

Transmission of Traditional Lao Folk Music from Central Laos to the United States of
America

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Abstract

Significant changes have been made to folk music from Central Laos and Laotian diaspora communities in America due to factors of globalization, nearing the end of the Vietnam War. Multiple cultural factors such as language barriers, new values, and traditions affected the instrumentation of songs and brought about new techniques within the Laos music scene. It was further enhanced through Western instrumentations when Laotians migrated to the United States of America.

This study examines the changes of Central Laos folk music in the United States after generations of Laotians immigrated to the country after the Vietnam War, and how these new traditions became part of Laotian Americans' reformed cultural identity. My analysis consists of comparisons between the Laotian music of Central Laos and Laotian American music. This research focused on *lam*, a folk singing genre. I highlighted critical differences between traditional and popular Lao music, regarding musical elements such as tonal inflections, tempo, rhythmic structure, and instrumentations. By noting these differences in each song, my analysis provided a detailed view on the process of oral transmission and how a new cultural environment might affect oral tradition. My studies is intended to bring awareness to the preservation of folk music and the recognition of how music functions as an integral cultural connection in a dispersed community.

Terminology

Khene – traditional Lao and Thai mouth organ used to accompany folk songs.

Lam – traditional Lao music.

Lamvong – traditional Laotian slow dance where women and men dance in a circle, accompanying a folk song. It utilizes slow, rotating hand movements by bending their hands. It is used when referring to the genre of traditional Lao music that is at a moderate walking tempo.

Fawn – a broader term for Laotian dance, where one does not necessarily need to dance in a circle.

Khap Nguem – a genre of Lao folk music that involves a singer and usually khene to accompany the singer.

Molam – traditional Laotian singers in Laos; also used interchangeably to describe a genre of traditional Lao music that is at a faster tempo.

Sihn – traditional Lao skirt with geometrical patterns sewn throughout it, usually worn by women.

Lam Pern – a genre of traditional Lao music that is at a fast tempo and is very upbeat.

Lam Som – a singing style popular around the Central Campassak Province that is accompanied by the khene.

Lam Salavane – a singing style from Salavane Province that includes Lao and Mon-Khmer languages.

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Introduction

I was born and raised in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and have grown up as a second-generation Laotian American. I often attended the Buddhist temple with my grandmother and birthday celebrations with my parents, so I was able to be immersed in it at a young age. Because of this, Laotian music was an integral part of my childhood. When my grandmother would sing, she would tell stories, but I was usually uninterested because I was not as familiar with the Lao language. As I became older, I understood these stories and realized that these were folk songs popular throughout Laos. My father would sing folk songs as well but in a different manner. It sounded more romantic, with a slower melody, and included American rock instruments. He would play it from his mobile phone through a Bluetooth speaker, and I would hear this music echoing throughout the house almost every morning when he was preparing breakfast. Whenever he had a catchy song stuck in his head, he would also burst out into random songs throughout the day. Sometimes, he would host karaoke nights, and I would sneak away with my other siblings and cousins so I would not have to hear his “obnoxious” singing. As a young child, I did not understand what he was singing about, but I often wondered why he loved singing them so much. The music sounded very sweet and flowy, with each phrase moving seemingly to the next. These songs would include a drum kit and a “khene,” bamboo mouth organ with long pipes (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Lao bamboo mouth organ¹

¹ Raine-Reusch, Randy. *Khaen*, www.asza.com/Instruments/ikhaen.shtml. Accessed 3 Dec. 2024.

Chapter One

Brief History of Laotian Immigration to the United States

Laotian history stems from thousands of years. It is important to note this to understand how Laos has become a historically diverse nation, which is what inspired Lao's culturally diverse music scene. When Laotians immigrated to the United States of America, these musical characteristics traveled with them. This migration has been the cornerstone for establishing Laotian American music in America and for bringing about more Westernized Lao popular music.

The first inhabitants of Laos lived in the mountainsides and were formally known as Lao Theungs at about 10,000 B.C.² Surrounding regions like Thailand and Cambodia started to exchange ideas and share cultural differences with Laos but led to small wars among their nation due to little common ground.³ At this time, Laos lacked formal control and a sense of unity. However, in the 14th Century, resolution started to take form because of the unification process that was under the reign of King Fa Ngum (1316-1393), which included a kingdom composed of present-day Laos, northern Vietnam, and eastern Thailand. That region was known as "Lan Xang," meaning one hundred

² Bowman, John S., ed. "Lao." In *Columbia Chronologies of Asian History and Culture*, 452. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/bowm11004.28>. Accessed October 21, 2024.

³ *Ibid.* 452

elephants.⁴ This was a sovereign kingdom for over 350 years.⁵ This kingdom soon failed after its last successor, Souligna Vongsa, passed away, and questions about who the next ruler would be started to complicate Laos's unification process. A serious invasion from Vietnam led to these new disputes, along with other neighboring regions wanting to expand their kingdoms.⁶

Siam, known today as Thailand, took reign in hopes to bring more cohesion to Laos, and they ruled from the late 18th century to the late 19th century. Their rule led to the division of three regions in Laos: Luang Prabang (north), Vientiane (center), and Champassak (south).⁷ From 1846-1885, the Siamese sent troops into Vietnam to help prevent Vietnamese expansion, but France was already taking control over most of Vietnam and wanted to capture Laos as well.⁸ The conflicts shifted to figuring out who should rule over Laos; the Siamese or the French. A French explorer, August Pavi, was on a mission to convince Laos to be under French rule because they would grant better protection against neighboring countries.⁹ He eventually gained Lao's trust, but the Siamese did not.¹⁰ While the Siamese tried to resist this takeover, France was now in control of Laos in 1893. Their control led to the abolishment of slavery among Laotians

⁴ Ibid. 454

⁵ "Lan Xang." Encyclopædia Britannica. Accessed November 25, 2024.
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Lan-Xang>.

⁶ Bowman, John S., ed. "Lao." In *Columbia Chronologies of Asian History and Culture*, 454. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/bowm11004.28>. Accessed October 21, 2024.

⁷ Bowman, John S., ed. "Lao." In *Columbia Chronologies of Asian History and Culture*, 456. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/bowm11004.28>. Accessed October 21, 2024.

⁸ Ibid. 457

⁹ Ibid. 457

¹⁰ Ibid. 457

and better aid for their health and sanitation. They also helped to formulate the Franco-Siamese Treaty, established in 1907, which defined the Lao border with Thailand.¹¹ However, their reign did not help to establish an industrial economy or an education system among Laotians.¹² France realized that not only was their conquest not benefitting Laos economically, but it was also not contributing to the French economy since most of Laos's economy was based on agriculture. Later, France signed a treaty acknowledging Laos as a sovereign state on October 1953.¹³

Leaving French rule led to a political split in Laos. A few months after the treaty, the Vietnamese invaded northern Laos, and the two main national political parties of Laos disagreed on Lao's sovereignty. The national political parties in Laos, specifically the Pathet Lao on the left and the right-wing royal government, became increasingly divided, resulting in the outbreak of a civil war. The Geneva Agreement in 1962, signed by multiple nations such as the Republic of France, the Republic of India, the Republic of Vietnam, the United States of America, etc., allowed for the neutrality of Laos, with the intent to end the Lao Civil War.¹⁴ As tension rose between the two parties, the issue regarding the Vietnamese invasion and how foreign aid should be enacted led to their pull from the Geneva Agreement. Edward Harold Stuart Simmonds, British linguist and professor of Southeast Asian literature, explained that the invasion was getting more

¹¹ Ibid. 457

¹² Ibid. 457

¹³ Ibid. 460

¹⁴ "United Nations Treaty Collection." United Nations. Accessed October 21, 2024. <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20456/volume-456-i-6564-english.pdf>.

serious and that resistance to Vietnam was getting worse, so they needed the help of Western powers. He stated,

“In the Security Council the Western Powers introduced a resolution that a subcommittee should investigate the complaint and report. Resistance to this move from Russia was defeated and the veto avoided because the question of the subcommittee's appointment was accepted as being procedural and not substantive. Nevertheless, the Communist Powers contended that the action of the Security Council was illegal and tantamount to an amendment, in practice, of the U.N. Charter.”¹⁵

Simmonds described how the Communist Powers (Pathet Lao) resisted foreign aid because it was another risk to security for the nation. Conflicts started to form between the two parties because they fought on how to resolve this invasion issue. Prince Souvannaphouma (1901-1984) tried to deny Pathet Lao and their involvement in this matter, but eventually, Pathet Lao enacted a coup d'etat.¹⁶ This created a more left-leaning country, ultimately shifting towards the communist state that it resides in. Simmonds also expressed that the involvement of the United States of America was very intrusive and overpowering, not helping the situation, which is why the Communist group acted.¹⁷ The American military's involvement was not only to help resist foreign invasion from Vietnam but also to fight against Pathet Lao's takeover. They were adding more military aid than trying to create peace. Both the right and left wing brought violence rather than providing peaceful relations.

