DON'TREY
The Music of Cambodia
The Soundtrack of Cambodia

The Peak of Khmer Music

The pop music from the “Golden Age” before the Khmer Rouge lives on in the hearts and minds of Cambodians.

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In the 1960s, the nightclub opposite Pochentong airport on the road to Kampot was the meeting place of the rich and famous of Phnom Penh. The bar, that was run by the state authority Magetat, was destroyed during the civil war in 1975. Today, nondescript commercial buildings have taken its place. On the few surviving pictures of the bar, faded and pale, there is a modern pavilion facing a pond, a plush interior with comfy, modernist arm chairs, a stage for the band. On these old pictures, no people disturb the luxurious interior. But try and imagine yourself at the Pochentong bar on a party night during the Swinging Sixties. The house band starts to play a rocking tune. Men in sharp suits and women in colorful mini skirts dance the Twist and the Madison. You are in right the middle of the “Golden Age” of 20th century Cambodia, and everybody around you seems to be a movie star, a model, or just filthy rich.

The Pochentong bar was not open to everybody. Only a small wealthy caste of Cambodians and foreigners could afford to party the night away here. But the music, that kept the dancers on their toes, was the soundtrack of King Sihanouk’s Cambodia, a country that had just recently gained independence after almost one century of French colonial rule. A unique mixture of Western rock and Khmer traditional music became the heartbeat of a nation in search of a new post-colonial identity. In recent years, this sound had a revival in Cambodia and has become an international cult staple around the globe.

This magazine wants to pay homage to the rich musical history of Cambodia, from its ancient beginnings to the present. We invite you to do a Roam Vong with some of the musicians of past centuries, the pop stars of today, and with the ghosts that still party at the old location of Pochentong Dancing on some moonlit nights, when no one is looking.

Let’s dance, or, in Khmer: តេាយុឡានហ្លើអុីស្ត Just be sure not to touch your partner. It’s the Cambodian tradition.

Tilmann Baumgärtel
ThePeakofKhmerMusic

The pop music from the “Golden Age” before the Khmer Rouge lives on in the hearts and minds of Cambodians.

The 1950s and 1960s were a golden time for Cambodian music. The Khmer pop music of that period was not only famous locally, but also influential neighboring countries. Almost six decades later, the music from this period is still alive in the hearts and minds of the Cambodian people, and it is precious to the whole nation.

The Cambodians slowly adapted the music that could be played with them, so that it would suit the Khmer soul. When thinking of the music from the 1950s and 1960s, the first thing that comes to people’s mind are the most famous singers of that time: Sinn Sisamouth, Ros Sereysothea, Pen Ron, and other stars. However, few people are aware how these songs were created.

Sinn Sisamouth, known as the “Golden Voice”, was born in Stung Treng province. He had many talents: Sinn Sisamouth was able to play the guitar, write lyrics, compose tunes, arrange them, and sing them beautifully with his sweet voice. His heartfelt lyrics allowed the listeners to identify with his songs.

Hun Sarin, an adviser at the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, says that Sinn Sisamouth was successful because of his particular talents. He mostly composed songs about his own life and about places that he had been to, such as “Champa Battambang” (The Flower of Battambang), which is about his childhood in Battambang province. Sinn Sisamouth could also record ten new songs per day, because he arranged his own music, while other singers could record only one song.

Ros Sereysothea, one of Sinn Sisamouth’s duet partners, was famous because of her sweet voice that she used mostly for romantic ballads. Pen Ron – who was also one of Sinn Sisamouth’s frequent partners – was a female rocker that introduced the Cambodian people to rock’n roll.

Many of these singers needed nothing more than a beautiful voice and natural talent to succeed, and never received any formal training in music. A good number of them were discovered at the song contest during Samach Cheat, a formal public hearing between the people and government that was established by Norodom Sihanouk during his time as head of state. This song contest went on for three consecutive evenings.

The audiences filled the entire Veal Preah Meru, the public park in front of the National Museum. “When you went up on the stage, the audiences clapped loudly, and made you even more nervous,” she said. However, when it was her turn to sing, the audience went quiet and started to listen. Candidates for this contest were from all the provinces of Cambodia. It was broadcast live both on television and radio.

The judges of the program were all famous singers such as Sinn Sisamouth, Ly Tek, Toum Teng, Houy Meas, Mao Sareth and Chhoun Malai. They based their judgment on the voice, delivery, and dress. Even the presenter was a well-known song composer, Ma Laopy.

“Every teenager in my village talked about it,” remembers Tea Kimyeng, 61, a veteran rocker and composer, who used to study at RUFA, the school that made the music students from RUFA so successful.

