



By Hishamuddin Rais

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**I GREW** up at the tailend of the mystical sixties. I had my 18-inch bell bottoms, peace pendant hanging on my neck, Buddhist monk's shoulder bag and The Animals poster pinned in my locker. To complete my dream attire I went all the way to Penang to get the latest and the trendiest four-inch platform shoes. That was the year that was 1969.

Then Hamid Tuah – I had no clue who he was – led a few hundred Malay landless peasants to open up Selangor's state land in Telok Gong and Binjai Patah. Hell broke loose. He was detained under the Internal Security Act. I became politicised and retired from buying Fab201. I

started reading the Far Eastern Economic Review and The Opinion. Or was it because I was bored with the Osmond Brothers and the Monkees?

When I reached University Malaya in the early seventies – music, sound and dance had changed – the rock ‘n roll scene became heavier. Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull had pushed the sound barrier deeper into the subconscious.

At the same time, UM was the centre of a vibrant art scene. The Martha Graham dance troupe, The Bolshoi Ballet, Takarazuka from Japan and Bayanihan from Manila seduced many students into the Dewan Tunku Canselor. Even the legendary Marcel Marceau mimed his way into our campus.

I became part of UM’s Golden Age laced with cultural and intellectual renaissance. The students were no longer solely excited with “twist and shout” – they craved for something higher.

Campus citizens were baptised by Vienna Boys Choir, Ravi Shankar and Bharatanatyam from Tamil Nadu. The taste was wide and democratic. Popular culture was there too with Albert Hammond, D.J. Dave, José Feliciano, Agnes Chan, Rafeah Buang and the Bee Gees – all imported by the students union to celebrate the joy of living. It was a mixture of high and low art – catering to the emergence of a new enlightened urbane bourgeois intellectual class.

Now, from what I read – my alma mater is in the Dark Ages – a cultural desert, a no-go area for cultural and intellectual expression. The students are no longer cultural trendsetters and boundary-breakers. The Experimental Theatre – once the premier avant garde venue that staged Naga Naga and The Crucible is now left abandoned.

I was told there is an atmosphere of intolerance towards the joys of living and celebrating life. It’s a pity that young people in the campus are forced to age earlier and faster. Biologically, these students could just be approaching 19 but mentally they could turn Rip Van Winkle into a cool dude.

If one dares to look at the history of European Dark Ages then one would realise how that period was first fertilised with the blood of cultural workers – witches and dancers. The weakest member of the community was “repressed” and made an example to force the rest into conformity. This would be followed by self righteousness and intolerance.

I think the Dark Ages is slowly creeping out of the campus. The “witches and the New Age dancers” have been cleared from campuses. The forces of darkness are now already operating within our milieu. I came to this conclusion after the death of Michael Jackson. I was slightly surprised to read the contents in the online debates.

The discourse – if one is happy with that word – was shallow, even shallower than Danny Boyle’s Shallow Grave. Our anak muda Melayu in particular were more concerned whether Michael was a Muslim or not. Or whether he would be buried with Islamic rites.

## Listen to the pouring rain

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There was no evaluation of Michael's contribution to popular art and culture. Nothing was said about Michael's avant-garde dance style that influenced today's contemporary dance. Michael's voices on humanity, environment and ecology were drowned out.

Recently I received a chain letter on MJ's funeral. This letter – supposedly written by The Brotherhood of Islam trying to prove how MJ's mother was blackmailed by none other than the CIA to force her to have his last rites with a Christian memorial service. It was one of the most bizarre and absurd conspiracy theories that I've ever come across.

What went wrong with our anak muda? Why are they not into the now and the real? If today's youth are not into "experimenting" then our nation is headed into deep cultural recession. I'm not even asking them to remember who Hamid Tuah was – or to wear those horrendous platform shoes – but at least celebrate MJ's contribution as an icon of their generation.

I still remember that night at Dewan Tunku Canselor in 1973 when José Feliciano spoke to my generation. I would like to rededicate that same voice to our anak muda:

"Listen to the pouring rain  
Listen to it pour,  
And with every drop of rain  
You know I love you more"