

Not just Anywhere: An Interview with Abdul Talib

From 1976 to 1989, Abdul Talib was the bassist of Tania, a rock band known for its colourful and flashy performances, with costumes and make-up that channeled the glam rock movement of the 1970s. Formed in 1976, their legendary gigs in Pebbles Bar at the Singapura Forum Hotel (formerly Hotel Singapura Intercontinental) helped to bring live music out of the doldrums amidst the many restrictions and bans the Singapore authorities slapped on the scene in the early 1970s.

From the late 1980s till the late 2000s, the founding members of Tania—including Mutalib himself, briefly—owned and ran the Anywhere lounge at Tanglin Shopping Centre, which hosted indie bands such as Corporate Toil, Opposition Party and the reggae-inspired IGTA. This is an edited transcript of an interview with him in April 2022. It was conducted as part of the research for the exhibition *Home Grooves: A History of Singapore's Live Music Venues* at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

Take us back in time to your first performance with Tania. Where was it and how old were you?

Tania started in 1976. We started at the Asia Hotel when I was almost 18. I was still in my pre-U—I was at St Patrick's (Secondary School, which then had pre-university classes). I went to school in the mornings, and when we met in the evening, it was party time. (laughs) It was a bit impromptu—we were given the opportunity and we started the band.

We had my cousin, the late Zul (Sutan, guitarist and band leader), myself, and another drummer who left later. We had a manager who said, "I've got a gig at Asia Hotel and we need to have another guy sing." And it so happened that evening, we were down at the famous Newton Circus and we bumped into (vocalist) Alban (de Souza). We asked him, "Ban, what are you doing?" "Nothing." "Looking for a job?" "Sounds great." So the three of us decided to go down for the audition together.

We didn't even have any practice. On the audition day itself, we actually said, "What songs are you going to sing? Ban, you just tell us what song." We just tried out two or three songs. In fact, it was more of a practice session. We came half an hour early, but it just so happened that the manager who was auditioning us was sitting in the bar together with our manager at the time, Kelvin Lim. We just flowed on and we went from one song to another. In those days, most of the lounge songs were pretty standard and Alban sang a lot of standards, so we just went on and played with it. And voilà, we got a job.

We stayed there for three months before we were offered another place. The manager, Kelvin Lim, offered to put us in the famous Pebbles Bar in the Singapura Forum. That was where Tania really made its name. At that time, the disco era was coming in and the nightclub scene was dying out. A lot of the live bands were struggling, and they were big six-piece or seven-piece bands, so they were looking for jobs. But no lounge can accommodate six- or seven-piece bands, so we were the lucky ones. We went to the Singapura Forum, and we started there. We started a scene where it was more of a lounge act, and Alban being such a joker, he liked to tease people here and there.

The makeup was very much an accident. In fact, Kelvin said, "Hey, why don't you guys try something different?" We didn't talk about using makeup. Then he showed us a picture of this singer, Roy Wood. He had his face painted up with a lightning bolt and star in very thick make-up. It looked bizarre. The guy had long hair and all that, so Alban was not keen at all. He was the last person to think that he would wear makeup. But Zul said, "I'm game for it. Let's try it out." So we bought some makeup crayons and tried putting it on. It was just light makeup — there was no mascara, eyelashes, lipstick, or anything of that sort. We just put a

star on our faces to see what the crowd's reaction would be. When the lights turned on, you could see it shimmering a bit because the crayon was a bit shiny—not glittering, just a shine. There were no bad comments or anything like that. So over the next few days, we just kept on trying.

The glitter was really accidental, too. We had showgirls coming from Tropicana, Penthouse Club (at Cuppage) and Neptune. When they went on stage, they had glitter—shining, really glittering stuff. So when they came in, they greeted you, hugged you and all that, maybe gave you a peck on the cheek. One of the girls came and hugged Alban and gave him a peck on the cheek, and the glitter accidentally stuck to it. So when he went up on stage, it looked really different, so Zul said “Hey, why not?” The showgirls said, “You guys look good with glitter on your faces. I’ll tell you what we’re gonna do for you guys. What time do you start? We start later than that, but if you’re willing to do it early, we’ll come over and help you put on the makeup.” So that was how it started. They brought the glitter and all that, and one thing led to another. It became Tania putting on makeup. It just happened like that, and people liked it.

