

Sam-Ang Sam: We Live Through Changes

by Jarrad Powell

Sam-Ang Sam is a Cambodian composer, performer, and ethnomusicologist who has lived in the U.S. since 1977. He is presently an instructor at the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle and a visiting artist in the ethnomusicology program at the University of Washington. He and his wife Chan Moly Sam teach traditional Cambodian music and dance at the Cambodian Studies Center in Seattle.

This interview took place in Seattle on three occasions: March 14, April 28 and August 11, 1989.

Jarrad Powell: How did you become a musician? Do you come from a family of performers?

Sam-Ang Sam: When I finished elementary school in Cambodia my parents just put me into music school. I guess at the time I was really too young to decide what I wanted to be. They must have seen something in me because when I was young I liked singing and things like that. So they put me into the Ecole Nationale de Musique, which was the national school of music, and I actually studied western music before I studied traditional music.

Powell: Is there no formal place to study traditional music?

Sam: There is the University of Fine Arts, but it was not established until 1965, and I went to music school in 1964.

Powell: So you ended up studying western music. How did you begin? Did you start by studying a particular instrument?

Sam: The first year I studied harmony and theory, then picked violin during the second year and studied it for two years . . . and then traditional music.

Powell: Was this something that many children did?

Sam: No. I was a little unusual. I think for you to understand better I should say a little about the history of the University of Fine Arts. Before its establishment there was a national school of music, a national school of theater, and so on. But when the University was established these schools were incorporated into it and became what in French we call Faculté de Musique and Faculté des Arts Chorégraphiques, in which there are four sections: theater, occidental ballet, chorale, and folklore. I transferred from



the Faculté de Musique to the Faculté des Arts Chorégraphiques, where I studied traditional music. This was unusual.

Powell: How many years were you involved in this program?

Sam: At first you enter a four year program. At the end of the fourth or senior year you take an examination and the degree you receive is called Diplôme des Arts. This is like an artist's certificate. After that, if you passed the examination, you could become a teacher. But I did not want to become a teacher then. I continued on to another three-year program and got my Baccalauréat des Arts.

Powell: What age were you then?

Sam: I got the Diplôme des Arts at twenty and the Baccalauréat des Arts at twenty-three. I was like . . . a bad boy . . . I played a lot. Sometimes I did not go to school for three months at a time. So I passed and then I stayed back, I passed then stayed back . . . you know. I was almost the only one who did that. Usually they were supposed to kick you out of school if you did that, but they kept me there. That's why it took me so long. It took me six years.

Powell: So when you finished there you already had a background in western music . . .

Jarrad Powell is a composer and performer. He lives in Seattle where he is a faculty member at Cornish College of the Arts and director of Gamelan Pacifica.

Sam: Yes, harmony and all of that . . .

Powell: . . . but at that point you also had training in traditional music as well?

Sam: 1966 was the first time I had training in traditional music.

Powell: And how did that begin? With what instrument?

Sam: With the fiddle, the two-string fiddle.

Powell: Is it common in the traditional ensembles for one person to play different instruments?

Sam: Usually a musician specializes in an instrument. For example, I am a wind player. But I play other instruments. Most traditional musicians in Cambodia know how to play several instruments. This is for practical reasons. If you can play many instruments then you have more flexibility in joining groups and you have more opportunities to earn money. At the University you don't have to do that because you are on a salary. However it is useful for the University musicians too, particularly when they go abroad to perform. If you know only one instrument sometimes it is very difficult, because the school or host country usually cannot bring thirty musicians. They bring ten. You have to be versatile enough to play different instruments as the performances require.

Powell: Is being a musician a bonafide profession outside of the University? Can people make a good living or a living as a musician?

Sam: Very few people can. Musicians in Cambodia do not have very high status. The establishment of the University of Fine Arts changed that perception a little bit and musicians and dancers became more respected. But traditionally music was associated with drinking and entertainments that were not so serious. But aside from that, spiritually, people respect musicians very much. Still, musicians do not have a good standard of living at all.