Part of America's help was also considered an “invasion” among Laotian citizens. America's invasion left hundreds of families displaced by the excess bombing of

¹⁵ Simmonds, E. H. S. “A Cycle of Political Events in Lao.” *The World Today* 17, no. 2 (1961): 63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40393294>. Accessed October 2, 2024.

¹⁶ Simmonds, E. H. S. “A Cycle of Political Events in Lao.” *The World Today* 17, no. 2 (1961): 58–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40393294>. Accessed October 2, 2024.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 67

over two million tons of ordnances dropped towards the end of the Vietnam War from 1964 to 1973.¹⁸ The actions behind this rationale were to prevent the communist party from forming but ultimately failed as the Pathet Lao communist movement took over.¹⁹ Phitsamay Uy, an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, conducted research on Laotian Americans and described this communist takeover as having brutal force where several were taken into camps, displaced, and tortured.²⁰ They migrated to the U.S. due to the harsh conditions of the communist movement. The United States became one of the most prominent countries for these migrants to enter, allowing them to start a new life. According to the US Bureau Census, 12, 524 Laotian refugees arrived in the United States in 1989, with most in California. Nashville, Tennessee only had 55 Laotian refugees according to the U.S. Department of State in 1980, right after they fled from their homeland.²¹

¹⁸ Uy, Phitsamay. "Laotian Americans." In Asian American Society. New York: Sage Publications, 2014. 2. https://www.academia.edu/29486006/Laotian_Americans.

¹⁹ Ibid. 2

²⁰ Uy, Phitsamay. "Laotian Americans." In Asian American Society. New York: Sage Publications, 2014. 3. https://www.academia.edu/29486006/Laotian_Americans.

²¹ U.S. Department of State. "U.S. Government Policy on Refugees: A Historical Perspective." Accessed November 1, 2024. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/prm/rls/45960.htm>.

Chapter Two

Lao Folk Music and its Globalization

Folk music is an integral part of the daily lives of Laotians. Folk music became the source for bringing the Laotian community together in the U.S. Understanding Lao folk music can reveal how it was Westernized and why it is prominent in the Laotian American music scene. Traditionally, Lao folk music was performed in small, close-knit communities and used as a form of storytelling. It was noted by ethnomusicologist Terry E. Miller that “Lao has no comprehensive term corresponding to music in English.”²² However, “*Lam*” is often used to describe genres of folk music in Laos. Traditional singers are called *molam*” in Lao, and folk songs that they sing are often comedic and will have witty comebacks with other vocalists, making it very entertaining for the audience.²³ *Molam* and *Lam* are often used interchangeably within the community when referring to Lao folk music. *Khap Nguem* is a form of of Lao folk music that involves storytelling and the use of one instrument, khene. Miller analyzed the use of khene in this genre of Lao folk music by describing that,

“The accompanist plays in rapid arabesques, often trilling between two tones a third apart. The singer slowly and deliberately declaims lines of text, often separated by long pauses [figure 12]. Phrases tend to begin

²² Miller, Terry E. “Lao, Thai, and Cham Music.” *In Music of Southeast Asia*, edited by Ellen Koskoff. Routledge, 2000.

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226400.

²³ Miller, Terry E. “Lao.” *In Music in Laos*, edited by Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams. Routledge, 1998. 186-187.

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226794.

on the fifth or seventh tone and descend to the third, with sectional endings descending to the ‘tonic.’ Listeners are expected to add cascading-fourth melismas at the ends of sections to encourage the singer. Because of the slow delivery and the gaps between lines or sections, singers can more easily improvise poetry and comment on immediate events.”²⁴

My father, Eric Vongsiharath (b. 1969), is an amateur musician in the Lao community in Murfreesboro. He described that there are different types of *lam*, like *Lam Salavane*, *Lam Som*, *Lamvong*, and *Lam Pern*. The regions these singing-styles and genres originated from determine the type of *lam* being performed. The differences between these genres are usually within the tempo of the pieces. For example, *lamvong* is described as being performed at a moderate tempo while *lam pern* is performed much faster and is upbeat. While other factors like languages and melodic traits also play a role in determining what type of *lam* is performed, it is necessary to understand how diverse Laos is and that it is often difficult to note these differences in styles if one is not a native of Laos or is not well-versed in listening to Lao music. As Miller furthered this notion that, “Ethnically, Laos is a multicultural mosaic, consisting of 50 percent lowland Lao and 50 percent upland Tai, Mon-Khmer, and Tibeto-Burman language groups.”²⁵

Often, *Khap Nguem* focuses more on the khene performance, playing more virtuosic with improv and other musical techniques to heighten the emotions expressed from the song. It can be emotional for some Laotian listeners because the khene’s unique

²⁴ Miller, Terry E. “Lao.” *In Music in Laos*, edited by Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams. Routledge, 369, 1998.

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226794.

²⁵ Miller, Terry E. “Lao.” *In Music in Laos*, edited by Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams. Routledge, 358, 1998.

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226794.

timbre mixed with the singer's chanting and storytelling, brings life to the stories being sung.²⁶ It allows the audience to be immersed in the story and empathize with the narrative. This stresses the importance of understanding dialects and language in Laos. If an audience member cannot speak Laos or understand it, storytelling and chanting will not be as emotive. The listener would simply enjoy the music as an aesthetic rather than a real-life anecdote. Again, the narrative plays an essential role to *Khap Nguem*, so in order to listen to these stories, understanding language is equally as important.

These stories are often about love stories whether reminiscing about their homeland or about a significant other. A small circle usually forms when these folk songs are sung. Miller also stated that “The coordination of melodic pattern and lexical tone is necessary for full comprehension, but in practice, singers do not rigidly apply melodic formulas: they allow musical phrases and their individuality to override total coordination.”²⁷ This type of singing demonstrates that the patterns are not strict but rather improvisational. There will be pauses between phrases so that singers can add on to the narrative, and it allows both the khene player and singer to improvise and bring their own unique sense of musicality to the song.

Khene is the only instrument used in *Khap Nguem*. There can be other instruments used as well but those are considered a modernized version of *Khap Nguem*.

²⁶ “ຂັບງຸ້ມພື້ນເມືອງລາວກອນກ້ວບ່າວສາວ ຂັບໂດຍ ນາງສິມຈັນ ກອນເຄົ້າພາສາ ພັບໂດຍ ນາງສມຈັນ.” YouTube video, uploaded by Ts Studio Record Labels, October 30, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jn58BJgypeo>

²⁷ Miller, Terry E. “Lao.” *In Music in Laos*, edited by Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams. Routledge, 364, 1998.

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226794.

Khene are two scale patterns used: san scale and yao scale. The san scale (CDFGA) are the major notes and the yao (DFGAC) sounding minor.²⁸ Miller noted this distinction that, “The yao scale quite closely resembles the D minor pentatonic scale defined in Western music.”²⁹ The khene player will follow these scalar patterns and improvise from it. Khene players will play chords instead of individual notes, and these chords will support the melody of the singer. Folk music differs from Laotian mainstream music because it usually does not emphasize professional vocal techniques and perceives a more relaxed tone, enabling audience members to join. The song also progresses differently depending on the type of story being told.³⁰ These stories have shifted to an evolved form of Lao popular music that still resonates with several Laotian Americans and those from the mainland. This type of music has become a form of entertainment and comfort in the Laotian American community. In the next chapter, I used folk songs in my father’s collection as examples to discuss the changes in Lao folk music.³¹

Globalization has brought changes to the Lao music scene. Since the late 1900s, elements of Western pop music have been added to folk music, which resulted in the

²⁸ Miller, Terry E. “Lao.” *In Music in Laos*, edited by Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams. Routledge, 361, 1998.

