
iNVENTX Creative Exhibition

SUSTAINAISSANCE IN PRACTICE: Quiet Materials, Loud Meaning

Life & Music: A Visual Narrative of Music, Identity and Cultural Sustainability in Comic Art

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Abstract

Life & Music is a comic series that explores a personal journey through music, from childhood to adulthood. Starting with traditional Malay songs like Tepuk Amai-Amai and moving through global nursery rhymes, disco, rock, metal, techno, indie, and hip hop, the story captures how musical tastes evolve over time. It concludes with a spiritual shift, where the artist reflects on life and turns towards faith and inner peace. The comic aligns with the theme SUSTAINAISSANCE: Emotion, Expression, Identity by illustrating how music connects to emotional experience, helps us express who we are, and shapes our personal and cultural identity. Comics, as noted by McCloud (1993), are a powerful medium for layering time, emotion, and narrative in a visual format. Each musical phase represents a different emotional state and life stage, illustrating how cultural soundtracks remain emotionally embedded within us (Firth, 1996). Moreover, *Life & Music* reflects an engagement with cultural sustainability, echoing Mulyadi Mahamood's work on Malaysian comics as tools of cultural preservation (Mahamood & Mustaqim, 2022). By illustrating personal and shared experiences, the work helps sustain memory and identity in an engaging and meaningful way.

Keywords: Music and memory; Cultural identity; Visual storytelling; Emotional expression; Comic art; Cultural sustainability.

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Artist Statement

Life & Music is a personal reflection told through comic art, a journey through the evolving sounds that have shaped my emotions, identity, and worldview. From childhood songs and disco beats to rebellious rock, gentle folk, and eventually spiritual reflection, each panel is a memory and a moment in time. Music has always been more than entertainment; it functions as a mirror of who I was, who I wanted to be, and who I have become.

As a cartoonist, I believe in using humour and nostalgia to make deeper stories accessible. Comics allow me to blend visual storytelling with cultural commentary in a way that speaks to people of all ages. This work is about more than music; it's about change, emotion, growing up, and finding meaning.

By capturing both local traditions and global influences, this work aims to preserve and reflect cultural identity in a format that resonates with today's generation. *Life & Music* is my way of sustaining memory, emotion, and identity, one frame at a time.

Concept and Theme

The inspiration for *Life & Music* came from looking back at how music has quietly shaped every stage of my life. Certain songs instantly bring back childhood memories, awkward teenage phases, or moments of deep emotional change. I realised that my personal development was often marked by shifts in musical taste, each genre reflecting my identity at the time.

Life & Music reflects the theme “**SUSTAINAISSANCE: Emotion, Expression, Identity**” by using music as a storytelling device to explore how we grow emotionally, express ourselves, and shape our identity over time.

Emotion is central to this work. Each musical era depicted, that is childhood lullabies, rebellious rock, peaceful folk, and spiritual reflection, represents a different emotional stage in life. The artwork captures how songs become emotional memory markers, tied to joy, confusion, belonging, or growth.

Expression is portrayed through the evolving musical styles and the comic art itself. Music becomes a language of self-expression, and the comic medium allows those feelings and transitions to be communicated visually, with humor and honesty.

Identity is at the heart of the narrative. As the artist journeys through different genres, they are also navigating personal change—from childhood innocence to adult awareness and spiritual grounding. The comic illustrates how identity is fluid, shaped by culture, sound, and inner reflection.

By representing cultural references and emotional experiences in a visual format, *Life & Music* supports the idea of **sustaining personal and cultural identity** through creative expression.

Approach and Process

To create *Life & Music*, this project used a combination of traditional sketching techniques and digital illustration tools to bring the comic to life. The process began with hand-drawn sketches, where I mapped out the narrative structure, panel flow, and visual pacing of the comic. This early stage was crucial for balancing humor with emotional storytelling.

Once the concept and layout were solid, I moved into digital production using Adobe Photoshop software. The work was developed in a black-and-white style to emphasise expression and contrast, focusing on character emotions, dynamic movement, and the distinctive moods of each musical phase.

