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

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 present at the tail end of the peace and 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 swung back then. It had a hip king versed in jazz and the European dolce vita; it had boulevards where tailfins 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.
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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. Megging 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, hard to be interviewed. Finding the materials to do it was another story."

The film tells the stories of singers like Sinn Sisamouth, who were so interesting and, obviously, 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 that 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 musical scene. Out went the moose, books and magazines. Phnom Penh was evacuated. The long-haired were drafted by the army and proudly displayed to the camera by grinning cadets. Music was the propaganda of the Khmer Rouge. They were forced to give up all music and try to begin life all over again. I was asking them to access a part of their identity 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."

"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 Michael to form Dengue Fever to recreate the sounds they heard, and found 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 intervening process for this film was very intense and there were a few places where I had to turn off the camera and give people some time to collect themselves."

"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 footage of a man on camera because I know it wasn't always easy for them to share so many deep personal feelings."

"I am very excited we are bringing that footage over the 70s. It's really amazing footage that I think people haven't seen before. It's really incredible footage that I know people haven't seen before."

"I was told to bring home a few records and find out to the light of day."

"It was listening to one of these cassettes on a 2001 backpacking trip that caused brothers Zac and Michael to form Dengue Fever to recreate the sounds they heard, and found.
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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. 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 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.”

Through 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 conscience, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it we are nothing.”

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