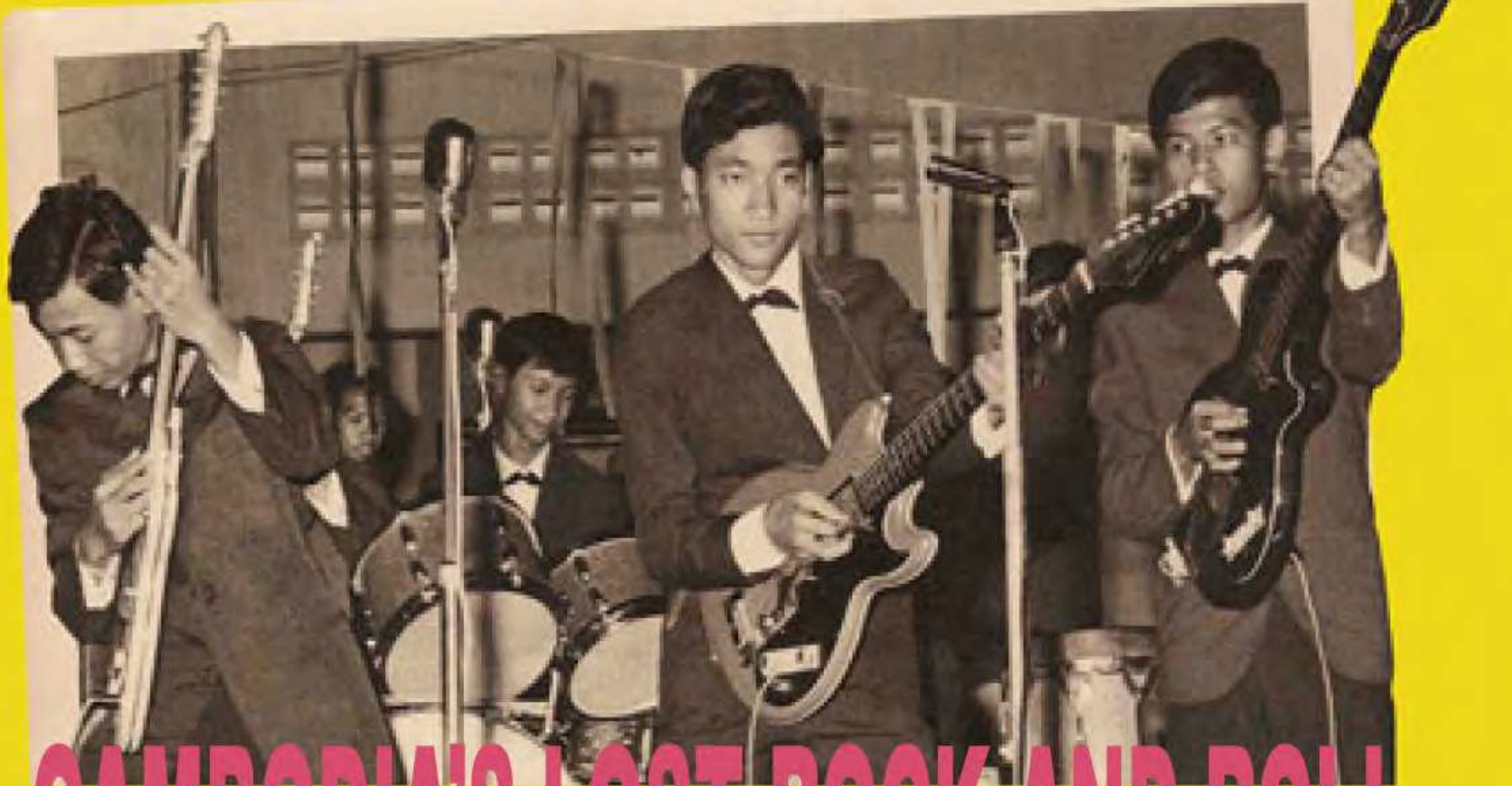


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**DON'T THINK  
I'VE FORGOTTEN**



