

MIFF Gala Celebrates Filipino Excellence

BY MIC DIAZ | PUBLISHER



Lea Salonga accepts MIFF Icon Award with Lou Diamond Phillips



Manila's Finest Director Raymond Red accepts Best Picture Narrative Award



Reynafé Castillo (daughter of Reynaldo "Bebot" Momay, the subject of the documentary) accepts Best Picture Documentary Award



Jericho Rosales accepts Best Actor Award



Manila's Finest Director Raymond Red accepts Best Actress Award for Ashtine Olviga



Manila's Finest Director Raymond Red accepts Best Cinematographer Award
Photos by Joe Cobilla

There was something bigger than awards unfolding inside The Beverly Hilton on September 6. As the **Manila International Film Festival (MIFF)** closed its 2026 edition, the **Closing Night Awards Gala** brought together generations of Filipino talent. The evening was hosted by Erin Lim Rhodes, host of *E! News: The Rundown*, Mark Dacascos and R'Bonney Gabriel.

At the center of that story was Lea Salonga. Just days after becoming the first Filipina to receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Salonga received the MIFF Icon Award, presented to her by Filipino American actor Lou Diamond Phillips. The honor celebrated a career that has crossed borders, genres and generations.

Music became part of the evening's storytelling. Tamyra Gray, who starred alongside Salonga in the Tony Award-winning Broadway revival of *Once on This Island*, opened the musical performances accompanied on piano by Troy

Laureta, who served as musical director for a portion of the gala. Gray later returned to perform "Reflection" from Disney's *Mulan*, paying tribute to Salonga, whose singing voice as Mulan introduced the song to audiences around the world.

AJ Rafael later served as musical director for Ruby Ibarra and the special "Saigon Sisters" tribute to Salonga. Joan Almedilla, Jennifer Paz, Emy Baysic and Lucy Acuña—all actresses who have taken on the role of Kim in *Miss Saigon*—performed a medley celebrating Salonga's journey from her early career through Broadway and Disney.

The awards reflected the breadth of Filipino storytelling at the festival. *Manila's Finest* won Best Picture – Narrative, with Ashtine Olviga receiving Best Actress and the film also earning Best Cinematography. Jericho

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MIFF Gala Celebrates Filipino Excellence (Continued from Page 1)

Rosales won Best Actor for *Quezon*, while *58th* received Best Picture – Documentary and Carl Joseph Papa was honored as Best Director.

The gala also honored Filipino entertainment legends Nora Aunor and Pilita Corrales with posthumous Lifetime Achievement Awards, accepted by Janine Gutierrez on their behalf. The Briones family—Jon Jon, Megan, Isa and Teo—received the inaugural Generations Award. The Shining A Light Awards recognized *58th* and *Kappa-Tiran*, with Sheryl Cruz and producer Marcos Mamay accepting for *Kappa-Tiran*. BarBara Luna, Priscilla Hunt, *Forgotten Island* and filmmakers Januel Mercado and Joel Crawford also received Trailblazer recognition.

More than an awards ceremony, the gala brought legacy, representation and possibility into one room. For one evening in Beverly Hills, Filipino stories and the people who tell them were not on the margins of Hollywood—they were the celebration.



Briones Family with Lea Salonga after accepting Generations Award



BarBara Luna accepts Trailblazer Award



Priscilla Hunt accepts Trailblazer Award



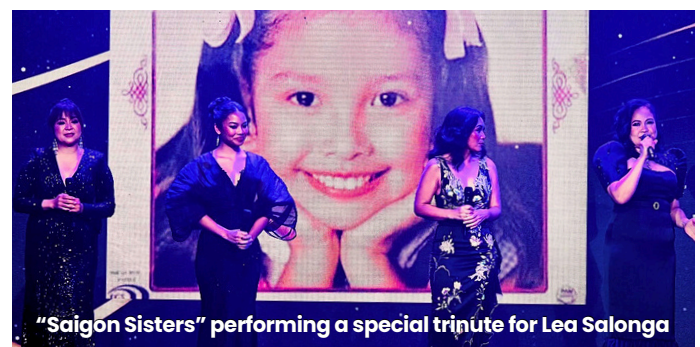
Forgotten Island writers/co-directors Januel Mercado and Joel Crawford, producer Mark Swift, and voice cast accept Trailblazer Award



Kappa-tiran actress Sheryl Cruz and producer Marcos Mamay accept Shining A Light Award



Janine Gutierrez accepts Monty Manibog Lifetime Achievement Award for her grandmothers National Artist Nora Aunor and Asia's Queen of Songs Pilita Corrales



"Saigon Sisters" performing a special tribute for Lea Salonga



Ruby Ibarra and Carl Angelo perform "Salbahe Ako" from Forgotten Island.

