

REMEMBERING CAMBODIAN ROCK AND ROLL

Music: The Soul of Cambodia

Western instruments and influences brought new sounds to Cambodia between the 1950s and 1970s. Several waves of modern music that eventually evolved into Cambodian rock and roll include the early French influence of folk music during Cambodia’s French Protectorate.

French Yé-yé, a style of popular music that emerged in Europe in the 1960s, and Afro-Cuban music were also embraced by Cambodian youth looking for new musical outlets and expressions to explore identity following Cambodia’s independence from colonialism. Finally, another wave is attributed to the Vietnam War; the presence of American soldiers in Vietnam imported Anglo-American influences into neighbouring Cambodia.

In 1959, the first guitar band to emerge in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia, was called Baksei Cham Krong. Mol Kamach was lead vocalist, his brother Mol Kagnol was lead guitarist, and Hong Samley was rhythm guitarist. Baksei Cham Krong drew inspiration from Cliff Richards, The Shadows, and The Ventures.

Another early band was Bayon, whose musical creations were inspired by The Kinks, Johnny Hallyday, and Elvis Presley. The band Apszara formed in 1961 and aspired to emulate The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and The Beach Boys. Finally, Drakkar Band was influenced by Santana.



Drakkar Band, 1974 album cover. Left to right: Chattha, Sareth, Sam Ath, Tana. © Photo courtesy of Touch Chattha.

“Music brought social change, it hit the heart of everyone. I know that the only way to help the country to become a democracy is freedom of mind... Rock ’n’ roll music. Rock ’n’ roll music makes more sense than everything else.” —Touch Tana



Baksei Cham Krong, 1959. Front, left to right: Mol Kamach, Mol Kagnol, Samley Hong. © Photo courtesy of Mol Kamach.

“Kamach got all the girls and I got all the boys... boys who wanted to play guitar!” —Mol Kagnol



Cyclo drivers in Phnom Penh, 1970s. © Photo courtesy of Documentation Center of Cambodia.



Yol Aularong’s Band, 1973. Left to right: Sieng Vanthy, Sambath, Yol Aularong, Pen Ram. The band played a well-attended concert at a French high school called Lycée Français René Descartes in Phnom Penh, near the historical site of Wat Phnom. Aularong was known as a social commentator. Ben Sisario of *The New York Times* referred to the artist as “a charismatic proto-punk who mocked conformist society.” © Photo courtesy of Department of Cinema and Cultural Diffusion, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



The cyclo was a common form of transportation in Phnom Penh. Rock-and-roll star Yol Aularong’s song “Cyclo,” featured in *Cambodian Rock Band*, became a cultural emblem and is still revered as an iconic rock-and-roll hit. The song is flirtatious, teasing young women at Central Market wearing fashionable tops that resembled maternity blouses. © Photo courtesy of DC-CAM.



King Norodum Sihanouk signing Cambodia’s Declaration of Independence in 1953. The First Kingdom of Cambodia, under Sihanouk, lasted from 1953 to 1970. The administration lost its power to a military coup d’état on October 9, 1970. US-backed Lon Nol became prime minister until the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge in 1975. © Photo courtesy of DC-CAM.



Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Serey Sothea. © Photo courtesy of CVMA.



Singer Huoy Meas (centre) also hosted a one-hour radio show on the National Radio of Cambodia. © Photo courtesy of Bophana Center.



TVK network television, 1970. Left to right, in military outfits: Svay Sor, Touch Chhatta, Chorn Peng Leng, Ly Tay Cheang, Sem Sopheap, Huoy Meas, Sang Ben. © Photo courtesy of Touch Chhatta.

Phnom Penh was a flourishing, sophisticated, and rich cultural hub that attracted many aspiring musicians from Cambodia’s countryside, including a major rice-growing province called Battambang. Ros Serey Sothea, dubbed “Queen with the Golden Voice,” travelled from home in Battambang to Phnom Penh with a traditional singing group to pursue a singing career. Singers Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Serey Sothea performed together throughout their entire careers.

Sinn Sisamouth’s enduring legacy, “Champa Battambang,” is played in *Cambodian Rock Band*.

