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SUBHEADLINE: The music of by-gone eras may be like a foreign language to some _ but for others it is a testament to beauty, grace and superior lyrics, as one popular Bangkok radio show is proving

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The record-player crackles with Moments to Remember, a big hit in the year 1955, this particular copy signed by Canadian celebrities ``The Four Lads". The mid-1950s' most popular vocalist, Perry Como, takes over with his dreamy baritone voice and his middle-of-the-road pop style music in Forever and ever:

Forever and Ever

My heart will be true!

Sweetheart, forever,

I'll wait for you!

the Pennsylvanian barber-turned singer vows, as if his sweetheart had kept him waiting for the last five decades.

The languorous, nostalgic and somehow out of date melodies carry on, with My Blue Heaven, a favourite of the '20s written by George Withing.

What is all this? Hallucinatory delirium? Temporal regression or some kind of powerful flashback propelling us in the happy-go-lucky era of post-World War Two?

Not at all. At the very dawn of the 21st century, in the midst of a Thai metropolis spiked with skyscrapers and highways, listeners of the 94.0 FM phone-in radio programme Private Collection are just getting their kicks, together with disc-jockey Dumras Rodjanapiches.

Every Saturday morning, from 10 am to 12:30 pm, the freelance DJ takes his fans on a trip down memory lane. Back to the gone but obviously not forgotten world of Western music from the '40s and '50s, or the more obscure '20s and '30s, when according to Dumras, ``both music and lyrics were fantastic, elaborate, deeply touching with words polished like poetry and songs written with great passion".

With his incurable nostalgia for the good old days, Dumras Rodjanapiches is already himself a kind of anachronism. A sweet anomaly with greying hair and melancholic eyes in a fast-changing world, to remind us there is no harm in going against the current, promoting values that one would never renounce, remaining truthful to one and only one passion: Western music from before the 1960s, only straying perhaps for old movies.

Frankie Vaughan, aka ``Mr Moonlight", beloved Irish singer Ruby Murray, British star of the '50s David Whitfield, rock legend Roy Orbison, Edith Piaf, Yves Montand, Nat King Cole, to name but a few, top his list, survivors of a time when rock 'n' roll was only emerging, when heavy metal didn't exist, nor did the electronic beat of today's dancefloors.

``This was when music was melodious and recording was not just hasty studio mixing," sighs Dumras.

Born in Bangkok, son of a rice exporter, educated in China and then resident of Singapore, Dumras surely indulged his appetite for travelling and cultural blending. His parents also passed on with great energy their love of music to their four children.

But it is largely due to his parents' old 78 rpm shellac records that Dumras developed a good ear for music. As a little eight-year-old boy, Dumras remembers shaking a leg to Big Band, Elvis Presley, and Frank Sinatra, among others.

He bought his first disc at the age of 10 _ Pat Boone's Star Dust _ and started venturing alone to Bangkok's few movie theatres at the tender age of seven.

``Bangkok had many more trees and much fewer inhabitants who tended to know each other more and be more friendly, with united families. The capital had only a few movie theatres _ the King, the Grand, the Queen Chalerms Thai, Chalerms Khetr and the Odeon, and it was easy to get around," commented Dumras, advocating once again the qualities of the good old days.

Some four decades later, Dumras, now aged 50, still marvels at purchases of old discs unearthed at the Chatuchak weekend market or in yard sales or flea markets abroad.

He also boosts his collection by putting up ads for LPs, through direct mail with music companies in the West, and by ordering through the Internet.

The music lover's collection by now includes some 12,000 records and around 4,000 CDs, which fill up an entire room on the second floor of his home.

Dumras' years spent in the US and Canada from 1970 to 1985 greatly helped expand his collection. Enrolled at Atlanta's Georgia Institute of Technology and Toledo University, for a bachelor's degree in textile engineering and a masters in industrial engineering, respectively, the student never missed an opportunity to augment his record collection, attend a concert or grab an autograph _ thus embarking on another adventure, which earned him the 400 signatures of his favourite stars that he now possesses.

After working for eight years as an engineer in Vancouver, Canada, Dumras returned to his native Thailand and worked as a construction engineer before setting up an export-import company together with his sister _ Krops Ventures, dealing in general merchandise and furniture.

As an avid reader and news junkie, he set up his own ingenious ways to keep track of the Western music world, scouring Chatuchak market for current editions of foreign publications and taking good care of an airport contact who cleans in-coming planes and saves overseas newspapers for him.

At last Dumras decided to make the most of his unique expertise and his respectable record collection.

