

The Quests: A Milestone in Music

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With more than 50 EPs and LPs released and recorded in three languages, The Quests garnered a wide fan base and achieved great success in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong.

The Quests started out as a duo formed to enter the “Radio Talentime” in 1960, with guitarist Jap Chong and his schoolmate Raymond Leong, both from Queenstown Secondary Technical School. They named themselves “The Quests”, after the title of their school magazine.

Inspired by the legendary performance of Cliff Richard and The Shadows in 1961 at the Singapore Badminton Hall, Chong and Leong decided to form an electric band. Lim Wee Guan, a neighbour, and Henry Chua, introduced by Lim's brother, took on the drums and guitar respectively, although neither could play the instruments. With determination and improvisation, they soon learnt, and the four-man band was ready to roll.

Made up of three guitarists and one drummer, The Quests began to make a name for themselves by backing the versatile entertainer Siri Perera – then regarded as Singapore's Charlie Chaplin – before scoring their first gig in late 1961. Saint Andrew's Mission Hospital paid the band S\$20, a decent sum at that time. House parties led to more frequent gigs and better pay, averaging S\$30 for every performance.

Making it to the finals of two “Talentime” contests in 1962, the band upped their game with a bass guitar – purchased by Chua's mother for S\$200 – and an amplifier, bought from the lead singer of The Jets, another local band. Despite having to share one amplifier between three guitars, there was a vast improvement in sound quality, which spurred the band on. The Quests won the next “Talentime” contest they entered, and were invited to perform on the popular television programmes *Dendang Ria* and *Pop Inn*.

Shortly after this, Wilson David, an acclaimed performer in the local music industry, performed briefly with the band. David had an impressive list of credentials, including singing with Stompers, the band that won the Cliff Richard and The Shadows sound-alike contest in 1962. He

brought something new to The Quests - a rhythm and blues vein.

In 1963, Leong left the band to further his studies, and was replaced by Reggie Verghese who was playing in another successful local band, the Checkmates.

Recommended by “Radio Singapore Talentime” host Kingsley Morrand, The Quests auditioned for EMI and secured a deal. In 1964, The Quests released their chart-topping single, *Shanty!* Their debut original composition, written by Henry Chua, was recorded after three takes, and enjoyed a successful launch as the first Singapore original instrumental record. It eventually replaced The Beatles' *I Should Have Known Better* on the top spot of the Singapore and Malaysia Hit Parade charts, and was even recorded by two European bands, the Invaders, from Sweden, and Johnny & the Electrostrings, from Holland.

With this success, the band continued to record singles and perform live. While performing at a British camp, they were impressed by the voice and showmanship of Keith Locke, and soon made him a part of the band. With plenty of contacts within the British Army, Locke's presence led to more gigs and exposure at the RAF camps in Tengah, Changi and Seletar, where the band could now command a fee of S\$500 for a four-hour performance, during which they would perform 70-80 songs! Booked for an average of six to eight shows each month, plus radio, TV and live shows, The Quests became the highest paid band in Singapore, a far cry from the days when it was paid S\$20 for an evening's work.

Despite various changes in the group's line-up, The Quests continued on its arc of success in Singapore and Malaysia, taking on a new direction of recording more originals than covers.

In early 1966, The Quests toured Malaysia to promote a new single, *Push Push/That You Are Mine*, supported by various other bands. The tour, which had the band performing in about 14 Malaysian towns and cities, did not go as smoothly as the band would have liked. Locke, who had gone AWOL from the army in order to tour with the band, was being pursued by the military police, while the band was subjected to hostility from the Malaysian crowds in retaliation for Malaysian bands who had received similar treatment while on tour in Singapore. One of the concerts had to be stopped and the bands were escorted back to their hotels by the police.

Upon returning to Singapore, Locke opted for an early discharge from the army, which meant that he had to return to Britain. In need of a lead vocalist as charismatic and talented as Locke, the band decided on Vernon Cornelius, who was singing with Unit 4 Plus 2 Plus 1. An extrovert who was already singing in the R&B style similar to Locke, Cornelius agreed to join The Quests.

By this time, The Quests were a household name, and had released 10 singles, each selling, on average, between 20,000 and 30,000 units. EMI, which had provided music lessons for the band members under the tutelage of Rufino Soliano from the Radio Television Singapore Orchestra, decided that it was time for them to record a long-playing record (LP).

