

INCH CHUA IN THE U.S.

Living in Los Angeles has taught Singaporean singer-songwriter Inch Chua the art of the 12-second pitch.

"Almost everyone you meet, it seems that they are giving you a 12-second elevator pitch when they first meet you. They just want you to know what they do because you live in a town where everyone comes from all over the world and has given up so much to be in Los Angeles to do their artistry," says Chua, 24.

Chua went to the American city in 2011 to focus on her music career. Currently in Singapore for a few gigs and to promote her sophomore album, Bum-fuzzle, to be released next Tuesday, the musician says the biggest hurdle she had to overcome when she first lived there was "cultural differences".

"One of the major cultural differences was the attitude towards modesty and humility," she says. "In Singapore, for some reason, false humility is encouraged. When someone praises you, you go 'No lah, no lah'. You're very shy, embarrassed or even discouraged from telling people that you're good at something."

"In the States, that stuff doesn't fly at all. In fact, you're expected to talk about what you're good at and people expect to hear that. It took a while for me to get out of my shell."

She will perform at the Singapore Night Festival at Singapore Management University on Aug 31.

Now known by her stylised stage monicker iNCH, the Lasalle College of the Arts graduate ventured into music at the age of 16.

Then, she had joined local indie rock band Auburn's Epiphany as its singer. Later, the band changed their name to Allura and developed a following through performances at major festivals like Bay-beats. In 2008, they released their sole EP, Wake Up And Smell The Seaweed, which a Life! review by music album reviewer Yeow Kai Chai then described as an "ebullient six-track outing".

The band became inactive in early 2009, when guitarists Mark John and Aaron Wong, bassist Matthew Yap and drummer Low Han Quan enlisted in national service. Chua started working on her own music, releasing her debut solo EP, The Bedroom, in 2009. The four tunes from the EP generated buzz from global music blogs like Hype Machine.

In 2010, she became the first local solo artist to play at major American music festival South By Southwest (SXSW), which had invited her. Indie rock bands Electrico and Great Spy Experiment were the first to perform at the festival in 2007. Other acts such as retro-rockers The Pinholes and rapper Kevin Lester have since followed.

Chua says that at the show, her first outside of Asia, she felt like "a fish out of water". "It was a rude awakening. It showed me where I was, in terms of how far I needed to go with my music."

She performed at the festival again last year.

Shortly after releasing her debut album, Wallflower (2010), she started working with Los Angeles-based YouTube sensation David Choi when he performed here in the same year. She so impressed his manager, Richard Frias, that he signed her on to his multi-media production and artist management company, Mighty Fresh.

Frias invited her to move to the Californian city. Chua, who is single, mulled over the offer for a month before taking it up. She now lives there in her own apartment and her income comes from gigs and album sales, as well as freelance sound design work for commercials and voiceover projects.

Being in Los Angeles has had a profound effect on how she creates her music. "Being in the States, you walk along the streets and you realise that the music is the complete personification of its environment. Being in LA has taught me to chill out and let go a little bit, which is a very important part of the artistic process," she says.

Chua worked on Bumfuzzle in both Singapore and the US. The songs were written throughout North America, the vocals and music were recorded with acclaimed local producer Leonard Soosay at Snake-weed Studios in Kaki Bukit, then mixed and mastered in Los Angeles.

The next six months will be spent touring the US, as well as Asia, to promote her new album. She does not rule out moving away from Los Angeles and setting up base in other American cities.

"If things turn out well and I have a chance to be in another city, I would totally go for it, just to try different environments and to shake things up for myself again. I just can't sit still."

PHOTOS:
 ASHLEIGH SIM
 MUGILAN
 RAJASEGERAN
 STEPHANIE
 YEOW, MARTIN
 PHILBEY



DHARNI IN POLAND

Hip-hop fans, clubbers and those in tune with the home-grown music scene know Darni as one of its beatboxing pioneers.

But in Poland, the 26-year-old is a television star with his own television show. The Singaporean hosts Son Of A Beat! on Polish cable television channel RBL.TV. On the weekly show, he interviews Polish celebrities and showcases his beatboxing skills - the art of making music, effects and sounds with only his voice.

The show is done almost entirely in Polish. No mean feat considering that he picked up the language only when he moved to Warsaw two years ago.

"Most of the time, what I say is scripted," says the vocal percussionist, whose full name is Darni Ng. "But I understand what they are saying 70 per cent of the time and I mix in a little English."

Besides his television shows, he gigs frequently and judges beat-box competitions - not just in Poland, but also other European countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Britain.

