

Klap ya *Handz*

Something of a mentor for Cambodia's up-and-coming young hip hop stars, **Sok 'Cream' Visal** is the man behind much of their music. **Liz Ledden** finds out more about his hip hop collective, **Klap ya Handz**.



KHMER HIP HOP IS A relatively new phenomenon, stemming from the innovation and creativity of a handful of experimental artists. It is now gaining momentum through greater exposure to young Khmers. Sok Visal was an early pioneer of the scene and today works with a talented group of rising hip hop stars.

■ FORMATIVE YEARS

Born in Cambodia in 1971, Visal, who also goes by his artist name Cream, left in 1975 and spent most of his young life in the gritty suburban edges of Paris.

Using graffiti art as a form of personal expression, he channelled his energies into music, forming a rap group in 1986. Though he says this first group "never made it," it proved the springboard for experimenting with music sampling and sound engineering. After moving to the U.S. for two years he went back to Paris where he realised that most of his friends had moved on or stopped creating music.

Returning to his native Cambodia in 1993, he abandoned music for a few years, until he teamed up with local music legend DJ Sop. Together,

they gained a following of young Khmer hip hop fans through DJing on radio channel Love FM's former incarnation, Metropole. The music was new to Cambodia and to the listeners, and Visal modestly credits DJ Sop with being the country's "godfather of hip hop."

■ OLD SCHOOL INFLUENCES

Khmer music from the 1960s and early 1970s captured Visal's imagination with its western influences evoking artists such as the Doors and the Beatles. Seeing international hip hop artists sample soul music on their tracks, he thought "why don't I do this with Khmer music?" He started mixing music from Cambodia's so called golden era with contemporary rap and hip hop beats, creating a unique and funky fusion.

His first album Cream remix of Khmer hip hop was released in 2001, with Khmae Funk following in 2002.

Now an art director at Phnom Penh advertising agency Phibious, Visal has taught himself music production. He mixes and produces music, as well as directs video clips of local hip hop and rap artists.

■ AN ARTIST COLLECTIVE

Rather than a structured record label or production company, Klap ya Handz is a label loosely applied to a group of young Khmer artists who rap, record and perform together. It was formed when Visal started collaborating with local artist Aping. The two performed together and recorded an album.

"Kids started to approach us saying they wanted to work with us," says Visal.

Last year Klap ya Handz was commissioned by phone network Mobitel to perform two concerts at Phnom Penh club U2. Tapping into young Khmer's dual interests in mobile phones and hip hop music, it was a successful partnership. They also performed a free concert outside Phnom Penh's railway station, attracting a large turnout.

■ HIP HOP'S KHMER FOLLOWING

Hip hop's popularity in Cambodia among the twelve to eighteen-year-old crowd is huge, says Visal. "You can't avoid it". He claims that ten to fourteen years ago people here didn't understand it, believing that hip hop was too slow to dance to. These days in Cambodia,

young people are increasingly exposed to overseas influences by way of family and friends living and perhaps returning from overseas, hence the hip hop explosion. Popular culture in the form of music channels on cable TV also delivers the latest trends from the U.S. straight to young Khmers, and Visal says the images portrayed in hip hop videos such as cars and girls are aspirational to Khmer youth.

According to Visal, Khmer hip hop is still largely underground despite the genre's popularity. Middle class Khmers dance to international hip hop at Riverhouse Lounge. Some local live acts involved with Klap ya Handz, such as Kdep, perform at Street 240's Orange Club. Others play at clubs like Spark and U2.

Plans for future Klap ya Handz collaborations, projects and albums include three new albums ready and waiting to be released. The future of Khmer hip hop looks bright with corporate sponsorship, such as Mobitel, meaning money can be made through live concerts. These are the lifeblood of local artists as rampant pirating makes it infeasible for artists to collect royalties. Visal, though, says this actually works to his and his peers' advantage, in that it creates hype and exposure for their music, as does the Internet.

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