



## **Rough Guide to the Music of Vietnam**

**January 20, 2015 / Paul Fisher**

**Vietnam may have experienced an onslaught of Western culture in the last twenty years or so, but a strong Vietnamese identity and tradition remains firmly intact. This shouldn't come as a surprise when you consider the Vietnamese have already seen off Chinese, French and American occupiers. The Vietnamese are a proud people. Proud of their history, proud of their resilience and proud of their culture and music.**

Like anywhere in the world, manufactured idols are popular with the new generation, but even they like to include the strains of the one stringed dan bao into the mix somewhere. The energy and bustle of today's Saigon (officially Ho Chi Minh City) is reflected in a thriving music industry. Like the organized chaos of thousands of scooters in a perpetual near miss accident, so random rows of CD stores are dotted along the streets. There are no big western chain stores to buy from, while on-line stores have yet to make an impact. Instead people buy in the old fashioned way; go to their local friendly independent shop, listen to the latest sounds and hand over their hard earned cash.

Like other Southeast Asians, Vietnamese like a catchy melody and love nothing more than singing karaoke, whether that be in a bar, at home or even on a bus. Singers are therefore the biggest stars, held in great esteem. This album features some of the very finest including the wonderful female vocalists Thu Hien and Van Khanh.

Even with the so-called economic miracle and the further opening up to foreign influences, one thing will always remain. Vietnamese musicians are able to tap into one of the world's richest musical cultures. Unlike their near neighbours in Southeast Asia, Cambodia and Thailand, Vietnam

shares its closest artistic and musical heritage with the Far East; China, Japan, Korea and possibly Mongolia. China occupied the country for a thousand years until 938AD and has had a profound influence on the musical tradition. Instruments such as the dan tranh sixteen stringed zither) is intimately related to the Chinese guzheng, while the Ty Ba lute is very similar to the Chinese pipa.

Vietnam also came under the influence of the Hindu kingdom of the Champa and the Khmers, yet some instruments appear to be purely Vietnamese in origin. Foremost among these is the monochord, dan bao, probably the instrument that most represents the quintessential sound of Vietnamese music. The dan bao can be heard on many tracks on this album in a variety of musical styles, from traditional to modern.

Western music was first introduced into Vietnam by the French, with songs such as La Marseillaise becoming popular following World War One. By the 1930s, the Vietnamese were making their first stabs at a homemade version of western music. Over the years this has metamorphosed into the popular style of playing Westernized music on mainly Vietnamese instruments such as the dan bao, dan tranh and dan sao trio you can hear on this album, or the crossover pop from stars such as Cam Ly and Quang Linh.

Vietnamese ex-pats have also made a significant contribution to the music scene, especially from Westminster, California. Arguably however, the greatest contribution beyond the Vietnamese communities has been made by Parisian based singer Huong Thanh and guitarist Nguyen Le.

From north to south, from ancient court and traditional music to living folk songs, via some of the biggest stars of contemporary Vietnamese music, this Rough Guide offers a unique glimpse into the rich variety of sounds emanating from one of the world's least understood nations. The Vietnam war might still resonate in the minds of many in the West to a soundtrack of popular 60s and 70s US hits. Meanwhile the Vietnamese themselves have long moved on, mixing vibrancy with tradition and real beauty.

## 1. HUONG THANH - CROSSING THE VALLEY

Female singer Huong Thanh and guitarist / producer Nguyen Le mix up Vietnamese traditional music with jazz and other kinds of extraneous influences. Huong Thanh was born in Saigon, where her father, Huun Phoc, was one of the biggest stars of cai luong, renovated Vietnamese theatre. She started performing in shows with her father from the age of eight, and in 1977, her family moved to Marseille in France. Thanh sang both pop and cai luong for the Vietnamese community, which she continued to do after her family moved to Paris. She still considers cai luong to be at the heart of her singing style today. Nguyen Le was born in Paris to Vietnamese parents who came to France after the end of French colonization in 1954. He started out playing rock before taking up jazz and is one of Europe's leading jazz guitarists playing with a glittering array of musicians including Gil Evans, Quincy Jones, Peter Erskine, Ornette Coleman and Ralph Towner. Eventually he wanted to explore his own identity, which opened up the possibility to mix the Vietnamese music he remembers as a young child, with jazz and the other styles that he grew up with in Paris. Meeting Huong Thanh in Paris in 1995 allowed him to fulfil this ambition and she featured on his solo album Tales from Vietnam in 1996. Huong Thanh has since recorded three of her own albums, produced and arranged by Nguyen Le. Crossing the Valley is taken from the second album, Dragonfly, released in 2001. It is a traditional tune given a new arrangement, with poetic lyrics- 'the monkey climbs up the tree and the birds are singing. In the murmur of the valley I'm dreaming'. It features the sao (flute), dan tranh (zither) and traditional wooden percussion instruments together with guitar, keyboards and bass.

