



# throwback vibes

Photo by [Jazara](#)

The Islamic Singaporean Photographer

**with everything nostalgic being held in high regard these days, it's easy to get the appeal of the pinholes – four young men, with their upbeat 60s-inspired tunes, and a whole lot of retro style to boot. plus, they're not afraid to flaunt our distinct singaporean accents too. by [amelia tan](#)**

WE MEET AT a back alley in Bugis, head up a narrow flight of stairs to see four dudes, clad in slightly flared trousers, two of them wearing sunglasses, despite the fact that the room is rather dark – and this is just the sound check. When they're done, instruments set aside, the tall lead singer, in a brown leather jacket, stretches out his hand and flashes us a warm smile, "Hi, my name is Famie."

Later on, during a crowd-rousing, feet-tapping performance at Pink Noize studio, Famie introduces his band again with that same warm voice, "Hi, we're The Pinholes, and this is rock 'n' roll music." This time, they have on navy military jackets and these amazing striped trousers, decidedly retro. But that's not what grabs everyone's attention; strong riffs immediately hit the room like only rock music can, and they manage to sound both chill and energetic, balanced and frenetic, as they sway their heads to the melody. "This is a gig, and you guys are allowed to rock," he quips. "Go crazy!"

The band, consisting of guitarist Didi Hanafiah, bassist Wando Diao, new drummer Shari Ismail, and the lead singer, Famie Suliman, have been making waves recently with their brand of 60s rock. Yes, they do sound like The Beach Boys, with their cheery numbers and catchy choruses in "Sunshine" and "Bring Back The Vibe", but they come tinged with Singaporean accents.

"We've always been modern-classic. We take what's classic and then put in some 'modern'," says Famie of their music. Giving a bit of insight to the band name, he adds: "It's like when you use a pinhole camera, if you use it wisely, with more focus, you'll get a good photo. Well, the same goes for us."

Other than being city boys living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the lead singer says that they like to put their own spin on retro music, starting from their accents, "That's where we come from, why hide?" Even so, the group writes songs with lyrics that contain little quirks of Singaporean living. "Take a bus from Bedok/Drop down at Holland Road" goes the song "Ali Malarkey", which starts with a melodic riff from the lead guitar.

It seems like the whole rock 'n' roll vibe is everywhere, steeped deep in everything they put out, but Famie admits that it's not something that they intentionally strive for. "I don't think much about [sounding old-school], I'm more a melody kind of person."

"I just trust my instincts. Maybe it comes naturally? At first it's quite hard, to be in the midst of modern living and suddenly wanting to play something else, to backtrack to a time when we're not there," says the key songwriter. "It's a challenge, but fun at the same time – something that we fell in love with."



### BRING BACK THE VIBE

While on stage, The Pinholes are every bit the charismatic performers, offstage, the band is undeniably laidback. Clutching their guitar cases, they head to the next show at Hood Bar, and instead of, say, riding in a van... they tap their EZ-link cards when they board the bus. “That’s how we do it, man,” says Famie, with a grin, as they file into the double-decker bus in their eye-catching outfits. A lot of the band’s image starts and ends with old-school, including a sepia-toned cover for their first album, *Bring Back The Vibe* – though, the first thing that most people notice would be their stage outfits. It’s no Lady Gaga or Empire by the Sun theatricality, but they put in the effort to dress as close to how their music sounds like. We’ve heard about their usual floral tops and mod jackets being picked out from Salvation Army, or donated by a 60s band called The Kinks, but this time, they share that they got their jackets made by “a tailor uncle at Bugis”. “These striped pants, we got it from the UK – we just can’t find the material here,” Famie starts. “Remember the first time when I showed it to you guys, what were you all thinking?” he then asks, turning to the rest of his bandmates.

“I don’t know, crazy *la!* Like... okay. I’m not usually used to funky clothes like that,” Didi replies. Famie laughs, “I do wear whatever you see here though!”

Contrary to popular belief, and mops of hair aside, image is only a part of their appeal. “I mean, without this,” he points to his pants, “I’m still about music. If this is more important, then I won’t be carrying on... I want to be heard, so that there’s a connection between us and the people; that’s more important. Clothes can change, can fade, but I tell my stories through music.”

We’re guessing that the question everyone has to ask is this: why the 60s, what’s so special about the era that made the band so drawn to it? The answer comes with its fair share of musical icons, as Famie shares, “The 60s were actually Year Zero for Pop. So many exciting things were going on, there was Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Jim Morrison – all these fantastic people around – Janis Joplin...”

“But even here, we’ve got good bands – The Quests, The Swallows.”

It was Famie’s interest in these bands, after being fans of 90s alt-rock groups, The Stoned Revivals and Force Vomit, that made him curious about Singapore’s music scene from before he was born. He says, “I wanted to know who were ‘The Beatles’ of Singapore. No one ever told us. There’s few documentation. There was Big O then though, but in terms of footage, I remember seeing music shows that were way cooler, that would make us more proud to be Singaporean.”

