

Dick Lee (李迪文): Creating Endless Opportunities

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His name appears on many lists of 'firsts', but perhaps the most significant of them all was being the first Singapore-born musician to inject a local identity into his original music, by tapping on the influences which shaped his life.

He has composed music and songs for the biggest names in Chinese music, clinched two HK Film Academy Awards for movie soundtracks, had an album go platinum in Singapore alone, pushed for a Singapore identity long before it became fashionable, and created music for the first and most successful Singapore musicals.

Dick Lee is without a doubt one of Singapore's most recognised and renowned music personalities, a singer, songwriter, composer, and playwright; an artiste who has contributed in no small measure to the development of original music in Singapore.

The eldest of five children, Richard Lee Peng Boon was born on August 24, 1956. He grew up to the tunes of his father's jazz and big band favourites, and his mother's favourite pop music.

"My earliest influence was the music of the 1960s which was playing in my home. Dad loved big band, jazz, crooners, and *keroncong*, while my mother, in her 20s at that time, loved contemporary Western and Chinese pop music. She loved to dance, and was the original 'party girl'. The regular dance parties we had at home happened because of her, as was my interest in fashion."

"I grew up understanding contemporary music and was being given wide exposure to it. The whole '60s era is still very important. It was a time when music was crossing borders – the United Nations, cross-cultural awareness. Imagine, a Japanese song entitled *Sukiyaki* was No. 1 in the US! An Indonesian song, *Bengawan Solo*, was sung in Mandarin, and *Dahil Sayo*, a song from the Philippines, was a hit all over Asia. The music industry was thriving; that was the era of Naomi and the Boys, Heather, Sakura, and Rita Chao."

Dick's exposure included the music of the Monkees (a British band which had its own TV show), Burt Bacharach, and Petula Clark. "It was all sophisticated, yet it was Top 10 mass appeal. It was stylish and mature, and this carried into the '70s. It was very satisfying to a music fan at that time."

Beginning his endeavours in music at the age of 10, Dick describes how he never did well in his piano lessons or exams simply because he spent all his time composing his own pieces, including a musical when he was 12.

"As a 13-year-old, I was writing adult music, and as a 15-year-old, I dressed as an adult to go clubbing. I certainly aspired to be older than my years!"

Through it all, there was reflection. “I tried to analyse it; I thought about music all the time. What did I want to do, and how should I do it and get audiences to like me?”

In those early days, Dick played many gigs in different venues, among them free performances at some of the National Library branches.

“I was an indie in my time. There was no path for me. I made my own way. In those days too, it was not the approved thing, to be a musician. I played bass in a band, and tried everything. I picked up the guitar, and of course, you had to smoke if you played the guitar back then!”

When Dick went to St. Joseph’s Institution (SJI), he was exposed to a very multi-ethnic environment in which race did not matter. “We had music, we hung out, chased convent girls...the whole experience really inspired me. It was Bras Basah (where SJI was) by day, Orchard Road with its 24-hour coffee houses and the Holiday Inn, by night. That was my life, my inspiration.”

His career progressed while he was studying at SJI, with groups “Harmony”, and “Dick and the Gang”, which was a musical group formed with his siblings. At 15, Dick took to the stage in a number of talent shows before recording his own compositions for his first album in 1974, *Life Story*. The title track became a familiar tune to many Singaporeans years later when it was used in a feel-good insurance commercial.

Dick's pioneering album in 1984, *Life in the Lion City*, was credited for the infusion of Asian elements, a style he was known for, stemming from the cultural mix of his “father’s very Westernised lifestyle ... and his (my) mother’s more Chinese tastes”. He championed the inclusion of Asian elements into pop music throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, it was only five years later that he was to achieve regional prominence with the release of an album entitled *The Mad Chinaman*.

The 1989 album went platinum locally in just three months and won awards in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan. With a title track inspired by the Tiananmen Square massacre, Dick was moved to explore his roots, acknowledging his confused identity through his lyrics: “*Traditional-international, Western feeling from my oriental heart, How am I to know and how should I react?*”

The Most Personal

“I’ve never written a definitive pop song except for *Home* and two Chinese songs – *Search of my Life* and *Love is Forever* – which are considered classics in Chinese music. For me, personally, it’s *Lifestory* – I wrote it at 16 and it’s still relevant to me today. I still perform it. It’s my theme song. *Fried Rice Paradise*, also written when I was 16, which I still perform, whenever there is a piano available.”

