

Phuket Diary

By Joe Josef

Country and Eastern

How much? the pump attendant asks. The tank of my little bike holds about 3 liters of petrol. When full. That's 30 Baht. 1.20 US dollars. The price for one bottle of beer.

Well, lets have a party and fill 'er up! That will give me about 100 kilometers on the road, enough for one days leisurely travel.

Or maybe not? Who knows *what a difference a day makes...* 24 little hours from now, where will I be? Only Buddha and Esther Phillips, both of whom are residing in the great Nirvana by now, know.

Feels great to be *on the road again*. When the low season blues wash over the island with their heavy bellies all black and blue and when the laundry comes back all damp and smelly... when the breakers off the Kata and Patong beaches show their teeth and eat tourists alive... when the monks hide in their temples and huts instead of wandering the misty morning Sois... that's when I grab my bike and rediscover Phuket.

Actually it doesn't really rain that much in the rainy season. It's more or less like an average Italian or Spanish summer. Today is no exception. By tonight my nose and arms will be burning red. But that's okay.

Down the road there is an open air market. A lot of pick-ups and vans. Fifty or more small motorbikes parked at wayside. Many of them are samlors, three-wheelers, with a self-made side car attached to the frame. I stop and find a vacant spot between a rusty old samlor, who's third wheel stands at an 20 degree angle to the other two and who's gas tank has been replaced by an old plastic oilcan... and a shiny new street-racer with flashing colors and the words *new rod angell* sprayed on the side.

The place is bustling. The first stalls right next to the road sell snacks. Spring rolls, hot cookies and sugar cane juice are being made and sold fresh on the spot. Further on down, fruit vendors have stacked their wares up high. A fiest for tropical fruit lovers: Mango, mangosteen, rambutan, litchi, lamyai, lime and the king of fruits, the mighty and smelly durian. The vegetables on the other hand seem quite familiar to Western eyes: carrots, cabbage, corn, onions and mushrooms abound.

The middle section of the market space belongs to the meat-vendors. Freshly slaughtered chicken, raised in the yard on leftovers from "real food" lie on wooden planks side by side with pig's ears, noses and intestines.

From the clothes-vendor's stalls comes the monotonous rattle of voices appraising colorful T-shirts from abroad and cheap bustieres made in Thailand.

Right in the middle of the market a truck has dumped some PA equipment which seems to originate from Chuck Berry's first garage *back in the woods* 1952. An old synthesizer that must have belonged to Ray Charles in his teens and an antediluvian copy of a Fender bass made in Hong Kong. A microphone very like the one from my old tape-recorder back in Albuquerque four decades ago.

This wondrous collection of museum pieces is not for sale, I discover. This is the actual road-gear of an authentic upcountry Thai band 1998. While I stand and inspect the musical tools, the musicians

enter the "stage". They all have a funny, kind of unsteady walk. The pianist feels his way to the keyboard-stool, which actually is a wooden crate, with his fingers rather than with his eyes. And the singer grabs her microphone while meditatively looking in different directions. I do not realize it at first, but when the bass man is being escorted up to his Hong Kong Fender and has his helper crank up the volume on the amplifier for him, it dawns upon me, that this is an all-blind bunch.

Without further preamble, the songstress intonates a wail, that makes my spine shiver. *Oioiooi...* she goes, *ahahaha...*

And one, two, three, voila, the band joins in to the crash of a cymbal. And guess what! They sound incredibly good! The girl's piercing, lamenting voice crisp and clear on top of the instruments full-bodied backdrop. Fascinated I sit down on an empty wooden fish box and open my beer.

A blessing for the musicians, that they cannot see their audience. Nobody really listens, people walk by and carelessly drop a coin or two into the battered old cookie jar in front of the singers inwardly looking eyes. As a matter of fact, I, the only whiteskin in the place, am a greater spectacle for folks to behold. People actually stride up, *pretend* to listen to the music, but stare at me, their curiosity barely masked by the casual cling of money in the dented old jar.

The music is strictly Isaan - the *Country and Eastern* of Thailand so to speak. Lengthy ballads about the love between poor farmers, who cannot unite, because parents give their daughters to wealthy landowners as maids and play toys. About girls, that must go to the big city and sell their love for small money.

All songs are in the same key, all melodies are in minor, all the singer's vocals are interspersed with needle-sharp, pentatonic guitar fills. But the mood is not sad. Rather hypnotic and relaxed. Once in a while the guitar-player grabs a bamboo flute, somewhat like a pan flute, with the pipes organized in parallel rows rather than in an semicircle and blows away. The arrangement of the pipes allows him to produce chords as well as melodic fills. Strangely, he makes the flute sound very much like his electric guitar.

The sun is shining, big umbrellas cast shadows over sapodillas, rose-apples and plastic wares. The air is filled with scents and smells. Of spicy pastes enriched with coconut milk. Of dried fish and smoked squids. Open fires from stalls and samlor-shops that prepare deep-fried pawpeas and chicken's leg with sticky rice give away billowing clouds of smoke.

Smiling slender girls from Patong and Kathu in T-shirts and designer-shorts mix with big, bargaining mama-sans in ankle-length sarongs. Shy boys and girls from nearby villages with big eyes cannot help but stare at me, flash their teeth and avert their face, when their eyes meet mine.

Everything breathes peace and leisure. Time flies by. The bottle of beer is empty. My butt hurts from the uncomfortable seat. I find a 50 Baht note in my pocket and slip it gently into the old tin can. It will be the only one of its kind between all the coins. With the wails of the blind songstress still in my ears and the wind in my hair I ride on.