Before being accepted into the school, students had to go through a number of difficult tests to make sure that they were capable to pursue their music career. The academic education took four years. “Not all of the students, who managed to pass
I love those songs very much because they could relate to the songs easily. The songs during 1950s and 1960s are forever. I really want my great grandsons to know my love story. "Nary Nem Noun" (Virtuous Nary) that was about his love for a girl called "Nary". However, he warns: “Composing a song based on my own favorite topic is not possible. And I also have to know the possibilities of the voice of the singer.”

According to Ell Bunna, the talent of the song composers, singers and musicians was very important for the popularity of the songs. Especially, the lyrics of the songs, which often talk about social reality, but also describe the beauty of the Cambodian countryside, are a reason, why people from many different backgrounds could relate to the songs easily.

A song like “Chi Vit Kam kok Thiboung” (Life of a Miner), for instance, is about the difficulties and hopelessness of the poor people working in the mines of Pailin province, but mixes its message with a love story.

The composers also chose the singers whose voices they felt were suitable for a specific song. Songs that were performed by Sisamouth include “Ter bong kos avey ban srey somleng” (What have I done wrong, that you asked for a divorce?) and “Neary sompot” (I'm waiting for love) is a Khmer version of the American folk song “The House of the Rising Sun.”

Most people in the 1950s and 1960s listened to music on the radio. The National Radio of Cambodia broadcast local music, both traditional as well as pop music, but the station also played songs from other countries, including music from former colonial power France. Besides radio, records were another way to listen to music, but records were too expensive for the majority of Cambodians. However, in the early 1970s audio cassettes were introduced to the Cambodian market. Audio tapes were cheaper, contained more songs, and typically came with a lyrics book attached.

Some students just gave up because it was very hard,” says Ell Bunna. He adds that even after they passed the entrance exams, students had to follow a strict school policy. For example, students were not allowed to get involved in anything that was not related to their major. “When I composed my first song for a record company, I had to change my name to ‘Ell Bunnary’, because my major was performance,” says Ell Bunna. “So I was not allowed to write lyrics.” However, even though the composers as well as the musicians had gone through music school or other music lessons, they still earned less than singer did. On average, a composer got 1,500 Riel per song during the 1950s and 1960s, while Sinn Sisamouth earned around 5,000 Riel when he recorded a new number. However, not all singers earned as much as Sinn Sisamouth. Musicians typically got 500 Riel per recording session.

“Most people in the 1950s and 1960s make a living out of it, “ he says. “But in 1960, Swai Sor became a music composer and the song arranger for King Norodom Sihanouk in his Premath Top music band. Henry Ricka, a French music professor, had told the king about Swai Sor’s ability, and he went to work for Sihanouk. His tasks in the palace were to arrange the songs composed by the king in order to make them beautiful, and to perform, when there were international guests visiting. My relationship with the king was like between close friends. The king was never strict with me, and he was kind to me. Thus, the king seemed like an ordinary person to me,” he recalls. He has arranged between 20 to 30 songs for Sihanouk. Swai Sor did not get a honorarium for this, but he received a salary of 1,500 Riel per month.

Swai Sor also composed songs for Sinn Sisamouth, the Cambodian superstar of the 1960s and early 1970s. Songs that were performed by Sisamouth include “Ter bong kos avey ban srey somleng” (What have I done wrong, that you asked for a divorce?) and “Neary sompot” (I'm waiting for love) is a Khmer version of the American folk song “The House of the Rising Sun.”

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During the 1960s, there were a couple of record companies such as Heng Heng, Chanchaya, Kampuchea, Pous Meas, Pka Romdoul, Kampuchea, Thas, and Van Chan. But there was only one recording studio in Phnom Penh, that belonged to the Van Chan record company. Other record labels did not have their own studio, and had to rent Van Chan’s studio when they wanted to record a new song.

But even in this studio, there were only a few musicians, only one amplifier, one microphone and one set of drums,” says Ouk Samath, a drummer, who went on to compose his own songs.

The singers and musicians recorded every song in one take. If none of them made a mistake during the recording, they had to start all over again. The master tape had to be sent abroad because there was no record pressing plant in Cambodia. Cambodian songs were pressed onto vinyl in Singapore, Hong Kong, or France, then sent back to Cambodia, where they were sold.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many bars and clubs opened in Phnom Penh. Singers and music bands were hired to perform in these new venues. Those bars were located near Kbal Thnal, along the riverside, around the Central Market and the Olympic Stadium.

Meas Phanna, 73, a music fan in Phnom Penh, says: “The music that was played in these clubs included Rock’n’Roll, Rumba, Cha-Cha-Cha and Blues. They really played music like the Rom Vong or the Rom Khbach, the traditional Khmer dance music.”

