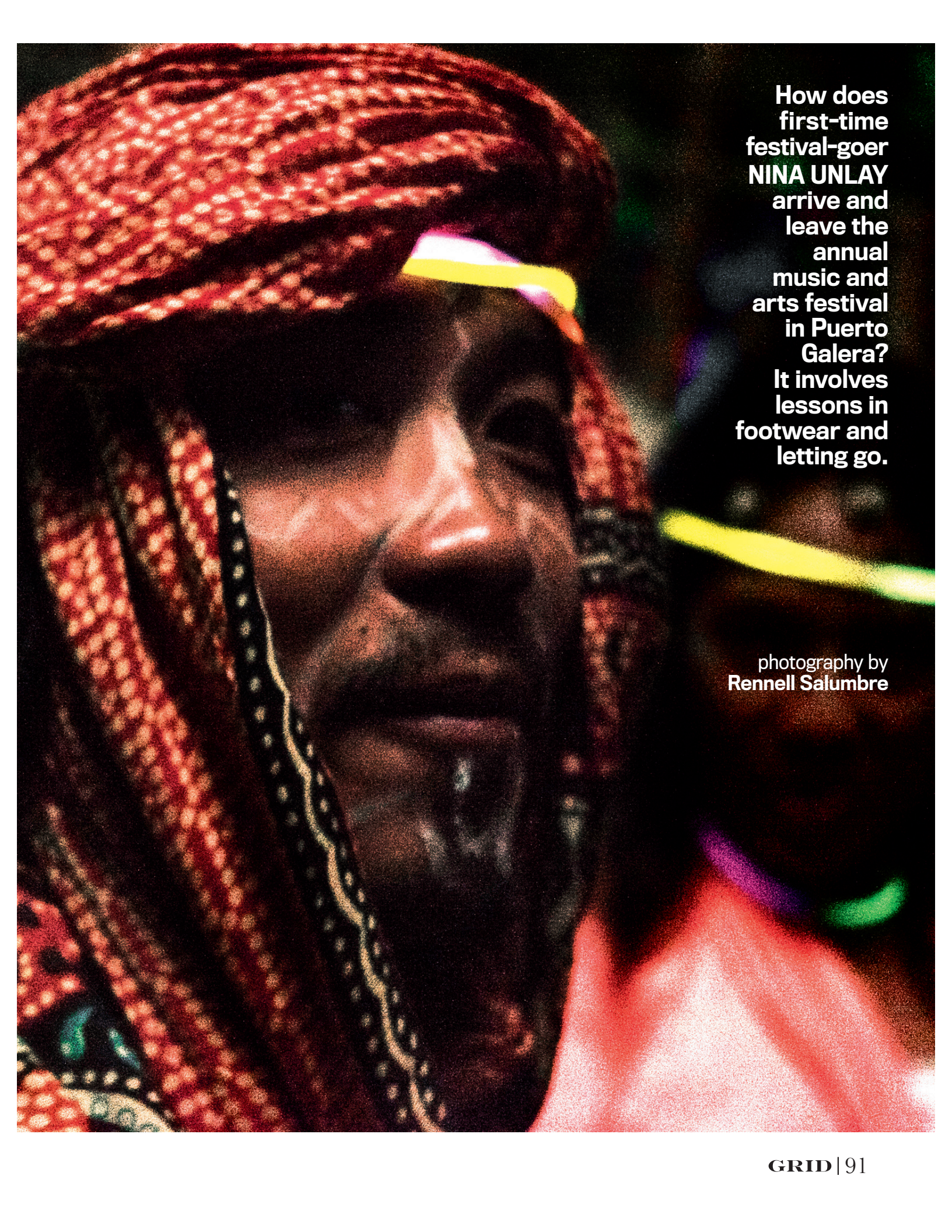




getting  
into

# Mala- simbo





**How does  
first-time  
festival-goer  
NINA UNLAY  
arrive and  
leave the  
annual  
music and  
arts festival  
in Puerto  
Galera?  
It involves  
lessons in  
footwear and  
letting go.**

photography by  
**Rennell Salumbre**

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## When I asked people what I should expect from Malasimbo, the primary piece of advice was about my footwear.

*“You’ll want to wear slippers because you’ll take a boat to the island, but you need to hike up the mountain to get to your hotel and the concert grounds so... maybe you also want to wear sneakers.”* And so the first and most pressing issue facing me as a first-time festival-goer turned out to be what kind of shoes I should use to walk the beach-mountain terrain of Puerto Galera in Oriental Mindoro.

The annual Malasimbo festival, which started back in 2010, is held at the foot of Mount Malasimbo, overlooking the bay of Puerto Galera. As one of the bigger music festivals in the country, featuring a long lineup of musicians and other artists spread out over two weekends, a weekend’s pass to Malasimbo was in the price range of P6,000 to P8,000—it’s something you’ll want to at least do right, for that price tag. And so it became a debate on-and-off through the festival between me and my fellow newcomers: Do we pack our sneakers along with our sunblock and insect repellent? By the wee hours of the morning (the festival lasts until 4AM), will we still care?

Our boat arrived on the shore of Talipanan beach, and fortunately, it was only a short walk to our hotel. I arrived safe and sound, with only sand in my socks. I thought I was doing pretty well.

We arrived smack in the middle

of Malasimbo, on the first day of the second weekend, which was billed as the Malasimbo Lights & Dance Festival. This was also the first time that the Malasimbo festival extended to two weekends, and this catered to the young and eager to party. We arrived at the concert grounds later that Friday night, and it became clear that the weekend was more or less the after-party to the party—not a bad thing, I found. The extra weekend was filled with Malasimbo loyalists, people who were so hung over from the weekend prior that they couldn’t bear to head back to the city, or did try to go home, and turned right back around.

