





CHAPTER 10

# CAUGHT IN A MOSH

**I** think you should have your guitar bridge aligned, man,' Edd told me one night at practice. It wasn't the first time I'd heard this complaint peppering the discussions we had after playing shows – Edd was simply outlining a real, albeit small, problem.

I was greatly excited, or rather, after several years without playing any live music, I used live shows as my own springboard of destruction. Truth is, I was well known in the international hardcore punk scene for my wild stage act with the Nerds, a band with strong references to that dark side of the combination of metal and punk embodied by the late GG Allin.<sup>1</sup> Being a fan of the Confederacy of Scum and a rabid supporter of bands such as ANTiSEEN, I even sliced my forehead and 'juiced' blood on stage once. I used to assault people in the crowds. Don't ask me why, but one time in Belgium, a drunken guy spent the best part of a song walking in front of the stage, flashing his dick at my whole band. When we'd had enough, I bent down from the edge of the stage, grabbed him by the base of his testicles, and lifted him up as hard as I could. Trust me, he didn't do it again. At other times, I have kicked people who stood in front of me under the stage in the face. And I can only fondly recall some of my silliest moves ever, such as one time when I stage dived and fell beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> The self-proclaimed most decadent rocker of all time, who rose to fame for his extremely wild stage act, including assaulting the audience, cutting himself with sharp objects, and defecating and eating his own faeces on stage. He died in 1993 after a fatal heroin overdose, thus failing his project of committing suicide on stage.

crowd, breaking the cartilage connecting my lower right rib to my sternum; or the numerous times I flipped off tables and fell miserably while playing guitar on their edges. In many cases, I couldn't walk properly for days.

In Malaysia, I didn't even dare to be the wild brat that I used to be, but again, once I was on a stage playing guitar, there's something inside me that pushes my inner demon switch, taking out the best – or the beast, according to taste – of me. That's how I got the moniker Monkey Motherfucker – by swinging my guitar around like a chimp version of Angus Young possessed by Shiva the destroyer. With Dzul in WEOT SKAM, however, a fellow who jumps around on stage as if he were casting for an American basketball team, my live show lycanthropy definitely got more complicated. Dzul seems to like slamming against me several times during each and every show. The fact that he also has cascading hair reaching to the small of his back – and that he loves to twirl it around the stage as if it were a whip – doesn't help either. A few times his hair has got stuck around my guitar headstock or, even worse, around the tuning machine heads. As you can imagine, it's quite hard to keep in tune with such a lunatic occupying the same stage.

'Man, there's nothing wrong with my guitar. It's Dzul – he keeps bumping into me on stage,' I rejoined, feeling annoyed. Edd should have cut the crap and recognised how my wild stage act enhanced the band's live act. Each time I walked off stage after a show, not only I could feel my ribcage resonate with the energy of greatness but I could also see it reflected in the faces of the people in front of the stage. With me, WEOT SKAM had become a live strength to reckon with.

'Yeah I know,' he would say as his final answer, 'but your guitar bridge, well, you should check it, Marco.' Edd clearly had an obsession with sounding as crisp and clean as possible. And inasmuch as it might sound like an oxymoron for a thrashcore band, he was right: precision makes an extreme band tighter and a step above the rest of the mediocre amateurish ensembles. But I was still too excited to be back in a real band to pay attention to what he suggested. I recognise it here publicly: I was acting unprofessionally and I must apologise.

One night at practice I eavesdropped on Edd and Leon's conversation. They were talking about our latest live performance.

'The show was good, everybody said we played tight,' a pause, 'but my friend told me that Marco's guitar was out of tune.' Edd didn't look at me, but his clear intention was to make me hear what he was saying. Touché.