Powell: Yet music must have many functions within the culture.

Sam: Definitely. It depends on what type of music and what ensemble. Each ensemble has a certain function.

Powell: Would you describe the types of traditional ensembles?

Sam: The main one is Pin Peat, the court ensemble, which is used to accompany the masked dance, the shadow play, court dance, and also religious ceremonies. Then we have Mahori, which is like entertainment music. It is usually played as background music, like at a banquet. Another function of this ensemble is to accompany folk dances or plays. Then there's the Arak, the oldest Khmer ensemble. It is used for the worship of spirits. The old Khmer believe in animism and worship nature gods and invisible spirits and things like that. When people in the village get sick they play that music to put the medium into trance to reveal the cause of the illness. Then you have the wedding ensemble called Phleng Kar or Phleng Khmer,

which obviously accompanies wedding ceremonies. There are also a lot of other small ensembles, like Ayai, which is duet singing, and music for plays, such as Bassac or Yike theater. Then there is an ensemble for funerals, an ensemble for boxing matches, and still others.

Powell: Are some of these ensembles considered court ensembles and others folk ensembles?

Sam: It's a little difficult to define that. Previous scholars did not believe that there is a clear difference between court and village, but I do believe that there is a clear distinction. We have to look at the style, we have to look at where the ensemble exists and its history. I personally would categorize the Pin Peat ensemble as court music because of its origin and history — it was first used to accompany court dance. The earliest inscription that mentions musical and dance activity dates to 611 A.D., so it is very old. It came from the court, but now it also exists in the village. So should we call it a folk ensemble? It depends on how we define *folk*. The wedding ensemble also exists in the palace, but should we call it a court ensemble? I would not call it a court ensemble, because of its function. To define an ensemble I would trace its origins and its original function, where it came from and what it was used for, because later on you could play Pin Peat for a wedding . . . we haven't done that yet . . . then do we call it wedding music? No. You wouldn't call it wedding music just because it might be used like that.

Powell: I notice with gamelan music that the court ensembles forms tend to be larger and the playing more refined, while the village style is a little more raucous . . .

Sam: It's true . . . in Cambodia too . . .

Powell: . . . but they do use a lot of the same repertoire.

Sam: It's true with the Pin Peat ensemble too.

Powell: So how did you end up in the United States?

Sam: When I got my Baccalauréat degree in 1973 I got a scholarship from the government to study music in the Philippines. There I studied composition, not traditional music.

Powell: You studied western composition? What did that entail?

Sam: To write nocturnes, fugues, theme and variations . . . all the small forms, because it was an undergraduate program.

Powell: . . . so basically European classical music, 18th and 19th century music?

Sam: Yes, European classical music. I studied for three years. Then in 1977 I came to this country as a refugee.

Powell: Was that a direct result of the political situation in Cambodia?

Sam: Yes.

Powell: So you came directly to the U.S. from the Philippines?

Sam: Yes.

Powell: We hear a lot about how the political situation affected the arts and culture in Cambodia. What is your perception of that?

Sam: One thing we all know is that there are changes all the time. We live through changes. For example, when a political regime is changed, music, in a way, is changed . . . not the form, but the emphasis and its implications . . . the themes that are used in music are changed. During the monarchy, which we see as a peaceful period, the creation of art usually was recreational and artistic. The themes emphasized nature, the environment in which the Khmer live. When the republican regime took over in 1970, themes changed a little. Political overtones were added. Pure artistic themes did not really exist anymore. This has since become even more obvious because the period from 1975 to 1979 was a terrible time for the Cambodians. It was a real revolutionary period. Now, as a result of that, song texts and poems are all political, talking about solidarity, or the Vietnamese saviour, or the revolution of January 7th, and so on. They do not write about the sky being beautiful or the rice field being beautiful, but rather about how they have to fight for the revolution or how socialism is great. But the forms are still the same . . . the instrumentation of the Pin Peat ensemble is still the same, the dance forms are still the same.

