

# Bangkok TIMEOUT

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March 2001 • Bt80

## Dr ka-TI: Mission Impossible

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# I Came Back to Fight the Pirates

By Micky Van Nisse

Her love for her country brought her back – to start a passionate revolution that would promote Thailand's artistic and creative prominence as a result. When that mission proved impossible, she didn't quit but found a gentler - probably more effective - way.



Why would Sirabhorn Muntarbhorn, an American-educated Doctor of Law leading a comfortable life in the States, want to come home to Thailand in order to start a revolution? Given that she came from a wealthy family and that what was lying ahead in her home country was probably not going to be a bed of roses, one should be forgiven for – at first sight – presuming she wasn't in her right mind at the time.

Sirabhorn Muntarbhorn, also known as Dr ka-TI, explains, "I learned from Andy Warhol that, 'you have to do stuff that average people don't understand, because those are the only good things'. Whenever you create something new that is not the trend, it will be met by resistance." She says that it takes time, effort and perseverance to change things. If things could be changed so easily, they probably wouldn't last.

Dr ka-TI's self-appointed mission in her home country was primarily to tackle piracy in the music industry. That was three years ago. With her professional expertise as a lawyer and her passionate dedication as an artist, she would lobby the industry and thus help Thailand improve its reputation world-wide regarding intellectual property rights.

One of the first things Dr ka-TI tried upon returning from the US in 1995, was to register the music of an artist at the Department of Copyright in Bangkok. To her astonishment, none of the officials knew what to do.

The music industry seemed not to mind the status quo. While the existing music companies did not exactly welcome Dr ka-TI's plans for reform, many "old timers – musicians – regarded me as an outsider, a rich kid, who was talking from the top down. The excuse (in the industry) is always MONEY."

Things got worse not better, she discovered upon coming home. Using someone else's work and calling it your own 'creation' seems to be the ongoing trend.

"The music companies operating in Thailand send sweet looking teenagers on the stage. They copy the music from abroad then adapt it to suit Thai taste. They create a handsome appearance, then cash in quickly on their investment. After one or two seasons the performers are replaced. The practice has created an industry of

hobbies." Dr ka-TI linked resistance to reform to piracy via the backdoor of some of the big companies. When selling directly on the black market they neither pay royalties to their own musicians, nor tax to the government. It didn't take long for Dr ka-TI's reform efforts to run foul of vested interests. She realised she had better change her tactics, or else. She didn't see much use in becoming a martyr. That didn't mean though that she gave up. Instead she found a valid alternative.



Dr of Law Sirabhorn Muntarbhorn:  
I wanted to help the music industry change for the better.



Dr ka-TI at home - it doubles as a library and study centre for talented musicians she discovers.

### Mission Possible

"You have entered a library of books about music and musicians," informs Dr ka-TI when the Bangkok TIMEOUT team enters the cosy living room of her home on Sukhumvit Road. There are not only rows and rows of thick, hard-cover books but also three guitars; a *Di Giorgio* from Sao Paulo in Brazil, made specially for The Bossa Nova, a Chet Atkins *Gibson* and a GBIO George Benson, *Ibanez*. On a cabinet is a picture of Albert Einstein with his quote; 'I see my life in terms of music.' The building belongs to her family, being also home to her mother and one of her two brothers. In the yard and under the building are seven well-groomed dogs who bark loudly at

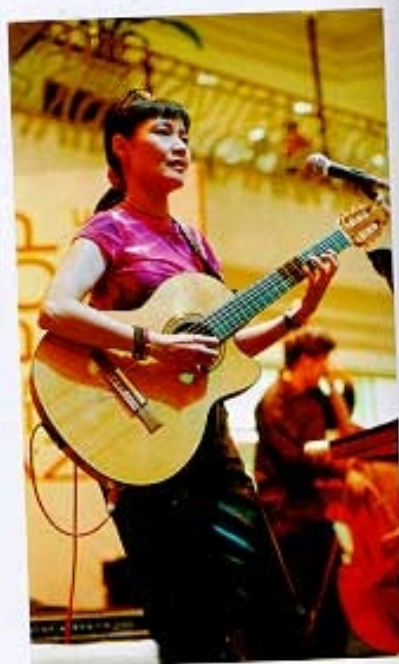
strangers but probably don't bite, and three cats. The two kinds of pets are kept separate.

Dr ka-TI's library is being created for the benefit of her charges; promising musicians who she selects very, very carefully. She goes back to the States once or twice a year in search of new books and the latest CDs and videos. The small group of young artists she has taken under her tutelage can borrow any item of this steadily growing private library. But whenever it is necessary to make copies of sections of any of these books, she makes sure the borrower is aware that, "it's only OK to make copies for not-for-profit (educational) purposes."

