

Iron Maiden and *Khmer Rock*

Thom Thom is Cambodia's one true rock band. **Charis Shafer** talks with its three members about their hard-hitting style and future plans



Thom Thom *The only original rock band in the Kingdom*

JEAN PHILIPPE PETESCH OF Thom Thom is a busy man. Currently at work on a PhD on the impact of Iron Maiden on its fans and working as a teacher at the Lycée René Descartes, he still finds time for the music he loves.

Originally coming to Cambodia to get away from touring with his previous band, he decided to put down some roots here. It was while working at the Francophone school that he met his protégé and friend Sopoi Ann. Sopoi had always been interested in music.

"I like singing and don't have the money to go to karaoke," he says. "I want to sing and play guitar myself."

■ ROCK BIG BIG

Thom is Khmer for big, and the band's name literally means big big. The colloquialism, often used following thank you, might not impress many grammar teachers, but it does elicit smiles at market stalls.

This amusing and strong expression struck the band's good friend and electro-acoustics composer Sylvette Veizin as a

perfect fit for the group. It was she who suggested the name to the band.

The name is ideal for the big guitar sound, the heavy bass guitar and the powerful drums that make up Thom Thom's music. The three instruments create what the band's website calls a "resounding dough" sound. Although that enigmatic description may be more readily understood in French, the name and sound certainly place Thom Thom in Cambodia's musical avant-garde.

■ THOM'S THE ONLY ONE

"There is no real rock band," says Jean Philippe, speaking about the lack of hardcore music in the country. "We are the only one!"

He is also keen to stress that the band plays all original music. "We don't play covers," he says emphatically. The band has produced a CD of their music, released in 2006.

Their first show was in true punk style. After having only six weeks of rehearsal, they played a New Year's Eve party at a bar near the Boeng Kak Lake. "Very do it yourself!" Philippe exclaims.

They have also played at Gasolina and at the opening of the Angkor Photo Festival. In December, they played their first "unplugged" gig at the Meta House.

■ NALEN ROCKS

The third member of the band is young bassist Channalen Lim (Nalen). The band's only female member joined after practicing for a mere year-and-a-half on the bass guitar. A fan of both dance and romantic music, when asked what kind of dance music she bangs the air with her hands, "strong music."

"When you hear the music you want to dance and you want to move," she explains.

Sopoi's musical inspiration is more closely attuned to that of the Doctor of Iron Maiden.

"J'adore le rock," he says, looking to Jean Philippe for translation though none is needed. Nirvana is at the top of his list. "I like a big sound," he adds. "That's my dream – to play a big sound on guitar."

■ EUROPEAN DREAMS

Jean Philippe's aspirations for the band are somewhat

loftier. "To become professional musicians in Europe," he says. Although "not big stars," he adds keeping his feet firmly on the ground. His ultimate goal is for the band to tour Europe for several months in order to make enough money to live in Cambodia the rest of the year.

Still a student at IFL, Nalen is excited about the prospect of touring Europe. "For me, just one time in this life. It's enough for me," she says.

Equally excited, Sopoi is slightly less philosophical about the potential tour. "I want to discover everything – girls, culture and food!" he says.

For the time being though, Jean Philippe's direction is closer to home. "We don't get a lot of money but we need equipment. That costs a lot of money," he says of plans of stepping up their tours around Asia. Later, though, Europe is definitely in their plans. He hopes the reception will be positive.

"Having Asian people singing in French might be a bit exotic. I hope so anyways!" Smiling, he says, "We keep our fingers crossed."

For more information:
www.khmertomthom.com 🇰🇷

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