

Suraphon Sombatjaroen on 78 rpm: The development of Thailand's king of music business¹

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Abstract

Suraphon Sombatjaroen (1930-1968), still known as 'the king of Thai country song', has become a legendary figure in Thailand, dominating all discussion of early *lukthung*. Thailand's popular media (television, film and newspapers) regularly present the romantic image of Suraphon as an individual artistic genius killed in his prime. However, his recording and business history has received little scholarly attention. This article describes Suraphon's use of the 78 rpm record format and his exploitation of the emerging *lukthung* audience in order to contribute to a fuller understanding of the Thai popular music industry during the 1950s and 1960s. Through the skilful manipulation and management of audience tastes, band personnel and content provision, Suraphon became the first Thai artist to bring song writing, performance, recording process, management and promotion completely under his own control.

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Introduction

Suraphon Sombatjaroen (1930-1968), still known as ‘the king of Thai country song’, has become a legendary figure in Thailand, dominating all discussion of early *lukthung*. Thailand’s popular media (television, film and newspapers) regularly present the romantic image of Suraphon as an individual genius killed in his prime. For example, when then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra announced, in September 2002, that he would like to stay in power for sixteen years, he was alluding to Suraphon’s *Sixteen years of our past* (สิบหกปีแห่งความหลัง). Editor of *The Nation* newspaper, Thanong Khanthong, responded with a discussion of Suraphon’s life:

Suraphol [*sic*] died on August 16, 1968 from gunshot wounds, leaving a rich repertoire of luk thung songs that embodied the spirit of the 1960s when Elvis Presley and the Beatles were rocking the world with their electrifying performances. But Suraphol, who came from a humble background in Suphan Buri, had his own special way of crooning the songs he composed by himself. His music was rich in style and his lyrics reflected the changes Thai society was undergoing at that time.²

Here are all the key elements of the Suraphon story. The Thai equivalent of Elvis or the Beatles, Suraphon is credited with a unique performance style and it is stressed that he wrote all of his own songs. His music is said to be the soundtrack for the 1960s in Thailand. Thanong’s description is representative of a multitude of articles, theses and books that emphasise Suraphon’s creativity and his singularity.

What is missing from the popular and academic discussion of Suraphon is an assessment of his business skills and how these skills contributed to the formation of his memory. This article does not so much seek new eyewitness accounts of Suraphon, as analyse a primary source that has hitherto received very little attention from researchers – that is, the actual records that comprise Suraphon’s

² Thanong, “PM Thaksin to embrace Suraphol doctrine?”, 1.

discography. Suraphon recorded on 78 rpm (both shellac and vinyl), 45 rpm and 33 rpm, but it is the former that contains the largest amount of untapped research data. Suraphon's 78 rpm discography is a chronological record of his entire career extending from 1953 to 1968 – incidentally exactly sixteen years.

It must be understood that the practice of collecting 78 rpm records is a very recent phenomenon in Thailand and consequently the general public knows little about this abandoned format. After 78 rpm production ceased in 1969 many shellac records were melted down for a variety of purposes, including making vases and also as an adhesive to connect knives to their handles, and many vinyl records were destroyed. However, government radio stations and temples continued to make use of their 78 rpm libraries and later preserved them to varying degrees and, as a consequence, numerous records have survived. My investigation into the revival of interest in vintage Thai pop music will appear in an edited volume in 2014 but, in summary, it appears that spurred by internal political turmoil post 2006, increasing numbers of middle and upper class Thais have returned to the popular culture of their youth and that of their parents. As the most famous musician of the golden era of Thai song, Suraphon is a symbol of a remarkable period of creativity that modern Thais are increasingly appreciating.

Discographical framework and literature

My research has identified 267 78 rpm records that have some connection to Suraphon and to this can be added a further eight 45 rpm records that have material not found on 78 rpm (the usual practice for the majority of Suraphon's career being that songs were issued on all three formats). After removing individual songs that have no Suraphon connection, my list consists of 458 songs that Suraphon played a part in, whether as singer, songwriter or band leader. It should be noted that some of Suraphon's songs were issued more than once and recorded by more than one artist. This analysis is therefore limited to songs that were recorded during Suraphon's lifetime, or immediately after, on the Chang Samsian label or as posthumous tributes.

In order to put my research into context, it is necessary to provide a brief review of the literature on Suraphon Sombatjaroen. After Suraphon's murder in 1968, several books and films about his life were produced. The most notable book, partly because it speculated freely on who might have been responsible for the murder, is *Suraphon's Life of Struggle* (ชีวิตการต่อสู้ของสุรพล), published in 1969 by the renowned Isan songwriter K. Kaeoprasoet and Wijiit Khumsap. The films include *Sixteen Years of Our Past* (สิบหกปีแห่งความหลัง), *Suraphon My Son* (สุรพลลูกพ่อ), and *Spirit of Suraphon* (วิญญาณสุรพล). *Suraphon My Son* starred singer Banjop Jaiphra and actress Sopa Sophaphon and was directed by Rangsi Thasanaphayak, who went on to make the famous *Magic of Lukthung* (มนต์รักลูกทุ่ง) (1970). The film was financed by the deceased singer's father and many of the Sombatjaroen family appeared in it. However, Srinuan (Suraphon's wife) and most members of the band boycotted it and instead contributed to *Sixteen Years of Our Past*.

