MUSIC TO REMEMBER

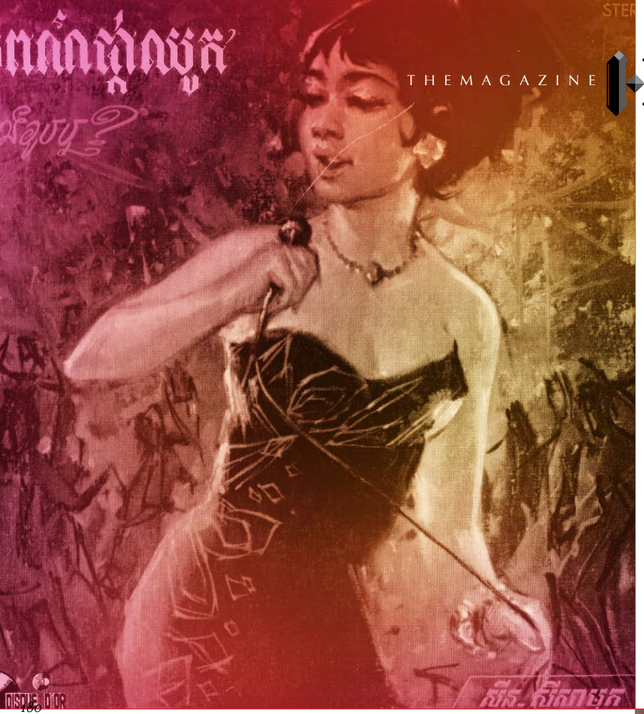
John Pirozzi's new documentary examines Cambodia's brutally decimated music history.

BY GARY BOYLE

It starts with a cowbell, chiming time over the scratch and static of an old disc. A funky bongo beats until the drums crash in on a wave of 60s rock guitar and Hammond organ stabs: a four-bar phrase of loose and limber rock and roll. Then a remarkable soprano, a woman's soaring melody weaving within the rhythms, singing her Khmer siren song.

It's the late 1960s, and the singer is one of Cambodia's most famous, Ros Sereysothea. Her band rocks confidently, rolling with the positive vibes prevalent at the tail end of the peace 'n' love decade: GI R&R rock laced with a shot of Cambodian rice whiskey. This is good-time music, and those were indeed good times.

Phnom Penh really swang back then. It had a hip king versed in jazz and the European *dolce vita*; it had boulevards where tailfinned American cars would cruise; and its smart set of swingers filled the music clubs nightly. Outside the clubs, cool drivers leant on their cyclos, fedoras tilted, radios pressed to their ears, just digging the music. Evocative Super 8 footage of these scenes fills the first act of a new documentary, *Don't Think I've Forgotten*. Nine years in the making, the film is the first to focus on the amazing music that came out of Cambodia in the 60s and early 70s, from its genesis to its demise.



Sisamouth, who is often described with Ros Sereysothea as the soul of Cambodia, shook loose his bow-tie and got all Austin Powers groovy. Listening to the music in *Don't Think I've Forgotten*, or on a compilation such as *Cambodia Rocks*, the sense of fun and joy is abundant in every track, as if the party would never end.

All of a sudden it was all gone

"Once the civil war began in 1970," explains Pirozzi, "leading to the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975, the country descended into one of the darkest periods known to modern history. So much of the legacy of a peaceful, independent Cambodia was destroyed and lost forever that the songs that survived from this period act as a way for Cambodians to recall this time, when their country was at peace and life was

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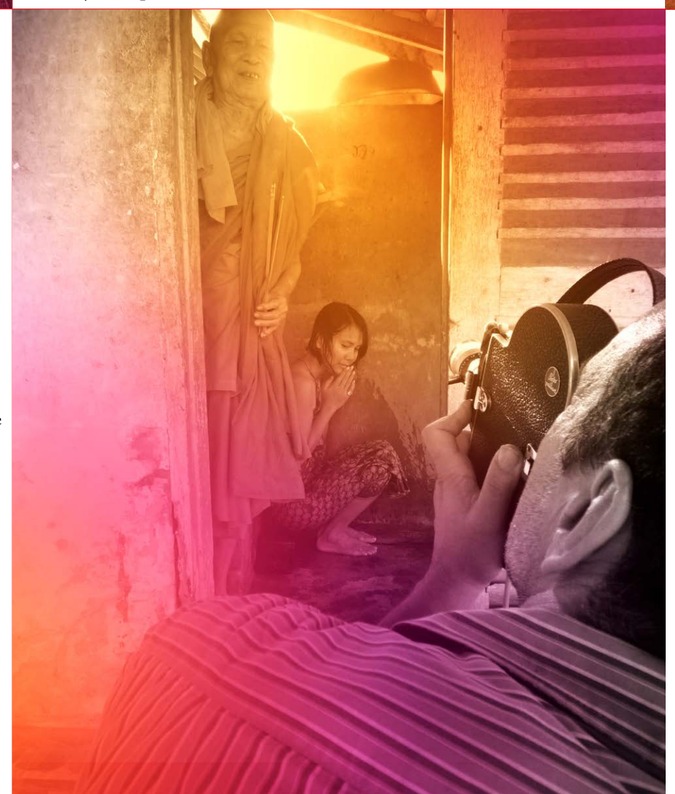
"I began reading a lot about Cambodia's modern history," says director John Pirozzi, "which is really tragic but also fascinating. When I heard Cambodian rock and roll music from the 60s and 70s I really became intrigued with what that scene was all about. At the time there was little to no information about it available. Merging an exploration of the music and history together into a film seemed like a logical thing to do because both were so interesting and, obviously, had to be intertwined. Finding the materials to do it was another story."

