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MUSIC BY NUMBERS

A music enthusiast introduces a unique instrument to Malaysian shores, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

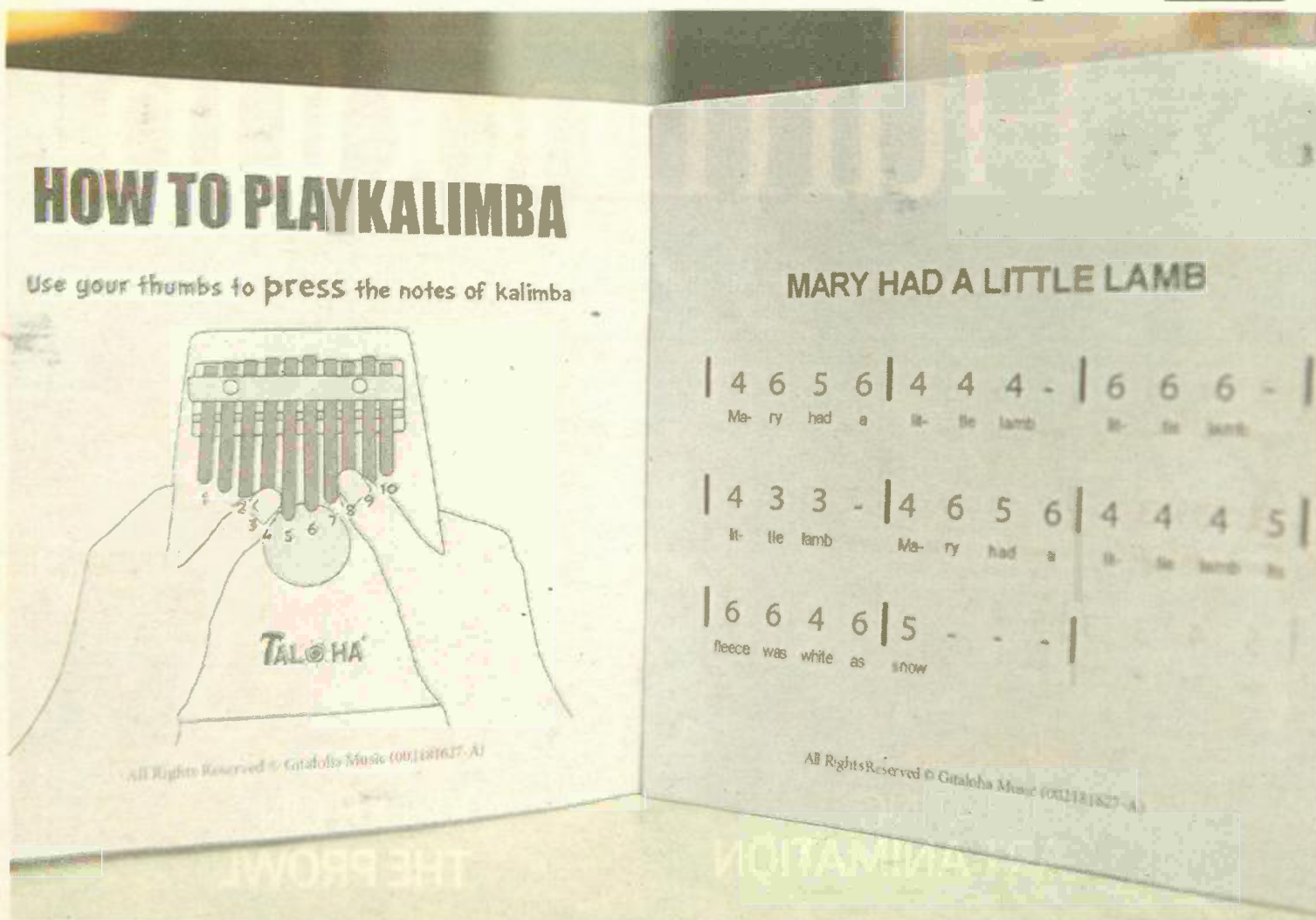
THE cold air inside the cafe is a welcome respite from the unflinching heat. It seems empty save for one customer seated in a quiet corner.

I guess he's Louis Low Cheng Yong, the man I have come to meet. Although he has his back to me, his posture suggests that his attention is focused on a particular task. Probably playing with his smartphone is the thought that comes to mind.