Instead of a revolution staged

at the doors of the big producers, Dr ka-TI's present strategy is to work at the grass-root level of the Thai music scene. Her focus is on the young, as theirs is the future. The effects may be somewhat less dramatic in the short term, the long-term results are likely to be far-reaching, nevertheless. "I go around the various clubs and other live music venues, looking for real talent. I may take on one or two new musicians per year." She provides assistance, not so much financially but rather through teaching and working together. "They are not the only ones who learn, I do too." She is also organising corporate sponsorships. Her protégés "must be dedicated, hardworking and be willing 'to pay their dues' as they say in the industry." She illustrates, "An acquaintance rings up and asks me what I am doing ... 'Practising my guitar' I answer. Then she or he will ask, 'Why do you practise, you are an archarn (teacher/professor) already!? Those are the ones I hang up on IMMEDIATELY!'"

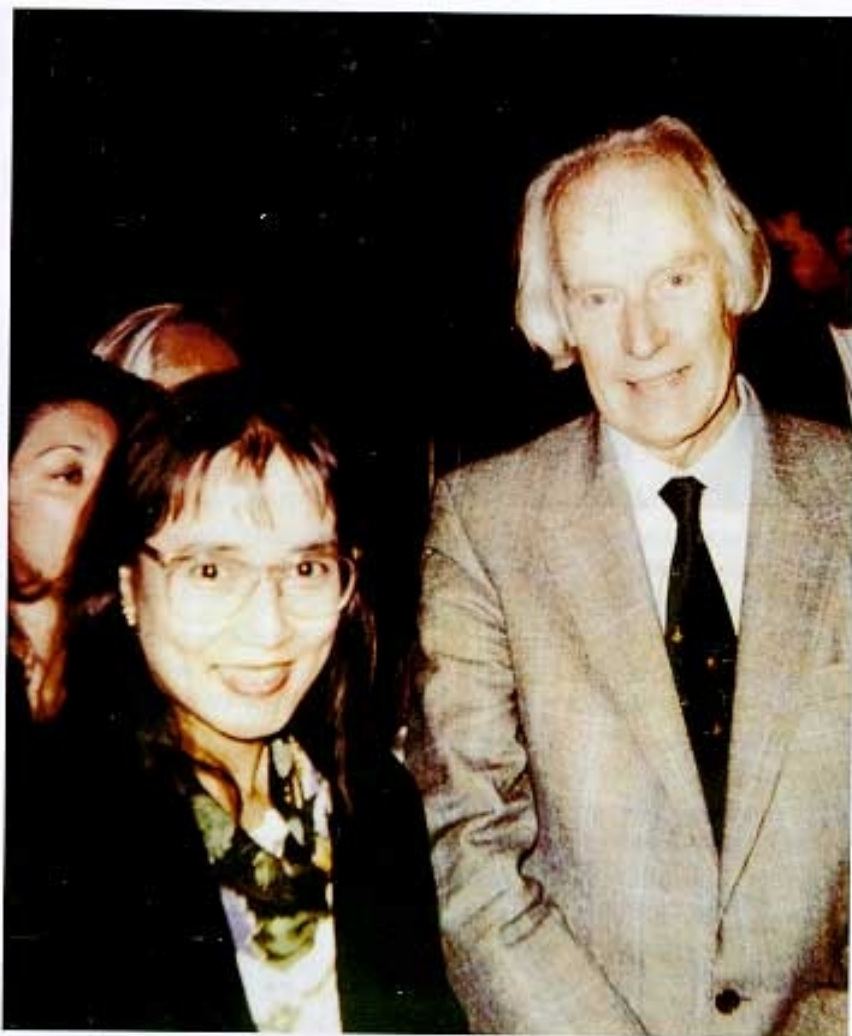
Bad attitude seems to have permeated throughout the music



At the Emporium Music Fest, January 2001.

industry, not just the vested interest groups. "Culturally speaking, once you are an archarn (a professor) — of music or whatever else — you will get the respect of students or people with lesser qualifications, regardless of your ability or efforts to stay abreast."

Dr ka-TI insists that she doesn't give a damn about having a degree or a doctorate for that matter. She reckons that sitting on your laurels isn't going to achieve anything much at all other than missing out on opportunities. "When you graduate from music school it does not mean that you can play. Your actual learning begins after you get your degree." The talented musicians Dr ka-TI finds are unlike herself not from wealthy families. It's not because she is drawn to the underprivileged. "To get where they are, they must have worked very hard and persisted against the odds." Sadly, experience has shown her that, by and large, rich kids she comes across don't have what it takes. It seems that those who are privileged usually don't make the effort, while those who could be great usually don't have the means.



With George Martin, producer of the Beatles, Los Angeles, 1995.