“It’s our fourth Malasimbo,” said Lexi, one of the friends I bumped into on the concert grounds. It felt like we were constantly bumping into people that we knew. “We’ve been coming back ever since the second one. So this time we came prepared.” With what, I wondered. Coffee? An extra pair of shoes? She pulled out a box of fluorescent crayons. She had a glow-stick crown resting on her head and fluorescent swirls drawn on her face. I felt severely unprepared all of a sudden. I glanced at her feet: Sandals. Of course.

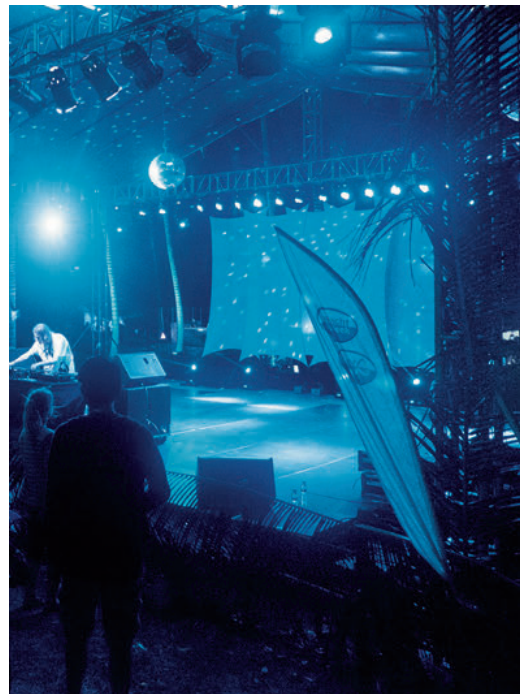
I offered her my face, one of my companions offered her his arm, and she enthusiastically drew on them. “You take what you get here. If someone offers you crayons, mud, grass... just embrace it,” she told us. I saw someone to my left running up a coconut tree, and another practicing capoeira by himself with paint-stained pants. The audience felt like as much the act as the people on stage. The natural beauty of the venue certainly provided some inspiration. The

concert grounds are stationed on Mount Malasimbo’s natural amphitheater, with steps of soil and grass, and surrounded by trees that are lit up by neon lights.

By the second night, I was spending as much time as I could with the Malasimbo loyalists. The afternoon was spent by the water, under the sun, in bikinis, listening to them recounting Malasimbo memories with as much nostalgia as much as there was excitement. “My favorite Malasimbo act of all time was in 2013 when Jimmy Cliff played ‘Wild World’. Everyone in the crowd was swaying their arms. He did four encores that night. I nearly cried,” musician Aeon Mapa says over pre-festival coffee. He’s been to every single Malasimbo festival. “Every year, you look forward to seeing something amazing. Not a particular musician, but something random. Last weekend, I saw Fred Wesley’s band, and his keyboardist was one of the most amazing pianists I’ve ever seen. I didn’t even know his name, or that I would see him.”

The connection between audience and performer, and even performer to next performer is strong, helping create the culture of Malasimbo. While music is an important element, it is almost as though it didn’t make a difference to the crowd whether it was headliner or opening act. We were given an itinerary

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for the different performers of the night, but the entire night felt like one big performance.

We headed to Malasimbo in the designated jeepney, some of us lying down on the seats, while Aeon played “Summertime” by Billie Holiday off his phone. Even the lights on the jeepney were tinted blue, and it felt like visual pre-game for the Malasimbo lights.

When we arrived at the Malasimbo grounds, I had the famous Dabo Dobo, Malasimbo’s special adobo; and kesong puti panini, made by the Mangyans, the indigenous people of Mindoro.

Some of the Mangyan tribes present their cultural heritage at the Mangyan Village Exhibit, where they also sell their local handicraft. I bought a bracelet of tibak seeds, a banana variety endemic to Mindoro. Inday, the local who sold it to me, said that the longer they the seeds

were worn down, the more they would look polished.

By the end of the night, I found myself immersed by the different art installations they had around the area. My favorite, “Everywhere There You Are” by Wawi Navarroza and Ling Quisumbing

**With my limited experience, I felt that the connection between audience and performer, and even performer to next performer was strong in creating the culture of Malasimbo**

Ramilo, made for a great view when lying down on the grass.

This was also when I found that I’d lost my phone. I also broke my slippers after running up and down the amphitheater grounds frantically looking for it. Probably a sign that I was doing the music festival all wrong again.

By the end of the night, my phone was still missing, and for a while all I could do was think about where it had gone, to the strains of “Everywhere There You Are.” But within the next hour or so, I was back to contentedly, phonelessly, lying down beneath the art installations, listening to good music. I even managed to put my slippers back together. That’s the magic of Malasimbo.

I went home that weekend, minus one phone, and in place some sunburn and sand in my sneakers. My rose-tinted idea of a music festival was shattered. It isn’t perfect; in fact, it takes some effortful letting go of things (goodbye, phone) to stay in the Malasimbo mindset. But if you’re resolved to stay there, you’re golden, and it honestly doesn’t feel very hard. The moment you buy a ticket for Malasimbo, you’re committing yourself to an entire experience, or even a series of experiences, and if you’re not committed, then you’ve just wasted your money. Once you buy that first ticket, you let everything go, and then you wait for the burst of nostalgia to kick in when you leave.

