
The singer is one of a new crop of Cambodian artists fusing new beats with sounds from the country's golden age of pop

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SIN SETSOCHHATA, AN emerging singer-songwriter from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, has a deep sense of history and a profound sense of self. Her easy smile reflects the sure-handed emotion of her songs, stories of personal struggle and triumph that delineate her musical journey to date. “Maybe,” she says, “it’s a destiny that’s shaped me.”

Setsochhata comes from a line of musicians going back through her parents to her grandfather, Sinn Sisamouth, an iconic figure who blended traditional elements of Khmer music with early rock & roll, incorporating soul, R&B, and even psychedelia to help develop the unique sounds that defined the golden era of Cambodian rock. Known as “the King of Khmer Music” and “the Elvis of Cambodia” in the Sixties and Seventies, Sisamouth recorded hundreds of songs and, along with singers such as Ros Sereysothea and DJs like Huoy Meas, was a leading light in Phnom Penh’s thriving music scene before disappearing when the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975. The new regime banned foreign sounds in a campaign to drive out Western influences, and hunted down any perceived enemies of the state. (“If you want to eliminate values from past societies, you have to eliminate the artists,” Prince Norodom Sirivudh notes in *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten*, a gripping documentary on Cambodia’s lost rock & rollers of the time.) Now, like her talented forerunners, Setsochhata is drawing on her past — musically, personally, and historically — to create fresh grooves for listeners around the world.

That’s an aim she shares with a rising tide of Cambodian artists, most notably VannDa — who name-checks Setsochhata’s grandfather and other legendary artists as he raps over, around, and through the traditional Cambodian two-string guitar and flute in “Time to Rise,” a song that’s been viewed more than 73 million times on YouTube since its release in March — as well as acts such as Bross La, MC Sey, and Setsochhata’s KlapYaHandz labelmates RuthKo, Reezy, and Vuthea. But Setsochhata stands out from the homegrown, chiefly male rappers who are popular with today’s Cambodian youth. Her soulful songs are stories, not boasts. Where a lot of the guys are badass, she’s a balladeer, more Toni Braxton than Tony Montana.

Two years ago, Setsochhata remade “Champa Battambang,” one of her grandfather’s most beloved hits, harking back to the nostalgic love story and surfy guitar and

organs of the 1962 original while creating a jazzier, more contemporary version all her own for the 2019 film *In the Life of Music*. In 2020, she co-wrote and recorded three songs for *Music Magic Love*, a drama series set in contemporary Phnom Penh. This spring, Sochatta, 27, released “Truth,” “Believe,” and “No Regrets,” which
5 comprise the beautifully rendered Realization trilogy, and her releases since then include a Mekong-blues collaboration with Grammy-nominated Krom and a slow-burning duet with native break rapper Vin Vitou.

We Zoomed with the rising artist to track her history and chat about her trilogy, musical legacies, and what’s driving her music forward.

10 **You were born in Phnom Penh, and your father was a musician. What sort of music did you listen to growing up?**

Growing up in a musical family was really amazing for me, from my grandfather to my father and to my brother and even my mom, who was a singer as well. I woke up every morning listening to music, with my parents playing it all the time, from early
15 morning until late evening. I grew up in this kind of environment.

A musical household.

When I was, say, seven years old, I started to realize, “Oh, I’m the granddaughter of this legendary [singer].” Before that, I’d never known anything about myself, about my family. I knew my grandfather’s name, Sinn Sisamouth, but I had no idea he was
20 famous. No idea at all. When I was eight or nine, there was a class and an article talking about my grandfather and another pop singer back in the Sixties and Seventies. That’s when I realized, “Oh! This is my grandfather. Oh, my God.”

Beyond his own success, your grandfather was known for his duets and helping empower other artists. What musical lessons do you take away from him?

25 To me personally, music is a huge part of human life. So that’s [one thing] I learned from my grandfather’s music. When I was young, it’s just, like, me listening to a song. But when I’m older, I start to look back into every detail of the songs: the words, the meaning, the context. I have no chance of talking to him in person, but I can learn all of that from his music.

30 We have one kind of traditional music, played with Khmer instruments, my grandfather kind of converted in a modern way, [keeping] the format of traditional music, but using it with modern instruments. He would always see things outside of the box and try to get new things combined with the old stuff....

I think that trying to find yourself is really important. I prioritize that as an artist because I feel like when you cannot find yourself, you cannot let people know who you are. So that's what I've learned from my grandfather's music as well.

5 What you would say is the most popular music in Cambodia today, and how do you see yourself fitting into the greater music scene there?

First, I'd say pop music. Writing a beautiful love song or maybe a broken-hearted one is always popular. But the younger generation, younger audiences are more into hip-hop. Me, I'm still into R&B, soul music, and jazz and blues.

When did you start singing?

10 I started singing when I was five, and back then, in Cambodia, we were influenced by Thai music. So I recorded my voice singing Thai and sent it to my grandmother, who was living by the border with Laos. I had no idea what the meaning of it is, I just sang. And at maybe seven or eight, people, friends at school, even teachers know I can sing. I'd sing the national anthem, like almost every day.

