

WHEN THAI MUSIC WAFTED FAINTLY THROUGH the humid night air, Sophary Som, then a young Cambodian girl fenced inside a crowded Thailand refugee camp, would listen for hours. She tried to memorize the songs coming from radios in houses outside the barricade. Sometimes she thought of childhood days when she'd danced about her home, dreaming of becoming a singer herself.

But any such ambitions seemed hopeless when, in April of 1975, the invading Khmer Rouge army forced her entire city to evacuate at once. In the tumult and confusion, Sophary was separated from her family. A neighbor took her in, becoming her substitute mother for many years.

The American bombing of Cambodia during the U.S.-Vietnam War shattered much of the country, and in the four years after the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975, approxi-

mately 2 million Cambodians died from exhaustion, starvation and slaughter. In 1979 the Vietnamese army invaded, and with bloody fighting drove the Khmer Rouge to the Thai border, sparking a civil war that still continues. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians fled through dangerous jungles into Thailand, where many became virtual prisoners in Thai refugee camps. Most eventually migrated to other countries.

Sophary experienced all these things before coming to America. Tonight, however, Sophary, her dark eyes glowing, steps to the microphone at a Cambodian restaurant in Long Beach and begins to sing "Goodbye Phnom Penh," a delicate, Western-influenced pre-1975 song about unrequited love:

Goodbye, goodbye
Phnom Penh
I leave you with much
remorse

I leave you because you
remind me of the past,
Of the faded romance
I once had . . .

He told me he loves
me at one moment,
And the next he
says not . . .

Goodbye, goodbye,
Phnom Penh, I leave
you now

Singing the Ram Vong and the Twist"

Cambodian "classics" were mostly written between 1955 and 1975, and were heavily influenced by Western music. They carry the innocence of an earlier era, romantic and sometimes saucily playful. The melodies are more complex than Western ones, with an Asian feel in their minor chords and graceful transitions. "These are the sad songs I once listened to as a child," says Haigan Chea, a young Cambodian engineer. "When I hear them again, it makes me realize I'm not in Cambodia anymore. I'm here in America now."

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The youngest residents of Southern California's Cambodian community, which is the largest in the United States with approximately 80,000 members, are indeed becoming Americanized. Half of the community lives in Long Beach, and the musicians among them are at the heart of a new, still evolving Cambodian-American music scene. Like the Cambodian refugees who scattered to France, Canada and

Australia, Cambodians here are producing new songs and re-recording older ones for distribution throughout the Cambodian diaspora.

Recently, two Southern California performers — Von "Thea" Vatheany of Los Angeles and Richard Vichan Chea of Long Beach — created the first Cambodian pop karaoke laser disc. "In Cambodia recently I saw their karaoke at almost every restaurant in Phnom Penh and heard [pirated] copies of their songs everywhere," says Christine Nou, a pretty graduate student at Cal State Fullerton who's come to this restaurant tonight to attend a farewell party for friends. They are two members of the United Cambodian Students of America, one going to graduate school, the other returning for a year's stay in Cambodia, where a year ago a U.N.-supervised election established a shaky partially parliamentary monarchy headed by the chameleonesque King Sihanouk.

Most of the Cambodian-Americans at tonight's party are in their 20s and 30s, people who came as refugees in the 1980s, often traumatized and impoverished. They struggled to learn English, to gain an education and to understand the American culture and political system. Watching them now, they appear so poised and capable you might not guess that every one of them still feels the effects of all that happened half a world away and half a lifetime ago. You might not guess that they continue to be affected by events unfolding in Cambodia today.

The Ram Vong is a lively Cambodian dance, and its beat draws almost everyone onto the dance floor. It's a line dance . . .

There's a celebrity dining here tonight — Dr. Haing S. Ngor, who won an Oscar for his portrayal of Dith Pran in *The Killing Fields*. A small group of Cambodian fans gather around him as he leaves, politely offering both handshakes and bows. Some of the party

guests call each other "older brother" or "sister." Christine explains: "It's a Cambodian custom showing respect. At home my sisters call me 'older sister Christine,' even though we have become very Americanized."

