

**Gendered Modernity in Cambodia:
The Rise of Women in the Music Industry**

LinDa Saphan, Ph.D
Assistant Professor of Sociology
College of Mount Saint Vincent, New York, New York

Abstract

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 and rock and roll in Cambodia.

Modernity in Cambodia was seen as both Western and the prerogative of men (Berman 1988). But in the 1960s women took center stage in Cambodian popular music, displaying a new type of womanhood and creating their own path to modernity. Thus the music of the prewar era sheds light on the Cambodian process of modernization, as well as the changing role for modern Khmer women. This article will highlight two women who were among the most revered and remain popular icons in Cambodia today: Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran. In these two women we find two divergent ways of articulating modernity, the first more hegemonic, traditional, and idealized; the second a new conception of womanhood, influenced by notions of modernity adapted from the West. They each in their own way maneuvered their identity as modern women and reinterpreted the prevailing notion of Khmer womanhood.

Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century Cambodia went through many political and social changes in a short period of time. The country had been under the French Protectorate, established in 1867 to protect Cambodia from invasion by Thailand (then called Siam), for almost a century. In 1953 King Norodom Sihanouk won independence from France for Cambodia. He soon gave up the throne to found the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (Popular Socialist Community), took on the role of prime minister, and remained in power until 1970. Under Sihanouk Cambodia enjoyed a rare period of peace in the 1950s and 1960s that allowed a new phase of cultural transformation. That period was brought to an end by political turmoil when Cambodia was drawn into the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and a struggle for power by political factions on the left and the right, culminating in the takeover by the Khmer Rouge regime and the genocide (1975–1979).

Sihanouk ruled Cambodia with a strong authoritarian hand, including silencing his political opponents, but he was a forward-thinking leader who brought Cambodia into the modern age and was open to Western cultural influences. He pushed the nation toward new frontiers in all aspects of Cambodian society and culture, particularly in films and the music industry. Sihanouk's willingness to allow social change and Western influences, along with his strong personal interest in the arts, opened the door for a shift in the nature and role of music. The combination of Western rock with Khmer lyrics and music produced a unique sound by the 1960s. This music was not merely copied from abroad, but an innovative new sound that went hand in hand with the country's thrust toward modernization as imported Western modernity was adapted and

reinterpreted to create a new brand of Khmer modernity. The new electrified music was heard through the new technologies of radio, recorders, and movie soundtracks.

Modernity in Cambodia was seen as both Western and the prerogative of men (Berman 1988), who dominated new endeavors in urban planning, architecture, literature, and the visual arts. The preeminent modern figure was the young urban man. But in the 1960s women took center stage in Cambodian popular music, displaying a new type of womanhood and creating their own path to modernity. A large number of female performers rose to stardom during this time and they emerged as role models for other young women. For the first time, Cambodian women saw other women leaving the domestic sphere to take up public careers in ways that at first subtly and then clearly stepped away from the traditional image of womanhood. Thus the music of the prewar era sheds light on the Cambodian process of modernization, as well as the changing role for modern Khmer women.

From the long list of talented prewar singers, musicians, and composers, this article will highlight two women who were among the most revered and remain popular icons in Cambodia today: Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran.¹ In these two women we find two divergent ways of articulating modernity, the first more hegemonic, traditional, and idealized; the second a new conception of womanhood, influenced by notions of modernity adapted from the West. They each in their own way maneuvered their identity

¹ Some of the information in this article was gathered in the course of interviews I conducted for a documentary film titled *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll*, directed by John Pirozzi and released in 2014. I interviewed surviving Cambodian singers and musicians of the prewar era, relatives of Ros Serey Sothea, many people in the Cambodian music industry, and others who were connected with that era.

as modern women and reinterpreted the prevailing notion of Khmer womanhood. These women built successful careers around their musical innovations, the songs they selected, and their modern lifestyles. Their success stories embodied the new social mobility in a previously very stratified society, and their impact was long-lasting. Their public visibility influenced a whole generation of young women, challenging the social conventions of the time.

Prewar music shows the capacity of Cambodians to adapt and reinterpret imported Western modernization. In Cambodia this adaptation was also gendered. Cambodian women in the early stage of modernization took a nonconfrontational stance in order to preserve social conventions, but at the same time they subtly pursued a modern path to an expanded role in society.