After this initial flurry of publishing, writers appear to have been put off by family managed copyright issues. Waeng Phalangwan's compelling *Isan Country Song* (ลูกทุ่งอีสาน) (2002)³ and Siriphon Krorphthong's excellently researched history of *lukthung* (2004)⁴ were not intended as Suraphon biographies, but contain the most original information from the intervening period. However, Phornsri Woranut's recent decision to put on record her dealings with Suraphon appears to have inspired a new wave of publishing. Typical of this new wave is Loetchai Khochayut's *King and Queen of Thai Country Song: Suraphon Sombatjaroen and Phornsri Woranut* (ราชาและราชินีลูกทุ่ง สุรพล สมบัติเจริญ-ผ่องศรี วรนุช) (2012) which adds little new information apart from Phornsri's reminiscences.

By far the most significant text on Suraphon and his recordings to this point is Phichit Thisaphak's *One of the Best in the History of Thai Country Song: Suraphon Sombatjaroen* (หนึ่งในหน้าประวัติศาสตร์เพลงลูกทุ่งไทย สุรพล สมบัติเจริญ) (2009). Phichit's book is almost unique in Thai language musicology in that he references and includes

³ See discussion of Waeng in Mitchell, "Waeng Phalangwan - A Lao-Isan perspective", 66-96.

⁴ See discussion of Siriphon in Mitchell, "Sorapet Pinyoo", 295-321.

discographical data, while detailing 252 songs that were either written or performed by Suraphon. I have been able to combine my own discographical research with Phichit's data so as to compile the academic literature's most comprehensive list of recorded Suraphon songs. By way of comparison, Phichit cites 126 songs sung by Suraphon on records, whereas my own list calculates 187 such songs just on 78 rpm (although included are six early Kratai masters). Conversely, I catalogue 258 songs that were definitely written by Suraphon, whereas Phichit's appendix lists 323, although he includes many songs that were never recorded or were only recorded on 45 or 33 rpm. Both of our totals are significantly higher than the estimate of 204 songs written by Suraphon (and recorded on any format) that is frequently quoted on Thai websites.⁵ Since I have only included records that I have actually seen or can be attested by Phichit, my list will surely expand in a future publication.

Discographical Table

The following table summarizes Suraphon's career in chronological order according to his participation in a remarkable 45 78 rpm brands, providing the years of his involvement and number of records he recorded, along with other key personalities from his records with each brand. Note that the table includes some records published after Suraphon's death for reasons already elaborated.

Brand	Years of Suraphon's involvement	Number of records with Suraphon connection	Other key persons on the Suraphon records
Kratai ('rabbit')	1953-1956	9	Prathumrat Sornrabiap, Norng Joi, Phanni Muangsornkhiao
D. Couper Johnston and co. Bangkok	1956-1957	5	Mongkhon Amatayakun, Prachum Phumsiri, Wongjan Phairot
Asawin	1956-1958	4	Latda Sriworanan, Samphan Umakun

⁵ See, for example <<http://www.chumchonradio.net/wizContent.asp?wizConID=84>>.

Brand	Years of Suraphon's involvement	Number of records with Suraphon connection	Other key persons on the Suraphon records
Sahamit/Rakhang	1957	2	Roikaeo Rakthai, Mongkhon Amatayakun
Srisuphan	1957	1	Samniang Muangthorng
Nak Rorng	1957	2	Mongkhon Amatayakun
Hong	1957-1961	13	Wongjan Phairot, Suwari Iam-ai, Slai Krailoet
Wua Krathing	1957-1961	12	Somsri Muangsonkhiao, Samniang Muangthorng, Juea Rangraengjit
Samor (Anchor) R.O.C.K.	1958	2	Juea Rangraengjit, Emorn Wisetsut
Ying Chu Chang	1958	1	Naengnoi Songwonlak
Yokhi Thorng Phun Phaphayon	1958	1	Naengnoi Songwonlak, Suraphon Thonawanik
Ekachai Phasuk	1958	1	Siri Khumyu
Ma ('horse')	1958	3	Samniang Muangthorng, Phaibun Butkhan
Phan Thai Norasing	1958-1959	4	Samniang Muangthorng, Samphan Umakun
Tukhata Thorng	1959	3	Samniang Muangthorng, Wipharat Prueangsuwan
Banthoeng	1959	1	
Peacock	1959	5	Samniang Muangthorng, Mayuri Phurahong, Chusri Thorngyaem
Mongkut	1959-1960	2	Phorngsri Woranut, Srisa-ang Trinet
Nakharat	1959-1960	15	Slai Krailoet, Suwari Iam-ai, Udom Thorngkham, Samniang Muangthorng
Nok Kaeo	1959-1960	8	Yongyut Chiaoachai, Phorngsri Woranut, Siri Khumyu, Phraiwan Lukphet
Kamathep	1959-1961	9	Pricha Mettrai, Samniang

