

SIBLING REVELRY

With the collective goal to fuse music, poetry, and visual art into one cohesive form, Jack of None exhibits their artistic dexterity and takes us on a vivid journey of their reveries on art, love, sexuality, and other seemingly taboo or disturbing themes. **Metro Society** talks with A.G., Maxine, and Julian Syjuco about how they are dissecting the facets of the human condition on a path no other group has taken

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Armed with their strong bond and undeniably excellent combination as artists, A.G., Maxine, and Julian Syjuco continuously challenge our affinity to the convenient and what is easy to the ear by delving into the deeper recesses of our consciousness through the music of their group, Jack of None. Only to further solidify the band's passion for their craft, their first album "Who's Listening to Van Gogh's Ear," received critical acclaim at the 2016 Independent Music Awards held in New York and was nominated for best spoken word song of the year and best spoken word album of the year, and was awarded for best album art, photography, and design from the same award-giving body.

Two years into the birth of Jack of None and after their first album being noted for best new sound in 2016 by Canada's SleepingBagStudios, they have released their second album, which has been receiving rave reviews from all over the world. Expertly weaving poetry into music, Jack of None has once again wowed audiences and surpassed expectations, delivering their distinct, exceptional sound that has listeners on the edge of their seats, hanging on to how the band's music reaches into the subconscious.

Growing up a Syjuco

Born to highly acclaimed multimedia artists Cesare A.X. and Jean Marie Syjuco of experimental studio and exhibit hall Art Lab, A.G., Maxine, and Julian have grown to have varying mediums and degrees of immersion in art as a whole. A recipient of the Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Philippines Award for Art & Culture Advancement and other notable awards, their father Cesare is a multimedia artist and painter who has had a solo exhibit at no less than the main hall of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and is likewise a poet who has recently released a 15-track album and book that, just like his children's band, fuses his poetry and music. Their mother, Jean Marie, on the other hand, is a prominent figure in performance art, aside from being a known visual artist and painter, bagging awards such as the Cultural Center of the Philippines' Gawad CCP Para sa Sining Biswal Award, and the gold medal in the annual art competition of the Art Institution of the Philippines in 1980.

With both parents being movers and mavericks in the art world, it is no surprise that they grew up living and breathing art. The eldest of five children A.G. shares, "it was all around us. It was what was discussed at the dinner table. It wasn't until I started going to school that I realized I was a bit different from the other kids. My ideas of what art is versus what we were being taught in art class were completely different." Maxine further shares, "There was always music playing in our ears... there was always an art film to watch late at night... there were always paintings and sculptures being created around us... and there were always lots and lots of books for our imaginations to devour. To me, being an artist was never a question—it was an inevitable answer." Names such as Marcel Duchamp, Akira Kurosawa, and Aldous Huxley were talked about alongside the likes of Miles Davis, Chuck Corea,

Friedrich Nietzsche. Sometimes, they would listen to their dad plucking away on his six-string guitar or the likes of Steely Dan and Talking Heads on their music player.

Although it seemed natural for them to love art in all its forms, they never felt any pressure from their parents to pursue art as a profession. As testament to this, each of them has pursued different forms of art and was encouraged to pursue all their talents, creative or otherwise. A.G. tells us, "there was never any pressure. There was always encouragement, but that was true for everything we showed interest in, whether that was learning a musical instrument, or playing basketball. Our parents were extremely supportive of everything we did." Proving this is A.G. graduating summa cum laude with a degree in information technology before working for a multinational corporation, while continuously making music. Much like his eldest brother, Julian also pursued another art in the form of painting, with both art forms allowing him to express himself completely. Julian reveals, "As someone who constantly craves variety and meaning in my life, I am very lucky that what I do serves as both my work and my escape. I often find myself lost in them and very much enjoy the process of creating—whether it's with a palette knife or an electric guitar. I am very grateful and fortunate to have been born into a family that provides me with the platform and means to continually push the boundaries of both music and visual art."