## 2. . THANH QUY

### NGOI TUA SONG DAO (SITTING BY THE PEACH MULLIONED WINDOW)

Situated in the north of Vietnam, to the east of Hanoi, Bac Ninh Province is home to Vietnam's oldest singing tradition, quan ho. A genre of songs featuring call and response group singing, believed to date back to the 13th century, quan ho are performed during the famous spring festivals that took place at the numerous pagodas in the region. Originally sung in exchange between

mandarin families, its popularity spread throughout the northern region, and is today one of the most important types of Vietnamese folk song. Men and women take turns singing in a kind of challenge and response to each other. Women and men are afforded equal status, with mutual respect and some good natured banter. From upbeat tunes to melodious and graceful songs, quan ho were originally unaccompanied, but these days can feature dan-bau (monochord) sao-truc (bamboo flute) tam thap luc (dulcimer) with occasional guitar and keyboards. Male singers carry a black silk umbrella while women hold a fan underneath a palm-leaf hat that is tucked underneath the arm. Thanh Quy is an exceptional female quan ho singer, whose male counterpart on the album from which this track is taken, is Quy Trang.

### 3. CAM LY - EM GAI QUE

Born in Saigon, Cam Ly is one of Vietnam's most loved pop singers. She first grabbed the public's attention in 1993 after winning first prize in a city-wide duet singing competition along with her sister. Soon after, Cam Ly signed to Kim Loi Studio one of Vietnam's most prestigious record labels which propelled her to pop stardom with a succession of best selling albums. She is the recipient of numerous music awards and Cam Ly has also proven to be a versatile and talented singer when it comes to traditional folk music, especially with southern style songs. She has toured in many countries around the world and has released over 15 CDs and DVDs featuring short musical movies. Em Gai Que is the title track to her album released in 2004.

### 4. BLUE ASIA - BLUE REQUIEM

Blue Asia is the project of possibly Japan's most innovative producer Makoto Kubota, together with his assistant and arranger Yoichi Ikeda, and the Malaysian top producer team of Mac Chew and Jenny Chin. Since the 1970s Kubota has been at the cutting edge of Japanese productions of world music, with groundbreaking albums by among others Indonesian singers Elvy Sukaesih, Detty Kurnia and Malagasy band N'Java.

Blue Asia travel to work with artists in their own locality, including in 2003, Saigon, Vietnam. Inspired by the undeniable blues quality of some Vietnamese traditional music, Blue Requiem features top dan bao player Thuy Hanh, and the sampled drums of legendary funk and jazz drummer Bernard Purnie. This pairing created some unique down-home Mekong delta blues.

### 5. THU HIEN - CAU DOI CAU CHO

From Hue, the ancient capital in Central Vietnam, Thue Hien has been one of Vietnam's most enduring and popular singers. In 1962, during the escalating war, she joined a well-known performing art group. In 1966, she started her solo career spending most of her time performing throughout the country, especially in the fierce war zones of central Vietnam. Thu Hien has earned the most prestigious recognition title, as 'the People's Artist'. Over the last forty years Thu Hien has released more than 20 albums mostly of northern and central folk and traditional revolutionary songs. Her songs are typically based on folk melodies with Vietnamese traditional instruments, such as the dan bao, set over a luscious texture of western keyboards and percussion with her sumptuous voice gliding over the top.

### 6. KIM SINH - LI GIAO DUYEN

Kim Sinh was born in 1930 in Hanoi and lost his eyesight when he was three months old. He started to learn the dan nguyet, a two stringed Vietnamese lute, when he was eight. At the age of twelve he modified a guitar to sound like a Hawaiian or bottleneck guitar and during the French occupation performed in Dance Halls. Self taught, he had never heard black American blues or jazz and he developed his bluesy style of playing in apparent isolation, based entirely on his own ability and instinct. Through the years he became known as a master player and singer of cai luong, the kind of theatre which was revised and improved in 1916-17 by a group of Southern Vietnamese music lovers. Li Giao Duyen is his own arrangement of a traditional song from Southern Vietnam.

### 7. KHAC CHI ENSEMBLE - ON THE BAMBOO BRIDGE

Khac Chi Ensemble features dan bao virtuoso Khac Chi Ho, together with vocalist and multi-instrumentalist Ngoc Bich Hoang. Chi attended the National School of Music and undertook an

extensive musical education before becoming a master instructor at the Department of Traditional Music at the Hanoi National Conservatory. He later became conductor of the Conservatory's acclaimed Traditional Music Orchestra and in 1988 was awarded first prize in the national annual Improvement of Traditional Instruments Awards for his developments of the dan bao. Bich was a scholarship student at the Hanoi Music Conservatory and studied a multitude of instruments. She performed with many of Vietnam's most prestigious musical ensembles and was a regular on national radio and television. She too is the recipient of various awards including the first woman to receive the top prize for her dan bao playing in the 1988 Vietnam Competition for Professional Instrumentalists. Since 1992 they have both lived in Vancouver where they continue to teach and perform. On the Bamboo Bridge is a southern Vietnamese folk song. The male and female vocals accompanied by a variety of instruments such as the dan bao and its bass version the dan bao tram, dan mo (wooden percussion) dan nguyet (two stringed lute) dan tranh (zither) and ken bao (conical double reed).