I'm not a huge fan of how Malaysians, and Asians in general, have a way of getting to the core of a problem by walking around it forever in circles, without ever speaking their hearts out. I didn't reply and finished tuning my guitar, played the practice's set list as best as I could, and then headed home after drinks without hearing about the tuning issue again. I never intentionally wanted to sound bad – I had been very careful. It was just a matter of stage circumstances and a bit of disorganisation. Now, every musician reading this could think that I'm an idiot who can't use a tuner. Well ... yes and no. I wear spectacles, and when I play I don't wear them to avoid damage. There's no way I can see the tuner's light as I can barely see the set list when I put it over my own amp. To add to the situation, WEOT SKAM is tuned one step lower, which requires you to clearly see on the machine that what you are setting on the first string is a D. It's therefore impossible to tune properly without wasting too much time looking at the tuner, and thus making the show sloppy by killing the flow of the set list and the crowd's anticipation. There's nothing quite as bad as a punk or a metal band that keeps you waiting by wasting minutes between songs. You can't be sloppy, or you become a clown. In my own twisted mind, I had a point that I tried to get across without success. At least, I required that the singer avoided smashing into my headstock every time I tried to move around the stage and engage the crowd.

When came time to play our next show at Soundmaker, I was well aware that it could have been the occasion to redeem myself. I tuned properly before getting on stage and also placed a tuner on top of the half-stack's head in case I needed a quick check during song breaks. Before we hit the stage, I also found Dzul and asked him to be very careful of where he jumped around: 'If you hit my guitar again, I will lose tuning, and then we will suck. Jump around as much as you want, but keep your distance and give me some moving space. Understand?'





WEOT SKAM live @ Soundmaker, Penang, with Samm on drums, 4 April 2015



Dzul answered positively. We went on stage and checked the sound and amps briefly before starting with the first song. This time, I made sure that I had sufficient space around my guitar's headstock and stayed back and close to the amp in order to leave more space for Dzul. As always, Edd was on the other side of the stage, concentrating on his guitar playing and standing still before his amp, rarely bothering to even look at the crowd. In this way, he was never a target of Dzul's barbaric stage pillaging. Leon, on the other hand, always participates with Dzul and me in the front trenches, but somehow he had the uncanny habit of minding that his own bass's headstock stayed in the right space all the time.

As we kept gaining momentum and going through the songs, I came forward from my amplifier's confinement to step closer to the crowd. I could feel that by staying behind, the performance missed something – I didn't want WEOT SKAM to come off as less powerful just because I stayed back to protect my guitar like a shy schoolboy on his first day at school. I knew that I could both play tight and give people the show they had come and paid to witness. That's what people wanted this band to be. One time, my friend Vinoth of bands Nonserviam and Cakerawala told me that 'people like to see WEOT SKAM because you guys move around on stage a lot, unlike most other Malaysian bands.' I obviously had a stage pride and didn't want to disappoint those who, like Vinoth, came to our show to be bestowed with our special brand of kicks in the gut.

As I was lost in these thoughts and playing carefully following every drumbeat, I saw something coming in the corner of my left eye. It was something tiny, hairy and dressed only in skater pants and Vans sneakers. Here it was, the terror of guitar headstocks, the Genghis Khan of the Malaysian metal punk stage: Dzul. He pirouetted between Leon and me, aiming at an unknown final target, and getting dangerously closer and closer to me and my guitar. I stepped back towards the amp instinctively as he zoomed past me. Once he reached the right edge of the stage, he ricocheted as if he were a bullet, and ran back to the other side from where he had come from. For now,

my guitar was safe. I saw him jump before the crowd at the centre of the stage, land on his feet and ricochet against the bass drum, where he placed his right foot and kept still and singing. In pure WEOT SKAM style, there was quite a heavy workload of action on the stage, and people in the pit didn't know where to look at anymore. Exploiting this moment of calm before the metal punk Mongol's next stampede, I stepped forward again, finishing the song with a solo. We had a short break in the set list, especially to help our new drummer Samm breathe, since he had just switched from playing post-rockish alternative rock to this balls-out hardcore mayhem and still needed to get used to the frenzied beats. Going towards the drums where the slayer of stages was resting, I caught Dzul's attention and told him once again to watch where he jumped as I needed some action space.

'Don't bump into my guitar please, or the show will be ruined.'