IN 1975 DESPITE THE FACT THAT Sihanouk himself played both saxophone and clarinet, the Khmer Rouge slaughtered thousands of singers and musicians — an estimated 90 percent. Influenced by Maoism, envious of the urban elite and enraged by the corruption of the Lon Nol regime that overthrew Sihanouk, the mostly peasant Khmer Rouge troops murdered intellectuals and others

whose occupations they felt were too bourgeois. Among those killed was Cambodia's most beloved singer, Sin Sisamuth. The gorgeous pre-1975 recordings of his delicate, romantic voice on CDs and tapes bearing photos of his plump, boyish face are still by far the top sellers at Cambodian music stores. Before they killed him, the Khmer Rouge tortured him and cut out his tongue. His son, said to look and sound much like his father, is a singer in Cambodia now.

After 1975 the Khmer Rouge put new lyrics to the classic melodies. Patrick Peou, 23, a Long Beach bank teller and the Friendship Band's keyboard player, remembers: "I was 6 when our country went to disaster, and we were sent to the countryside to work, with no food and with people dying all around. The Khmer Rouge added brainwash lyrics, manipulation lyrics, to the older tunes." Sophary, who grew skinny and weak from endless field work and not enough food, says, "The Khmer Rouge [lyrics] were all about working hard, like — 'Hey everybody, get up early and go to work! You have to get in food to eat!'"

By 1984 the lyrics had changed again. The Vietnamese-backed government was urging Cambodians to write the state radio station about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge. More than 400 letters poured in each month, and the best were turned into new lyrics for the same classic tunes. Popular songs included "Selling Rice to the State," "At Night Time We Suffer Remembering the Bloodthirsty Regime," and "At Our Village I Feel Suffering Over the Khmer People Killed."

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With much pain
inside me
And I promise never
to repeat

This horrible mistake
again!

Accompanying her, flanked by carvings of
Apsara, the heavenly dancing goddess, copied
from Cambodian temples, are five Cambodian-
Americans, members of the Metha Pheap
("Friendship") Band. The band's leader and
drummer, Siphon Troeung, first met and
played with some of these musicians in 1980,
while locked in another Thai refugee camp.

Modern Cambodian pop is different from
the centuries-old Cambodian "gong-chime"
music that is an offspring of Indonesia's metal-
percussion sound. The modern music, often
very beautiful, uses Western instruments —
electric guitars, keyboards, drums — and musi-

cal phrasing. There's even a strong Latin influ-
ence, with cha-chas and manbos, passed down
from the years when Cambodia was still under
the thumb of France.

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ian dance, and its beat draws almost
everyone onto the dance floor. It's a
line dance, a little like the Hustle or
the Texas Tortoise, except for the way
these dancers gracefully twist and
weave their elbows and hands. In addi-
tion to the Ram Vong, there is the
Saravan (with a cha-cha beat — swing
your arms as if you're trying to fly); the
Khmer Ler (a line dance with a Z.Z.
Top beat — sweep your arms up and
down like an ocean wave); and the Lam
Leary, danced to "Beautiful Above All."
Salan Thong, a pre-med student at UC
Riverside with waist-length dark hair,
laughs and moves her feet faster as the
music speeds up. It's like the MTV pro-

gram *Lip Service*, where kids lip-sync
and dance to recordings the DJ speeds
up and slows down — or like the
ancient Cambodian village song
"Smaon," designed to produce a trance
state in shamanistic healers.

The next song, "It's My Party," is
pure American pop and soul, sung in
English as the dancers do a modest,
somewhat restrained twist. Cambodian
bands seem able to play most well-
known American songs, and before this
evening ends Sophary will sing more
than a dozen in English.

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lyrics again. A few years ago there was
even a spate of songs about Cambodian
life in Long Beach (including "Long
Beach Girl") written by local artists.
Although Thea and Richard are among
several local Cambodians writing new
songs, they chose 12 classics for the
karaoke tracks Richard produced at his
tiny Vichan Studio in his Long Beach
home. He performed the music, and
Thea, who is matinee-idol handsome
with a romantic, emotion-filled voice,
sang the lyrics.