#### 8. TRANH SAO BAO -LY CON SAO

Traditional instruments not only accompany pop singers, but are used to create a modern form of instrumental music. The most popular ensemble is the trio of tranh (zither) sao (flute) and bao (monochord) of which dozens of albums exist. A cheesy keyboard and a tinny drum machine are added in varying quantities to create a range of syrupy concoctions, from the simple and sweet to the super saccharine.

#### 9. HUY DU, TUYET TRING - KIM TRONG TUONG TU THUY KIEU

Hat tho is a worship chant, that is part of hat van, a traditional folk art that combines a kind of trance singing with dancing. Hat van originated in the Red River delta in the 16th century. It later spread to the entire country and combines the beauty of folk songs from all regions, north to south. The music is mostly slow, exquisite and dignified with a range of rhythms and pauses. The instrumental backing is sparse yet creates the atmosphere. The main instruments are the dan nguyet, dan-nhi, (two stringed fiddle) dan tranh and various Vietnamese guitars. These are interspersed with the striking of the phach (a piece of wood or bamboo) marking the rhythm, xeng (clappers), trong chau (drum) and chieng (gong). A form of ritual music, its original purpose was to call upon spirits and reconnect them with the living in a trance ceremony. Only since the mid 1980s has hat van been practiced openly again, as for many years before it was deemed not to be conducive with the anti-religious leanings of the government.

#### 10. NGUYEN THANH THUY

##### LUYEN NAM CUNG

The Dan Tranh is a sixteen stringed zither that originated in Hue and is derived from the Chinese guzheng. It is an extremely subtle instrument with delicate nuances mainly due to it being strung with light metal strings. Some modern instruments have seventeen or more strings and are flatter than the concave shaped original. It is believed to date back around 800 years and is one of the most loved of all Vietnamese instruments. The dan tranh is plucked using all the fingers, the player usually wearing finger-nail plectrums. It is used in different situations; as part of a small ensemble, accompanying a singer or played solo, unaccompanied. Nguyen Thanh Thuy has released one of the most successful solo dan tranh albums of recent years. In 1998, she won the first prize in the Third National Young Talent Dan Tranh Contest, and the first prize in a traditional art performing contest. Since then, she has performed in numerous music shows and festivals in Vietnam and around the world.

#### 11. VAN KHANH - DEM PHUONG NAM NGHE CAU HO HUE

Van Khanh was born into a traditional music family and is a fantastic singer of central style country and folk songs, which combine traditional Vietnamese flavours with a modern accompaniment. When she was aged twelve, she joined the Quang Tri performing art group and toured across her province performing most nights. When Blue Asia (see track four) were looking for a singer for their Hotel Vietnam album, they chose Van Khanh for the sweetness and pure quality of her voice and ability to straddle the line between traditional and modern folk. She has lived in Saigon (Ho Chi

Minh) Vietnam's entertainment capital for the last nine years, and her name is now synonymous with the central Vietnamese folk music she has helped to popularize.

#### 12. QUANG LINH - TOI YEU XOM NHO NGAU XUA

Not surprisingly Vietnamese pop far out sells traditional music, and Quang Linh is one of the country's most adored pop stars. He was born in Hue, and was reportedly a banker in Hanoi before becoming a super star. He started singing when aged nineteen at the Youth Culture House in Hue. He made his professional debut in 1996, when he joined the Ha Noi Performing Art and Dance Theatre. He subsequently moved to Ho Chi Minh where his popularity soared as a solo singer. He is known for singing both romantic pop ballads and the folk / country style of music.

#### 13. CHAU DINH AND CA HUE ENSEMBLE TEN REASONS WHY WE LOVE HUE GIRLS

Set on the picturesque Perfume River, the city of Hue was Vietnam's capital from 1802 until 1945. A world heritage site, Hue is the cultural centre of Vietnam with a rich musical tradition. The best known of those traditions is ca hue, literally Songs of Hue. Ca hue partly originate from the so-called 'Ten Royal Pieces' that were introduced from China and modified for Vietnamese tastes. The voice in ca hue is sometimes uniquely tense without much vibrato. Chau Dinh is one of the great vocalists, sometimes called the Queen of Ca Hue and is backed by an ensemble of four instruments; dan bao, dan nhi (two stringed fiddle), dan nguyet (two stringed lute) and dan tranh (sixteen stringed zither). And the ten reasons why we love Hue girls? Black hair loose on the shoulders, nice way of walking, sweet voice, beautiful dark eyes, slim body, Hue style conical hat, nice teeth (they make even the most precious pearls jealous). beautiful way of standing next to the Perfume River, steps so light, and dress waving in the wind.

#### 14. DAN BAO VIETNAM - RIDER IN THE SKY – LIVE

The dan bao, one stringed monochord, has been a feature on many songs on this album, but never quite as on this track. With just the one string and a wooden sound box, the pitch is regulated with the ball of the thumb and the wonderful sliding sounds by bending a lever arm. In the family band Dan Bao Vietnam, the father plays the dan bao, his two daughters are on wooden percussion and his son on Casio keyboard. This was recorded live next to a swimming pool on Saigon's harbour to an audience of mostly Japanese tourists.