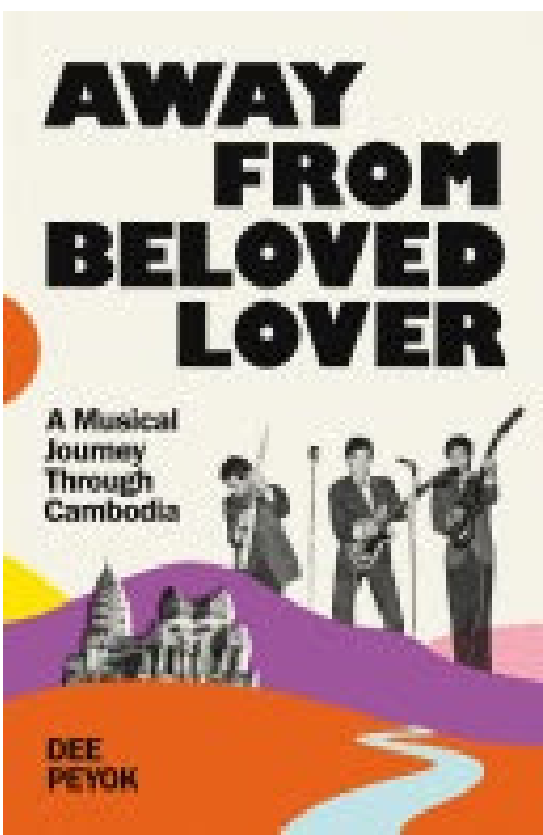
The National Radio of Cambodia (RNK) also served as a recording studio for the musicians. The artists recorded live on set; their songs playing on the radio in real time. Eager fans listened on the radio at home. Cyclo drivers and other city dwellers gathered around the big radio speakers, posted at Central Market in Phnom Penh to hear their favourite artists including rock-and-roll icons and their latest releases. Singer Huoy Meas’s radio show appealed to a youth audience, who listened faithfully every day to the latest hit songs and to interviews with their favourite singers.



Various 1960s/1970s Cambodian artists’ record sleeves, including Pen Ran, who embodied the emancipation of the 1960s era, and was known for her flamboyant and sassy rock dance moves and appeal to youth audiences. © Photo courtesy of CVMA.



Left: Ros Serey Sothea shares the same name as Chum’s band member Sothea in *Cambodian Rock Band*. Her singing voice helped define Cambodia’s music scene in the 1960s, including rock-and-roll music. She recorded over 500 songs. © Photo courtesy of CVMA.



Left: Thach Soly’s, Touch Tana’s, Mol Kagnol’s, and Keo Sinan’s commentary are extracted from Dee Peyok’s book *Away from Beloved Lover: A Musical Journey Through Cambodia*, a musical travelogue that tells the story of Cambodia, past and present. It is available for order locally from [The Book Warehouse](#), [Nooroongji.ca](#), [Indigo Books](#) and [Kobo eBook](#).



Yorthea Phirom Band in the movie *La Joie de Vivre* in 1968, written and directed by Sihanouk. © Photo used with permission from the Cambodian Royal Cabinet.

Political Turmoil and Civil Unrest

The arts, including Cambodian rock and roll, thrived in the midst of political chaos marked by the Vietnam War (1955 to 1975) and a coup d’état led by Lon Nol that established a Khmer Republic from 1970 to 1975. The most devastating atrocity was the Khmer Rouge insurgency led by Pol Pot. During his Year Zero, from April 17, 1975, to January 7, 1979, 1.5–2 million people died either from execution, exhaustion, illness, or famine. Some youth were unable to grasp the gravity of the Khmer Rouge invasion. Despite curfews in place, seeking the solace and escape of music, the youth gathered at house parties to listen and dance to their favourite Cambodian rock and roll.



On April 17, 1975, under the guise of protecting Cambodian urban dwellers in the capital city of Phnom Penh from American bombings, Khmer Rouge soldiers invaded and evacuated the inhabitants to forced labour camps through armed force. Intellectuals, artists including musicians, all remnants of a capitalist society were to be eradicated. © Photo courtesy of DC-CAM.