The three giants of prewar music—one man, Sinn Sisamouth, and two women, Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran—are still remembered today because they possessed immense talent and produced a prolific amount of music. Much of it somehow survived destruction by the Khmer Rouge so that it could be mixed and remixed, recopied and reproduced thousands of times and circulated on YouTube, as CDs, or in digital files such as mp3. The increasing availability of prewar rock and roll has led to a strong contemporary revival by young musicians in Cambodia and in the diaspora who are playing the music their parents listened to in the 1960s.

The social importance of popular singers of the 1960s and 1970s is still relevant today in spite of the loss of film footage, images, and songs during the war years. Still today the music of the Sihanouk era creates a sense of identity, especially among Cambodians overseas. The attempts of the authoritarian regime of the Khmer Rouge

regime to destroy all that was considered contamination from the West— they banned money, destroyed all banks, and targeted men with long hair and those who wore glasses—and to disregard the unique contribution of these artists to the music world ultimately failed as some of the recordings of these singers remain cherished by the people, the legacy of a vibrant culture before the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge in 1975.

The Social Construction of Womanhood in Cambodia

Mary Douglas (2005, 79) argues that “the human body is always treated as an image of society.” This means that the physical body is a social construction within a specific cultural frame. In the Cambodian social landscape, the body is related to the concept of idealized female representation. As Cambodia was transitioning to the modern era in the early 1960s, the new social norms applied mostly to men: men wore the Western-inspired clothing seen in foreign fashion magazines while women were expected to wear a traditional blouse and an ankle-length *sampot*. We might conclude from this that modern men were meant to appear in the public space while women were still relegated to the traditional private space of domestic life.

As in essentially all societies worldwide, feminine identity and the male social role are fundamental to Khmer cultural traditions. The traditional guidelines for the social conduct of the genders are known as *Chab Pros* (Law for Men) and *Chab Srey* (Law for Women). These guidelines, introduced in the nineteenth century by King Ang Duong, describe how people behave toward each other according to gender, social standing, and age. In her book *Lost Goddesses: Female Power and Its Denial in*

Cambodian History (2008), Trudy Jacobsen describes them as idealistic etiquette guidelines for the elite class rather than a true depiction of the actual role of women, who enjoyed relative equality with men until the nineteenth century. The gender norms could also be applied to performing artists: they were in an elite class, separate from other women by virtue of being public figures.

Some of these guidelines are general social norms for both genders, such as respect for the elderly, the importance of family values, gratitude toward one's parents, and kindness toward relatives and neighbors. Others are directed specifically at women, such as patience when a husband is angry and never talking back to him, talking gently in a soft murmur, and walking without rustling one's skirt. Certain instructions certainly encourage gender inequality, such as that women must never touch their husband's head without bowing with respect and to respond quickly when the husband gives an order. Although *Chab Pros* and *Chab Srey* were never official laws, they are still taught in schools, where children recite them by heart.

The gender code shaped the image of the ideal Khmer woman as patient, obedient, and quiet with a soft voice and gentle manners. Still today the role of the Cambodian woman is a passive one: in the public image a woman of good character does not talk back, accepts orders, and is uneducated. Schooling was traditionally considered appropriate only for boys, and today there are three times more boys than girls in Cambodian schools. Some gender-behavior rules specifically convey that a woman with ideas is undesirable, meaning that a woman should not think and even less take the lead in a public role. In sum, a woman is expected to be dutiful, honor her husband, and uphold the family honor through her purity and submission.

Sihanouk's new government included some women. Norodom Sirivudh, half-brother of Norodom Sihanouk, told me in an interview in 2008, "The modernity that Prince Sihanouk brought was not only about building roads, it was also an attitude. There was advancement of the situation of women. There were female ministers and secretaries of state. There was more equality for women during the Sangkum era, including the democratization of the royal family. A princess can now marry whoever she wants. So there was a modernization even of the Khmer aristocracy and monarchy." However, the only women who rose to positions of authority in the government were those of the elite class who were connected to a man of the elite class in a position of power (Jacobsen 2010, 211). They were allowed to hold these positions, indicative of social change, but they and all women were simultaneously expected to conform to the traditional role of Cambodian women. Jacobsen (2010, 211) quotes a 1963 Cambodian government pamphlet titled *Femmes du Cambodge* (Women of Cambodia) that explained the role of women outside the home: "The young Khmer woman of today is by the side of her husband at receptions, informs herself of all aspects of national life and international events before expressing her point of view, interests herself in literature and music, goes often to cinemas, learns Western dances and follows fashion." Thus, women were called to a new role in Cambodian society, but it was within the State's definition of modernity, which preserved male privilege and the privilege of the elite class.

