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One master helps another

By Dan Poynton

A few years ago, English rock star Peter Gabriel was given a video of Master Kong Nai playing traditional Cambodian chapei music. These rugged "Mekong Blues" seemed to resonate in him, he told the Post in a phone interview from England on September 8, and he was immediately hooked. So began the connection of two very different musicians from very different worlds.

Last month Gabriel sent Dickie Chappell, a sound engineer for Gabriel's record label Real World to Cambodia to record Nai for a forthcoming CD to be released internationally in 2007.

"With Master Kong Nai I really had a moving time," said Chappell. "He is a great man full of kindness and laughter even when his own home is under the horrid threat from development."

But there is more than just music to their connection. The philanthropic Gabriel is not only helping to preserve Khmer music - he has hinted that he'll be taking up the cause of the Tonle Bassac squatting communities, home to Master Nai and many other precious Khmer artists.

"As a singer I'm very drawn to voices, and it was his voice that pulled me right in at the beginning," said Gabriel.

"The Cambodian Ray Charles tag seems appropriate, in that there's a warmth that comes out, and you know there's been some suffering there. You feel both the sun and the rain coming out of that voice."

Gabriel compares chapei music to the Delta Blues he grew up on.

"I've got absolutely no idea what he's singing about. But it's the gutsiness, and simplicity, and heart-felt quality - along with the acoustic instrument, and the improvising," he said.

After breaking from Genesis, the band he helped form in the 70s, Gabriel concentrated on innovative solo albums, creative videos and film scores. Later, after much success, he began a life's mission of bringing together the music from people around the world.

Through his Real World releases, he has promoted musicians like Nai to Western audiences. He also founded the WOMAD festivals, which celebrate "ethnic" music

from all over the world and aims to preserve these often endangered art forms.

A few years ago, Nai and other chapei masters feared the extinction of their ancient, haunting style. Historians say as many as 90 percent of Cambodia's artists may have died under the Khmer Rouge, and the youth of today's fascination with pop culture might hamper preservation. The government has little interest in helping the arts, said Nai, nor does it appear to see the value of preserving the unique artists' community squatting in the Tonle Bassac.

Gabriel expressed outrage over the recent forced evictions, now eroding the Bassac community and many others across Cambodia.

"If you want to use me as a supporter, not that it'll mean anything, but I'm very happy to be quoted in a campaign against moving them," he said.

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Phnom Penh Post, Issue 15 / 20, October 6 - 19, 2006

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