Much like her brothers and parents, Maxine is multitalented, having received accolades for her works in various fields such as photography, installation art, and painting, with exhibits and performances staged in esteemed venues in the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and the US, to name a few. She admits to having her parents as her main influences, especially in her poetry, which has been since translated into other languages and has likewise received critical acclaim. "I'd like to think I get my romantic and feminine side from my mom, and my darker, more twisted, and intellectual side from my dad. They're both my idols, and their input is always invaluable to me. Growing up, I learned from my mom all the techniques that I now use in my visual art. She would buy me all the art materials I ever needed and wanted, and would patiently guide me as I discovered my own style. As for my dad—he and I spend late nights discussing books, philosophy, and artistic ideas while listening to music. Jazz is perhaps our favorite genre," Maxine divulges.

Evolving tastes and talents

Jumping into music likewise came naturally for all three. A.G. became a professional musician at the very young age of 15 as part of Faust!, a band he shared with his sisters, and was later on signed to Vicor Music. Even as teenagers armed with original compositions, they were already able to boast having their composition *Katakataka* get a copious amount of airplay at a local radio station. The youngest of five children, Julian shares that growing up, visual art, poetry, and music have been present in their lives, saying, "If anything, what we each do is build upon what our parents instilled in us from a very young age." Their youngest sister, Maxine, recalls snippets from their childhood proving they have found a common love for art and music at a very



The youngest girl and the youngest boy in the Syjuco brood, Maxine and Julian shine, not just in visual arts but in music as well.

young age. She shares, "I remember the day my brother A.G. left a double-cassette tape of Smashing Pumpkins' 'Melon Collie and the Infinite Sadness' outside my bedroom door. I also remember the day my brother Julian was heartbroken and we stayed up all night singing '90s alternative love songs while he played the guitar. It was in those two moments that I knew my brothers and I shared something very special: a mutual love and admiration not just for music, but for self-expression and the artists who sought to express themselves purely, regardless of what anyone thought or said."

These being said, it is not surprising that their parents also greatly influence their work as Jack of None. All three siblings mention the likes of Laurie Anderson, Henry Rollins, The Velvet Underground, BB King, Charley Patton, Leadbelly, Paul Desmond, Robert Johnson, and much more. However, their parents continue to inspire and influence their work, with everyone else as "shadows, while (their) parents are the sun and moon," as Maxine puts it. Julian adds, "Being the wonderful and immensely successful people that our parents are, they greatly influenced who we've become and what we do. My dad is one of the greatest art minds and one of the most highly acclaimed art critics in the country. And



JACK OF NONE
AT THE IMAS
[Independent Music Awards 2016]
LINCOLN CENTER, NEW YORK CITY

3 CATEGORY NOMINATIONS

BEST ALBUM OF THE YEAR [WHO'S LISTENING TO VAN GOGH'S EAR?] / ROCK & POP CATEGORY

BEST SONG OF THE YEAR [MRS. FITZGERALD] / SPOKEN WORD CATEGORY

BEST ALBUM ART & PHOTOGRAPHY [MAXINE SYJUCO / ALBUM ART AND DESIGN]

Praise for their debut album, "Who's Listening to Van Gogh's Ear?"

"BRILLIANT!
 Purely, utterly, uniquely BRILLIANT!
 ...Truly art as much as music could ever be.
 Maxine's poetry & lyrics provide intense imagery you simply can't ignore, while the guitars bring their A-game... Massively captivating and extraordinary. Jack of None delivers incredibly new, fresh and unique music as true masters of depth."
 —@maggiejoel, Canada

**"An incredible achievement!
 A work of art. A must-have."**
 —@mattandmaxine, U.S.

**"Thought-provoking...
 Progressive... Bold...
 A landmark album!"**
 —@art, Mexico, U.S.

**"A visionary band...
 With words that are visually striking & deeply powerful amidst the fascinating, innovative music."**
 —@sarahm, U.S.

