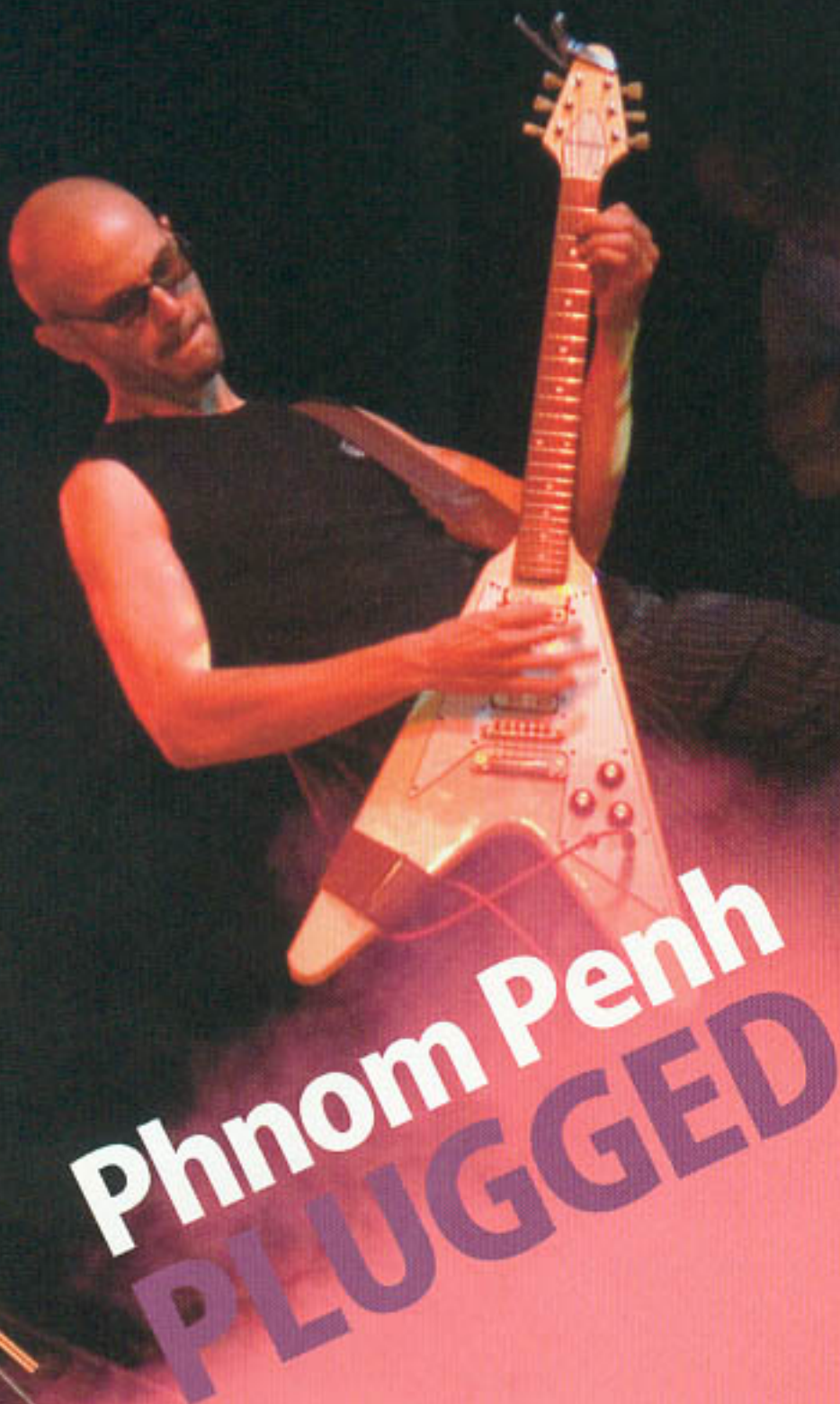


PHOTO BY JEROME JAYMOND



# Phnom Penh PLUGGED

Phnom Penh does not have a vibrant live music scene, with most people opting for one of the discos instead. Undeterred, **Mark Jackson** talks to three musicians determined to keep the capital's rock and jazz scene alive and kicking.

When Bona Thiem returned from France, where he played in several bands, to his native Cambodia in 1999, he spent a minstrel's existence, nomadically playing with assorted musicians in various bars and hotels, because the capital didn't have a stable, fixed live music venue. This unsettling experience was part of the reason why he decided to open Memphis as a devoted rock and blues bar a couple of years ago. The other reason was that he just wanted to play the music he likes.

"Musicians need to play to survive, and they have to play what the owner wants, otherwise they are out," he explained in his bar, which celebrated its second anniversary in early July.

Originally starting out as an open-mike, jamming experiment, Bona has now collected together a house band that is a mix of Vietnamese, Khmers and the ubiquitous Filipino singer, with the owner joining in on guitar at the weekends. The music reflects Bona's own R&B influence, particularly Hendrix, Clapton and Page, although the band plays a range of rock covers, from Alanis Morissette to Lenny Kravitz. Breaking from the covers formula, Monday night is jamming night so it's always possible to pitch up and strum away or just come along and listen to the musicians' concoctions.

The band starts at 9pm during the week and at 10pm at weekends, finishing when the punters have had enough.

The most striking feature of the bar is the lack of windows, creating a timeless smoke-filled environment, reminiscent of footage of early Beatles in The Cavern, although the air-conditioning keeps the atmosphere cool and, despite his striking looks, Bona hasn't yet acquired a screaming follow-

ing among his predominantly expat clientele.

Bona welcomes any bands to pop across the border from Ho Chi Minh City and, as he has his own equipment, there is no need to cram that drum kit into your backpack.

## Red Hot Chilli Sauce

Although Michel Ghigo hails from the French Riviera, he is possibly in a better position to speak of live music in Cambodia than Bona, as he has been playing here for 11 years in three separate bands. He originally came to Siem Reap to run an orphanage, fell in love, got married and stayed, all the time staying faithful to his drums (*and presumably his wife, too - Ed*).

The last two bands, Vealsre (The Rice Field), and Teuk Mate (Chilli Sauce), have recorded three CDs in Phnom Penh, thanks to funding from The French Cultural Centre and the French Embassy's Francophone programme.

The Billy Brags of modern Cambodia, the bands are a mix of French and Khmer musicians, with lyrics in both languages on contemporary Cambodian topics such as corruption, AIDS, prostitution and the feel of Phnom Penh after the rain. Equally eclectic are their musical influences

