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SINGAPORE

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George

the By

Issue



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need we say more?

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Roy Payamal and
Inch Chua



A WOMAN WE LOVE

love this
GIANT

Words by Wayne Cheong

DESPITE HER NAME, INCH CHUA HAS BEEN MAKING SEVEN-LEAGUE STRIDES WITH HER MUSIC CAREER. IT'S BEEN ALMOST TWO YEARS SINCE HER EXODUS TO LOS ANGELES; WE ASK HER: WHAT'S NEW?

Photographs by Nicky Loh Styling by Janie Cai

ASSISTED BY SOH GAIL AND EUGENE LIM HAIR AND MAKEUP BY ANGEL GWEE USING DIOR AND L'OREAL PROFESSIONNEL



LIKE HER NAMESAKE, INCH CHUA IS WEE.

So dainty is she that, in all my time of knowing her, every time we part ways, we hug and I lift her off her feet. It might be, though it's never really been confirmed, that she overcompensates for her petite stature in other areas of her life, namely her shocking blue mane.

Of course, the change in her appearance isn't compensatory; she just felt like changing her hair colour. And that's the noteworthy thing about Inch: regardless of what people might say about her, she'll

march, hell, even krump, if she feels like it, to the beat of her own drum.

Inch has always possessed a maverick nature, even when she sang with the now-defunct band, Allura. She's attained the honour of being the first Singaporean solo artist to play at the South by Southwest (SXSW) Music Festival in Austin, Texas; released her first full-length album, *Wallflower*; and championed the copyleft movement by giving the album away for free online. She also made an appearance at TEDx Singapore. Then, in late 2011, Inch upped and left for Los Angeles for more opportunities in the music scene.

Since the move, she's signed with Mighty Fresh Inc's Richard Frias, who manages YouTube artists such as David Choi, Marié Digby and Kevjumba, opened for Katy Perry, Macy Gray and Vampire Weekend, and finished her sophomore album, *Bumfuzzle*.

But for now, she's back, albeit for a short spell. By the time you've read this, to promote *Bumfuzzle*, Inch will have played a few gigs at Starbucks outlets across the island and attended a wedding. We meet up at The Flying Squirrel, where Inch is still savouring her *sushi* when I enter the coffee and *sake* bar. "Sorry," she says mid-chew, "guess you got to deal with this mess." Same old Inch (well, with a new mop of azure), still self-deprecating.

The phrase, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," might ring true, but to truly know someone, a proper examination of her composition is needed. These are the four parts to (an) Inch.

MUSICIAN

Since taking root in Los Angeles, where the palm trees stand like sentinels against a seemingly fabricated cobalt sky, Inch hasn't had the misfortune of meeting any of the snakes in suits that beguile with their forked promises. Desperate people, maybe; but not sleazy Hollywood types. "If I can sense something iffy about you, I'll

(her song "Mt Epiphany" contains religious overtones). As she tells me, when she was in Spain, she came across Antoni Gaudí's *La Sagrada Família* and it was within its confines that she had her Damascene conversion. The way the sunlight filtered through the stained glass windows, the austerity of the architecture, the sound of footsteps breaking the reverent silence—this was when she found God.

"Being a Christian in Singapore is cool, but in my marketplace in the US, it feels like a crime sometimes," Inch says. Then again, when you profess a faith like Christianity, expect the slings and the arrows of affliction to follow you. There was an episode when more conservative Christians were miffed that Pink Dot, the movement which supports lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, had used her track "Rule the World" in its promotions. At that time, Inch's music fell under Creative Commons, so there wasn't a need to ask for her permission to use her music, but they wanted her to write to the organisation and ask it to cease using the music.

"This was when I struggled," Inch says emphatically. "I didn't want them to take it down. It would really break my heart to tell somebody, 'You can't use my music because you're gay.' That's not what I believe in. There's something fundamentally wrong in telling someone that being gay is wrong. It just is."

You can see it on her face as she talks about this. Her eyes take on a sheen; her expression is pinched. Like barbed wire tracing across her face as she slowly articulates how torn she is between what the Bible says is the absolute truth and what she knows of her gay friends.