Brand	Years of Suraphon's involvement	Number of records with Suraphon connection	Other key persons on the Suraphon records
('Cupid')			Muangthorng, Suwari Iam-ai, Wongjan Phairot
Donjedi	1959-1961	20	Phorngsri Woranut, Mayuri Phurahong, Chusri Thorngyaem, Phraiwan Lukphet, Yongyut Chiaoachanchai, Kan Kaeosuphan
Phaya Nak	1960	1	Phaibun Butkhan
Nakhon Thorng	1960	1	Suraphon Thonawanik, Prachum Phumsiri
Good Luck	1960	2	Yongyut Chiaoachanchai, Samniang Muangthorng
Chao Na Sukjai	1960-1961	4	Yongyut Chiaoachanchai, Wanthana Sangkangwan, Komin Nilawong
Chao Na	1961	7	Phorngsri Woranut, Kulap Kathinasamit, Phayong Mukda, Praphan Suriyasak
Hong Thorng ('golden swan')	1961	3	Tueanjai Bunphraraksa, Mueangmon Sombatjaroen, La-orngdao
Insri ('eagle')	1961	6	Yongyut Chiaoachanchai, Tueanjai Bunphraraksa, Phraiwan Lukphet
Saeng Prathip	1961	2	Phorngsri Woranut, Phiphat Boribun
Khao	1961	1	
Khao Phra Wihan	1961	1	Chaichana Bunnachot
Nok Khun Thorng	1961	5	Phorngsri Woranut, Kan Kaeosuphan, Kulap Kathinasamit
Phra Athit	1961	1	Phayong Mukda
Phukhao	1961	2	Phira Tribuppha
Phaen Siang Thai	1962	1	Yongyut Chiaoachanchai
SSS	1962	2	Yongyut Chiaoachanchai, Samran Phakdi-asa, Phorngsri Woranut

Brand	Years of Suraphon's involvement	Number of records with Suraphon connection	Other key persons on the Suraphon records
Suphannahong	1962	2	Kan Kaeosuphan, Sak Koson, Phraiwan Lukphet, Yongyut Chiaoanchai
Chang Samsian	1961-1969	96	Chusri Thorngyaem, Rungnapha Darakun, Phanomphrai Lukphet, Mueangmon Sombatjaroen, Kangwanphrai Lukphet, Sriphrai Lukrachaburi, Thorngbai Rungrueang, Sakchai Wanchai, La-ongdao, Sakaoduean, Jinda Sombatjaroen, Thaen Nakhonpathom, Jittakon Buaniam, Phon Phonaphrai
Thao Suranari	1965?	2	Thaen Nakhonpathom, Sakchai Wanchai
Kai Khu Boe 31	1966	2	Phayong Mukda, Chalorng Karaket
Kulapthip/Winyawat	1967?	1	Manat Suksri
Prang Sam Yort	1968?	1	Khwanjit Sriprajan
Duangjan	1969	1	Jinda Sombatjaroen
Sombat Bunsiri	1969	1	Yuphin Phraethorng, Sombat Bunsiri
45 brands	1953-1969	267	

Suraphon's career and entrepreneurial development

Suraphon's career can be usefully divided into three periods (with some overlap) as follows: firstly, the early song writing years with T. Ngekchuan's *Kratai* label (1953-1955); secondly, a period of being a singer/songwriter for hire (1956-1960); and thirdly, his long period of independence leading his own troupe and producing his own records (1961-1968).

First period: The *Kratai* label

Suraphon produced at least 17 songs for Sino-Thai T. Ngekchuan's *Kratai* label between 1953 and 1955. In doing so he joined a long list of legendary performers who began their careers under the 'Rabbit' brand, including Juri (Manthana) Morakun, Winai Julabusapa, Suthep Wongkamhaeng, Wongjan Phairot and Khamron Sambunnanon (as Thorngkham Sambunnanon). Since the death of T. Ngekchuan in 1970 the family has resisted all attempts to purchase, examine or study the huge collection of remaining records, until recently I was the first person to be given access. The *Kratai* collection enabled me to compare the various dates of writing, mastering and issuing for a number of records. Because T. Ngekchuan, up until the mid 1950s, sent his records to Europe to be mastered and then, in the case of his partnership with Columbia, usually to India to be manufactured, there was a significant delay between the writing of a song and the issuing of the record, in some cases of up to three years. Suraphon was ambitious and this kind of delay would not have impressed him – later he would take control of the recording and mastering processes so that a new Chang Samsian single could be issued on average once a month with a turnaround time of less than two months.

A more positive lesson was available to Suraphon during his assignation with *Tra Kratai* – the means to appeal to the largest developing demographic for *ramwong* and *lukthung*. Throughout the 1950s *Kratai* was recording and issuing original *morlam* performances under the description of *phleng Isan*. Suraphon practiced his song writing with T. Ngekchuan's younger brother and it is quite conceivable that *Kratai's morlam* catalogue and the existence of a *morlam* audience could have provided the background and inspiration behind the subject matter of songs such as *Tears of a Lao from Vientiane* (น้ำตาลาวเวียง), *Lao Visiting the Jungle* (ลาวชมดง) and *Lao Visiting the Forest* (ลาวชมป่า). Even at this early stage in both Suraphon and *lukthung's* development, the Isan audience was extremely important. Presumably, the targeted purchasers of *morlam* recordings, apart from rural radio stations, were Isan urban migrants and they were also consumers of live music. Miller notes that as early

as 1946, a *morlam* concert in Bangkok was advertised by trucks playing *morlam*. Almost 3,000 Isan migrants followed the trucks to the Rajadamnoen Boxing Stadium.⁶ Thus, from T. Ngekchuan, Suraphon would have learnt that both the Isan and the Sino-Thai communities were worth pursuing.

