyricist, Yudi, feels like a magical, destined connection. It reminds me of the profound yet seamless passage of time. I would love to hear from you, Yudi, about your experience creating this song.*

## YY

I feel honored to have co-created “Peach Blossoms” with Ah Niu (Chen Qingxiang), with whom I share a long-standing musical connection. Ah Niu was the winner of the second edition of the Halo Songwriting Contest (海螺新韵奖). At that time, we were like his older siblings, supporting him in his growth and musical exploration. After the competition, our production company closely nurtured promising talents like him, and Ah Niu gradually stood out, eventually signing with Rock Records and becoming a prominent figure in Malaysia’s Chinese music scene.

During the production of his first three albums, I was always there for Ah Niu—not just as a friend and mentor but also as his creative partner. His musical style, filled with humor and relatable everyday life, often led to spontaneous creations. For instance, his hit “Look Over Here, Girl” (对面的女孩走过来) emerged naturally, and I helped polish the lyrics for smoother flow.

As for “Peach Blossoms,” Ah Niu approached me one day asking if I could help write the lyrics. The creation process flowed effortlessly, and I completed the lyrics within half a day, almost as if inspiration had struck instantly. Ah Niu’s melody carried a distinct Nanyang charm, and the cheerful tune combined with playful, uplifting lyrics quickly made “Peach Blossoms” a celebrated hit in Chinese-speaking communities.

Upon its release, “Peach Blossoms” achieved enormous popularity not only in Malaysia and Taiwan but also became a collective memory for an entire generation in mainland China. The song’s widespread acclaim led to its performance at CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala in 2007, introducing this Nanyang-originated song to an even broader audience across the Chinese-speaking world.

Sometimes, jokingly, I tell Ah Niu, “My name appeared in the credits of the Spring Festival Gala! Did you see it?” Though lyricists’ names aren’t always remembered, I deeply appreciate the critical role composers and lyricists play in a song’s success. Ah Niu has evolved from a youthful artist in his early twenties into a mature musician, husband, and father, with his music reflecting this personal growth. It has been a privilege to witness and accompany his journey, and I’m grateful for the connections brought about by this song, allowing us to meet and reconnect through music across different times and spaces.

## HG

*Yudi, you truly embody the versatility of an all-around performer. I vividly recall your captivating performance at the Tests & Us 3 book launch, where you sang several songs, especially “Kopisusu,” whose title itself seemed to bridge cultural gaps. The Malaysian teachers and students enthusiastically swayed to its rhythm, creating an incredibly vibrant atmosphere. It felt as though we were savoring the song’s imagery of love and life, discovering familiarity and mutual understanding within the exotic flavor. Could you please share more about the meaning behind “Kopi Susu”?*

## YY

“Kopi Susu,” which translates to “coffee with milk” in Malay, is not merely a beverage but a deeply symbolic element of Nanyang culture. Nanyang coffee is uniquely roasted, traditionally using vegetable oil or butter, imparting an intensely fragrant aroma, then mixed with sweetened condensed milk to create the smooth, sweet yet balanced taste of Kopi Susu. This coffee is beloved not only by the Chinese community but also integral to Malay and Indian daily life, making it a shared cultural symbol across ethnic groups in the Nanyang

region. Thus, even the title of the song embodies cross-cultural integration, symbolizing the harmonious coexistence of diverse communities in Southeast Asia.

“Kopi Susu” originates from an ancient Indonesian folk tune, its original creators lost to history. The earliest recorded versions are characterized by their rough audio quality and heavy dialect, indicating a heritage potentially older than existing recordings. During the 1950s and 1960s, the rise of radio and vinyl records popularized numerous renditions of this song. The most influential interpretation came from the legendary Malaysian Malay singer Saloma, whose charming and captivating vocal style ensured the song’s enduring popularity across generations. When I first encountered “Kopi Susu” during my research into Nanyang musical traditions, its melody immediately captured me. I felt inspired to reinterpret it, recognizing it as more than just a folk tune—it represents multiple layers of Nanyang cultural imagery: a children’s song passed down orally, a discreetly romantic love song, and even playful flirtation.

In Malay culture, the “Pantun” is a traditional four-line poem, often employed to convey emotions, wisdom, or humor. “Kopi Susu” is rooted in this poetic tradition, rich in metaphors and symbols typical of Malay subtle expression. For instance, the lyrics mention a striped cat running fastest, metaphorically representing the strongest or most admirable man winning the affection of the desired woman. This indirect yet playful approach made the song versatile enough to serve both as a romantic tune and a children’s song. Interestingly, variations in lyrics across different performances allowed the song to shift from flirtatious romance to cheerful children’s melody. This dual nature enhanced its widespread popularity, with many Malay children growing up singing it without fully understanding its deeper meanings, simply enjoying its memorable melody.

