

Art of faCt: An Interview with praCh

Called by *Asiaweek* “Cambodia’s first rap star,” praCh uses his music and lyrics to connect younger and older generations, Cambodia and America. Born in Cambodia in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime, he and his family left when he was an infant. They eventually settled in the large Cambodian community in Long Beach, California. In 2000, when he was twenty-one, he recorded his first album in his parents’ garage for the Khmer New Year celebration. Without his knowledge, the CD made its way across the Pacific to Cambodia, and a pirated version—which omitted his name—became the number-one album in the country. His work combines traditional Khmer musical forms and instrumentation with the hip-hop beat and unflinching directness of American street rap. He has been featured in *Newsweek*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New York Post* and on *Frontline*, commercial television, and *Voice of America*. This interview was conducted by telephone in September 2003.

SM Can you talk about the meaning of your name in Khmer?

P The meaning of *praCh* is “advisor to the king” or “person who talks a lot.” But my parents didn’t name me praCh because of that. The area where I was born was called Veal Srae K’prach: farmland of K’prach. I’m from a big family. I have three brothers and four sisters—four girls, four boys—and I’m the seventh child. They didn’t know what to name me when I was born at the camp place, so they just named me praCh.

SM You were born after the Khmer Rouge period, is that right?

P I was born in 1979, near Battambang. The Vietnamese had invaded already. It was chaotic then, the time of confusion. No one knew where they were going or where they were headed. But my mom was pregnant with me. She had me in a hut. Later, my parents went back to Cambodia and videotaped the tree I was born under, but the hut’s no longer there.

SM Do you have any memory of the border?

P Actually, I was so young, the only thing I can remember is waterfalls. And I remember a bridge, made out of rope, but it seemed more like a dream, not even a memory. But when I asked my parents about it, they said it was an actual place. That was when we were crossing to the Thai border and I was an infant.

SM In your song, “Welcome,” you talk about arriving in the U.S.: “soon our feet hits the ground,/my mom busted in tears./words can’t describe,/a moment so rare./and right by her side,/my father was there./staring at the skies,/hold’n each other./realize we survive the genocide.”

P That I remember. That is probably the first thing I remember clearly. It’s strange. I remember on the plane trip they asked if we wanted peanuts. My parents and the other people were joking about the food. Oh, they’re going to give us these bags of peanuts, why don’t they give us *banh chhev*? And then, when the plane landed, they opened the door hatch, and I remember seeing my mom crying and my dad holding her. He said, “From this point on, it can only get better.” They praised the Buddha, and they held each other.

There was hope for us. I was too young to understand what was going on, but now I do understand it. I’m glad that I remember that time.

I saw families that were kissing the ground. Because finally they made it. It seemed like we had just escaped from hell. I don’t mean Cambodia is hell, but it just seemed like there was total darkness then, and finally we made it out into the light.

SM How did you end up in Long Beach?

P I was in Florida from 1983 until 1987, in the suburbs. Then we moved to California, to El Monte, north of Long Beach. If there’s any ghetto place, this was the ghetto of all ghettos. It was bad. It was like a project—apartments on top of apartments—and the school was in the back of the apartments. In the alleyway there were drug deals, and every night we heard helicopters and shoot-outs.

We took it for two years, and then my parents decided to move to Long Beach. We had always heard about Long Beach and had a cousin down there. It was 1989.

When we moved down there, again it wasn’t paradise. It was an apartment complex, on the border between Long Beach and Compton, and there were a lot of Cambodians—like a Cambodian haven. But once we went outside, to the stores or the park, no one knew who Cambodians were. We didn’t really have an identity. They called us *Chinese, chinky eyes,*

gook. I guess that just made me stronger. I wouldn't say anything like that to other people now because I know how it feels. You learn from stuff like that.

SM So how did you get interested in poetry and rap?