A lot of the clubs were closing down, and the lounge act was coming up, so we happened to be in the right place at the right time. I guess the music plays a part too. We were into rock and roll, playing everything from Beatles to Led Zeppelin, but all in the lounge act. I think in those days, the crowd were like, “No worries. We’re out to have a good time. Let’s go out and drink and be happy.” Obviously, we also had the New Zealand Armed Forces guys and the British army guys who were looking for places to drink and sing along. So that was how it caught on. We also had tour groups coming in from Australia and even the Japanese coming in to watch our lead singer dressed up with lipstick and makeup, jumping from table to table and making people happy.

We were at Pebbles Bar for almost seven years, until 1983-84. When we wanted to move out, we weren’t sure where to go. Somebody actually came up to tell us he had a place that he thought we could make a new joint at the Seaview Hotel (near East Coast Road). We moved down to the Seaview Hotel and Tania had our third gig there. That place became a happening place. It was evolution, and people were coming back again because the disco was there. Then they wanted the show band in the lounge to come back into the club scene. That was when things like Rainbow, Peppermint Park and Top Ten came up. That caught on because after a while people started to say, “Hey, I want to dance to live music. I don’t want to dance just from the disc.” People were looking for something new again, which was where the lounge act came out. We had Energy and Speedway, which was a lounge band that came up to be a show band. So the show band era came in and we had the Filipino bands coming in on that.

Going into the 1980s, what sort of opportunities were there for bands in the live music scene?

We had one opportunity (to tour overseas) but Alban was not ready to travel out. The Lettermen (a vocal group) came in from the US (coming to Singapore). They performed at the Hyatt for two or three nights and someone must have brought them to Pebbles Bar, and they saw us. In fact, Alban found out the lead singer’s name, which was Tony Butala, and Alban went up to him, dragged him up on stage and jumped around with him, making him sing and have fun. I wouldn’t say Alban made fun of him. I will never forget the moment when he actually slipped down and rolled Tony Butala’s pants right up to his knees to see whether he had heavy legs, and the crowd just loved it.

Tony actually said, “Hey guys, we are performing at the Hyatt. I know you guys can’t come and see us at night, so why didn’t you come for the afternoon matinee?” After that night,

Tony asked, "Hey, I know you guys are working at night. Come and see our show. We'll make arrangements for you guys to come and see the matinee." So we went to see their matinee show at the Hyatt, and he mentioned that the previous night, he had been down at one of the hotels on Orchard Road and saw some guys performing and was really taken by it. After that night, he actually came over again (to our show) for a second night. He said, "Look, would you guys like to travel with us and become curtain raisers (our opening act)?" You don't know how excited we were. But at that time, Alban was not ready because he was going through a rough patch. So Tony said, "I tell you what, we're going to the Philippines and even Hong Kong and Japan, so on the way back, we're stopping in Singapore, so let us know. We are serious about this."

Zul and myself felt that it was the opportunity of a lifetime. However, at that time, there were the bands The Xperiment—(it's lead vocalist was) Joe Chandran—and The Adapters, who were doing a Europe stint. They had a very good manager called K. V. John. K. V. John was a former DJ and he was sending all these bands across Europe, they were going club to club. In Europe, we were told that it wasn't something like in Singapore where you actually worked in a club for at least three months. There, you were on the road. You had a big bus with all your equipment and you would be going from club to club, spending up to two or three nights in one club before moving on. So they had that touring stuff in Europe, but we were not game for it.

We continued at Pebbles until the scene changed when the club scene came, with clubs like Rainbow, Top Ten, Peppermint Park—people were looking for shows and that kind of thing. I think Peppermint Park had a big impact, because people like Anita Sarawak (a well-known Singapore singer at the time) performed there, as well as the environment, the ambience and all that. Top Ten was very different, because you had people like (American R&B group) The Commodores performing there, and Rainbow also had a totally different scene—every club had their own identity.

How did Anywhere lounge come about?

(Tania performed at Peppermint Park for a while.) After Peppermint Park, we had a gig at The Federal hotel in KL. When we came back, we were looking for a place and found a club called Midnight Express down in Katong somewhere. Obviously, we wanted to move back to the Orchard Road scene because that's where the scene was. And at Top Ten, the owner couldn't offer us full time but he didn't mind taking us in (on the off-days of their resident bands). So we were considering this.

