

Billy Koh (许环良): The Butterfly and Its Dreamsby **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

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Considered one of the most instrumental and influential figures in the Singapore music industry, Billy Koh (许环良) is perhaps best known as the record producer who launched the successful careers of Singapore singing artistes Kit Chan (陈洁仪), JJ Lin (林俊杰), A-Do (阿杜), and BY2. As the most recognised face from Ocean Butterflies Music Pte Ltd (海蝶音乐私人有限公司), which Koh co-founded, he had, together with his team, re-shaped the landscape of the Singapore Chinese pop music scene over a span of a quarter of a century, carving a place for itself and creating a brand name that exerts an impact in Asia.

In his nearly three-decade-long career, Koh has produced more than 150 albums and is credited for discovering and grooming many top artistes who made it big in Asia. For his contributions to the Singapore music industry, Koh was awarded the Meritorious Award and the Wings of Excellence Award by COMPASS in 2001 and 2005 respectively.

It had all begun in 1981. Billy Koh had formed a singing group called The Straw (水草三重唱), together with his schoolmates, Koh Nam Seng (许南盛) and the late Sunkist Ng (黄元成), to participate in the television talent show “Chinese Talente” (《斗歌竞艺》), which was one of the most watched shows then. They became one of the most popular singing groups and one of the most memorable performers of the *xinyao* (新谣, Singapore Chinese ballads) movement in the next six years. Many of their signature tunes like *Ah Ben Ah Ben* (《阿 Ben 阿 Ben》), *Rockabye* (《摇摇民谣》), *Where is Our Song* (《我们的歌在哪里》), *The Story of Dong Dong* (《东东的故事》), etc. remained favourites with followers of the movement.

Koh said, “*Xinyao* was a definitive moment in Singapore’s cultural history. It was a movement started by the people for the people even before the government began talking about promoting the creative industries.”

Koh had gotten involved in music producing quite by accident. He reminisced, “The first *xinyao* public concert was held in 1983. Since I was the show director, I was elected to be the producer of the first *xinyao* album, *21 Tomorrow* (《明天 21》). No one else was interested in the job because the producer had to deal with the nitty-gritty of music production. Comparatively speaking, songwriting was more fun and puts one in the spotlight.”

In 1986, The Straw, with another two partners also from the *xinyao* movement, Colin Goh (吴剑峰) and Teo Kay Kiong (张家强), founded Ocean Butterflies Music. The five men, all in their

early twenties then, ploughed in S\$2,000 each. The company name originated from a *xinyao* album, *Ocean Butterflies Chasing After the Sun* (《海蝶逐日》).

Koh explained, “Singapore is a garden city. There are caterpillars and butterflies in the garden. Ocean butterflies are destined to leave the garden, looking for new challenges and pursuing their dreams.”

“We were young and thus fearless then. We started the company with the main aim of promoting *xinyao*. We produced one or two records a year. Whatever money we made went towards paying the rent. Life was simple and frugal then, but we were happy.”

Three years later, Ocean Butterflies began record production for overseas singers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia. Some of the well-known singers they collaborated with were Feng Fei Fei (凤飞飞), Tsai Chin (蔡琴), Annie Yi (伊能静), etc. The company also contributed significantly to advertising jingle writing. At one time, their works were featured in about 80 per cent of the Chinese commercials in the market. Scott Emulsion's Growing up (《成长成长》) and UIC detergents were among some of the award-winning jingles that the Company did. According to Koh, Ocean Butterflies was bringing in a stable income then and provided the partners with avenues to build up their industry experience.

In 1992, the company tried their hand at grooming local talents for the overseas market, with Kit Chan (陈洁仪) being the first artiste. She was deemed “lacking in the looks department” by record companies. The whole exercise fizzled out.

A year later, however, Kit Chan started getting noticed after she won the “Special Media Recommendation Award” in a Singapore radio music awards show with her debut album released in Singapore. Although a Taiwanese record company signed her on almost immediately, it was not till late 1994 that she released her album in Taiwan with the title track, *Heartache* (《心痛》), a song written by Koh. The song became a hit and the rest was history.