Powell: What was the period of the Khmer Rouge occupation like?

Sam: It was a very difficult time for all Cambodians. It was a political and revolutionary period. A lot of people died and there was very little artistic activity, because that wasn't the forte of that regime. People were more concerned with fighting and surviving. Any musical activity at all was organized by the regime and was designed to convey the political ideology.

Powell: When were you last in Cambodia?

Sam: 1974.

Powell: Now you are about to go there this spring for the first time in many years. Do you still have many connections in the music world over there?

Sam: Yes, I still exchange letters from time to time with a few friends there, and also with my teacher at the University of Fine Arts. My old teacher is now the minister of information and culture.

Powell: Apparently many of the artists and intellectuals were killed during the Khmer Rouge time period. Did some survive? Who became the teachers at the University?

Sam: Very few survived. If you listen to recordings from before 1975 you will see that the artistic quality was very good. Now a lot of younger musicians are being taught by those old teachers, but there are only a few of them left. It is generally estimated that eighty percent were killed, so there are very few people who can teach now.

Powell: Do you feel that you still have a role to play

in Cambodia's cultural life?

Sam: Yes . . . from outside. I think there may be resentment among my colleagues and friends at the University because I did not fight the revolution like they did. They might see me as an opportunist, since during the revolution I escaped. But I did not really escape. I was sent by the University to study in the Philippines. Then in the U.S. I've had the opportunity to go to school and they haven't. Plus they have gone through considerable hardship. But in my heart I want to help my country as much as I can. That is why I have been doing research and publication on Khmer music. This is also the reason I switched from composition to ethnomusicology after I got my M.A., so I could pay more attention to Cambodian music. I'm making this trip to discover what kind of help I can provide from here, and to bring back some documents.

Powell: Are there new forms of artistic expression emerging now in Cambodia, or is it pretty much just the dichotomy of the traditional combined with whatever remains of the western classical tradition?

Sam: It is difficult to say, since I haven't been back to Cambodia for fifteen years. As I understand it, Western classical music is not heard at all now, as it was before 1975. New pieces based on the traditional forms are now being created. There are quite a few new pieces that have been created since 1979. But to me they are still the same forms. They may have new lyrics or new choreography, but the classical forms are still the same. Cambodian pop music still exists too, and has been there all the time; and American pop music too, because they have Madonna tapes and Michael Jackson tapes and that sort of thing.

Powell: But is there any kind of atmosphere of experimentation? For example, the Indonesian dancer and choreographer Sardono Kusumo talks about how at some point he realized that he was free to try new things, and how liberating that was for him [*Balungan* III(1):3-10]. Or in Japan there was the development of *Bhuto*, a new dance form that grew out of the nuclear holocaust of World War II. Is there anything comparable to that happening in Cambodia?

Sam: Sure, some new things are happening in Cambodia now too. Our University has experimented all along. For example, the shadow performance from Siem Reap, one of the Cambodian provinces, used torches or burned coconut shells to cast a shadow. When the University brought that to the concert hall, a projector was used instead, so that was a change. The production has been getting larger too. The staging is more grandiose, and they are experimenting with technical things like lighting. But Cambodia is different from countries like Japan or Indonesia, because we have been in a state of warfare, and at this point the main thing is preservation, conservation, and restoration, and not going ahead just yet. I believe that when things must become a little more solid, then we will

go on to do something else.

Powell: I'm curious about how you see your own musical role in the West. You are trained in western composition; you also have a grounding in the traditional music. How do those two things relate for you in your own work?

Sam: I think it is very helpful. Over here I learned technique and the scientific way to do things. That is why underdeveloped countries send students outside . . . to learn technique, to learn new ideas, to learn how to use technology that will be helpful to the country. I combine all of this. I know I have the traditional resources and I just put that to work, using what I learned here as a system, as a process to digest my traditional material to come up with something. For example, in research I am writing differently from my colleagues in Cambodia. I have a lot more access to facilities here to be able to do that. Those of us on the outside have published a lot more than people inside. Over there their role is to preserve, to teach students. Over here it is very difficult to teach students. First of all, we don't have committed students to be taught. Therefore, our role is different . . . to do documentation. If you look for the history of Cambodian music there is none. The tradition exists, the music exists, but no one has written about it, because Cambodia has no ethnomusicologists and no music historians; and if there were any writing it would be political, because art is always a low priority.