The New Women Musicians

Prior to the 1960s, although there were women musicians in traditional popular music, music was dominated by men and there were no female musical icons. Women were not included in the modernization of traditionally male domains like architecture, painting, and literature, but since social codes allowed them a role in music and cinema, those two arts presented an opportunity for them to redefine their place in the public sphere. The new women musicians would gradually break the gender mold for the very first time, but because music in postcolonial Cambodia was a male-dominated industry, the emergence of women as true icons would be gradual compared to their male counterparts. Slowly but surely they would create a new perception of women through by offering alternative role models of womanhood.

The first generation of popular female musicians were folk singers like Mao Saret, Chhuon Malay, Sieng Dy, Sieng Vanthy, Chea Savoeun, So Sopen, Kang Chanthy, Hay Sokhoum, Hem Sovanna, and Vor Sarun. Most of these early singers have been forgotten by the public today both in and outside Cambodia mainly because few of them recorded and too few of their recordings and no footage of their performances survived the wars. But two women, Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran, rose to stardom along with Sinn Sisamouth, who is seen as the father of Cambodian popular music.

These singers had to navigate among three competing forces: traditional social rules, Sihanouk's stranglehold on freedom of expression, and the new musical styles imported from the West. Although Sihanouk presented an appearance of openness, the jailing and later house arrest of songwriter, poet, and scholar Keng Vannsak after he voiced opposition to Sihanouk was a reminder to artists that there were boundaries to

their modes of expression. And yet in their roles as public performers, they succeeded in producing new music that satisfied the aspirations of modern youth in the 1960s.

Women musicians had the same challenge, with the added burden of confronting gender limitations. They too would find new ways of performing both music and gender roles that would inspire young women.

Ros Serey Sothea

The traditional ideal woman was embodied in the figure of Ros Serey Sothea, probably the most successful Cambodian female rock artist of all time, who enjoyed a widespread fan base and a longer career than most. Dubbed by Sihanouk “the Golden Voice,” she was the consummate star. Her incomparable talent and beauty and her tumultuous personal life made her a unique personality in the Cambodian music industry. She performed a wide repertoire, from operatic genre to traditional Khmer songs and garage rock.

Ros Serey Sothea had a reserved and quiet demeanor even while performing. She was of a time when singers performed in a static position, with little movement of the body as they sang. Her gestures and body language were restrained and gentle. Unfortunately only one film clip, showing her parachuting from a plane during her military service, survived the Khmer Rouge destruction of cultural artifacts. But my interviewees from the music industry remembered her stage presence as conforming to the *Chab Srey* code of quietness and harmonious and proper behaviors.

We know of Ros Serey Sothea’s appearance from her many surviving record covers and from family photos saved by her sisters. Her clothing reflected her traditional

background: she wore Khmer skirts (the cotton *sampot* or silk *phamuong*, depending on the event) and embroidered blouses that conformed to the Khmer code, which prescribed harmonious clothing to exemplify the ideal woman.

Her conventional attire typically restricted women to the home, out of public life, and yet Ros Serey Sothea was not a domestic woman. She worked professionally from an early age. Her sister, Ros Saboeun, reported that their father abandoned the family, leaving their mother with no other choice than to allow Sothea to become a professional singer in order to provide for the family. As in most Asian societies, adult Cambodian children are expected to contribute to their family financially—having a career does not mean separation from the family, and in fact Ros Serey Sothea supported her family throughout her life.

Ros Serey Sothea's life and role as a musical icon represent socially constructed ideas of the ideal woman, but this outward image does not convey the drama of her private life. Her body image belong to her audience, and the men in her life took possession of it. Interviews with her sisters and former colleagues reveal that she was dominated by two husbands. She first married singer Sos Mat and as her older sisters revealed, she suffered domestic violence to such an extent that his jealousy was even unleashed on her publicly, causing her to divorce him. Following her divorce she rebuilt her career by launching a comeback with a string of duo hits with Sinn Sisamouth on albums and soundtracks. She then married Huy Siphon, the son of a music producer. As she rose to stardom, Srey Ya, a high-ranking military officer in Lon Nol's army (in power from 1970 to 1975), began to stalk her. His obsession led him to kidnap her and his position in the military allowed him to force her and her family to accept a marriage

between the two. Intimidated by the army, her husband, Huy Siphon took refuge in France.