The karaoke was commissioned by
Sea Star, a Chinese-American company
in Monterey Park, which sent the com-
pleted tape to Hong Kong, where a
matching video was shot and Cam-
bodian titles added. "They used real
famous Chinese movie stars, and it looks
so nice, so beautiful," says Richard. But
the tape was pirated. Although cheap
copies are sold throughout Cambodia,
neither Richard nor Thea receives a
penny in royalties.

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"People sneaked around and copied everything. It's scary when you work real hard and people take your work and make you feel bad. A copyright does no good in Cambodia," mourns Richard. Thea says: "Before, I feel mad a little bit. I was thinking how could I earn more credit and fame somehow. But right now I'm thinking, well, my country is such a poor country . . . no one can pay much for tapes."

"I always wanted to play music my whole life," says Richard, whose father, an amateur musician, was murdered a week after the Khmer Rouge takeover. Fleeing to a Thai refugee camp as a teenager, Richard struggled for months to fashion a homemade guitar out of plywood. To tune it, he had to continually fill it with water to make the strings taut. "Sounded crummy," he says with a grin. Later, an American aid organization bought a guitar for its staff, and Richard and others were allowed to practice with it. When he finally came to America, he graduated from a Georgia music school and moved to Long Beach. At his Vichan Studio, he records Cambodians and Hmongs and recently attracted his first Anglo clients.

In a way, Vichan Studio carries on America's garage-music tradition. Taking up one small room and a sound-proofed closet that doubles as a recording booth, it's crowded with equipment and a large secondhand Tascam board that can mix 24 tracks down to 16. On the walls are color photos of Richard's mother and wife and one of Richard himself, looking rock-star cool with dark glasses and his trademark shoulder-length hair. Most other Cambodian male performers have conservative haircuts to meet the demands of day jobs or traditional parents. But they still have a look in their eyes that says that somewhere in their minds and souls, music is playing. Love of music has to drive Cambodian performers pretty hard, or they would have given up long ago.

Thea was 11 when he crossed the Thai border. "There were a lot of land mines in the jungle where we traveled, and if you didn't walk the right way, your life was gone," he recalls. He spent five years in a camp, came to the United States, and after graduating from high school took a job inspecting fruit trees for medflies ("Our group found some"). He's now studying music at Glendale College.

He sings dozens of songs in English as well as Cambodian, including a moving version of Kenny Rogers' "Lady." Thea's singing style is soft and soulful, and he believes his songwriting is "different, more modern" than that of most Cambodian-American songwriters. Richard's songs are influenced by R&B. "I love Smokey Robinson. I love Lionel Richie especially — I wish I could meet him. I wish I could someday work at an American music [company]," he says wistfully.

Sophary also is writing songs about her life. In 1979, when the Khmer Rouge were first driven out, she returned to her hometown with the neighbor she'd called "Mami" during the Khmer Rouge

leave. Now Sophary, who lives in Long Beach with her real mother, doesn't know how to find her. "But I think of her every day," she says.

Sophary's favorite group is the Carpenters. "I listened to them in Cambodia, and when I came to America I heard them on an oldies station," she says. Another Cambodian says he loves the Carpenters because they remind him of peaceful pre-Khmer Rouge years, when he listened to their songs over American Armed Forces Radio while he worked in his father's rice field.

So many Cambodians have a fondness for American songs and singers of the 1960s and '70s. To them, that music is part of some America they once imagined and dreamed about, an America they never found. Maybe they're homesick not just for Cambodia, but for that still-elusive country of songs by the Carpenters and Kenny Rogers and Lionel Richie, an America they'd once believed would bring an end to suffering. **L**

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Sophary also is writing songs about her life. In 1979, when the Khmer Rouge were first driven out, she returned to her hometown with the neighbor she'd called "Mami" during the Khmer Rouge years. An older brother found Sophary and took her back to their real mother. At first, Sophary didn't recognize her, "but then we cried and hugged each other." Sophary and her real mother both begged the "wartime mother" to join their family when it fled to Thailand, but the woman said she couldn't