

Restoring China

When Lee Leng Kok realised he was holding a unique archive of historical Chinese recordings, he was determined to restore and preserve it. **Tim Goodyer** finds out what happened



Lee Leng Kok began to collect 78s and LPs when he was just 15 years old and, over the next 22 years amassed a collection of about 1,500 shellac records and 3,000 vinyl LPs. Many have never been re-released on CD, and this is their story...

Prior to 1949, China had a thriving record industry, in which a major player was Electric and Musical Industries (China). Following the Communist revolution, EMI China moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong, and its Shanghai property was taken over by the new Chinese government, which then established the China Records Company. The old EMI music was blacklisted, and the government not only forced a 'new' Chinese music upon the public, but also took measures to stop people playing the pre-1949 recordings. Although still played in Singapore (notably by the Rediffusion radio station), the Shanghai 'Oldies' were neglected for more than four decades until, in 1992, EMI (Hong Kong) released a series of CDs that featured some of these recordings.

'In 1992, I thought that it was great news that the Shanghai recordings were to be made available on CD,' says Lee Leng Kok. 'But when I heard the CDs and compared them to the original 78s, I felt that they did not do them justice. I didn't know whether EMI had access only to inferior recordings, or whether the noise reduction and remastering was carried out unsympathetically, but I knew that the songs could sound much better. I decided to learn everything I could about audio restoration, and to find a way to restore and release these songs.'

Lee contacted EMI in Singapore, offering a direct comparison between the remastered CDs and his original discs but the company declined. However, during these discussions he discovered that the CDs were not remastered from original 78s or metal parts, but from 33 1/3rpm LPs that EMI HK had produced during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1998 he contacted PV Anthony, the owner of a small studio in Singapore that was equipped with three Cedar Audio restoration units – a DC-1 Declicker, a CR-1 Decrackler and a DH-1 Dehisser. Using these, Anthony demonstrated that noise could be removed from original recordings without significant degradation.

Lee had contacted another collector, Loo Kang Kong. Their combined collections contained about 2,000 pre-1949 Shanghai recordings and a number of Hong Kong recordings of Mandarin rarities, many dating back to the 1930s and out of print for many decades. They realised that this represented an important historical resource. They conducted a trial, restoring a number of 78s and burning the results to CD for their own pleasure. 'I was impressed with the quality of our restored songs,' says Lee. 'We were hearing the music with a clarity that perhaps even the original record company had never heard. So we made about 50 copies of the CDs, giving some to friends, some to radio presenters, and selling a few to cover production costs.'

Lee and Loo were approached by Alan Ng, an Oldies enthusiast and reporter for the Chinese newspaper Lian He Zao Bao, which published a feature on the restorations. However, it was not until Lee was interviewed on FM 95.8 in Singapore by Anna Lim that the public were able to hear the results. The response was immediate, and Lee was soon inundated with requests to hear more. One of the callers was former actress Linda Choy, who suggested that Lee hold an Oldies session at the Kteta Ayer Community Centre in Singapore. On 29 May 2000, Choy played the restored tracks to more than 300 people prompting several suggested that he release the restorations commercially. In fact, Lee had already applied for a licence from EMI HK and, when this was granted, Anthony used a newly-arrived Cedar for Windows system to restore selected Shanghai recordings for independent release – Singapore allows this as 'personal' publishing. Since this time, Lee has established his own label, Ancient Sound Restore, for further releases.

With production of *Famous Songs from Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s (Vol 1)* underway, Choy helped Lee to organise a product launch at the Community Centre. This generated sales in excess of 200 units on the first day of issue and led to further interviews in Chinese newspapers, all of which suggested to Lee that he

should restore more songs.

Famous Songs included a track recorded by Jiang Qing, a Chinese actress from the early 1930s whose stage name was Lan Pin, but who later achieved notoriety as the wife of Mao Ze Dong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist party. When Jiang married Mao, she attempted to destroy all the evidence of her past life. This extended to executing colleagues, singers and composers with whom she had worked prior to the revolution. Lee says: 'While many Chinese still hate Jiang Qing, I believe that these rare recordings should be preserved for the future.'

