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## Arreal Tilghman: Finding his voice in 'dangdut'

Dorian Merina , The Jakarta Post , Jakarta | Sat, 10/04/2008 11:36 AM | People



**ARREAL TILGHMAN:** (JP/Dorian Merina)

Ask Arreal Tilghman about *dangdut* music and the American-born singer breaks into a wide grin.

"*Diberanda ini ... Kumenanti dirimu oh kasih...*," he sings in the *cengkok* style typical of *dangdut* performers.

The vibrant and constantly evolving musical form that draws on Arabic, Malay, Indian and rock influences exploded in the 1970s with acts such as Rhoma Irama and Elvy Sukaesih.

Now, as Tilghman gets ready to release his first solo album, the genre can add R&B, hip-hop and even gospel to that list.

"*Dangdut* is not just a music," said Tilghman, 22, who recently spent two months training and studying in <http://www.thejakartapost.com/print...>

Indonesia. "It's a lifestyle."

The artist's journey, from a small city in Maryland in the United States to being recognized by the Indonesia Museum of Records as the first foreign *dangdut* singer, is one that reflects the adventurous spirit of *dangdut* music itself.

Arreal began singing before he was five years old. His grandfather was part of a group that sang gospel, a style of music that originated in the African-American community and went on to influence pop and rock n' roll.

"I used to listen to them and love them," he said. "So I guess you could say that it's in the blood."

He dreamed of a musical career, but his home city Cambridge, with a population of just over 10,000 at the time, offered little opportunity for the ambitious teenager. He left home at 17 and moved to Wilmington, Delaware where he began singing in R&B and hip hop groups.

After a few years of traveling and playing at local clubs, the day-to-day pressures of maintaining a singing career led Arreal to question his path in life. During one frustrated evening he smashed his guitar and pledged never to follow music again. But the pull of music was too strong for him.

"It didn't work because my heart wasn't happy," said Arreal of the time period. Soon afterwards, the singer came across an advertisement in a local newspaper. The ad said it was looking for singers for a new project in a new style of music called *dangdut*. Intrigued, Arreal responded.

"I was searching for something different," recalled Arreal with a laugh. "But I never knew it would be like this!"

The woman who placed the ad was Rissa Asnan, an energetic mother of three who had moved to the U.S. from Indonesia in 1989. In 2004, Rissa founded NSA Productions and began promoting Indonesian artists on tours in the U.S., but after four years she realized the audience was still overwhelmingly Indonesian.

She envisioned something more -- a true cultural exchange between the two countries that had shaped her own life.

"I love my country, Indonesia," she said. "And I want to give something back."

Her vision was to use *dangdut* music as a cultural bridge. But first, she needed a singer.

Rissa auditioned between 30 and 40 singers in the Delaware area, but Arreal stood out.

"He has good character in his voice," said Rissa, 38, pointing out that the quality of the voice is critical in *dangdut*. And she added, "He's willing to learn and be serious about it."

Within a month of beginning training in the U.S., Rissa had Arreal performing in front of a live audience at the Asian Festival in Philadelphia.

"I can't tell you how nervous I was to sing in front of different people in a different language," said Arreal. But he had faith in his new producer. "I trusted her. It sounded like she had a good plan."

Not everyone agreed, however.

"My friends thought I was crazy," said Arreal. Some of them questioned his departure from the more mainstream genres of hip hop and R&B.

At the same time, Rissa was going through a similar challenge.

"When I first did it, even Indonesian people laughed at me," she said of the project that took over a year to get off the ground. Many of them considered *dangdut* as a music strictly for Indonesians. But Rissa saw a future in it.

"I'm doing it from the bottom of my heart," she said. "You never give up on your dreams."

The two landed in Jakarta in July and began work immediately on a new album. Arreal spent long hours in the studio, refining his technique, and Rissa arranged the Indonesian artists who would make up the band for the album. The first week was especially hard for Arreal, who had never traveled outside of the U.S. before.

When he first performed in Indonesia, before a large wedding celebration, he was met with near silence by the shocked crowd. For the singer, who was still struggling to understand Bahasa Indonesia, the reaction was devastating.

"I thought they hated it," he said. "My confidence was so low."

A turning point came when Arreal began training with Trie Utami, the singer known for her own experience performing internationally. He immersed himself in Indonesian culture and soon experienced *dangdut* in a way he never had before.

"When we got here I had to tear down my American mind frame," he said. Trie pushed him to get beyond the techniques and explore the energy and feeling of the music.

"Now I understand it," said Arreal, who someday hopes to teach *dangdut* to other Americans.

Soon, Indonesians will get a taste of this new take on the roots of *dangdut* music. Arreal's album, *Dangdut in America*, which features a lively mix of songs in both Indonesian and English, is scheduled to be released in November.

"I think the world is ready for something new," said Arreal. "Success is not selling a million records but making history here in Jakarta, in Indonesia."

*The writer is an intern with The Jakarta Post.*

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