Kit Chan's success marked the first time a Singaporean artiste had made it overseas with a local team behind them. Her breakthrough opened a whole new horizon for Singapore artistes as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other Asian countries started taking notice of Singapore music. Ocean Butterflies continued launching local new acts overseas. They included 2 Girls (两个女生), Shirley Yee (伊雪莉), Joi Chua (蔡淳佳), etc.

But the good times did not last. The Taiwan music industry was shaken up by major changes that took place between the years 1995 and 2000. Mergers and acquisitions altered the face of the music scene there. Short-term profit taking ruled the day, and idols “who can't hold a note” became the mainstay of the scene. Illegal pirated copies and online downloads rubbed salt in the wounds.

As the main revenue of Ocean Butterflies came from music production, it was badly hit. It went from producing four albums a year to nothing by 1997. When the Asian financial crisis hit that year, Ocean Butterflies was S\$500,000 in the red. “When the crisis was at its worst, the

management was not paid their salaries. For eight months, we had to live on our savings,” Koh said. “I felt thwarted, constantly questioning myself where I had gone wrong.”

Amidst the difficulties then, Ocean Butterflies discovered A-Do (阿杜) and JJ Lin (林俊杰) through “Very Singer Course”, a talent-scouting scheme originated by Ocean Butterflies where 3,500 candidates were auditioned in 1998. A Taiwanese record company signed a distribution deal with Ocean Butterflies for A-Do the next year.

After spending three years of hard work on completing A-Do's first album, the deal between Ocean Butterflies and the Taiwanese company turned sour as the latter doubted the former construction foreman's marketability.

Koh was baffled, “We grew up listening to great songs and being moved by wonderful music. That was the reason why we got involved in the music industry in the first place. We want to rediscover that magic in music.”

Trusting in his own instinct and professional judgement, Koh decided to buy back A-Do's contract signed with the Taiwanese company by paying a fee of NTD 6 million in installments. Koh then set up a new team in Taiwan and transformed Ocean Butterflies from a music production house to a record company. A-Do's debut album, *Getting Dark* (《天黑》), was released in April 2002.

Within weeks, A-Do made it to the top spot in the best selling albums chart in Taiwan! The album went on to sell more than 2 million copies within six months across Asia. A-Do's fame spread across almost all Chinese communities in China, Taiwan, the United States, and many Asian countries. Billboard magazine covered the story of A-Do in 2003, now famed for his husky voice and loved for his modesty and shy demeanour. In 2004, he became the first Singapore singer to be invited to perform on the New Year's Eve television show on China Central Television. Artistes considered it a great honour to be invited for this annual show.

“The lesson to be learnt in A-Do's case is that life is unpredictable and full of surprises, so we must trust our instinct and believe in ourselves,” Koh concluded.

In 2003, Koh produced and launched young Singapore composer-singer JJ Lin's debut album *Music Voyager* (《乐行者》). Lin was very well-received in the region. It led to him winning the Best Newcomer Award in the “15th Taiwan Golden Melody Awards”, the Asian version of the Grammy Awards.

In 2004, Koh was awarded the “Best Producer Award” for Lin's second album, *Second Heaven* (《第二天堂》), at the “China National Music Awards” (中国原创歌曲奖). This is the first music award and also the first time recognition is bestowed on a Singaporean by a national level organisation from China.

Koh revealed that the very first musical instrument he had learnt to play was the Chinese flute. So he always harboured a soft spot for wind instruments, often using them where appropriate in the songs he produced. For example, in JJ Lin's song, *River South* (《江南》), strains of the *xiao*

(vertical bamboo flute) could be heard. For one of A-Do's songs, *You Complete Me* (《有你才完整》), the oboe and the bamboo flute were used to create the feeling of being in the harbour as the ancient yacht sailed in.

“There is a native American legend that says that the human voice is the closest thing to the Gods, followed by wind instruments, which is sounded by using human breath. It is a direct reflection of the human emotions. But it doesn't mean that once the Chinese flute or *xiao* is introduced, the song would become very 'Chinese'. When you are making music, don't just think of moving the Chinese. Any music that moves people in general is good music.”

