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`360 degrees' pays off for Too Phat

By Wahti Mahidin

TOO Phat's Joe Flizzow and Malique were involved in all aspects of the making of `360 degrees', their third album and the second to go platinum. WAHTI MAHIDIN writes.

THERE may soon come a time when the credits on a Too Phat album will feature one sentence, over 13 lines: Producer, arranger, lyrics, concept, music, design, fashion, mixing, marketing, background vocals, recording, management, publicity, advertising and all album what-have-you's - by Malique and Joe Flizzow.

If 10 years ago the term was multi-tasking, now it is called surviving.

"I can't expect to just rap all my life," said Malique, one half of the rapping duo currently riding high on the crest of album sales, "or I wouldn't HAVE a life."

Joe couldn't agree more with his compatriot: "Besides, its MY life and MY music so I should be in control."

Too Phat's 360 degrees, the group's third album and the second to go platinum, is more than a recording to Malique and Joe. It is blood, sweat, tears ... and fears all rolled out from the drawing board and gruelling studio hours, which makes the album's success all the more intoxicating.

On 360 degrees, Joe produced his own solo performance of the song Nasty Girls, having also re-written the lyrics and re-composed the additional music to this improvised version of a Khatijah Ibrahim song. Malique created his solo Where My Love At, rapped it in the studio and tweaked it to perfection behind the controls.

In general, both Joe and Malique were thoroughly involved in the composing, arranging and mixing of 360 degrees for which they won two awards for Best Group Vocal Performance and Best Local English Album at last Saturday's Anugerah Industri Muzik (AIM).

Outside of album production, Joe has started a production company looking into new television programme concepts. He has just finished a self-funded pilot project called the Joe Flizz Show, and it promises "fun". Joe's education as a host is being abetted by 8TV's talk show Flava, where he plays compere with commendable results, says Ahmad Izham Omar, the station's chief operating officer.

The third member of Too Phat, DJ T-Bone, is a resident DJ at one of KL's biggest nightclubs. As a sessionist, DJ T-Bone is often hired to play during recording of other artistes' album.

Although Plan B, the group's second album, still leads in terms of sales, 360 degrees was a ground breaker for Too Phat on the international scene.

Not to mention profitable, seeing as how EMI recently released the platinum edition of the album, with major modifications put in. Apart from a totally new look and different concept in casing, the music has also been altered and improved.

For 360 degrees Platinum Edition, the boys went even further by "sweet-talking" (both Joe and Malique are charming) artiste friends and counterparts into singing together with them on the album. Artistes featured include Indonesian superstar Dian Sastrowardoyo.

The 20-page booklet for the CD was conceptualised, designed and directed by Malique, from scratch to printing plate. EMI product executive Jeremy Chong owned up to the creative, albeit amateurish, shots found all over the booklet.

Yet none of these efforts can overshadow the coup when creating 360 degrees in the first place - snaring Warren G, one of America's earlier godfathers of hip hop. The collaboration with Warren is a crucial element in earning Too Phat global esteem in the borderless world of online R&B music.

That Joe and Malique managed to make the connection with Warrren painstakingly through their own contacts in the international hip-hop scene was a master stroke. For the record, let it be noted no other local act has pulled off a collaboration with an international superstar without a push from the recording company.

The highlight of 360 degrees Platinum Edition is the re-recording of Malay versions of hits Alhamdulillah and Ala Canggung - Too Phat's first Malay recordings.

Regionally within the hip-hop community, Too Phat is well regarded. In Malaysia, it is an icon, deserving the respect and even adulation of other artistes within as well as outside the realm of hip hop.

While diva Datuk Sharifah Aini once consented to lend her name and voice on a Too Phat recording, veteran singer Datuk Yusni Hamid has also shown support for the group.

Having earned a reputation as former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's favourite singer, Yusni added distinguished charm to the launch of the 360 degrees Platinum Edition. Sharifah Aini corroborated with Joe and Malique on stage for the song Ala Canggung, marking a first for her. She also sings in the recording of this bonus track.

The launch, of course, was to mark the presentation of the platinum album to Too Phat after 360 degrees hit sales of 50,000 units.

"And we're a hip-hop group at that," said Joe, reiterating the significance of this sales figure. With the long slump experienced by the local recording industry, selling breakeven numbers of albums is a feat more associated with mainstream music genres.

Both Joe and Malique are that much closer to realising their hope of "not relying totally on Too Phat for income".

"I want something else to fall back on and that something can still be in the music and production line," says Joe.

With the pressure off from depending on Too Phat's earnings, the two will be able to treat their music with the respect it deserves. They also expect regional industry executives to respect their achievements by giving them the support they are due.

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