P Poetry, I don't remember the exact time. Some people remember I wrote my first poem on this day or that. I don't remember that. I was into art and drawing. One day my older sisters came home from school and started writing poems about flowers and nature, and I heard music on the radio, and I thought, Hey, I want to give this a try.

I watched *Sesame Street* too, maybe that got me into it. I didn't really learn my ABCs in school because I couldn't connect much with the teachers. You know, my parents didn't know English, so they couldn't teach me; I had to speak Khmer at home. But *Sesame Street* was good for me, because it kind of rhymed too. Every time they said something, it rhymed. So thanks to *Sesame Street*, thanks to Big Bird... I owe it all to them.

I was also listening to rap: Run DMC, EPMD, and NWA, with Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, DJ Yella, and MC Ren. They're here in Long Beach, in Compton, one of the biggest rap groups ever—not just here, but worldwide. So I grew up listening to rap. My parents called it jungle music because the bass was real loud.

I really liked the music. And I would go to battles—not battling people, but competing lyrically. I was the only Asian doing that. You go against each other outside in the park. Everybody's there. You know, they have their crew, I have my crew—well, basically, I didn't have any crew, I had my friend who didn't know English. You go back and forth, rap back and forth, kind of like Khmer *ayai*. The crowd declares who wins. Whoever's sharper wins. I win sometimes, I lose a lot of times, but that was a stepping stone. You learn from your mistakes, you earn your stripes. And then you go to clubs, work your way up. That's how I got started.

But during that time, it was mostly gangsta music. That was just about all there was in my area. It was a gangster environment. You saw graffiti everywhere. There were shoot-outs. Like I said, I was living in the ghetto. It was hectic and crazy and I was listening to Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre, and everyone was looking up to them.

My turning point came when I moved back to Florida. My parents sent me to Florida to live with my older brother for almost a year and a half.

SM So they sent you there to straighten you out.

P Actually, yeah. With my friends and all the fights, they saw what was happening and they said, Just go stay with your brother for a while. When I was in Florida, there wasn't much to do. I was writing street music—don't

get me wrong, you can't take that out of me. But I guess I was having an identity crisis. And my brother, he guided me a little bit.

SM How did you find that identity?

P Well, everybody here in Long Beach was doing the same thing. All they talked about was guns, gangs, girls—like bragging rights. Even today, you hear a lot of that B.S. on the radio. But when I went to Florida, I didn't have any connections with friends, I was isolated from society. My brother owned a car shop. I was about sixteen or seventeen years old, and he let me manage the place. He trusted me. And he started telling me stories about what had happened in Cambodia.

SM Did he just start telling you?

P Actually, I asked him. Because when I asked my parents, they would tell me some things, but I was too young to remember them. Even when we were eating dinner, they would say, You'd better finish up your plate because people in Cambodia don't have much to eat. But they never got to the point of talking about the killings. They would tell us what had happened in general about Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime, but they wouldn't tell any personal stories. I think they were waiting for us to be the right age. They didn't want to tell us stories about death.

But my brother wasn't holding anything back. I told him what my parents had said and I asked him, "Is it true?" He said, "Oh yeah, it's true." And then he would go on to his own stories. He was working in the camps. They separated boys from girls, parents from children. The camps were separated by a few miles. He knew my mom and sister were starving, so at nighttime he would sneak out to find food. He would take a coconut or whatever he could steal and drop it off for my sisters and my mom and come back to his own camp. Some nights he didn't even sleep because it was hours of travel, and he had to hide at the same time. He told me if he got caught, it was an automatic death sentence.

He was saying there was a massive grave pit, where they executed people. He was describing all these horrors. And he said, I know I'm telling you stories; you don't have to believe me, but from their stories and my stories, you put it together and think about what you believe or not.

We were staying up late at night to have these conversations.

SM So you weren't even sure what they were telling you really happened?

P Yeah, because there were no documents. The only film that I remember vividly was *The Killing Fields*. Even in school books, other historical events had a chapter, but Cambodia had only a page. Two million people

murdered, and there was only a page with one picture. At least give it a chapter. But now that I know, I see living documents all around me.