In 2006, American venture capital firm, IDG-ACCEL China Growth Fund, invested close to US\$10 million into Ocean Butterflies. In the following year, another American venture capital fund, SIG, invested more money. Ocean Butterflies has plans to develop music business in new media.

Koh has, in recent years, been involved as a member of the judging panel for television talent shows like Singapore's “Project Superstar” and China's “Happy Boys” (《快乐男声》). He has also continued his songwriting and producing works, including the cheer song for the China Olympics sportsmen, *Go Go China* (《加油中国》), and the theme song for the Shanghai World Expo 2010, *Wings of Dreams* (《梦想的翅膀》). His most recent high-profile producing effort was the song, *Every Touching Moment* (《感动每一刻》), which was commissioned for the Singapore Pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo, with music composed by JJ Lin and lyrics written by Koh and Eric Lin (林秋离), who is an acclaimed lyricist and the director of Ocean Butterflies Music Taiwan.

Koh attributed the company's success to his wonderful team at Ocean Butterflies. He also believed that they survived through the years because of their positive attitude, “One must not be overly concerned about personal gains and losses. Passion is important. One must enjoy the process. That's the only way to sustain yourself on the journey.”

“It's like walking into a very long tunnel, with no exit in sight. But since someone has made it through before, then there must be a way out. If you feel tired along the way, take a break but you can't stop. Otherwise, you could get knocked down.”

Quote

“Singapore music has come far. After a long period of seeking a unique identity and public recognition, we have arrived as part of the mainstream. We no longer need to emphasise the fact that ‘we are from Singapore’.”

Awards

1989: 3rd Sing Music Awards, Singapore, *Best Record Production* for Liang Wern Fook's In the Name of Love

1992: Ear Awards, Singapore, *Best TV Commercial* for Scott's Emulsion Growing Up (《成长成长》)

1993: Ear Awards, Singapore, *Best Radio Jingle* for Scott's Emulsion Growing Up (《成长成长》)

1994: Ear Awards, Singapore, *Best TV Commercial* for Carrier System-5, Carrier Air-Con 《一开得利事事顺意》

1995: Ear Awards, Singapore, *Best Radio Jingle* for Carrier System-5, Carrier Air-Con 《一开得利事事顺意》

2001: Compass and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS), *Meritorious Award*

2004: China National Music Award (中国原创歌曲奖) by China State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT; 国家广播电影电视总局) for *Best Record Producer (Hong Kong and Taiwan Region)*
Lianhe Zaobao, Singapore's No. 1 Chinese Daily, *The Man of the Year* (Music Category) for JJ Lin's "Heaven" (第二天堂)

2005: COMPASS, *The Wings of Excellence Award*
China 3rd South-East Music Award (第三届东南劲爆音乐颁奖典礼), *Best Record Producer* (Hong Kong and Taiwan Region) for JJ Lin's "Heaven" (第二天堂)

2006: China Pepsi Music Awards, *Best Music Arrangement* (Hong Kong and Taiwan Region)
The Straits Times, Singapore's No. 1 English Daily, *The Power List of 2006*

Discography

As Part of Singing Group, The Straw (水草三重唱)

| Year of Release | Song Title | Album |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|
| 2006 | 追云 | 新谣经典之冠珍藏版 |
| 1987 | On Sale 大拍卖 | On Sale 大拍卖 |
| | 曾经说过 | On Sale 大拍卖 |
| 1986 | 心字寂星 | 最初的梦 |
| | 无言的祝福 | 最初的梦 |
| | 摇摇民谣 | 最初的梦 |
| | 我们的歌在哪里 | 门 |
| | 17:00 的心情 | 门 |
| | 阿 Ben 阿 Ben | 门 |
| 1984 | 东东的故事 | 明天 21 |
| | 一首歌 | 明天 21 |