**"Heavily in sound...
 Heavy in substance."
 —@mattandmaxine, Toronto**

**"Deeply compelling...
 A balance of the mysterious and the melodic... Jack of None creates a unique, poetic, otherworldly universe."
 —@rockwith, U.S.**

**"A musical odyssey...
 An art masterpiece."
 —@jackofnone, U.S.**

my mom is the foremost exponent of performance art in the country. So artistic input is always given to us, and is definitely always most welcome."

Maxine, A.G., and his wife Mica got together as an experimental art-rock group called Utakan in the early 2000s, whose recordings were put on hold as A.G. was assigned abroad for work, and Maxine's poetry, paintings, and sculptures were exhibited locally and abroad. Some time in 2015, A.G. and Julian collaborated on music online. Later that year, Maxine and Julian visited A.G. in Chicago and with music being the art form they commonly love, as well as each of them having their own distinctive input to make, Utakan evolved into Jack of None.

Being based primarily in Manila for Maxine and Julian and Chicago for A.G., the group has only encountered distance and space as their only challenge. A.G. being the primary composer shares, figuring out the technical aspects of an online musical collaboration. It took a lot of trial and error to figure out what worked well and what didn't. "In the first record, only three of the 12 tracks were recorded with the three of us present in the same physical space." Between sharing raw audio, rough mixes, and music samples, they have used basically all modes of file sharing; growing to explore, and being brutally honest and understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses. "Our passion to create can never be silenced. My brothers are both immensely talented and we share a mutual respect and understanding for one another. We grew up as a tight-knit family so getting along has never been an issue. When A.G. sends me his music compositions, I listen to them over and over again until I feel almost "possessed" or "hypnotized" by some kind of artistic spirit that allows me to write/compose poetry and lyrics to best fit his music. I then

Above: The album cover of Jack of None's first album entitled "Who's Listening to Van Gogh's Ear?" which won best album art, photography and design at the 2016 Independent Music Awards. **Left:** A promotional poster for the nominations received by the group and their debut album at the 2016 Independent Music Awards

