

Norodom Sihanouk and the political agenda of Cambodian music, 1955–1970



True rock and roll in Cambodia began in the 1950s with teenagers from a wealthy family in Phnom Penh, the Mol brothers and their band, *Baksey Chamkrong*, named after a mythical bird. They started out performing at weddings and parties and on the radio, playing traditional Cambodian songs with new instruments like the accordion. Then in the mid 1950s the oldest brother, Mol Kagmol, created a homemade electric guitar after a magazine photograph of a Gibson. The 1961 movie *The Young Ones* (called *Wonderful to Be Young* in the U.S.), starring British rock and roller Cliff Richard, became the impetus for Cambodian rock and roll. After seeing the film, Kagmol, younger brother Kagmach, just thirteen years old, and friend Hong Samley, formed a guitar band, a genre never before seen in Cambodia. They copied Cliff Richard's every movement, from his dancing style to the way he held his guitar.

The combination of Western rock and roll and Cambodian lyrics and music produced a new and unique sound. The traditional high-pitched singing brought an operatic element to rock and roll. These songs have a very upbeat modern rhythm combined with lyrics that describe traditional practices like fattening a pig for a wedding.

Well-known male singers of the time included Eng Nary, Em Yeng, Sos Mat, and Meas Samon. But Sin Sisamouth was known as the 'King of Cambodian Music'. He was part of the energetic modernization of the rock-music scene in Phnom Penh that Khmerized Western sounds like rhythm and blues and rock and roll – very similar to the garage rock that was popular in the U.S. in the mid 1960s. What made Sin Sisamouth an icon was his crooning voice and his capacity to write ballads as well as upbeat rock songs played with a distorted guitar sound.

The beautiful singing of the renowned female vocalists was the final touch that made this Cambodian mix so enticing. Mao Sareth, Ros Serey Sothea, Pen Ron, and Huy Meas, to name only a few, were famous during the country's cultural and musical renaissance. They sang in a variety of genres from romantic ballads to playful up-tempo pieces. Women and men alike gave Khmer lyrics and sounds to popular Western rock songs.

Sihanouk's impact on music

Under the French Protectorate no higher education was possible in Cambodia. Now the country was changing on every level, from the infrastructure to the social mobility of the people through the new education system; under Sihanouk the country saw the construction of universities, ministries, and public monuments celebrating its culture and identity. Phnom Penh became known as the 'Pearl of Asia' during this economically prosperous time. The urban elite was open to foreign influences and sought to embrace its new identity as a modern nation.

This modernization of the country was not established through democratic practices of governing. The Sangkum government demonstrated the same authoritarian tendencies as many Cambodian rulers before it. By centralizing all the administrative, political, economic, and cultural functions in Phnom Penh, Sihanouk made it a central capital of the country: "This regime called Sangkum Reastr Niyum leaves, in terms of equipment, an undeniable positive legacy. But this regime, a mixture of paternalism and bloody repression, is led by a leader who does not accept that he is not praised, that he is not liked, let alone that he could be criticized. If it turns Cambodia into one of the most developed countries in Southeast Asia in 1970, on the political level this regime does not evolve."²

There was plenty of freedom of speech if one desired to praise the Prince or the government, but there was no platform for those who wished to express any level of disagreement, even if it did not rise to the level of dissent. Criticism was allowed only if sanctioned by the Ministry of Information through approved government newspapers or magazines. Members of the communist party were executed on the grounds that their ideology, according to Sihanouk, constituted a subversive act of treason.

Sihanouk's ruthless side needs to be balanced against his legacy in the arts. He was a man of many talents. He produced and directed 19 films, starring in many of them. He was a gifted musician as an instrumentalist, singer, and songwriter. He took pride in having a father who played many instruments and a mother who was in charge of the royal ballet and who enjoyed listening to the music of Charles Trenet and Edith Piaf. Sihanouk encouraged the modernization of music by staging competitions for singers and musicians. Many famous singers were discovered through these competitions, such as Ros Serey Sothea, Huy Meas, and Pen Ron.