As Producer/Lyricist/Composer

| Year of Release | Song Title | Artiste | Title of Album/Project | Producer | Lyricist | Composer |
|-----------------|---------------|----------------|------------------------|----------|------------------|------------------|
| 2010 | 感动每一刻 | 阿杜+蔡健雅+林俊杰+孙燕姿 | 上海世博会新加坡馆主题曲 | 许环良 | 林秋离+许环良+MrMars | 林俊杰 |
| | 这叫爱 | BY2 | 成人礼 | 许环良+温晋禾 | Miko+Yumi+MrMars | Miko+Yumi |
| | 大人的世界 | BY2 | 成人礼 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | Ove André Brenna |
| 2009 | 妈妈的娜鲁娃 | 林俊杰 | 100 天 | 陈炯顺+许环良 | 张美香+许环良 | 林俊杰 |
| | 转动 | 林俊杰 | 100 天 | 许环良 | 廖莹如+许环良 | 林俊杰 |
| | 很忙 | 容祖儿 | 很忙 | 许环良 | Mr Mars | 许环良 |
| | Don't Go Away | BY2 | Twins | 许环良 | Miko+Yumi+MrMars | Miko+Yumi+冯时泽 |
| | 勇敢 | BY2 | Twins | 许环良+吴剑泓 | 林宇中+许环良 | 林俊杰 |
| | 表达爱 | 林俊杰+廖君 | 和路雪广告曲 | 许环良+陈炯顺 | 林怡凤+林蔚利+许环良 | 林俊杰 |

| | | | | | | |
|------|-------------------|---------------|-----------------------|------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| | 梦想的翅膀 | 林俊杰+阿杜+By2+金莎 | 上海世博会2010 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 梁伟丰 |
| 2008 | 点一把火炬 | 林俊杰 | JJ 陆; SIXOLOGY | 许环良 | 邢增华+许环良 | 林俊杰 |
| | 期待爱 | 林俊杰,+金莎 | JJ 陆; SIXOLOGY | 许环良 | 林怡凤+许环良 | 林俊杰 |
| | 街道 | 林俊杰 | JJ 陆; SIXOLOGY | 林俊杰+DrMoon | Dr Moon+许环良 | 林俊杰 |
| | Hurray | 林俊杰 | 发现.爱 新歌+精选 | 梁定江 | 林宇中+许环良 | 林俊杰 |
| | 买买买 | BY2 | 16 未成年 | 许环良 | DrMoon | Wrethov,Wrethov,Welin,Broddeson |
| 2007 | 加油中国 | 奥运金牌手 | na | 许环良 | 林秋离+许环良+周炯 | 许环良 |
| | 唱响世界 | 海蝶群星 | 企业歌曲 | 许环良 | 林秋离+李志清 | 李志清 |
| | 幸福新天地 | 南华小学生 | 南华音乐剧 | 梁定江 | 许环良 | 梁定江 |
| | 活过 | 阿杜 | 佛.笑/ Buddha Smiles | 吴剑泓 | 许环良 | 吴剑泓 |
| | 露水 | 洪俊扬 | 佛.笑/ Buddha Smiles | 吴剑泓 | 林秋离 | Liu Wei Xiong+许环良 |
| | 逃离 | 阿杜 | 撒野 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 张思尔 |
| | 新家 | 阿杜 | 撒野 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 李志清 |
| | 发现爱 | 林俊杰,+金莎 | 西界 | 许环良 | 林怡凤 | 林俊杰 |
| | 西界 | 林俊杰 | 西界 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 林俊杰 |
| | 自由不变 | 林俊杰 | 西界 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 林俊杰 |
| | 全球华语歌曲排行榜 | - | 颁奖典礼主题曲 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 许环良 |
| 2006 | 熟能生巧 | 林俊杰 | 曹操 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 林俊杰 |
| | 小乖乖 | 小乖乖儿童 | 小乖乖系列 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 许环良 |
| | Don't Say Goodbye | 洪俊扬 | 独角兽 | 吴剑泓 | 林怡凤+许环良 | 吴剑泓 |
| 2005 | 一千年以后 | 林俊杰 | 编号 89757 | 许环良 | 李瑞洵 | 林俊杰 |
| | 靠岸 | 林宇中 | 林宇中 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 李志清 |
| | 工体北 | 林宇中 | 林宇中 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 林宇中 |
| | 有你才完整 | 阿杜 | I Do | 许环良 | 林秋离+许环良 | 许环良 |
| | 下雪 | 阿杜 | I Do | 许环良 | 林秋离+林宇中+许环良 | 黎沸挥 |