The constrained way that Ros Serey Sothea moved on the stage was consistent with her gender role. The differences in the movements of male and female dancers, both traditionally and still today, are stark. In traditional formal folk dances, women's movements are very limited, while men's are free and creative and they occupy a larger space on the dance floor. But what made Ros Serey Sothea an enduring icon and beloved singer was her ability to shake and move dancers in her audience with her wide-ranging repertoire, from love ballads to rock and roll. In fact her music invited both men and women in the audience to free themselves from social rules governing the body. Ironically, while she was not free of those rules herself, she made her listeners dance.

The body—especially for women and specifically for Ros Serey Sothea—generates a social rather than personal identity (Gliddens 1991). Although Ros Serey Sothea's traditionally dressed body is profoundly gendered in a confining way, she nonetheless played an important role in the making of modern Cambodian femininity and masculinity (Entwistle 2000). In the traditional perception, she embodied the old norms that made certain men feel they could own, beat, and abduct her. But her comeback after her divorce was a huge personal and professional victory that sent a strong message to both genders about women's ability to confront limitations and oppression and take back control of their bodies—perhaps not by overt political action as Western women were doing, but by walking away from abuse and doggedly pursuing their goals. Despite her abasement as a woman in her personal life she showed herself to be the consummate professional, on par with her duo partner Sinn Sisamouth, the

country's best-known male performer. This was not lost on the women in her audience, who loved and admired her even more for her survivorship and achievements and found their own voice in her courage.

As a woman who left the confines of the traditional domestic role to take on a career in the public sphere, Ros Serey Sothea opened the path for the next female singer, Pen Ran, who deviated more obviously from the cultural ideas of womanhood and brought Cambodian women into modernization.

Pen Ran

As Berman (1988, 15) wrote, "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world." Rock star Pen Ran rose to that definition of modernity. She was the opposite of Ros Serey Sothea, known for her dynamic stage presence and powerful vocals. Very little is known of her biography. Her sister Pen Ram, also a singer, passed away before anyone was able to interview her and record her family history. Pen Ran had an exclusive contract with the Magasin D'Etat night club as their female singer under the protection of talented songwriter Mel Bun. She was nicknamed the "Cambodian soul singer," or "our black singer." Soul was a very popular new genre in the 1960s with Pen Ran and male singer Liv Teak taking clear inspiration from Wilson Pickett and James Brown.

Pen Ran's stage performance ushered in a new style for female performers. While her predecessors were vocal artists only, with very little physical presence, Pen Ran moved her body freely to the rhythm of the music. In Pen Ran the female body and

how it is dressed become an expression of empowerment and modernization, demonstrating that the disciplined body of the docile and gentle-mannered woman was not the only option for Khmer women. There was no shyness in Pen Ran's manner. She was outgoing and talkative and had no fear of what people might say about her, yet she never came across as arrogant. Her music was that of a rebellious young woman who refused to conform to social conventions, relayed through her physical appearance and her ironic tones and clever lyrics. Although Pen Ran did not write her own lyrics, she chose her own themes and had her songwriters write songs that fit her personality and musical style. In these ways she took control of her public image rather than allowing people to dictate it to her. In rejecting traditional norms she embodied Berman's (1998, 11) image of modern women "asserting their dignity in the present—even a wretched and oppressive present—and their right to control their future; striving to make a place for themselves in the modern world, a place where they can feel at home."

The modern, free-spirited young woman that Pen Ran represented was coiffed in short bobbed hair, wore the latest fashions, from capris to bell bottoms, and was comfortable in her time and place. Pen Ran was this modern girl, teasing the audience with her flirty postures and humor. She injected fun and humor into her work relationships and her entertaining stage performances. This was a clear break with previous stars, whose behaviors were dictated by proper etiquette and body gestures. A parallel can be drawn between Pen Ran and Elvis Presley, described by Paul Willis (2000, 47): "Elvis Presley was consistently best in his fast-moving beat songs. With his gyrating hips, outflung arms, and coy angling of the head, he altogether did away with the image of stationary singer. Almost every early record cover shows him moving and,

of course, his stage name will always be Elvis the Pelvis.” If Ros Serey Sothea was of the generation of stationary singers, Pen Ran was certainly of the pelvis era of popular music in Cambodia, presenting a much more modern alternative of womanhood. Ros Serey Sothea’s album covers show mostly headshots while Pen Ran’s show her full body in motion.