The character design and visual language draw from **Malaysian cartoon influences**, particularly the work of Lat, as well as classic comic traditions. I kept the line work bold and clean to enhance readability and give a timeless, expressive quality to the illustrations. Throughout the process, I aimed to maintain a rhythm that mirrors the **flow of music**, from playful and chaotic to calm and introspective, allowing readers to feel the emotional and identity shifts in each phase of life.

This combination of analogue storytelling and digital production helped shape a narrative that is both personal and universally relatable.

Meaning and Impact

Through *Life & Music*, I aim to tell a story about how music shapes who we are. Each phase of life is reflected through a different musical genre, capturing childhood innocence, teenage rebellion, self-discovery, and ultimately, spiritual reflection. The comic suggests that music functions as more than background sound; it is a soundtrack to our emotions, identity, and personal evolution.

The work emphasises the importance of reflecting on personal and cultural origins. Whether it is a childhood folk song, a pop icon, or a song that helped us through a tough time, these sounds become part of our emotional memory. They remind us of who we were, and guide us toward who we are becoming.

I also want to highlight the value of cultural continuity. By telling this story through comics, I am preserving both personal and shared musical heritage in a way that's accessible and engaging. In a rapidly changing cultural environment, *Life & Music* is a reminder that while trends and times may shift, the emotions and meanings we carry through art and music are what truly last.

Materials and Techniques

This project employs a combination of traditional sketching techniques (pencil ideation sketch on paper), digital illustration tools (Adobe Photoshop) and print on canvas.

The process began with hand-drawn sketches, where I mapped out the narrative structure, panel flow, and visual pacing of the comic. This early stage was crucial for balancing humour with emotional storytelling. Once the concept and layout were solid, I moved into digital production using Adobe Photoshop software. I worked in a black-and-white style to emphasize expression and contrast, focusing on character emotions, dynamic movement, and the distinctive moods of each musical phase.

