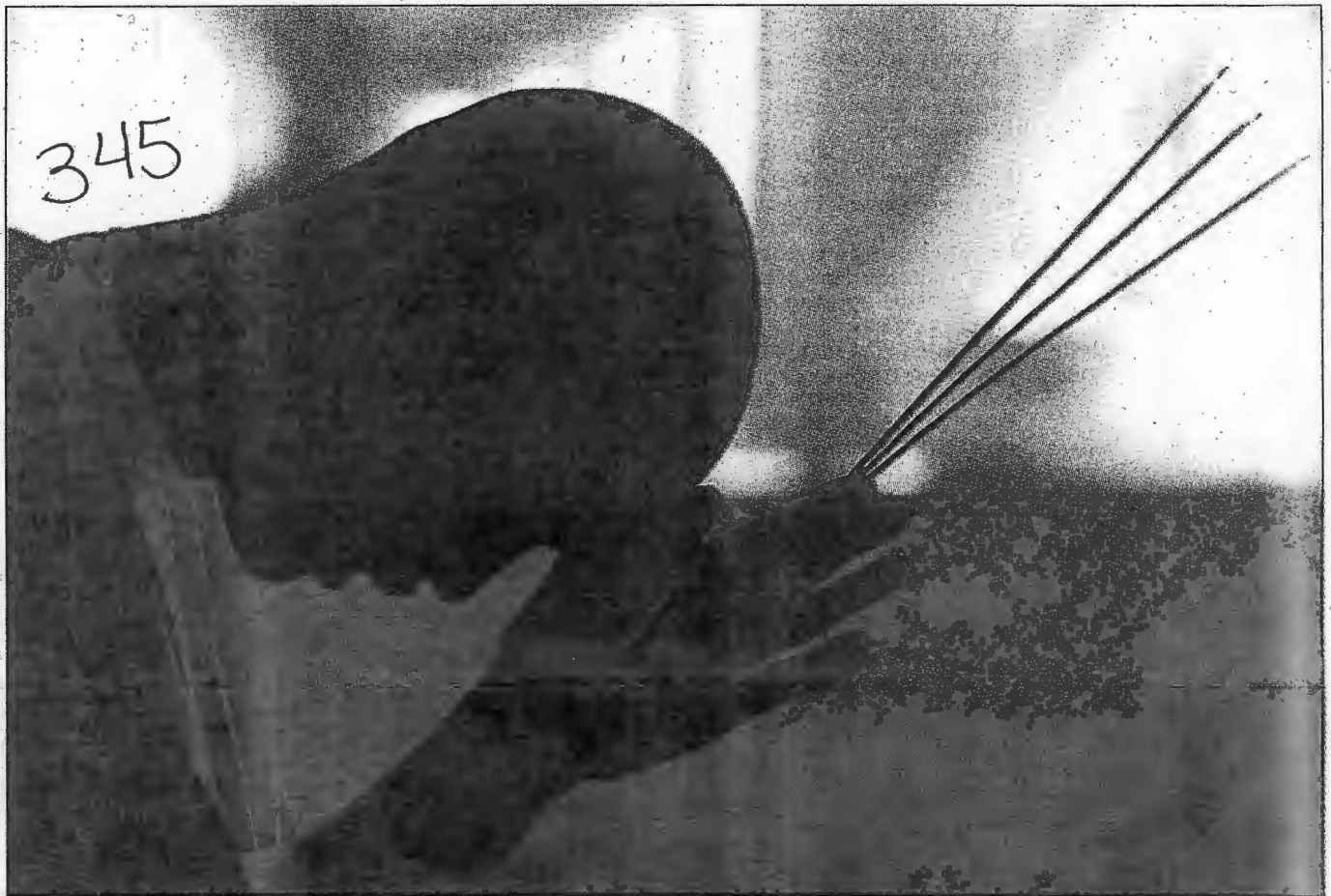


'I don't really feel safe. I have now lost my brother and my boyfriend.'