Powell: So you see this kind of documentation as an important thing for you to participate in?

Sam: Yes. We have made quite a few recordings and publications here, and we send material back to Cambodia all the time. During the war, 1975 to 1979, a lot of documents were lost, burned by the Khmer Rouge, so they need documents.

Powell: You recently had some of your own pieces performed in Seattle. Having heard one of those performances I feel that there is definitely a connection between the traditional music and what you do in this other idiom, though it is hard for me to describe it. Does it operate for you on a conscious level?

Sam: Yes. There are at least two stages for a composer. The first is the student stage. Next you go out and tell the world what you are. During the student stage any student must try many things as an exercise or drill. When you are no longer in a situation where you have to follow certain requirements or do what a teacher tells you, you are free to do what you want to do. You must choose a way, an avenue to walk; and for me the important thing is the point of departure. In my piece, for example, I used Asian material as a point of departure. It sounds very oriental, because the mode is Asian and that mode occurs throughout the piece. I used the idea of a temple atmosphere . . . that's my inspiration, the idea that I wanted to convey to the audience. Then I used western instruments

and techniques, like playing inside the piano, or a concern with timbre . . . these are all western ideas that I incorporated into my composition. But the point of departure, or the ingredients that I used to cook that food are really Asian ingredients, while the way that I cook it is really a western way to cook.

Powell: A lot of Asian composers, like Takemitsu for example, studied western classical music and contemporary music, then later returned to the traditional music of their culture, allowing that music to influence their own composing in a subtle yet discernible way.

Sam: A lot of Japanese composers did that. They started with western music and then they came back. That has something to do with your consciousness as you grow older, and then the idea of nationalism comes to you. It is very difficult to neglect or not to look back at our own tradition. We have to pay attention to our culture and utilize that as much as we can in our work. We cannot compose like John Cage, or Milton Babbitt, or Davidovsky. We have to be original, to be ourselves, and to add another kind of beauty to the West. If we were to compose just like John Cage it would not be too interesting. We add something different.

Powell: Cage himself said, I believe in the essay called "The Future of Music," that it is in the so-called third world, particularly Africa, India, and Indonesia, that modern music now belongs, that it is there that the future of music lies. It seems that a kind of paradigm shift has occurred, especially on the West coast, where more and more we find musical influences coming from Asian and African cultures, rather than Europe . . . and not just in the cultural realm, but in the economic and political realms as well. It is hard to know where this will lead. You have two roles to play. You are a composer who is interested in creating new works, while at the same time you are an ethnomusicologist who wants to preserve and document the traditions of your native culture. Do these interests conflict at all? Do you feel any remorse as you see things changing?

Sam: I like these two fields. The difficulty for me is finding enough time to spend on both areas. Plus, if I were to go to Cambodia, it would be very difficult to teach students composition now. It is already difficult for them to accept classical music, and for them to accept contemporary music would be even more difficult. I am not saying that composition is not important, but they need time to grow. Therefore, ethnomusicology is an immediate need for Cambodia and I feel I have a role to play there.

Powell: So now you find yourself writing a piece of music for gamelan combined with Cambodian instruments. Is this the first time that you have written something that is sort of tri-cultural?

Sam: When I was in the Philippines, during my student years, I tried to mix my instruments with piano and western flute and so on . . . I have tried before, but the

purists did not like it and I was criticized, so I stopped. But here other people are doing it and it is more acceptable. I don't think it is wrong, because we don't call it traditional music. I still worry though. Sometimes the insiders or practitioners are very sensitive about how the outsiders use or even write about the traditional stuff. But I do what I do with only good intentions. I like contemporary music very much and I believe in doing new things. Yet to a certain extent you could also look at me as a traditionalist, that I like to conserve things. What I plan to do with the gamelan and my oboe is a new development, not a traditional one. It is not traditional music, it is experimentation. Sometimes we have to preserve, other times we have to do something new, otherwise it would be the same thing all the time.