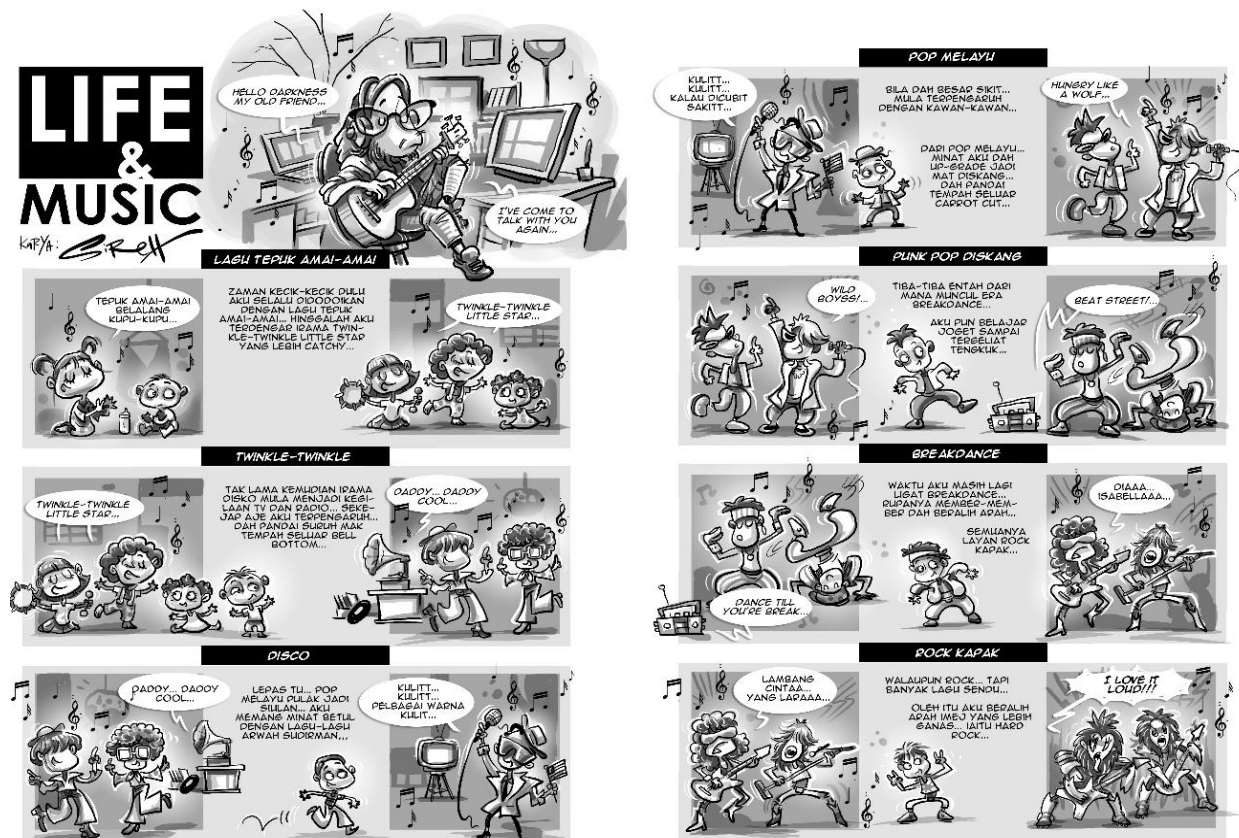


Figure 1. Life & Music, p.01 and p.02

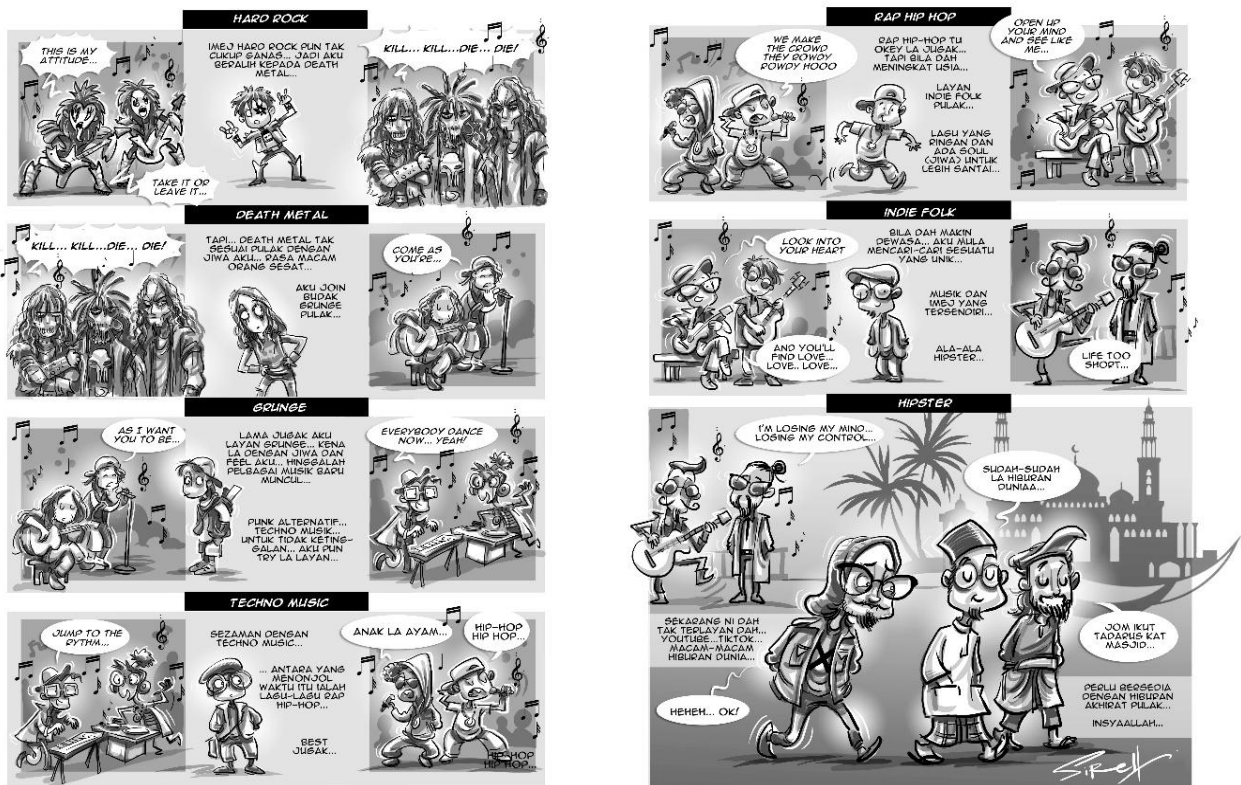


Figure 2. Life & Music, p.03 and p.04

Artistic and Design Influences

Life & Music draws on Malaysian cultural heritage, especially childhood songs like *Tepuk Amai-Amai* and national music icons such as **Sudirman**. These references reflect a local identity shaped by both traditional and modern sounds. The comic also draws from **historical shifts in global music**, from disco to grunge and hip hop, illustrating how cultural globalization intersects with personal growth. By blending these elements, the work preserves a sense of **cultural continuity** in a rapidly changing world.

My creative journey has been inspired by **Datuk Lat**, whose humorous yet heartfelt depictions of Malaysian life taught me the power of storytelling through comics. Internationally, I have drawn inspiration from **Bill Watterson** (*Calvin and Hobbes*) for his emotional depth and expressive simplicity, and **Hergé** (*Tintin*) for his clean visual narrative style.

Conceptually, I am influenced by the idea of **autobiographical storytelling**, using everyday life as a meaningful artistic subject, and the **power of nostalgia** as a tool for cultural preservation. This work also aligns with ideas associated with the slow art movement, valuing reflection, memory, and emotional resonance over speed and trends.

Conclusion

Life & Music functions as more than a nostalgic comic; it functions as a living archive of emotion, expression, and identity. The work echoes the ideas of Lat and other Malaysian cartoonists who use humour and everyday narratives to preserve cultural nuance (Subramaniam et al., 2025; Mahamood, 2015). By presenting a musical journey across life stages, the comic illustrates how visual storytelling can reflect not only personal memory but also collective cultural identity.