The film tells the stories of singers like Sereysothea and the suave Sinn Sisamouth, who were finding ways to blend traditional eastern sounds with the Latin cha-cha-cha popular at the time. The American invasion was at this point musical rather than military, as the Armed Forces Network's radio shows added rock and soul to the Latin mix. Khmer musicians plundered sounds freely as hair grew, hemlines rose and Cambodian hips shook to the raunchier new styles of the time. Musicians like the Bayon Band ploughed a go-go groove, Huoy Meas sang of philandering husbands over mournful sax and Drakkar brought it heavier, with ramshackle fuzz solos and thunderous drums. Pan Ron's sighs of desire rubbed against the daft punk of Yol Aularong and everyone was dancing. It was exciting music soundtracking an optimistic time, explains John.

"Singers like Sinn and Ros sang many songs extolling the natural beauty of the country and, of course, many, many love songs. The lyrics and the music from this time are incredibly beautiful, but one of my favourites is Yol Aularong, who was part of the last wave of young singer-songwriters. His music is very daring in that it has an element of sarcasm in it yet is still playful. Musically it has an almost early-punk-rock energy to it. I'm talking about 1973/74. I would have loved to hear where he took it over the coming years."

Even the smooth Sinn



good. It's one of the few points of reference that they have. It's really hard to imagine losing almost all connection to your culture's past but in effect that's what happened there. Fortunately, much of the music survived and really is a tool that helps people remember their past."

When bombs began to fall, the music went underground, dodging curfews in daytime nightclubs, but even this subterranean scene was not to last. The Khmer Rouge aimed to wipe out all traces of Western influence and culture – to "eliminate the artists" – erasing all evidence of the vibrant music scene. Out went the movies, books and magazines. Phnom Penh was evacuated. The long-haired were slaughtered. The only permitted music was the propaganda of nationalistic songs, whose choruses sang of servitude and the value of hard work. Traditional instruments forced out Fenders, old records were destroyed, and singing the wrong song got you killed.

As a result, very little performance footage exists. The only surviving film we see of Ros Sereysothea is as a parachutist, drafted by the army and proudly displayed to the camera by grinning cadre. John's film is the first to build a visual history from the musical fragments.

"I had to start with just a handful of names of singers who had died under the Khmer Rouge," says Pirozzi. "The first thing we set out to do was scour the globe for both footage and still images relating to the time and subject. There is a fair amount of footage but a lot of it tended to be news-reel coverage of dignitaries visiting or a new government building opening. There is only so much of that you can use. But we also found some real gems too. My producing partner, Andrew Pope, discovered a large batch of home movies from Cambodia in the late 50s that had a more 'man on the street' sense to it. It's really amazing footage that I know people haven't seen before. I'm very excited we are bringing that out to the light of day."

Pirozzi continues: "The late King Father, Norodom Sihanouk, had been a filmmaker during the 60s. He personally gave us permission to use his films, which include some musical performance as well. The performances are actually some of the only surviving footage of the musicians from this period.

"Slowly we built up information by filming over 70 interviews in four countries but it wasn't easy because over time people's memories become a bit fuzzy. Also many of the people we interviewed were survivors of the Khmer Rouge era. They were forced to give up their identities in order to survive. After the Khmer Rouge they had to begin life all over again. I was asking them to access a part of their life that was so far removed from their present-day situations, and it's hard for me to even imagine what that must be like. For the most part it seemed to bring back a lot of genuinely happy memories which I think come through in the film.

"Of course when the interviews got to the war and Khmer Rouge years people became either very sad or upset. The interviewing process for this film was very intense and there were a few times where I had to turn off the camera and give people some time to collect themselves. I am so thankful to everyone who was willing to let me interview them on camera because I know it wasn't always easy for them to share so many deep personal feelings."

