

**Seong Koon Low Won (上官流云): Sight and Sound of a Bygone Era**

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National Library Board, Singapore

*He has written many songs, filled with colloquial colour, humour and heartfelt emotions that remain favourites even till today. Meet veteran singer-songwriter and getai performer Seong Koon Low Won.*

At Hong Kong megastar Sam Hui's (许冠杰) concert held in 1990, there was a segment where he and his group of two other singers dressed up as the Beatles. They sang two songs *hang fai di la* (《行快点啦》, which means “walk faster” in Cantonese) and *yat sum seong yuk yan* (《一心思想玉人》, meaning “thinking about my loved one” in Cantonese). The humorous lyrics were written to the tune of two The Beatles' songs - *Can't Buy Me Love* and *I Saw Her Standing There* respectively.

The two songs were hits in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong after it was released in 1965. Some lines became part of the daily lingo in Hong Kong. They were widely sung by many singers, proving their popularity. But not many people know that the Cantonese lyrics were written by a Singaporean artiste Seong Koon Low Won (上官流云), who released an album with these two songs in it in the mid-1960s. The album cover photo was taken in front of the National Theatre, which was built in 1963.

“I was inspired by The Beatles. They were really popular in the early 1960s. Even Rose Chan sang my song *hang fai di la* when her striptease show was banned by the authorities and her career needed a boost,” Seong Koon Low Won recalled, referring to the famous stripper whose shows attracted full houses of patrons at the *getai*.

The veteran singer, songwriter and sometime movie director was born in 1922 to a poor family. He had to help out with the family finances by selling sundry items like cigarettes and fruits on the streets. One of his customers took a shine to him and offered to bring him along on a trip back home to Shanghai. The young Seong Koon jumped at the opportunity. He was only 14 years old then.

“I had the time of my life. Shanghai was a swinging city then. I spent my days watching movies, mostly films starring Ruan Ling Yu (阮玲玉). At night, I was at the amusement parks watching the opera performances. I was mesmerized by the actors.”

These experiences provided the young boy with the confidence and inspiration to become an actor. To him, actors only needed to look good and have the gift of the gab. There was no use for academic qualifications, which suited him fine since he never had the opportunity for formal education.

It was only after he returned to Malaya about one and a half years later after war broke out in China that he got a chance to learn how to read and write. He was working in a rice shop and the clerk there saw his potential and spent time teaching him. It was a blessing for Seong Koon for

he realised the power of education after he joined the Black Cat Hokkien Opera Troupe (黑猫闽剧团) as a cook. He soon started acting.

“The actor playing the role of the waiter dropped out because he was sick, so they needed a replacement. I stepped in and was a hit with the audience. I guess I had the looks and talent. I was promoted to lead actor some six months later.”

In those days, the actors did not rehearse nor were they given any proper scripts to refer to. Seong Koon recalled, “I did not have any formal training. The director would brief us in the day about the story and the actors are expected to improvise at the night-time performance. I would often be drinking coffee in the kopitiam, cracking my brain on what to do and say for the show. I came up with many songs with humourous lyrics to amuse the audience.”

“Back then, I don’t even speak Hokkien very well. But I learn whatever I could along the way. I did it all myself – music composition, lyrics, etc. If you are willing to put your heart and mind to it, you could pick up just about anything. A creative mind must be well read and familiar with the literary classics. Without knowledge, you are just like a blind man, blind even in the face of beauty.”

It was at the troupe that Seong Koon met his first true love, the female lead on the show. She was musically trained and talented. She would teach him how to read the musical scores and they would compose songs together. It was after one steamy date by the sea with her that he wrote *Midnight Kiss* (《午夜香吻》), which till this day remained a perennial favourite with many singers.

Their relationship did not work out though. Seong Koon left the troupe to join the *getai*, which had skit performances aside from song and dance items. He wrote many plays there like *Mermaid* (《美人鱼》), *Farewell My Concubine* (《霸王妖姬》), etc. He was also the director and would come up with his own stage design, often painting the backdrop himself.

“The *getai* business was very competitive back then. We work seven nights, no rest. We must constantly come up with new shows to attract the audience who pay to watch us. The program must change every couple of days. I would sit in the kopitiam raking my brain on what to put up and who to cast.”