“It’s fascinating how these two have endured. I wrote them for myself, with no career, no agenda, and no expectations of them. Subsequently, I’ve always written for the market. I’ve never been so true to myself as I was with those two songs.”

In 1990, Dick moved to Japan where he continued to develop the new Asian identity through his work, and through collaborations with top Asian artistes such as Sandy Lam and Zoo. He has since gone on to work with yet more established artistes in the region such as Anita Mui, Andy Lau, Aaron Kwok, and Miyazawa Kazufumi, to name a few. And in the process, he achieved something no one else in Singapore had done before: he won two HK Film Academy Awards. The first, in 1995, was for Best Original Movie Theme Song for *She's a Man, He's a Woman*. Four years later in 1999, he reprised it for the movie *City of Glass*.

Dick's passion for musicals led him along a different yet complementary path. He has written many ground-breaking musicals which were staged, including *Beauty World*, *Fried Rice Paradise*, *Kampong Amber* and *Sing to the Dawn*. *Forbidden City* was commissioned to open the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay in 2003, while Jackie Cheung's *Snow.Wolf.Lake* toured Asia in 2005 and *Nagrland* toured Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong in a 2002 sell-out tour.

Parallelling this are his other loves – theatre and fashion. The former finds voice in his role of Associate Artistic Director of The Singapore Repertory Theatre, an appointment he has held since 1998. The latter was first ignited when he began designing for his mother's boutique, Midteen, at the age of 16. He trained in fashion design at Harrow School of Art in London, managed and trained top Singapore models, designed his own fashion labels and set up Hemispheres, Singapore's first store to showcase the works of young designers. He also founded the Society of Designing Arts, which introduced Singapore designers to the local fashion market.

From 1982 to 1990, Dick also ran his own events company specialising in fashion and tourism events, and, with former TV producer Lim Sek, set up talent management agency Music & Movement. Throughout his career, Dick has always trail-blazed, and this includes playing a part in creating the Boom Boom Room, a cabaret featuring a transvestite show in the tradition of the legendary Bugis Street.

In 1998, Dick moved to Hong Kong where he was appointed Regional Vice-President of Artiste & Repertoire at Sony Music Asia. Then in 2002, Dick was appointed Creative Director for Singapore's National Day Parade. In a happy coincidence, his song *We will get There* was selected to be that year's national song and the theme song for the parade. It was performed by pop star Stephanie Sun, who went on to include the song in her own top-selling album. The song was his second national song, having had written *Home*, which was performed by singer Kit Chan in 1998. More than a decade later, *Home* remains one of Singapore's most loved national songs.

Dick celebrated the 30th anniversary of his career in 2004 with the release of a 5-CD compilation, the publication of his autobiography *The Adventures of The Mad Chinaman*, and the creation of Dick Lee's Sunshine Project, a charity for handicapped children and youth counselling centres.

Since 2005, Dick has functioned as Artistic Director of People’s Association’s performing arts group, PA Talents, and in this capacity, developed a season for their ethnic orchestra and created the Singapore Pop Orchestra in 2007. In 2006, he was invited to write music for the opening ceremony of the 15th Asian Games in Doha.

In 2008, Dick collaborated with Japanese ad agency Chuo Senko to form a creative agency which is now called Dick Lee Concepts. In 2010, he launched a production company, Fantastic Entertainment, to stage musicals and comedies, and was also chosen to be Creative Director of National Day Parade 2010.

But Lee, whose name pops up in so many varied contexts, fears that he is perceived as “the thing that will not go away”.

“I am a victim of my own self-promotion. I sense that people are tired of hearing my name...that they know I’ve done ‘something’, but they don’t know what! I learnt early that I had to promote myself in order to be taken seriously. When I was writing songs as a young person, and trying to find my own voice, I never wanted to just copy.”

“The term ‘Singaporean’ had no meaning at the time, so who was I – Chinese, Singaporean, Asian, English-educated, Peranakan – and what did I have to say? I wanted not to be shallow, I wanted to be taken seriously. How could I introduce a Singapore element into a form that was basically Western? I wanted to do it with honesty, tapping on the things I knew.”

“Throughout my career, I have made very informed and careful choices, and made the right connections. It might look like a breeze, but in between are huge spaces of insecurity and fear. The sense that without music, I am nothing. That’s why I create opportunities, I make it happen – out of a need to assert myself to myself, not to the world.”

