



Revival instinct

Young Cambodians are rediscovering their rock 'n' roll roots destroyed by the madness of Pol Pot, writes **Hamish McKenzie**

The sepia tone photo shows a young child, wearing nothing but a nappy and a slight scowl, sitting on a small wooden seat. Her father stands beside her, wearing an army uniform with flared trousers, a pistol in a holster hung on his right hip. Parked in the background, behind a rabble of dust and vegetation, is a Soviet T-54 tank. The child's hand rests on a transistor radio, its aerial pointing straight up.

The girl in the photo would grow up to be Srey Thy, one-time karaoke singer and now the frontwoman for the Cambodian Space Project, a band that is leading a psychedelic rock revival in Phnom Penh. As the radio in the photo proves, rock 'n' roll prevailed even in Srey Thy's embattled village in Cambodia's southern Prey Veng province.

Srey Thy was born into conflict. As the daughter of a tank driver, she would move around the battlefields with her family as Cambodia's civil war dragged on even after dictator Pol Pot had fled Phnom Penh. For her, war was a normal part of life.

She has never owned a CD player. When Cambodian Space Project founder Julien Poulson discovered her in a karaoke bar and asked her to join the group, she would listen to music on her cellphone. She was enjoying a tradition from before Pol Pot and his genocidal regime, the Khmer Rouge, came to power in 1975.

"There was a childlike innocence to the Cambodia of the 1960s," says

Poulson, an Australian guitarist who first visited Cambodia on a fellowship to study the country's music in 2007 and since decided to stay on and form the band, which will play in Hong Kong on Saturday, March 5. "It was a very sweet, innocent place, which adopted this explosion of music from the West."

Wealthy Cambodian teenagers were embracing music from the "British Invasion" – led by The Beatles and The Rolling Stones – that swept the world. Less well-to-do music lovers heard popular Western tunes over the airwaves courtesy of American troops stationed in neighbouring Vietnam.

There was a swinging scene in the capital, with singers Sinn Sisamouth, Pan Ron and Ros Sereysothea attaining star status with their uniquely Cambodian takes on Western hits. "That time was Phnom Penh as the kind of Paris of Indochina," Poulson says.

However, all three are believed to have been killed by the Khmer Rouge, which wanted to destroy culture and return the country to a misconceived agrarian utopia.

"So that meant targeting musicians, destroying all instruments, destroying record players – any evidence of the culture that had gone before," Poulson says. Musicians, intellectuals, people with light-coloured skin and, perversely, anyone wearing glasses were systematically killed.

"Everything changed quickly. As you got to 1975, the lights were ripped out. The heart and soul of Cambodia were destroyed overnight." But Pol Pot failed to kill culture. "Their music remains very

popular today," Poulson says. "You'll hear it come out of the CD players of tuk-tuks or from market stalls. It's a haunting legacy to a different time."

Now, 30 years after the Killing Fields, the music is getting a second lease of life. In October, the CSP released their first single – a reworking of the Pan Ron single *I'm Unsatisfied* – at a Phnom Penh launch party that attracted surviving musicians from the 60s and 70s, as well as Roy Sereysothea's sister.

"For me, it was one of the more joyful musical evenings of my life," says Sean Hocking, owner of boutique indie label Metal Postcard, which released the single. "If I had been at the Buena Vista Social Club reunion of musicians [in Cuba], I would describe the evening as the Cambodian version of that."

Despite being new on the scene, the CSP has already enjoyed measured success in Cambodia. The eight-piece band, made up of expats and locals – including a master drummer called Bong Sak who was once a rice farmer and soldier – plays three nights a week in the country and has just finished a 20-stop tour of Australia, which included a slot at the highly regarded Mona Foma Festival in Tasmania. As well as clubs and bars in Phnom Penh, they play regularly at villages, schools, orphanages – and once, even, at an elephant's 50th birthday party. But they're not alone in reawakening Cambodia's lost years of rock 'n' roll.

Filmmaker John Pirozzi is putting the finishing touches to a documentary about Cambodia's rock 'n' roll history. Called *Don't Think I've Forgotten*, it will complement Pirozzi's 2007 film *Sleepwalking Through the Mekong*, which followed US band Dengue Fever on their tour of the country. Dengue Fever is fronted by Cambodian singer Chhom Nimol, who the band discovered singing at

a karaoke bar in Long Beach, California, home to the largest Cambodian community outside of the homeland. The band plays Cambodian-inspired rock, and Chhom Nimol sings most of the songs in Khmer.

Pirozzi says there is a new-found appreciation in Cambodia for the music from the 60s and 70s. "Now you're getting a group of people who are young adults who didn't directly experience the Khmer Rouge," says Pirozzi. "They are curious about the cultures past and they are rediscovering it."

