

## Kong Nay and “The Flute Player” UK Tour

Sick of slick, soulless muzak numbing you from every direction? Well, get ready for something rugged, real and bizarrely exotic hitting the UK music scene this July. Every one seems to know about Cambodia’s gruesome tragedies, and nothing about its ancient arts. But now an old blind man from the Cambodian slums called Kong Nay is making music visionaries like Peter Gabriel turn their heads: could this be the next Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan?

Kong Nay’s *Chapei* music - the “Cambodian blues” - is about to strum and holler its gutsy way into your orbit. It’ll probably make you laugh (even if you don’t speak a word of Khmer) - it could make you cry - and you won’t have heard anything like this ancient, haunting yet foot-tappingly funky music before. *Chapei* doesn’t often wander so far from the rice fields of the Cambodian heartland or the slums of Phnom Penh, where rats dance lazily and dark-skinned children defy appalling poverty with beaming smiles. Yet, like Ali Khan’s music, it has a knack of speaking to people – bypassing cultures and languages.

*Chapei* music is special. You won’t find anything like it in neighboring Thailand, Vietnam or Laos. Some say it’s like the Delta Blues. The lone impassioned *Chapei* singer belting out hard-hitting riffs and sliding blues-notes on his *Chapei Dong Veng* (“long-necked, two-stringed guitar”) is surely like the rugged Delta bluesman with his weeping slide guitar, roaming the poverty stricken Mississippi. And the heart of both is roguish, by-the-seat-of-your-pants improvisation.

But *Chapei* is a more primordial blues - heard long before even the great Cambodian kingdom of Angkor. Legend has it that *Chapei*’s lamenting, laughing path winds back 25 centuries, when Buddha himself introduced it to the world as a symbol of the “middle path”.

If *Chapei* is the “Cambodian blues” then let the “Cambodian Ray Charles” bring it to us this summer. Blind *Chapei* master Kong Nay not only seems to look and feel like Charles, with his trade mark gangster sunglasses and a smile that has been known to out-shine even the dazzling Cambodian sun. He is also a soulful genius, able to move people through the whole range of human emotions with his husky old voice – from raucous slapstick to Buddhist mysticism. He can recite an ancient religious epic word for word, or improvise a tall yarn on the spot. Part sage-part clown, Nay often has his audience dancing in the aisles overcome with laughter, or openly weeping at the sadness of his poetry. One of the two greatest living *Chapei* performers, 62-year-old Nai is a legend in his homeland. He is Cambodia’s most recognizable traditional musician, and is adored for his humanity as much as for his music.

“As a singer I’m very drawn to voices, and it was his voice that pulled me right in at the beginning,” says rock legend and international humanitarian Peter Gabriel about hearing Nay for the first time in the movie “The Flute Player”. “There’s a warmth that comes out, and you know there’s been some suffering there. You feel both the sun and the rain coming out of that voice.”

Gabriel grew up on the Blues and although he had never met Nai, something resonated in him: “I’ve got absolutely no idea what he’s singing about. But it’s the gutsiness, simplicity, and heart-felt quality - along with the acoustic instrument and improvising.”

Gabriel was hooked and last year he sent recording engineer Dickie Chappell to Cambodia to record Nay for an international solo release for Real World.

Chappell was bowled over by both Nay’s music and humanity – and also saddened by the poverty that Nay lived in. He felt he had to do something for this man, and so he organised the UK tour off his own back.

Sad stories are never far from the people of Cambodia – recent home to the Killing Fields of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge:

Kong Nay, blinded by small pox at four, was seen as dangerous by the Khmer Rouge, who systematically

murdered or forced into exile around 90 percent of Cambodia's artists and intellectuals. *Chapei* singers, famed for their satirical political comment, were doubly dangerous. In 1979 the Khmer Rouge marched Nay, his wife, and five of their eventual 11 children into the Killing Fields to be murdered. Miraculously they were rescued - literally at the last minute - by Vietnamese soldiers fighting the Khmer Rouge.

The Khmer Rouge are no more, but is Pol Pot's dream of eradicating Cambodian arts still a reality? Resourceless, uncaring and corrupt government officials do almost nothing to support their unique but highly endangered artistic heritage - preferring to work on their private bank accounts instead.