Then came an opportunity at a jazz club, Bistro Toulouse Lautrec, at Tanglin Shopping Centre. And the two partners had a fallout. The partners (Dr Goh Poh Seng and Peter Bader) owned Rainbow and Bistro Toulouse Lautrec. So when the two partners had a fallout, they split up, that was when Top Ten (founded by Bader) actually came up. So (Dr Goh) decided to quit (with Bistro Toulouse Lautrec), and there was no more jazz club. He gave it back (to the landlord), and I saw the opportunity. This was a club that was fully renovated and all done up, with a bar, counters and everything, and the only things they didn't have were a (boss), equipment, and of course the staff and the business to run.

I had a very good friend who had mentioned that he really wanted to open up a pub together with (us) during the Seaview Hotel days. So I approached him—his name is Vincent (Ayathuray) by the way, a very good friend—and we met for supper after one of our gigs. I told him, "We've got the equipment. All you need is really good management and some capital to actually kickstart the club." So that was how Anywhere started. And the name Anywhere is also coincidental. Like when we wanted to go out for *makan*, we say, 'Eh, where you want to go?' "Anywhere la, anywhere." So that started it. It rings a bell, (it's) very

easy for people to remember (the name). Very easy for people to say, “Eh, where you want to go tonight?” “Anywhere.” So that started the whole thing and it caught on. Everything was ready; we had a manager who used to be with the Dynasty Hotel, who was running the lounge, and we took him in, and he set it up. We had a couple of partners and everybody chipped in for the capital, and voilà.

Things started running like that. And the funny thing was that, because we were new, when we applied for the licence, the authorities only gave us until 12 o’clock. And the owner of Top Ten (said) it was a waste if the club closed at midnight, since there would still be another three hours of partying. So (for those) in the crowd who still wanted to continue drinking, why not have the band come over to Top Ten and continue to perform? So we did that for the next two months until we got the full licence to operate until two in the morning.

Tania performed at Anywhere from 1989 until 2008, which was quite long. Zul actually called me up and said “Hey, why don’t you come over, because our final night will be (on) such and such (a night).” I asked what happened and if there was a problem. Zul said, “No, no, no, I decided I want to quit, I don’t want to manage any more clubs or anything of that sort,” and the guys agreed. So I actually went to the closure of Anywhere. But the band carried on, because the *makan* place down in Orchard Towers, Dennis, changed hands and came up to be Harry’s Bar. So the owners of Harry’s Bar actually offered Tania the opportunity to come there and perform. So Tania performed there for quite a number of years; by then they’d added a lot more band members. I left quite early, in 1989, I think, about eight or nine months after I’d set up anywhere together (with the band). The band carried on. They replaced me with a bass player. In fact, a few months after they replaced me, Zul actually asked me if I could come back for three months to take over from the current bass player because he went for a bypass, so I did try to come back. But after one week of performing, I found that I’d very much lost my interest in that. And they managed to find another guy to carry on with it.

Can you share some lessons that you learned or some takeaways from these experiences playing in these different venues?

There were four of us in (the band), Zul, Alban, myself and “Boy” (Ismett Lubis, the keyboardist). The only ones who read music were Boy and myself. In fact, we were using our ears and the feel more than we were trying to read music and play at the same time. Our motto was, let’s have a good time. We’re here to enjoy ourselves. Everybody enjoy it, forget your worries—music is there to be enjoyed. But it’s not easy to earn a living in Singapore as a musician. It’s different if you have studied (music) like Jeremy Monteiro or my late brother Iskandar (Ismail). They are really well-studied musicians. If you want to study music, you can become a music teacher and all that. Singing is different—it’s God’s gift, it’s a talent—you can go for singing lessons, but if you can’t sing, you can’t sing. But today, if you look at the media and all that, you can see it’s a lot easier for a lot of people, if you have talent. So anybody who thinks that they really have the talent should go for it.

***Home Grooves: A History of Singapore’s Live Music Venues* is an exhibition at the Esplanade Concourse. It is free of charge and runs until 18 August 2023.**