Gloria Tho, 17, of Long Beach

LA Times 12/17/03



LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

MOURNING: A friend of Vouthy Tho prays at the Tho family home in Long Beach. The 20-year-old aspiring rapper and his friend, Sok Khak Ung, 22, a Marine on leave from Camp Pendleton, were gunned down Oct. 20 by an unknown assailant.

Soundtrack of Violent Streets

Long Beach rappers tell of bloodshed around them and the earlier genocide in Cambodia.

By NANCY WEIDE
Times Staff Writer

Prach Ly pops in a CD as his car threads through Long Beach's refugee neighborhoods. The poor of many nations live on these tattered streets, where homes of Buddhist Cambodians are distinguished by humble front porch shrines and pots of fragrant lemon grass.

A rap groove vibrates Ly's Mustang, an eerie soundtrack for this ride through the everyday risks that Ly and other ghetto kids dodge — or, sometimes, don't.



Tho, the son of refugees, was high school prom king.

gives me goose bumps," said Ly, turning up the volume, his car passing by the house where Tho was killed. "He's overlooking his own casket, watching it go into the ground, and his unsettled spirit will haunt those who did evil to him."

Tho, 20, died Oct. 20, gunned down by an unknown assailant along with Sok Khak Ung, a 22-year-old Marine on leave from Camp Pendleton.

Both were sons of refugees who had fled genocide, and their deaths revealed a story largely unheard outside the Cambodian commu-



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Abstract (Article Summary)

GRIEVING: [Gloria Tho], who lost her brother and her boyfriend to shootings, looks at photo albums of her brother with Bobby Horn. Those and other shootings prompted **Cambodian** business and civic leaders to urge city leaders to wage war on street crime.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times; FRIENDS REMEMBER: Edgar Espinoza, left, David Perez and Chantan Loeung listen to Vouthy Tho's recordings and reminisce about their friend at Tho's home in **Long Beach**. Tho was an aspiring rapper and deep-sea welder.; MOURNING: A friend of Vouthy Tho prays at the Tho family home in **Long Beach**. The 20-year-old aspiring rapper and his friend, Sok Khak Ung, 22, a Marine on leave from Camp Pendleton, were gunned down Oct. 20 by an unknown assailant.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times; Tho, the son of refugees, was high school prom king.; STORYTELLER: [Prach Ly], 24, chronicles violence in the **Cambodian** refugee community through hip-hop, rap and classical **Cambodian** flute. His latest CD is "Dalama."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Lori Shepler Los Angeles Times

Full Text (1947 words)

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Prach Ly pops in a CD as his car threads through Long Beach's refugee neighborhoods. The poor of many nations live on these tattered streets, where homes of Buddhist Cambodians are distinguished by humble front porch shrines and pots of fragrant lemon grass.

A rap groove vibrates Ly's Mustang, an eerie soundtrack for this ride through the everyday risks that Ly and other ghetto kids dodge - - or, sometimes, don't.

The singer is Vouthy Tho, a former high school prom king, an aspiring rapper and deep-sea welder. He also was Ly's friend. Tho lived long enough to graduate from high school, but not college.

"He's foreshadowing his own death in this song, and it gives me goose bumps," said Ly, turning up the volume, his car passing by the house where Tho was killed. "He's overlooking his own casket, watching it go into the ground, and his unsettled spirit will haunt those who did evil to him."

Tho, 20, died Oct. 20, gunned down by an unknown assailant along with Sok Khak Ung, a 22-year-old Marine on leave from Camp Pendleton.

Both were sons of refugees who had fled genocide, and their deaths revealed a story largely unheard outside the Cambodian community, a story of youths facing violence with a gritty pragmatism, their streets an echo of the killing fields.

And Ly, 24, has been the prime storyteller.

In hip-hop and rap grooves and classical Cambodian flute, Ly's latest CD, "Dalama," is lyrical, hypnotic and funky. It is also tragic.

Ly unfurls a sweeping tale that starts in 1975, with the Khmer Rouge movement and a Cambodian holocaust that left more than 1 million dead from starvation and torture -- "People buried alive," Ly sings, "to save money on bullets."