Huy Puth, 70, a retired director of karaoke videos for the Rakamoy Hang Meas label, used to work in a club near the Olympic Stadium during the 1960s. He recalls that these clubs were exclusively for upper-class people, because they were extremely expensive. “I remember the price of a bowl of noodles on the streets was just two Riel, while a glass of water was sold in the bar for 800 Riel,” he says. “But even though the clubs were expensive, the live performances of the singers were worth paying for.

On Sovannody, 68, had the chance to see the performances in the clubs because of his job. He worked as a bodyguard for Air Force General So Sakkot and had to follow him everywhere. He remembers that bars in the city were very modern and expensive. Nevertheless, the singers there were amazing and sang so perfectly. They stood motionless on the stage, but their voice sounded lively.”

However, in 1975, all that came to an end when the Khmer Rouge took over the country. Many famous singers were killed, while others fled abroad in order to survive. Sinn Sisamouth, Pen Ron and Roe Sereysothea did not survive the Killing Fields.

The Khmer Rouge destroyed Cambodian culture and art, and that included music-related documents and records. They also systematically killed intellectuals and other educated people, including singers and composers.

Under their rule, only revolutionary songs about communist ideology were composed. That is the reason, why singer Hem Sovann, the former winner of the Savannakhet mach Cheat contest, survived. “I was flexible. I sang the song they told me to sing,” she says. Even though Cambodian music culture was systematically destroyed and its records annihilated, the music of the 1950s and 1960s has survived in the memory of Cambodians until today.

Because music stays in the heart, it can’t easily be wiped out.

Sok Samphoasphalyka, Khiev Chakriya, Nov Povleakhena, Louv Lykeav, Nhem Piseth
The Traditional Music of Cambodia

Music has been a part of the life of Cambodians since ancient times. Some of the traditional styles have survived to the present day as a result of national policies for the protection of the nation's musical heritage.

Ahepa Phinea

Since the earliest times, Khmer people have believed in natural spirits (deities), genius spirits (fairy), and guardian spirits (tutelary god), who were believed to protect people from danger, to heal, and to ask for rain. For that, people offered their food and drink along with music. When a person got ill, Arek music was played to invite him to please the listening spirits and elicit their intervention. Nine instruments are used in each performance of Arek. The name Mohoari might have been called after the name of a family who was known for their music and was, in fact, used in all the music played in Arek and it is performed in a certain way. Mohoari music is gentle and soothing, so it is played mainly to ask for rain for the upcoming season.

The name Arek might also be used in its different forms: Arek means light, health, holy, or even die, if the ceremony was not performed. The Arek music is played in the Ahepa Phinea ensemble as the same time as that of Arek, too. Arek is played in the Arek ensemble, but the Arek music is used in its different forms. "Arek is not extinct yet. There are veterans who still play it today, but they play it in a different way, they play it in a different style, which is different from the original style."

Bassac

The term Mohoari was also used in the Mohoari orchestra. However, the dominant type of music is the Pin Peat orchestra. Pin Peat music is used in many ceremonies, including religious ceremonies, funerals, and other ceremonies. Pin Peat is the traditional Khmer bank orchestra. Many religious ceremonies are accompanied by Pin Peat orchestras. Pin Peat orchestra is the most well-known type of music. For that, people think that the Pin Peat orchestra comes from Thailand. Therefore, Pin Peat is sometimes called "Thai Music." However, Pin Peat orchestra originates from Cambodia. The endurance of the Pin Peat orchestra is the representation on several ancient temples.

Ethnic Dance

The Pin Peat orchestra is generally used to accompany the traditional Khmer dance, like "Batnat," "Kheakk," and shadow puppet theater performances. Many subgenres, including Karen and Cham music, are accompanied by Pin Peat. Royal ceremonies are accompanied by Pin Peat orchestras. Pin Peat is the largest musical ensemble among the Khmer traditional music banks. Khmer people think that the Pin Peat orchestra comes from Thailand. Therefore, Pin Peat is sometimes called "Thai Music." However, Pin Peat orchestra originates from Cambodia. The endurance of the Pin Peat orchestra is the representation on several ancient temples.

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Time for a Change?
The reasons for the decline of popular music in Cambodia

When we arrive at his house, Nam Bunnaroath is in his studio, mixing the music of a song that he is about to send to Thailand. There are three electric guitars on one wall of his studio, while on the other side, there are a number of acoustic guitars, keyboards and amplifiers. It is here, where he composes the music for his record company.

Nam Bunnaroath is the owner of Town Productions, a well-known record company among the youth of Phnom Penh. He is also a singer and a government official at the Department of Music in the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. For his record company, he writes songs, produces the singers, who are under contract with his label, and records his own songs.