**CAMBODIA'S LOST ROCK AND ROLL**

**A FILM BY JOHN PIROZZI**

**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

**BY DR. LINDA SAPHAN**



# STUDY GUIDE

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This study and discussion guide for the documentary film *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll* is designed for general audiences and teachers at the high school and college level.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THIS GUIDE

This guide presents additional background information to help viewers better understand the film. It is designed to help viewers think more deeply about the complex issues raised by this documentary and to process their reactions to a very emotional time in Cambodian history. The guide is an invitation to openly explore Cambodian musical production and historical events via dialog among families, classmates, friends, and communities and to foster acceptance of a variety of viewpoints. It is hoped that discussion participants will take away a sense of optimism in spite of the tragic historical events that took place in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge era.



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# A MESSAGE FROM JOHN PIROZZI



During the '60s and early '70s as the war in Vietnam threatened its borders, a new music scene emerged in Cambodia that took Western rock and roll and stood it on its head – creating a sound like no other.

Cambodian musicians crafted this sound from the various rock music styles sweeping, America, England and France, adding the unique melodies and hypnotic rhythms of their traditional music. The beautiful singing of their renowned female vocalists became the final touch that made this mix so enticing.

But as Cambodian society - young creative musicians in particular - embraced western culture and flourished under its influence, the rest of the country was rapidly moving to war. On the left, Prince Sihanouk joined forces with the Khmer Rouge and rallied the rural population to take up arms against the government that deposed him. On the right, the Cambodian military, with American military support, waged a war that involved a massive aerial bombing campaign on the countryside. In the end, after winning the civil war, the Khmer Rouge turned their deadly focus to the culture of Cambodia.

After taking over the country on April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge began wiping out all traces of modernity and Western influence. Intellectuals, artists and musicians were specifically and systematically targeted and eliminated. Thus began one of the most brutal genocides in history, killing an estimated two million people – a quarter of the Cambodian population.

The film is a celebration of the incredible music that came from Cambodia and explores how important it is to Cambodian society both past and present.

John Pirozzi

A film by JOHN PIROZZI  
Presented by HARMONY PRODUCTIONS / PRIMITIVE  
NERD / PEARL CITY  
Executive Producers BRADLEY BESSIRE YOUK  
CHHANG JONATHAN DEL GATTO  
Additional production services by THE DOCUMEN-  
TATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA  
Editors DANIEL LITTLEWOOD GREG WRIGHT MAT-  
THEW PRINZING  
Producers JOHN PIROZZI ANDREW POPE  
Director JOHN PIROZZI  
Researcher LINDA SAPHAN