Lee sent a copy of the first CD to one of the surviving Shanghai singers, Yao Lee, who recorded 'Rose, Rose I Love You' in 1940, a song that was translated and released in the US in 1950. Lee had included two of Yao's songs on the CD, and she was very supportive. He also found Ou Yang Fei Ying who recorded the well-known song 'Shangri-la' and is now in California. He then decided to seek other survivors of the era, finding one in Singapore, and a further two in the US. To date he has tracked down 10 singers who recorded in Shanghai, and would be pleased to hear from any others who may still be alive. By this time, his efforts had attracted a great deal of attention and, in September 2000, he was approached by the Community Centre and asked to form an Oldies Club. Following the success of the previous meetings, he agreed, and the club was launched on 14 October.

At about the same time, the Centre decided to hold a year-end charity dinner for the residents of Kteta Ayer, and Lee suggested they invite the surviving Shanghai singers as guests. He contacted Yao Lee, Ou Yang Fei Ying, Qu Yun Yun, and a 1950s singer from Hong Kong, Tsin Ting, all of whom attended. Following newspaper reports that the four were travelling to Singapore, the anticipated 500 audience swelled to more than 1,200. Of particular interest was Ou Yang Fei Ying, whose music had been popular in Singapore for more than 50 years, but who had never visited the state.

The event proved to Lee that interest in the Shanghai Oldies and their singers was stronger than even he had imagined. The Oldies Club began to spread, attracting members in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia. By now, the news of the Oldies Club had spread outside the Chinese-speaking community. In October 2000, Lee and Loo published a CD of Chinese New Year songs and, on 1 June 2001, they released their third CD, *Famous Songs from Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s (Vol 2)*. This was again welcomed by the fans, but Lee was beginning to realise that, with production runs of 2,000 copies, sales were barely covering production costs. In part, this was because he was including 28-page, colour booklets with each CD. Part of the appeal for the Oldies fans, these included stories, old photos and pictures not found elsewhere. But Lee was happy to continue on this basis and, following a meeting with Yao Lee in Hong Kong, he promised to compile some of her 100 or so surviving pre-1949 recordings for CD release.

Further encouragement arrived when Hong Kong radio formed its own Oldies Club, inviting the Singapore club to attend the inauguration ceremony. The following month, Taiwan Radio also invited members of the Oldies Club for interview. Due to Taiwan's separation from mainland China, the Taiwanese were particularly interested to rediscover the Oldies, many of which had remained unheard for half a century. In November 2001, the Kteta Ayer Oldies Club celebrated its first anniversary, inviting singers Zhang Fan and Frank Huang to attend as guests. Both sang on numerous of the Shanghai recordings from the mid 1930s until the move to Hong Kong in 1949 and, again, fans turned out in great numbers.

Lee was keen to begin work on new CDs but, following a re-organisation of Cedar Audio's distribution in South East Asia, there was no system available for his use. 'The Cedar for Windows system we had used was, strictly speaking, a demonstration system located in Singapore,' he says. 'I had approached Gordon Reid, managing director of Cedar, for permission to use this to produce a limited set of commercial recordings, and he had agreed. But following the re-organisation, the system was withdrawn. I subsequently tested and purchased about 10 low-cost systems that claimed to achieve comparable results, but without success. It is important that the job is done as well as possible today because, as the original discs deteriorate, it will become more and more difficult to do so in the future. Eventually, nobody will be alive from the Shanghai era to ensure that the remasters accurately reflect the original sound.'

'I discovered that nothing but Cedar was able to produce the results I required. As far as I am concerned, the low-cost software packages are toys in comparison, leaving behind clicks and crackle, or introducing unpleasant artefacts during de-noising. I approached a number of local studios and record companies to see whether they would purchase a system, but none were able to commit to this. So, after discussions with my parents and friends, they offered the financial support that has allowed me to purchase a new Cedar for Windows system. This is the most powerful restoration tool in Singapore, and with this I can continue to restore more 78s for release on my label.'

Lee is to be thanked for his efforts. There are now two Oldies clubs in the region, and his restored CDs have met with universal praise from reviewers and the original artists for their clarity and musical detail. But perhaps most important of all, it seems that an almost forgotten era of Chinese recording will be preserved and enjoyed again, half a century after the government of the time attempted to bury it forever.

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