While he was interviewed, his father, El Bunna – a skillful and well-known musician – was playing some instruments, but he did not spend much money to have new songs composed, as this consumes a lot of time and effort: “Once these records are produced, they are immediately pirated, so spending much money is useless,” he adds. “We cannot blame nobody, because the record company owner wants profit and customers want cheap CDs.” A pirated CD costs 1,500 Riel, while the prize of an original CD is 2.50 to 3 dollar.

Another problem in Cambodia is the lax enforcement of copyright. There are countless pirated VCDs and DVDs on the market, and most of the customers buy pirated CDs. Therefore, the producers have to spend a lot of money to have new songs composed, as this consumes a lot of time and effort: “When these records are produced, they are immediately pirated, so spending much money is useless.” He adds: “We cannot blame nobody, because the record company owner wants profit and customers want cheap CDs.”

The reasons for the decline of popular music in Cambodia

“Time for a Change?
The reasons for the decline of popular music in Cambodia”

Him Sophy is the composer of a Khmer rock opera.”Where Elephants Weep,” in which contemporary music is performed with traditional Khmer musical instruments and Western rock instruments for the first time in Cambodia. Born in 1963 in Prey Veng province, he decided to study at the music school of the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1972. In 1985, he got a full scholarship to study in the Soviet Union. He stayed there for thirteen years and completed two PhD degrees: one in composition in 1995 and one with a dissertation in musicology in 1998.

Back in Cambodia, he came up with the idea to create a Khmer rock opera in 2001. To create this work and in order to form an ensemble, he cooperated with producer John Bert who raised funding in the United States. Bert had previously been producing and directing theater-based projects for community development. His other collaborator was Catherine Filloux, the librettist of “Where Elephants Weep,” an award-winning playwright who has been writing dramas about genocide, human right violations and social justice.

In 2005, the group started performing the opera in the United States. “Many different kinds of audiences appraised this performance very much as it is very different from other operas,” Sophy says. In 2008, his group started to perform “Where Elephants Weep” in Cambodia at the Cleria Theatre in Phnom Penh.

After composing the score for “Where Elephants Weep,” he composed a work called “The Charm of Cambodia” for the Ministry of Tourism to be performed at the 30th Asian Tourism Forum in January 2011. He is currently working on two new log projects: “Khaly the Crocodile” which is composed to company Khmer contemporary dance. The other piece in the making is “Cambodian Requiem” (in Khmer “Bangsokoul”) which is in the style of Khmer traditional music.

Teenagers should listen to original Khmer songs which are composed and written by Khmer people to support our culture,” he says.

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Prom Veasna
Hang Meas (Golden Swan) record company, says that it is becoming normal to copy songs from others and that almost all record companies do so. If there would be a stricter enforcement of copyright, there is a number of newly composed songs, which did surprisingly well and can serve as an encouragement for others to come up with new material. These songs got their music composers recognition from the public.

Nam Bunnarouth says: “I have composed some new songs which have gained popularity and recognition among the young. They are “Mousy Neaty” (One Minute), “Hot Neuy” (Exhausted), “Rok Keas Sneh” (Love Withdrawal) and “Ahkara Deng Kunt” (Grateful Words)”, he claims. “I like this job, even though it is not very well-paid. But it feeds me, and I love his style that he shows during his performances, “ says Mr. Chhoun.

Most of teenagers prefer the songs of their beloved singers and wave them, when their stars perform.

Eang: “I want to teach songs composed by Cambodians, but the problem is that the students want to learn international songs and music. Therefore, I need to include that in my teaching in order to give the students what they want.” He says.

Some contemporary music is copied from our neighboring nations such as Thailand and Vietnam. “There are many young people who like pop music from Korea and from the US, and the composers need to copy these songs, because of the fans,” says Eang.

Menh Sothyvann, a music teacher and music mentor. “Sometimes my parents and the people around her might inspire her song ideas, but she writes the songs down, she needs to be alone when she writes the songs down, she needs to be alone when she writes the songs down,” she says. She distributes her songs to her fans through YouTube and Facebook. She also burns them on CD and passes them to every record store in Phnom Penh, so they can make their own copies. She also gives away free copies during charity performances. “To me, music is a nonprofit business. Selling these CDs will not make me rich. It will just even pay for the time and the effort that I put into the music,” she says. She makes her money as a MC at corporate parties, concerts and other events. “I love it, and I do it for fame, pride and patriotism,” she points out.

The people around her might inspire her song ideas, but when she writes the songs down, she needs to be alone with her guitar. Her father, a musician, is her piano instructor and music mentor. “Sometimes my parents and sister help me with the lyrics, but mostly I write them myself,” she says. She really loves old Cambodian music and tries to preserve it. That is why she sings some of the old songs during her performances, so that her teenager audience hears and remembers the old songs in order to never forget the significance that the past has for the present and the future.

