

Contributors



 **RG MEDESTOMAS** | fotomedestomas.com
Feast for the senses, Page 96

Manila-based photographer RG Medestomas developed a taste for photography while studying engineering, so he decided to switch schools to pursue his passion. "I found photography to be the perfect medium for me to express my creativity," he says. He had a great time getting to know the chefs while shooting our Pampanga dining feature. "I was so stuffed with delicious food that I almost had to be rolled to the next destination," he laughs.



 **AUBRIE PICK** | aubriepick.com
Scents and sensibility, Page 88

Shutterbug Aubrie Pick has worked with authors like Chrissy Teigen, Guy Fieri and Cedella Marley. Three of her Bay Area recommendations are heading out to Ocean Beach to check out the Camera Obscura, biking across the Golden Gate Bridge and getting Lappert's ice cream in Sausalito. When she's not behind the camera, Aubrie can be found hiking the hills with her scruffy dog, perfecting her tandoori chicken soup or plotting her next road trip.



 **AIM ARIS** | aimaris.com.au
State of origin, Page 67

Aim Aris is a Melbourne-based photography enthusiast with a passion for sustainable living, knitting, travel and everything else in between. One of her favorite past assignments was visualizing the theme of violence within the context of food photography for a local magazine, and two of her favorite places in Melbourne are the National Gallery of Victoria and her neighborhood of Fitzroy, which she can walk around snapping for hours.



 **CRAIG SAUERS** | craigsauers.com
New folk in town, Page 79

Writer and runner Craig has been exploring the colorful fabric of life in Thailand for the better part of a decade – from the underground craft beer scene to the evolution of its street food. "I like places that remind you that Bangkok isn't just any big city, like the early 20th century shop houses in the Talad Noi neighborhood, green and secluded Koh Kret, dive bars like Shades of Retro and Teens of Thailand and the sprawling Train Market," he says.



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Thailand's indigenous folk music, *molam*, has been attracting a sophisticated global audience, thanks to musicians who mix its traditional uptempo beats with soul, rock and sounds from other cultures – giving it an expansive and impressive sonic reach

By Craig Sauers Photography David Terrazas



**PARADISE
BANGKOK**
ZuPrangMa Records

T

he lights are low inside Studio Lam. Apart from two bar shelves – where round bulbs bathe glass jars in soft yellow light, illuminating more than a dozen kinds of herb-laced Thai moonshine called *ya dong* – this tiny dive bar in Bangkok's trendy Thong Lo neighborhood seems to exist in a perpetual blackout. Out of this darkness, a DJ appears during a brief lull between sets. Under the reds, blues and greens of a pulsing strobe, the shadowy figure puts on a track that gets a table of Thai twentysomethings on their feet. It's an old *molam* song – a funky riff from the agricultural north-eastern region of Isaan, and Thailand's equivalent of country music.

The female singer's seductive high-pitched quiver resonates behind a beat that wouldn't feel out of place in Latin America or West Africa. And the accordion-like drone of the *khaen*, a free-reed mouth organ constructed out of bamboo, provides a hypnotic – not to mention exotic – melody for her voice to follow. The sound is entrancing, the rhythm easy to get into. Yet molam music – which can be traced back to the 17th century – hasn't always appealed to the country's younger generation.

"Molam has long been stereotyped as the music of poor people," says Nattapon Siangsukon, better known as Maft Sai, owner of Studio Lam and record store ZudRangMa, founding member of Paradise Bangkok International Molam Band and all-round molam enthusiast. "Because of this, it's been hard for young people [in Bangkok] to appreciate such traditional Thai music."

As Maft Sai points out, molam has long been linked to poverty. Isaan is the poorest economic region in Thailand, and the music was born from this heartland. At festivals and ceremonies upcountry, lone singers would perform uptempo, spoken-word stories of one-sided love and rural hardship – often underscored by sarcasm – over the backing of the *khaen*. This ritual established a connection between people and place, a point of pride still evident in the working class today. But, in Bangkok, molam is often heard in taxis and ramshackle buses, as well





THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT
Khun Narin; Rasmee
Wayrana; Nattapon
Siangsukon (Maft Sai)





as at blue-collar bars and restaurants – giving it a different kind of connection for the city's high society.