Like Long Beach rappers before him, legends such as Snoop Dogg and Warren G, anger and violence fuel Ly's lyrics, though his latest songs are nearly free of profanity.

By the end of "Dalama," a listener understands the reality for this population estimated at between 35,000 and 50,000 -- the world's largest outside Cambodia.

It's rare to find an elder Cambodian who has not watched victims dig their own graves or be led at gunpoint into the lush forest, never to be seen again. A generation later, it's hard to find children of refugees who do not know someone harmed by urban violence. In "Art of Fact," Ly sings:

A quarter of a century after the genocide

The other five million survive

... I find myself in Long Beach, the next Cambodian mecca

For some futures so bright, looks like high beams

... Others are lost in the American Dream

Later in the song, Ly casts as villains the "OG," original gangsters:

There's an epidemic that's killing us surely

over things we don't even own

Like blocks and territories

So-called OG recruiting young ones

Jumping them in gangs, giving them used guns.

Not even old enough to speak

Already holdin' heat

Ly is no stranger to the street, having circled the outskirts of gang life as a juvenile. The apartment building where his family then lived, on Long Beach Boulevard north of the San Diego Freeway, was infested with gangs and crime.

On the drive listening to Tho's rap, Ly steered around a block where he was jumped, a schoolmate stabbed, a friend robbed for his bike. At 15, he was riding with some bad characters in a car that was stolen. He was arrested, convicted and sentenced to 18 months' probation for his first and only offense.

As a result, his parents shipped him off to an older brother in Florida, and he spent a year there, working hard, seeing that the potential existed for a happier life.

Ly's parents had mentioned the tragedy of Cambodia, but his brother provided details he never knew.

When he returned to Long Beach, he worked at a karaoke shop and began recording music in his parents' garage, eventually becoming a rapper full time.

There were other Cambodian rappers, but Ly was the first to address the genocide. He became a star in Cambodia and an unlikely cultural bridge between young and old, in Long Beach and in Phnom Penh.

His rap music tells a tale familiar to older refugees. But for young listeners, it chronicles the Khmer Rouge extermination of an estimated one in five Cambodians, a fact well-covered in Long Beach schools. In Cambodia, the genocide is not taught in school, said Narin Kem, editor of the Khmer-language Serey Pheap News in Long Beach.

Ly's CDs are sold at most of the Cambodian stores on Anaheim Street, the heart of the refugee enclave, and in other cities, such as Fresno, with refugee residents. But tens of thousands of pirated copies have been sold in Cambodia, according to a Newsweek piece from Phnom Penh that called Ly "Cambodia's first rap star."

Cambodian Rap

On "Dalama," Ly links the past and present bloodshed from such starkly different landscapes. One particularly affecting song features a sweet-sounding little girl's voice:

It's a mad world that we're living in

It's a mad, mad world that we're living in

It's a mad world that we're living in

But the struggle continues, so hold on my friends.

"Many Cambodian kids, and my friends of other races, can second this opinion, but it's kind of like 'West Side Story' here. Only instead of fights over turf and girls, it's fights over girls and turf and money, but with big guns," he said of Long Beach, where gangs roil the poorest parts of a city that the census says has the 10th-highest poverty level in the country.

"You learn," he said with a shrug, "never to walk alone."

Ly grew up in America but was born in Cambodia. As his umbilical cord was cut that May 1979 in a hut, beneath a shade tree, Ly's mother could finally travel. The family dodged land mines and walked for so many days and so many miles they wore the skin off their soles.

Their homeland had been overtaken in April 1975 by an extremist band of Maoists led by Pol Pot. A four-year attempt to wipe out modern society and culture and replace them with a utopian agriworld left infamous mass graves that became known as the killing fields. Even today, they crater the landscape.

Performing Together

As young singers in the insular refugee community, Ly and Tho sometimes performed on stage together at traditional gatherings and social events. Ly said he loved that Tho's friends made commemorative Tho CDs for funeral attendees, but that he could not make

eye contact with Tho's family because he was so bereaved.

Numbers on crime are hard to come by because it is extremely underreported among Cambodian refugees, who often distrust government and fear retaliation or deportation. Police do not log statistics by national origin, but community leaders and authorities acknowledge crime's constant presence.