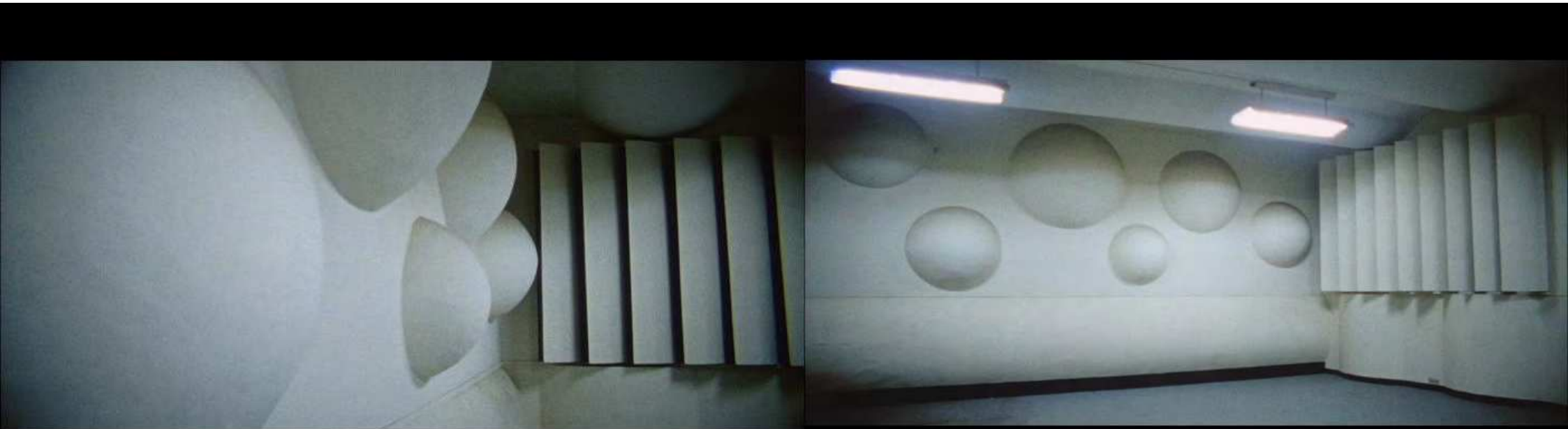


# SUMMARY OF THE FILM



*Don't Think I've Forgotten* is a documentary film that examines popular music from the pre-Khmer Rouge era and explores the impact of music in the struggle for political, ideological, and social change. It depicts the musical and political history of Cambodia from the birth of popular music in the 1950s to the emergence of rock and roll through the mid-1970s. During this period the different musical phases and influences were closely intertwined with the changing political regimes in the country.

The genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge has shaped the perception of Cambodia, but it is a country with a rich cultural and musical heritage. This film sheds new light on the thriving musical scene that developed along with rock and roll in Western countries, but in a unique Cambodian style. It celebrates the powerful music produced by talented musicians in an era of social and political upheaval. The film is based on interviews with Cambodian musicians, singers, ethnomusicologists, historians, filmmakers, architects, politicians, and others in the music industry. It presents songs recorded from 1950 until the Khmer Rouge era; archival footage from institutions in France, the United States, and Cambodia; and personal family photographs, album covers, and magazines collected from Cambodians in the diaspora.



## General Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What ideas, images, and questions did you take away from the film? What do you think the filmmaker wanted the audience to take away?
2. Write down your observations about the film. Describe what you learned and discovered and note questions that the film raised but did not answer.
3. Discuss how the film helped you to understand the Cambodian cultural heritage.
4. Why do you think the director chose the title *Don't Think I've Forgotten*?



# MUSIC AS A WAY OF LIFE FOR CAMBODIANS



In Cambodia the performing arts, in particular music, are important forms of sociocultural discourse. In the Cambodian ethnomusicological tradition, music and dance performances are replete with narratives of the joy and despair of the people and heroic action glorified by storytellers.

Bas-reliefs in Angkorian temples from the 9th to 15th centuries, particularly in the Bayon temple at Angkor, depict Apsara ballet dancers and musicians playing the flute, gong, and harp—evidence that music was important enough for warriors and princes to commission these stone carvings. Music has always played a central role in Khmer religious, social, and civic gatherings. It is not merely entertainment, but an integral part of the identity of the Khmer people and their traditions and rituals: from birth to death, music accompanies people throughout the milestones of life, whether it is sickness, a wedding, kick-boxers moving to the rhythm of music, or funeral ceremonies.

Modern popular Khmer music emerged from a strong cultural and musical legacy that goes back over a thousand years. Many modern musicians and singers from the pre-Khmer Rouge era were trained in traditional music. As in Western countries, there are several different types of traditional Khmer music, each used for a different purpose and having its own characteristic ensembles of unique string, woodwind, and percussion instruments made of local materials like bamboo and rattan. At times the chapey, a long-necked guitar with three strings, is played solo but generally most instruments are played in ensembles of varying sizes, depending on the event or art form. These ensembles often accompany dancers or singers at theater shows, puppet shows, funerals, and so on.

The pin peat is a formal ensemble of about ten or more wind and percussion instruments that performs in temples and at the royal court. The less formal phleng kar ensemble with at least seven instruments is used in village wedding ceremonies and often includes singers. The mahori string and percussion ensemble, initially with four instrumentalists and one vocalist, originated at the royal palace and branched out to secular settings. Today the mahori is a large orchestra that can have from ten to twenty players.