Where her allegiance lies, only Inch knows, but the line that she straddles is a razor's keening edge. When it comes down to an absolute that Inch should take, will the path she walks on leave footprints of scarlet in her wake?

SINGAPOREAN

In 2011, before leaving for LA, Inch wrote a screed on her Facebook. In it, she lamented the lack of support for local musicians. "I'd like to announce," it read, "that I've decided to move to another country to pursue my career. I'm not giving up on you, Singapore, but rather it's due to the fact that it's the only choice I have, thanks to your pathetic need of validation from elsewhere before you see things clearly for yourself." And at the end of the missive, she signed off as "A 100% HOME-GROWN SINGAPOREAN ARTIST & PROUD OF IT."

"It was never my intention to leave and not return," Inch says. "I love this country too much." When she's overseas, she often compares her experiences to those she's had at home, not as a means to find fault, but rather to hit on a solution for how to replicate it in Singapore. "There are a lot of cultural differences and other factors that could change the model. I went to the States to see how it's done first-hand."

She does note that, since returning, she's noticed improvements to the local music scene, "but it's a slow process. What you need is more vibrancy. In the States, you always need to bring your 'A' game because people are just as hungry as you, if not more. We need the challenge to advance the quality of the music scene."

Other than what she does, Americans also find where she hails from interesting as well. "In a time like this, when people are hungry to know what's going on in other parts of the world, they can go on the Internet to find out."

"Being a Singaporean is more of a plus point for me. Regardless of age, gender and nationality, good music is good music. Having a good story, like where I come from, helps. People have this perception of our country, such as our strict laws and the tidiness, so when I talk to them, they're tickled that there's a subculture in Singapore like our music. I think the average American doesn't expect that Singapore music could sound so Western. Malay surf rock music to metal with Tamil influences—there's some eclecticism to it, but it's still predominantly Western music. The music that we have is such an opposite of Singapore's 'clean-and-green', sterile image."

Inch's loyalties lie here. So far, the people whom she's talked to haven't said anything offensive about the Lion City. "In fact, they all want to come here someday. I was in Texas for SXSW and the waiter who served us found out that we're Singaporeans. He said, 'I've been saving up to visit Singapore. I've seen that episode of Anthony Bourdain in Singapore and the food looks delicious!'"

Inch is an exemplary ambassador for Singapore. Hardworking and tenacious, she's always game to extol the virtues of the Republic. Up next for her will be a tour of the North American West Coast in February to support *Bumfuzzle*'s release, and it will conclude in Singapore. And after that? Her fingers are crossed, but she hints that

if the trajectory of her career continues, bright and fiery, even more opportunities might open up for her.

According to the Chinese creation myth, the earth that we live off was once part of the being called Pangu. Tall and mighty, he cleaved the Earth and the Sky with his axe. With his feet planted, arms gripped into the firmaments, his back straightened as he pushed up the Sky. Eighteen thousand years have eye-blinked by, and Pangu's body is interned into our world. His breath is the howling wind, the mist and the clouds; his voice the thunder; his left eye the sun; his right the moon; and so on and so forth. We play in the mountains of his ribs; build civilisations amongst his sinews. We mine his bones; our fields are awash with the shower of his sweat. We live off the sum of Pangu's parts.

Inch is a giant in her own right. Only a mere flower of 24, she's done many things the average person would never have thought was possible at that age. She'll return to LA, banging down doors and refusing to take no for an answer. Her detractors might dismiss her efforts, but the next time she comes home, these small-minded plebs will be staring up at this

colossus of the industry.

And then, it is time to go. She has to continue with the rest of the delivery and I have to return to the office. We step outside and under the diffused orange glow of the streetlights, Inch, somehow, looks a different person from way back when. She looks confident... Taller, maybe?

We reach in for a hug. There's confidence in her stance, as I wrap my arms around her, unsure whether the tips of my fingers will touch. And as my arms coil around her and tighten, I'm hesitant if I can even move this human oak that's rooted and sure.

But the silly doubt scatters. For even those who are larger than life, they still require support from the rest of us, and I straighten my back and lift... ❧

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