"When I started the film [in 2005], it really wasn't like that, because the younger people weren't as curious. There was still a real cloud over Cambodia about the past – it was really the older generation's music." New York-based



Srey Thy of The Cambodian Space Project. Photo: James White

It was almost something in their past that they now realise they can look back on and have some pride in

John Pirozzi, filmmaker

Julien Poulson and Srey Thy play an acoustic Cambodian Space Project set at Metal Postcard's "Half-Baked" show, Saturday, March 5, 8pm, HK\$100 (adv), HK\$125 (door), Saffron on The Peak, Dairy Farm Building, 100 Peak Rd. Tickets from Saffron outlets at Stanley, Repulse Bay, The Peak. For details, call 2818 3233.

Dengue Fever's new album, *Cannibal Courtship*, is out now.



Cambodians enjoying Western rock music during the early 70s (left); The Cambodian Space Project (right, top) Photos: Nathan Horton, Bophana Centre



Backstage peek at Oscars online

Dawn Chmielewski

Think of it as "Oscars After Dark." In the latest instance of the internet enabling society's voyeuristic obsession with celebrities, viewers of the 83rd Academy Awards ceremony will for the first time get the kind of access previously reserved for tuxedoed and bejewelled members of the Hollywood elite.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and broadcast network ABC are unhooking the velvet rope on the Oscar.com website – for a price – to provide live video streams of usually hidden aspects of Oscar night in Los Angeles tomorrow night (Monday morning Hong Kong time). They'll include celebrities mingling in a lobby bar, hair and make-up artists applying a final gloss to presenters before they take the stage and award winners gliding into the post-ceremony celebration, the Governors Ball.

It's an effort by the academy to hold the attention of Americans, a nation of dedicated multitaskers, three-quarters of whom are either online, yakking on phones or sending text messages while watching television, according to a new Deloitte survey.

"We all know that more and more people who are watching TV are also engaging with some other devices – whether a computer or an iPad or a smartphone," Ric Robertson, the academy's executive administrator, says. "So, what can we serve up to them to keep them engaged with the telecast, to provide a complementary experience?"

This second-screen experience is not just an attempt to retain younger, more tech-savvy viewers. It's also an experiment by the producers to see if they can wring more money out of viewers by getting them to pay a fee for more-exclusive online content.

The academy and ABC will charge US\$4.99 for the "All Access" feature, which provides live feeds from 28 cameras positioned on the red carpet, inside the Kodak Theatre and backstage, as well as at the ball.

Asked whether Hollywood stars would balk at the webcam scrutiny, Robertson says it's no different from the photographers who swarm the event capturing candid moments.

"There aren't going to be any

bathroom cams. We draw the line somewhere," he says.

An Oscar Backstage Pass application for the Apple iPad, iPhone and iPod Touch is also available for 99 US cents.

"The Backstage Pass app is one of the many ways that we are using digital technology to redefine the Oscar experience this year," says Albert Cheng, Disney/ABC Television Group's executive vice-president of digital media.

"We want to offer an experience to viewers that allows them to feel like they are there with their favourite nominees and be able to see the stars mingle at this prestigious event."

Robertson says the idea of the Oscar webcams came from one of the academy's governors, Pixar Animation Studios guru John Lasseter. "He's been pushing us for several years to really blow it out and

There aren't going to be any bathroom cams. We draw the line somewhere

Ric Robertson, executive administrator of the academy

do something like this," he says. "It was to a large degree at his instigation that we sort of did a reboot, with tremendous support of Albert Cheng," he says, sounding a bit like an Oscar winner crediting everyone for an award.

One technology analyst is sceptical that people will pay for the privilege of rubbernecking via the internet.

Some "people would pay that for a behind-the-scenes look at the Victoria's Secret fashion show, but not the Oscars", Forrester Research analyst James McQuivey says.

"The idea of giving people a second-screen activity is the right one, though. People want to look up clips, see information, possibly even vote on outcomes before they are announced. But if the experience is untested, it's impossible to convince people [they should] pay for it."

McClatchy-Tribune



The Oscar Backstage Pass app, available for Apple's hand-held devices

Religious Notices

Faith Community Church
at South Island School, 50 Nam Fung Rd.
Hong Kong - Sunday at 10:30 am

Family Worship Service
Sunday School for all Children & Youth
Warm Welcome for Everyone

10:00 am Round-trip Bus Service Provided from Admiralty Centre McDonald's
fcc.faiithcommunitychurch@gmail.com
www.faiithcommunitychurch.org.hk
Church Office Tel: 2545 5545

Faith, thrives on tough challenges
Community, builds up one another in love
Church, Christ's Ambassador to the World

HONG KONG CITY CHURCH
10:45AM Sunday Service

Central Plaza, 46/F (Sky Lobby)
18 Harbour Road, Wan Chai
Enquiries: 2167 8167

A ministry initiative of reason music ministries