About his current work, Dick says: “Anything I write now will be more personal, perhaps too personal and not accessible. Anything I do now is through the eyes of my life and career. It seems darker. I put what I’ve gone through into my music, and I will continue to write what I think is meaningful music.”

His latest album – *Life Luxe* – is Dick’s first studio recording in a decade, and includes smooth jazz, some original compositions and some covers. This new album, Dick says, is “music from my generation.”

Quote

“I often feel my personal (and artistic) growth reflects the growth of my country, being the absolute Singaporean that I am.”

BOX/SIDE-STORY*Details, details*

Lee's thoroughness and attention to detail is illustrated very clearly in the way he approached *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress*. After watching a Chinese soap opera, Dick was intrigued by the story of the Empress Dowager Cixi, ruler of the Qing Dynasty in the 1800s, and delved deep into books and history while keeping in mind the thoughts and challenges she must have faced. While usually portrayed as a villain, Dick wanted to show a different side of her – as a mother, wife, and lover.

Together with lyricist Stephen Clark and director Steven Dexter, Dick spent four years becoming thoroughly acquainted with the history, stories and relevant biographies, including visiting the Forbidden City in Beijing several times before beginning to compose the musical.

Written in stages in London and in Singapore, the first draft of *Forbidden City* was presented and decided on for the opening ceremony of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. The immense popularity of the production saw it return to stage for two re-runs in 2003 and 2006. Dick's compositions for the musical went on to win the "Life! Theatre Awards for Best Music in 2004".

Awards

1995: Perfect 10, *The Perfect 10 Music Achievement Award* for outstanding contribution in the Singapore Music scene

1995: HK Film Academy Awards, *Best Original Movie Theme Song* in the 1994 film, "She's A Man, He's A Woman" (《金枝玉葉》) for (《追》) *The Search of my Life*

1998: Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Awards *Top Local English Pop Song*

1999: HK Film Academy Awards, *Best Original Movie Theme Song* in the 1998 film, "City of Glass" (《玻璃之城》) for (《今生不再》)

1998-2002, 2004-2006: COMPASS *Composer of the Year Awards*

1999: COMPASS *Artistic Excellence Award*

1999: COMPASS Award for *Top Local Chinese Pop Song*

2003: Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize – *Arts & Culture Prize*

2004: COMPASS Award for *Best Malay Pop Song*

2004: Singapore Cultural Medallion

2004: LIFE! Theatre Awards, *Best Music* for “Forbidden City”

2007: Boh Cameronian Arts Award, *Best Music* for “Puteri Gunung Ledang”

2008: Boh Cameronian Arts Awards, *Best Music* for “P. Ramlee the Musical”

Albums

1974: Life Story

1979: Internationalland (Single)

1984: Life in the Lion City; Suriram (Single)

1985: Return to Beauty World

1986: The Songs from Long Ago; The Songs of Christmas (Christmas Album);
Fried Rice Paradise (Compilation)

1987: Connections

1989: The Mad Chinaman; When I Play (Compilation)

1990: Asia Major

1991: Orientalism

1992: The Year of The Monkey; Peace, Life, Love (Christmas Album)

1993: Hong Kong Rhapsody (Instrumental): Life Story (Compilation)

1994: Secret Island: Compass (Cantonese)

1995: Singapop

1999: Transit Lounge

2000: Everything

2003: Rice (Instrumental)

2004 :Life/Stories (Compilation)

2010: Life Deluxe

Musicals:

1988: Beauty World (Singapore, also 1993, 1998, 2008)

1991: Fried Rice Paradise (Singapore, also 2010 (re-written))

1992: Nagraland (Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan)

1993: Hong Kong Rhapsody (Japan); Fantasia (Singapore, Japan)

1994: Kampong Amber (Singapore);

1997: Hotpants (Singapore); A Twist Of Fate (Singapore, also 2005)

1998: Snow. Wolf.Lake (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, China, also 2004, 2005)

2001: Re:mix (Singapore)

2003: Forbidden City (Singapore, also 2004, 2006)

2006: Puteri Gunung Ledang (Malaysia, Singapore); Man Of Letters (Singapore)

2006: Man of Letters (Singapore)

2007: P. Ramlee The Musical (Malaysia, Singapore)

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