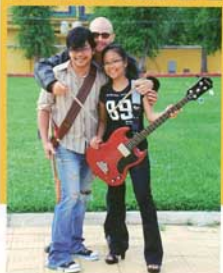


It is Friday night at Gasolina in Phnom Penh. A three-piece rock band called Thom Thom is blasting away at full speed. Punk, rock and ska songs are delivered with an aggression and dedication that are seldom heard in this city. The female bass player is Khmer, the drummer is a bald headed Frenchman beating his drums like a madman. They sing in both French and Khmer and one wonders where their musical influences come from. Influences that have nothing to do with the Khmer's love of romantic music. They used to call themselves Vealre which means "paddy field" but nobody could spell their name. When a Khmer musician suggested they change their name to the more suited Thom Thom, they did it on the spot.

Singer and guitarist Sopei, 28, comes from Kandal province, and works as a sound engineer at the French cultural centre. He used to be a street kid who ate from rubbish dumps. When he was 7 he ran away from home but



Thom Thom "got their balls" before an appreciative audience at Gasolina



was caught by the police 4 months later and brought back to his parents. "That period made me street wise. I saw the poverty and the daily struggle to survive for most Khmers. I was taught to play the chapel, the traditional two-stringed Khmer guitar, usually played by older musicians. Each chapel song can last for hours, the lyrics are improvised and could be inspired by a girl with a beautiful spot on her face or a street dog. The Chapel singers are the bluesmen of Cambodia. We write all our music ourselves. Most Khmer songs are love songs. Our lyrics are about poverty, prostitution, corruption and greed. So-

cial matters that lie close to our hearts," says Sopei. The bass player Nalin, 24, is a student at a French language institute for foreign languages. She grew up in Kratie where her mother introduced her to the great sixties rock singer Sin Sisamouth whose music is synonymous with Cambodia. They have a song about each province in Cambodia describing the landscape and it's people. Another great influence is the singer Ros Sreysothea. "I like her lyrics," says Nalin. She used to listen to her on a cassette player everyday on her way home from school. She has only been a musician for a year but practises hard on her own to catch up with the male group members.

The drummer Jean Philippe used to be a professional guitarist in France before switching to drums when Thom Thom was founded in 2006. "My dream has always been to be a drummer," he says. He considers himself a heavy metal fan, and wants Thom Thom's music to sound

as raw as possible. He hates to listen to Khmer bands with big Marshall stacks, watering down their music with layers of soft keyboards, playing what people want to hear. "We are in opposition to just copying popular Thai, and Chinese songs like most bands do here. People in the countryside think that the songs are original material, only city people with access to cable TV know what the songs should be like. Last year we were playing a live concert with other Khmer bands at Apsara TV. In the middle of a song called 4-wheel drives - about all the Toyota land cruisers and Lexus luxury cars that cruise around Phnom Penh

- the broad cast was suddenly stopped. A high-ranking government official called the station and told them to stop the concert immediately. He obviously didn't like the lyrics. The concert was later broadcast with us having been cut out of the programme. There's no tradition here for writing original music and no real will to do that. It's a matter of culture. In Cambodia you have very skilled musicians, but they are usually too lazy to write original material. It's a matter of tradition. When

In true rock band style, Sopei (left), Jean Philippe (centre), and Nalin (right) claim they will not compromise their musical principles for the money



the THOM club

you learn to play an instrument in Cambodia you follow the master. If you want to live from your music, at least two thirds of your material must be well-known cover songs. There is no band spirit here like in the west, where people play out of passion. To be a musician here is always a matter of making money. To be playing for fun is considered a waste of time. Most Khmer musicians don't want to take a chance and invest their energy in writing original pieces. Here, it's safety first.

It's much easier to play Khmer versions of hit songs from Thailand, China and Korea. We all have day jobs, which allows us not to compromise on our music. We have had offers to play for between \$150-200 a night, but would have to change our material to include a lot of cover songs. We turned them down, to have accepted the offers would have made us feel like prostitutes," says Philippe.

To stick to your own guns is not always easy. Thom Thom was recording a song

called '75' about the fall of Phnom Penh, and were using a megaphone to record the voice reciting the orders the Khmer Rouge gave to people when they entered the city. A neighbour came and told them to stop. It reminded him of the emptying of Phnom Penh. "I was teaching French at the university and the Khmer students all said that it was the Vietnamese that did the genocide not the Khmer Rouge that's why we did the song," says Philippe.

Thom Thom have about 15 gigs lined up for the autumn of 2007. They will be playing at a carnival in Sihanoukville. There will also be two live shows to record a DVD in Battambang. There is a concert planned for the French cultural centre plus regular gigs at the Memphal pub and Gasolina in Phnom Penh.

"We want to play live. When you play live you can't hide anything, that's where you get your balls," says Philippe.

Stefan V. Jensen