On where he gets his ideas or inspiration from, Seong Koon was adamant that one has to be naturally driven and not dependent upon inspiration, “It’s a joke if we have to wait for inspiration to strike. Rather, it’s a habit. Someone who often writes would simply continue to do so. And in order to be able to write, one must be knowledgeable. You can only learn more and move forward if you already have a foundation.”

His songs, written in many different languages, including Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Mandarin, English and Malay, could still be heard on the airwaves. Two of them, *Malay Love Song* (《新马来情歌》) (may be the first local song with mixed lyrics in Mandarin and Malay) and *Indian Love Song* (《印度情歌》) are very popular. These songs were composed in the late 1950s and

early 1960s when Mandarin pop songs with “nanyang flavour” were the main musical trend then. One could still hear them being sung or played at festive occasions and weddings.

“My songs are filled with the colloquialisms of the language or dialect used. If you have constant exposure to the language, you would be able to write songs like that. The words have to go well with the tune. It is much easier in Mandarin than in the different dialects.”

Seong Koon remained creative even in his later years and was said to have a hand in the creation of more than three hundred songs. However, he was told in his younger days that songwriters would be heavily taxed for each song they wrote, and since he was never paid much to begin with, Seong Koon hid behind many pseudonyms. That added to the difficulty of tracing all the works of this prolific songwriter. According to his wife, the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) that helps songwriters and music publishers administer the rights to their musical works, would still send her a cheque every year for public usage of Seong Koon’s body of work.

In 1956, Seong Koon started acting in the movies. One of his first, *I Love This Young Man* (《我爱少年家》), was a Hokkien movie he starred in with Xiao Juan or Ling Bo (小娟 or 凌波) in her pre-stardom days. He was also asked to compose 16 songs for the film. That started a new career for him – the movie actor and film composer. He would act in another ten more movies and composed songs for many of them, like *Romance in Malaya* (《马来亚之恋》), *Blooming Age* (《十七十八正当时》), *Beauty and the Beasts* (《好花插牛屎》), *Breaking the Vinegar Jar* (《弄破醋瓮》), etc.

In those days, musical movies were the in thing, so Seong Koon’s services were in great demand, composing for famous directors like Yuan Qiu Feng (袁秋枫), Ma Xu Wei Bang (马徐维邦), Cheng Gang (程刚), etc. He also translated five songs for the Shaw Brothers’ movie *Orang Minyak*.

He would also spend time on set learning the tricks of the trade. Later, he helped shoot some insert shots in Singapore for these Hong Kong-produced films made primarily for the Singapore market. He would eventually direct his own movie in the 1970s, the Chong Gay film *The Two Nuts* (《两傻上岸记》), with a cast made up of local talents. He was also the scriptwriter, actor and music composer for the movie.

“I have a finger in many pies. So if something doesn’t work out, I’ll branch off and work on something else. When the *getai* and nightclub scene died down in the 1970s, and jobs there dried up, I did more songwriting and composition of background music.”

For the significant contributions he made to the development of local music, Seong Koon was presented with the Meritorious Award by COMPASS in 1998. Three years later, on 23 June 2001, Seong Koon passed away from heart problems at the age of 79.

Seong Koon may be gone but his songs, filled with colloquial colour, humour and heartfelt emotions that captured the sounds and spirit of a bygone era, continue to live on.

**Quote**

“Sometimes, you are simply forced by circumstances to write. I had a family and many mouths to feed. That was inspiration enough.”

**Awards**

**1998:** 4<sup>th</sup> Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Meritorious Award*

**Discography*****Selected Works***

**1974:** 大联唱片出品《乌鸦斗凤凰》（粤语）

Record Company/Serial No.	Song Title	Artiste	Title of Album/Project	Lyricist	Composer
马标唱片公司 Horse Brand Chinese Long Play Record HBEP 101	A 剥土豆 房内对口 B 厚脸皮 桥边对唱	胡同+黄英 徐来+胡同+ 流云+丁兰	夏语电影《马六甲姑娘》、《阿绣卖胭脂》插曲		
马标唱片公司 Horse Brand Chinese Long Play Record HBEP 102	A 情海 午夜香吻 B 拜年姻缘 美丽的世界			上官流云	
马标唱片公司 Horse Brand Chinese Long Play Record HBEP 126	A 东瀛寄相思 遥远的爱人 B 印度情歌 月儿弯弯照九州	巫美玲	华语歌曲	上官流云	
马标唱片公司 Horse Brand	酒吧女郎	巫美玲、上官流云	华语时代曲 《两口子对唱》		