In 1993, he started writing a music column in the Siam Post, called ``Pleng Sakhon Nai Adhit" (Pop Songs of the Past) and later pursued his journalistic career at Thai Post, reviewing newly released CDs and ``writing features about old stuff" as he explains.

It's a position that he still holds today.

Some six years ago, he launched his own radio show entitled Private Collection. Initially broadcast on 98.5 FM every Sunday morning, it is now hosted by 94.0 FM. Dumras has also lent a hand organising the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand's movie nights for many years and was appointed by former prime minister Anand Panyarachun to the Board of Directors of Channel 11 a few years ago.

A few days ago, the engineer-cum-journalist-cum-DJ released a book distributed by Thai Post entitled Amata Pleng Sakon Wan Waan (The Immortality of the Good Old Days' Songs), which compiles features on 60 old-time stars, from composer, conductor and American patriot John Philip Sousa to jazz saxophonist Grover Washington Junior, to Louis Armstrong, Kate Smith, Edith Piaf, Tony Bennett, Les Paul, Mort Shuman, Ritchie Valens, Demis Roussos. Volume two will follow next year.

“I picked up a few of the most famous musicians although some might be completely unknown in Thailand. My aim is to maintain and preserve all the goodness of these bygone stars, to last through another generation,” Dumras commented with his deep yet quiet voice.

By now, this enterprising man can even pride himself on having a handful of fans, up to 150 by his reckoning, mostly aged 40 and up, with a wide scope of interests who gather regularly to listen to music _ old music of course. He receives a minimum of 12 requests an hour.

What impresses Dumras' fans most is the endless resource of his valuable record collection, which contains gems such as Vee Jay Records' LP Introducing the Beatles released in 1963 and now valued at around \$500 (21,500 baht), Benny Goodman's Live at the Carnegie Hall stamped with his autograph, and extremely rare records, film and cartoon soundtracks. The list goes on.

“I have been a listener of Dumras' from the very beginning of his radio programme. I am fascinated by the extent of his collection, which includes very rare pieces that you would not be able to listen to anywhere else,” commented Orathai Pholdee, a lecturer at Kasetsart University's Faculty of Humanities.

“It happened several times that Dumras came up with a song that no one had never heard of but which was taken up again by other radio stations _ he launches new fads. With his experience of life abroad, he is opening new windows on the world,” Acharn Orathai added, captivated by the idea of being able to listen to rare pearls such as Robert Burns' My Love Is Like A Red Red Rose, Marlene Dietrich or Deanna Durbin.

“Why would I listen to music on the radio if it is to hear songs I can get from any Tower Records?” Orathai said, citing many moving instances when listeners would hear songs they had not heard since their innocent childhood days.

“As far as I am concerned, I appreciate Dumras' sober way of introducing songs, neither too talkative, nor posing as a great expert and looking down on listeners as some DJs tend to do, crushing listeners with hit songs” commented Chanyudh Srakeow, former Channel 4 writer and regular listener of Dumras'.

“There should be more such programmes. Private Collection is very educational and it is important for new generations to know about past music success,” Chanyudh continued, admitting the appreciation of old classics might require a specific background, personal links with the West or failing that, an introduction.

Convinced of sharing a valuable passion and a unique and precious knowledge, Dumras and like-minded friends thus take offence at not seeing more financial support for such kinds of programmes. With three sponsors, Dumras just manages to cover the costs of buying the air-time and has had to make do with two and half hours of air-time instead of the planned five.

The freelance DJ has a very clear-cut idea of the big business behind hit recording artists and hit songs. ``Radio stations always try to follow the British charts or the top 10 rankings because record companies are pushing them," Dumras said. ``Record companies are only interested in making big money, this I can say for sure."

To tone it down a bit, another flat note to this score is the prospect of more intense competition and numerous changes expected due to the pending Radio and Television Broadcasting law, now being scrutinised by the Council of State.

``Let's see what happens for independent DJs like myself. Hopefully I will not be relegated to air my programme at midnight.... What's for sure is that I love what I am doing, and the way I am doing it. I like working without borders, in a free world. I have no liking for red tape nor excessive regulation or commercially oriented business," Dumras explained, already contemplating ways out in case he is pushed aside.

``I might enjoy doing all this for 10 more years. Then I might give away my collection. I have no real sense of attachment _ my aim is just to share and to pass it on to another generation. Life is to give, not to gain," the veteran collector concluded philosophically.

Still single _ because he is ``married to music" _ Dumras better start searching for a worthy soul who could inherit this priceless collection with full understanding and gratitude.

But it might be that Bangkok's teeny-boppers would rather worship other musical gods.