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~~POP MUSIC~~; Bringing it back home; L.A.'s Dengue Fever, rooted in Cambodian '60s pop, rekindles the spirit at its source. Dustin Roasa. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.:May 23, 2010. p. E.13

Abstract (Summary)

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Full Text

(1339 words)
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On a muggy evening last week, a crowd of thousands gathered around a temporary outdoor stage in this city's Cambodian Vietnamese Friendship Park. As with most nights, the manicured grounds had a carnival atmosphere, with mobile vendors selling sweets wrapped in banana leaves, and rows of middle-age women stepping their way through aerobics routines during the respite from the blazing sun.

But this night was different, because the Los Angeles band Dengue Fever, which takes its inspiration from Cambodian rock music of the 1960s, was scheduled to perform a free show. Even though most of Dengue Fever's lyrics are sung in Khmer, and Cambodians know many of the 1960s songs that the band plays cover versions of, this was only its second trip here since forming in 2001.

The U.S. Embassy brought Dengue Fever to Phnom Penh as part of celebrations to mark the 60th anniversary of U.S.-Cambodian diplomatic relations this summer. In addition to this concert, the band played a benefit show for a cultural preservation organization, participated in a panel discussion and screened a documentary about its 2005 tour here called "Sleepwalking Through the Mekong," all of which were well attended.

"It is nice to get to connect so heavily with Cambodia. It is definitely where our hearts lay," said bassist Senon Williams.

At 8 p.m., Dengue Fever's five American backing musicians strode onto the stage. Sporting facial hair of varying lengths

and wearing fedoras and tams, they looked very much the West Coast indie rock veterans they are.

Following them onstage was Battambang-born vocalist Chhom Nimol, whose heavy eye makeup and floor-length lilac evening gown made her look every bit the daughter of Cambodian singing royalty that she is.

"Hello, are you feeling happy?" Chhom shouted in Khmer, her hands pressed together in front of her lips in the traditional Cambodian greeting. In the crowd, clumps of Cambodian teenagers wearing skinny jeans and pastel-hued flannel shirts sewn in the country's garment factories cheered, while fathers balanced toddlers on their shoulders for a better view.

The band launched into "Lost in Laos," a festive song with a charging, rockabilly saxophone. But as the band began playing its second song of the night -- a cover of "Please Shave Your Beard," a ballad originally sung by Ros Sereysothea, one of the biggest stars of the 1960s Cambodian rock scene -- another anniversary resonated.

Thirty-five years ago last month, the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh and plunged the country into a nightmare that resulted in an estimated 1.7 million deaths.

One of those killed was believed to have been Ros, along with dozens of other musicians, filmmakers and artists who had made Phnom Penh in the 1960s the epicenter of a renaissance of Cambodian art and culture unrivaled in the country's modern history.

Under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, pop music flourished in stable, pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. As war raged next door in Vietnam, singers such as Ros and Sinn Sisamouth heard American and British rock and surf music on Armed Forces Radio and shaped it to their own ends, blending its energy and catchiness with traditional Khmer melodies and lyrical themes.

Dengue Fever keyboard player Ethan Holtzman discovered Cambodian rock when he was backpacking here in 1997. He was riding in the back of a truck with a friend when the driver played a cassette compilation of songs by Ros, Sinn and others.

"The psychedelic and surf-rock guitar were familiar enough to me, but it had this whole other element. What really struck me was the way the Cambodians brought their own traditions into it through the vocals and instruments. It took it to another level and became Cambodian psychedelic," Holtzman said.

These artists wrote and recorded thousands of songs, which they performed on radio and in nightclubs to rapturous audiences. "It was an exciting time," said actress Dy Saveth, 66, who starred in more than 100 films and counted most of Phnom Penh's creative elite, including Ros and Sinn, among her social circle.

But in 1970, Sihanouk was deposed in a coup. With a new pro-American government in place, Cambodia became entangled in the Vietnam War and began losing ground to a growing communist insurgency.

Phnom Penh fell on April 17, 1975, and the Khmer Rouge emptied the cities and forced people into labor camps, where nearly all the rock musicians are presumed to have died. Most of their recordings disappeared with them.

Not content with the music's physical destruction, the Khmer Rouge also sought to erase it from the nation's collective memory, forbidding the singing of old songs and replacing them with paeans to revolutionary zeal.

Singing rock and roll became a subversive -- and extremely risky -- act. "I used to sing Sinn's songs to myself while I was being forced to tend cattle, but I had to do it softly so that the Khmer Rouge guards would not hear me," said Pol Mony, 48, a Phnom Penh native who grew up near Sinn's house. Pol recently began transcribing the music and lyrics of recordings from the period and collecting them in an online archive that he launched in 2003.

Efforts to preserve the music, film and architecture of the era have recently gathered steam. Dengue Fever is a driving force in this movement. In January, the band released a compilation of 1960s songs called "Electric Cambodia," and its tour here generated an unprecedented interest in the era -- although the band's initial impulse was musical, not academic.

After Holtzman returned from his backpacking trip with a handful of cassettes he had bought in a local market in Phnom Penh, he and his brother Zac, a guitarist and vocalist, decided to form a band that would play these songs. They recruited bassist Williams and drummer Paul Smith (horn player David Ralicke joined after the band's first show). But the band members knew they needed a Cambodian singer. They scoured Long Beach's Cambodian community for vocalists and eventually persuaded Chhom, then a recent transplant from Cambodia, to join.

Dengue Fever's self-titled debut, released in 2003, contains mostly covers of Cambodian rock classics, although at the time the band didn't know the tragic fate of the singers. But the group also began branching out from its Cambodian roots, populating its second and third albums with more original compositions, including some with English lyrics. "We're trying to shine a light on this body of work, but we're not traditionalists," Williams said. "The music was a catalyst for original songs."

As Dengue Fever's following grew in the United States and Europe, it often found itself straddling the line between indie rock and world music audiences. But in Cambodia, those distinctions matter little, particularly for Chhom, who had a successful solo career here before moving to the United States.

"I feel excited and nervous playing in Cambodia. There will be a lot of family and friends in the crowd," she said during a rehearsal.

Near the end of its set at the anniversary concert, the band played a cover version of "Where Are You From?" a well-known Ros and Sinn duet. Cambodian American hip hop artists Pou Khlaing and Tony Real, who have a large following here, joined the band onstage and rapped Sinn's parts, to the clear delight of the young Cambodians in the audience. At the edge of the crowd, a group of break dancers had turned off their portable stereo and were twirling their bodies to the sounds coming from the stage.

As the song played, Seung Sreng, a 65-year-old woman with closely cropped silver hair, broke into a smile. "I think it's great that Americans are playing our music," she said. She had first heard "Where Are You From?" as a young woman in the 1960s, but she hadn't heard it played live in a long time. "I'm having so much fun tonight. I'm so happy," she said.

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calendar@latimes.com

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: FEVERISH: Native Cambodian Chhom Nimol and her band play in Phnom Penh.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Dave Perkes; PHOTO: (E1) Mekong rock: Dengue Fever in Cambodia; PHOTOGRAPHER:Dave Perkes

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