

Creating a Legacy

For Singapore Music

Dr Sydney Tan (ST) is an aesthetic physician in private practice but has been involved professionally in music for the last 35 years as a music director and producer. Working with and producing music for industry veterans from Tracy Huang, Dick Lee, Kit Chan, Taufik Batisah and Vocaluptuous to newer artistes like Charlie Lim, Tabitha Nausier and indie darlings The Sam Willows. He has been involved in ground breaking musicals as early as *I Remember Broadway* (1982) and *Beauty World* (1988, 1998, 2008), and has conducted the orchestra as music director for *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress* at the opening of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in 2002 and its subsequent runs in 2003 and 2006. Sydney also composed and produced the movie soundtrack for *Singapore Dreaming* (2006). The last couple of years have been especially busy, with Sydney juggling clinical practice while fulfilling the role of music director for the 28th South East Asian Games (SEA Games) as well as the 2014 and 2015 National Day Parades (NDP). *SMA News*' Dr Jipson Quah speaks to Dr Sydney Tan to find out more about his remarkable career in music.

Hi Sydney, how did you embark on your career in music production? What was your training like and who are some of your musical inspirations?

ST: My mum gave me piano lessons while I was growing up and I started to flourish under the guidance of my band conductor, the late Mr Lim Peng Ann, while I was in Anglo-Chinese School in the 70s. He made me take up the oboe, exposed me to the orchestra and demonstrated the meaning of discipline and rehearsal technique. Church choirs and acapella groups rounded off the exposure and in those pre-YouTube/internet days, the cassette recorder was my teacher as I spent hours rewinding tapes and transcribing the music and arrangements of Burt Bacharach, Sergio Mendes, Quincy Jones and Gene Peurling's Singers Unlimited. One thing led to another for one moment I was running the National University of Singapore Students' Union (NUSSU) talent time and in the next moment, I was Dick Lee's music director for his WEA Records release in the early 80s, *Life in the Lion City*. The extra money earned from WEA Records helped pay my medical tuition fees!

What made you decide to have dual careers in medicine and music? What are some of the similarities and differences in both your professions?

ST: By the time I graduated from medical school in 1985, things were at a high musically. In my housemanship year, I remember dashing off from the hospital wards on my off days to produce Dick Lee's *Return to Beauty World* and two other albums for WEA

Record's boss Jimmy Wee. It was a lot of fun, I was meeting people, gaining experiences, earning extra money and music technology was on its upswing, those being the formative years of MIDI and early digital music, leading to compact discs and the transition from analogue music to the digital recordings that we know today. I thought I'd keep doing this and see how far the balance between my two careers could be maintained. It's been more than 30 years, and I just hit the CPF collection age, so maybe it's time to slow down.



I find medicine and music similar, different and yet complementary at the same time. While the medical process is convergent in its problem-solving, the musical process is divergent in its exploration from a given point. Yet both are about communication, require a connection and empathy with your fellow men, involve maths and pattern recognition and most importantly both have the privilege and power to heal and to soothe.

Tell us more about your role in this year's SEA Games and NDP. As we host the SEA Games and celebrate our National Day in our 50th year of independence, the music production must be tremendous!

ST: The role of the music is to touch and move people attending and watching the events, bringing them to a heightened awareness of what is unfolding before their eyes. This involves writing/choosing the correct music, motifs and performers, then finding the appropriate musical arrangements, instrumentation, recording and mixing which results in the final soundtracks for the occasion. Especially for such large projects, this

is a fairly complex process involving countless meetings and coordination with multiple departments from choreography and props to fireworks, lighting, projection and special effects; all have to be synchronised, not just to the second, but to the frame in time code. (There are 25 frames per second.) Beyond all the technicalities, the paradox is that in spite of the grandeur and scale, our hope is that the individual watching/attending would come away with memories of a special personal experience.

The SEA Games comes to Singapore once every 22 years but not only that, this year's games coincided with the opening of our new national stadium, our country's 50th year of independence, and it is also the year that our founding Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew passed away, so the significances, expectations and pressures are very high.

In your celebrated career, you have worked with numerous generations of local and international artistes. Which has been your most memorable production and why?

ST: It's been a great privilege to be able to be involved with music all these years but perhaps the most meaningful one was in producing the national song *Home*. In 1998, I was putting together the Sing Singapore project and Dick Lee had written the song *Home* while he was away and feeling homesick. It was a song with a genuine core, message and emotion. After I arranged and produced the song, early detractors deemed the lyrics negative, the instrumentation and approach with the acoustic guitar and string quartet accompanying Kit Chan was unlike the model of what was considered a "National Song". With the support of Prof Bernard Tan and Joe Peters, who were on the committee at the time, it was pushed through. Years later, on every National Day, children across Singapore spontaneously sing out the lyrics, not because they are made to, but rather because they feel the emotions and want to, "This is home truly...". I feel a sense of gratitude for being able to play a small part in contributing to the legacy of Singapore music for the generations to come. ▶

PROFILE



INTERVIEW BY

DR JIPSON QUAH

Editorial Board Member

Legend

1. With Dick Lee mixing Singpop in Japan 1996
2. With the Empress Dowager (Kit Chan) during *Forbidden City* at the Esplanade Theatre 2003
3. Producing music in the studio for SEA Games 2015 and SG50 NDP

Photos by Dr Sydney Tan