15 When I was around 14 or 15, I started listening to more international music. Back in the Nineties I was a fan girl of American and British boy bands, like Backstreet Boys and Blue. Yeah, I grew up being a fan of boy bands. And after that, in the early 2000s, I started listening to more R&B: Chris Brown, Alicia Keys, and others. This is my music journey as a listener.

20 How did the listening become performing?

I started singing at charity concerts at school. In 2016, I started singing at my university, but back then I never thought of being a musical artist. That wasn't my goal, because I'd seen a lot of struggles my father had been through, my family had been through. My friend said, "Sochhata, you have a beautiful voice, you should have
25 done something." Some [people] even told me to apply for a singing contest. But I said, "No, no, no, that's not my thing." But then they said, "OK, if you don't apply for any singing contests, just do this SoundCloud one posted on YouTube, or maybe Facebook." And I said, "OK, I'll do that if you want." But it's a little bit funny because I'd never shown my full face like this [smiles], just like half of my face with that.

30 That's changed!

Yeah. One day, a film producer who used to work for BBC came to Cambodia, and he found me on Facebook, seeing me doing this English song cover. He just reached out, asking if I'd be interested in making music for his film series [Music Magic Love]. He already had the music and lyrics in English, but when I got them and started singing,

there was something inside that felt like, “Oh, this is not right.” So I asked him if he would mind my changing some of the lyrics. And that’s how I started to write. He was like, “Whoa, fantastic.”

5 **You write and sing mostly in Khmer but also in English. Do you want to continue doing both?**

When it came to my trilogy, I felt like maybe I could write it all in Khmer. But I think things changed along the way, because the first song that I wrote is “Truth,” which took me a whole year to complete — but then one day, just sitting in my room, things popped up in my mind, and I’m like [sings in English] “Believe in yourself, finding
10 your way.” That’s the first line. It’s the first line that comes to my mind. And then I just, you know, sit down and start writing [“Believe”].

I can say that writing in English is an experiment for my musical journey, to see my possibilities, see my ability to do things. I just take it as an experiment because, for now, Cambodian audiences have started listening to international music as well, so
15 why not?

And of course, the songs in my trilogy have different tastes, different moods, different tones. I just want to put it out to the audience and see which ones they like, which ones they don’t like.

20 **Each song on Realization is different, but together they present a bigger picture. Tell me about the opener, “Truth.”**

After my dad passed away, it took me two years to recover from the loss, because I’m the youngest daughter and I was so close to him. It was a very hard time for me, losing a loved one for the very first time in my life. It’s just really hard, because I feel like I always talked to him about everything. The good things, the bad things, I
25 shared everything with him. So losing him made me feel like, “Oh, from now on, who can I talk to? Who can I share with, and who can I run to when I need someone?”

After two years, I started to realize that I can’t stay like this for the rest of my life [but there’s] one question I always ask myself again and again: Why? That’s the only question: Why? Why did he leave me? Why did he have to go so early? And I cried myself to sleep every single day, but I got no answer. So I started to talk to myself a lot ... you know, asking myself why. One day I woke up and the answer that I got was
30 “Because he already left. You can never get him back.” Then why live in this situation for the rest of your life, Sochhata? Wake up! Just like today, when you woke up and you have the answer. That’s when I started to realize, “OK, this is my starting point.
35 This is where I have to stand up for myself.”

Just like the song says: “Face the truth.”

Face the truth, yes! But then, at the end of 2019, unfortunately, my brother Sethakol passed away. That’s when I know ... it’s the time to take action. Start waking up and stand up for myself. Yeah. I finished “Truth,” and then “Believe” after that. I wrote
5 “Believe” in just 30 minutes.

Thirty minutes!

It’s unbelievable, it’s unbelievable. But it happens because working on writing music, it’s not like we have to limit it, like, “Oh, you have to write this in two days, in three days, in one month or two months.” We can never limit that, sometimes it
10 just comes right away. [At other times] you have the inspiration, but it’s not enough. You kind of need the emotion to include in that. You have to find a right way to work it out, to interpret your feeling into song lyrics.

Did you know that you were going to do a short film for Realization as you were recording?

15 I actually had no idea at all, to be honest. I can never be thankful enough for Sreylin Meas. She’s an amazing director. She came up with the idea, including all the tiny moments.

So where are you going from here?

20 I make music because I love it and don’t want to waste my talent. That’s what people always tell me, that you have almost everything that everyone really wants, but why don’t you use that? That’s also one of the motivations that pushes me to go on my musical journey. And I’m so thankful for the people around. But I make music because I love it. It’s not like I’m living under the legacy of my grandfather anymore. Let’s just say I’m creating my own legacy.

25 **Are you working on anything now?**

I’m working on my next EP and hope to get it done by next year. I don’t want to force myself. I don’t want to rush things. I’m preparing the themes of the EP, even the stories. [For] my trilogy, I kind of integrated the feelings of my own self into song lyrics and put it out. For my next EP, the plan is to collect stories from people around
30 me. Maybe they’re the closest people of mine, you know, that I can talk to. And they are willing to share with me their untold story. I would name it The Untold Stories. That’s the plan for now.