I started writing poetry using what my brother was telling me, my memories, and my parents'. I thought, I can't write about what I don't have. I'm not going to be fake. So I started writing my life story by crafting *Dalama*. I didn't have a title then. I was just writing on pieces of paper, throwing them in my bag. I'd write in notebooks, on napkins, whatever I had at the moment, and put it away in a pocket somewhere.

When I went back to Long Beach, I had learned a lesson.

SM How did you record your first album?

P When I returned to Long Beach, I formed a group with friends. I was living at my parents' house. In the garage, I gathered a karaoke machine, microphones, a tape player you could plug a mike into. That was basically the equipment I used for the first album. I didn't have any beats or instrumentals, so I bought some CDs from stores to use. I was doing it just for fun; I wasn't thinking of selling. I decided I was going to make a CD and pass it out during the Cambodian New Year—just for the fun of it.

The first album took about three months. I would stay up late at night, and I had school in the morning on top of that. My parents said I had to stop the noise by ten o'clock, so at nighttime, I put the headphones on to do my editing, sampling, cutting, adding echoes.

One night, I had an experience. I'm not really superstitious, but I remember I was doing the song "The Year Zero." I was there by myself. And when I was doing that song, I felt a sudden chill in the room. All of a sudden the room got cold. Slowly, I turned off the equipment and then I ran into my house. I don't know what it was. But it happened to me three times when I was working on that album—on the songs "The Year Zero" and "The Letter." It could have been in my head. But when I am rapping, when I'm in front of the microphone, it's just not me anymore. It's like someone else has taken over.

When I was putting the album together, I didn't know what to name it. I was thinking about the Dalai Lama. I was thinking about drama, trauma, and I made up the word "Dalama." I looked it up in the dictionary, but there was no such word. I thought, I'm going to make up my own word and turn that into the story of my life.

I also did the artwork for the cover. I did the second one too. If you look at the cover of the second CD, you can see it connects with the first one. Each symbol represents a song. It's split down the middle into mirror images: on one side Angkor Wat, on the other the White House; on one side flowers, on the other a skeleton. When the first album got to Cambodia, they substituted a picture of a kid with a rifle. I don't know how it got to Cambodia.

We passed it out at the New Year in April 2000. The adult coordinators didn't really accept rap. They said, "We're sorry, but we really can't accept rap music here." I said, "Just give me a try." They said, "No, we can't do it."

SM So you weren't able to perform.

P No, I performed. It just sort of happened. We had a booth at the event to sell our CDs and promote our record label. My friend really didn't take it seriously, but I did. I thought, I'm going to make this happen because this is what I want to do. I went to the main stage to ask about performing. They said, "No, we can't let you go up there."

At that time, they were setting up for another band. The coordinator got up to say to the crowd, "Give us a few minutes for the band to set up." And she walked away. I thought, Here's my chance. The mike's still sitting there, and it's still on, and she's walked away. I thought, Here it is now—do or die.

I just walked up there and started talking to them. I spoke Cambodian, *chumreap suo*. Not many young Cambodians know how to speak Cambodian. I remember seeing the coordinator on the side; her eyes were saying, You're going to get it for this one. I said to the crowd, "I'm going to do a song for you now. If you don't like it, just boo me off the stage and I'll leave. But this is my chance. I want to do one Cambodian song and one American song."

I sang the song "Welcome." I did the English version first. The kids liked it because they understood it. The adults didn't really understand it. Then I said, "I'm going to translate it into Khmer."

It was an experience I'll never forget.

There was no music—just me and the mike, *a cappella*. I saw in their eyes that the adults couldn't believe what I was saying. I could tell they were hanging on to every word, waiting for what I would say next. When I was done, I had a standing ovation. The adults were applauding even more than the kids.

