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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2010

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NEVER A DULL MOMENT



Guitar virtuoso
Hucky Eichelmann talks about finally making the album he wanted to record 30 years ago

Story by
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PHOTOS: PAUL TOOTH



He grew up in a country where people did not celebrate Valentine's Day 40 to 50 years ago, although he thinks they do now. As a matter of fact, Hucky Eichelmann got to know about this day of love and red roses here in Thailand.

"I think love is a wonderful and truly great thing to celebrate, all year round! As for celebrating it on this particular day, I have the impression that like so many other occasions, it has become a rather commercial institution. Call me old-fashioned, but for me love still comes from the heart and not so much from a bunch of roses, a 'special love dinner' offer or the like, *erab*," said the famed musician, who hails from Sulzbürg in the musically vibrant southwest region of Germany.

Launching a new album on Feb 15, he probably has no time for any Valentine celebrations anyway and this latest project has kept him fully occupied since Christmas last year. The new CD, *Magical Melodies of Thailand* features some of the kingdom's most famous classical and folk tunes such as *Sansern Phra Baramee*, *Khmer Sai Yoke*, *Khang Khauw Kin Klauy*, *Duan Phen*, *Lao Duang Duen*, *Long Mao Ping* and *Nok Sai Bin Khum Thung*.

"It's funny that I wanted to do this album 30 years ago when I first came to Thailand. Back then I asked my Thai friends to show me some classical Thai music and when I listened to them I instantly wanted to record them," he said. "There are songs that go in your left ear and out of your right ear that you just forget, but these melodies have remained in my heart."

Over the three decades in this country, he has become a music icon inspiring Thais to play the classical guitar and has tirelessly contributed to grooming the kingdom's young classical guitarists by holding master classes at St Cecilia Academy of Music, Chulalongkorn and Mahidol universities.

But how did the hearty Hucky fall in love with the guitar himself?

"My dad used to hide an acoustic guitar in his bedroom. It was sort of a holy piece as it was from his days as a travelling young man. Nobody was allowed to touch it and, of course, that made it even more curious and adorable for us kids," he recalled.

"However, on one of my birthdays, some close friends who knew about my love for dad's instrument gave me a nylon string guitar, not a very good one but good enough to fall in love with the natural and sweet sound of the acoustic guitar."

It became his dream to play it properly and he was trained in classical music and pursued a Master's degree to affirm his passion. His move to Asia allowed him to develop a diverse repertoire that bridges the cultures of East and West. Under his record label, Asia Music International (AMI Records), Hucky has released many seminal albums of Thai music, from his production of *ranad* master Khun-In's Thai fusion album *Off-Beat Slam* on to *The Spirit of Lanna* and the *Rhythms of I-san* and, of course,

his highly-acclaimed and best-selling albums of His Majesty the King's compositions, *Candlelight Blues* and *Sawasdee Words*.

Working on the new album, he interprets traditional Thai music in a contemporary fashion, learning how versatile it can be, for instance it can be played in Baroque and Renaissance styles and sounds just about perfect.

"It's a pity that Thais use so little of these fantastic melodies. Thais have become more familiar with Western tunes and youngsters may have difficulty in playing and listening to the classical Thai music scale. The aim is to create an album with music as a forepiece that will have listeners appreciating Thai music and not thinking only of the guitar playing," said the German, who speaks Thai fairly well.

Previously, he had to fly to Europe for recording audiophile quality discs. The new Karma Sound Studios in Bang Saray, Chon Buri, however, offers world-class facilities and it now takes a one and a half-hour drive for him to get to do his recording.

"In a city studio, it's like a dead refrigerator, it's so cold and dark, there's no life. At the Karma Sound Studios, you can see the sea and the tropical gardens and that gives you a totally different inspiration," said the guitar virtuoso.

"Moreover, the superb audiophile recording equipment can really capture the original sound qualities of your musical instrument and even some small finger movements, your breathing and, some people say, even your heartbeat."

A high quality of recording was needed to fully represent the sound from his favourite Australian guitar, which he considers an extension of his arms, used for the new album. The guitar has a powerful sound and long sustaining notes, almost like a piano, that cannot be captured in normal studios.

The recording takes just about one hour for a song, but much more time is spent listening to it and choosing the preferred takes. "Normally we would go for the 200 percent most perfect take but what's even more important for this album is the Thainess and to choose one that sounds the most Thai."

"For example, the song *Sao Mai* played with a typical tremolo can sound too Spanish and so I had to adjust the classical guitar playing technique to make it sound Thai," he explained.