Performing “Kopi Susu” always creates a distinctive atmosphere. Whether at the Tests & Us 3 book launch or other concerts, this song effortlessly engages audiences, drawing them into the joyful spirit and cultural vitality of Nanyang. Beyond being a song about coffee, it reflects the openness, simplicity, and humor of Southeast Asian society. Historically, emotional expressions were often subtle, making this playful, indirect flirtation a cherished aspect of social interaction. Today, its lively tune and charming lyrics transcend generations, continuing to resonate deeply.

Thus, “Kopi Susu” is not merely a folk song but a melody connecting the diverse cultures of Nanyang. Originating from Indonesia, adapted into a classic by Saloma in Malaysia, and continually reinterpreted, it has become integral to Nanyang music. It symbolizes multicultural fusion, embodying shared memories among Chinese, Malay, and Indonesian communities. Like the rich, aromatic flavor of Nanyang coffee, the song’s melody and lyrics warm hearts across borders, making it an indispensable part of Southeast Asia’s musical heritage.

## HG

*During traditional festivals like Mid-Autumn and Lunar New Year, I’ve had the privilege of attending several of your*

concerts, Yudi. In October 2023, my friends and I experienced your performance beneath swaying coconut palms on a moonlit Mid-Autumn evening. The luminous moon seemed to traverse oceans, illuminating distant memories and vivid dreams. Your familiar melodies, infused with the moon's serene glow, stirred our emotions deeply, evoking endless reflections on life and love. Then, in February 2024, while celebrating the Lantern Festival abroad, your radiant voice again transported me into an enchanting dreamlike state. For instance, your song "New Shoes, Old Shoes" inspired thoughts of shoes as metaphors—symbols of journeys, companionship, and the passage of time, each step narrating unique and timeless stories. Meanwhile, the tender melodies of "Winter Jasmine" gently awakened a sense of renewal, embedding the essence of springtime into our hearts. I'm curious about how you cultivate such elegance and deep emotional resonance. How do you seamlessly blend your voice, expressions, gestures, and audience interactions?

**YY**

Performing isn't merely an act of entertainment—it's a profound form of communication. Each song builds a bridge connecting the performer and the audience, intertwining personal memories and cultural heritage. When I choose a song, it often resonates with my personal experiences, such as "New Shoes, Old Shoes" or "A Greeting Card." These songs go beyond pleasing melodies, encapsulating life's wisdom, growth, and interpersonal bonds. "New Shoes, Old Shoes" especially symbolizes life transitions and the passage of time, reminding me that each step imprints memories of our journeys. Consequently, when performing this song, my voice naturally reveals vulnerability, reflecting nostalgia for the past and anticipation for the future. Similarly, "Winter Jasmine" softly awakens dormant emotions, gently embedding the warmth of spring into the listeners' hearts. Each classic song embodies emotional depth and cultural continuity, eventually becoming collective memories across generations.

People often ask how I manage my voice, facial expressions, body language, and audience interactions effortlessly. My answer is authenticity rather than deliberate choreography. Every performer assumes various roles on stage. For instance, portraying Princess Wen Cheng required embodying historical authenticity through precise movements and attire. However, when performing songs deeply intertwined with my life and emotions, I prefer a natural approach, fully integrating music with personal experience rather than merely acting. Genuine affection and understanding of the song foster effortless emotional immersion. When singing old Shanghai songs or classic Nanyang melodies, I don't consciously imitate them; instead, I share precious memories like recounting stories to a friend. This authenticity makes performances lively and genuine, naturally guiding my expressions, smiles, and gestures alongside emotional shifts in the music. Such profound connection stems not from rigorous training but from daily experiences—understanding music, reflecting on life, and loving culture—which all manifest through my singing.

Each song resonates differently with listeners, highlighting music's magical nature. Some might simply enjoy the melodic beauty, while others perceive deeper emotions and themes. The listener's background, experiences, and emotional resonance determine how profoundly music touches them. Similar to appreciating art, the interpretation depends greatly on personal experiences and perspectives. Thus, songs may merely be melodies to some or profound life reflections to others. As a performer, I guide listeners toward discovering Nanyang music or appreciating Shanghai classics, but ultimately, each individual derives their own meaning from the music.