Second Period: Singer and songwriter for hire

After leaving *Kratai*, Suraphon worked as a free lance singer for established songwriters, such as P. Chuenprayot, Roikaeo Rakthai, Samphan Umakun, and Slai Krailoet. He had temporary positions fronting Juea Rangraengjit's Mambo Rock, Chutima Suwannarat and Somphong Wongrakthai's Bangkok Cha Cha Cha and Mongkhon Amatayakun's Jularat and wrote songs for some of the *phleng Thai sakon* era's biggest stars, including Wongjan Phairot, Latda Sriworanan, Narit Ari, Somyot Thasanaphan and Suthep Wongkamhaeng. During this middle period, Suraphon appears to have absorbed valuable lessons from the negative experiences of other songwriters.

From the premier songwriter Phaibun Butkhan, he learnt that in the burgeoning entertainment industry it was unwise to be too moody in one's writing. Consequently, Suraphon continued to make his mark with light, happy songs that distinguished his output from that of Phaibun, whose sad songs at the time were instead performed by the rising star (and protégé of Benjamin) Thun Thorngjai. Also from Phaibun, Suraphon would have learnt about the fragility of the songwriter's existence. Suraphon was able to snare one of Phaibun's songs 'on the cheap' during a period when the older man had become too famous for what the market could support. Used to receiving 600 baht per song, Phaibun produced a series of songs under the name Sarot Srisamlae, including *Frost in the Sixth Month* (น้ำค้างเดือนหก) (Phaya Nak GTT2) for Suraphon and *Rain in the Seventh Month* (น้ำฝนเดือนเจ็ด) (SSS6) for Phorngsri, which were sold for only 200 to 300 baht per song.⁷ Phaibun's problem was that he did not control the production and distribution aspects of his music and this made him

⁶ Miller, *Traditional music of the Lao*, 40.

⁷ Phichit, *One of the Best in the History of Thai Country Song*, 255-256 (in Thai).

vulnerable to undercutting and shifts in taste. Suraphon learnt that he could ensure the long term market for his songs by controlling the entire production process.

Suraphon was always keen to learn from other songwriters. He must have studied the methods of the older generation closely because many of his song titles were borrowed from older songs – *Talking Behind Someone's Back* (จุดใต้ตำตอ), *Promiscuous Mora* (โมราก็) and *Man Appeases His Moody Girlfriend* (หญิงงอนชายจ้อ) to name just a few examples. On at least one occasion he sought formal instruction from an established songwriter. In an earlier article I described the argument between Benjamin and Suraphon,⁸ which was partly caused by Benjamin's resentment at Suraphon borrowing elements of his singing style, although it was mostly over Phorngsri leaving the latter's band. Waeng records that early in his career Suraphon actually asked to become Benjamin's student, but that Benjamin rejected him and then was not able to accept it when the younger man became famous.⁹ It is interesting that during Suraphon's second period he and Benjamin appeared on records together, for example, Hong SW037 fronting the Roikaeo Rakthai and Phayong Mukda bands respectively, and Ekachai Phasuk AP05 on which they each perform with the comical Siri Khumyu. These examples show that at this stage of his career Suraphon was not always able to make his own choices, but he obviously learnt from these contacts with the older generation of performers.

Third Period: Transition to independence and then dominance

Suraphon grasped the importance of branding and unlike many of his contemporaries he was able to maintain consistent branding from the time he first became independent. After several years of free lancing for other songwriters and their bands, he joined Samniang Muangthorng and Phorngsri Woranut in Kan Kaeosuphan's Prakai Dao troupe circa 1958-59. However, he was anxious to be his own master and Suraphon officially launched his own band at Wat Chot Thai Karam in Ratchaburi

⁸ See Mitchell, "Waeng Phalangwan", 83-86.

⁹ Waeng, *Isan Country Song*, 202 (in Thai).

on Chinese New Year, 1960.¹⁰ This first edition of the Suraphon Sombatjaroen band included Kan, Phorngsri and Yongyut Chiaoachai and sometimes the band name would change according to who the person booking was most interested in, e.g., the Phorngsri Woranut Band. Most of the musicians and equipment came from the Air Force Band and it was not until 1961 that the Suraphon Sombatjaroen Band became a solid entity. The fluidity of the ensemble at that time is usefully illustrated by three consecutive Nok Khun Thorng records from 1960/61. ST02 features *Faithful Southerner* (คนใต้ใจซื่อ) sung by Suraphon for Kan Kaeosuphan's Prakai Dao and ST03 includes *Northern Girl Tired of Love* (สาวเหนือเบื่อรัก) sung by Phorngsri Woranut for Prakai Dao. However, ST04 has Kan performing *Ploughed Furrows* (รอยไถแปร) and Phorngsri singing *Tears of the Major Wife* (น้ำตาเมียหลวง) both for the Suraphon Sombatjaroen band (see figure 1).