'OK, I know,' he agreed. Thus I felt safe when we went on to start the next song, one of our fastest numbers titled 'Knock Out'. It's a short and fast thrashing song about Rambo, which came out on a Sylvester Stallone tribute seven-inch EP in Japan shortly before I joined the band. When we perform it live, Dzul usually wears boxing gloves and pretends to act like a Thai kick boxer with great visual and entertaining effect on the crowd. We all took a deep breath. Samm struck his sticks until four. And there it was: after an initial progression of single chords played with slow emphasis, this song races at breakneck speed into a stopped and repeated riff.

To play this part more comfortably, I generally bend over the guitar and stop looking around to concentrate on producing the best chugging I can on the first few guitar strings. That was exactly what I was doing – bent over the guitar and not looking – when I realised that again, something small, black and hairy – exactly like the title of that Screaming Lord Sutch song – was coming my way ... and it was too late to step back and look for shelter next to my amp.

'What the...'

I lifted my head up and saw that a mass of hair plastered with sweat over a face was only inches from me. Of course, it was Dzul. Instinctively, I pulled back my guitar fret to put my right shoulder

Dzul mesmerising young souls at Alt HQ, Kuala Lumpur, 4 May 2014



between me and the pillager of Malaysia's thrashcore stages, and save the tuning machines from the impact. But, inevitably, Dzul swerved to the left and bumped his head lightly against the front side of my headstock. After the impact, I retraced and kept looking at him: after having run back, he slowed down in a way that didn't seem very much right. There was something very wrong indeed. When he turned to face the crowd we all saw it: a stream of blood was running down the upper right side of his forehead and over his face, flowing fast down his neck and caking his chest red. I realised that in the impact, one of my guitar string's ends that are rolled around the machine heads, had hit and cut him on the forehead. I don't know how many of you





Trying to be Sadako from the Ring on stage next to Leon @ Soundmaker, Penang, some time in 2014

have had cuts in the head region before, but if you have, you'll know that even the smallest cut produces more bleeding than most people can handle. Cutting one's forehead lightly is also a popular trick used by professional wrestlers in the United States to add drama to their staged performances. In the more underground leagues, such as the Entertainment Wrestling Association and Combat Zone Wrestling, wrestlers know that blood drives the crowd crazy, and use their opponents' foreheads as a target for all sort of vicious objects, from staple guns to neon light tubes to knives and forks. The bands from the Confederacy of Scum, not casually huge pro-wrestling fans, were also using this trick quite often for great scenic effect. In a way, that was what had happened to WEOT SKAM, albeit involuntarily. But when it happens during a song titled 'Knock Out', when the singer wears Thai

boxer's shorts and gloves, it looked as if we had made it exactly on purpose.

I was not alien to this kind of 'stage juicing' as I had once cut myself in the head with a broken glass back in the Nerds' days. Self-inflicted or not, I knew very well that besides Dzul's evident discomfort of being drenched in his own blood his wound was just superficial. If it had been deeper, the blood flow would have been much, much scarier, like a red fountain that never wants to stop. Still playing, I stepped closer to Dzul to make sure that he was OK and his cut was minimal, and was relieved when I saw it was. He just had a tiny little hole that the spike at the end of one of my strings had produced at the top right corner of his forehead, just below his hairline. None of us felt we needed to stop our set because of Dzul's bloody forehead. 'Knock Out' was one of the last songs on the set list and WEOT SKAM pulled the set to a close without a problem.

But the crowd had rarely seen anything like this happen on stage in Malaysia, and their moshing intensified while shutters flickered madly. When we finished, Dzul rocked off stage with the right side of his face full of blood, and people obviously left a good metre-wide circle all around him as if he were the carrier of a strange kind of infectious disease. Even if totally unharmed, Dzul looked a bit of a mess. I closed my guitar in its case and reached off stage for him. A thick swat of his long hair was plastered to the tiny wound with coagulating blood.

'Come to the bathroom,' I said. 'We've got to clean up your face.'