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|------|-----------|---------|----------------------|----------------|---------|---------|
| | 了解 | 陈伟联 | 没有发专辑 | - | 许环良 | 黎沸挥 |
| 2004 | 江南 | 林俊杰 | 第二天堂 | 许环良 | 李瑞洵 | 林俊杰 |
| | 害怕 | 林俊杰 | 第二天堂 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 林俊杰 |
| | 哈罗 | 阿杜 | 哈罗 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 周传雄 |
| | 走向前 | 阿杜 | 哈罗 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 蔡政勋 |
| | 爱就是你 | 阿杜+ 马千珊 | 醇情歌 | 毕晓世 | 许环良 | 毕晓世 |
| 2003 | 就是我 | 林俊杰 | 乐行者 | 许环良 | 张思尔 | 林俊杰 |
| | 会有那么一天 | 林俊杰 | 乐行者 | 许环良 | 张思尔 | 林俊杰 |
| 2002 | 天天看到你 | 阿杜 | 天黑 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 许环良 |
| | 他一定很爱你 | 阿杜 | 天黑 | 许环良+David Koon | 李志清 | 李志清 |
| | 天黑 | 阿杜 | 天黑 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 洪典 |
| | 撕夜 | 阿杜 | 天黑 | 许环良 | 武雄 | 蔡政勋 |
| | 幻想 | 阿杜 | 坚持到底 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 许环良 |
| | 原是一家人 | U 频道艺人 | 贺年 U 选咚向 | 许环良 | 黄元成+许环良 | 梁伟丰+许环良 |
| 2001 | 小子万岁 | 林明伦 | Channel U" 亲子兵法" 主题曲 | 许环良 | 梁文福 | 许环良 |
| 2000 | 让我爱下去 | 陈洁仪 | 最好 | 许环良 | 林夕 | 许环良 |
| | 天冷就回来 | 陈洁仪 | 最好 | 许环良 | 梁文福 | 梁文福 |
| | 愿望 | 陈洁仪 | 愿望 | 许环良 | 许常德 | 许环良 |
| 1998 | 再爱一回 | 陈洁仪 | 入戏太深 | 许环良 | 许常德 | 许环良 |
| | 秘密花园 | 邰正宵 | 相思如麻 | 许环良 | 王中言 | 许环良 |
| 1997 | 揭晓 | 陈洁仪 | 揭晓 | 许环良 | 陈少琪 | 许环良 |
| | 分享孤独 | 陈洁仪 | 揭晓 | 许环良 | 林夕 | 许环良 |
| | 啄木鸟 | 2 个女生 | 2 个女生 | 许环良 | 王中言 | 季忠屏 |
| 1996 | 解脱 | 吉娜 | 在乎感觉 | 许环良 | 杨孝芬+环良 | 杨孝芬 |
| | 情人 | 陈洁仪 | 别让我恨你 | 许环良 | 许常德 | 许环良 |
| | 活的更精彩 | 陈洁仪 | 别让我恨你 | 许环良 | 许常德 | 许环良 |
| | 伤心 | 陈洁仪 | 伤心 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 许环良 |
| 1995 | 担心 | 陈洁仪 | 逼的太紧 | 许环良 | 梁文福 | 梁文福 |
| | 逼的太紧 | 陈洁仪 | 逼的太紧 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 许环良 |
| | 野草闲花 | 陈洁仪 | 逼的太紧 | 许环良 | 许常德 | 林子健+许环良 |
| | 何必清楚 | 梁朝伟 | 错在多情 | - | 丁晓雯 | 许环良 |
| | 我的心的打烊很东方 | 任天鸣 | 一程山水一程歌 | 郭峰 | 邢增华 | 许环良 |