During the early years of the 1960s, Suraphon led a fundamental shift within the Thai music industry. Unlike the previous generation of songwriters, Suraphon was not afraid to use his talent and future output as a bargaining chip. Phorngsri Woranut recalls that in late 1959 Suraphon was able to convince his new record company, Cathay, to use Phorngsri, then a relatively unknown singer, to record *You Won't Forget?* (ไหนว่าไม่ลืม), because Suraphon had just left Kamon Sukoson and the manager at Cathay was afraid that he would change his mind.¹¹ This indicates that Suraphon had up to that point followed in the footsteps of established songwriters such as P. Chuenprayot, Phaibun Butkhan and Benjamin, who always worked for, and recorded their songs through, one of the major companies. However, Suraphon wanted to be his own boss and, with backing from a wealthy patron, had just begun a semi-independent label named Donjedi. He also promoted his records by renting a radio station and by advertising through radio,¹² newspapers and leaflets. He became the first artist to bring song writing, performance, recording process, management and promotion completely under his own control. Four major companies – D. Couper

¹⁰ See <<http://www.thaifilm.com/forumDetail.asp?topicID=4712&page=1&keyword=>>.

¹¹ Interview with the author 26 April 2012.

¹² See Phichit, *One of the Best in the History of Thai Country Song*, 24 (in Thai).

Johnston, Kamon Sukoson, Srikrung and Yisimon – still controlled the business side of the recording studios and the distribution networks, but Suraphon’s business model, whereby the artist assumed creative and financial control, was an example soon followed by younger contemporaries such as Phloen Phromdaen (Nok Iang), Waiphot Phetsuphan (Phetsuphan), Phraiwan Lukphet (Phraiwan Lukphet) and Phorngsri Woranut (Hoi Sang).



Figure 1: Nok Khunthong ST02 and 04. (Photos from Khanueng Saengthorng)

In 1959, Suraphon launched his first record label named Donjedi, after a town in his home province of Suphanburi. Donjedi (see figure 2) was highly successful with around 25 records issued, including the Suraphon penned mega-hits for Phorngsri, *Bangkok* (กรุงเทพ) (SS509), and Yongyut Chiaoachai, *Farmer's Oath* (สัญญาของชาวนา) (SSC06). However, after the messy professional breakup with Phorngsri occurred, Suraphon must have felt that a permanent band and new identity required a new record label, and so the iconic Chang Samsian brand was launched in late 1961. Chang Samsian maintained an unbroken run of approximately 110 78 rpm records (of which I have been able to locate 96), until the format was abandoned in 1969, as well as 45 rpm production from 1967 until Srinuan dissolved the Sit Suraphon ('disciples of S') band in 1973. This tally makes Chang Samsian the most prolific brand of what I term the Late Period of 78 rpm production in Thailand (1958 to 1969).¹³



Figure 2: Suraphon's *Parrot Forgets the Jungle* (แก้วลมตง) issued on the Donjedi label in 1961. (Photo from Khanueng Saengthorng)

¹³ I divide the Thai 78 rpm era into three – Early (1905 to 1947), Middle (1948 to 1957) and Late (1958 to 1969). My reasons for doing so will be set out in a future publication.

Although Benjamin popularized Phibunsongkhram's engineered dance craze of *ramwong* from the 1940s as a popular song form during the 1950s, it was Suraphon that ensured that Benjamin's *ramwong* became the key ingredient of 1960s *lukthung*. The following charts catalogue the styles found in all Suraphon 78 rpm songs and then just on the iconic Chang Samsian brand. The overall dominance of *ramwong* is quite extraordinary – 40 percent of Suraphon's songs are listed as *ramwong* on the record label (compared to 25 percent of all *lukthung* 78 rpm songs).¹⁴ This shows that Suraphon considered *ramwong* to be the most important element of his songwriting and also confirms what was stated earlier – that he preferred up tempo, lively music to sad, moody songs, hence the lower incidence of slow and bolero rhythms.

