

## Keeping Time

By Stephen Black with Ronnie See

A pamphlet hidden in a pouch of tobacco proved that See Heng Chwee was a Communist. Immediately he was thrown into a hot airless darkness so small he couldn't spread his arms. Sometimes the Japanese dragged the 50-year old-prisoner to another room and tortured him for information he didn't have. He was given only starch to eat and he could drink only his own urine. There was an open bayonet wound across his ribs. His knees and skeletal buttocks ached from the constant pressure of the damp hard floor. The silence was broken only by moans or footsteps or beatings. Heng Chwee's only hope was that the truth would set him free.

Thirteen months passed. A Japanese/Chinese translator named Koh believed the prisoner's story: one of Heng Chwee's daughters had refused to marry a man based on his advice. In retaliation, the man had hidden Communist pamphlets in the tobacco that Heng Chwee sold. In what little free time he had, Koh collected evidence to prove Heng Chwee's innocence. He was successful.

Heng Chwee finally left Outram Prison, walking slowly on legs swollen from malnutrition. His wife was beside him. For the same amount of time, she'd been kept isolated in the Women's Quarters of the prison.

The "informant" was shot in the head.

Silat Road was where Heng Chwee began a new life with his family. Not far from his home was a Sikh Temple about thirty years old. It was still referred to as the "Police Gurdwara".due to the fact that many of its original members were on the police force. A number of distinguished citizens grew up in the Silat Road area, including the fourth President of Singapore, Wee Kim Wee. The works of painter Ong Kim Seng's hang in collections around the world, including that belonging to Queen Elizabeth. Peter Lim, who made a bid to buy the Manchester United football team, also grew up in the area.

Heng Chwee and his family were squatters, like just about everyone around them. And, like their neighbors, they were tough, for Silat Road was the most crime-infested place in Singapore, a place where trucks of gangs carrying weapons were as common as trucks of pigs and chickens.

Two major gangs ruled the area: the 18 Gi Ho Gang and the 18 Koon Tong Gang. These secret societies and their splinter groups battled each other constantly, making a warzone of the once peaceful farming community. The police rarely came into the slums of Silat Road, but if they did, they came in pairs with their guns drawn.

Unlike most of his neighbors, Heng Chwee could read and write,. He'd learned when he was a boy growing up in southern China. There, the village temple and his father's farm had been havens of civilization and morality amidst the nationwide battles and civil wars amongst warlords, armies of bandits and the corrupt government. Opium claimed many lives the wars hadn't. Foreign gunships patrolled the coast, supporting their armies on newly claimed territories.

The Chinese Revolution and then the Japanese Invasion surged through Heng Chwee's life like great waves of destruction. At age 40, he lost everything except his wife and daughter, his small farm and his long pigtail. His pigtail and farm were sold for a ticket on a junk to Nanyang, the land to the south. Before he left, Heng Chwee prayed at the graves of his four sons.

As a boy,Heng Chwee had also learned the art of fortune-telling. He could interpret *qian*, the divine slips of paper believed to predict the future. Now, on Silat Road, he shared his skills with everyone, from homeless young gangsters to politically-connected rich aunties who were terrified to be driven through the neighborhood to his house. Regardless of race or religion, anyone who asked for Heng Chwee's help received it. His Malay neighbors were like family. Without pay, Heng Chwee kept the flood drains clear of muck, trash and the floating dead. His neighbors, whether Malay, Chinese or gangsters, began calling him Heng Chwee Peh, Peh being a sign of respect.

Near Heng Chwee Peh's home was an area of no-man's land with broken grave markers, small bushes, sparse trees and coffins jutting out of the eroded hillsides. With their friends standing guard, boys ran in to chop firewood for cooking fires, hoping the gangs would stay away. The boys would nervously fish and catch eels in the heart of Snake Gang territory. No one knew what the gangs did with trespassing boys. Along Silat Road, if you were marked for dead, that was it. Done deal. You'd be slashed and stabbed. You'd die.

Heng Chwee Peh sent his sons and daughters to learn at British schools. In the eyes of some of his Chinese neighbors, this made him a traitor. However, when the British police started giving the gangsters pieces of paper, they and their relatives pleaded for help. Heng Chwee Peh's second oldest son, a young boy not yet in his teens, read aloud the papers and explained them. He soon began showing up at the police station, where he'd scold the gangsters in Hokkien as the Indian police officers watched. He warned his neighbors about the seriousness of Section 55\*. He spoke frankly to the police officers, sometimes pleading for leniency so that an offender's dependents wouldn't suffer. The officers were impressed and often the boy found himself in conversation about. school and books, including one of his favorites: the

Oxford Dictionary. The boy's name was Kim Huat and he seemed to be on his way towards becoming a policeman.

Kim Huat never begged or stole. He dealt with the crime around him in a moralistic, business-like manner. He once charged gang members to store their weapons in an unused part of the family home. After his father patiently explained the danger of the situation, he stopped.

As a boy, Kim Huat once worked in an opium den, rolling balls of opium and preparing pipes. If someone threw a coin at Kim Huat, he threw it back. Coins were to be placed in his hand. He was providing a service and he was to be given payment properly.

The gangs rarely pressured Kim Huat to become a gang member. If they did, he refused. Kim Huat wanted to be a leader or nothing at all.

*\* Section 55 allows the authorities to hold a suspect without trial for up to ten years.*

*2:08 AM, August 6, 1966.*

Southeast Asia is under attack by the Communists and the Americans are fighting in Vietnam. Western culture, especially rock'n' roll, is considered to be an amoral threat to Asian values. The nation of Singapore is barely a year old. Among several ordinances to enforce 'good behavior', is a ban on jukeboxes. In a few years the government will outlaw long hair for men.

