Cambodia - a song sheet

This song sheet has been created for Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) 2018 and is part of a series which provides lyrics and music for songs created during, or in response to, a genocide. In this song sheet we showcase two of Cambodia’s most popular musicians who were murdered during the genocide and invite you to reflect on the attempt to eradicate their music and words.

The Genocide in Cambodia

The radical communist Khmer Rouge, under their leader Pol Pot, seized power in Cambodia in April 1975 after years of civil war. The Khmer Rouge ruthlessly imposed an extremist programme to transform Cambodia into a communist paradise.

The Khmer Rouge persecuted ethnic minority groups including Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai people and religion was banned. Professionals such as lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers and scientists were murdered. As many as two million people, one quarter of Cambodia’s population, died between 1975 and 1979 as a result of executions, starvation, disease and exhaustion.

Before 1975 Cambodia had a rich and thriving musical tradition. Of particular note was Cambodia’s psychedelic rock scene, which lasted from the late 1950s until the early 1970s. Cambodian artists covered and remixed Western rock, producing their own versions of Western classics such as The Animals’ House of the Rising Sun.

Everything changed when the Khmer Rouge seized power. Traditional and popular music was banned, and it has been estimated that 90% of Cambodia’s musicians died during the genocide. Some were interned in prison and torture camps, while others were forced to write and perform music that the Khmer Rouge deemed acceptable. Most were eventually murdered.

At the Choeung Ek Killing Fields, revolutionary slogans and music were played from loudspeakers to hide the sound of executions. Uniquely among the song sheets we have produced, this resource for Cambodia contains no song that you can perform at your event. The Khmer Rouge were extremely thorough in their persecution of Cambodia’s artists, and much of Cambodia’s rich musical heritage was destroyed. Most of the recordings which remain have been pirated and the family members of musicians struggle to receive any royalty payments.

You can find the rest of the song sheets and hear recordings of the songs at hmd.org.uk/songs.
Before the Khmer Rouge won power, Cambodia had a thriving and vibrant music scene. Most of the musicians who were active prior to the genocide were murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Below are two of the most famous.

**SINN SISAMOUTH**

Sinn Sisamouth was Cambodia’s biggest star in the years before the genocide, and has been called Cambodia’s answer to Elvis Presley. He recorded thousands of songs, and it was said by his son that his catalogue roughly corresponded to one song recorded for every day he was famous. His song *Champa Battambang* was a huge hit, and was one of the first songs broadcast on Cambodian television.

Sisamouth was an artist, had connections to the old government, and was highly educated. As such, he was a priority target for the Khmer Rouge, and he was eventually murdered. The place, date and manner of his death are unknown. He would have been around 40 years old.

The Khmer Rouge destroyed most of the master tapes of Sisamouth’s recordings in an attempt to wipe out his legacy forever. Sadly, no recording survives of *Violon Sneha*, the hit that propelled him to stardom. Thankfully, many of his songs live on in recordings made from cassettes and LPs, and are often heard on Cambodian radio stations today. Many of these recordings are pirated, and Sinn’s surviving family have struggled to receive royalty payments for Sinn Sisamouth’s work.

**ROS SEREY SOTHEA**

Ros Serey Sothea was Cambodia’s most famous female star before the genocide, and was granted the honorary title ‘Queen with the Golden Voice’ by King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia.

Sothea found fame singing traditional Cambodian ballads such as her first hit *Stung Khieu*, but later developed a more contemporary style which combined romantic ballads with a focus on loss, betrayal and death, set to Western-style instruments. Sothea also released a number of psychedelic rock tracks, and her hit *Chnam oun Dop-Pram Muy* remains popular today. She sang a number of duets with Sinn Sisamouth, the *Elvis of Cambodia*.

Sothea was a prime target for the Khmer Rouge when they took power, and her eventual fate is unclear. According to some accounts, she was forcibly married to a Khmer Rouge official, and was subsequently murdered for voicing her unhappiness. Her surviving sisters believe that she, along with their mother, was murdered immediately after the fall of Phnom Penh.

The Khmer Rouge destroyed the master tapes of Sothea’s back catalogue, although some vinyl and cassette recordings have survived. Some of her songs, along with the work of other Cambodian artists of the time, were featured in the 2002 film *City of Ghosts*. Sothea’s sister, Ros Sabouet, has been credited with reuniting the remains of the Cambodian music scene, and has also been instrumental in campaigning for the families of murdered artists to receive the royalties from their songs.