Just as a thousand readers imagine a thousand different Hamlets, a song can evoke countless unique impressions among listeners. My role transcends mere performance—it is to offer a soulful journey, encouraging listeners to feel, remember, and contemplate, transforming music into an art form that profoundly touches hearts.

This explains why many audience members often remark after concerts: "Listening to your songs feels like experiencing a spiritual spa, bringing tranquility and introspection." Perhaps this epitomizes music's power—it temporarily shelters us from the world's noise, immersing us in melodic emotion. Whether during traditional festival concerts or special performances, every song I sing creates a meaningful dialogue with the audience. Music is more than auditory pleasure—it conveys deep emotions, and transcends cultures, geography, and generations, weaving together our shared stories. As a singer, my role is simply to build this bridge, enabling each listener to discover their unique stories and emotional resonance within the melodies.

**HG**

*I've noticed your concerts have a unique charm—fully engaging multiple senses of the audience. Besides the auditory and visual delights, even the sense of taste enjoys a special treat. The rich essence of Nanyang seems to linger and overflow from our lips and tongues. At events featuring your performances, we often savor coconut candies infused with an artistic aura, bringing tangible satisfaction. As the candy's flavor settles, sweetness fills our hearts uniquely. Many of us fondly remember chewing these delightful coconut candies while listening to your captivating voice during concerts. Could you share the story behind these coconut candies?*

**YY**

To me, coconut candy isn't merely a delicacy from the Nanyang region; it's a precious memory and a timeless emotional connection. My journey into making coconut candy started because it embodies cherished childhood memories of crafting candies with my mother. This taste is a legacy she passed down to us, and I strive to keep that legacy alive. Growing up, my family wasn't wealthy enough to afford imported chocolates or sweets, so during festivals, my mother would lovingly make coconut candies by hand. In those days, sweets were rare treats, savored cautiously and saved carefully to prolong their special sweetness. After my mother



passed away, I returned to my hometown, determined to revive this tradition. My friends strongly supported this idea, agreeing that coconut candy is more than just a confection—it is a meaningful piece of Nanyang culture deserving preservation. Thus, in 2016, the artisanal coconut candy brand “Yudi Mama’s” was officially born, offering handcrafted candies that spread warmth and tradition.

Our coconut candies are made from the freshest, most authentic Nanyang ingredients, preserving the purity of traditional craftsmanship. The key ingredients include rich coconut milk freshly squeezed from coconuts, maltose for a smooth texture, and brown sugar that adds deeper, aromatic sweetness compared to refined white sugar. To enhance local authenticity, we incorporate distinctive regional specialties, transforming our candies into a genuine taste of Nanyang:

- **Bentong Ginger:** Bentong, famous for its pungent and flavorful ginger, adds a subtle spiciness to the candies, creating a warming sensation.
- **Durian:** Known worldwide, especially Bentong’s Musang King variety, its rich, creamy fruitiness enriches our coconut candies.
- **Sesame Seeds:** Providing aromatic depth and a delightful texture, sesame seeds round out the candy’s complexity.

Blending tradition and regional ingredients, these coconut candies represent more than just a treat—they carry forward cultural memories.

Apart from the flavor, we’ve meticulously designed our candy wrappers featuring traditional Malaysian Batik patterns. These colorful and intricate designs turn each candy into a miniature piece of art, making the tasting experience ceremonious and culturally resonant.

The sweetness of coconut candy aligns harmoniously with the warmth of music, inspiring me to integrate the two. As the candy melts on the tongue and familiar melodies fill the air, a sense of blissful comfort emerges naturally.

At concerts, distributing coconut candies fosters wonderful interactions. Some audience members cherish the candy, holding it carefully before finally indulging, while others eagerly unwrap it, recalling joyous childhood festival memories. Such interactions transform concerts into comprehensive aesthetic experiences where music, taste, and visuals intertwine vividly. For international students or overseas Chinese, this taste often evokes memories of home. Many have shared how the candies remind them of hometown celebrations, their mother’s cooking, or childhood’s purest joys. If one coconut candy can evoke nostalgia and provide warmth abroad, it fulfills my greatest aspiration.

Coconut candy is thus more than a sweet—it encapsulates familial warmth, Nanyang culture, festive memories, and my longing for childhood and maternal love. Through music, I aim to share this sweetness widely; through coconut candies, I wish for people to taste the rich stories of Nanyang. In Malaysia’s warm climate, listening to classic melodies and savoring coconut candy, perhaps you’ll recall a familiar place or unforgettable moment. This magical convergence of taste and music captures time, enhances memories, and perpetuates culture.