Currently, she is a student at the University of Cambodia, and lately, she has not performed on TV as she is busy composing new songs. She plans to put out a new album in 2012. “I’m strong in my talents, my skills, my music, my time and my capital to open up a professional musical school and studio and a shop for musical instruments,” she says. 

The authorities should strictly enforce the law. If there was a stricter enforcement of copyright, there is a number of newly composed songs, which did surprisingly well and can serve as an encouragement for others to come up with new material. These songs got their music composers recognition from the public. 

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The Ruling Stars
Preap Sovath and Aok Sokun Kanha: fashion idols of Cambodia's youth

H is concerts are sold out. His songs are on the radio, and he is performing on TV. Preap Sovath mixes the styles and invents her own chic that many of Cambodia's teenagers follow. She sings beautiful rock and pop songs, and she acts like a boy: Aok Sokun Kanha.

"Oum Chea Besdong Boung" (You Are My Heart), recorded in 1997, made Preap Sovath, 35, a star, and that is what has remained until today. This tall, good-looking man with the sweet voice has been the most popular singer of Cambodia for almost 15 years. Aok Sokun Kanha, 25, joined his ranks in 2007, when she recorded her first song "Tael Toul" (Lonely) for the Hang Meas record company, the same label that has Preap Sovath under contract. Recently, the two have teamed up on the hits "Call Tune Donnang Chet Smo" (My Call Tune Shows How Honest I Am) and "Call Tune Sontour" (Call Tune Apology) which have been smashing successes among their teenage fans.

Part of the secret of the success of these two prominent singers is their unique style. Preap Sovath became a fashion model because of his unique, trendy dress and hairstyle. Aok Sokun Kanha has created her own unique tomboyish style that has made her "the princess of style" among teenagers.

Preap Sovath likes to wear a tight shirt with the top buttons open together with black, tight trousers. He says: "I have always liked the style of the 1960s and 1970s. Tight, long-sleeved shirts and black trousers just look classic to me." And he keeps reinventing his style. When he started out, he wore his hair slicked back, but later he let his hair grow down to his shoulders – for older, conservative Cambodians his hair was outrageous. At this point, however, his dressing and hair style are of timeless elegance for most teenagers.

More recently, he is sporting the spiky look that Korean boy groups have made popular in Asia and has parts of his head shaved. In the last decade, the "Korean style" has made waves not only in Cambodia, but also in many other Asian countries. Aok Sokun Kanha is quite different from other female singers in Cambodia. She likes wearing sportswear, sweaters, hoodies and sneakers in both daily life and when performing on stage, a style that is not very common for Cambodians.

While other Cambodian female singers like to wear fancy gowns and put on a lot of makeup, Aok Sokun Kanha does it her way. She wears little make up, wears loose pants, miniskirts or petticoats. Until recently, she was rarely seen wearing dresses when she performed. Unless the situation forces her to dress up, she would prefer to wear simple pants or jeans with a t-shirt and sometimes a bandana. "Her dressing style looks easy going and is acceptable for every situation," says Ah Dai, one of her fans. Many teenagers today pick up that style that signals independence and toughness. And it is not just her dressing style that makes her attractive to teenage boys.

As a child, Aok Sokun Kanha was rejected by the Hang Meas label, because she was considered to be too "boyish". Despite the difficulties, the young singer did not lose hope and managed to start her career in a modest way. She has released more than 200 songs and has transformed into her. Aok Sokun Kanha has achieved enormous success in the music business, but she has always managed to remain true to herself. She remains the same person she was when she was starting out. Her father was a musician and her mother was a traditional dancer. Aok Sokun Kanha says: "To be a singer is an honor. I was never good at school, but I did well in dancing class and in sports."

She made her first record, when she was 12 and got only 20 dollars per song. The record was not a success. Aok Sokun Kanha says: "They did not give me a chance to sing a romantic song, because I was so young at that time. They did not believe that I could sing a slow song well." However, she was happy that she could make some money on her own to support her family. Aok Sokun Kanha later worked for three different record companies before joining Hang Meas in 2007.