Performing artists before the Khmer Rouge era, including Sinn Sisamouth, Ros Serey Sothea, Huoy Meas, and Pen Ran, were trained in traditional ensemble music. Their traditional training gave their music a depth that went beyond their gifted voices or their ability to pick up a tune from hearing it on the radio.





# MUSIC AS A WAY OF LIFE FOR CAMBODIANS



Unlike the succession of short-lived political regimes and ideologies that prevailed in Cambodia for many centuries, the country's very long musical tradition has been a stable anchor for the Cambodian people.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Take a moment to write down any song lyrics from the film that stood out for you. Compare your impressions with your classmates.
2. How can music be the “soul of a nation”?
3. What songs from the film do you know? Which songs inspire you?
4. In your view, why have Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Serey Sothea become iconic representations of Cambodian popular music?
5. Who do you think are the five most important male singers of Cambodia from the 1960s and 1970s?
6. Who do you think are the five most important female singers of Cambodia from the 1960s and 1970s? Compare your answers with your classmates.
7. Many Cambodian songs celebrate the beauty of the country and describe each city or province. On a map of the provinces of Cambodia, list songs for each province. Which provinces don't have a prewar song dedicated to them? Why do you think that's the case?
8. When you think of Phnom Penh before the wars, what images come to mind? Where do those images come from?
9. In what way does the film confirm or contradict your ideas of Phnom Penh as the “Pearl of Asia”?
10. Why was Phnom Penh the hub for musicians from all over the country?
11. What is a guitar band versus a big-band orchestra? Can you name some orchestra bands from the film?
12. Describe the sound of the band Baksey Cham Krong. How were they unique and how did they contribute to shaping the music scene?
13. Where did Cambodian musical influences come from in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s? Can you connect the musical influences and political regime for each period?





# HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The Kingdom of Cambodia dates to 802 AD, when Jayavarman II declared himself king, marking the beginning of the Khmer Empire. In the collective memory of the Khmer people, one name symbolizes the unity, identity, and pride of the nation: Jayavarman VII, who ruled from 1181 to 1218. He defended the country against invasions, expanded its territory, rebuilt the city of Angkor, and built hundreds of monuments and hospitals. He is remembered for his practice of the Buddhist principle of compassion toward his people.

The French Protectorate (1867–1949), established to protect Cambodia from invasion from neighboring Siam, continued authoritarian rule as Cambodia was folded into France's colonization of Indochina along with Vietnam and Laos. Norodom Sihanouk ascended to the throne in 1941 and brought Cambodia to independence in 1953. He soon abdicated in favor of his father in order to dedicate his life to political action, founding the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (Popular Socialist Community) political party. He effectively ruled Cambodia in various capacities until 1970, returning again as king from 1991 to 2004. Under Sihanouk during the 1950s and 60s Cambodia enjoyed an interval of relief from a long period of warfare extending from the Angkor era to the Indochina War. Sihanouk centralized all administrative, political, economic, and cultural affairs in Phnom Penh.

But in 1970 Sihanouk was deposed and the encroaching Vietnam War led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot—mastermind of the genocide that killed approximately two million people—with Sihanouk's support. Pol Pot's regime was driven out of Phnom Penh by the Vietnamese army in 1979. Following the Cambodian–Vietnamese War (1979–1991), current prime minister Hun Sen took power in 1997.

Cambodia's rulers have demonstrated authoritarian tendencies since the country's inception, from absolute monarchy to genocidal despotism to today's constitutional monarchy. Today the king of Cambodia is an elected monarch, making Cambodia one of the few such monarchies in the world. The monarch represents peace, stability, and prosperity to the Khmer people.





# THE MODERNIZATION OF CAMBODIA UNDER NORODOM SIHANOUK



When Cambodia gained its independence from France in 1953, the infrastructure of the country was very poorly developed, lacking roads, schools and universities, and government ministries to run the country. The postcolonial regime under Prime Minister Norodom Sihanouk undertook the task of modernizing the country in all respects, from public works projects, industry, and agriculture to education, art, and music. Because of its political neutrality Cambodia was able to secure international aid for its modernization process from both Western and Eastern countries. Moreover, Sihanouk's policy of neutrality temporarily delayed expansion of the neighboring war in Vietnam into Cambodia.