Powell: Since you play the role of scholar and artist, there is often a conflict. The artist tends to want to take whatever material is available and use it, make something from it. The scholar tends to reflect more on the purity of the form or on delineating boundaries in order to codify or classify things. Do you feel a stronger inclination in one direction than the other?

Sam: No, I think one thing helps the other. I think I have an advantage as both a performer and a scholar. I see some people who are only scholars, and when they write about the performance in a culture in which they are not a performer, they often interpret things wrong because they lack understanding. And sometimes, as you say, they try to codify, they try to theorize, and I don't know how useful it is when the practitioners don't think that way. It is a pure perception from the scholars themselves.

Powell: When I read interviews with Javanese artists, I am often struck by how innovative their thinking is. One expects a traditional mentality that would somehow be limited in scope, but they have very expansive ideas, and I think in a way people in the West get the wrong notion of how people think and create in those cultures.

Sam: The advantage I have when I write is that I can stand on the scholars side and look from that point of view, and then I can jump across the boundary as a practitioner and question that scholarly point of view, whether it is legitimate or right.

Powell: Is there a role for the composer in the traditional music?

Sam: We say that the performer is a composer, in the sense that, while performing, he or she makes choices about the particular pitches to use at a certain point, but not in the sense of creating a new piece. To get the artist's diploma in Cambodia, you must master your instrument and also be able to answer historical questions, but composing is not emphasized.

Powell: In Cambodia they use a heptatonic scale, usually described in the literature as seven equal divisions of the octave. Is it in fact that?

Sam: I wrote about this in my dissertation. We have

two types of scales that are used, depending on the type of music. The seven tones represent the maximum available pitches in the tuning system. But the main pitches that we use, in Pin Peat for example, are only five, an anhemitonic pentatonic scale. We use the fourth degree and seventh degree mainly as passing tones. The intervals are not really equidistant. The B to C is smaller than A to B, the E to F is smaller than D to E. We say that our whole tone is about 171 cents, rather than 200, but the consecutive whole tones are not really all equal. If they were equidistant then you could start a piece on any tone and it would sound the same. But in fact if you start on a different key of the xylophone it is a different mode, so the intervals cannot all be equal.

Cambodia is different from countries like Japan or Indonesia, because we have been in a state of warfare, and at this point the main thing is preservation, conservation and restoration, and not going ahead just yet.

Powell: In Javanese music you can transpose a piece to a different mode. It does not sound the same as if you transpose in equal temperament, but it is still the same piece. Is this possible in Cambodian music?

Sam: Yes, but you cannot do that with every piece. Sometimes we play a piece and after one cycle we shift to a different level. In the West you might call that transposition, but with our tuning it becomes a different mode because we do not have the accidentals to make the adjustment at the new level.

Powell: How many identifiable modes do you have? Are there seven, corresponding to the number of steps in your scale?

Sam: We have more than that. When we create modes we use a lot of combinations. For example we could use five pitches. If we start on pitch one it might be one mode. But we could use the same pitches and start on pitch three instead and it would be a different mode. Most of the pieces use five tones, but it depends on the type of music. The wedding music uses a seven-tone scale more than pentatonic, while the Mahori and Pin Peat use pentatonic more than heptatonic.

Powell: What does the future hold for you and your music? What comes next?

Sam: First of all, returning to live in Cambodia is not

realistic. I could not leave my children here and go to earn ten dollars a month for teaching. How could I support my family? Also my children cannot go to Cambodia and study because they do not read Cambodian and there is no school for them. So I find that my home is here in the U.S., where I will continue my work with ethnomusicology and composing.

Powell: You have an important role here in the Cambodian community too.