Singing the Bossa Nova for the team of Bangkok TIMEOUT.

Dr ka-TI herself is an exception in that respect. When in 1964 she was sent to England to study at the exclusive Lady Eden's School, she 'discovered' the guitar, as a result of her liking of The Beatles, who were taking the world by storm. Whereas it suited young ladies of high-society families to play Furū Elise on the piano, playing the guitar was most definitely not the thing to do. Thus, to get her parents to agree that she should get a guitar, she sent numerous pleading letters home, she recalls. "I bought my first guitar at Harrods." It was after she finally got permission that she started teaching herself to play the guitar.

Despite her enthusiasm for the guitar she continued her piano studies, receiving music awards for



Sirabhorn Muntarbhorn in her student days.

excellence on the ivories. After finishing high school at Heathfield, Ascot, she went to America at her parents' choosing, to study for an Associates in Science Degree, majoring in Interior Design, at Endicott College, Massachusetts.

The USA became Dr ka-TI's new home. It was here that she took her interest in music several steps further. For the next 22 years she immersed herself in the science, art, laws and work of the performing arts industry – first graduating with a Bachelor Degree (Honours) in Jazz Guitar from Berklee College of Music, Boston, then receiving a Doctor of Jurisprudence Degree from the University of LaVerne, College of Law, California. The advanced courses she took, afterwards, at the University of California, Los Angeles, made her also a Dr of Entertainment Law.

Her work took her to Hollywood's famous film studios, literary agencies, music publishers and recording companies. Dr ka-TI's address book became a virtual Hollywood Who's-Who. Her passion for music and the arts fuelled her

enthusiasm for the arguably rather dry metier of lawyer. Otherwise it's unlikely she would be a member of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) and eligible to vote for the coveted Grammy Awards.

It wasn't really a case of *if* but rather *when* Dr ka-TI would come home to Thailand on her special mission. Like every Thai living abroad, she loved her country and the more she became aware of what ought to be changed at home, the more she felt the need to come and "fulfil my dues," as she puts it when talking about the role of artists in society.

"The big reason that literally triggered the move back to Bangkok was the January 17, 1994, earthquake plus three months of aftershocks. My home was in the San Fernando Valley area – the epicentre! It took me a year to repair and sell the house – at a loss, sell the car, pack and ship stuff ... thus, my return mid-1995."

For the next couple of years Dr ka-TI, having been away – not one or two years but – some 30 years in all, had to settle in, acclimatise, adapt to being back and find her way around town.

When she realised that she had embarked on a Mission Impossible, she had already committed herself to her cause. Not being a quitter, she decided to adapt to the realities of Thailand of today and make the best of it.

Is there anything to show after just two-and-a-half years of working on her low-profile Mission Possible at the grassroots level? There is, for one, her Brazilian Jazz Band that is being very well received. Also she is ready to start a James Taylor band. James Taylor plays the guitar as if two people were playing, or one person with 10 fingers on each hand. "It doesn't matter how hard I listen to James Taylor's guitar playing, I still don't get how he does it," she admits. Other musicians she



It takes years to make a guitar respond to you, especially a new one.



My band is the only Bossa Nova Jazz band in Thailand.

admires: Guitarists Tommy Emmanuel and George Benson – she interviewed both for Overdrive

Magazine, Cellist Yo Yo Ma, pianist-composer Duke Ellington, the great Spanish classical guitarist Andres Segovia, whom she met in 1981, trumpet virtuoso Miles Davis – she has his book of paintings, Sting - former member of 'The Police' and others. She hopes one day to record with James Taylor and Yo Yo Ma, preferably together.

"I am the only lady jazz musician in the country," she points out, "my band is Thailand's only Jazz Band, specialising in the Bossa Nova rhythms of Brazil." Its musicians are her charges.

A few other 'candidates' she found on her talent searches are getting ready to make a name for themselves. "They are working very hard to become world

class artists but it's too early to mention their names in public."

Communicating in English is a prerequisite for achievements on the world stage. Dr ka-TI teaches the young and hopeful English through lyrics; GSM, 'More than Words' on Pirate Radio FM 89; 'Learning by Singing' on FM 103; Generation Terrorist Magazine; Channel (V) Magazine. "My job is to be a role model for equal opportunities."

The challenges of being a performing artist stimulate her to keep improving herself. "I don't take shortcuts." She performs nightly at Ma Maison, The Hilton Bangkok – except Thursdays and Saturdays. In between; a one night special at the Salsa Club, on 8<sup>th</sup> March. Her agenda keeps filling with engagements. And she practises on her guitar, many hours, everyday. "It takes years to make a new guitar, especially a new one, respond to you, to communicate with it as something that lives." 

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