A one-instrument man, Hucky uses sounds from many parts of the guitar such as the soundboard, the bridge, the back and the sides as a percussion tool in *Burma Kloug Yao*, *Lai Pong Lang*, *Khang Khauw Kin Klauy* and *Lao Krathop Mai*. Another objective was to put together the right sequence of songs to keep the excitement going — no dull moments.

"*Magical Melodies of Thailand* brings music from all over the country: North, South, Northeast and Central regions. They all perfectly go along in harmony. It's a shame that while it works in the music world, we as human beings are incapable," he said. "Fighting each

other will not see any winners but only losers. So I hope that people will listen to more music and get into the spirit of peace and harmony."

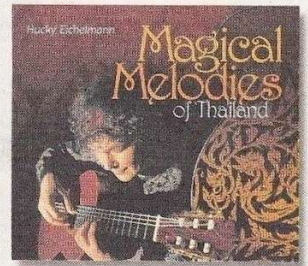
While humans may overlook listening to music, Hucky's Persian cat, Mikki, happily purrs to classical and soul melodies. And when Hucky practises songs from the new album, the feline music lover always sits close to him and soothes away.

"It is strange that when listening to my hi-fi system, Mikki always finds the perfect centre spot between the speakers before he lays down to listen... Sometimes I wonder whether it would be good to have his ears!" Hucky said of his beloved pet.

Magical Melodies of Thailand marks three decades of his life in Thailand. Living in a foreign land, Hucky has kept his systemic way of thinking and discipline in work, typical for Germans but how has he picked up Thainess?

"Sometimes I feel it has been only 30 weeks or months... Having been based in Thailand for such a long time, I truly treasure the fact that I had a chance to look at things in different (Thai) ways, making me flexible and giving me the ability to adjust to almost any situation," he said.

"I enjoy that great warm feeling of being part of Thai society, of being called *nong*... ooops, that was before... and *pi*... that's more like it these days."



Sounds familiar

Hucky Eichelmann's *Magical Melodies of Thailand* features 14 Thai songs. They may be familiar melodies but do you know their origins? Here are some fast facts about some of these fabulous tunes.

Sansern Phra Baramee (Thai Royal Anthem)

The Royal Anthem was composed in 1888 by Russian composer Pyotr Schurovsky. HRH Prince Narisara Nuvattivongse wrote the original lyrics; later, in 1913, King Rama VI revised the lyrics to the current version.

Khang Khauw Kin Klauy (Bats Feeding on Bananas)

This upbeat song was originally named *Ling Thok Krador Saa* which has a naughty connotation; perhaps this is why the name was changed to *Khang Khauw Kin Klauy*.

Nam Ta Saeng Tai

It was originally composed for the play *Norasingha*, which was first performed in 1944. Khru Sa-nga Aramphoe wrote the music and Marut-Nerantit, the lyrics. *Nam Ta Saeng Tai* describes Norasingha's tearful farewell to his wife Nuan as he left for duty as a royal barge tillerman, from which he never returned.

Lao Duang Duen

Composed by HRH Prince Phichai Mahintharakulorn, it was first named *Lao Dammeru Kiam* but as its first passage describes the beauty of the moon, the song is best known as *Lao Duang Duen*.

Sao Mai (Spinning Silk)

The Lanna-style fiddle folk song comes from Nan province. Later it was adapted for a drama-dance with the dance theme based around silk production and it shows dancers miming the different movements of spinning and weaving silk. The song wittily reflects how difficulties in life can be overcome in terms of a snag in the silk-making process.

Lao Krathop Mai

Composed by Acharn Montri Tramote as a bamboo-based dance, it was later adapted for several *luk thung* songs. This style of bamboo dancing is common across Southeast Asia, and involves tapping a pair of long bamboo poles together, while dancers jump in and out of the sliding bamboo trap on the ground, making sure they don't get caught.

Khmer Sai Yoke

This beautiful song was composed by HRH Prince Narisara Nuvattivongse after he accompanied King Chulalongkorn on a visit to Sai Yoke waterfall in Kanchanaburi province. The composer was impressed by the natural sound of the waterfall as well as the birds chirping that he heard.

Information, courtesy of AMI Thailand. From Feb 15, *Magical Melodies of Thailand* will be available in all fine record shops and book stores throughout Thailand. Starting mid-March, the AMI catalogue will be available for digital download from iTunes and most other major online stores. For more information, please visit www.amithailand.com or call 02-862-1836.

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