Pen Ran rejected the stereotyped femininity and social conventions of the time. In her clothing and in her stage presence she claimed equality with men who wore Western clothing and gyrated in Western fashion. Both Pen Ran and Ros Serey Sothea were in control of their public identities, and both succeeded in their careers to a degree that was closed to women of the previous generation. On the other hand it is clear that both of the images of womanhood that they projected were socially constructed, chosen from the social environment that was available to them at the time. Each appealed to a different segment of society: Ros Serey Sothea reached an intergenerational audience while a wide audience spanning different ages and genders while Pen Ran’s targeted audience was clearly the youth who embraced Westernization.

The New Musical Sound and Scene

Just as Cambodian architects added Khmer style to Le Corbusier’s ideas, musicians crafted a unique new sound by integrating Western and Khmer elements. Foreign musical influences arrived in waves, initially through the urban bourgeois class traveling abroad. Later stores offered records, magazines, and instruments from Western countries. The early influence was French, and then Anglo-Saxon music made its way to Cambodia with the records of Pat Bonne, Connie Frances, Frank Sinatra, the Beach

Boys, the Beatles, Cliff Richard and the Shadows, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley, Paul Anka, Jerry Lewis, Chuck Berry, the Ventures, and so on.

While there were singers such as Samley Hong and bands like Apsara who were known for their cover versions of Western music like Johnny Hallyday and the Beatles, the Cambodian rock and roll scene soon grew into a new hybridized Khmer sound characterized by local songwriting practices. Ethnomusicologist Sam Ang Sam described the typical Khmer song structure in an interview:

There were a lot of rules and formulas that composers followed [during the 1960s and 19970s]. For example, you have to go in order: first couplet, then second couplet, then you go through the refrain and back to the third couplet. Then you usually do a solo part, which is usually either the second couplet, the repeat of the second couplet, or you repeat the refrain. And then you come back to the solo of the third couplet. Then you restart with the refrain and end the formula.

Khmer song structure didn't necessarily follow the Western model even when adapting Western songs. For example the Khmer version might add an instrumental segment that was not in the original song. Musicians would start with the general idea of a Western song and change the details to make it Khmer. In some cases, Western countries have imposed their cultures on others, with "colonizers as civilizing agents and the colonized as beneficiaries" (Born and Hasmondhalgh 2000, 5). But Cambodian musicians actively sought out modern influences from abroad. Throughout my interviews with musicians,

singers, and composers, they expressed that their experience of adapting new Western songs was about the medium: their interest lay in the nonrepresentational aspect of the music as many of them did not speak French, much less English. The Anglo-American songs were heard through short-wave radio programs broadcast by the American Forces Network based in Vietnam or from vinyl records ordered from the Panabou record store in Phnom Penh. Just as Western composers draw upon non-Western music, Cambodian musicians turned their ear toward Western music to craft their own aesthetic, as Born and Hasmondagh (2000, 15) write: “Those modernist and postmodernist composers who have drawn upon or made reference to other musics (non-Western, folk, or urban popular) are not producing that music but drawing upon it in order to enrich their own compositional frame. They are transforming that music through incorporation into their own aesthetic: appropriating and re-presenting it. Crucially, in doing so, they intend not only to evoke that other music, but to create a distance from it and transcend it.”

The Voices of Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran

Again we turn to Rose Serey Sothea and Pen Ran to understand two very different voices of the prewar period.

Ros Serey Sothea’s well-known tragic personal life lent an aura of drama to her fame and undoubtedly influenced her music: in many ways, the hundreds of songs that Ros Serey Sothea recorded were the expression of her personal life. Among her wide singing repertoire, Cambodians especially cherish her dramatic melancholic romantic ballads, like ‘Story of My Love’ and ‘On Top Of Sampov Hill’. Her singing trademark was her high-pitched, twangy voice with its soprano resonance. This high-pitched

singing was and is still considered the ideal seductive voice by male and female Cambodian audiences alike. It was described as the embodiment of the idealized Khmer woman's voice. As an Internet fan wrote in his blog, "Sothea was a tiny woman, standing only five feet tall, but boy, she had a voice like an amplifier and she rarely needed a microphone."²

Among the many talented male and female singers of the era, Ros Serey Sothea's voice stands out as unique, really incomparable with its ghostly resonance. While the voice and style of some Cambodian singers resembles their Western counterpart—like Huy Meas, the Edith Piaf of Cambodia, and Live Teak, the Cambodian James Brown—Rose Serey Sothea's voice cannot be compared to any other Cambodian or Western singer. She continued her voice training throughout her career, including training with Sinn Sisamouth throughout their shared career, and still today no other Cambodian singer has equaled the quality of her voice.

