

Personal Take V: Azmyl Yunor

To Shred or Not to Shred

I am a great believer in serendipity, and I believe things happen for a reason. How I discovered the electric guitar—for me, the Telecaster—had nothing to do with my understanding of tone or sound or even musical ability. The most important thing to me was that the Telecaster seemed to be a model that none of the shredders I was exposed to played—this was an important distinction for me. Shredding was perceived as an expected skill for most guitarists to aspire toward in Malaysia at that time. I felt otherwise.

Growing up as a teenager in early 1990s Malaysia and living outside the capital city in the relatively backwater suburb of Bangi didn't help either.

No one in my extended family played any musical instruments, let alone the electric guitar. My father was a big Beatles fan, and it was because of him I discovered and loved the album *Abbey Road*. He was also a big fan of “pop yeh yeh,” the surf and Beatles-inspired Malaysian bands of the 1960s. None of these included any element of shredding.

When I eventually swapped my piano lessons to pick up the classical guitar at seventeen years old, I made an oath to save my pocket money through the years (and begged a bit more from my parents) to buy my first and only electric guitar when I turned eighteen. When my birthday arrived, I found it in a '95 cream-colored Mexican Fender Telecaster, which I still use to this day to perform and record with. It has aged beautifully, both sonically and physically. But what led me to the Telecaster?

I had grown up watching local “rock kapak” bands on television—hair-metal- influenced bands that were famed for their Scorpions-styled Malay-language ballads written by other songwriters, which were de rigueur before the government banned long-haired rockers from the media in 1992. However, Nirvana's ascent in 1991, when I was fourteen years old, was more important to a wannabe guitarist like myself. Nirvana showed me that you could go unhinged with an electric guitar, for once.

The guitar solo was an ever-present barrier to someone like me, who detested practice and technicality, wanting to pick up the electric guitar.

I preferred the stance rather than the skill of wielding the instrument. It was a symbol of resistance.

While Keith Richards was the first icon whom I associated with the Telecaster, the band that I admired most was R.E.M. I could relate to the organic, rural, and lush imagery of their songs and album covers (and Michael Stipe's garbled lyrics), living in my backwater conservative town. However, Peter Buck's guitar playing elevated my imagination elsewhere—music was my best friend, and their music was the soundtrack of my youth before teenage angst kicked in. I also noticed that Nirvana thanked R.E.M. in their liner notes.

Peter Buck's arpeggio-centric electric guitar playing was friendlier to those of us who did not aspire to shred or play extended solos. I also learned songwriting from listening to R.E.M. songs, and when the internet finally arrived sometime in the mid 1990s, I searched for the chords or tabs for their songs.

As my house did not have a printer then, I wrote down all the tabs on paper and learned the chords to most of their I.R.S. Records songs. Hungry for anything about the band, I found a copy of their mini-biography in a bookstore. I discreetly unpacked the plastic wrapper (that's how books were sold here) when no one was looking and flipped through it briskly to find photos of them—this was revelatory since I could hardly find any images of them playing live. In several live photos, I noted Buck also played a Telecaster aside from his Rickenbacker.

As I daydreamed about writing my own songs—I still had no idea what a singer-songwriter was—I discovered Bruce Springsteen from a short clip of the music video to his song “Human Touch” on America's Top 10 chart show, which aired on local TV. I really liked the song, and lo and behold, he too played a Telecaster.

Around this time, I discovered Tom Petty, and it was a revelation to me that he played a cream-colored Telecaster as well. The inlay of his solo album *Wildflowers*—released in 1994, the same year I picked up the guitar—featured a picture of him with his Telecaster. That sealed my fate.

It all came together because none of them shredded, and the Telecaster was the obvious choice of the salt of the earth. And that's how a Malay boy in the tropics became a Telecaster-wielding folk rocker in a sea of metalheads.