

'Don't Think I've Forgotten' director John Pirozzi talks Cambodian rock and roll film

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John Pirozzi, the filmmaker behind the acclaimed documentary, "Don't Think I've Forgotten," about the lost history of Cambodian rock and roll. Photo Credit: Nick Hahn

It wasn't just London that was swinging in the 1960s, according to the new documentary "Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll." Directed by John Pirozzi, the film paints a picture of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, as a vibrant city teeming with garage bands and rebellious rockers -- until the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975. In just a few years, the regime wiped out nearly 2 million Cambodians and almost all evidence of the country's once-flourishing music scene. Pirozzi pieced it back together by tracking

down old albums, rare footage and surviving musicians; the movie ultimately took him 10 years to make. He'll show it in person Wednesday night at Huntington's Cinema Arts Centre. (It is also playing at Sag Harbor Cinema.) Pirozzi sat last week to discuss his labor of love.

How did you discover this music? I'd always been fascinated by modern Cambodian history. I worked as a camera operator on "City of Ghosts," the film Matt Dillon directed about Cambodia, in 2001. I remember shooting a scene with [James] Caan, who was supposed to be singing a Cambodian song, lip-synching. I thought: "What is this weird music?" When I got back here, a friend of mine sent me a compilation, "Cambodian Rocks." When I heard the music, I thought: This is a way to tell the history.

How did you find all the footage? The first thing that helped us was that King Norodom Sihanouk [deposed in 1970] had made all these films; he was a filmmaker in the 1960s. He made these glossy color films that showed Phnom Penh as this glamorous place. They were a bit like Bollywood films, with a dramatic scene and a musical number and then a comedy scene. I'm hoping that other stuff gets uncovered now, that someone in Phnom Penh rips up their floorboards and finds a treasure trove. You never know. **Who were the main players in Cambodia's music scene?**

Sinn Sisamouth was not only the most popular, but he was a little bit older. He covered every generation. He started out as a crooner in the '50s. I always think about Elvis, how he had such a negative reaction to The Beatles, but Sinn Sisamouth was the opposite. He said, "This is where the music is going, and I'm going to do this, too." I guess he did have a little generational angst -- he recorded a song called "I'm Too Old to Wear Bell-Bottoms." Easily No. 2 is Ros Sereysothea. Her story is incredibly tragic. She was a poor farmer girl whose father abandoned the family. And she comes to the big city, and her voice is so incredible that she's brought to the National Radio Station. At the time the Khmer Rouge took over, and we lose track of what happens to her, she was only 27. But she'd recorded hundreds and hundreds of songs. **It's amazing how quickly the musicians were keeping pace with the rest of the world. They weren't behind the curve at all.** They seemed to run parallel to Western culture. And not everyone kept up like that -- when you look at Europe at that time, European rock was not that interesting. People have asked me why the Cambodians were able to adapt so well. It's a very artistic culture -- or was.

What do you hope American audiences will take away from the film? I hope Americans will connect with what happened in Cambodia. The music is the great equalizer. You look at these musicians and you think: This kid could be anybody.

WHEN | WHERE Wednesday night at 7:30 at Cinema Arts Centre, 423 Park Ave., Huntington.

TICKETS \$15

INFO 631-423-7611, cinemaartscentre.org