The Ruling Stars
Preap Sovath and Aok Sokun Kanha: fashion idols of Cambodia's youth

Since she has started to appear on the label, she has recorded more than 200 songs. Aok Sokun Kanha became a singer to support her family. As she was the eldest sister, she had no chance to pursue her bachelor degree, because she has to earn money for her siblings. "I want to be a film director, but I can't because I am too busy performing," she says. "I have no idea what he looked like." Her life with only his mother in Kandal province continued to be a struggle after the Khmer Rouge period. In 1990, he started to sing in bars and restaurants in order to support his studies. Seven years later, he was recommended by a friend to the Hang Meas label, where his career took off. He was a student of Economy at the Royal University of Law and Economical Management. His life with only his mother in Kandal province continued to be a struggle after the Khmer Rouge period. He says: "I have always liked the style of the 1960s and 1970s. Tight, long-sleeved shirts and black trousers are very different from other Cambodian singers. Aok Sokun Kanha, both live a modest life that is very different from other Cambodian stars who go out every night and party. Aok Sokun Kanha wears those fashionable dresses only during her performance. Preap Sovath lives with his family, and has successfully managed to keep them away from the media.

Both have supported charities. They have been involved in social work for orphans in Phnom Penh and in Kompong Speu province. They also support the Somaly Mam Foundation that fights against human trafficking. Apart from their singing careers, Preap Sovath and Aok Sokun Kanha both run their own businesses. Preap Sovath has a hair-dressing salon and a tailor shop. Aok Sokun Kanha runs a beauty parlor and a decoration shop.

Preap Sovath has performed in many countries, including Japan, the United States, Australia, Vietnam and Thailand. He has brought back one insight from these tours: "Music is the identity of a nation."
Oum Dara started to write these songs from his memory. Some of these songs existed or were destroyed during the Pol Pot period. Among the lost songs are pop songs from the 1960s and 1970s that got lost during the Khmer Rouge period. These songs have never been recorded and no written scores existed or were destroyed during the Pol Pot period.

So Oum Dara is writing the scores from his memory. Some of these songs were written by him, some by others. Oum Dara started to write these songs down one year ago. He tries and plays the old songs on his trumpet in order to remember their melodies.

"Klem Snae" (The Smell of Love), sung by So Saven, and "Som Bort 1000 Peak" (1,000 Words of Promise), sung by Chhoun Malai, are among the sixty songs that we find nowhere, but in the head of Oum Dara, one of the few surviving musicians and song composers from the Golden Age of Cambodian pop music. After the violin, he learned many other instruments in order to re-tell these old songs on his trumpet in order to re-tell these old songs.

The friend soon gave up, but Oum Dara had found his calling. After the violin, he learned many other musical instruments including the trumpet and the melodion, and went on to become a music teacher himself. And he started to write his own songs, including the lyrics.

Oum Dara says that he was asked in 1961 to become the music conductor at the Golden Lotus, the floating restaurant that was near Chroy Chang Va Bridge on the Tonle Sap. In the same year, he also started to perform for National Radio Kampuchea. He stayed with the station until 1975, when the Khmer Rouge took over power in Cambodia.

During the Khmer Rouge Period, millions of people were killed, especially educated people and famous people. Fortunately, Oum Dara stayed alive: “I survived because I was lucky. I did, what they ordered me to do. I didn’t argued or debate,” Oum Dara explains.

Between 1960 and the Khmer Rouge period, Oum Dara wrote many love songs: “I cannot remember how many songs I wrote during that time. However, one of his songs he keeps talking about is the song that tells his own story. “Ora Sorng Khemru” (Hopeless) came straight from the heart of Oum Dara. It is about his love for a girl, that was not meant to be, because he already had a wife. Oum Dara says that he is sure that the girl also loved him and that she understood his feelings after hearing his song: “But she has never talked to me anymore since then.”

Sorn Vanna, the second wife of Oum Dara, says: “I know everything about his love story, but I do not care.” And she adds: “I pity him. Most of his lovers left him because of his quiet personality.”

Oum Dara has two children with Som Vanna. They got married in 1980, after his first wife Sok Khom had died during the Khmer Rouge Regime. Oum Dara had married his first wife Sok Khom in 1957. They also had two children.

After the tragic time of Khmer Rouge people, time people with any kind of education were in high demand. Oum Dara started to work in the Ministry of Education in Leng Nara, a town of about 10,000 dollars, 10 percent of the earnings of real artists. Therefore, he adds, “I spend my own money to start this new music company.”

Leng Nara explains why he has started this business: “Some of my friends spent between three years and ten years with old teachers, but they have no time to become real artists.” Therefore, he adds, “I spend my own money to start this new music company.”

Leng Nara has spent his savings of about 10,000 dollars, 10 percent of the estimated total costs, for the company that will retrieve old and lost songs from the 1960s and 1970s, and give potential singers and composers the opportunity to come up with a new sound based on the music of the Golden Age. “Oum Dara is a kind man. He is willing to help us as much as he can,” says Leng Nara. He doesn’t care much about the fee, because he does love music.

Touch Sapar
Amateur Productions

Cambodian youths create their own music.