Prior to independence, the French colonial administration took a conservative authoritarian approach to the arts in Cambodia, preserving traditional Khmer art forms such as weaving and bronze work and preventing the introduction of modern Western influences. Sihanouk, however, had an avid personal interest in the arts—he was himself a musician, songwriter, and filmmaker—and was intent on bringing Cambodia into the modern world by opening it to Western influence in the arts, architecture, fashion, cinema, and music. In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, he undertook the creation of monumental buildings such as the Phnom Penh Olympic stadium, theatres, and luxury residential complexes as a testament to the legitimacy of the new state.

Although Sihanouk's policies may be described as authoritarian, the vast majority of the people embraced this importation of the modern Western world to Cambodia. Artists of the time sought out influences from all over the world and were eager to experiment with new art forms. Cambodian popular music exploded during this “golden era.” The pre-Khmer Rouge music scene was vibrant and innovative, mixing traditional Cambodian music with Western styles—rhythm and blues, rock and roll, country, and Latin rhythms to create a distinct Cambodian sound. People flocked to nightclubs to hear the new music and it was broadcast across the country by the national radio.





# THE MODERNIZATION OF CAMBODIA UNDER NORODOM SIHANOUK



The history of popular music in Cambodia is closely tied to social, cultural, and political movements and purposes. Sihanouk, his successor general Lon Nol, and Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot all used music, especially large-scale musical productions at public events, to accomplish their political aims, expanding it well beyond its traditional purposes of enhancing small local social gatherings and entertainment.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### National politics

- From the film, can you describe the political regime of each decade of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s?
- List the political leaders highlighted in the film.
- How was Sihanouk depicted in the film?
- What were Norodom Sihanouk's artistic talents?
- Would the rock and roll music scene have been possible without Norodom Sihanouk? Explain your position.
- Many royal figures have been involved in the Cambodian modern music scene. Can you list a few from the film?

### International affairs

- What countries and political parties were involved in the Vietnam War? What were the causes of the war? What was its outcome?
- What was the Cold War? Describe Cambodia's political neutrality during the Cold War.
- What is meant by the "domino effect" in Asia? How did it impact U.S. foreign policy? Do you think the domino theory was accurate?
- On a map of the world, color the communist countries in red and the capitalist countries in blue. How would you classify Cambodia in the 1960s?



# THE GENOCIDAL KHMER ROUGE REGIME



The Khmer Rouge regime was in power from 1975 to 1979. Many Cambodians know the fact that it lasted for three years, eight months, and twenty days but sadly, many people today, young and old, know hardly anything about the Khmer Rouge regime and what really took place in that era. Even today the world is still puzzled by those terrible years. Few colleges teach genocide studies and Cambodia has received little attention in genocide courses because some consider it a case of “ethnocide”—the killing of a culture, rather than people. The Cambodian genocide needs to be studied and understood in order to stop the mass killings that continue today in many countries.

The Khmer Rouge leaders sought to create a pure and authentic Khmer culture, which led to racial hatred and defining some groups of people as different and refusing them humanity. Music under the Khmer Rouge regime was limited to songs celebrating the regime's ideology and political agenda. Songs from the previous regimes of Sihanouk and Lon Nol were banished. While Western musical influence was welcomed under Sihanouk's modernization plan, it was banned by the Khmer Rouge. Cultural repression took on deadly proportions for Cambodia's musicians. Records and cassettes were destroyed and artists were targeted and killed by the military, who saw in them imperialist contamination.

*Don't Think I've Forgotten* tackles this cultural hatred of hybridization which understood Westernized musical influences as contamination.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Conformist Behavior

1. Most people want to fit in somewhere, to belong to a group, a community, and a country. How important is it to you to fit in? How does it affect your and your classmates' self-esteem? Are teenagers more vulnerable to needing to fit in than adults?
2. How important is it to teach children to conform and to obey their elders? What is the difference between obedience and blind obedience?
3. In the film, an American soldier expresses his disagreement with his government and commanding officers for being in Vietnam and Cambodia. How do you understand his behavior of challenging his superiors in front of a camera? What argument would you use to tell Khmer Rouge soldiers that obeying is not always the right thing to do?