Dzul nodded and followed me without answering. His upper lip was pursed over his mouth in the particular way those who feel the metallic taste of their own blood between their teeth would do. In a way, I hoped this might have taught him a lesson in stage manners. But since he had hit me, I also felt that it was right to take care of his blood-virgin forehead. Most of the friends around us – who on the surface looked like tough guys with metal shirts depicting far worse images than a simple swathe of fresh human blood – looked like they had been completely crushed emotionally by Dzul's bloodied face. Besides me, nobody seemed to be able to lift a finger to help. I brought

Dzul to the bathroom and asked him to wash himself as I returned into the guts of Soundmaker's hall looking for Cole and some alcohol to disinfect the wound. When I found it and went back to the bathroom, most of the blood that had coagulated around Dzul's forehead had already been washed into the basin, whose time-stained yellowish white rim had taken on a coppery tint.

'Come on, put your dickhead down here, bad boy.'

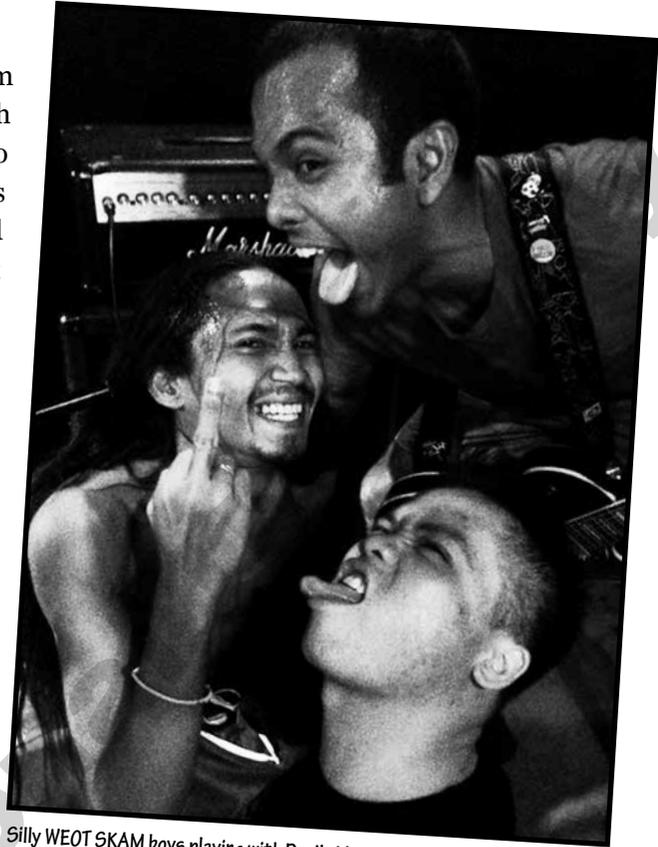
Towering over his bent torso, I showered

Dzul's forehead with alcohol as if I were a long-haired metal punk priest. All the while I cleaned his cut with alcohol-soaked cotton, Dzul didn't say anything. A group of his friends who had grouped outside the bathroom door looked at me speechless. Maybe this was too insanely and extremely over the limit of their safe idea of punk to swallow. Oh boy.

'Done,' I patted him on his back after placing a plaster over the now bloodless, small strip that opened into a tiny hole at the upper right side of his forehead. Edd and Leon arrived on the crime scene just as I was finished with my impromptu punk rock nursing.

'Is it all good, bro?' they asked to whoever cared to answer.

'Sure, don't worry. This dickhead still has a lot of blood left inside him,' I told them as I patted Dzul on the back and we all smiled, relieved.



*Silly WEOT SKAM boys playing with Dzul's blood*

## **PART II : FIRST SYMPTOMS: CHILLS, FEVER AND COLD SWEAT**

Since that episode, there hasn't been any issue on tuning anymore. On my side, I've kept going with my stage act, but I've also started being very careful of my surroundings. I change guitar strings more frequently and use a tuner for a quick check whenever we stop after a block of songs. On their side, they probably understood that I didn't mean to be a problem, that the real menace was the human bullet that ricocheted left and right on stage. What about him, you ask? Well, stubbornness is a hard trait to change. But at least these days Dzul has learnt to use his eyes, and not just his head, whenever he's running around like a ram on stage.