Sam: Yes, that's right. Here we have quite a few musicians. But there are only two musicians who went to school and got degrees, Chinary Ung and myself. The system in this country emphasizes academic achievement, which makes it even more difficult for traditional musicians.

Powell: So most of the musicians in the community here don't play professionally anymore?

Sam: No. They play weekends, most of the time at weddings. They have to work at regular jobs and practice in their spare time. They are not sophisticated enough to arrange concerts, so we do that, and then they come to play for us. We want to keep something to show the young people what is Cambodian.

Powell: I recently went to the Cambodian New Year celebration here. I saw a lot of Cambodian young people there and was struck by the interesting juxtaposition of the traditional arts with the contemporary American dress, cars, and customs that they seem to have adopted. What do the traditional arts really mean to them? Is it something they welcome or is it something that they would rather forget about?

Sam: That is a difficult question. These young people look to American culture as superior to their own, because they lack understanding and appreciation of their own culture. What we are trying to do is show them that we have our own culture. Of course they don't appreciate it as much as the old people, because the old people grew up with the tradition and have seen it for a long time, so they value it more. Some of the young people are very committed to the arts, particularly the performers who work with us and come to the lessons every Sunday. They enjoy doing it and it is very important to them. Another thing that is very overwhelming is western music, like rock music. A lot of the young people who came to the New Year's performance probably went afterwards to a social gathering with rock bands. So it is very difficult to conserve the traditional arts. The performers are not professionals. To attain high quality like the performers in Cambodia today is very difficult, because over there they practice every day, many hours a day, so they can maintain the quality. Over here that is not possible. We are doing this just so the young generation will not forget, so they will know that they have something. Also a lot of these people don't know what professional quality really is, so in their eyes it was a very

good production and they appreciated that.

Powell: It seems important that it connects with them on more than just on a quality level . . .

Sam: Yes . . . we needed a celebration and we provided them with entertainment and for them that was very joyful. Even in traditional contexts in Cambodia, in the countryside in particular, you would find that people come for the entertainment and never judge the quality either — as long as it makes them laugh or smile that is what counts.

Powell: Is this a new thing for the community here or has this type of celebration been going on for some time?

Sam: The Seattle community celebrates the Cambodian New Year every year.

Powell: How has your influence affected or changed things?

Sam: In the past I came only as a guest. Now I am also the teacher and producer. I don't really know what it was like before I became involved so I can't make a comparison.

Powell: What is your hope for this performing group now that you are director?

Sam: This year we received a grant from the N.E.A. for the school of music. When I come back from Cambodia I will continue teaching, hoping to train more students to be musicians. Also we hope to find a way to get more money so we can keep the dance class running as well. Other Cambodian organizations have also asked us for help. There are twenty-three of them in Washington state. They want us to provide teachers, or to borrow our costumes. We hope to convince them to send their students to our school here, so later on they can have performers in their own community.

Powell: How do you feel about your trip to Cambodia? You are leaving in less than a week. Are you apprehensive or fearful about it? Do you have a sense of how you might be received over there?

Sam: I have some fears, but not great ones. I appreciate this opportunity to go back to my country after fifteen years. My main concern is how my colleagues and friends will react. In fifteen years things may have changed a lot and I have to think about what I have done for them or for my school. I got a letter today from a very close friend of mine who is now director of the national troupe in Cambodia. He sent me his photo. He looks older now. I thought to myself, if I am not allowed to come back from Cambodia, maybe that would be okay too. I mean it wouldn't be okay, because I am leaving my children here, but I still have quite a few friends alive there, so maybe it would be okay for me to live there too. I do not want things to happen that way. I hope to come back as scheduled. But I am more concerned for my children here than for myself. So I have mixed feelings, but I see this trip as a positive one and I am optimistic. If I had a strong feeling that there was definitely going to be a problem, then I wouldn't go.

Powell: Both you and your wife lost many family members and friends during the Khmer Rouge period . . .