# THE GENOCIDAL KHMER ROUGE REGIME



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### The Khmer Rouge

1. Who were the Khmer Rouge? Did the film help you understand who they were?
2. Did the film help you understand the Khmer Rouge era? What parts of the film about the Khmer Rouge made the biggest impression on you?

### Genocide

1. What other mass killings or genocides in the world do you know about?
2. What can we learn from studying genocide?
3. Can studying genocide help us prevent it? Explain your opinion.
4. What do you think are the three most important things about the genocide in Cambodia that everyone should know?
5. It can be difficult to comprehend genocide and mass killing because they are not ordinary life experiences. We may feel paralyzed by the sheer violence of mass killing. What else makes it difficult to understand genocide?
6. What thoughts and emotions do you have as you try to come to terms with learning about genocide, and coping with these horrors?
7. Do you think it's impossible to fully understand genocide?
8. Interview your parents, elders, and teachers about what they know about the Khmer Rouge era and the genocide. Compare their responses to those collected by classmates.
9. What should the goals of genocide education be?
10. After a genocidal regime has ended, what actions are necessary for genocide education? What do you think about the following possibilities?
  - a. Publicizing the truth
  - b. Writing accurate histories
  - c. Making, watching, and analyzing films such as this one
  - d. Forcing perpetrators to apologize
  - e. Holding trials
  - f. Initiating reconciliation
11. Why is it important to bring genocide leaders to trial? Explain your position.