## HG

*Indeed, the ability to create and perceive beauty is essential. Speaking of your hometown, Bentong, your music inspired me to visit Moo Cottage (牛背小居), your thoughtfully crafted homestay. Among the homestays I’ve experienced in Malaysia, Moo Cottage stands out distinctly with its unique cultural charm and imaginative design. (Allow me to describe my experience: It was a serene afternoon, with warm sunlight filtering gently through the leaves, dancing along the long corridors. Verdant potted plants—aloes, bird’s nest ferns, wandering jews, periwinkles, dracaenas, bamboo lilies, bromeliads, and countless others—lined my pathway, evoking a spiritual garden nurturing timeless dreams and tropical allure. As I ascended the vintage wooden stairs, I silently cherished the fleeting, youthful moments, feeling profound contentment in the simplicity of the present. Reaching the second floor, I encountered the charming wooden sign “Moo Cottage,” whose playful lettering drew my gaze toward nearby Niu Bei Mountain. A few steps away, a washbasin crafted in the shape of piano keys surprised and delighted me. Opening the faucet with one hand and gently touching the keys with the other, I felt an inner melody stir. Nearby railings shaped like musical staff seemed to capture these melodies, composing songs that lingered warmly in the heart. Every corner of the living room spoke softly of elegance and nostalgia. A unique vintage radio whisked me back to late-night high school moments spent listening to broadcasts, while shelves filled with charming bowls and jars evoked simple daily pleasures. My eyes rested upon posters and photographs of Yudi, vividly bringing back memories of music, classic Nanyang-era tunes, and the touching sentiments from the symposium I’d attended. I was suddenly struck by life’s dreamlike quality and the interconnectedness of musical worlds. Experiencing just the right songs in a foreign land at the perfect time seemed like a wondrous fate. That night, I slept peacefully on the “Moo Moo Tatami,” lulled by refreshing summer breezes, cricket serenades, and frog choruses—a rural symphony new to my urban-raised ears. Fetching water later, I noticed a curious cat quietly observing me from a tabletop corner. The gentle insect hum accompanied me into sleep, only for a rooster’s crow to awaken me hours later. Surrounded by nature, I temporarily forgot everyday worries and disturbances.)*

*Yudi, I’d like to know how you infused Moo Cottage with such distinct meanings through space, arrangements, and nature. Do these designs reflect specific sentiments toward your hometown or personal life stories? When you see the posters and photos displayed at Moo Cottage, what memories and emotions surface? How do you view the relationship between these visuals and the homestay’s overall atmosphere? Does this space perhaps mirror your inner world and creative inspirations as an artist?*

## YY

Moo Cottage wasn’t intentionally created as an artistic space; it emerged naturally upon my return to my hometown. Initially, I simply sought a personal refuge—a place

to rest during life's journeys. Over time, however, it organically evolved into its current form. When friends visited and expressed awe at its unique charm, I looked around and realized, "Oh, it has already become this!" Moo Cottage was built as an extension of my family home, not deliberately styled to reflect traditional aesthetics. Instead, it gradually took shape based on my own values and vision. Perhaps due to my years spent traveling, I desired to create a space that authentically represented me—a place born of spontaneity, freedom, and diverse influences. Its beauty unfolded naturally, without a predetermined blueprint or rush. In this space, I've learned to lose myself in time, realizing that true beauty emerges unexpectedly from life's gradual unfolding.

It's often said that one's home reflects their personality. If my voice and music convey certain impressions, perhaps Moo Cottage does too—it doesn't intentionally cater to any particular aesthetic but finds a natural balance between spontaneity and careful intention. I love creatively repurposing materials already available. For instance, the living room's musical-staff railing is crafted from materials salvaged from a TV production set; the unique leaf-shaped lamps were similarly adapted. Every wooden plank, lamp, and piece of furniture is something I encountered by chance, each subtly enriching the space's personality. Yet, certain elements demanded persistence, like the piano-key washbasin. Though initially misunderstood by the craftsman, my insistence brought this distinctive feature to life. While some aspects emerged effortlessly, my pursuit of beauty sometimes knew no bounds.

Moo Cottage isn't traditionally "designed" but rather a collage reflecting life's unfolding. Every object added is a testament to the moments lived. Guests sometimes remark feeling transported to another dimension when entering the living room, or hearing whispers of time as sunlight streams through wooden shutters. Such experiences are delightful surprises—the intrinsic charm of a naturally developed space, rather than meticulously crafted aesthetics.

