

## Vernon Cornelius: Singing through the Sixties

by **Perera, Loretta Marie and Perera, Audrey**, written in August 2010  
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*Known for his mellow voice as much as for his high-energy performances*, Vernon Cornelius has been an intrinsic part of Singapore's Western music scene since the 1960s.

From talent contest hopeful to lead vocalist to radio DJ, Vernon Cornelius is a name synonymous with Singapore's thriving music scene in the '60s and has continued in that vein throughout his career. He has been associated with many "firsts" – lead singer in the first band to record a long-playing (LP) record in Singapore, the first DJ to produce and host a radio show dedicated to jazz, and the first to introduce completely new music to his listeners.

Born in 1947, Cornelius grew up in a family that was rooted in music. "In our family, there was always music. It's a very Eurasian thing – aunt on the piano, singing, merriment after a few drinks...music was always part of any gathering." Raised amidst the sounds of Pat Boone and Nat King Cole from his mother's record collection, Cornelius also recorded songs from the radio which eventually led to a "hunger" for music.

With an allowance of 20-30 cents, he learnt to save so that he could buy what mattered most to him: music, in the form of singles, which, at that time, cost about S\$1.20.

"The person who had the greatest impact on me was Cliff Richard and his band, The Shadows. It was 1963 and it was all about smart costumes, electric guitars, choreographed dancing, and great songs. I was overwhelmed. I wanted to be him, and bought everything he ever released."

Striking chords on his first electric guitar when he was 14 years old, Cornelius went on to participate in talent contests, the first being at Great World Cabaret in 1960. Then came his first appearance on television in 1963 at 16, performing with the Oliveiro Sisters. His stage presence and powerful vocals caught the attention of The Trailers, who invited him to join the band.

He took his admiration for Richard to the stage when he played with The Trailers at the end of 1963, impressing audiences with covers of Cliff Richard's songs. The band, with its new member, came to be known as Vernon and the Trailers – a not-so-subtle tribute to Cliff Richard and the Shadows.

Encouraged by manager Tommy Low to accept more bookings to pay for instruments and equipment, the band got their big break with a residency at the New Penangway in Upper East Coast Road, and soon after that, at Palace Sunday Tea Dance where they replaced The Quests, another popular band at that time. The band continued to perform regularly with Cornelius as their frontman until 1965.

It was around this time that The Checkmates, an established R&B band, was on the lookout for a new vocalist. Cornelius, who had just left The Trailers, was invited to join the band. While this would be a "step-up" for him, as The Checkmates were more famous and earning twice as much

as The Trailers, it also meant that he would have to forgo his favourite Cliff Richard songs in favour of rhythm and blues.

In August 1965, The Checkmates expanded their line-up to include two members of The Cyclones and Cornelius – this super-group became known as Unit 4 Plus 2 Plus 1.

Less than a year later, Cornelius was approached again, by another successful band. The Quests were in need of a lead vocalist and wanted Cornelius to come on board. This was an offer too enticing to pass up – The Quests was the top band in Singapore at that time. Cornelius joined them in April 1966 where he experienced his “first serious taste of fame”, complete with crazy mobs, screaming female fans and star treatment.

Once again part of a group that shared his admiration for Cliff Richard and the Shadows, and The Beatles, Cornelius became part of the first band in Singapore that placed equal importance on looking good and sounding good, and giving every performance a conceptual approach.

“Each performance was like a story unfolding, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Everything was scripted, to the point where we practised in a studio with mirrors, going through the whole performance, so we could see what the audience was seeing. The studio was at EMI, MacDonald House. If not there, we practised at a band member’s home in Tiong Bahru – they all lived there.

“The band was very conscious of appearances, style and class, and thought of everything, right down to individual words, to ensure there were no moments of dead air. This was The Quests’ formula, inspired by Cliff Richard and the Shadows, and The Beatles. It was the first band in Singapore to do this. It didn’t matter where we performed – we had to look and sound consistently good. We imagined ourselves as stars, and we were, judging by the response we received. And that gave us a certain attitude on stage.”

Opening for many internationally famous bands such as The Yardbirds, Herman's Hermits, Adam Faith, and Helen Shapiro, impresarios of that time such as Mike Ellery and Donald Moore saw the band as a slick act that wouldn’t let the side down. “For us, it was a way to pitch ourselves as equals and strive to match [them] in terms of quality.”