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226794.

²⁹ Miller, Terry E. “Lao.” *In Music in Laos*, edited by Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams. Routledge, 1998.

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226794.

³⁰ Miller, Terry E. “Lao.” *In Music in Laos*, edited by Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams. Routledge, 1998. 364.

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226794.

³¹ Thammathevo, Chanthon. *99 Popular Song: In the Past and Present*. SMP Printing, 2004.

creation of modern Lao pop music. Ethnomusicologist Terry E. Miller declared that “...traditional music has barely survived, whereas popular music has come to dominate the Lao music scene within North America.”³² This type of music combines Lao folk melodies and traditional instruments with modern Western instruments, such as drum sets, electric guitars, and keyboards. Multiple factors have propelled this change in Lao folk music: the rise in modern technology and the internet's accessibility, as well as geopolitical and generational changes. As a result, music has continued to grow in popularity and attract new audiences.

Geopolitical and generational changes have brought Western influences into Laotian music. In Laos, the new form of government enacted through a coup brought several people to the United States because they disagreed with the decisions. Their immigration process demonstrated the assimilation patterns of having to learn English as their second language, so this would mean often consuming American media to help fulfill that desire. This consumption also portrayed how American media tends to feed its way into Laotian music by often combining the two cultures or having to find common ground. It keeps these folk songs “fresh” because they must keep up with a new generation of Laotian people, usually through oral means or small books from American media. Oral traditions are important because they can spread ideas throughout one's community and other communities. With these Western influences, a blend between the

³² Miller, Terry E. “Lao.” In *Music in Laos*, edited by Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams. Routledge, 1998. 364.
https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226794.

cultures of those in America and those in Laos started to form. This is shown in popular music, especially with the growth of videos and music from the Internet.

The internet was introduced in the early 1980s, significantly changing communication. Media from all over the world are being shared on this platform, making communication more efficient when information is needed from other parts of the globe. Music videos and streaming platforms give musicians in the industry more access to a more extensive and diverse audience because they can span several nations. Anyone with access to the internet can look up any type of music they want to listen to and can mimic their style of performing. Laotian American musicians continue to copy artists they enjoy listening to or see popularity by changing their clothing and behaviors in how they speak. An example of an artist that has millions of views and streams is “SOPHANA,” who utilizes the internet by collaborating with other Laotian artists. One of their songs “ແພງອ້າຍ,” translated to as “Dear Brother,” starts off the melodic line with one of their collaborators from the girl duo “Mild & Mint”. It has additions of a metronomic line that involves a bass line and finger snaps to create what several Laotian Americans consider as a charming aesthetic. The lyrics in the song also apply to this aesthetic, speaking about dating between a young boy and a girl. The music video they uploaded on YouTube has 262 million views within three years since they uploaded it, and their collaboration with other artists has contributed to this increasing view count.³³ Using the internet has also made this accessible to people in Laos and those in America, so the audience is much

³³ “ແພງອ້າຍ (ແພງອ້າຍ).” YouTube video, uploaded by Sophana CHANNEL, March 5, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3H3ZAFsdF4>.

larger than it used to be in the early 1980s. This has spread more knowledge around the world about Laotian traditions.

The Laotian community in the U.S. also witnessed a similar modernization from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Lao electronic instruments gained popularity alongside modern technologies like electric keyboards, synthesizers, and microphones. This trend mirrored elements of Western popular music, particularly popularized by several hits from the 1980s. The popularity of these instruments in Laos was largely influenced by their success in Western pop music. Lao pop music is now performed for large audiences in America, and within these songs, listeners can hear the inclusion of Western instruments. There is now a blend of cultures with mixes of traditional Lao instruments and Western rock instruments. New generations are also attending as the audience, so parts of the music must be geared towards a youthful audience with the primary consumption of "American" pop music like hip-hop, R&B, and rock. Since this type of music appeals more to a younger generation, those under forty years old, these styles are merged with Lao folk songs and are performed at major festivals. Music from Thailand has also played a major role in Laos, currently more consumed than Lao music.³⁴ With the effects of Westernization, Thai popular music has gained popularity in Thailand and Laos and has evolved further away from their traditional music.³⁵ This modernized

³⁴ Miller, Terry E. "Lao, Thai, and Cham Music." In *Music of Southeast Asia*, edited by Ellen Koskoff. Routledge, 2000. 1039.
https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226400.

³⁵ Maryprasith, Primrose. *The Effects of Globalization on the Status of Music in Thai Society*. University of London, 2000.
[https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10020361/1/__d6_Shared\\$_SUPP_Library_User%20Services_Circulation_Inter-](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10020361/1/__d6_Shared$_SUPP_Library_User%20Services_Circulation_Inter-)

popular Thai music is important to note because most songs do not include any traditional instruments in their music, differentiating Lao music and culture from their neighboring nations. Adding Lao traditional instruments to popular music offers a common ground between differing generations and cultures. In pursuit of this, it can also generate curiosity among these younger audience members to learn more about their culture and language, cultivating their cultural identity.

Chapter Three

Popular Lao Music

The music scene has continued to evolve since the migration from Central Laos to America near the end of the Vietnam War to what is considered Lao “pop” or modified Lao traditional music. Drum kits and electronic keyboards are used in the same folk songs and have been associated with a classical dancing style called “*fawn*.”³⁶ Terry E. Miller noted that, “Traditional Lao musicians do not view accompanying lam with modern Western instruments as problematic.”³⁷ This is seen as a means of cultural preservation while adapting to the changing audience. While more traditional music like, *Khap Nguem* focuses on one Lao instrument, Lao popular music incorporates both Western and Lao instruments. They use instruments to shape the song into a specific genre, such as disco, *lamvong*, or slow rock. The appearance of the performers is another factor of the performance. Their outfits are very vibrant and made of silk skirts, “*sihn*” and silk tops matching the colors and patterns of the skirt. These performances occur during weddings, holidays, and festivals, with a rock band providing the accompaniment.³⁸

³⁶ “UNESCO - Khaen Music of the Lao People.” UNESCO.

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/khaen-music-of-the-lao-people-01296>.

³⁷ Miller, Terry E. “Lao, Thai, and Cham Music.” In *Music of Southeast Asia*, edited by Ellen Koskoff. Routledge, 2000. 1039.

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226400.

³⁸ Miller, Terry E. “Lao, Thai, and Cham Music.” In *Music of Southeast Asia*, edited by Ellen Koskoff. Routledge, 2000. 1039

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000226400.

The blend of folk music and Western instrumentations are demonstrated in my father's folk songbook titled, *99 Popular Song: In the Past and Present*, published 2004 (figure 2). Apparently, it was understood by someone of the Lao community that the book was compiled by the owner of restaurant called "Bamboo Oriental Cuisine" in La Vergne, Tennessee.

The first song in the book is called, "A Young Couple by the Waterbank." This song switches between the young man and woman, and they sing about their affection for one another. The melody of this piece exhibits an arc, as illustrated in the diagram, where it increases in pitch when they sing about their love. It then drops to a lower level when starting a new thought. The female singer starts the piece off, and it changes to the male singer singing a similar verse. They both join in singing the same lyric, "We want to be together," reinforcing the same strong feelings they have for one another at the end of the song. With both singers, it heightens the emotions of the song by stressing their great yearning for each other.