They said, "Do another one." And I did a song called "Ayai." It was a rap form of a Khmer *ayai*, kind of like a ghetto *ayai*. I rapped in Cambodian about welfare and drugs and what's going on in my community. After I was done with that, I really had them. The people asked me to do more. I said, "You know I'm not even supposed to be up here. I'm sorry." The coordinator came running up to me and said, "Do another one." I said, "No, I'm done now."

When I went back to my booth, there was a line of people wanting to buy my CD. I didn't want to make money off it. I just needed to get back the money I had spent making it. After that, I started passing it out for free.

DJ Sop, a well-known deejay in Cambodia, was there. I think he must

have taken a copy back to Cambodia. I don't know why they changed the cover and the name. They used two titles, actually: *Khmer Rap* and *Khmer Rouge, Khmer Rap*. The cover was gone. The artwork was gone. My name was gone. The credits were gone. Gone out the window.

About six months went by. I was starting to get noticed. People said, "Oh, you're the kid from the New Year." They encouraged me to keep going. This was from the adults. And the kids, they liked other songs. Some of them are street songs, about shootings and drugs, but that's what I was surrounded by at that time.

Then one day I got a call from a reporter for *Asiaweek* and the *Cambodia Daily*, Gina Chon. She asked, "Is this praCh?"

I said, "Yes, this is praCh." I thought I was in trouble.

She said, "I'm calling from Cambodia." I was thinking, What did I do? Why am I in trouble? She said, "I'm glad I got a hold of you. It was hard to find you."

I said, "Get a hold of me for what? I didn't do anything." But my parents sometimes go back and forth to Cambodia, so I asked, "You want to speak to my parents?"

She said, "No, I want to speak to you." And then she explained, "Did you know your album's a big hit here and everybody's listening to it? It's really hot. It's the number-one album in the country."

I said, "What album are you talking about?"

"*Khmer Rap*."

I said I didn't make any such album. And then she started reciting my lyrics. I said those were my lyrics, but that's not my title.

All of a sudden all these magazines and newspapers picked up on it. *L.A. Times*, *Newsweek*. I didn't even know what *Newsweek* was. I mean, I remember reading it in school, but I never paid much attention to it. When I talked to Chris Dufford, of the Associated Press, he said, "It's selling like hot cakes here. It's not just the fact that it's selling, but they're learning something from it. Kids are asking to know more about that time and era."

A reporter from *Voice of America* called me to do a radio interview to be broadcast in Cambodia. Her name was Savan, so I called her Aunt Savan. She conducted the whole interview in Cambodian for an hour and a half. I can't really carry on a conversation that long, but somehow I did. I did other interviews for Canadian and British stations, but that one was for Cambodia, so it meant more to me. She asked me when I was going to record another album.

At that time I had no plans to record another one, and in 2002, I was somehow chosen to coordinate the Cambodian New Year. It was a privilege for me to do that, but I felt like I had a heavy load on my back. It took about five months. I didn't do any CDs because it took a lot of my time. The New Year event was very successful. When we started, we were \$35,000 in debt to the city from past events. But this time—it wasn't just me, we all

put it together—the event made around \$60,000, plus we paid off the debt. We had about fifteen thousand attendees and two main stages. The next year, 2003, they asked me if I wanted to do it again. I said, I'm going to take a break and get back to what I do.

During this time, I was getting a lot of media attention and they were asking when I was going to do another album. I finally gave them a date: 3 March 2003, because that date was 03-03-03. I just liked the number.

SM This was your second *Dalama* album.

P I didn't know what I was going to write, but I knew I wanted to do a second *Dalama*. I started drawing the pictures, formulating ideas. A lot of producers approached me, but I already had my own, so I stuck with them because I believed in them. And I thought, It's not like we're doing this just for ourselves anymore. In three months, we knocked the album out. It was out for the New Year in April.

