

Poon Sow Keng (潘秀琼): From Lover's Tears to Tears of Loveby **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

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Her signature song, A Lover's Tears, has proven its staying power for over half a century. Meet the Queen of Alto, Poon Sow Keng, who shares with us the story behind the scenes during the recording of this iconic song.

In one of the most romantic moments in the movie *Secret* (《不能说的秘密》), Taiwan music superstar Jay Chou's (周杰伦) directorial debut released in 2007, the male and female leads were sharing their favourite song in a CD shop. The version of that song, *A Lover's Tears* (《情人的眼泪》), used in the soundtrack, was sung by Yao Su Rong (姚苏蓉). Shortly after, there was a renewed interest in the work of this veteran songstress. But there was also much discussion among many music fans about the original singer of this all-time favourite ballad, who in fact, is local songbird Poon Sow Keng (潘秀琼).

This is not the first time *A Lover's Tears*, considered by many to be the most romantic Mandarin song of its era, has been featured in a movie. Poon had sung this very song onscreen in the Shaw Brothers film *Little Lark* (《小云雀》) way back in 1964.

Poon, known as the “Queen of Alto” (低音歌后), had first recorded the song in 1958. It was composed by the prolific Yao Min (姚敏), the famous composer and producer for the record company EMI in the 1950s and 1960s, with lyrics provided by the equally illustrious lyricist Chen Die Yi (陈蝶衣).

Poon recalled the hard time she had at the recording session, “Back then, recording for an album was done with a live band. Mr Yao Min would conduct the band himself. Whenever a mistake is made, we will have to start from the top. It's much easier now, just press a button and we can rewind and start over. It took me two days to get the song right. It was such a difficult song! The key was either very high or very low at parts. When the song was almost done, the key for the last line ‘my tears would fall’ (掉下来) just wouldn't fall low enough.”

“Technically then, we were not able to manipulate the sound. I just couldn't get it right. I was upset and started crying. Mr Yao Min was shocked. I asked to try again the next day. He agreed and consoled me. The next day when I got to the studio, he had changed the key, lifting it half a key higher. The recording then went ahead without a hitch. So I did shed tears, but not for a lover. Rather, it was for the difficult song.”

Poon admitted, however, that she had shed real tears on stage singing *A Lover's Tears* after her divorce, “When things are not going well in your life, you would naturally feel sad when singing this song. Sometimes, I would sob so badly that I couldn't continue. Every night for the six months I was singing at the lounge, someone would request for this song without fail. And I would cry singing it each time. So for a full six months, I was crying on stage.”

But Poon is eternally grateful for this big break, “*A Lover’s Tears* made me a household name. Everyone remembered me for it. So Mr Yao Min was a really, really important figure in my life and career.”

Her career had begun at a very young age. When she was four, her family had moved from Macau to Kuala Lumpur, where her father was working as a barber. She was a shy child who kept to herself. She would often be found in a corner of the house singing and humming. In school, she was almost always the one chosen as the representative in singing contests and school concerts.

“Since we were not well-off, my siblings and I didn’t have toys like other kids did. Instead, we treated singing like a game. To us, it was the cheapest and most enjoyable means of entertaining ourselves. I like to sing. As long as I can sing, I’m happy. I am never off-key. I am always on the nose in this respect. I could repeat a song after listening to it once, and always in the right key. My father brought me to a Zhou Xuan (周璇) movie once, called *Orioles Banished from the Flowers* (《花外流莺》). As soon as I walked out of the cinema, I was able to hum all the songs on the soundtrack.”

She won second prize at a children’s singing contest when she was eight years old. At 12, she was already singing at an amusement park in Bukit Bintang in Malaysia. “I would be in school in the day, and by 4 o’clock in the afternoon, I would be at the *getai*. I would earn 40 ringgit a month which was quite a large sum in those days.”

“My parents used to tell me that I would always have this smile on my face whenever I was waiting for my turn to sing onstage. And I performed like a veteran even though I was very young then.”

At 15, she was performing more often in Singapore, as the entertainment scene here was thriving with the three amusement parks, nightclubs and hotels which were all engaging singers to perform. She was also earning more, a few hundred dollars a month. She was happy because she was able to help out in a big way with the family finances, “There were nine mouths to feed at home. Finances were tight. I never thought working at such a young age was a burden. Instead, I was genuinely happy to sing for a living. I felt honoured to be able to help improve the circumstances of my family.”

The same year, she signed on as a recording artiste with a company in Singapore and released her first album. “The recording industry wasn’t as organised as it is today. There were no songwriters who would come up with songs for your album. Most of the songs we sang then were popular oldies or those with Mandarin lyrics sung to melodies from the region or the west.”

Songs like *Bali Island* (《峇厘島》), *Bengawan Solo* (《梭罗河之恋》), *White Sheer Scarf* (《白纱巾》), etc became big hits among the Chinese communities in the region after Poon sang to the tunes of these famous Indonesian songs. When she was 17 years old, she became the youngest singer signed on under the Pathé (百代唱片) record label in Hong Kong, and also the only singer from Southeast Asia in its stable. She would go on to release more than 100 record albums.