Although Ros Serey Sothea was known for slow songs, she covered a wide range of styles from pop to rock and roll. Because the popular music scene was quite small in Cambodia, singers were required to be able to perform any genre asked of them. Songwriter Oum Dara reported in an interview that he only worked with the best performers: "My songs were very difficult to sing. Because I thought that they couldn't sing my songs, I didn't let them record them. I only wanted the best singers to sing them, so they wouldn't lose popularity. Only four singers were allowed to sing my songs: Sin Sisamuth, Eng Nary, Ros Serey Sothea, and Pen Ran."

² The Cole Ranch, "Ros Serey Sothea," <http://khmermusic.thecoleranch.com/rossereysothea.html>. Accessed September 11, 2015.

Oum Dara's famous song 'Old but Sweet,' recorded by Ros Serey Sothea, embodies the mix of Khmer and Western genres. The electric guitar and drum provide the rhythm while the lyrics use a typical Cambodian metaphor comparing an older woman to a ripe fruit at the peak of its flavor. The structure of the song is more typically Khmer, with an instrumental guitar solo between the verses, repetition of previous verses with a new verse, and a new guitar solo to end the song. Ros Serey Sothea's high-pitched voice follows the melody steadily. Although this is a rock song, her operatic voice echoes a classical style.

In Ros Serey Sothea's music there is a type of disconnect between the decidedly modern and upbeat rock and roll and the lyrics, which pertain to traditional women's concerns. In 'When Shall We Marry,' for example, the narrator expresses her desperation to get married, even threatening suicide:

Moved to hear the rainfall
Moved to hear the thunder
I am full of hope waiting for my love

You said you will come and ask for my hand
I have not heard from you for months

My love, it had been so cold
Oh how happy I would be if we got married this month

I have raised five pigs
There are so big but I have lost sight of you

These pigs will be served at our wedding
Now my mother wants me to sell them

My love will you buy them from me?
Oh how happy I would be if we got married now

I told everybody that I will be married before the monsoon

I ordered my dresses
But now they are out of fashion
My mother reproaches me every day

My love what are you waiting for?
If you are in love with another girl
I will go on a hunger strike to kill myself

In traditional Cambodian society expression of emotions caused discomfort and was discouraged. People would talk about personal experiences like love and despair in hushed tones with obvious embarrassment. Ros Serey Sothea put the whole range of deep emotion on the public platform, giving a public voice to the suppressed experiences and feelings of her audience.

Pen Ran's voice, style, and themes differ significantly from Ros Serey Sothea's. As a younger singer, her audience was the teenagers of the time while Ros Serey Sothea's audience was young adults and older. Pen Ran's powerful voice and easygoing style brought new freedom to the singing style of the time. She was not concerned about singing exactly on key or displaying her singing prowess. Rather, she used her voice freely to express emotion.

Pen Ran's repertoire included many songs with cha-cha, bolero, and mambo rhythms. She was not a romantic singer but a rocker with a fast, upbeat tempo to set the ambiance of a party with disco or gogo music, which suited her earthly voice quite well. Her jittery rhythms marked the new modern style. In stark contrast to Ros Serey Sothea's themes, the lyrics of Pen Ran's songs diverge from conventional women's themes, as in 'Black So Black,' a social commentary on valuing white skin over a darker complexion; 'Monkeys Doing the Monkiss Dance'; 'The Dowry,' a song about the

social practice of paying the mother of the bride the “price of her milk”; and ‘It’s Too Late Old Man’ and ‘I’m a Maiden Not a Widow,’ whimsical songs about the importance of getting married by a certain age. Pen Ran was not afraid to use sexual connotations in her songs. ‘Love Is So Sweet,’ translated by music and film collector Nate Hun, has clear sexual and sensual references:

Oh! I’m dying (repeat)
Oh! Love is sweeter than honey
It’s a beautiful sound,
My body’s become ticklish
Oh! Please don’t leave me!

My mind has gone blank
Oh! My body is twitching! (repeat)
My face and lips feel like they’re on fire,
They’ve become so sensitive,
I’ve got the goose bumps
I’m in a daze!