The history of Cambodian popular music from 1950 on is closely linked to the social and political situation of the times. In the second half of the 20th century Cambodia went through many radical political changes in a very short period of time. Those changes are reflected in the changing nature and role of popular music. The lyrics of popular Cambodian songs written under the leadership of Norodom Sihanouk show how this charismatic patron of the arts, himself a song writer and film maker, used popular music as a propaganda tool to advance his political agenda and enhance his image as a popular leader.

LinDa Saphan

Music during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, under Sihanouk
Norodom Sihanouk's strong interest in the arts and his support of modernization of the country inspired Cambodian musicians to bring a new sound to traditional music, including by adopting foreign influences. Enthusiasm for Westernized elements during Sihanouk's time in power can be seen in every field of the arts, from architecture to cinema, literature, and music. But Cambodian artists, architects, novelists, and musicians did more than simply borrow or copy Western art forms; they created a unique mixture of Western and Cambodian culture in innovative modern buildings, moralist novellas, and a new rock and roll sound. Phnom Penh was the think tank of the country as the political leadership encouraged this Westernized influence. In contrast to later political regimes, during the Sangkum era foreign culture was not seen as a threat to traditional culture; indeed it was welcomed.

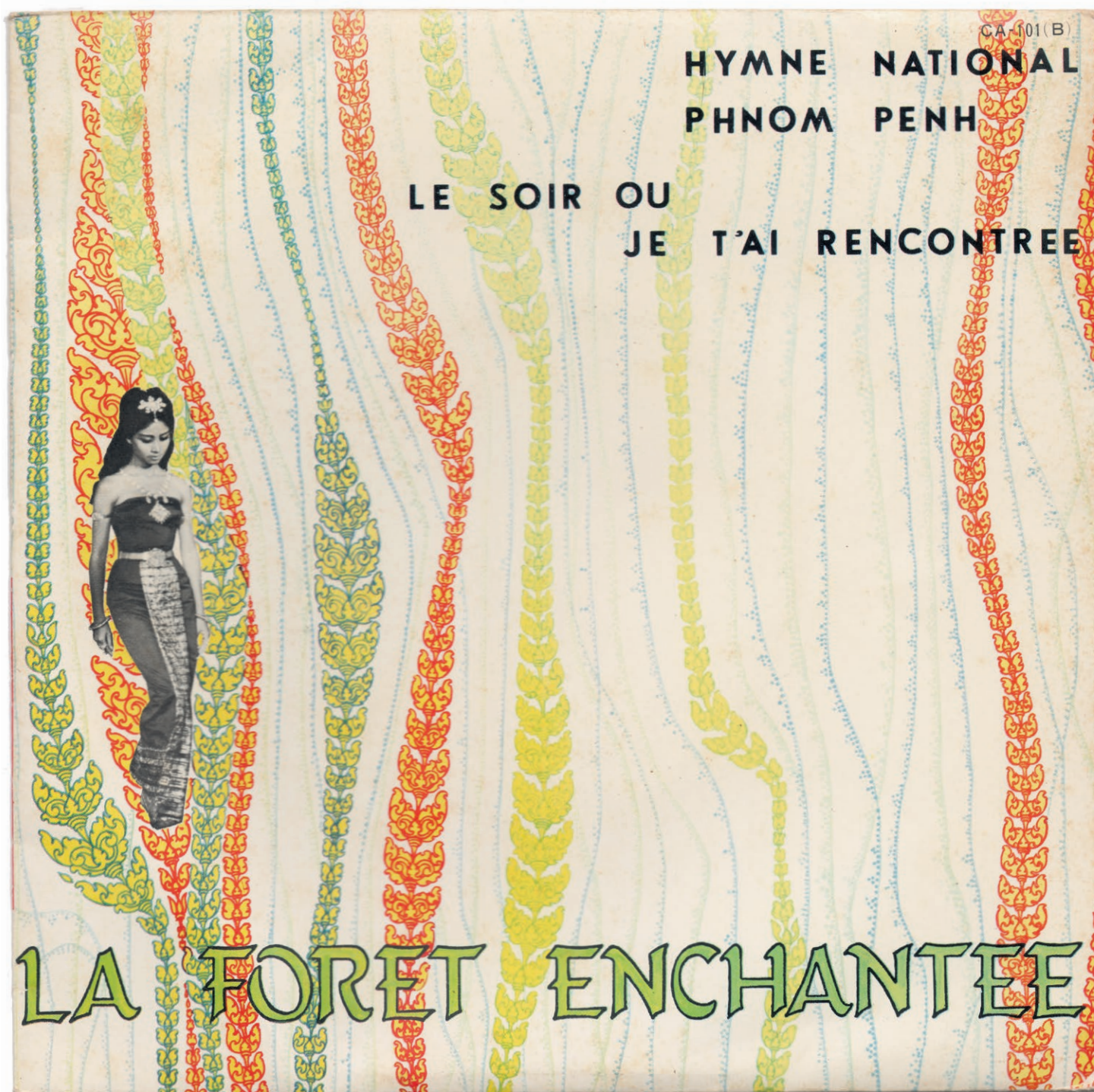
A new trend in Cambodia music under Sihanouk was the introduction of politics into the relationship between musician and audience. Music then became a propaganda