In line with current thinking on cultural sustainability (Khoo, 2022), the comic bridges the past and present, using art as a medium to foster reflection, connection, and continuity. As McCloud (1993) highlights, comics uniquely combine word and image to convey layered meaning, making them an effective tool for emotional and cultural storytelling.

Looking ahead, this work suggests potential applications for comics in education, community engagement, and emotional resilience-building, areas where accessible storytelling can encourage cultural dialogue and personal healing. In doing so, *Life & Music* suggests that sustainability extends beyond ecological concerns; it is also emotional and cultural.

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Authors' Bio

Anuar Hassan, known by his pen name Sireh, is a Malaysian cartoonist and visual storyteller with over two decades of experience in the creative industry. He holds a Master of Science in Creative Multimedia and currently serves as a lecturer in the Animation & Visual Effects program at Multimedia University (MMU), Cyberjaya. Anuar began his artistic journey studying Fine Arts at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) before earning a Bachelor of Arts in Computer Graphics Design from Wanganui Regional Community Polytechnic, New Zealand. His illustrations have appeared in several well-known Malaysian publications, including *Kosmo Ahad*, *Gila-Gila*, *Ujang*, *Gelihati*, *Humor*, and *APO?*, the latter of which he co-founded in 1998. Beyond print media, Sireh's work has been featured in numerous exhibitions, including those promoting road safety awareness, student life, and Malaysian culture and lifestyle. His comics often explore themes of cultural identity, humour, and social commentary, resonating with diverse audiences. Anuar continues to shape the Malaysian art scene through his academic role, creative projects, and an active presence on social media, where he shares his latest works, artistic reflections, and cultural insights.