

## BOOK REVIEW

**Marco Ferrarese, *Banana Punk Rawk Trails: A Euro-fool's Metal Punk Journeys in Malaysia, Borneo and Indonesia*. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre Malaysia, 2016. Pp. xvii + 456 (including 250 photos, a 70-min CD, Tracklist, Glossary, Bibliography & Index). ISBN ISBN: 9789670960029.**

### Marco Ferrarese's *Banana Punk Rawk Trails*

If I hadn't bumped into Marco Ferrarese at last year's Georgetown Literary Festival, I wouldn't have read *Banana Punk Rawk Trails: A Euro-fool's Metal Punk Journeys in Malaysia, Borneo and Indonesia*. Knowing nothing, and caring less, about rock music in all its forms, I couldn't see its relevance to me.

As it turned out, I found the book highly entertaining, intellectually absorbing, and culturally important.

Ferrarese has a very engaging narrative voice. Words like "verve", "energy", and "passion" come to mind when I try to characterise his style. With his first sentence in the Preface, he lured me into his world, and from then on held my interest with an effervescent flow of personal memories, amusing anecdotes, insightful observations, candid opinions, and thoughtful ideas – all delivered in a chatty style enlivened by startlingly apt imagery. Soon, I was eagerly following him on his romps through the metal punk world – in his native Italy, the US and Europe, and finally Malaysia, where he has resided since 2009, and where he is currently working towards a PhD in anthropology.

The book title's "banana punk rawk trails" refers to the route of his travels between 2010 and 2015, when he played lead guitar in a local "thrashcore" band, WEOT SKAM, doing gigs in Penang, Sungei Petani, Kuala Lumpur, Shah Alam, Seremban, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, Yogyakarta, and Bali.

His racy, fast-paced narration induces fast-paced reading. But rushing through the book isn't the best way to read it. It's a travelogue as much as a memoir, and, like all good travelogues, should be read slowly, so that the nuances of the time, place, and people that make each experience unique can come into focus.

Another reason for slowing down is that beneath the surface patter is a serious discourse of socio-cultural significance. In the Preface, Ferrarese reveals why he wrote the book; he wanted to understand why Malaysia is largely forgotten in the metal punk world today although it was the first Southeast Asian country to have a metal band – as early as 1982. To this end, in every chapter, he explores the various aspects of Malaysian life that might either nurture or inhibit the growth of a metal punk culture (and, by extrapolation, any other art form).

He asks the kind of nitty-gritty questions only an actively participating insider endowed with the intellectual curiosity of an anthropologist would think of. How widespread is the metal punk underground? Where are its centres of activity? What are the demographics of its musicians and fans? How available and affordable are basic requirements like instruments, sound equipment, practice space, and international magazines and CDs? What moral, financial, and organisational support can musicians expect from show promoters and audiences? How have ethno-linguistic divisions and ethnocentric

divisiveness impacted on the kinds of bands formed and music played? What happens when the musicians' religious and cultural values clash with the western ideologies underpinning the music? To what extent do musicians take advantage of indigenous musical traditions to create original music with distinctively Malaysian sounds?

His discoveries give us the first contemporaneous, experience-based documentation of how young people in this region are influenced by and respond to a western, anti-mainstream music movement that has gone global. From my perspective, the study's most valuable contribution to Malaysia's socio-cultural discourse is that it exposes our entrenched tendency to accept the idea of western superiority without question, and to adopt western socio-cultural forms and norms without understanding their underlying philosophies and ideologies.

Ferrarese self-mockingly calls himself a "Euro-fool". I, without mockery, liken him to the court jester of Europe's past, holding up a mirror for us, westward-turning easterners (the "banana" of the book title), to look at and assess our worth and place as creators and consumers of cultural products, in a world where the production and spread of culture have long been dominated by the Anglo-American west.

For this alone, *Banana Punk Rawk Trails* should be read by all Malaysians involved in the creation, consumption, and control of cultural products: musicians, artists, writers, film makers, publishers, booksellers, librarians, educationists, critics, academics, and policy makers addicted to banning books.

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*<https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/books/2016/03/23/did-you-know-malaysia-has-a-punk-rock-metal-band-scene>)*