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Alis in Yunaland

It's no wonder that this amazingly talented Malaysian singer-songwriter has made such an impact on the American music scene.

THERE'S a song currently getting a lot of play on radio where the word "down" is repeated over and over.

But instead of feeling down, I am uplifted listening to it. That's because the song provides a great, bright spot amid all the bad news of late.

It's because this single, *Crush*, is written and sung by our own Malaysian talent Yuna (pic) for her third United States-produced album called *Chapters*, and with it, she has truly made it in the ultra-competitive international music scene.

After its release in April, *Crush* made it to the 8th spot on Billboard's Adult R&B chart while *Chapters* broke into the top 10 R&B albums and top 20 R&B/Hip-Hop Albums charts.

Yuna caught my attention in 2013 with her collaboration with Adam Young on *Shine Your Way*, the title track of the Dreamworks animated film, *The Croods*.

I fell in love with her voice which is like smooth, delicious caramel that melts in your ears.

With *Crush*, Yuna upped the ante because she got Usher, the Grammy-award winning, mega best-selling R&B artiste, to sing with her. And that is a Very Big Deal. Their music video has chalked up close to nine million views.

If you've been under a rock and wondering who she is, Yuna – short for Yunalis Mat Zarai – is a 29-year-old Kedah-born UiTM law graduate.

She started composing songs at 14 and like many 21st-century artistes, first found fame online.

Her 2008 debut album won four *Anugerah Industri Muzik* (our equivalent of the Grammy Awards),

including Best New Artist and Best Song for the breathtakingly beautiful *Deeper Conversation*.

By 2010, she was on a roll, scoring success as a singer and a fashionista with her own boutique.

The following year, she decamped to Los Angeles and got her first big break when Pharrell Williams mentored and produced her first US record. She's also performed on Jay Leno and Jimmy Kimmel's shows, among others.

An interesting tidbit is her professional name wasn't always Yuna.

There's a 2006 YouTube video of her audition for a local reality show, *One in a Million*, where she introduced herself as Yunalis and told the judges to call her Alis.

She sang *Bohemian Rhapsody* because she thought she could showcase her vocal prowess. Judge Paul Moss disagreed but felt she was something special.

He was right. While the tudung-clad law student called Alis didn't win the contest, she already showed spunk and was comfortable speaking English to the judges.

Ten years on, Alis has become Yuna, the polished, confident turban-wearing artiste who has become a *bona fide* international composer-singer.

Yuna's success should be the pride of all Malaysians and it was made possible, I strongly believe, because of her English language proficiency.

Ultra-Malay nationalists may not want to sing her praises because of that but that is the undeniable truth.

In an interview with *sfweekly.com* in May this year, she said "I



was doing music back home, but I was doing a lot of English music so it wasn't really taking me anywhere. There wasn't a market in Malaysia. So I really wanted to see where my English music could take me."

Perhaps more importantly, she told *MTV News*, "Now that I'm here (in America), I get to really do what I want to do."

That is yet another undeniable truth: if you want to make it internationally in entertainment, you need English. That's how the Swedish group Abba became phenomenally successful in the 1970s and our Tan Sri Michelle Yeoh could play a Bond girl.

Indeed, part of Yuna's success is her brilliant way with words; her fans love and relate to her heartfelt, well-crafted lyrics.

A measure of her international success is the number of covers of her songs like *Fading Flower*, *Lullabies*, *Rescue*, *Decorate* and now *Crush* that get on YouTube.

And let's face it, YouTubers don't cover songs that won't get them likes.

One cover of *Rescue* is by an American church choir and it got comments about the song or Yuna "dekati" and "masuk gereja", meaning the song or composer got close to or entered a church.

The song, as another commentator pointed out, is about being a strong woman and nothing about religion, yet such is the state of mind among some Malaysians.

It's really not unexpected, considering the acute sensitivity about Islam and Muslims in today's world.

And that's another minefield a Malaysian Muslim female artiste must face. Above all, she is constantly judged by the way she dresses and interacts with the opposite sex.

On that score, Yuna has also done well and clearly that is no accident. As she told *New York magazine*; "By the time I got into music, I was already wearing the scarf all the time, and it's really personal to me, my Muslim beliefs, so I decided to keep it and find a way to work around it."

And indeed she has. From the

flowy tudung, she's created her distinctive, sharp turban look.

Since moving to the United States, she says she still meets people who don't understand why she continues to cover up.

"People say, 'You should let your hair out; you shouldn't be oppressed – you're not in Malaysia anymore. You should show your curves and be proud of it.'"

"But I am proud – it's my choice to cover up my body. I'm not oppressed – I'm free," she's quoted as saying by *Billboard.com*.

Apart from her colourful turbans, she wears high collars, long sleeves and long, flowing tops over ankle-length skirt, pants or skinny jeans that can only be described as stylishly modest.

Yet, someone still thought it fit to comment that the more international she got, the more skin she showed – which is just mind-boggling. But it hasn't fazed Yuna who knows just how hard it is to do something different and that's why she keeps close to her roots.

As she told *MTV News*, "I try to stay connected to the Malaysian fans, because they need it. I love my country, but when it comes to younger kids trying to get support to do what they want to do, it's really tough, because they get moulded into something very early, and it's kind of hard to break from that."

"And if they do something different, they get criticised for it. Like me – I get criticised all the damn time for doing this. They see [my work] as a little glimmer of hope. I'm probably the first Malaysian to ever do this, really get myself into the American music industry."

If she keeps composing and singing the way she does, there's no way critics and naysayers can keep Yuna down, down, down, down, down.

More importantly, she is exactly the kind of inspiring antidote our young Malaysians need to counter the toxic influence of extremism like the IS.

With her talent,
nothing
can keep
Yuna down



Aunty would love to try wearing a turban on a bad hair day but thinks she'd end up looking like Norma Desmond, Glenn Close's character in *Sunset Boulevard*. Feedback to aunty@thestar.com.my.

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