"Gigs always come to me. I don't really have to source for them," says the Temasek Polytechnic graduate, who is currently in Singapore for a

"I have this affinity with Poland. I just grew to like the country and I love the culture, how they live, it's a really cool place,"
 Darni (left)



FOREIGN ATTRACTION

Singaporean musicians say being based abroad helps fuel their creativity and lets them make a living



Eddino Abdul Hadi
 Music Correspondent

Say "Singapore musical export", and Mando-pop artists like Stefanie Sun and Tanya Chua come to mind. But home-grown musicians are increasingly flying the crescent and five stars outside of Asia and in exotic languages too.

Local beatboxer Darni is now based in Poland and gigs regularly around Europe, performing in fluent Polish to boot.

And while those who have left for stranger shores and bigger markets say it can be daunting, they also report that there are creative and commercial rewards to not staying on home ground. For Sanjeev Veloo, frontman of Melbourne-based rockers Empra - they

launched their third EP, Strange Condition, yesterday - moving to Australia allowed him to spend more time on his music.

"Not to put the Singapore music scene down, but I believe that to truly develop as a musician, you have to go out and experience what it's like in a foreign music industry," he says. "Singapore does not offer you enough chances to play original music regularly."

Life! speaks to Veloo, Darni, as well as two Los Angeles-based home-grown singer-songwriters, Inch Chua and Corrinne May. Find out why they took their music out of Singapore and how it has helped fuel their artistic passions and careers.

dinohadi@sph.com.sg

few shows.

It is no idle boast: Since he started beatboxing at the age of 14, Ng has risen to fame in the global beatboxing scene. He has won several international beatboxing contests, including the BScene Grand Beatbox Battle in Switzerland in March. Besides Europe and Asia, he has also done gigs in Canada and the Middle East.

He chose Poland as his base because the cost of living in the Central European country is lower, compared to other European cities.

The bachelor, who has performed at major events here like the National Day Parade in 2004, credits home-grown turntablist champion and hip-hop pioneer DJ Koflow for helping him early in his career. The pair regularly perform together when Ng is in Singapore. Their high-profile shows include opening for American rap star Kanye West's concert at the Singapore Indoor Stadium in 2008.

Ng got his big break in Europe when he joined the Bruk Braders, a beatboxing group that also comprises Blady Kris from Poland, and Roxorloops and Fatty K from Belgium. The group met on online beatboxing forums. They became popular when they competed in 2011 in the Polish reality television competition, Must Be The Music, which was watched by five million viewers.

Although they did not win, they reached the finals. Ng decided to stay on to forge a solo career after getting gig offers there.

"I have this affinity with Poland. I just grew to like the country and I love the culture, how they live, it's a really cool place," says the son of a research surveyor mum and lawyer dad. His father died when he was seven years old.

Ng got his television gig through a Polish friend working in the television industry. Although he will not reveal how much he makes in a month, he has a steady stream of income from live performances and television appearances, as well as from appearing as a judge at beatboxing competitions.

Currently recording his debut EP, he has big plans for the future. "I plan to be based in Los Angeles or New York in the future," he says.

"I'm building up my connections right now. I'm very sure that beatboxing is on its way to becoming bigger around the world, and I want to be there when it happens."





“Being in LA has taught me to chill out and let go a little bit, which is a very important part of the artistic process.”

Singaporean singer-songwriter Inch Chua (above)

SANJEEV VELOO IN AUSTRALIA

Singer-songwriter-guitarist Sanjeev Veloo at age 35 is, in his own words, living his rock 'n' roll dreams.

The former frontman of 1990s local rock trio The Boredphucks is now riding high with his current Melbourne-based band Empra. The band launched an EP, *Strange Condition*, yesterday.

In April this year, he and his Australian bandmates – Matt Agius, 23, on bass, Matt Gault, 27, on guitars, and Matt Cattanach, 29, on drums – beat acts from around the world to claim the top prize in a band competition held in Los Angeles.

Organised by entertainment giant Live Nation, a record label-cum-concert organiser which counts big-name artists like Jay Z, U2 and Madonna on its roster, Empra won US\$30,000 (S\$38,400) – a fund to be used for the band's marketing, tours and recordings.

Being based in Melbourne allows the singer, who now goes by the stage name Sanny Veloo, to tour with his band – something that he could not do with The Boredphucks in Singapore.

“In Singapore, the scene is small, so it's not like you can do a nationwide tour and play in Toa Payoh and then Yishun and then Tampines,” he says on the telephone from his home in Brunswick, Melbourne.

“Over here, we get into a van, book shows and play all over Australia. Not just in Melbourne, but also in other cities like Sydney and Adelaide.

“We try to make sure that we play every Australian city once every six weeks.”

The band, which released their self-titled debut album last year, book shows in clubs and pubs that have a 200 to 300 capacity, and charge \$10 to \$20 a ticket. They have released four recordings so far, including a live EP launched in April, *Live At Revolver*, all under Veloo's own record label Thunderheart Records.