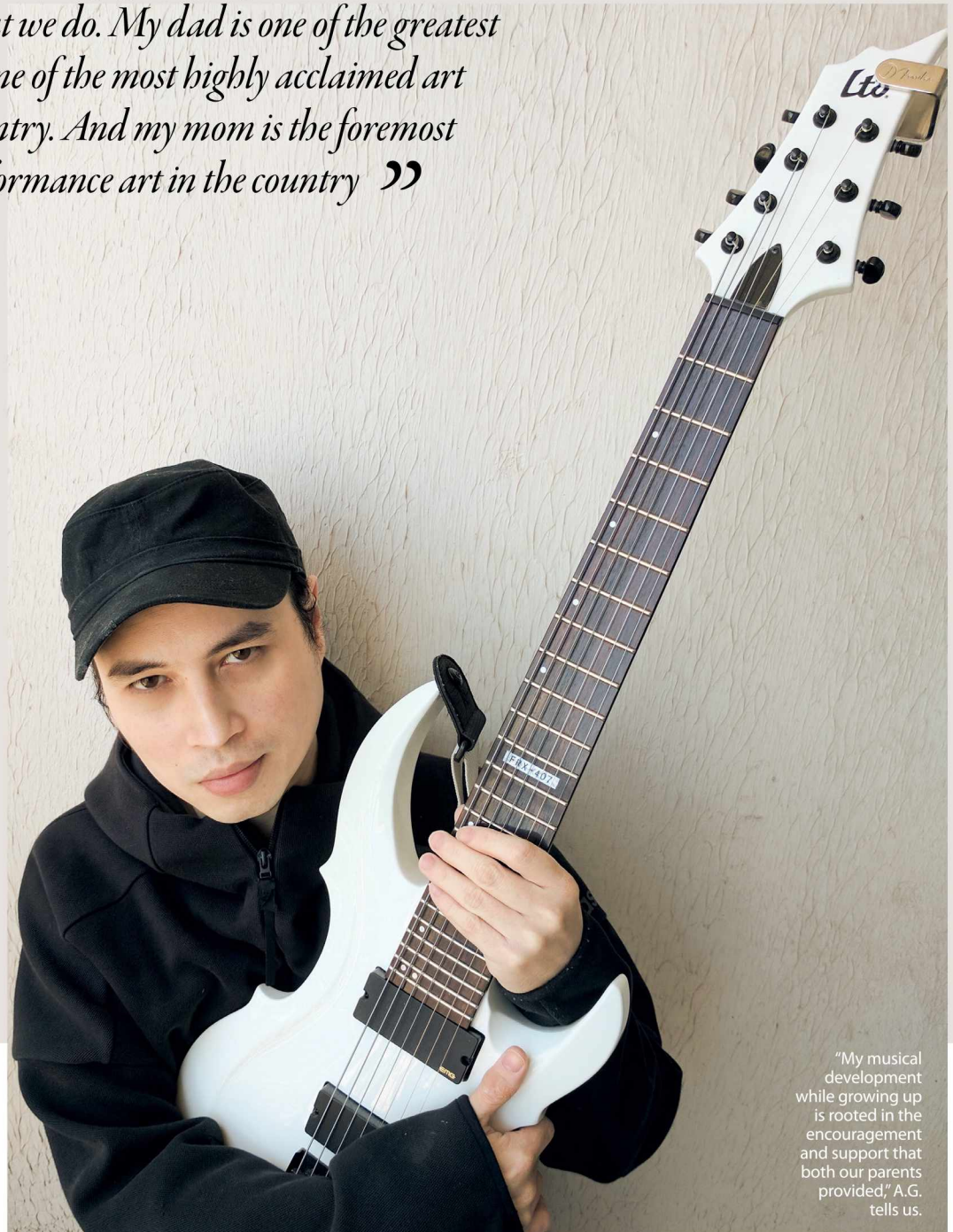
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send him my vocal recordings and lyrics, and he works with Julian to complete the process,” the group’s songwriter and vocalist Maxine tells us.

Changing the musical landscape

As the acceptance and popularity of the band’s musical style grows locally and worldwide, Jack of None can only hope that this interest in the experimental combination of literature and music is “indicative of people’s desire to discover deeper forms of art,” as Maxine puts it. She likewise adds that knowing there are more people who buy vinyl records these days means that there are more and more people who want to experience music versus just having it playing digitally in the background. “This brings me immense joy, and it means that the spirit of art is alive and thriving,” Maxine shares.

The group likewise hopes that other artists or musicians would be able to embrace their own voice and who they are, and as Maxine puts it, “dance amidst the angels and demons that sing within.” A.G. likewise shares, “when I started learning to play the guitar, my Dad would encourage me to focus on creating my own sound instead of learning to play covers.” Indeed, staying true to their voice and style has brought them recognition internationally. With a plan that has always been as simple as creating what they want by expressing themselves



“My musical development while growing up is rooted in the encouragement and support that both our parents provided,” A.G. tells us.

purely through their heart and soul, they hope to inspire others to create and keep doing it, “not for fame or fortune, but for the empowerment of art and the deepening of the human soul.”

As A.G. embarks on producing an album for a fellow artist, Maxine preparing to judge at the Independent Music Awards (and coincidentally being the first Filipina to do so), and Julian gearing up for his first solo exhibition in Manila, the group has no plans on slowing down and

intends to take their newly released album, “Who Shot Bukowski?” to greater heights by fusing it with other forms of art, they hope to elevate the audience’s overall experience. Indeed, Jack of None’s daring and uncompromising expression of themselves has shaken not just the local music scene, but the global arena as well. It just goes to show that there is triumph for those who dare to express themselves wholeheartedly and brazenly, just as Jack of None has.■