But first came a tour at East Malaysia, the likes of which had never been seen before. From Kuching in Sarawak to Kuala Lumpur, the band played 42 shows in eight towns. It was the first big act to tour East Malaysia, complete with touts selling tickets on the black market for three

times the price, extended performances, and screaming fans. The band members' rooms were broken into, with shirts, handkerchiefs, and even with underwear stolen! To complete the picture of pop stardom, the band flew from Brunei to Sibu in a twin-propeller aircraft, from which they emerged to cheering fans.

Once home, an intense three-and-a-half-month production schedule resulted in The Quests recording their first long-playing (LP) record. Comprising 13 original tracks – six instrumental and seven vocal – *Questing* was recorded at EMI's MacDonald House studio. It was the first LP ever recorded by a Singapore band.

Another major break came when The Quests performed as the opening act for one of their idols, The Yardbirds, from Britain, led by the legendary Jimmy Page. Said Vernon Cornelius: "The Yardbirds were our idols from their first hit, *For Your Love*. Meeting them softened the legs, let alone standing by with them in readiness to go on stage. They had no airs and were very unassuming lads. When they went on stage they ripped everyone off their chairs, especially Jimmy Page, extraordinarily dressed in Carnaby colours, who ripped and raged on guitar with amplifier volumes we'd never heard till then."

In mid-1967, Henry Chua left the band to pursue his studies, leaving them short of a bass player. Auditions led Sam Toh, who played bass with Bee Jays – one of the bands who had toured with The Quests in Malaysia – to join the band. They continued to play live gigs, though much time was devoted to working in the studio.

After being impressed by the rich sound of a band from the Philippines, The Quests decided to add a keyboard player to their line-up. Jimmy Chan, who had previously played with a band, The Trailers, became the sixth Quest member.

Receiving an offer to play nightly in the Mocambo nightclub in Hong Kong in late 1967 was an exciting opportunity for The Quests, given the thriving music scene there. More significantly, the band's three-month contract to perform twice a week live on TV was intended to promote the launch of colour TV in Hong Kong. To supplement their income, the band played every day at tea dances and clubs.

Although the band was poorly received at first, the Hong Kong crowd eventually warmed up to them and one of their original releases, *Mr Rainbow*, even topped the Radio Hong Kong Hit Parade. Soon there was a fan club, and a three-month contract extension proved their popularity. Frequent media attention spurred the band on, and two members – Reggie Verghese and Vernon Cornelius – even modelled in a Pierre Cardin collection for an advertising campaign.

Despite being offered a contract extension in Hong Kong, the band members had grown weary of performing every day, and decided to head home. However, they received shocking news that all artistes had to pay a 40% entertainment tax on their earnings.

The Quests returned home in November 1968 to a depressing music scene – work was becoming scarce and the music industry was dying largely because of the entertainment tax. Artistes could not afford it, and foreign acts wanted the promoters to pay for it. As a result, the concert scene

died. Cornelius quit the group for health reasons, and the band continued with Jap Chong and Reggie Verghese taking over vocalist responsibilities.

During a final stint in Hong Kong, the band redefined their sound with powerful instrumentals and intense guitar solos, before returning home to resume session duties in the studio with EMI. The band continued to provide backing vocals and music for singers such as Rita Chao, Sakura Teng, Kartinah Dahari, and Lam Leng, while recording more original music.

In 1971, The Quests decided to call it quits, preferring to exit on a high note rather than continuing without a clear goal, and the band members agreed that they had already achieved everything they had set out to do. The Quests were arguably Singapore's most successful homegrown band, and had reached a height that has yet to be challenged.

BOX

Biscuit tins and rubber bands

In the early days, writes founder-member Henry Chua, most people had no money for music lessons or musical instruments. But when a passion was born, as it was for this group of friends who lived in Tiong Bahru, inventiveness was fuelled.

Chua, then about 13 years old, did not know how to play the guitar or read music, but he crafted something resembling a guitar using a Jacob's biscuit tin without its cover and strung it with rubber bands. Fellow band member, Lim Wee Guan, who had undertaken to be the drummer – also without any knowledge about drumming – used empty Thye Hong biscuit tins for drums. His snare was made from one of these tins filled with bottle caps, while a leather schoolbag was his kick drum. Two oversized pencils with rubber bands wound tightly around one end of each worked as drum sticks, with the rubber bands reducing the sharpness of the sound and providing “bounce”.

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