While he says that Empra are starting to make “serious money”, the bachelor supplements his income with his own one-man website development business, Moksha Web, which counts tertiary education and entertainment companies as its clients.

“It depends on how well this new release does and we are also planning to release the second full-length album next year. If they both take off, then we would definitely have to concentrate on the band and be full-time musicians.”

He also says that they are planning to do an American tour either at the end of this year or next year.

Veloo first moved to Melbourne in 2000 for his media and communications studies at the University of Melbourne. He stayed on after he completed his degree to focus on making music.

In 2004, his bandmates from The Boredphucks, drummer Wayne Seah and bassist Justin Roy, joined him there. Renaming themselves The Suns, the trio were active in the music scene there before both Roy and Seah returned to Singapore in 2006.

Seah died at the age of 29 in his sleep in 2007, while Roy, now 36, plays with local rock outfit Amterible.

Veloo formed Empra in 2010 with Agius, who had played with him in another band called The Final Eclipse, while Gault and Cattanach were found through auditions. The band's name, he explains, is an anagram of the Sanskrit work “pre-ma”, which means universal love.

Veloo and Empra flew to Singapore earlier this month and was the opening act for American pop-punk band Fall Out Boy's concert at Fort Canning Park on Aug 6. They also did a set at Hood Bar & Cafe on National Day.

Veloo, who was also in town to mentor young bands in the Thunderband Slam band competition late last year, says that he does not rule out coming back for good in the future.

“Hopefully, I would have built up the experience to help Singapore musicians bring out their music overseas. I'd like to contribute to the scene back home in any way I can.”



“In Singapore, the scene is small, so it's not like you can do a nationwide tour and play in Toa Payoh and then Yishun and then Tampines.”

Sanjeev Veloo (above, with Empra members – from left – Matt Cattanach, Matt Agius and Matt Gault). The band play all over Australia, in cities such as Adelaide and Sydney

CORRINNE MAY IN THE U.S.

When home-grown singer-songwriter Corrinne May graduated from the United States' acclaimed Berklee College of Music 15 years ago, she had three options of where she should build a music career – the American songwriting and producing centres of Nashville, New York and Los Angeles.

In the end, the 40-year-old, who wrote and sang the 2010 National Day theme Song For Singapore, chose Los Angeles for its famed Californian sun.

“Although Nashville is more of a songwriters' town, where the art of songwriting is still passionately pursued,” she writes in an e-mail interview, “geographically, it does not offer the beautiful weather or terrain that Los Angeles does.”

“New York would have been a good city too, but the pop music scene has always centred around Los Angeles.”

Today, she is one of Singapore's foremost English pop music export, having sung to packed audiences at the Esplanade Concert Hall, as well as in venues in Japan and Los Angeles. But her early years in the Californian city were a struggle.

“I had to build up a fanbase and find my audience in a city that I was still getting familiar with. So I went to every open mic that I could, checked out all the venues that were appropriate for singer-songwriters, met new musicians at these venues and said yes to every social event I was invited to,” she recalls.

“LA is our creative home, our home for music. Singapore is our home where the extended family and friends are. We are seriously torn between these two alternatives.”

Corrinne May (left)

“It was all pretty exciting and a little bit tiring, but worth it.”

She also spent her early years there teaching music and playing piano at churches to supplement her income.

May, who now lives in Los Angeles with her musician-producer husband Kavin Hoo, 38, and their four-year-old daughter, Claire, was initially given a one-year visa in 1998 to work in the US in a field related to her music degree.

In 2003, the US Immigration Department gave Hoo permanent-resident status on the back of his established track record, which includes work with jazz artists such as Walter Beasley and soul singer Sherree Brown. May got the green card too, as they applied as a married couple.

The Raffles Girls' School alumnus, who won the Young Composer of the Year award and Wings of Excellence award from Singapore performing rights society Compass in 2007, has released five albums, including last year's *Crooked Lines*, which topped the local album charts. Her albums are distributed by Pink Armchair Records in the US, Warner Music in Singapore and the Philippines and S2S in Japan.

Being based in Los Angeles has opened her eyes to sights and experiences that she would not get in Singapore, and plays a large part in crafting her music.

“It's a great city to learn about the whole human condition. Sadness, happiness, poverty, excessive wealth and desperate need, all living in conflict and yet all living together,” she says.

“I find all these juxtapositions so fascinating and so inspiring to the writer in me that is seeking food for thought.”

And while she comes back to Singapore at least twice a year – most recently to play at a sold out show at the Esplanade Concert Hall in June – May says that she is contemplating returning for good.

“We will have a major dilemma once Claire starts primary school. We are still trying to decide whether we should move back to Singapore at that point in time. It's going to be a hard decision to make.”

“LA is our creative home, our home for music. Singapore is our home where the extended family and friends are. We are seriously torn between these two alternatives.”