Moo Cottage prominently displays my music posters, vintage radios, and nostalgic items. Some visitors interpret these as intentional self-expression, but they're more accurately traces of time—connections to music and past moments. Certain photographs, once taken for TV shows, remain displayed simply because I never removed them. Occasionally, I glance at these old images, greeting my past self warmly. Previous stages, songs, and identities have all gently imprinted this space, not as static reminders but as dynamic reflections evolving with time.

Music's universal connectivity mirrors the emotional resonance visitors feel upon hearing familiar melodies abroad. Similarly, Moo Cottage transcends mere accommodation, becoming an environment of relaxation and self-reconnection. Some guests fall asleep listening to rainfall, experiencing nature's pure symphony. Others reminisce about youthful nights spent with radios or spontaneously hum beloved classics. Just as the music resonates differently for each listener, the space offers personalized emotional experiences depending on individual sentiments. This defines Moo Cottage's significance: anyone can create their own sanctuary, their

personal garden—just as I've cultivated Moo Cottage. Such beauty isn't foreseeable; it gradually blossoms through life's passage, embodying the magical creativity inherent in everyday living.

## HG

*Yudi, as a singer deeply rooted in cultural expression, I truly admire the unique aura you radiate. What particularly draws me is the profound cultural depth and sincerity conveyed through your voice, coupled with your effortless ability to make those around you feel instantly comfortable, as though meeting an old friend. Both in your music and everyday life, you have the talent for transforming beautiful moments into unique forms of art, filled with warmth and meticulous care. I'm curious to learn about your insights on art, the world, and life. Does your distinctive artistic perspective and life philosophy fuel your creative expression?*

## YY

I've never viewed myself simply as a singer. Rather, I consider myself a "singer of humanity," using music as a medium to share emotions, reflections, and compassion. Many people first encountered me through the song "Mind Your Heart, Love Your Soul." Though I didn't write this song, it became a core theme in my life, accompanying me through various stages. Structured into five sections, this song poetically captures life's journey:

The first section addresses newborns, reminding them to cherish their hearts from the start. The second speaks to adults caught in life's routines, cautioning against losing oneself in daily busyness. The third section is for lovers, questioning whether one can retain inner authenticity when fully immersed in love. The fourth portrays life's explorations and confusions, challenging listeners to reflect deeply on their direction. Finally, it addresses life's ultimate questions, emphasizing the importance of lasting connections and shared humanity.

This song resonates deeply with humanistic care, urging us to value our inner selves and avoid losing our way. Music's true power extends beyond auditory pleasure—it offers emotional companionship and life guidance. I feel fortunate to have encountered such meaningful music, serving as a continual reminder and reflection point throughout my life.

Everyone enters this world with unique lessons to learn. Whether scholars, performers, parents, or everyday people, our primary task is to complete ourselves. Often, we live by others' expectations, seeking external validation. However, the deeper we journey through life, the clearer it becomes that our true purpose is to live authentically, not to meet worldly expectations. The goal is self-awareness and personal growth, beyond conventional measures of success.

Throughout my musical journey—from campus songwriting to pop, classics, and spiritual music—people questioned my changing artistic direction. Yet, I see all genres as interconnected; music, at its core, is simply a form of communication, bridging human connections. Life inherently involves interaction, each encounter offering lessons,



reminders, or reflections. Approaching life as a “learning journey” transforms experiences into opportunities for growth. Releasing attachments makes life a true playground filled with exploration and discovery.

I believe the soul is eternal, untouched by life’s transient storms—a fundamental truth guiding my life. Our existence isn’t defined by external achievements or hardships but by the growth, experiences, and awakenings we undergo. As a child, I frequently pondered life’s big questions, searching tirelessly for definitive answers. Yet, as time passed, I realized that life’s wisdom unfolds naturally, teaching us to discern essentials from trivialities. Gradually, we discard unnecessary attachments, learning to remain emotionally stable and maintain our smiles even after hardships.

I’m not inherently carefree; I experience my own doubts and struggles. Yet, continual self-awareness prevents stagnation. Challenges may persist, but my perspective on them has evolved. Realizing the world’s transient nature shifts our focus toward inner growth, revealing life’s inherent freedom.

To me, art isn’t deliberately crafted—it’s the organic outflow of life experiences. I avoid confining myself to particular musical styles or expressions. Whether music, spatial design, or daily living, my aim is to infuse the world with beauty, warmth, and humanistic values.

Everyone can create their own art—their life itself. When you engage with the world wholeheartedly, creating beauty through love, your existence becomes art. Regardless of external changes, always guard your heart. True happiness isn’t found in external approval but in inner awakening.