Pen Ran’s risqué intonation added to the suggestive lyrics. Simon Frith (1988, 115) makes a comment about the blues song ‘You Can’t Sleep In My Bed,’ recorded by Mary Dixon in 1929, that might apply equally to Pen Ran’s ‘Love Is So Sweet’: “The point of this song is not its acceptance of the ‘non-ideal’ sexuality of real life, but its humor—the humor of its tone of voice, its descriptive terms—and humor involves not just the acceptance of reality, but also its mockery. Humor is a form of refusal.” ‘Love Is So Sweet’ clearly shows Pen Ran’s rejection of the role of the body and voice imposed on women by conventional society. She adopted an alternative modern definition of self that was being comfortable with change and venturing beyond static norms. Her more masculine modern attire and singing style resonated with the youth culture as a new image of womanhood. Although she did not write her songs, she used her personality to

bring a modern twist to the formal traditional singing practices used by other musicians at the time and to stage performance as a female artist.

Sociomusicologist Frith (1988, 120) explains the complexity of a singer's performance: "A song is always a performance and song words are always spoken out, heard in someone's accent. Songs are more like plays than poems; song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of characters. Singers use non-verbal as well as verbal devices to make their points—emphases, sighs, hesitations, changes of tones; lyrics involve pleas, sneers and commands as well as statements and messages and stories." Given the strong presence of nonverbal components in rock and roll performances, songs from France, England, and the United States had a meaningful impact on Cambodian music and the audience even though many Cambodians did not speak English. The impact of the music transcended the lyrics. Music fan Thida Mam pointed out in an interview that she did not understand the meaning of 'Let It Be' at all and no one could explain the words to her at the time. What gave meaning to the song for her was the way the Beatles performed it, creating a connection to a wider space beyond the traditional Cambodian setting.

Pen Ran's performances were strongly marked by these nonlinguistic elements: she sang, she danced, she uttered multiple sighs and other sounds, combining body and voice in multifarious ways.

The Legacy of Prewar Women Musicians

Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran contributed to shaping a new Khmer perception of women's bodies and voices by facilitating a gradual progression toward an alternative modern woman. Without Ros Serey Sothea, there could not have been a Pen Ran.

Within the modernization that the country was embracing, women were able to negotiate a small space for themselves, an opening to gradually move out of the private and into the public sphere. At the same time Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran gave a new voice to young women through their musical performances, each in her own way.

Our examination of Cambodian music of the prewar era shows that the progression from old to new was neither abrupt nor total. Modern popular Cambodian music emerged from a strong cultural and musical legacy that goes back over a thousand years. In opening itself to Western music, Cambodians did not reject that legacy. In fact postcolonial musicians and singers were trained in traditional music and they used those skills to fold foreign influences into Khmer music, innovating a new musical genre.

Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran were greatly respected by the music industry not only for their talent and musical achievements, but also for their professionalism. Songwriters, composers and musicians wanted to work exclusively with them for their level of professionalism and understanding of the process of creating music. With very different personalities, they came across not as divas but rather as dedicated, meticulous workers, personable and easy to work with. In a world dominated by male artists and professionals, these women rose to stardom through their talent and gained the respect of both male and female colleagues for their skills, showing that women could have professional careers on par with men.

While many other fields in the era of Cambodian modernization were dominated by men, music and cinema presented opportunities for women to flourish. Women in those two fields were able to support themselves as well as their entire families, as Ros Serey Sothea did, showing that a woman did not have to be dependent on a husband. Ros Serey Sothea started working in the rice fields as a young girl. Once she set out for Phnom Penh and a career in music, she never harvested rice again, giving hope to girls and young women in the villages that they too could escape the rice fields.

Enduring Fame

An absent voice cannot trigger in today's youth or even elder Cambodians an emotional identification with the singers who have been lost. This is the case for many Cambodian singers of the prewar era, including the first generation of female singers such as Mao Sareth and Chuon Malay and to a lesser extent also Huys Meas and Pov Vannary, who made very few recordings that could be reproduced and circulated on cassettes or CDs or in digital files such as mp3.