Chinese Long Play Record HBEP 129					
马标唱片 公司 Horse Brand Chinese Long Play Record HBEP 138	A 星星。月 亮。太阳 不自量 B 旧爱难忘 谜一般的 爱情	美玲		上官流云	
马标唱片 公司 Horse Brand Chinese Long Play Record HBEP 139	A 我要跟着 你 跟我唱 B 盲目的爱 情 想起我的 郎	张小凤		上官流云	
马标唱片 公司 Horse Brand Chinese Long Play Record HBEP 179	A 把我的手 儿牵 靠不住 B 爱情是什 么 除非那些 不懂爱	张小凤	张小凤之歌	上官流云	
马标唱片 公司 Horse Brand Chinese Long Play Record HBEP 185	A 行快的啦 一心想玉 人 B 咸沙梨	上官流云	粤语小曲	上官流云	
马标唱片 HBL 109		上官流云等	摩登福建歌		
马标唱片 HBL 112		上官流云、 丁兰等	夏语电影摩登 插曲		
马标唱片 HBL 118		上官流云等	摩登福建歌 《三轮车钟 声》		
马标唱片 HBL 119		上官流云等	摩登福建歌 《江山美人》		
大中华唱 片		上官流云+ 艺文+郜小	方言趣剧《怪 人怪歌》	上官流云	上官流云

GCEP 81		丽+陆慧珠			
家铭娱乐 制作公司 GMCD- 94-1008		上官流云等	《好仔不如好 好新抱》	上官流云	
HiFi HF-2095			《两傻上岸 记》电影录音 原声带	上官流云	上官流云
Squirrel Record SEP 1012		上官宝伦	《吉普赛女 郎》	上官流云	
White Deer Record SSE-1003		上官苏申	《爱的主角了 不起》	上官流云	
Ligo LG- 9957A		林丽儿	《酒吧查某怨 三声》	上官流云	
大联机构 MLP- 2054			《两傻上岸 记》电影原声 粤语对白	上官流云	上官流云
大联机构 GULP 2114		王沙+野峰+ 上官流云等	新潮诙谐歌剧 《鸡牛猫狗》		
大联机构 GULP 2158		王沙+白言+ 上官流云等	古今谐剧集锦		
大联机构 GULP 2180		白言+关新 艺+上官流 云等	传奇神话谐剧 《神鬼人》		
王星唱片 SNR- 2317	好歹命天 注定 爱某不惊 艰苦 大醉仙、 猴齐天 有某无某 也辛苦	林松义+蝴 蝶姐妹	福建流行歌曲 《好歹命天注 定 》	上官流云	
王星唱片 SNR- 2331	肥婆卖水 货 娶个烂赌 货 情怀 情人梦 要去做菜 头 一的都唔 奇 老婆跟人 走	野峰	粤语流行歌曲 《要去做菜 头》	上官流云	

马联唱片 MRLP 7777		高山	新潮客家山歌 《客家阿伯卖 酿豆腐》	上官流云	
EMI LRHX- 961	情人节的 情人信	叶佩芬	三月里的小雨 /牵挂	上官流云	
EMI LRHX- 2026	梦碎心都 碎 茉莉花 恼人的香 吻	袁玉兰	十大电视名曲 欣赏《茉莉 花》	上官流云 (兼制 作)	
EMI LRHX- 2029	一曲情未 了	袁玉兰	电视剧《天龙 八部》主题曲 及插曲	上官流云 (兼制 作)	上官流云
EMI LRHX- 2036	一枝红玫 瑰	袁玉兰	《一枝红玫 瑰》	上官流云	上官流云
EMI LRHX- 2040	离情泪	袁玉兰	寻梦园	上官流云	上官流云

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