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|------|--------------------------|----------|------------------|-------|----------------|-----|
| 1994 | 心痛 | 陈洁仪 | 心痛 | 许环良 | 林秋离 | 许环良 |
| | 伤了和气 | 陈洁仪 | 不要伤了和气 | 许环良 | 许常德 | 许环良 |
| | 走出黑暗的世界 | 陈洁仪 | 心痛 | 许环良 | 庄淑珍 | 柯贵民 |
| 1993 | 心会跟爱一起走 | 陈洁仪+郭峰 | 清醒 | 许环良 | 邢增华 | 郭峰 |
| | 永恒的光辉 | 众星 | 新加坡金曲奖主题曲 | 许环良 | 梁文福 | 许环良 |
| | 人人守时,人人省时 | 陈洁仪 | 守时运动主题曲 | 许环良 | 黄元成 | 许环良 |
| | 933 醉心频道 | 众星 | 新加坡电台 YES933 台曲 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 许环良 |
| | 933 醉心龙虎榜 | 众星 | 新加坡电台 YES933 台曲 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 许环良 |
| | Yeos, The Natural Choice | 陈洁仪 | nil - jingle | 许环良 | 许环良 | 许环良 |
| 1992 | 渐行渐远 | 潘盈 | 相思线分两头 | - | 黄月琴 | 许环良 |
| | 三十岁的日子 | 徐乃麟 | 原色 | 许环良 | 邢增华 | 许环良 |
| | 爱情那棵树 | 何笃霖 | 深情不改 | 许环良 | 许常德 | 许环良 |
| | 记住我的讯号 | 何笃霖 | 深情不改 | 许环良 | 许常德 | 许环良 |
| | 失恋对话 | 曾维山 | Mustika | 许环良 | 邢增华 | 许环良 |
| 1991 | 雨过天晴 | 蔡琴 | 太阳出来了 | 吴大卫 | (Yin, Da Qing) | 许环良 |
| | 欧跟著我飞 | 凤飞飞 | 秋鸾 | 许环良 | 楼文中 | 许环良 |
| | 舞菌 | 小松&小柏 | Dancing Virus 舞菌 | 小松&小柏 | 邢增华 | 许环良 |
| 1990 | 成长成长 | 获奖广告曲 | 司克脱鳕鱼肝油 | 许环良 | 林少芬 | 许环良 |
| | 别在秋天离开我 | 方蓉 | 看见你牵别人的手 | 许环良 | 陈佳明 | 许环良 |
| | 突然很想 | 桂侠 | 谁说女孩不行 | 蔡宗政 | 许环良 | 许环良 |
| | 你有甚么样的寂寞 | 徐伟 | 岁月游子 | 许环良 | 黄月琴 | 许环良 |
| 1988 | 温暖的地方 | 张飘方, 吴佳明 | 温暖的地方 | 许环良 | 卡斯 | 许环良 |
| 1987 | 我们这一班 | 颜黎明 | 流行歌曲 | 许环良 | 黄元成+吴庆康 | 许环良 |
| | On Sale 大拍卖 | 水草三重唱 | On Sale 大拍卖 | 许环良 | 黄元成+许南盛 | 许环良 |

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|------|------------|---------|-------------|-----|---------|-----|
| | 曾经说过 | 水草三重唱 | On Sale 大拍卖 | 许环良 | 黄元成 | 许环良 |
| | 卖花老妇 | 洪劭轩 | na | 许环良 | 刘汶鏢 | 许环良 |
| 1986 | 少女的呢喃 | 颜黎明 | 青春 123 | - | 刘杰奇+许环良 | 许环良 |
| | 心字寂星 | 水草三重唱 | 最初的梦 | 许环良 | 黄元成 | 许环良 |
| | 无言的祝福 | 水草三重唱 | 最初的梦 | 许环良 | 许南盛+许环良 | 许环良 |
| | 走过年少 | 巫启贤 | 星空下 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 巫启贤 |
| 1984 | 邂逅 | 巫启贤+黄惠祯 | 明天 21 | 许环良 | 黄惠祯 | 巫启贤 |
| | 一首歌 | 水草三重唱 | 明天 21 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 许环良 |
| | 东东的故事 | 水草三重唱 | 明天 21 | 许环良 | 许环良 | 许环良 |
| | Don't Quit | 许环良+巫启贤 | 明天 21 | 许环良 | - | 许环良 |

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