It is believed that up to 90 percent of popular singers were killed by the Khmer Rouge, who targeted any form of modernization, as they represented the "new people" contaminated by Western culture. Khmer Rouge soldiers destroyed or forced people to destroy, burn, or bury records from previous regimes. Despite this, some records and master tapes survived abroad. The voices of the prewar artists are still heard in Cambodia and throughout the Cambodian diaspora in the United States, Canada, France, and Australia on the radio and through contemporary remakes of the songs of the most famous singers such as Sinn Sisamouth, Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran. Ros Serey

Sothea is still very much an icon in the Cambodian music industry and society. A feature film, *The Golden Voice*, was made about her life in 2006 by Greg Cahill. Matt Dillon used many of her songs in his movie *City of Ghosts*. Los Angeles-based band Dengue Fever and Cambodian Space Project (a Cambodian-Australian band) in Phnom Penh cover her songs and some of Pen Ran's pieces as well. Even though the names of singers like Mao Sareth and Chunn Vanna, among many others from the earlier popular music era, are now forgotten by the public, the significance of their contribution to modern Cambodian music has not diminished among music industry professionals. The songs live on through new remixes, cover versions, and copies of tapes, CDs, and mp3s sold in many stores or online in Cambodia and overseas throughout the diaspora.

Although their musical styles and their conceptions of womanhood were so different, Ros Serey Sothea and Pen Ran both desired a professional career and economic independence. Neither was content to sit on the sidelines watching men reap the benefits of social change from abroad and from within the country, and they brought a strong female presence to modernity in Cambodia. They seized an active role in the modernization of Cambodia by bridging past and present in their musical careers. Each in her own way, they broke away from the social barriers of class to achieve stardom. In their ease with adapting new musical styles, both showed their comfort with new Western influences and they stood shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts. They were truly modern women who opened the door for other young Cambodian women to reimagine themselves in the modern world.

References

- Adorno, Theodor. 1962. *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Andaya, Barbara W. 1977. "Historicising 'Modernity' in Southeast Asia." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, no.4: 391–409.
- Barzinji, Mariwan Nasradeen Hasan. 2013. "Modernism, Modernity and Modernisation." *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no.12: 43–52.
- Berman, Marshall. 1988. *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. London: Penguin.
- Born, Georgina, and David Hesmondhalgh, eds. *Introduction to Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Douglas, Mary. 2005. "The Two Bodies." In *The Body: A Reader*, edited by Miriam Fraser and Monica Greco, 71–81. New York: Routledge.
- Eliot, T. S. 1982. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Perspecta* 19: 36–42.
- Entwistle, Joanne. 2000. "Fashion and the Fleishy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 4, no. 3: 323–347.
- Frith, Simon. 1988. *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop*. New York: Routledge.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Groslier, Bernard Philippe. 1962. *The Art of Indochina*. New York: Crown.
- Groslier, George. 1931. "L'Enseignement et la mise en pratique des arts indigènes au Cambodge (1918–1930)." In *Bulletin de l'Académie des Sciences Coloniales*, 377–417. Paris: Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes, et Coloniales.
- Herbelin, Caroline. "Deux conceptions de l'art en situation coloniale: George Groslier (1887–1945) et Victor Tardieu (1870–1937)." *Siksacakr: Journal of Cambodia Research* (2011–2011): 206–218.
- Jacobsen, Trudy. 2008. *Lost Goddesses: Female Power and Its Denial in Cambodian History*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.
- . 2010. "'Riding a Buffalo to Cross a Muddy Field': Heuristic Approaches to Feminism in Cambodia." In *Women's Movements in Asia: Feminisms and Transnational Activism*, edited by Mina Roces and Louise Edwards, 207–223. New York.
- Muan, Ingrid, and Daravuth Ly. 2002. *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*. Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing.
- Philips, Nelson, and Cynthia Hardy. 2002. *Discourse Analysis: Investigating Processes of Social Construction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- "Ros Serey Sothea." N.d. The Cole Ranch.
<http://khmermusic.thecoleranch.com/rossereysothea.html>. Accessed September 6, 2015.
- Ross, Helen Grant, and Darryl Collins. 2006. *Building Cambodia: New Khmer Architecture 1953–1970*. Bangkok: Key Publisher.

- Sam, Sam-Ang. "Khmer Music." N.d. *Asia Society*.
<http://asiasociety.org/arts/performing-arts/music/khmer-music>. Accessed
September 11, 2015.
- So, Alvin Y. 1990. *Social Change and Development: Modernization, Dependency, and
World-System Theories*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Willis, Paul. 2000. "The Golden Age." In *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*,
edited by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwind, 43–55. London: Routledge.