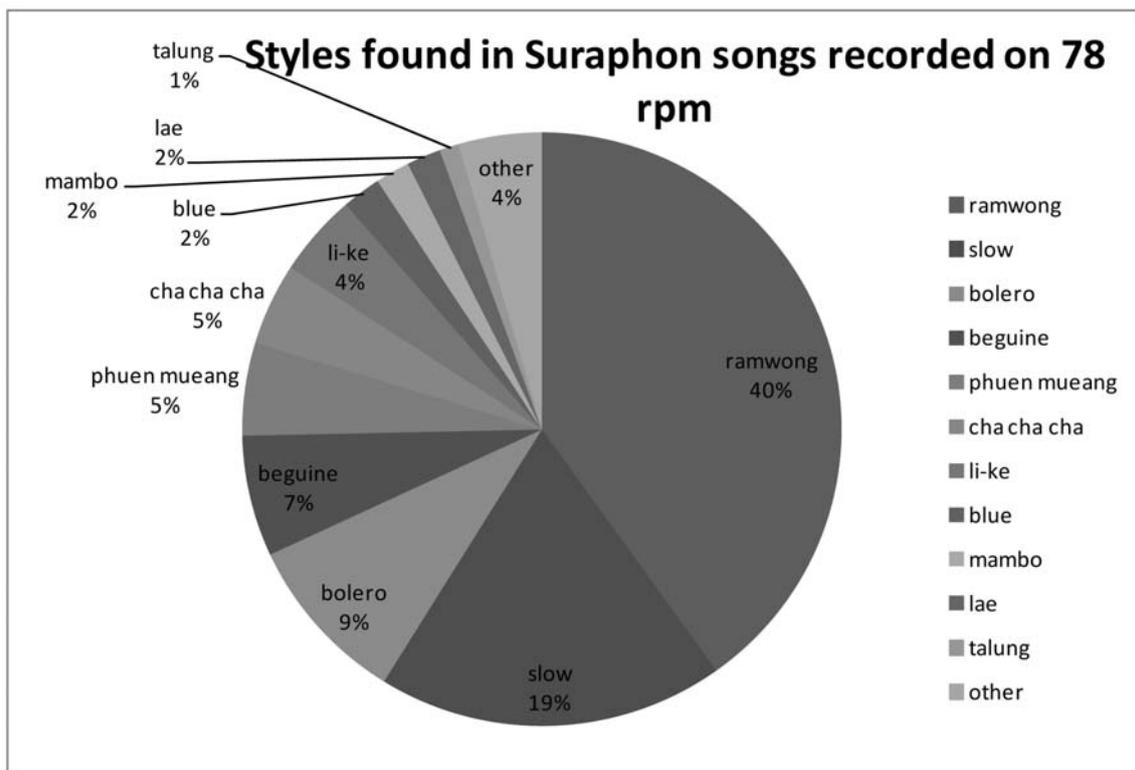


Figure 3: Styles found in Suraphon 78 rpm songs

¹⁴ Data for all *lukthung* and *phleng Thai sakon* songs will appear in a future publication.

The other significant variation is the low incidence of the Central Thai folk genre *lae* (2%, compared to 6% of all *lukthung* 78 rpm songs), which is surprising because *lae* was one of the most significant influences on the emerging *lukthung* style. Probably this shows that Suraphon was simply not comfortable singing the style, or less plausibly, indicates that he was more intent on pursuing the Lao-Isan audience than the Central Thai. In my list there are only two instances of Suraphon performing *lae* style songs, with the majority being sung by Kangwanphrai Lukphet and Thorngbai Rungrueang. It is quite possible that Suraphon eschewed *lae* to avoid comparison with fellow Suphanburi legend Waiphot Phetsuphan, who was known as ‘the king of *lae*’.

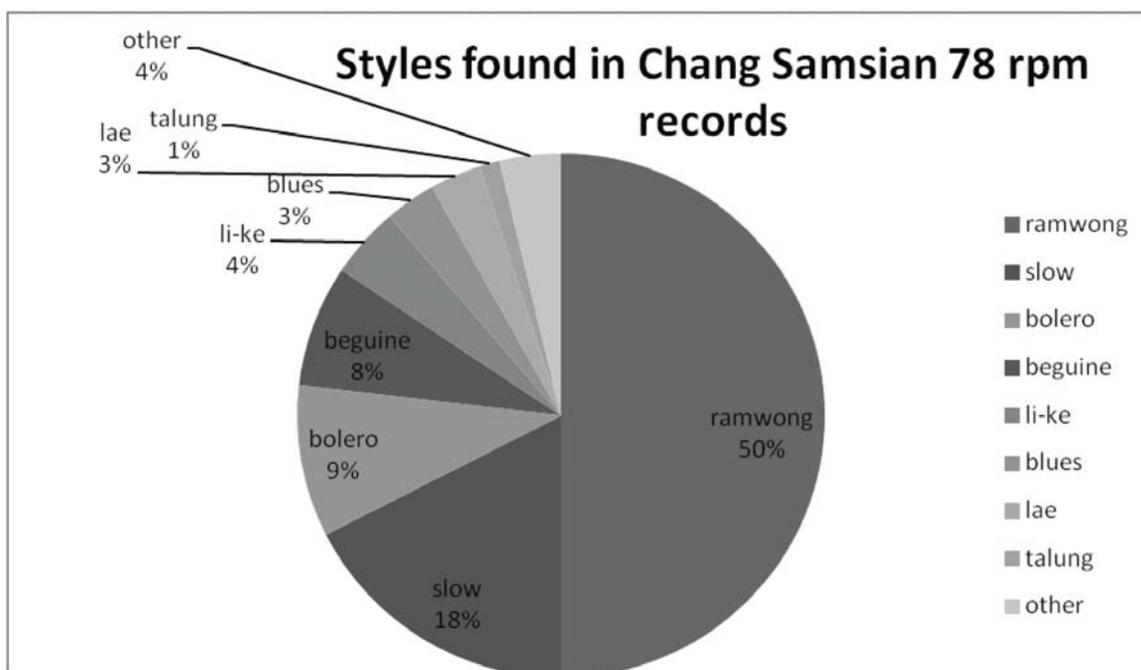


Figure 4: Styles found in Chang Samsian 78 rpm songs

Analysis of just the Chang Samsian 78 rpm records reveals that *ramwong* makes up an astounding 50 percent of the styles. Slow, bolero and beguine are essentially the same but, surprisingly, there are no examples of cha cha, mambo or *phuen mueang* (‘folk song’). This could be because Suraphon used *ramwong* as a broad description – certainly many of these songs use cha cha rhythms – but it does indicate that he had identified the necessary scope of his product and consistently produced what the audience preferred.