Sam: Oh yes . . . I lost my parents, two brothers, and two sisters, plus many friends . . . my wife the same.

Powell: It seems like it must be a part of your grieving process to return now.

Sam: Yes, I have a lot of friends that I want to see. But also I want to see the artistic situation and activities in my country.

Powell: We'll have to have another interview when you come back to find out what new insights you have.

Sam: I expect to see a lot that I don't know about now. Sometimes when you read newspapers or see movies it is only part of the reality, you see only what people want you to see, not the actual activities as they happen in that country. So I am going to see those now.

The following brief conversation took place on August 11, 1989 in Seattle, following Sam-Ang Sam's return from his two week visit to Cambodia.

Powell: I would like to get some of your impressions of your trip to Cambodia. You got to see your former teacher, some of your friends and former classmates. What was the reaction?

Sam: During my stay there I had official meetings with the people at the ministry of culture three times. The minister remarked that ninety percent of the artists were gone . . . and it was very surprising to me how few people are alive. The friends and teachers who survived are very glad to see people come back. In a way they admire my destiny I guess . . . my luck . . . that I was able to go out of the country and am safe. They have asked me to do a lot of things for them to help upgrade their lives. Every day friends and teachers came to my hotel and waited for me there . . . and we talked until night. So there was happiness. But for me it was very emotional, I think much more than for them, because the problems of poverty and hygiene touched me very deeply.

Powell: Were you impressed with what they were doing culturally?

Sam: The school has more students now than in the pre-war time. They are beginning to train new students. But there is a generation gap. The old musicians who were very good died. Now there are only young students. It takes a long time to practice to become a good musician, so it will take awhile for the quality to come back. But I am impressed that despite the situation people are struggling to bring the arts back. There are more performing troupes than before. Many members of the University were evacuated to different provinces during the Pol Pot time. They have remained there and formed performing groups. Therefore, there are many professional quality performing groups outside of the University. During the pre-war time only the

University offered formal training. Now there are other groups as well which are led by former members of the University of Fine Arts.

Powell: What did you experience that was unexpected?

Sam: I was surprised by the amount of research. Right now they are doing a lot of documentation, because the University has become aware of the danger that people will get old and die and what they know would be lost. They are recording a lot and writing and publishing much more compared to the pre-war time.

Powell: Did you make recordings there?

Sam: Yes. I am planning to release one recording of my teachers . . . three of my remaining teachers. I told them that I would bring it back to the States and release it and that I will send any proceeds to them. They are very sensitive now . . . you can't just go and record like before. A lot of people have done that . . . gone to Cambodia and recorded, then come back here and released the recording without proper credit or copyright or whatever . . . so they are very sensitive about it.

Powell: It's a curious criticism that is sometimes leveled against scholars, isn't it . . . how they go to a country and do their research and make recordings, then come back and publish the results, maybe land a well-paying position at a University because of it, without ever really considering proper compensation for the informants, the people whose ideas or work they are in a sense only borrowing.

Sam: Yes. This has often been in the back of my mind. I go to Cambodia and do interviews and gather information, then I come back here and I publish and perhaps build a reputation which could lead to a position somewhere . . . and for them . . . nothing. Yet one doesn't know how to compensate . . . it is definitely a question that should be asked. Yet, at the same time, if you don't do it, it's not so good either, because otherwise the knowledge could be lost. Scholars must find a way to compensate performers and informants. In Cambodia now anything that you give is a lot.

Powell: Were you able to see performances while you were there?

Sam: Yes. The day after we arrived I saw a performance organized for a delegation from Laos. I saw a shadow performance, folk dance, and also court dance. It was beautiful. It was in the theater where I used to perform.

Powell: Did your two weeks there seem to pass too quickly?

Sam: It was very short in terms of doing things that I wanted to do, but it felt long because it was so emotional . . . it is too much to take, to see that your friends, your teachers, your family are so poor . . . and I mean so poor. I didn't have a lot of money, but I gave it all away. It seemed like a long time, because every day was intense. ▀