“I was also into The Kinks, The Beatles then, so I asked around... who are the old legends? And people told me, and that’s when I realised – they know their heroes. I don’t think we know ours. Nowadays, the heroes are all Spiderman, Captain America... Jack Neo [laughs]. The Quests were established artists, and they were even under a big label, EMI. So, for us not to know them, it’s purely a waste. We don’t know our history – it’s like the Americans not knowing Elvis!”

He sees the band’s music, partly as a tribute to that lost era, “we’re bringing back the vibe,” he says, quoting their album name. Then again, a lot of what they strive for, in their last five EPs and the current album, is simply to make enjoyable music.

“[The 60s] bring good memories to people, that’s when everybody came together. And that’s what we’re all about, getting people together – music, art, culture – they bring everyone together. You’re rich, you’re not rich, you’re smart, like to go toilet more often?” he lends some humour to the statement before continuing: “All together for one cause.”

“Get loose. If you’re too tense chasing dollars and cents... nothing makes sense. It’s all about fun! When you go to a show, don’t expect so much *ah.*”

Previous page and this page, photos by Jazakallah. Opposite page, photo by Azroy Shazwan.

### LONG LIVE ROCK ‘N’ ROLL

We’re not supposed to expect much, according to Famie, but the second gig of the night, at the “Saturday Originals” hour at Hood Bar, certainly impresses. They start explosive, guitars and drums kicking in, while later on, their usual harmonies carry the songs forward. A slow tempo tune “How Much Is Too Much” shows off a more reflective side, followed by the next dreamy number, “Money”, which easily transports us to a cruise down the open road.

In a wild moment, Famie and Didi play with their backs against each other. He then challenges the audience to stand up, “dance like no one’s watching!” he shouts, before their final song “Youth of Gold”, a vibrant song with a repetitive chorus (“we are the youth of gold”), that no doubt, sounds like an anthem the band lives by.

After their 45-minute set was done and dusted, we settle down at an abandoned upper floor of a shopping centre, with the band sitting cross-legged on the floor. They’re fresh off playing two gigs in one evening, and naturally look tired, but the band keeps to the usual good-natured vibes that they exhibit on stage.

“I write all my songs with positive messages,” says Famie about his lyrics. “As a songwriter, I love to give a positive vibe to the people, especially those in Singapore, so that in the future, people will cherish these songs. If they come across them, it’s something to think about, like, ‘Hey, there’s something good going on.’”

As for fitting in something more emotional into the cheerful-sounding pieces, he says, “There are sad songs! Those are things we learn from... we put the songs out because they mean something to us.” He continues: “You can write many songs, but writing a great song doesn’t come easy every time. Something that means so much to people, that’s hard.”

The group plays to a lot of the younger crowd, especially at local festivals like Baybeats and the Night Festival, and they’ve noticed more support for local bands in the last few years. Though, they also have their fair share of older fans. They tell us about a particular fan: “There’s someone that mentioned ‘You guys remind me of when I was younger’. When we give off that kind of vibe, playing our own songs to them, something that’s totally new but influenced, it’s really heartwarming.”

In between prominent local gigs, festivals as far away as the prestigious South by Southwest in Texas four years ago, and an upcoming tour at Sarawak, Malaysia, the band has done pretty well for themselves since they started in 2002. They have gone through line-up changes, with Famie being the last founding member, but it seems that every reincarnation works as hard as the last.

When asked about their day jobs, Shari shares that he’s working as a chef, Didi travels to and fro Malaysia for work, while Wando is currently in National Service. Famie is the only one who doesn’t have another job. He says about running the band, “It’s something that I love, not something that I’m forced to do. That’s the reason why I still play and breathe music.”

Is it challenging to give so much to making music, especially since they’ve chosen to go the D.I.Y. route? “It’s all part of rock and roll. If you’ve got no challenge at all, that’s not rock and roll, probably something the industry created, like boybands. We’re a D.I.Y. group, there’s definitely a lot of challenges, setbacks, arguments – it’s normal!”

“Well, we’re playing two shows today. Who would do that if you’re not enthusiastic or if you haven’t got the energy to give back to the audience?”

And as for the local music scene, The Pinholes believe that they have a stake in it, along with the other hardworking musicians out there. We asked if there’s something distinct about our music that sets us apart, and they say, “A Singapore sound can go from electronic, anything, as long as they believe in what they’re doing. Even rock ‘n’ roll, with a touch of Singapore accent.”

We can’t help thinking that it’s this unabashed love for the country, despite the flaws, that keeps The Pinholes going strong. Along with the belief – that, yes, the glory days of the music scene aren’t gone, they’re here and still to come. Still, they admit that there’s only so much they can do, as they throw the question back to us, “I think there’s a question we also have to ask: are the people listening proud to say that this is the Singapore sound? Our bands are influenced by the music from other countries and they mesh it around... but are you guys proud that that’s the Singapore sound?”

The Pinholes’ latest album, “Bring Back The Vibe” is up for streaming at [thepinholes.bandcamp.com](#). Follow The Pinholes online at [facebook.com/thepinholes](#) and [twitter.com/thepinholes](#).