The formal division between *lukthung* ('country songs') and *lukkrung* ('city songs') was not made until at least 1964,¹⁵ but during the late 1950s and early years of the 1960s most singers were content to either sing *phleng talat* ('market songs') or *phleng phu di* ('good people's songs'). However, Suraphon followed Benjamin in not restricting himself to one market or style. Suraphon's voice is now considered the archetypal *lukthung* sound, but in his heyday he was obviously regarded as polished enough to sometimes be placed in the category of *phleng phu di*. Several of his 78 rpm records, such as Kamathep A42 and Wua Kathing K029, have the *lukkrung* king Charin Ngammueang on the reverse side. Further evidence can be found in his ongoing contract with Columbia, an international company that generally eschewed *lukthung*. On Columbia and Kamon Sukoson he wrote for and shared records with one of Thailand's first rock n' rollers, Misak Nakharat, although Misak, like Suraphon, was a notable jack of all trades.

It appears that the Thai audiences of the 1960s had marvellously eclectic tastes, but it is also true that experimentation with outside influences was a well established trend within the Thai popular music industry of the 1950s. Suraphon followed the example set by older writers, such as Nakhon Mongkhlayon, Nakhon Thanormsap, Phayong Mukda and Benjamin, in incorporating foreign rhythms and tunes into his songs. Sometimes this was almost slavish mimicry – Benjamin's *Caucasian in Thailand* (ฝรั่งเมืองไทย) (Nakharat KS33), which combined mambo with *ramwong* was quickly followed by Suraphon's own pastiche, *Blackout Mambo* (มดไฟแมมโบ้) (Nakharat KS69). When Benjamin's songs using Korean melodies proved popular, Suraphon responded with his own Korean flavoured songs, such as *Korean Storehouse* (คลังเกาหลี) (c1957) and *Love Under the Cherry Blossom Tree* (รักริงโง) (c1960), which were not particularly successful. His Vietnamese themed *phleng kae*, *Thai Boy's Voice* (เสียงจากหนุ่มไทย) (Chang Samsian no. 62) and *Answer from Vietnam* (เสียงตอบจากเวียดนาม) (no. 63) sung by La-orngdao, were more successful, but he was preceded by Isan songwriter, Sombat Bunsiri,

¹⁵ See Mitchell, "Thai television and *pleeng luuk tung*", 87-88.

who specialised in Vietnamese travel songs such as *Travel Poem Love Vietnam* (นิราศรักเวียดนาม), despite never actually going abroad.¹⁶ Suraphon's friend, Chaloechai Sriruecha, pioneered songs about the Mekhong, which Suraphon imitated with *Full Moon on the Bank of The Mekhong* (เดือนหงายที่ริมโขง) (Chang Samsian no. 18), and the use of Khmer language in *lukthung*, for example in *Lowland Cambodian Laments* (เขมรต่ำรำพัน). However, Suraphon made one particular source material undeniably his own area – that of Japanese themed songs.

The case of Chusri Thorngyaem illustrates a key reason for Suraphon's success – he was able to identify talent and supply content that suited the protégé's personality. Chusri's Police Captain father trained her to sing in Japanese so that she could accompany the screening of Japanese films. When Suraphon discovered her at age fourteen he believed he had found a singer who could follow in the footsteps of Somsri Muangsonkhiao, who had had a huge hit with Benjamin's *Lament from Korea* (เสียงครวญจากเกาหลี) in 1957. His first song for Chusri, *Love Beyond the Sky* (รักเหนือขอบฟ้า), appeared on the Donjedi label in 1961 and established a pattern of Suraphon combining Japanese popular song melodies with new Thai and Japanese lyrics. He partnered this song with his own attempt to sing in Japanese on *Thinking of the Rising Sun* (อาทิตย์อุทัยรำลึก), a song about a man who must leave his Japanese girlfriend, which borrowed the melody of Sparky Iwamoto's *Ringo hana wa saita kedo*. Chusri featured heavily in the early years of the Chang Samsian label with hits such as *Tokyo in the Past* (โตเกียวแห่งความหลัง) (Chang Samsian no. 1), *Waiting for You in Tokyo* (คอยเธอที่โตเกียว) (no. 5), which used the melody of Kyu Sakamoto's 1961 world hit *Ue o muite aruko*, better known as *Sukiyaki*, and *Darling, Where Are You?* (เธอจำอยู่ที่ไหน) (no. 30). Of course, Suraphon's earliest lesson in the economic benefits of partnering with younger singers was with his very first hit from 1953, *Chuchok and the Two Children* (ชูชกสองกุมาร), in which Norng Joi (full name: Thawoen Srirathanawithaya) supplied the voice of Wetsandon's children. Apart from Chusri, a number of Suraphon's

¹⁶ Waeng, *Isan Country Song*, 250 (in Thai).

young protégés went on to have considerable success of their own, most notably the sisters La-orngdao and Sakaeoduean.