The Quests secured their place in Singapore's music scene by signing with EMI, where the band was challenged to come up with original material. One of the original compositions was *Shanty!*, an instrumental track by The Quests' bass guitarist Henry Chua, which was such a success that it knocked *I Should Have Known Better* by the Beatles off top spot on the Singapore and Malaysia Pop Charts. *Shanty!* eventually became the band’s signature song.

The band saw more success as they toured and performed in Malaysia and Hong Kong, and made many TV appearances. After an extended run in Hong Kong, however, news came that all artistes would have to pay a 40% tax on their earnings. This tax was one of many factors that dimmed the fire of The Quests, along with differences in musical tastes and directions within the band. The Quests eventually disbanded in 1971.

Cornelius, who had quit the band in 1968, became a DJ with Rediffusion. “Mike Ellery, on the strength of The Quests’ success, gave me free rein. During my five years there, I tried to promote local bands, such as Joe Chandran and The Experiments, Tokyo Square, Pest Infested, Straydogs, and so on, and organised competitions such as “Ready Steady Folk” in 1972.

“I remember well meeting a young singer who didn’t fit the folk category, but I didn’t want to discourage him, so I got him to play the opening and closing songs for the competition, freshly composed every week. That was Dick Lee. There was an EMI guy there. I told him about Dick, that here was a singer who wrote his own songs and music. This guy recorded Dick’s first album, I think it was *Fried Rice Paradise*.”

Adding to his list of pioneering contributions to music, Cornelius also introduced “Just Jazz”, Singapore’s first jazz radio programme, which required research and provided listeners with not just music, but with insights into the history and background of jazz music. “I developed an obsession to be the first to introduce listeners to new music – the first to play James Taylor, Carol King, and so on. I ordered records from overseas before they were available in Singapore, so that listeners would hear them first on my shows. I wanted to raise the level of awareness among listeners so that they would enjoy the music even more.

“The whole drive to set the pace and innovate harked back to The Quests’ ethos, of being the first, and the best,” says Vernon, acknowledging one of the legacies of his time with The Quests.

Riding on his success at Rediffusion, Cornelius was invited to deejay on Radio Singapore at the same time. “I couldn’t use my name, so I was Chris King on Radio Singapore and Cornelius on Rediffusion, and I was given total liberty to do whatever I wanted. That fuelled my own music education, because I didn’t want to be just another DJ playing songs.”

After five years with Rediffusion, Cornelius left to pursue various other interests, including part-time deejaying, video production, advertising, photojournalism, research, and writing, alongside regular live performances in many of Singapore’s clubs and recordings.

His works include many multimedia shows and jingles for various ministries, including the Ministry of Health’s “Don’t Waste Water” campaign jingle in 1970. Currently writing a book about the history of Western music in Singapore, Cornelius performs regularly in Jakarta, Malacca, and Kuala Lumpur.

Perhaps one of his most significant works was released in a 1990 CD. He wrote and composed a folk song entitled *The Lion’s Song*, about Sir Stamford Raffles and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew. “In 1994, the song was included in the national song list. People thought I had been commissioned to write it as a form of propaganda, but I did not intend it as a national song. It was about historical figures, and the timing was apt because the year it was released was the year Lee Kuan Yew was stepping down as PM.”

One of the highlight performances of his career was during the national day celebrations on the Padang in 2009. “I engaged the crowd and used everything I ever learnt as a musician, broadcaster, DJ, commentator. There were 6,000 people on their feet, the most successful

outdoor concert I've ever done.

“My ambitious pursuits have largely been driven by the fact that I am not a graduate. I grew up in an era when getting your ‘O’ Levels was a mark of success. So I had to ensure that with each career change, I moved ahead. I had to carve an image for myself, rather than someone who was a part of The Quests, the Rediffusion guy, the Radio guy, etc...and I believe I've succeeded.”

### **Quote**

“In whatever field I've entered, I've challenged boundaries, gone beyond limits, pushed the envelope. My prime motivation has always been to touch emotions – because if you can do that, you have your audience in your hands.”

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