Nowadays, though, molam is undergoing something of a renaissance – not only at nightclubs in Bangkok but across the world – and incorporating multiple subgenres as it steadily mutates. Some of this can be attributed to the revival it experienced in the 1970s, when molam musicians – influenced by the tunes that US soldiers stationed at Isaan's bases were listening to – incorporated aspects of American jazz, rock, funk and soul into their repertoire. But a bulk of the credit goes to the contemporary DJs, singers and musicians who have been working hard to bring molam to the modern masses.

Maft Sai, for one, has been instrumental in empowering young Thai listeners to turn deaf ears to the genre's formerly entrenched stereotypes. After returning from London – where he worked as a DJ – around a decade ago, he chanced upon his father's dusty collection of Thai records. This sparked a desire to discover "old music that was new to him" – especially albums from the '60s and '70s.

"I was listening to all these artists on [my record player], but I wanted to see them live so I went upcountry to find them," Maft Sai says. "But when I tried to organize shows for them to play in Bangkok, they were busy farming, raising chickens or whatever. It took months to work everything out."

Alongside British DJ Chris Menist, Maft Sai began bringing some of these bands from Isaan to Bangkok, nearly six hours away by car. He threw in cuts from the duo's epic vinyl-hunting sessions at regular Isaan dancehall parties, which became popular among the expat community. "When we started doing the parties, our crowds were probably 80% foreign," Maft Sai recalls.

That demographic has now changed radically. Since first touring Europe with Paradise Bangkok in 2013 – a five-strong ensemble featuring older musicians from upcountry Thailand, as well as Chris – Maft Sai reckons that local interest in his style of music has accelerated. Today's clientele at Studio Lam, particularly during Isaan dancehall events, is largely Thai.

Not content with making their mark on the local music scene, Paradise Bangkok has undertaken three summer-long tours of Europe, opened for the likes of Damon Albarn, and played at last year's Glastonbury Festival. Maft Sai believes its success abroad has made molam cool for Thai listeners, granting them the freedom to explore their heritage through music.

With Paradise Bangkok's first album, the

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guys sought to capture and portray the rueful lyrics and uptempo pace of traditional molam music. But their sophomore effort more accurately reflects the music that's played at Studio Lam – songs influenced by the rhythms of Latin America, Indonesia and Africa, among other cultures, that add novel elements for Thai audiences to discover.

"There's no point in trying to replicate the same things," says Maft Sai. "If we're artists, we have to give people what we feel. Otherwise, what's the point?"

Chiang Mai-based singer Rasmee Wayrana adheres to the same art-driven mentality. She's experienced a similar rising interest in her music in Thailand and Europe, although she opts for a smoother sound and slower tempo. Isaan-born Rasmee performs a unique mix of molam and soul as she's joined by an upright bassist, percussionist and acoustic guitarist, all of whom are veterans of Chiang Mai's robust live music scene. Low and raspy, her voice has a mesmerizing quality – somewhat akin to a Thai version of Nina Simone singing in a language bound by five tones. But she doesn't believe in labels or comparisons.

"I don't think my music is 'molam soul' or whatever – we just play molam," Rasmee declares. "When my father first heard it, he said, 'This isn't molam! What are you doing?'" she adds, laughing. "But then he saw me on TV and was happy."

Rasmee's father, an accomplished singer of *jariang* (a kind of Khmer folk music) in rural Ubon Ratchathani, represents the other side of a small but still emerging generational divide. According to Rasmee, the old guard in Isaan "don't really get" her music – at least its gently rolling rhythm and unplugged instrumentals. What they do connect with, though, is her message.

Her tales of unrequited love and songs with morals that "teach people things" keep

LEFT PAGE
Maft Sai and his
Paradise Bangkok
bandmates



THIS PAGE
Studio Lam, a dive bar
in Bangkok's Thong Lo
neighborhood



to the traditions of molam, which often weaves together lessons on life, love and loss from casts of characters as varied as commoners and kings. "My song 'Lam Duan' is about my grandmother's life. My grandfather used to bring lots of women home, and I could see how that affected her," Rasmee says. "And people love when I incorporate narratives that are really strange, like how Thai people try to whiten their skin by taking pills. It's not good or bad – it's just a message."

What distinguishes this molam movement from other genre trends – and perhaps explains why it's caught on globally – is that listeners don't necessarily have to understand the lyrics to enjoy the music. The steady rhythm paves an easy path for any listener to follow, similar to the power of looping electronic music. Rasmee has sung to packed houses in Thailand, Poland and Indonesia, and collaborated with artists from France and Israel. "People don't want to listen to something they already have," she explains. "You just have to show who you are – show your culture."