Photos by Joe Cobilla

CHAT WITH MIC

Sheryl Cruz: Better Than Her Last

BY MIC DIAZ | PUBLISHER

Growing up in one of Philippine entertainment's most celebrated families, **Sheryl Cruz** knew that a famous name would only take her so far. In her *Chat With Mic* interview, Cruz shared that despite being surrounded by showbiz from childhood, she understood that she had to build a body of work that was distinctly her own.

Cruz began acting at just four years old and grew up in front of the public, eventually moving from child actress to teenage idol, recording artist, television personality and accomplished actress. Through it all, she has embraced versatility and the need to continually evolve. "My own competition is myself," she said. "I have to top my last project or my last character."

Part of that journey included her hugely popular love team with Romnick Sarmenta, which Cruz described as "phenomenal" and an important part of her career. Yet even at the height of their popularity, her goal was to establish herself as a solo actress capable of working with different leading men and production companies—a goal she eventually achieved.

Beyond acting, music has remained an important part of Cruz's life. While she considers film her first love, she grew up listening to her father's band and went on to become a recording artist and live performer, learning early that performing before an audience requires a different kind of discipline—there are no second takes.

That philosophy continues with *Kappa-tiran*, a film that confronts hazing, abuse and the desire to belong. Cruz hopes the film encourages conversations among families. Cruz is also embracing another chapter with GMA's *Born to Shine*, where she plays Coach Vanna, a vocal coach who becomes a talent manager. The project reunites her with friends from her *That's Entertainment* years.

Evolving also means looking ahead. She hopes to continue performing with longtime friends and taking on films with advocacy-driven stories and moral lessons—projects that can connect with audiences in the Philippines and around the world. For Cruz, every new role offers another opportunity to challenge herself as an artist.

After decades in entertainment, Cruz remains focused on what comes next. Her career has evolved across film, television, music and live performance, but the drive to challenge herself remains. Each new role gives her another opportunity to grow as an artist. For Cruz, success is not about competing with others—it is about pushing herself further and topping her last project.

DON'T MISS OUT!

Check out the full interview in *Chat With Mic* on the Mic Diaz Presents Youtube channel.



New conversations every week on *Chat With Mic* Talk Show at Mic Diaz Presents Youtube Channel



CHAT WITH MIC Episode 77: Sheryl Cruz

CHAT WITH MIC

Marcos Mamay: Public Service Through a Different Lens

BY MIC DIAZ | PUBLISHER

For **Marcos Mamay**, public service extends beyond government. The Vice Mayor of Nunungan, Lanao del Norte has also found another way to advocate for change—as a film producer focused on stories with social impact.

During our *Chat With Mic* conversation at the Manila International Film Festival in Los Angeles, Mamay discussed producing *Kappa-tiran*, an advocacy film addressing hazing, bullying and violence within fraternities, sororities and other organizations. He hopes the film can serve as an eye-opener, particularly for young people considering joining such groups.

His commitment to service also shaped his unexpected path into politics. Mamay said residents encouraged him to run after years of limited peace and development in Nunungan. He eventually became mayor and now serves as

vice mayor, pointing to infrastructure, expanded access to electricity, improved peace and order, and collaboration with other government agencies among the changes pursued during his time in public office.

Whether working in government or producing films, Mamay returns to the same principle: collaboration. “We cannot stand alone,” he said, emphasizing that meaningful change requires people and organizations to work together. For Mamay, filmmaking and public service may be different worlds, but both offer a platform to raise awareness, bring people together and make an impact.

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CHAT WITH MIC Episode 79: Marcos Mamay



With *Kappa-tiran* producer Marcos Mamay, and lead actress Sheryl Cruz

Photos by Nilo Cruz



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ENTERTAINMENT

We Are One 3.0: Six DJs, Six Genres, One Night

BY MIC DIAZ | PUBLISHER



For one night in Torrance, the dance floor became a trip through decades of music. **We Are One 3.0**, held September 12 at View Music Bar & Lounge, brought together six DJs and sounds spanning the '70s, '80s and '90s to Disco, New Wave and House. Presented as a **CMLA/PPP Project**, the event continued a tradition of bringing the music many Filipino-Americans grew up dancing to in Manila into Southern California.

Behind the evening was Club Manila Los Angeles (CMLA), led by DJ and organizer Jake Martin. DJs Art De Vera, Edwin Macabuhay, Jake Martin, Jun P, Lemuel Pia and The Spinductor (Gilbert Villaroman) each brought a different musical lane to the dance floor. For decades, CMLA has helped keep the sounds and atmosphere of Manila nightlife alive for Filipino audiences in Southern California.