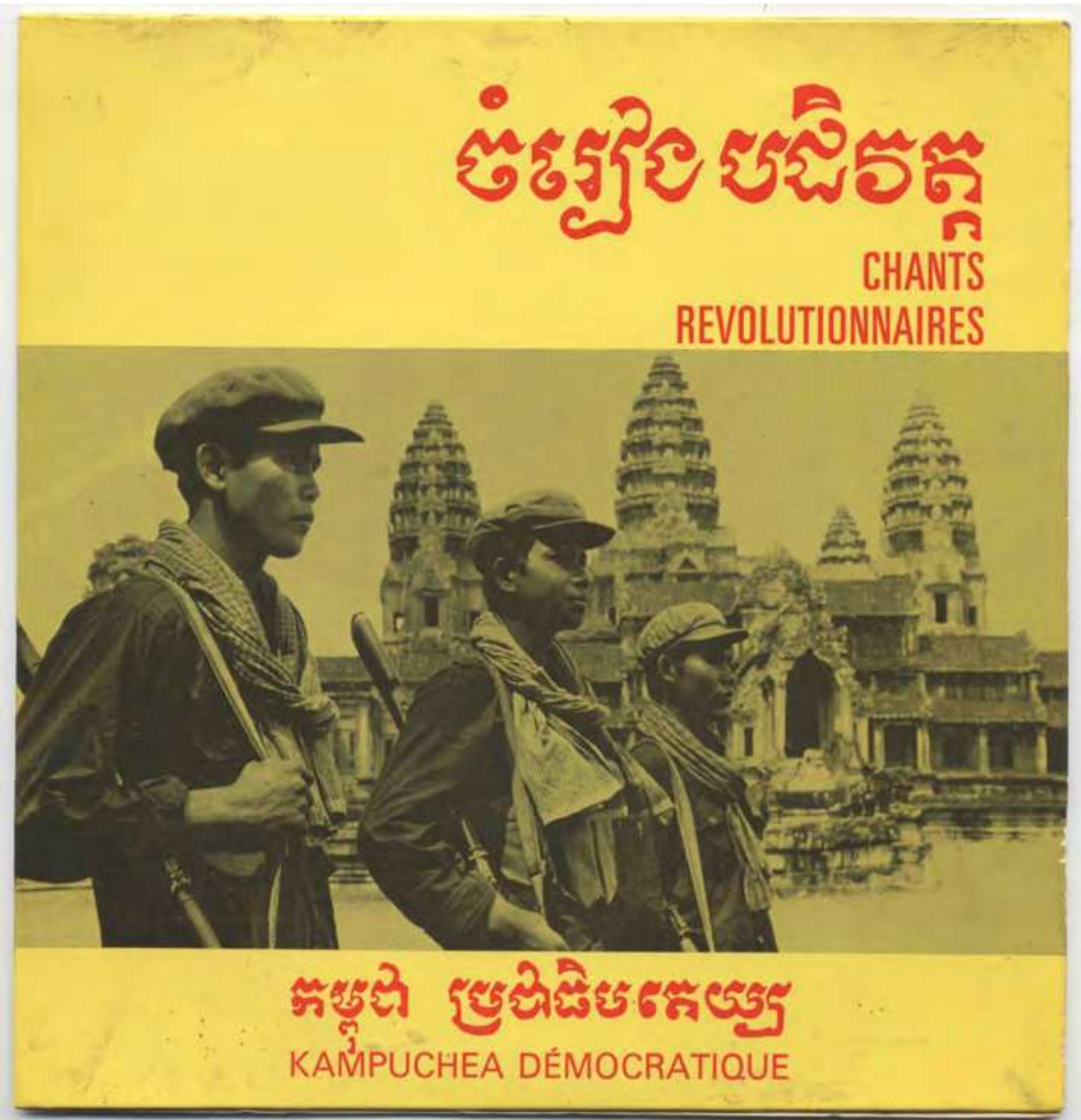


# KHMER ROUGE PROPAGANDA MUSIC



The totalitarian Khmer Rouge regime did not allow any form of politicized songs that were critical of the government to be performed. Singers and musicians in *Don't Think I've Forgotten* testified that they had to conceal their identity in order to survive and described the prohibition against performing songs from previous regimes and foreign songs.

The Documentation Center of Cambodia has in its archives 130 recorded instrumentals and songs, some without labels or titles, from the Khmer Rouge era. The song titles and first verses convey the types of songs that people were allowed to listen to under the Khmer Rouge. They tell about struggling to build dams and dig irrigation ditches, the people's commitment to the revolutionary Angkar ("the Organization," the term adopted by the Khmer Communist Party to refer to itself), and the victorious revolutionary soldiers and their sacrifice.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the goals of propaganda? How does it work?
2. How can you distinguish between freely created musical material and propaganda songs?
3. Are these political propaganda songs to be considered art the same as songs freely created by composers and musicians?
4. Does propaganda create new views or does it reinforce or intensify preexisting prejudices?
5. Why did the Khmer Rouge target modern music artists? Why did the musicians hide their identity?
6. Is propaganda music a legitimate art form?
7. What role do freedom of expression and creativity play in making music?
8. In the film, Prince Norodom Sirivudh says, "If you want to eliminate values from past societies, you have to eliminate the artists. Because artists are influential, artists are close to the people." Can you explain this statement by Prince Sirivudh and give more examples of the role of artists in Cambodian society today?
9. Can you imagine living in a society with no musical creativity? What would that be like?



# CONCLUSION

Cambodians' collective memory of the music of the 1960s and 1970s—and a portion of the music itself—has survived being banned by Lon Nol's regime and targeted under the Khmer Rouge, who virtually destroyed the musical culture of the country, including vinyl records, cassettes, radios, and turntables. The popular musical industry disappeared. Popular musicians were targeted and very few survived the regime—as many as 90% are believed to have died. Yet today, almost 40 years after the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror, Cambodians strive to keep the old music alive in their collective memory. Despite the Khmer Rouge's attempt to abolish all forms of popular music, especially those with foreign influence, the popular songs written by Norodom Sihanouk, Sinn Sisamouth, and many others are experiencing a revival.



1. Does the music of the pre-Khmer Rouge era still have meaning today?

2. Is it important to preserve such old music?

3. Do you enjoy listening to this music? List today musicians covering oldies songs.

4. How do you think a country can recover from a genocide and loss of a large part of its culture?

5. Do you think these events could ever happen again?