Figure 2. Father's Songbook³⁹

The song, “A Young Couple by the Waterbank” is part of the *lamvong* genre, known for its moderate tempo. The melody is cohesive and lyrical from phrase to phrase, allowing the musical ideas to flow seamlessly. For example, the first phrase group in the melody represents the first line of text, “Oh, the girl on the edge of the river” (see figure 4). The second phrase group aligns with, “Brother, please leave a friend,” and later into “With this younger brother” for the last phrase group. Each phrase group sounds melodious and connects to the next phrase. It differs from *Khap Nguem* singing style because these lines are not spoken or chant-like and can be sung with more emotional expression. The emotion is the words, “Oh” which is repeated throughout the song and is represented with the first two notes of the melody (A and F sharp). It presents an expression of yearning by saying “Oh” that is expressed through the dotted quarter note (F sharp) to elongate their desire. The longer note length provides the music space to express the words with vibratos or pitch bends that is often used in Lao folk music. What

³⁹ Thammathevo, Chanthon. *99 Popular Song: In the Past and Present*. SMP Printing, 2004.

strikes me about this piece is that it existed when my grandmother was in her early teens in Laos and is a tune that she still remembers. This is an example of how oral traditions have now been passed down through written formats among generations to adapt to the environment that it is in now.

There are also notations in each phrase within the lyrics that indicate which chords musicians should play. This enhances the simple melody through the addition of different instruments by introducing dynamic elements. While the song includes chords that are usually accompanied by the khene, modern technological instruments like the keyboard or an electric guitar can be used during this to transform it into more of a pop tune. These chords were added to create more dynamics and establish the new style of the genre (see figure 3).

ຊ່ວຍເຫຼືອ ສາວແຄມຮູ້ມ
ເນື້ອສ້າງ ແລະ ຫຳນອງ ໂດຍ : ສ່ ແສງສິວິວັນ
ສ້າງໂດຍ : ຄຳເດີມ ຊາບູບານ ແລະ ຫານເວເັນ ອາຊາສັກ

Intro : Dm - Dm
(ຊາຍ) ໂອ! Dm ສາວແຄມຮູ້ມແຫ່ງນີ້
ອ້າຍຂໍຝາກໂມຕີ ກັບນ້ອງນີ້ດ້ວຍໃຈໝາຍພິນ
ຂໍຝາກກາຍ F ຝາກດວງຊີວິນ
ມອບໃຫ້ແດ່ຈອມຂວັນ B^b C ນວນນ້ອງສາວແຄມຮູ້ມ F
ຮັກເຈົ້າແລ້ວ Dm ອ້າຍ D ຄິດຈະລະລຶມ Gm
ຫວັງຕາຍສ່ວນສາວຮູ້ມ Dm ບໍລິມ ບໍ່ເລືອນໝີເລືອຍ F
▪ (ຍິງ) ໂອ! Dm ບ່າວ ວຽງຈັນນີ້ເອີຍ
ນ້ອງເກີດມາບໍ່ເຄີຍ ຈະຮັກຊາຍຄົນໃດມາກ່ອນ
ນ້ອງເປັນສາວ F ສາວປ່າດົງດອນ
ໃຜບໍ່ເລີຍມາວອນ B^b C ຂໍຄວາມຮັກຈາກນ້ອງ F
ມີແຕ່ອ້າຍ Dm ຄົນດຽວ D ຫິມາໝາຍປອງ Gm
ນ້ອງເອງບໍ່ຂັດຂ້ອງ Dm ຮັກນ້ອງ C ແລ້ວຢ່າປຸງໃຈ Dm
▪ (ຊາຍ) ນ້ຳຮູ້ມ F ຮັກແຄມຮູ້ມນີ້ນັ້ນພຽງໂດ
ກໍປຸງເໝືອນຫົວໃຈ ອ້າຍຮັກນ້ອງພຽງນີ້ນັ້ນ
▪ (ຍິງ) ນ້ຳຮູ້ມ ຮັກແຄມບໍ່ຍອມແປສັນ
ຂໍດວງໃຈອ້າຍນີ້ນັ້ນ ເໝືອນກຸ້ມນີ້ແລ້ວກໍພິ Gm
(ຊາຍ) ໂອ! Dm ສາວແຄມຮູ້ມນີ້ນັ້ນ
ອ້າຍຂໍຮັກນ້ອງພິນ ຊົ່ວຊີວິນຈະຈາກໂລກນີ້
▪ (ຍິງ) ນ້ອງເໝືອນກັນ F ຈະຮູ້ຮັດພິກດີ
ຮັກແຕ່ພຽງອ້າຍນີ້ B^b C ບໍ່ມີບັນລິມ ໄດ້ F
▪ (ຊາຍ) ບຸນອ້າຍແລ້ວ Dm ນ້ອງແກ້ວ D ຈົ່ງຢັ້ງເຫັນໃຈ Gm
(ຍິງ) ເພາະນ້ອງກໍຮັກອ້າຍ Dm ຮັກອ້າຍໝາຍຝາກຊີວິນ Dm (ຊາຍ)
(ຍິງ) ອ້າຍເອີຍ F ຢ່າເລີຍລະລຶມຮັກນີ້ນັ້ນ
(ຍິງ) ອ້າຍເອີຍ ນ້ອງບໍ່ລະເລີຍຮັກນີ້ນັ້ນ
(ຍິງ) ອ້າຍເອີຍ ຮັກກັນ C ຊົ່ວນິສັນດອນ Dm

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Figure 3. “A Young Couple by Water Bank” Song

(male) Oh! (Dm)	This girl on the edge of the river
Brother, please leave a friend	with this younger brother
I'm sorry (F)	Leave the sun (C)
Give it to (Bb)	the number of younger sisters (F)
Love you already (Dm)	Brother (D) do not think to forget (Gm)
Hoping to die with a drunk girl (Dm)	Don't forget, don't forget (F)
(Girl) Oh! (Dm)	This is Vientiane
My brother was never born	Will love any man first
My sister is a girl (F)	the forest girl (C)
Who never came to (Bb)	ask for love from my brother (F)
Only brother (Dm)	The only person (D) who came to like (Gm)
The younger brother himself did not interfere with (Dm)	Love your sister (C) and don't change your mind (Dm)
She drinks (F)	Love that edge
It is like a heart	That's just brother love
(female) drinking water	Love the water bank edge
I pray for that brother's heart	It's like drinking water and it's enough (Gm)
(male) Oh! (Dm)	This girl is drunk
My brother loves my sister	Time will leave this world
(female) sister too (F)	Be honest and good party (C)
Love only this brother (Bb)	Never forget (F)
(Male) Dm	Brother (D), do you still agree with (Gm)
(Female) Because my sister loves my brother (Dm)	I love my brother (Dm)
Brother (F)	Don't forget that love
(Female) Brother	I do not neglect that love
(Male and female) We want to be together	Love each other (C) for eternity (Dm)

Figure 4. “A Young Couple by Water Bank” Translations



Figure 5. “A Young Couple by Water Bank” Melody

Another example of a folk song is “I Hate a Person with Too Many Hearts” (see figure 6). As assigned in the book, typically, a male singer sings this song. He repeats that exact phrase twice when he starts singing and starts by describing how he despises it when a woman loves too many different men and cannot make up her mind about a guy. This is repeated through the translated words, “Hate people very much, hate people very much” (see figure 7). These words align with the first phrase marking of the melody, which is often repeated throughout the song. The repetition reinforces his frustration for the woman, which portrays this emotional expression in Lao folk music. He declares his

hatred for all women who do that because the one woman whom he seems to have loved does the agonizing act that hurts him. This frustrating thought that the singer speaks is very unnerving, and it keeps cycling throughout the song. The vocalist also sings about how he wants her to be straightforward and have a solid answer when deciding whether she loves the main man. This is expressed in the middle of the song when he sings, “Catch a fish with two hands, how can it be held?” He used a metaphor by comparing the woman’s behavior of the men she likes to fish being caught. He wants her to realize that she can only catch one fish, so she needs to decide what man to choose. Musically, this folk song is sung on a G pentatonic scale in G major but can be sung in any key depending on the range of the vocalist. The melody is demonstrated as a reference to understanding the scalar pattern and how the chords complement those notes (see figure 8).