Kim Huat is now called 'Ronnie'.

Ronnie's hair touches his collar and he's holding a guitar. He's being questioned by three officers, There are 40 armed riot police outside and a truck that could take away 50 people easily. Gurkhas- Indian hired guards, are everywhere, waiting for orders.

Five thousand people are packed inside the brand new Singapore Conference Hall. They've gone crazy for Ronnie's band as well as The Checkmates, Rony and The Echo Jets, Naomi and The Boys, Shirley Nair and The Silver Strings and The Cyclones. They want more Ronnie, but Ronnie is surrounded by police officers. Five thousand people are screaming downstairs, screaming for Ronnie

“ Mr. Ronnie See ... This license I'm holding says you and your band of gangsters will stop at 2 AM ... it's now 2:08 AM. You are breaking the law....”

*Sweat.*

Ronnie organized the event.

*Tension.*

Ronnie's wearing a gold Sixties style mod outfit.

*Handcuffs.*

Ronnie's sober and sincere. He apologizes, explains about the delays due to equipment problems.

"You were on *Istana Pesta* last year, weren't you?"

Ronnie says that yes, he and his band had appeared on the popular TV show. The officer in charge stares at Ronnie a little longer before putting his clipboard away.

"Better wrap it up. Now. Do what you gotta do. Move it."

Ronnie rushes downstairs towards the stage. Another severe looking police officer is waiting at the bottom of the steps. He blocks Ronnie's way.

"Ronnie See," he says without emotion. "You're gonna have to sign this before you go anywhere." He pulls out a clipboard.

On the clipboard are two flyers for the event.

"Sign these, would ya?" the officer says, "my sister saw you at her friend's birthday party. They're both in the crowd." Ronnie quickly autographs the flyers.

"Ronnie, one more thing ...."

Ronnie picks up his guitar.

The officer puts his pen back in his pocket. "Ronnie, you're like the Cliff Richard of Singapore ... when you gonna make a record?"

The early days of Ronnie and The Burns were exciting, even the practices. Twice a week, around six in the evening, Ronnie carefully packed his records and record player in old rice sacks. He'd walk along the muddy tracks of the Malayan Railway, hoping the gangs weren't around. He'd quickly scramble away from the tracks and through the jungly paths and side streets that led to Tiong Bahru.

Going to practice was like going to another world. Once Ronnie made it past the ritzy Bobotan Mansions on the edge of Tiong Bahru, he knew he was safe. At the end of Seng Poh Road, beneath the clock tower, was a coffee shop with a jukebox. There he'd listen to Cliff and Elvis.

Seng Poh Road itself was full of cars and taxis. On one side were the sheltered passages of the SIT flats. Everywhere else there were makeshift walkways covered with canvas. The streets were crowded and full of shops. The hawker center was always busy and sometimes the night markets set up their tents and made it even busier. Amidst all of this, Ronnie thought of the logistics of the band: *concert posters to be printed... equipment to be upgraded. How much to charge? How will we look on stage?* He'd check his wallet, making sure he had enough to take the four members of his band out for snacks after rehearsal.

Chicken pies were 60 cents each and a glass of fresh sugar cane juice was a dime. As he walked, Ronnie practiced singing, especially his favorite song:

*It won't work poor boy,  
Don't you try again.  
Fate took hold of your love and you can't win ...  
You can sing the blues all to yourself  
But while you're singing  
She's with someone else, poor boy ...*

Ronnie crosses Tiong Bahru Road. He climbs the stairs to the third floor and knocks on the door. His classmate Ivan is there, grinning from ear to ear. The 45s get unpacked, notes get reviewed and the lyrics are checked. The band shows up. Drums are dragged out of a bedroom and guitars get plugged into the homemade amps. Ronnie plays the 45s and explains the chord changes. The song list is decided.

The door is soon surrounded by dozens of shoes. Boys and girls are everywhere. A few sit on wooden stools; most are on the floor. Everyone's sweating and drinking tea or coffee, except Ronnie. Ivan flips the room lights on and off. The musicians carefully walk to their positions and pick up their instruments. Ronnie faces everyone; the kitchen is his stage.

Feedback whistles through *Theme for a Dream*, the first song. Ronnie is quietly patient as the others quickly fiddle with their gear and move speakers. *Thinking of Our Love* is pretty smooth, except for a crackling in the rhythm guitar amp. While Ivan's brother checks the cables Ronnie thanks everyone for their support and mentions an upcoming birthday party gig. Ivan finally flashes a thumbs up. Ronnie counts off the intro to *Please Don't Tease*. The band storms through it and jumps into *Gee Whiz It's You*. It's 1964 and a hot innocent sexiness pumps through the flat. The band is tight. The sound is as good as it gets. *Elvis is rockin' the kampung*.

The intro to *House of the Rising Sun* begins. The band plays the electric blues and Ronnie's voice is pure regret. No one has ever felt anything like it. The small living room of the flat on Tiong Bahru Road feels like a New Orleans jail cell on a Sunday morning.

Ronnie wipes his arm across his face, takes a swig of water. "Now we've got another one by Cliff Richard. It's called *Poor Boy*."

The jangly guitars begin, proud but bittersweet. The sparkling cymbals and the drums sneak in, smooth and steady against the rhythm guitar. Ronnie's voice is happy. The packed room is full of smiles and tapping feet.

Ronnie looks at everyone, then closes his eyes. He keeps singing.

*Bad luck can be good luck in disguise*

*Some day new love may come to call*

*Poor boy, we'll be rich men after all, poor boy...*

*Poor boy,*

*we'll be rich men after all ...*

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*The lyrics to Poor Boy are copyrighted by eldorado music and were written by McEntire and Vernon.*

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