Venus on Earth (2008) © Album artwork courtesy of Dengue Fever.
[Dengue Fever](#), whose music is heard in *Cambodian Rock Band*, is a contemporary American band who take their influence from Cambodian music of the 1960s and 1970s. Their albums are available for purchase online from [shop.denguefevermusic.com](#)

Cambodian Rock and Roll Lives On

“When the bombs came, with the clothes on my back, I took my records. I didn’t care about anything, just the clothes on my back and my records,” said Keo Sinan, a drummer who played at La Melodie nightclub and record collector. It is thanks to his fearless actions to preserve these record collections that so much of the music has endured for fans of Cambodian oldies and rock and roll worldwide.



Keo Sinan worked with Rotanak Orodum Oum and Nate Hen, founders of the Cambodian Vintage Music Archive, to digitize the records he safeguarded during the Khmer Rouge regime. © Photo courtesy of Martin Jay.



A worksite in the time of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, circa 1977. © Photo courtesy of DC-CAM.



Tuol Sleng, a former high school that is now a genocide museum in Phnom Penh, in 1979. The S-21 prison was the most notorious of the 189 known execution centres in Cambodia. Comrade Duch, as depicted in *Cambodian Rock Band* and whose real name is Kang Kek Iew, was the first Khmer Rouge leader to go to trial in 2009. In 2010, he was found guilty of crimes against humanity. Approximately 14,000–17,000 prisoners were detained at the S-21 prison. They were tortured in old brick cells that served as classrooms in the former high school. Only twelve prisoners are believed to have survived at S-21, where mostly elite prisoners were detained. © Photo courtesy of DC-CAM.



The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia in 2007. © Photo courtesy of DC-DAM.

In Search for Justice and Memory

Started in 1997 and dissolved in 2022, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia was a joint court established by the United Nations and the government of Cambodia to try the senior and most responsible leaders of the Khmer Rouge.



Sophan Dontrey. © Photo courtesy of Thach Soly.



Thach Soly in 2014. © Photo courtesy of Kevin Peyok. Thach Soly was an active rock-and-roll musician from 1963–1970 and started the band Sophoan Dontrey, a five-piece band with a rhythm guitar, lead guitar, bass guitar, drums, and vocals. Unlike other early musicians who formed guitar bands, Soly did not come from a wealthy family. “I had to create my own knowledge with the music, no one else was going to teach me, so I had to teach myself how to play.” In 1960, a determined Soly entered a music competition at the National Congress, in Phnom Penh. Judged by Holocaust survivor and music teacher Maurice Liebot at the Université Royale des Beaux-Arts, Phnom Penh, Soly won the competition and soon landed regular rock and roll sessions for the National Radio of Cambodia. He recorded 120 songs and wrote his own lyrics. Soly survived the genocide and now in his 80s, he continues to live in Cambodia.

Roots of Compassion

Healing and reconciliation are also shaped by relationships that first-generation genocide survivors have with their children. As revealed in *Cambodian Rock Band*, the wounds of war and genocide also scar subsequent generations. Cambodian oldies and rock and roll thrived in a culturally rich society and, in the blink of an eye, underwent an incomprehensible demise.

Cambodian rock and roll is a timeless medium. For many survivors, the genre contains buried fragments from the past, inciting painful memories and an unspeakable longing for irretrievable family heirlooms. A shared passion for Cambodian

rock and roll also creates opportunities for dialogue about resilience between survivors and their children that can bridge generations, heal misunderstandings, and uncover untold personal histories. The music of the past continues to cultivate meaningful family bonds to last a lifetime and beyond.

“Remembering Cambodian Rock and Roll” Written and compiled by Sophea Heang for the Arts Club Theatre Company, 2025

Sophea Heang is a poet and co-founder of Angkor Harvest–Cambodian food ambassadors–serving the hallmarks of Cambodian cuisine. Sophea is currently completing her first book, Remember me in Stillness, a prose and poetry memoir that examines the inter-generational genocide experience of Cambodian-Canadians.



To learn more about the history of the Cambodian genocide, download the **Khmer Rouge History app**, generously provided by the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center.

[ANDROID](#)

[IOS](#)

Watch the documentary [Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten \(2014\)](#) by John Pirozzi

Watch [In the Life of Music \(2018\)](#), a film by Caylee So and Sok Visal

Watch [this webinar](#) from Dr. LinDa Saphan, Center for Khmer Studies on Cambodia’s Golden Voices Legacies