ຂັງຄົມຫຼາຍໃຈ

ເນື້ອສ້ອງ ສະໝ ທ່ານສາ ໂດຍ : ສີ ທຸນວິງ
ສ້ອງ ໂດຍ : ສີ ວິເສດ

Bolero Intro : G-Em-C-D-G

<p>I ຂັງຄົມຫຼາຍໃຈ ຈະສັກຜູ້ໃດ ສັກຈິ່ງກັບສາ ຫາກແມ່ນບໍ່ຄິດເປັນ</p>	<p>ຂັງຄົມຫຼາຍໃຈ ສັກ ໂດຍສິ້ນ <i>Em</i> ອ່າງສາກ ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ ຈິ່ງຮັດໂມດີ <i>Am</i> ອ່າມິນຊີໂຍ <i>D</i></p>
<p>II ຂັງຄົມຫຼາຍໃຈ ບໍ່ສັກຜູ້ໃດ ຈະບໍ່ສາກ ບໍ່ສັກຈິ່ງກັບສາ</p>	<p>ຂັງຄົມຫຼາຍໃຈ ອ່າງສາກ ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ <i>Em</i> ແລ້ວຈະຖືໂຕ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ <i>Am</i> ບໍ່ສັກຜູ້ໃດ <i>D</i> ບໍ່ສັກຜູ້ໃດ <i>G</i></p>
<p>R ຜູ້ນີ້ສັກ ບໍ່ສັກຜູ້ໃດ ຈະບໍ່ສາກ ສັກຜູ້ໃດ</p>	<p>ຜູ້ນີ້ສັກ <i>Em</i> ຈະບໍ່ສາກ <i>G</i> ສັກຜູ້ໃດ <i>Am</i> ສັກຜູ້ໃດ <i>D</i></p>
<p>III ຂັງຄົມຫຼາຍໃຈ ບໍ່ສັກຜູ້ໃດ ແມ່ນບໍ່ສາກ ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້</p>	<p>ຂັງຄົມຫຼາຍໃຈ ແລ້ວຈະຖືໂຕ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ <i>Em</i> ຈິ່ງແກ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ໂຕ້ <i>G</i> ຕາມສິ່ງທີ່ <i>D</i> ອ່າມິນຊີໂຍ <i>Em</i></p>

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Figure 6. “I Hate a Person with Too Many Hearts” Song

Hate people very much (G)	Hate people very much
Who will love (G)	Who really loves this (Em)
love really said (G)	"Don't be fooled"
Don't think about anything	Cut off the friendship (Am) Don't be jealous (D)
I hate cheaters (G)	hates cheaters (repeat)
Do not love, do not wish	I don't care for it (Em)
Catch a fish with two hands (Em)	How can it be held? (Am)
If you don't love, stay away (G)	A lot of people (D) do not want love (G)
This person knows (G)	That person you flirted with knows (Em)
Don't know when (C)	will open the door of life (G)
will be at the level of the world (G)	Or stay in heaven (Am)
or spouses (C)	Can't find it (D)
Hate people very much (G)	Hate people very much
Do not love, do not cry	Then do not deceive each other (Em)
This is not really love (Em)	Fix the chain link (G)
Let's stay away from each other for life (G)	Forever (D) don't meet each other (G)

Figure 7. "I Hate a Person with Too Many Hearts" Translations

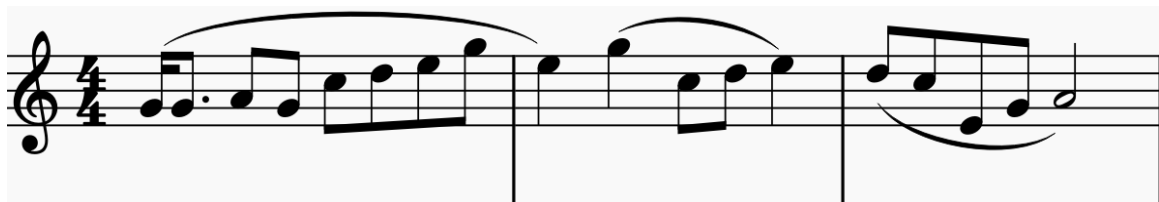


Figure 8. "I Hate a Person with Too Many Hearts" Melody

The next piece is about a bird who flew away from home, and the singer compares this bird to a woman (see figure 9). A bird in Lao is called "Noik," and he says that word several times in the opening, referencing the woman he is in love with. The bird flies away from the nest and is off somewhere, and the singer is calling on the bird's family members. This starts the song off by noting her absence where the singer is a man calling on the woman and her family, asking why they have not returned. This is revealed

through the words, “You are part of us, where did you get lost” (see figure 10). Later, the singer is singing that the woman has met someone else, which is why she has not returned, “or hook up with someone new, so I forgot about it.” Throughout the song, he mainly reminisces about their lives together before she left. He dwells and wonder why the woman has not returned to him because he still loves her. This is another example of a *lamvong* song because it exhibits the same steady tempo as mentioned from the previous folk song, “A Young Couple by the Waterbank.”

ນົກເຂົາລືມຄອນ

ເນື້ອສ້ອງ ແລະ ທ່ານອງ ໂດຍ : ມູນທ່າ ສິພິມໄຊ
ສ້ອງ ໂດຍ : ກໍ ວິເສດ

Slow Rock Intro : D-Bm-A-D

I	ນົກເອີນົກເຂົາ ເຈົ້າພາຈາກຄອນ ເຈົ້າຖືກລືລວງ ຫຼືສູກສາພັນກັບສູ່ໄໝ	ຂອງເຂົາເກົ່າກ່ອນ ຫຼິງຄູ່ໄປຢູ່ແຫ່ງໃດ ຕິດບ້ວງພານ ຈິ່ງຫຼິງລົມໄລ ບ່ອນເຄີຍສູກສັນ	Bm G D Em A
II	ນ້ອງເອີນ້ອງນາງ ກ່ອນເຄີຍຊິນຊູ ເຈົ້າລືມລິດສັກ ເຈົ້າລືມນ້ຳຄຳເຄີຍອິດພັນ	ເຄີຍຄຸງຂ້າງຢູ່ ພົບຄູ່ໄໝປ່ຽນແປ້ນ ທີ່ດຸ່ມດ່າ ຊ່ວມອະຫິຖານ ສັກກັນຈົນຕາຍ	Bm G D A D
R	ຖິ້ມກ່ອນຄອນເກົ່າ ເຫຼືອ ເປັນອະນຸສອນ ເຫັນພາບໝອນຮ້າງ ຫອມກິ່ນເນື້ອອຸ່ນ	ທີ່ເຈົ້າເຄີຍນອນ ແຫ່ງຄວາມຫຼົງເຫຼືອນໃຈ ຫິນງຽມ ເຄີຍຈູບລູບໄລ້ ນວນນາງ	Em Bm D Bm A
D		ຍັງຈຳໄດ້ ເຄີຍຈູບລູບໄລ້	Em A
III	ນົກເອີນົກນ້ອຍ ກັບເຖີດຍອດສູ່ ແມ່ເຈົ້າຫຼິງເດີນທາງຕິດໄປ ຖິ້ມກ່ອນຄອນຫຼິງ	ຂ້າຄອຍເຈົ້າຢູ່ ຂ້າຢູ່ໂດດດ່ຽວອ້າງວ້າງ ຈິ່ງກັບຫົວໃຈເດີນ້ອງນາງ ຍັງຄອງຍັງຄອຍ	Bm G Bm D

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Figure 9. “Woman and Bird” Song

Oh bird, dove	Their bird (Bm)
You are part of us (D)	where did you get lost (G)
You left to us to do something (G)	Stick to your life(D)
Or hook up with someone new (Bm)	So I forgot about it (Em) I'm at my happy place (A)
My sibling, my little sister	used to be by my side (Bm)
Before I was happy (D)	Meet a new partner and change your life (G)
You forgot (G)	about drinking water (D)
You've forgotten what you've been up to (Bm)	Pray together (A) Love each other until death (D)
the place before the old town (Em)	that you used to sleep (Bm)
left as a memorial (G)	of hindsight (D)
Seeing a broken picture (D)	that she spins (Bm)
The smell of warm flesh (B7) is still enough (Em)	I used to kiss her (A)
The little bird	I'm waiting for you at (Bm)
Back to the peak (D)	killed alone creates space (G)
Yes, you are lost on the wrong journey (D)	Take heart sister (Bm)
Places before and after (A)	Still waiting for you (D)

Figure 10. “Woman and Bird” Translations



Figure 11. “Woman and Bird” Melody

The final example is titled “Do Not Forget Vientiane,” where the singer expresses the warmth and happiness associated with Vientiane, Laos (see figure 12). This song can be sung by both male and female, but the recording in this song was sung by a

woman.⁴⁰The singer expresses her feelings of being far away from home by singing, “I am far away on the surface of the earth,” which aligns with the melody’s first phrase. The second phrase corresponds with the lyrics, “Happy, can’t forget Vientiane,” a line repeated towards the end of the song to emphasize her deep longing for home, specifically Vientiane. The prolonged half notes in the song characterize an emotional expression, reinforcing her nostalgia for Laos. This song resonates with many Laotian Americans because it evokes cheerful memories of their homeland.