The absence of music would be a scandal

Despite the ferocity of the Khmer Rouge, the music would not be destroyed. Treasured albums were hidden, often buried in gardens. Songs survived to be mass-produced on cheap cassettes and are sold throughout the country to this day. It was listening to one of these cassettes on a 2001 backpacking trip that caused brothers Zac and Ethan Holman to fall in love with these old songs. Returning home to Los Angeles, they formed the band Dengue Fever to recreate the sounds they heard, and found

their Cambodian vocalist, Chhom Nimol, singing in a Long Beach restaurant.

"I was born in Battambang," says Nimol, "which is also home to Ros Sereysothea and Pan Ron, two of the most famous singers in Cambodian history. My mother and my father were both folk singers in the 1960s, and my sister and brothers all grew up singing. My sister is a very famous singer in Cambodia, so I always had music in my family and in my life. We did not have a lot of money growing up, and singing was a good way to work and support my family in Cambodia. Even if we don't have money or we feel lonely or sad, we still have our memories and our feelings in the songs.

"For me and my family and friends, the classic music is still very important. I think the classic songs influence a lot of new musicians and I hear the old songs remixed or they sing them in new styles that are more current. When I sing with Dengue Fever or by myself, Cambodian people are very supportive and they tell me they are proud of me for trying to make Cambodian music popular in the world. I am very happy to hear that and I am happy to keep singing."

I'm happy her voice is still here

With such an emotional subject, a director – especially one from overseas – must employ tremendous respect and delicacy in their filmmaking. The finished documentary is powerful and moving, and Pirozzi handles the drama sensitively. For a film anchored so strongly to a time and place, the New York-based director had only one location in mind for the premiere.

"It was really important for me to premiere the film in Phnom Penh. The city is one of the main characters in the film and there are songs in the film speaking about the importance of the city to the people in both good and bad times. The local press ran a few articles about the film before we screened. There was so much positive buzz leading up to the premiere that I actually got nervous because there was so much expectation surrounding it. No one had even seen the film yet!"

"It was a very charged atmosphere for me, sitting in the beautiful Chaktomuk Conference Hall, which is the crown jewel of modern Khmer architecture, watching the audience fill the theatre until there was not even a place to stand. For me this was going to be the most important night of the film's life. If we could connect with the Cambodian audience, we had done something right.

"Much to my relief the film was received with open arms by both young Cambodians and their elders. I think they really appreciated that we had taken great care in trying to construct a film that showed the beauty of both the music and Cambodia before the war. To my knowledge, no one has done this before, perhaps because finding the material to do it was so difficult."

Cambodia is a rich subject for filmmakers. Aside from Pirozzi's film, the modern-day circus traditions of Phare Ponleu Selpak feature in Joel Gershon's *Cirque du Cambodia* documentary currently in production, and 2014 saw Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* tell the tale of the Khmer Rouge with clay models and gain an Oscar nomination.

"Rithy Panh is doing such important work,' says John. 'It's a very big deal that his film, *The Missing Picture*, was nominated this year for an Academy Award. He was a survivor of the Khmer Rouge, and his perspective in telling these stories is invaluable. I think he is creating a body of work that people for years to come will be able to access to understand what life was like in Cambodia during that crucial period. In fact what he is doing is allowing the country to move forward. There is a new breed of young Cambodian filmmakers that are beginning to tell their stories of Cambodia today, but before that can happen there needs to be an accurate account of the past. I think Rithy Panh is providing a much needed accounting."

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What impact or effect would he like the film to have, both in Cambodia and worldwide?

"I'd like the film to leave both Cambodians and people outside Cambodia with a positive image of a country that is usually only associated with only war and genocide. The reality is Cambodia is changing greatly now. There is a new generation that was not alive during the Khmer Rouge and is ready to move the country forward in a way that may not have been possible until now."

"I think every generation needs to look at the positive contributions of the generations before them for the building blocks needed to do this. In Cambodia that is a very difficult thing to do, because so much of the country's legacy, in every field, was lost. I hope that the film plays a small part in helping to rectify this situation."

Though Pirozzi's film primarily exists as a celebration of the music of the time, it should become much more. The documentary has created a tangible historic document from the shaky clips and the fuzzy memories. It brings image and sound to the last rays of positivity before the darkness of the Khmer Rouge. The old songs are faded postcards from better times, gone but not forgotten.

"There is a quote from the great filmmaker Luis Buñuel that I recently read that comes to mind. He was writing about his mother's Alzheimer's and her losing her memory: 'You have to begin to lose memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all, just as an intelligence without the possibility of expression is not really an intelligence. Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it we are nothing.'" ※

For more information on the film, visit www.dtifcambodia.com.