For a moment, I wonder if I should interrupt him. When I stand in front of him, ready to introduce myself, I see that he is, in fact, holding what can only be described as a box-like contraption that has a similar shape to a metronome.

We greet each other before he holds the contraption out and says: "Here. This is a kalimba."

Registering my blank stare of incomprehension, Louis gives a short laugh. He invites me to take a seat and then he begins to explain the history of this musical instrument and how he came to be the first to introduce it to Malaysians.



Low has prepared a simple guide book for beginners.

LITTLE MUSIC

Many people believe that some 3,000 years ago, a musical instrument called the mbira was created in the west coast of Africa. In the 1920s, an Englishman, Hugh Tracey, who was interested in ethnic music, travelled to rural Africa where he came upon the mbira.

Later, in South Africa, he set about exploring the mbira and developed his own musical instrument which he called kalimba. The word is thought to be a Bantu (general label for about 600 ethnic groups in Africa) word which means "little music". In time, Tracey started to commercially export the kalimba to all parts of the world.

The kalimba (sometimes called the African Thumb Piano) is, essentially, a lamellophone. This means it has little staggered tines (lamellae), attached to a wooden board. To play the kalimba, hold it in your hands and pluck these tines with your thumbs.

SELF-TAUGHT MUSICIAN

The kalimba is not the first ethnic musical instrument to take Louis's fancy. The 26-year-old's passion for music began when he was 13 and started to play the classical guitar.

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"I could play classical music like Bach on the guitar," he shares. He attended a music centre but found that the teachers kept changing every so often that he gave up on formal lessons. Scouring the internet, he discovered websites and YouTube videos and taught himself to play the guitar.

Why the guitar, I ask. "I thought it was cool and I could impress girls," says the self-confessed shy man, chuckling.

Working part-time in a music shop after his Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia exams gave him a taste of what it was like to run a business. Still, he decided to first complete a degree in broadcasting from Utar.

Then, this middle child with two sisters went into the business of selling musical instruments. He started small; his first venture was to set up a stall in flea markets, at first in the suburb of Mont Kiara and, later, in Publika mall.

Today, Louis has a store in Cheras (www.gitalohamusic.com) which sells what seems like an eclectic collection of musical instruments from ukulele and electric guitar to the cajon (a box-shaped percussion instrument originally from Peru).

To supplement his income, Louis offers music lessons and speaks of the

students who inspire him. In particular, he tells the story of Bryson, a young lad who is left-handed. Through sheer perseverance, Bryson has mastered the art of playing the guitar, an instrument that is traditionally for right-handed people.

Though he's not being sure how well the kalimba will be received, Louis is already thinking about manufacturing it on a large scale. He says: "I will go to the manufacturing capital of the world, China." The cost of manufacturing it in Malaysia, he feels, may prove to be prohibitive even though we can use local woods like teak or the trunk of a mango tree. Currently, all the kalimbas that Louis has produced are stamped with his company logo, Taloha.

VARIETY OF SOUNDS

For a relatively uncomplicated musical instrument, it is possible to create a variety of sounds with the kalimba. When you hold it and pluck the tines, the sound created has a light quality. Place it on an empty box and the sound has a resonance to it.

Cover and uncover the 'sound hole' and you will once again change the sound.

"The sound is heavier than that made when you pluck the strings of the harp,"

says Louis.

Musically-savvy people will understand what he means when he explains that the notes on the kalimba tines are arranged in ascending scale from the centre outward and that they are often tuned diatonically in the key of G. For those who don't, Louis has made life very easy. Each purchase of a kalimba (RM80) comes with an accompanying music book. The tines are numbered 1-10. So, to play the first line of Mary Had A Little Lamb, you will pluck the tines in the following sequence:

| 4 6 5 6 | 4 4 4 - | 6 6
6 - | 4 3 3 - |
| Ma-ry had a | lit- tie lamb | lit- tie
lamb | lit- tie lamb |

He plans to publish a music book with more complex musical scores for songs that Malaysians will recognise, ranging from Let It Go and to a selection of popular Chinese songs.

Although he's still somewhat shy, Louis admits that he has found confidence through his music. Nothing, he adds, will stop him from wanting to seek out unique instruments like the kalimba, to encourage the average man to come out of his comfort zone and learn to play music.



Low hopes to introduce the unique instrument to Malaysians.