

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 Talentime” (《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

	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 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

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

	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	刘汶鏖	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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