For me, personally, I think *Dalama Two* is more—I don't want to say creative, but I gave it its own life. It's not a duplication of the first album. It bears a similarity because it's an autobiography too. But at the same time, it holds its own ground. I mixed Cambodian traditional music with rap; I created a Cambodian hip-hop beat. And this time, I was really proud to say, all the beats and instrumentals were ours. We did the show for the Cambodian New Year, appearing on both stages in front of thousands of people; the crowd's reaction was phenomenal. I didn't have a chance to take it to Cambodia, but a couple of my friends did.

Right now, I'm producing a couple of other people's albums. One is for a Khmer female rap group, Universal Speakers. The other is traditional *pin peat* music. I really want to help revive that. There are only about four Cambodian master musicians left in the United States, and Mr. Chan Ho is one of them. He plays all the instruments. I was privileged to have him play interludes on traditional instruments for *Dalama Two*. There's also some traditional music with me rapping over it; his son played that.

SM Could you talk about how you came to combine rap with traditional Cambodian musical forms, such as *ayai*?

P Actually, when I wrote the first *ayai*, I wrote it in rhyme without any melody. But when I went to record it, the rapping didn't sound right. I needed a melody. So I came up with one, and it was an *ayai*. *Ayai* is sort of like rap music, but in a Cambodian way. *Ayai* is like one poetry master to another poetry master going out on stage or in front of a village and competing with their wisdom, their knowledge about certain subjects, like their land, but it has to continuously rhyme. So basically—rap. Not all rap is about streets and drugs and partying. There's every variety of rap. With

Cambodian *ayai*, it's sort of like that too. Sometimes they use bad language. I figure it's almost exactly like rap, but in Cambodian style, with Cambodian words. I got a chance to meet one of the famous Cambodian comedians, Prum Manh, when he came down to Long Beach for the New Year. He's very wise. He told me later it was not exactly *ayai*. It's called *kong kaev*.

Have you seen *Oan Ouey, Srey Oan*? It's an old Cambodian movie from before the war, with Kong Sam Oeun; he died during the time of the killing fields. In the movie, Kong Sam Oeun and Trente-Deux are selling street food, and they're singing to get the crowd's attention, competing with each other to get the people to buy their food. They're going back and forth about the prices, whose food is better. Like the rap battles I used to do in the park.

SM Where would you like to go with your music?

P I want to do *Dalama* in three parts, a trilogy. So far I have done two: *Dalama...the end'n' is just the beginnin'* and *Dalama...the lost chapter*. The last one will be *the beginnin' of the end*. That will be a very dark album. I will squeeze all the light out of it. It will be about political turmoil. I'll do that one when the time is right.

The music that I do is not just about me. It's a movement. We are trying to break new ground, explore new music, new sounds. On the second CD, I mixed traditional music with rap. For my next one, I'm going to try to mix old Sin Sisamouth songs. You know who he is? The great singer who was killed by the Khmer Rouge. I'll mix it so that he sings a chorus and then me. And someday I wish to write screenplays.

SM Do you see what you're doing as unique?

P I see a lot of people doing a lot more than me. I think we are heading in a good direction. I'm just one of many trying to do what we can to help out. There's a world out there, and everybody's got to do something, play a role. I think I found my part. Before, I was building walls—isolating myself from people. But now that I know what I can do and how people react to it, it's more like building a bridge than a wall.

SM What do you think about the future and the role that art can play in healing people after the war?

P I see there's hope. I see some things have survived. Like traditional music: the adults love it, because it's from before the war and it survived. What I'm doing is completely different, but at the same time, it is connecting with that.

Some people ask me what gives me the right to rap about the war because I wasn't born during the time of the killing fields. I didn't go through that. But I have that in my blood. My mother and father, my brothers and sisters went through that. I lost aunts and uncles. So how can they ask me that?

If there's anything that can help the older generation, it's giving them justice. Twenty-five years have gone by. When will justice be served? If we keep quiet about it, what they went through will be for nothing. It would be as if they lost their parents, children, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles for nothing. I don't know how to put it in words, but my personal opinion is that they need some kind of justice. Some kind of closure. I don't believe in vengeance. I don't believe in fighting. But I do believe in justice.