A music lover since his youth, Sim Saky, 26, a graphic designer for Arun Reaksmey Phama, has made his dream come true: to be a star in his own band called Sim Saky Productions (SSK) since 2006, when Sim Saky made his first album. In late 2010, he released the third album with three other members. “The third album is the most successful album so far. My friends admire me a lot for it,” Saky says. “I produce those albums not for commercial purposes. I just want to have fun and show off my abilities to my friends,” he adds. Recently, this kind of amateur production has become very popular among the youth of Cambodia. Not only SSK, but also Reak Smey Slek Meas is working on their own albums. Oum Mounych, 21, leader of a band, says: “I know how to edit video. ” He recalls his concerts in Australia, where thousands of people around him were cheering. “If my sons, daughters, grand children, brothers, nephews and grandfather could see this, how happy would they be,” he says. “I feel very happy to play with foreign musicians, and it is possible to play with foreign musicians, and it is possible to exchange experiences, to know and to learn. But I do not forget about my own culture.” And he adds: “I think I have a special talent to play the Chapei from my previous life, because I have a good and clear voice.” However, there is one Cambodian superstition that he wants to get rid of: “Please stop telling people that they will become blind by playing Chapei. Otherwise you contribute to the extinction of Chapei music.” Mech Dara

Master of the Chapei

Kong Nay preserves Khmer musical heritage.

Today Kong Nay, 66, master of the traditional Chapei, the two-stringed and long-necked guitar from Cambodia, has fathered ten children and lives in Sangkat Boeng Tumpun, Meanchey District, in the Southwestern outskirts of Phnom Penh. He was born in Kampot province into a family that played traditional instruments. When he was four years old, he was blinded by smallpox. At six, he asked his mother to bring him to listen to Chapei player Phurum Chah. My thought: “I am blind and do not know what to do. If I can learn how to play the Chapei, it will help me to support myself.” He went from rice field to rice field to perform, imitating the Chapei with his mouth. Farmers asked him to perform for them and gave him money for that. At the age of thirteen, his father taught him a Chapei. His uncle taught him how to play it by playing each song to him three times. He tried to learn the songs by heart. Kong Nay began performing professionally at the age of eighteen and in 1964 he married his wife, Tak Chhe. Under the Khmer Rouge, he was only allowed to play propaganda songs. Kong Nay, like thousands of other Cambodians, faced starvation and illness. The food rations he received were similar to those of the sick. He was forced by the Chapei Rouge cadres to make rope out of palm leaves. In mid 1976, his brother was killed by Khmer Rouge soldiers. “I thought I will be next,” Kong Nay said to himself. In early 1979, he and his family were taken to be killed. The Vietnamese army that invaded Cambodia in January 1979 saved them just in time.

During the 1980s, Kong Nay and his brother-in-law made a living as itinerant musicians. In 1991, he won a national music contest of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. He was in his early fifties, when he recorded one of his songs in a studio in Phnom Penh for the first time. Kong Nay started teaching many students how to play the Chapei at the NGO Cambodian Living Arts in 2003. He has played internationally in Africa, France, Belgium, United States, England, Australia and New Zealand. He recalls his concerts in Australia, when thousands of people around him were cheering. “If my sons, daughters, grand children, brothers, nephews and grandfather could see this, how happy would they be,” he says. “I feel very happy to play with foreign musicians, and it is possible to exchange experiences, to know and to learn. But I do not forget about my own culture.” And he adds: “I think I have a special talent to play the Chapei from my previous life, because I have a good and clear voice.” However, there is one Cambodian superstition that he wants to get rid of: “Please stop telling people that they will become blind by playing Chapei. Otherwise you contribute to the extinction of Chapei music.” Mech Dara

DONTREY—The Music of Cambodia

[Image 41x474 to 568x752]

Sim Saky in his office

Amateur Productions

money and if you are a creative mind”, says Saky. Douch Thida, 23, a watch vendor at Phnom Penh’s Paragon Market, says: “I used to listen to their songs, and I admire them, because they can produce a song album by themselves.” She adds: “Even though it is not as good as commercial productions, it is acceptable.” Despite the fact that the amateur producers do not make any money, they still seem happy to work for free for the love of music. “At least I can be a star in my friends’ minds,” says Saky. Oum Vannak
“Dances mirror Society”

Western dances like the Cha-Cha-Cha are having a comeback in Phnom Penh.

At 4:30 in the afternoon, Ken Sophin sits in his living room, waiting for his students. On the left a CD player stands on a rack next to a mirror wall. A 25-year-old lady and a 50-year-old man have just arrived, and Sophin tells them about the dance styles that they can learn in his class.