The format allowed each DJ to bring a distinct sound while



keeping the energy moving throughout the night. As one era gave way to another, the dance floor connected generations of music lovers through songs that have remained part of their personal soundtrack.

At its heart, the night was also about connection. Familiar songs became shared memories as friends and fellow music lovers came together through the sounds that helped define different generations. The music created a bridge between Manila memories and life in Southern California.

More than nostalgia, We Are One 3.0 showed how music from different eras can continue to bring a community together. The songs carried memories of Manila clubs, mobile discos and mixtapes while finding new life on a Southern California dance floor—proof that decades later, the music still moves people.



Photos by Jason Bascon

CREATOR SPOTLIGHT

ZIN MARKIE: Finding His Rhythm Through Dance

BY MIC DIAZ | PUBLISHER



For **Mark John Almeria**, better known as **ZIN MARKIE**, dance has become more than something he performs. It is a way to connect with people, build community, and bring energy into a room.

For more than 17 years, Markie has built his life around movement. His journey has taken him from competitive dance and international stages to choreography, live performance, and eventually, the world of Zumba® and dance fitness in the United States.

A Gold Medalist at the World Championships of Performing Arts (WCOA), Markie was also part of Junior New System (JNS), the Filipino dance crew that gained international attention for its combination of hip-hop choreography, precision, athleticism, and theatrical performance. The group appeared on major entertainment platforms, including *Asia's Got Talent*, where Junior New System received the Golden Buzzer, as well as *America's Got Talent* and other international stages and dance competitions.

Today, Markie brings those years of performance experience into a different kind of room. As a licensed Zumba® Instructor, he teaches Zumba®, Zumba® Gold, Aqua Fitness, and other dance fitness programs, combining choreography and music with the energy and personality he developed through years of performing.

His work has also gained recognition within the Zumba® community. Markie was featured in an official Zumba® Dance Off promotional campaign shared through the brand's social media platform, bringing his dance fitness work to a wider audience.

The transition from competitive dancer to dance fitness instructor has allowed Markie to take the discipline, musicality, creativity, and stage presence developed throughout his performing career and use them to inspire others. His classes are not simply about learning choreography—they are about creating an experience where people can move, have fun, and connect.

Markie continues to choreograph, perform, teach, and collaborate while expanding his presence through Zumba® masterclasses, U.S. tour events, live performances, dance fitness programs, and international projects.

Whether he is under the lights of a stage or leading a room full of people through a Zumba® class, ZIN MARKIE continues to follow the same passion that has driven him for more than 17 years: bringing people together through movement, music, and dance.

ENTERTAINMENT

Star Quest Moves One Step Closer to the Finals

BY MIC DIAZ | PUBLISHER



The competition is heating up at **Star Quest Season XI**, as **Roum Evangelista** emerged as the winner of the quarterfinal round held September 11 at **Almuchow Atbp.** in West Covina. Organized by Freddie Castañeda and hosted by Raz & JayR, the competition continues to provide aspiring singers with an opportunity to showcase their voices before a live audience.

With the quarterfinals complete, Star Quest now moves to the semifinals on October 9 at 8 PM at Almuchow Atbp. Evangelista will join fellow semifinalists Jimmy Retorta, John

Berg, Jujin Heley, Winie Ortin, Julie Ann Ramos, Monica Chen, Adam Diamond and William Sobrepena as the competition moves closer to its finale.

More than a singing competition, Star Quest has become a gathering place for performers, families and supporters of local talent. With the field narrowing and the stakes getting higher, the October semifinals will determine who moves one step closer to becoming the next Star Quest champion.

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ART & CULTURE

Taia Akulova Asks: Where Do We Go From Here?

BY MIC DIAZ | PUBLISHER



Los Angeles-based contemporary artist **Taia Akulova** explored identity, connection and belonging in *Where Do We Go From Here?*, an exhibition that opened September 12 at R.O.K. Art Gallery in Los Angeles. Curated by Nelson Anderson, the exhibition brought together several years of Akulova's work. Originally from Siberia, Russia, and with a background in architecture, Akulova works between figuration and abstraction, using expressive brushstrokes, layered color and fragmented imagery to explore the distance between our inner experiences and what we are able to communicate.

Throughout the exhibition, faces, lips and bodies emerge without always coming fully into focus. Works such as *Talk to Me* explore how words can fall short of expressing what we truly feel, while *Medusa Gorgon* considers how fear and perception influence the way we see others. Rather than providing a clear answer, *Where Do We Go From Here?* examines uncertainty, transformation and the continuing search for identity, connection and belonging.

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