Perhaps Suraphon's greatest business achievement was to assemble a stable of extremely talented songwriters, who were able to supply the content required by a major touring group and a record label as well as outside writing contracts with companies such as Columbia and Cathay. Suraphon was extremely adept at reusing and repackaging material. The way in which he employed the members of his band in a kind of a songwriting factory is reminiscent of Alexandre Dumas' collaborative approach to the writing of his historical novels in 19th century France. Unlike Dumas, Suraphon almost always gave credit to his junior songwriters, although he was not above adapting another's work into his own. This is what reportedly occurred with the song *Unforgettable* (ลืมไม่ลง), which according to DJ and collector Khanueng Saengthong, was adapted by Suraphon and Samniang Muangthong around 1957 from a Phayong Mukda song, although it is now legally recognised as belonging to Samniang alone. It was not successful when first issued (Nakharat KS10) so Suraphon and Samniang wrote a *phleng kae* ('answering or dueling song'), *You Won't Forget?* (ไหนว่าไม่ลืม) (Nok Kaeo SP08), which became hugely successful for Phorngsri Woranut in 1959. After that, *Unforgettable* (Kamathep A30) also became a hit.

After the iconic brand Chang Samsian was launched in 1961, Suraphon increasingly used other writers to compose *phleng kae*. One aspect that this study is able to reveal because of its discographical approach is how Suraphon deferred to other songwriters when he considered that their skills were superior in a particular area. For example, it is clear that Suraphon felt that Thorngbai Rungrueang was able to express the feelings of women better than he. Thorngbai wrote the words to *Chinese Girl* (ม่ายซ่า) (Chang Samsian no. 40) for Pathama Na Wiangfa, *Answer from Vietnam* (เสียงตอบจากเวียดนาม) and *Despise* (หมั่นไส้) (both no. 63) for La-orngdao, *Really Crazy* (บ้าซัดซัด) (no. 72) and *They're Real* (ของแท้ๆ) (no. 73) for Phenphak Lakhana, and *I'm Sure* (น้องก็แน่) (no. 82) for Riam Daranoi. All of these were answers to songs sung and completely composed by Suraphon (except for *Spine-Chilling* (เสียวไส้) (no. 60) written with Thorngbai). Apart

from maximizing record sales, Suraphon's skill at providing content for the new singers in his band ensured a continual flow of hopefuls. Sakchai Wanchai, Kangwanphrai Lukphet and Rungthip Thanthong were chosen out of over one hundred when they applied in 1962. When Suraphon advertised for positions in 1965, 1,200 singers auditioned with only five being chosen - Phon Phonaphrai, Thae Nakhonpathom, Monphrai Lukrachaburi, Phetnoi Luksuphan and Master Piak Jormbueng.

A measure of the way Suraphon's business success was perceived by his contemporaries can be seen in the following quote from Samniang Muangthong: "When we were writing songs together we received 100 baht per song but after we separated Suraphon was receiving a million and I was still getting 100."¹⁷ Samniang was presumably using hyperbole, but certainly Suraphon was generating a much higher amount per song than any other Thai performer because of the vertical integration of his business model. Because nearly every step of the entertainment process was under his control and ownership his profits were magnified. To his fellow songwriters, who were generally conducting business in the traditional patron client manner it must have appeared that Suraphon was making unbelievable profits.

Conclusion

In summary, the main reason for Suraphon's success discussed in this article is content provision. There is no doubt that other less definable factors such as charisma, the simultaneous flaunting and supporting of social norms, voice quality and so on were at play, but this article identifies some of the reasons that Suraphon's content was able to meet the needs of his consumers. He experimented with almost every trend within the popular music industry, from Latin American influences, such as mambo and cha cha, to Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and Korean melodies and lyrics. Furthermore, the emphasis that Suraphon placed on the established style of *ramwong* is intriguing and revealing. From 25 percent of *lukthung* 78 rpm songs to

¹⁷ See <<http://www.thaifilm.com/forumDetail.asp?topicID=4712&page=1&keyword=>>.

40 percent of Suraphon 78 rpm songs to 50 percent of Chang Samsian songs – the figures are astounding. *Ramwong* was surely old fashioned by the 1960s, yet Suraphon identified and targeted an audience that wanted a mix of the old and the new, an audience that apparently still exists, judging by the continuing strength of the *lukthung* market.

Suraphon became the first Thai artist to bring song writing, performance, recording process, management and promotion completely under his own control. His band did not merely earn – it multiplied earnings by linking songwriters and their content to new singers and then always back to Suraphon himself. With his own brands Donjedi and Chang Samsian, Suraphon showed the previous generation of eminent musicians that independence was truly possible. Perhaps Suraphon would have continued to dominate the Thai music scene if he had not been murdered, but certainly during the 1960s his creativity and business acumen inspired a brief but remarkable golden age of Thai song making.

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