Ken Sophin, 62, is a professor of engineering at the University of Technology of Cambodia at day, and a dance instructor in the evening. When he went to France in 1983 in order to pursue a degree in engineering, he took dance classes for two years. Ten months ago, he started to teach dance classes in his villa in Toul Kork.

“Dancing and Gymnastics,” says his name card. He added that dancing is good for the health and it is fun. He also wants people to learn the dances properly. “Dancing and Gymnastics,” says his name card.

In the last couple of years, Cambodians have started to do aerobics. Between five and seven o’clock both in the morning and in the evening people work out to loud pop music along the streets, in parks and at the Olympic stadium. Most of them are between twenty-five to fifty.

Horn Sopheaknha, a 48-year-old businesswoman, is one of Sophin’s students. She says that she never used to dance when she was young. Before enrolling in this class, she weighed 87 kilo and went to the gym, because she wanted to lose weight. Her weight now is 79 kilo.

“My husband does not want me to dance along the street, since it looks like his wife is showing her body to everybody,” says Sopheaknha. She adds that her husband is taking the class together with her now, since he saw how much she enjoyed it and how healthy it was. “When I am dancing, I am happier than when I work out on machines,” she stresses.

Dance instructor Sophin explains that before the Khmer Rouge regime, he used to dance at the balls of the universities after the final exam. Another ball took place one month before Khmer New Year. He pauses with a smile and then goes on to tell that because of his young age he was not allowed to enter bars or clubs.

Dances that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s were the Cha-Cha-Cha, the Tango and Rock and Roll. These dances are from western countries, and he learned them from his friends who studied with French students.

“I hardly use Khmer songs for my lessons in Cha-Cha-Cha. I take ‘Black Magic Woman’ and ‘Hey you comin’ v’ for my class. The Khmer beat is not as danceable as the western one,” says Sophin.

He says that people in the 1960s and 1970s taught each other before they went to ball; they learn to dance at each other’s house. Today, however, young people dance anarchically, and without respect for each other, he says. And he has observed: “When the Khmer Rouge regime, they have performed at the Cholma Theatre, Chaktseumkorn Conference Hall, Naga World and on numerous television shows.

Lon Den said that Tiny Toones does not only offer creative programs such as music and arts classes. The organization also provides English courses from kindergarten to upper intermediate level and Khmer from grade one to grade six. The children and youths in the organization are between seven and twenty-four. He says, the organization is open to all kids who do not have a certain standard of living, especially to street children.

Tiny Toones supported by a number of international charity organizations, including the McKnight Foundation of Minneapolis, the Global Fund for Children, Australia Volunteer International and Freedom To Create (FTC). Tiny Toones now has 38 staffers, three foreign teachers and nearly 3000 members, both male and female, in its five branches.

Tiny Toones’ members have been invited to Singapore, Thailand, the US and Italy. In Cambodia, they have performed at the Cholma Theatre, Chaktseumkorn Conference Hall, Naga World and on numerous television shows.

Tiny Toones in Italy in 2010

Tiny Toones in Italy in 2010

Tiny Toones

Tiny Toones is a non-profit organization that was established in 2008 and trains youths who like to do hip-hop breakdancing. Tiny Toones was founded by Toy Sokhel, who calls himself KK. He learned breakdancing in the United States, says Lon Den, the program coordinator of Tiny Toones. KK was born in a Thai refugee camp in 1977 during the Khmer Rouge dictatorship. His family immigrated to the US, was he was four. He became a male dancer in Long Beach, California, as a teenager, and was in and out of jail for drug and other offenses during his youth.

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Cambodian musicians have written so many songs about the cities, provinces and sceneries of their country, that they form a virtual map of the kingdom. Here are some examples...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Songtitle</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Singer</th>
<th>Composer</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bye Capital City</td>
<td>Phnom Penh Capital</td>
<td>Chhon Vanna</td>
<td>Voy Ho</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Bo Sra Waterfall</td>
<td>Mondulkiri Province</td>
<td>Touch Teng &amp; Mao Sareth</td>
<td>Oum Manirin</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Pailin Breeze</td>
<td>Pailin Province</td>
<td>Sirey Boeun</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Romvong at Angkor</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Flower of Psar Ler</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>The Beauty of Koh Kong</td>
<td>Koh Kong Province</td>
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<td>The Caves of Pich Chenda</td>
<td>Battambong Province</td>
<td>Ros Sereyothea</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Message through the wind</td>
<td>Kompong Cham Province</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Missing O Chrov</td>
<td>Banteay Mean Chey Province</td>
<td>Sinn Sisamouth &amp; Ros Sereyothea</td>
<td>Ma Laopi</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Memory of Kompong Sam</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>The Flower of Kbal Chroy</td>
<td>Kondal Province</td>
<td>In Fung</td>
<td>Ma Laopi</td>
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