ບໍລິມວຽງຈັນ
ເນື້ອຄືອງ ແລະ ທ່ານອງ ໂດຍ : ສີ ແສງສິວິວັນ
ຂ້ອງ ໂດຍ : ສານວະວັນ ສາຊາສິງ

Slow Intro : C-Dm- Em-Am

I	ແມ່ນຢູ່ແສນໂກ	ສຸດແດນດິນຟ້າມີນ້ຳ	Am
	ເຖິງມີສຸກສັນ	ກໍລືມວຽງຈັນ	G ບໍ່ໄດ້ C
	ຈາກມາແສນນານ	ຍິ່ງທ່ວງ	Am
	ຍາດມິດທັງປວງ	ຂ້າສຸດອາໄລ	Dm
	ດວງໃຈ	ຄະນຶງທຸກວັນ	C
II	ເມື່ອຢູ່ສູງວຽງ	ຍິ່ງປຽວຍິ່ງຄິດເຜົາ	Am
	ເພື່ອນນິກທີ່ເທິງ	ຢູ່ໃນກິ່ງທອງ	G ອັດອັນ C
	ສຸກກາຍສຸກໃຈ	ເມື່ອຈາກ	Am
	ເມື່ອຍາມໄດ້ພາກ	ແຄວ້ນຖິ່ນວຽງຈັນ	Dm
	ຖິ່ນຖານ	ນະຄອນຂອງລາວ	Am
R	ຈາກໄປສູ່ໄຕ້ຟ້າ	ປະເທດອື່ນ	C
	ທ່າງມິດທີ່ເຄີຍສົດສູ້ນ	ທ່າງລູງປ່າ	Dm ນ້ຳອາວ G
	ເຖິງມີສຸກສູ່	ວັງທອງ	Am
	ບໍ່ເພື່ອນເທິງຫົງ	ພິນ້ອງລາວ	Dm
	ຄົດມາ	ແສນເສົ້າທ່ວງໂຍ	G
III	ມີອາດຫຼີງລືມ	ພາຍແຫ່ງຄວາມຫຼັງນິ້ມ	Am
	ເຖິງຟ້າປຽນວັນ	ກໍລືມວຽງຈັນ	G ບໍ່ໄດ້ C
	ເມື່ອຍາມຫວນມາ	ຍິ່ງມື່ນ	Am
	ໄຕ້ຟ້າເໝືອດິນ	ລາວນີ້ເມື່ອໄດ	Dm
	ສຸກໃຈ	ເໝືອຄຳກ່າວຂານ	Am

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Figure 12. “Do Not Forget Vientiane” Song

⁴⁰ “ຂໍ້ບຽ້ມເພິ່ນເມືອງລາວກອນກ້ວບ່າວສາວ ຂໍ້ບໂດຍ ນາງລືມຈັນ ກອນເຄີ້ຍາບາສາ ສິບໂດຍ ນາງສມຈັນ.” YouTube video, uploaded by Ts Studio Record Labels, October 30, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jn58BJgypeo>

I am far away	on the surface of the earth (Am)
Happy (F)	Can't forget (G) Vientiane (C)
From long ago (C)	Worried (Am)
All relatives (Am)	kill at the mercy (Dm)
Heart (F)	count every day (C)
When alone	I'm more sad (Am)
Like a bird that sings (F)	In Kong Thong (C)
Happy and sad (C)	when far from home (Am)
When the guard is at the (Am)	Vientiane District (Dm)
Locality (G)	hometown (Am)
From under the sky (F)	other countries (C)
A friend who used to be new (Am)	away from uncle (Dm), aunt (G)
Until happy at (Am)	Vang Thong (Am)
Not like seeing face (Am)	my cousin (Dm)
Think (C)	Sad and caring (G)
May have forgotten	Image from back then (Am)
until the sky changes (F)	You can't forget Vientiane (C)
When the time comes (C)	visit (Am)
Under the sky above the ground (Am)	when are you here (Dm)
Happy (G7)	above the speaker (Am)

Figure 13. "Do Not Forget Vientiane" Translations



Figure 14. "Do Not Forget Vientiane" Melody

All these songs are about love, a common theme among Lao folk songs. The melody in these songs progresses in an arc form, slowly developing the story and reaching a conclusion. The tempo at which they are set is steady because the point of these folk songs is to tell a story rather than highlight the virtuosic nature of the singer. Folk songs can tell a story about one's life, and each one of the pieces did this, expressing their emotions towards a specific topic, whether through a sense of frustration or a great

yearning for love. It presents the Laotian experience of ordinary citizens. A similar style in how they sing also shows that the melody would create an arc throughout each stanza, descending closer to the ends of those lines. The melody often uses a quarter-note or eight-note pattern at a moderate story-telling tempo. These folk songs are significant because they have survived through generations, where most are passed down orally, but these have been written out and are still essentially a part of the Laotian American music scene. It is often not the case when writing these songs down, so writers and singers are usually unknown due to the lack of research on Lao music. These folk songs are also the foundation of what is now considered popular Lao music. The style of folk songs makes a difference through the instrumental choices and singing style. Folk music keeps the same slow, walking tempo throughout and will add different lyrics and tempo to progress the music and story. A faster tempo would progress the story or project, and a slower tempo would indicate the end of the story.

Each traditional song differs because of the varying dialects and cultural practices, so it is essential to note this when comparing them. As mentioned earlier, Lao was divided into three separate regions, so depending on where Laotian immigrants were from, the traditions specific to that area were brought to America. For these reasons, music became a tool for them to create interconnectedness among other Laotians. For example, the Lao New Year Festival in Murfreesboro, usually during the second to last week of May, has become a significant community event, during which live dance and music performances were put on. Throughout the nation, Laotians come to celebrate this new form of cultural identity and perseverance. Laotian Americans share traditions through “*lamvong*” and “*molam*” singing, even with a diverse background in Laotian

cultural practices. Generational gaps between Laotians in America are also finding ways to connect. Most of this is through forms of oral traditions being shared, and with modern technology, second and third-generation Laotian Americans can understand more of their cultural heritage.

Several examples of these pop songs are sung by several musicians today. One of these songs is called, “ໃສ່ວ່າຊັງເຂົາ,” translated to “You Say You Hate Them.”⁴¹ This song was created in 2023 by Jimmy Sittiphon, a famous Laotian artist utilizing instruments of the Lao popular songs. In his band, he includes a sort of rock style of instruments. The drum kit keeps the metronome of the song in a typical 4/4 time signature. The ornamentations of the piece also include the khene-sounding pitches in the background, which are operated by the keyboard. There are also multiple guitars, one of which is an electric guitar, adding to the slow rock style of the piece. The guitar used in that section is an acoustic Lao guitar, the shape of which is curved like a leaf, and at the top of the neck of the guitar, it has a dragon carving. The rolls made on the guitar are included to extend to the following phrase when the vocalist is singing at the end of a cadence. These elements still present a similar form of folk tune singing, especially from the vocalists where he sings the lyrics in an arc form, ending the song with what he starts with but with a more powerful authentic cadence. The different rock instruments in this piece emphasize the vocalists more by creating more moving lines. It brings more emotion to the pieces, making them more interesting.