tool with the goal of showing the popularity of the regime in power to the masses. As a newly independent state, Cambodia's leaders wanted to demonstrate their ability to rule without external interference. Sihanouk sought to showcase Cambodia as a modern culture through architecture, cinema, and music. Adorno noted that this use of music had already begun in other parts of the world: "Since the mid-nineteenth century a country's music has become a political ideology by stressing national characteristics, appearing as a representative of the nation and everywhere confirming the national principle."¹

The birth of Cambodian rock and roll

Western influence on Cambodian music was first noted when marching band music from the Philippines was brought to the royal palace in the 1940s. Known as *Phleng Manil* ('Manila music'), this was mainly a horn and brass genre. In the years afterward students and other urban upper-class youth who traveled to Europe brought modern music back with them to Cambodia.

Images courtesy of Batt Sovannet "Nate" Hun.



Sihanouk was a charismatic figure able to inspire and excite his people. He was adept at arousing an emotional response to motivate his followers with his passionate and persuasive speeches. Music was ever present as he toured the provinces. To bolster his image as a modern and popular leader, he traveled with a band with the most popular singers of the time, who entertained the crowd after the Prince's long speeches. As his younger brother, Norodom Sirivudh, told me in an interview in 2009, "Sihanouk was a powerful leader, but you can tell that he was also an artist. Those are the two sides of my brother. My brother had a vision, especially when it came to art and music in particular. The royal military orchestra accompanied him in all his travels." He also strongly encouraged each ministry to have its own musical ensemble.

Sihanouk truly loved the arts and Cambodian culture, and through his support of the arts he promoted Cambodian culture both within and outside the country. He gave his patronage to modern arts whether in films, architecture, or music as part of his plan of overall modernization of the country.

Sihanouk composed and wrote lyrics for many songs throughout his life. Many were love songs dedicated to his wife, Monique Izzi, such as *My Darling*, *Monica*, *Love Star*, and *If I Dare to Love You*. He was very much criticized for marrying her because she was not of royal birth, and it was almost as if he was seeking approval from his people by depicting her in his films, songs, and magazines. He commissioned nostalgic and romantic paintings and photographs of her, which were published in magazines along with his song lyrics.

Sihanouk also wrote songs expressing his love for his country, such as *Flower of Battambang*, *Beauty of Kep City*, *Phnom Kulen*, and *Phnom Penh*. These songs promoted the qualities of each province to people who had never traveled outside their own village, giving Cambodians a sense of national unity and pride in their regional resources. He also wrote songs about neighboring countries like Laos (*Luang Prabang*, and *Flower of Vientiane*), Indonesia (*To Visit Java Again*, and *Good Bye Bogor*), and China (*Nostalgia of China*). Some of Sihanouk's songs had an overt political theme, like one praising Vietnamese hero Ho Chi Minh and giving thanks for the trail with a "glorious name".³

There were also songs written by others praising Sihanouk and his accomplishments. This early traditional song, entitled *Cambodia's Hope*, was probably written around the time of Cambodia's independence from France in 1953, while Sihanouk was still King:

*Please remember that Cambodia is prospering because of the King.
The nation will no longer meet grief,
We'll be known, and our hopes will be accomplished,
Because of the King.
So I pray to all deities, please help our King and Cambodia to be preserved from any disaster and always be in peace.*

The song *Phnom Penh* was written by one of Sihanouk's sons, Norodom Yuvaneath, and sung by Sin Sisamouth and Mao Sareth. Sihanouk had developed Phnom Penh more than any other city in the country, modeling it after the city of Paris. This song depicts the beauty of the capital city, but also the modernity of its infrastructure; it mentions the many roads,

modern people in the streets, and flowers in every season, even ending with the sound of a car honking. Even today this song, by a son praising his father's successful endeavor, gives audiences a sense of beauty and modern development.

There were songs that directly praised Sihanouk, like *King Father*, a name he seemed to particularly cherish, or *Monseigneur Papa*. *Samdech Ev* [King Father] praises Sihanouk's paternal role effusively:

*Cambodia has only one King Father
We are his children and grandchildren and we live peacefully.
We built schools and hospitals in the countryside.
His Majesty has pure virtues, and compassion toward his people.
His Majesty goes to the openings of buildings for the benefit of the nation and young generations.
Cambodians work hard to build legacies.
The whole nation is blessed by the graceful presence of the King Father.*

Under Sihanouk's influence, traditional Cambodian music was mixed with more modern strains to create a very unique sound. For example, many composers, including Sin Sisamouth, were known for their use of rock and roll band instrumentation with guitars and percussion, which was a departure from the traditional ensemble of wind instruments. Latin music also made its appearance, including Sihanouk's song *Phnom Penh*.

Sihanouk not only influenced and shaped popular culture by showcasing musicians in his films as part of the modern life style of the Cambodian people (and encouraging others to do the same), but also through his own compositions and musical experimentation.

Conclusion

Sihanouk has been criticized for making films and writing songs for his own personal glorification. He did cast his wife, children, and himself in his films. Nevertheless, those films were part of his efforts to create an image of a popular and modern leader who undertook a new medium to communicate with his people. This staging of his persona as a popular leader required him to use means to reach the average Cambodian, the majority of whom were peasants living in rural villages. Popular music was the best tool for communicating Sihanouk's vision of modernity. Having famous singers perform at his speeches created the impression that they supported his agenda of promoting and preserving culture as well as his foreign affairs policies, including neutrality, which was criticized by some of the urban elite. Sihanouk made sure that he was surrounded by the best artists of the time whether in cinema or in popular music.

Through the use of popular music, including singing and writing himself, Sihanouk provided positive, encouraging words to his people. At a time when few Cambodians had access to radios and even less access to televisions, in order for him to stage himself before the masses, he traveled all over the country and made sure to have a band and famous singers with him.

Samley Hong, of the 1960s band Baksey Chamkrong, told me in an interview that he had wanted to be a singer like his King when he was a little boy. Sihanouk's support of popular culture also created a bond among the people such that music became part of the collective culture, without divisions between high and low culture. Without this royal figure, many artists before the Khmer Rouge era would not have had the support and encouragement to become artists and to attain a place of value in society. With this positive evaluation and confidence from the Prince, Cambodian artists gained a heightened sense of self-esteem. Over time, this array of encouraging factors inevitably resulted in a greater sense of national unity.

Sihanouk did not simply rely on speeches to gain the support of the people. His filmmaking, songwriting, and urban design added to his ability to hold the support of the masses and motivate them to participate in his vision for a modern Cambodia. Whether one shares that vision of modernity or not, it must be agreed that Sihanouk left a lasting legacy of promoting the popular culture of Cambodia.

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Notes

- Adorno, T. 1962. *Introduction to the sociology of music*. New York: Seabury Press; p.155
- Jennar, R. M. 1997. *Cambodge: une presse sous pression*. Paris: Reporters sans frontières; p.6, my translation.
- The Ho Chi Minh supply trail that ran from North to South Vietnam, through Laos and Cambodia.