The music director at Pathé Records then was Yao Min, who would decide what songs the singers would sing, “He understands what style of music would suit each artiste. He made so many singers big names of their time. So many of his songs remained classics till today. He was really kind to me. He never scolded me nor did he heap praises on me. He wrote many songs specifically for me.”

“I found out from his sister, Yao Li (姚莉), that he liked my voice very much, for he would invite many veterans from the music and film scene such as Chang Loo (张露), Linda Lin Dai (林黛), Grace Chang (葛兰), etc. to the studio whenever I was recording. He would tell them, ‘She is very young and very petite but she has a great voice’. I was not frightened by the crowd. The more the merrier. It just motivated me even more.”

With the success of *A Lover’s Tears*, Poon’s singing career reached new heights. She would shuffle back and forth between Hong Kong and Singapore via the steamship for her album recordings and singing engagements. She was soon singing at prestigious establishments like the nightclub at the Singapore Hotel as well as at the restaurants at the Cathay Building. She would also grace cha-cha parties thrown by post-war British officers on the top floor of the New 7th Storey Hotel, now demolished, but was a five-star hotel in the 1950s and 1960s. Poon would count Loke Wan Tho, the movie magnate, and his mother as her ardent fans.

“Mrs Loke loved the Chinese classic oldies while Mr Loke loved western songs. So each night, after half an hour singing in Mandarin at the Chinese restaurant, I would be asked to sing songs in English at the Western restaurant downstairs. This was the heyday of my career and I had many fans who would come dine at the restaurants just to hear me sing.”

She would also perform in nightclubs all over Hong Kong. Singers back then did not have a coterie of minders to take care of their needs. They usually had to manage on their own. “I had to rush to a few clubs each night to fulfil my singing engagements. Once on a stormy night, I failed to hail a cab and since I had no car, I had to take a bus. I had to run after the bus dressed in my costume. The jewellery on me dropped off one after another as I ran. By the time I got on the bus, all the jewellery was missing!”

Poon’s stint in Hong Kong would continue till 1986, when she was invited to start singing classes to nurture a new generation of talent at the then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). The class of more than 40 students were made up of many faces that would soon become well-known singers on the station’s programme “Sing Sing Sing” (《星星星》). Poon resigned six years later to devote her energies to charity work, singing for the less fortunate here as well as overseas. Very often, she would sing her signature tune, *A Lover’s Tears*.

“The tears I shed now are no longer tears of a lover. They are tears of happiness, tears of care and concern. They are really tears of gratitude.”

Quote

“I have always led a simple life, and I feel that anyone can be happy if they keep things simple. Even so, I hope to be remembered. Please forget me not. I wish that the songs of Poon Sow Keng would be a part of everyone forever.”

Discography

1958: 天使唱片出品，《情人的眼泪》，45rpm.

1959: 《我是一只画眉鸟》，1962年电影《那个不多情续集》插曲

1963: 《潘秀琼之歌》，收录《望春风》、《春之花》、《苏州之夜》

1968: 《杯酒残梦》，收录《月光湖上》等歌

1960s: 《闭上眼睛想一想》，收录《想来想去放不下》

1986: 新广电视连续剧《天涯同命鸟》主题曲. 词：王茵，曲：李思菘收录在群星会（6）- 潘秀琼（上）

1993: 百代中国时代曲名典 44 – 潘秀琼.收录《何必旁人来说媒》，《爱情象气球》等

2003: 皇星唱片出版《国语难忘金曲珍藏集 – 潘秀琼》

2005: 新丽声出版《名曲回顾 – 秋的怀念》

2005: 新丽声出版《名曲回顾 – 梦中人》

2005: 新丽声出版《名曲回顾 – 送君》

上海百代唱片，《家家有本难念的经》

百代国语唱片《椰岛姑娘》，45rpm.

天使唱片出品《心弦之歌》

马标唱片，收录《雪山歌》等

国际唱片，《国语时代曲》，收录《红豆寄相思》等歌

远东唱片公司，《精选流行歌曲》，收录《巴厘岛》等歌

中声唱片厂出品，《秋雨里的春风》

百代中国时代曲名典 43 – 潘秀琼.收录《梭罗河之恋》《含羞草》等

百代中国时代曲名典 45 – 潘秀琼.收录《我要为你歌唱》等

百代时代曲传奇 4 – 潘秀琼.两港的晚上. 收录《搭错线》等

名将唱片出版, 《情人的眼泪》

Awards

2008: Composers & Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS), *Meritorious Award*

References

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黄国川 (February 23, 2010). “潘秀琼 音符跳动精彩人生”. *光华日报*. Retrieved 4 June 2010, from <http://www.kwongwah.com.my/supplement/2010/02/23/4.html>

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