⁴¹ “ໃສ່ວ່າຊັງເຂົາ ໄສ່ວ່າຊັງເຂົາ - ຈິມມີ ສິທິພອນ ຈິມມີ ສິດທິພົນ.” YouTube video, uploaded by Jimmy Sittiphon, December 22, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xo-xNTiUB2c>.

The next song is often performed at Laotian gatherings, festivals, and birthday parties in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. It is titled "Dream of Vientiane Through Words" or "ວຽງໃນຜັນ ຮ້ອງໂດຍ ຄຳຜ່ານ" by John Manivong.⁴² The vocalist in this piece is older and has a more mature-sounding tone than in the previous piece. The song utilizes a tambourine to keep the metronomic tempo, a guitar, and sampled acoustic instruments on the keyboard, including the sounds of a Laotian bamboo flute. The vocalist sings about the capital of Central Laos, Vientiane, and how he misses it, similar to the folk song "Do Not Forget Vientiane." This version has a more regulated rhythmic pattern to keep the other instruments coordinated with the singing. Lao popular music like this one does not improvise like folk songs but is strict with the lyrics. The timbre of the voice is also different where the singer in this piece tends to use a lot of vibratos to express emotion by sustaining the note. When I asked my father about this song, he said that he would often get emotional singing it and commented, "I would miss my hometown." He discussed with me that other Laotian Americans missed Vientiane as well and hoped to one day revisit the city that they grew up in. The combination of rock instruments and folk melody created an exciting mix of traditional songs and modern popular music.

Another example portrays this nostalgic soundscape that is reminiscent of the singer's time living in Vientiane, Laos. The song is titled "Dream House" by Sunaree Ratchasima, which is an older song than the previous two from the late 20th century to

⁴² "ວຽງໃນຜັນ ຮ້ອງໂດຍ ຄຳຜ່ານ." YouTube video, uploaded by John Manivong, November 17, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1hFCvWOZUc>.

early 21st century.⁴³ It is, again, about living in Central Laos, and it is sung by a woman with a different timbre, her voice sounding higher pitch. It still follows the same narrative form as the previous songs do but is accompanied by different instrumentation. In this case, the instruments used are drums, a tambourine, a violin-sounding instrument, and a piano keyboard. These instruments create a dream-like atmosphere of reminiscing about Vientiane by including instruments that offer lighter articulations and melodic lines. The singer romanticizes the city with these elements and creates a longing to visit their mainland.

Each of these songs uses similar rock band instrumentals in the folk songs. They all follow a similar tempo marking and rhythmic pattern. It is essential to note this because these folk songs are the foundation of Laotian popular music and are presented at all the cultural gatherings and festivals that several people find joy and comfort in. The difference is in the instrumentation and how these pieces are being sung. Popular Laotian music dwells on the emotions throughout the song, so they have hefty vibratos and often sustain notes until the following phrase begins. Folk songs are more about the stories being told rather than the emotions of the artists, so they are not as reliant on singing virtuosically.

⁴³ “เวียงในฝัน - สุณารี ราชสีมา[OFFICIAL MV].” YouTube video, uploaded by Sure Entertainment, April 4, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hf8dbXuKO0w>.

Chapter Four

Cultural Influence on the Laotian American Community and Musicians

As people immigrated to the United States of America, these folk songs have been carried over but with different instrumentations and styles. To gain more insight from the Laotian community, I attended a Lao wedding on August 31, 2024, as a part of the community's event for those in Middle Tennessee. The wedding took place in Murfreesboro, TN, at the venue, Elks Lodge, but those within the community came from Nashville, Lebanon, and Smyrna, to support and celebrate one another. The audience consisted of Laotian Americans between their early fifties and late sixties, and this generation left Laos due to the communist regime in the 1980s. Because this was a Laotian event, women wore their traditional "*sihn*," silk-made skirts with varying pattern designs, and men wore suits. The singer at this wedding also wore a *sihn* but it is optional and based on his or her style of performance wear. The music at the wedding started with *molam* and later into upbeat songs near the end because more people felt comfortable and wanted to dance as the night went on. The *molam* song at the beginning had several Laotian Americans and friends of other ethnicities, including the bride and groom, *fawning* to it (figure 8). Even if people were not great dancers, it was a special moment to come together and practice the dance with those in the community around them. Instruments that were used also included rock instruments that are typically used in modern popular Lao music.



Figure 15. Fawn during a performance of a traditional Lao song, 2024. Photo by the author.

I attended the Laos New Year festival at the Wat Lao Buddharam Temple on May 24, 2024 (figure 9). The audience included several Laotian Americans and Caucasian Americans, so the music had to appeal to both audience members from both communities. This created an exciting blend of languages and styles in the music. The instruments used in one of the songs were an electric guitar, drum set, and electronic keyboard. A younger generation was present there, so they would sing American popular songs to appeal to that audience and those who are not Laotian. The festival also had markets to resemble a particular place in Laos called "Seehuam," a market-like place in Laos that sell a variety of things at booths, like clothes, jewelry, toys, and food. From this festival, it sets up a soundscape of their mainland from the music to the different markets, bringing communities from all over the United States together.



Figure 16. Lao New Year 2024 at Wat Lao Buddharam in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 2024. Photo by the author

Western influence among Laotian singers who came to the U.S. also started to take shape when there was a realization of the change in music from when they left Laos. My research consisted of obtaining interviews with a few musicians from the Lao community. I interviewed a female Lao singer, Nicole Hyouibandith whose stage name is “Jackajan.” Jackajan is translated to cicada in English, so her logos often included that as her brand name. Nicole has performed worldwide at festivals hosted by Laotian communities from around the globe (figure 10). She stated that her purpose was to keep Lao traditions alive and perform at fundraising events so families in need may benefit. She strives to support and share her art with the Laotian community.



Figure 17. Jackajan singing at one of her performances.⁴⁴

Nicole's story is unique in that she did not start singing at an early age but in her late teens to early twenties. She immigrated to the United States in 1981 from Central Laos and was introduced to Lao music through her brother, who needed a singer for his band. She grew up in Tennessee and had to translate these Lao songs into English to memorize them better. She practiced them while doing minimal tasks around the house or driving her car to match the singers she listened to. She also used to be shy before performing some of her shows, but she started to branch out when she realized she needed to bring good energy to the crowd. To do this, she started learning how to dance and be a performer, not just a great singer. Her appearance also started to reveal the difference between her and other Laotian singers where she would wear dresses that revealed more of her and not the traditional skirts like *sinh*. She would often make these outfits herself, bringing her own unique style to the music industry.

Nicole can also sing in multiple dialects of Laotian songs and in Thai and English, appealing to a diverse audience. She also had to practice accents because of the different

⁴⁴ Lao in the South. "JackajanUsa Nicole - Lao New Year 2019 - Interview - Murfreesboro, TN." Accessed November 7, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmWUVgGWhGo>.

regions of *molam* music. The Vientiane accent is her natural accent, but she will switch to different ones like “Salavane” (South Laos), “Thai Dai” (area in Lao close to Thailand), and “Luang Prabang” (Northern Laos). Each one has a slightly different sound to it due to the influence of the particular region. For example, someone from Thai Dai will speak Lao but sound like they are speaking Thai because they have a softer tone according to some Laotians. Terms can also be different. For example, traditional music from Luang Prabang is not called *molam* but is referred to as, “*komnum*.” This of music also has its own style due to the cultural differences of Laotians in the South or Central regions. Most Laotian Americans do not request that type of music because people in Middle Tennessee are from Central Laos in Vientiane. Nicole still remembers how to sing that type of music because when she travels to another part of the United States, certain areas are more populated with people from Luang Prabang.

Nicole’s primary audience is the older generation of Laotian people, so at these ceremonies and social gatherings, she sings at least one recognizable folk song. These songs are also usually accompanied by *fawn* which focuses on the slow movements of hands turning and tempo being at walking speed. Then, a younger generation of people will join and dance to more energetic songs throughout the night. These songs are still under the same umbrella as Lao traditional music. If she is at a Lao festival and the younger generation is present, she will perform music like Lao hip-hop or even sing in English. She says that even young people go to the dance floor when traditional music is played. One of her popular songs sung is called “Bak Salope,” a Lao line-dancing song. Multiple people of varying generations can join because of its simple foot movements and group effort.