In the early nineties many top traditional Cambodian musicians, dancers and artists were given land by the Ministry of Culture in the Dey Krahom slum in central Phnom Penh - including Nai and his family. This was near the Royal Palace, University of Fine Arts and cultural centre of the city. Over the years the slum became one of Cambodia's most cultured communities, even if still poor.

However corrupt government officials are now selling off inner city land to foreign investors, pocketing the money for themselves and then forcibly evicting the residents - often with violence - to squalid settlements miles away from the city with its hospitals, schools and other amenities. Dey Krahom is one of the last remaining pockets of "slum" in the inner city river area, and is gradually being evicted. Around Nay's little house are properties now evicted and covered in razor wire to prevent people reestablishing. Even as Nay gains in fame and stature, his rights seem to be disappearing - any day now Nay is expecting to be evicted.

"They say they're going to send us 32kms away," said Nay. "It's too far away, especially coming back from performances at night time."

Everyone in this close-knit community is worried about arson, which has often been an unofficial method of clearing valuable land of squatters in Cambodia. This is frightening for a blind man.

After recording Nay, Chappell visited him in his shack in Dey Krahom and was shocked at the war-zone atmosphere and the government's systematic clearance of this treasured community. "If these evictions were going on in England, there'd be riots and people setting fire to parliament," says Chappell, amazed at how the Cambodian government seems to give no value to its cultural heroes

Enter the knights in shining armour: foreign NGOs like Cambodian Living Arts (CLA). CLA gives Master Nay and 16 other masters of endangered Cambodian arts a small salary to make ends meet, and promotes and organises their performances. Cambodian performance fees are meager, even for legendary artists like Nai. The CLA masters in turn all teach promising young students in an effort to save their arts from extinction.

CLA was the brainchild of Arn Chorn-Pond, who was nine when Pol Pot took over Cambodia.

"My whole family were slaughtered because they were all musicians," Arn says. "I started playing *khloyay* [Khmer flute] in the KR - they said 'Play or die'. They killed off the old masters and brainwashed the kids to play revolutionary songs."

The KR murdered Arn's first flute teacher before his eyes after he had taught Arn for five days. But when the KR tried to make Arn personally kill his second teacher, master musician Yeoun Mek, he courageously outwitted them. Arn saved Mek's life, and nearly lost his own as a result. Arn's life was spared because the Vietnamese invaded - the boy was sent off to fight at the front line.

After living as a refugee in the US Arn returned to Cambodia years later. He managed to find Mek - an alcoholic wandering the city streets with no work. Mek became one of the first masters in Arn's CLA.

Nay's UK performances will be preceded by "The Flute Player", a deeply moving one-hour film about Arn's battle to save Cambodia's traditional music from extinction. The documentary was nominated for an Emmy and features Cambodian master musicians, including the charming and unassuming Nai. It also offers a poignant glimpse into the contradictory world of modern Cambodia - full of wrenching tragedy and childlike laughter, just like Nay's *Chapei* music.

Of course it was Arn who sent Gabriel a copy of "The Flute Player", introducing him to Nay's *Chapei* in

the first place, which is where this whole story begins...

UK audiences will be able to check out *Chapei*'s new blood, as Nay is also bringing his most talented female protégé, 21-year-old [CHECK AGE] Ouch Savy. Although a male-dominated art-form these days, there has been a strong female *Chapei* tradition. Members of the King's harem included competent *Chapei* players. Woman singers these days tend to be more lyrical and lilting, shying away from the rapping, sliding blues notes and general monkeying about of the men. However Savy may have to do her share of dueling and sparring if Master Nai calls her up to duet with him – an important and exciting part of the *Chapei* tradition, which calls for much rapping, rhyming and a lightening wit.

Savy is an exceptionally talented young musician, who has made over 20 television appearances and performed with Khmer-American band Dengue Fever. Even more amazing is that Savy is also a leading singer in two other very different Cambodian traditional genres: *Ayai* and *Mohori*.

Nay and Savy are playing 14 concerts throughout the UK, finishing 6 August. The highlight is two appearances at the Charlton Park WOMAD festival in Wiltshire.

As well as Nay's solo CD due out with Real World, he will be broadcasting on BBC's Radio 4.