Some of Tho's young friends and relatives, who gathered for Buddhist prayers to mourn him, told of being jumped for bikes or for no reason, of being threatened while walking to school.

"I don't really feel safe," Gloria Tho, 17, said softly. "I have now lost my brother and my boyfriend."

Her sweetheart from Fresno was shot to death Christmas Day two years ago while rescuing his brother's bike from thieves, one of a series of 11 shootings that claimed five lives from fall of 2001 to late January 2002. The shootings motivated Cambodian business and civic leaders -- characteristically uninvolved in mainstream Long Beach affairs -- to write a letter to city leaders, pleading with them to mount a war on street crime.

"Our children are being shot in the streets of Long Beach," it began. "... A perception exists in the Cambodian community that resolving the shootings and killings of our Cambodian youth is not a police priority. This perception needs to be changed."

In a song called "War On the Streetz" from a 1999 CD, Ly expresses similar frustration.

Sidewalk chalk tapin' up the crime scene

Rotten cop patrol the block of my streetz

I see robbery in progress in broad daylight

All this negative surroundin' me, it's hard to be right.

It is sometimes from within their own community that the violence strikes. Cambodian gang members carried out a brazen weekday killing in 2001 outside of a Department of Motor Vehicles office on Willow Street. They shot to death Vutha Tea, a Woodrow Wilson High student with no gang ties, and gravely wounded a passenger in his car. Incredibly, the passenger had been shot once before, but survived that attack, too.

Tea's death is representative of the violence that links many Cambodians in Long Beach. He was friends with a relative of Ung, the Marine killed with rapper Tho. And Tea's senior class portrait appears directly above Tho's in the Wilson High yearbook.

The slayings of Tho and Ung, who were shot at a late-night barbecue by a hooded man

who suddenly appeared over a backyard fence, remain unsolved. Police have no motive and no indication that the victims were involved with gangs.

The killings rocked the world well beyond the Buddhist temples and Khmer restaurants where weddings and Miss Cambodia pageants and social life revolve.

For Ly, this public reckoning has been overdue and essential if anything is to change for genocide survivors and their children.

His song, "Power, Territory and Rice," is a powerful tale about the war, and if you replaced the word rice with drugs or money, the song could serve as testimonial to life amid poverty and the tyranny of gangs.

He's likely to attract more international attention with next year's 25th anniversary of the end of the Khmer Rouge reign. But unlike the genocides in Bosnia and Germany, Cambodia has yet to see war criminals tried.

Haunted by Memories

This lack of punishment or justice haunts refugees. Cal State Long Beach professor Paul Bott recalled that one of his students did not show up in class for days. It turned out she had been at an Anaheim Street market when she spotted the Khmer Rouge soldier who executed her parents in front of her.

Ly nods when he hears this.

"A lot of kids my age in Cambodia don't even know about Pol Pot and the genocide, what it was about," he said, and "people outside Anaheim Street don't know what goes on there either.... I think the pain starting back then, the pain right here, right now, have become wrapped up together here in our families. Somebody's got to talk about that, or nothing's going to change."

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: GRIEVING: Gloria Tho, who lost her brother and her boyfriend to shootings, looks at photo albums of her brother with Bobby Horn. Those and other shootings prompted Cambodian business and civic leaders to urge city leaders to wage war on street crime.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: FRIENDS REMEMBER: Edgar Espinoza, left, David Perez and Chantan Loeung listen to Vouthy Tho's recordings and reminisce about their friend at Tho's home in Long Beach. Tho was an aspiring rapper and deep-sea welder.; PHOTO: MOURNING: A friend of Vouthy Tho prays at the Tho family home in Long Beach. The 20-year-old aspiring rapper and his friend, Sok Khak Ung, 22, a Marine on leave from Camp Pendleton, were gunned down Oct. 20 by an unknown assailant.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: Tho, the son of refugees, was high school prom king.; PHOTO: STORYTELLER: Prach Ly, 24, chronicles violence in the Cambodian refugee community through hip-hop, rap and classical

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