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## Jazzing up the Music Scene

Dr ka-TI Muntarbhorn is determined to bring the local industry to new heights

DR KA-TI MUNTARBHORN

# Fighting off the PIRATES

Passionately crusading against plagiarism and piracy, talented jazz artist Dr ka-TI Muntarbhorn believes the Kingdom has enough talent that needs only to be harnessed. But change has been slow in forthcoming.

By Percy Roxas

**D**r ka-TI's prescription: hard work pays off. Either you like her or you don't. Some say she has lived outside the country far too long and is "far too farang" in her ways to represent things Thai. Others say she's the epitome of the modern Thai woman who has a mind of her own, and who refuses to be boxed and labelled.

Many say she's taking herself too seriously and that she's not the musician she's been trying hard to be. But most agree she's the best thing that has ever happened to Bangkok's live music scene in years.

But while people may be ambivalent about who Sirabhorn Muntarbhorn (Dr. ka-TI, as she is more popularly called) is or what she's like, they agree that the self-appointed "crusader" for local talents is anything but easy to ignore.

Unlike most of us, the "Bossa Nova Queen" knows what she wants, knows what getting it entails, and is willing to work hard and persevere to get it. She's not only proving that Thai musicians have got what it takes to be considered world-class, she's also willing to fight the lonely "battles" many Thai musicians would rather retreat away from.

"Take me for what I am, and test me for what I am," she loves to say. Since her return from America to Thailand in 1995, Dr

ka-TI has been passionately calling attention to several issues in the Thai music industry: plagiarism and piracy, the need for originality and for more musicians to put art in their craft, and the urgency of developing young Thai musicians into world-class artists. For this reason, the media says she is out to "revolutionise" the local music industry.

Dr ka-TI is the first to eschew the word, but doesn't hide the fact that she has found her cause. She wants to see major changes in the local music industry even as she strives to become an exemplary Thai artist whom other Thai musicians can emulate. And while she knows that changes cannot happen overnight, she's not willing to just wait on the sidelines.

"I want to be a role model," declares the American-educated musician (BA with honors in Jazz Guitar and a doctorate degree in law, no less), "regardless of financial or family background. I really would like to see this happen because it would make my time in Thailand worthwhile. I want to help kids who are



afraid to explore their possibilities. I want to tell the young that there's no limit to their dreams. They can make their dreams come true although it entails plenty of hard work."

Some eyelashes may bat at such statements but Dr ka-TI is not one to say only what people want to hear. She is saying this because she sincerely believes young Thais needed new role models because they have been following the wrong role models for so long, especially in the music industry.

"Many young Thais have the talent, the gift, and the ability, and when they are just starting out in their careers they are full of artistic fire," she points out. "But they are immediately swallowed by a system that is full of plagiarism, that lacks originality, and worst, full of role models of people who want to make quick bucks even if they are stealing somebody else's property. I think the young generation can do better than this."

"The thing is," she adds, "these kids are not as tough as I am in fighting the system. They can't resist those little devils that are whispering in their ears: 'If you try to be too artistic you will starve,' or, 'we will expel you out of this company.' But they must get rid of that fear. They have to believe in themselves."

Some observers who have heard similar lines from Dr ka-TI retort that these words are easy to say, especially if you're born as rich and privileged as she was.

But Dr ka-TI insists, "Money has nothing to do with my achievements or where I am now. If I am here, it's because I worked hard to be here. And that's why I'm going to prove to them that if they are serious and willing and they work hard, nothing's impossible."

It's not just the young Thais that Dr ka-TI wanted to influence. She also wants to be a role model for fellow musicians.

"Sixty-three million people, and no world-class musicians. What's wrong with us?" she asks.

"Does this mean there aren't enough talent in Thailand? I don't think so. This is happening because



DR KA-TI MUNTARBHORN is not only hailed as the country's only female jazz guitarist, but also a celebrity with a "no-compromise" approach toward art and life.

Thais still don't believe in themselves. We still think we're many steps behind farangs. We've got to stop that. We're not any less capable."

Dr ka-TI wasn't the first to raise these issues, but she's one of the most consistent and one of the most media savvy of them. She's also fortunate to have wide access to media mileage.

She's not only a musician and a teacher, which means she gets a lot of press, but also she's a radio announcer at Bangkok's FM-103, and a columnist for various Thai publications. Thus her ideas are heard at various forums.

Another thing that puts her in a unique position - aside from her wit, charm, and educational credentials - is that she is her own best example. "I'm the best example of the adage 'hard work pays off,'" she says. "I'm not saying that I'm smart or that I am special or something, but I'm very proud of the fact that I fought hard to be where I am today."

As her bio confirms, she herself went through what most musicians undergo in pursuit of their craft and displayed a characteristic most successful persons possess: true grit. In her younger days,

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she overcame her mother's objections to a guitar education with nothing more than firm determination. In jazz school, she made it, even graduated with honors, through sheer guts. She was able to enter law school without even the pre-requisites.

Furthermore, she is presently making it in a male-dominated field in a country that culturally does not allow for second chances.

She has broken the hurdles that many older women face and at 48, is enjoying a career many younger musicians would envy.

Today, she is not only hailed as the country's only female jazz guitarist, but also a celebrity with a "no-compromise" approach toward art and life.

She and her band, the only band specialising in Brazilian sounds, has played in various settings in Bangkok, from the "Bangkok Jazz Festival" to the Emporium Music Festival, from charity concerts that are too numerous to mention to beer gardens.

Aside from her regular performances at hotels such as the Dusit Thani, she has also performed with some of the world's best jazz musicians visiting Bangkok: Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter when the Thelonius Monk Institute visited in 1996, Maynard Ferguson's Big Bop Nouveau Band, and guitar great Joe Beck, among others; and has been invited by the Embassy of Denmark to host the Scandinavian Summit Jazz Ensemble.

Yet she is the first to tell you that the road to her present success wasn't a royal one. When she started performing professionally four years ago, she wasn't an overnight sensation.

"It wasn't easy for me," she recalls. "I was laughed at, I was insulted. I suffered pretty much before they finally recognised that I'm good at what I do."

She doesn't hear much from those people nowadays, probably because no one can deny that she is making an impact both here and abroad. She's making the country proud.

In case you haven't heard, she will be guest musician at the Bangkok concert of Portuguese jazz singer Paula Oliveira in March, and in April, she will be representing Thailand at the "Yatra Jazz Festival" in India. To top them all, she just won one of the three artistic residency grants from Fundacao Oriente of Portugal.

"I'm quite happy with what I have achieved so far because I worked so hard for it," she says. "But I'm not resting on present laurels. I won't stop until I see world-class Thai musicians, and I'd like to see it in my lifetime. That's my goal."

To this end, she's been training several handpicked Thai talents ("By instinct, I know whether they have it or not) free of charge, and many of the proteges she brings to her gigs from time to time, have proven that she wasn't wrong in investing in them. Who among her talents will be the first to make a mark on the international scene?

We won't be surprised if Dr ka-TI herself becomes the first Thai musician to "go inter, inter" as they say in the local parlance nowadays.

Did you know that she is set to record an album in Los Angeles in June when she goes there to receive an honor from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences as a member for 20 years? Now, that's something. ☘