While Rasmee and Paradise Bangkok have cultivated an international following with their catchy beats and groovy rhythms, Khun Narin prefers to keep things close to home. The psychedelic Isaan rock band from the sparsely populated Phetchabun province has a rotating line-up that includes members who range from high-school student to retirees. They're usually found playing their form of *phin prayuk* – a kind of

HEAR IT LIVE

Where to go to
catch molam, luk
thung and more
ear candy in
Bangkok



Parking Toys' Watt

This expansive open-air bar, filled out with gorgeous retro furniture, features a rotating schedule of Thai folk, country and rock bands that take to the stage each week – the Paradise Bangkok band even celebrated its album launch here. The food on offer isn't too shabby either. **164 Soonvijai Rd Soi 14, +66 2 318 1415**



Tep Bar

An homage to classical Thai culture – from the evocative "hidden" gold wall to *ya dong* cocktails – this bar in Chinatown's Soi Nana has nightly performances of luk krung, a more gentle and poetic cousin to the rough-around-the-edges luk thung. **69–71 Soi Nana (Chinatown), +66 9 8467 2944**



Studio Lam

Maft Sai's bar is the number one after-hours destination for molam, funk, Afro-Caribbean beats and much more. It gets going late, and there isn't much room to move, but this is one place that anyone interested in world music – not to mention Thai culture – needs to visit. **Sukhumvit Soi 51, +66 2 261 6661**

"I'm proud that a group playing local music from Thailand has been accepted by people around the world"

THIS PAGE
Khun Narin and his eponymous band

droning rock music in which the *phin* (a three-stringed Thai lute) is run through a series of effects pedals – at backyard parties, sitting on the red plastic stools associated with Thai street-food joints, as locals listen in while sipping on whiskey.

In fact, no one in the band ever sought fame abroad. They've all kept their day jobs: taxi driver, mechanic, beef jerky vendor, Buddhist priest. Yet, remarkably, Khun Narin is signed with LA-based Innovative Leisure, a label that counts top indie artists Rhye,

Classixx and Crystal Antlers in its roster.

"When I was young, I liked *luk thung* music [a slow-paced relative of molam]. At that time, I listened to Santana, too," says the laconic Rin, who gave the band its name. "But I didn't pick up an instrument until I was 28 – it was the *chap* [a flat, round cymbal with knobs in the middle, used to keep time in music] – and I'm 47 now."

Rin's humility is particularly noteworthy. Before the band was signed back in 2013, he once insisted that they were "not professional musicians". Even today, he simply enjoys playing the *chap* live, letting his bandmate Beer use his arsenal of effects pedals – phaser, distortion pedal and digital delay – to cultivate a haunting trance-like sound from his tricked-out *phin*.

Some of the band's songs stretch on for more than 10 minutes, like the 19-minute-long "Show Wong Khun Narin". Their live performances seem to last for hours – song after song melting into one another, the twang of the *phin* kept in time by the crashing of small cymbals, the pace carried by percussion. They play jam rock with a Thai twist, and it's the kind of music that connects with listeners on a gut level.

"I'm proud that a group playing local music from Thailand has been accepted by people around the world," says Rin. "And it's a good sign that people in Bangkok are getting to know our culture, too, because many people living in the capital are from Isaan, after all."



SHOPPING FOR VINYL

Top record shops selling Thai albums in Bangkok

Tang Siang Thai

One of the last of a dying breed in a neighborhood where everyone once went to buy records, this shop has stood in the same place for more than seven decades, selling molam and luk thung records, as well as Thai and Chinese oldies. **Charoen Krung Rd Soi 11, +66 2 221 8732**

ZudRangMa

Maft Sai's record shop remains one of the best in town. Stocked with tons of rare Thai pressings, as well as albums from more far-flung places like Ethiopia and Indonesia, there's always a hidden gem to unearth here. **Sukhumvit Soi 51, +66 8 8891 1314**

Tonchabab

Another goldmine for crate diggers, this record shop has two branches – one in the Old Town, the other near the Train Market on Srinakarin Road. At either, dig deep for rare cuts from the likes of Diana Ross and tons of old luk thung albums from the '60s. **10 Boonsiri Rd, +66 8 1695 2785**