Later, I asked Nicole on her opinions on how the music scene is different in the U.S. from how it is in Laos and for her to explain her answers. The only difference, Nicole says, is how they wear their outfits. It is more modern in the USA, but in Laos, they are more modest and traditional in how they wear *sihn*. Again, she also believes there are generational differences with old, traditional, and modern mixes. She explained that, “Right now the new generation is more of modern, hip, pop songs than old traditions. Kind of a mix with old traditions and modern. We [Lao musicians in America] do mixes of modern and traditions but back at home, they don’t do much modern like they do here. Here we do just about everything, every type of event.” Her explanation highlighted this shift in music between the generations and immigration factors. In the United States, the audience is much more diverse than in Laos, so more popular and modern Lao music is played and created.

The next person I interviewed was my father, Eric Vongsiharath, who performs on keyboards, small percussion instruments, and sings at various Laos functions with his band (figure 11). He is also from Vientiane, Laos, Central Laos and was brought to America in 1985 at sixteen. He is a self-taught musician and in recent years, started practicing daily at the keyboard and enjoys listening to music and singing because it makes him feel relaxed and confident. When he finally had time to learn keyboard notes and sing varying songs, he committed to it. He learned by watching YouTube videos and listening to advice from friends in his circle. When I asked him about his opinions regarding this generation's music, he specified that rap and pop music are part of Laotian music. He explained that “When I lived in Laos, I would listen to music from around the globe like Thai, English, and Indian. The music changes, but with music in English,

teenagers are the common group that like that. Rap is coming in now and so is pop music. But [in] my opinion, I like country music. But music is music. It changes.” Modernized Lao music has been a popularity among the younger generation as Eric has explained, so there has been a mixture of country and pop music to appeal to all generations in the Lao community. He also acknowledges that the only difference between Laotian music in the United States and Laos is the change in audience and the type of generation that will listen to this music. His response was similar to Nicole’s because they both noted that there is a change in genre throughout the generations. They also noted the remixes of Lao folk music and American pop music. These remixes help to keep Lao music alive in the younger generation, who are not as apt to listen to the traditional “*lam*” music as one might expect. The remix allows them to find their sense of identity in the Laotian community that so many before them have been a part of. Then, I asked him what role music played in the Laotian community, and he answered that it was to continue acknowledging Laotian culture and display it with the world. There are less Lao people in Middle Tennessee as in Texas or California, so efforts to preserve culture are smaller. He states that performing Lao traditional pieces is a tradition, so there will be at least one *lamvong* song at ceremonies or festivals. It is vital to include these at ceremonies as part of continuing to preserve cultural identity.



Figure 18. Eric Vongsiharath performs on tambourine at Lao Wedding in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 2024. Photo by the author.

Kouramsavanh Bandith is another self-taught singer from Central Laos born a year later than my father (figure 12). She came to America at sixteen years old, resided in California as her first stop, and now resides in Middle Tennessee. She was invited to sing with a band in California through a phone call, which is how she entered the Lao music scene in America. She came from a family who loved to sing and dance, so she was interested in performing and started singing when she was in Lao before she moved to the United States. She taught herself for most of her teen years, but during later years, she was helped by more professional musicians. She became more active in the music scene as an amateur musician, realizing that she wanted to help the Lao community in any way she could. She helped through fundraising events or community parties where they

needed a singer. Then, I asked her if Lao music was different from American Lao music, and she said that it was. Her perspective on this question is tied to how different Lao traditional music was from “Americanized” Lao music. She spoke about the “Americanized” version, discussing what was previously mentioned about how Lao popular music includes more Western instruments like the keyboard and drumkits. She also sings in Lao, English, and Thai, depending on the audience and time of day.

The audience tends to get tired during the night, so more upbeat songs with people dancing are played to keep the energy up. She stated that “Lao music has different genres: Cha-cha-cha, new wave, country, *Salavane*, *nam durn*, slow, and disco.” It is interesting how the words and accents sometimes change depending on the style, but everything else, like the tempo, musicality, and instrumentation stays the same. She also mentions that musicians can remix these songs into any genre they want, and the band members know the song and can just change the genre. Understanding this is vital to knowing the importance of folk songs because it is embedded in several modernized Lao pop songs.



Figure 19. Kouramsavanh Bandith sings at a Lao Wedding in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

Photo by the author.

There were several similarities and differences between each person interviewed. One was that they were not formally taught to sing or perform on their instruments. Through globalization, the use of the internet and modern technology has helped to nurture their talents. YouTube and other social media applications have provided access to more musical resources for those who want them and want to be a part of the musical scene. Oral traditions have also played a factor when practicing with band members or meeting with friends to play instruments and listen to traditional Lao music. Their perspectives regarding the differences between Lao music from Central Lao and America have also been similar, and they believe these pieces are the same foundationally. The same folk songs are indeed being used, but the changes lie in the style of music produced

and the lyrics involved. Significant differences between each musician were the reasons why they decided to start learning more about traditional Lao music and when they started. My father, Eric, started much later than Nicole and Kouramsavanh because he had less time to devote to music in the first ten years when he first immigrated to America. He was constantly working and focusing on caring for his family, but now that his children are adults, he uses his free time to learn and create music with his friends. Nicole and Kouramsavanh were asked to join the music scene by band members rather than searching for it for themselves and still enjoying continuing in this industry. They differed in how they approach music professionalism, where Nicole has a merchandising business for her fan base and record albums. Kouramsavanh enjoys singing in her free time with her band and views this as a fun hobby. All three of these musicians continue with their performances because they love to listen to Lao traditional music and want to preserve these traditions.

Conclusions and Music Preservation

Through a blend of Western instruments and Laotian traditional instruments, modernized Lao popular music has formed. Elements of popular music like tempo, rhythms, and narrative structures are based off principles from folk music. The change and difference are due to the instrumentations and vocal techniques between Lao folk and popular music.

Combining cultures by adding instruments is how people in America keep Laotian culture alive in various places. After analyzing examples of folk songs and popular music, it is evident that a change has occurred in Laotian music during the immigration process to the United States. These changes are present in a way that they are the effects of Western influence, bringing about a blend between American music and Laotian music. Noting these changes can bring insights into how music plays a role in the lives of Laotian Americans and why preserving Lao folk songs is vital to sustaining their cultural identity. Throughout my field research and interviews, I discovered how important music is to the Laotian American community. Many Laotian Americans commit to learning music because they enjoy it and often participate in it as a hobby. These songs that they perform are love songs either of a significant other or of a particular place. They romanticize Laos, creating soundscapes of their homeland. It connects them to the mainland while being across the world from where most Laotian immigrants grew up.

Not only are Laotian traditions and cultural exchanges spreading throughout the world, but they are also helping Laotian Americans come together with a common ground. Lao folk music is the common ground that has helped keep traditions alive and is

the glue to preserving Laotian identity, tying regions together. That is why ensuring the youth are well educated in Laotian culture and language is vital.

Laotian Americans are being introduced to popular music and are finding appreciation in it while trying to maintain their cultural traditions in this music. While these are important, there are questions about how people plan to preserve folk music. Modern media from Thailand are also gaining more popularity among Laotians with their television shows, music, and clothing. There is a shift away from the traditional roots of Laotian music into a new generation of music that is trendy. The interviewed musicians' generation has kept up with the traditions by performing and understanding these songs. Although they fall under a distinctive style, they still incorporate these essential folk songs. After their generation leaves, there are concerns about whether these folk songs and traditions will be kept alive because they will not be as popular as the new and fresh music by the new generation of artists. The younger generation has challenges because several Laotian American citizens born in the United States cannot speak Lao. If the motive is to pass down the music and folk songs to keep traditions alive, those who cannot speak Lao will not pass this on to future generations. Teaching music and language to those who grew up in the United States is essential if the goal is to preserve the identity of the Laotian culture. Music has been a major contributor to Laotian culture because it has helped those who immigrated to the United States by being that comforting source to an unfortunate political displacement. To preserve these traditions, recording literature and conducting more research on this crucial subject will continue Laos' cultural heritage.

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