



(Picture left): June with bassist Prof Hanafie at the Brunei Jazz Concert. (Right): Flashback to July 21, 1978... June, then an Upper Six Arts student, performing at the Penang Free School's Prefects' Night at Dragon Palace, Hotel Merlin in Penang.

June — quitting law in favour of music

LAWYER-turned pianist-vocalist, June Tan Sook Ee from Penang may well be a trend-setter at least in Sabah, quitting law in favour of a full-time music career.

The gifted musician has come a long way from the days when she started singing along with songs on the radio at the age of four.

Music runs in the family. Her father, Robert Tan, was a renowned musician who led a popular piano trio that played in well-appointed hotels and resorts on the island.

"One of my earliest memories was of playing and running around the house while my Dad's band was having rehearsals," Tan recalled this week.

When she turned eight, classical piano lessons were the order of the day. It was hardly surprising when she started performing gigs while still in school. By 16, she had passed the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music Grade VIII Pianoforte Examination (Theory & Practical).

Interestingly, Tan, then a school-leaver from Penang Free School, was waiting for her HSC results when she was recruited as a music teacher in Sabah way back in 1979.

"At that time, Yamaha Music could not find a music teacher here, so I was roped in as a part-time music teacher for three months." She went on to work as a private music teacher for two years. During this period, she packed up to go to Singapore where she studied and obtained the Teaching Certificate awarded by the Yamaha Music Foundation.

Upon her return to Sabah, Tan accepted an offer to be a resident

pianist-vocalist for a year at Semporna Grill, Hyatt Kinabalu, Kota Kinabalu until October 1987. Early in 1988, she set foot on Australia to perform as a solo pianist-vocalist at Lee's Cuisine House, Launceston, Tasmania.

Whatever the case, the home turf is still the best, so she returned to Malaysia to work as a resident pianist at Melaka Grill, KL Hilton, Kuala Lumpur for four years until April 1992.

The ambitious Tan, who wanted to broaden her life experiences, killed two birds with one stone. She pursued law studies while playing solo piano full-time at the Kuala Lumpur Hilton. The story is that music had seen her and her hubby Lee through their law studies as external students. Lee is a law lecturer today.

Despite performing six nights a week, she graduated in law with honours from the University of London in 1993. Following a three-month stint as a resident pianist at the Lobby Lounge, KL Regent, Kuala Lumpur the same year, she went to London, UK to complete the Bar Examination. Tan, who became a Barrister at Lincoln's Inn in July 1994, returned to Sabah and practised law.

However, by 2003, Tan had come to the crossroads of her life with an irresistible desire to return to her first love — music. Music was beckoning her to the bright lights of the stage again. Simply, she said goodbye to her law books for good. But two years earlier, she had formed a musical duo with Vincent Chin who was introduced to her as a young musician with a fiery passion for music.

"Everything just fell into place nicely...the opportunity to play gigs

came. People's lifestyle has changed with a demand for 'Happy Hours'. They want to sit back and unwind themselves after a hard day's work. At one point, I was performing almost nightly."

All this development rekindled Tan's enthusiasm for music "so much so that I decided to stop practising law and start practising music full-time."

Her music repertoire has evolved to include jazz which she has developed over the years.

"Given the revival of the jazz trend, there is a lot of work to be put in. To keep abreast of the times, I practise a great deal, vocally and on the piano." She took a further stride by going to the United States for training in jazz. Her teachers include Matt Harris, Frank Collett and Dave Packer.

Today, Tan is a regular feature

at the @mosphere Revolving Restaurant & Lounge, Kota Kinabalu, performing solo as the pianist-vocalist every Friday and Saturday night.

In fact, she performs in various configurations, as a solo artiste and in the Jazzelton Duo/Trio/Quartet/Quintet.

"Being a pianist has an element of versatility. You can work with a bassist or a drummer or team up with a bassist and a drummer to form the traditional jazz trio. And if you bring a saxophonist into the picture, you have a quartet and even a quintet with a violinist. The choice is yours."

That's exactly what she has been doing all this while.

From late 2001 to 2004, she performed in the JV Quartet together with Vincent Chin (saxophone), Suro Rahman (drums) and Suro Ahmadi (bass guitar) at

the Shangri-la's Tanjung Aru Resort (Star) and Sutura Harbour Resort & Spa, Kota Kinabalu. She was a founding member.

In recent years, she was in the JVH Trio together with Vincent (saxophone/conga) and Prof Hanafie Mohd Imam, a renowned jazz musician who has played with international jazz artistes.

Currently, he is a Professor of Music with the School of Arts at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The trio performed by invitation at special events.

One prestigious engagement was being the featured entertainment at the IBM-organised ASEAN ISV Summit held at the Mandarin Oriental in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Tan and Prof Hanafie were recently invited to give a jazz concert in Bandar Seri Begawan by the Brunei Music Society. Among

the distinguished guests were the Australian High Commissioner and the South Korean High Commissioner.

The Jazzelton Quintet now consists of Tan herself, Prof Hanafie (double bassist/bass guitarist), Mohd Shaun Yazeed (drummer), Mohd Nizam Attan (violinist) and Jacek Adam Rubczak (clarinetist & soprano saxophonist), a Polish musician who teaches music at UMS.

Justifying her re-entry into the musical world, Tan said: "I have dabbled enough in law, six years all in all. One goes through various stages of one's life. I have come to this stage where I want to have the liberty to do what I love to do."

In her words, her law career was fascinating too. Each weekend, she would look forward to a white Monday. "These were my thoughts then...what am I going to

learn next? What is in store for the rest of the coming week?" she recalled, saying no two days were the same in handling cases.

Asked whether she can earn a living as a pianist-vocalist, she has this to say: "Well, put it this way. If you have a passion for music, money is not a key consideration." She also coaches budding musicians in contemporary music at the Rock School, Likas.

Tan's only regret is perhaps turning down a gig offer as resident pianist of the then Chelsea Hotel, London in the early nineties because of study commitments. Her websites are www.junetan.com and www.myspace.com/jazzelton