PEACE PROFILE: Laura Tevary Mam and The Like Me's
Wei Ming Dariotis & Jonathan H. X. Lee
San Francisco State University
Available online: 05 Dec 2011

To cite this article: Wei Ming Dariotis & Jonathan H. X. Lee (2011): PEACE PROFILE: Laura Tevary Mam and The Like Me's, Peace Review, 23:4, 552-557

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2011.625871

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Peace Profile: Laura Tevery Mam and The Like Me’s

WEI MING DARIOTIS AND JONATHAN H. X. LEE

Laura Tevery Mam is a Cambodian American musician and youth peacemaker making a difference in Cambodia and in Cambodian diasporic communities worldwide. Through her music, she invokes healing and cultural pride; a deep love for Cambodia fuels her work. Laura is the youngest girl cousin of a large, mostly female family. When she was twelve, she visited Cambodia for the first time and fell in love the minute she stepped off the plane. Seeing a quiet Angkor Wat took her breath away and made Cambodia all the more mysterious to her. Something about being in the country and experiencing her family there, she says, “made my heart warm and to this day... a smile always comes to my face no matter how tired I am.”

Laura was born and raised in San Jose, California in a large family with an abundance of cousins, aunts, and uncles. Her parents, father Vitou Mam and mother Thida Buth, are highly resilient and intelligent survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime. Since she and her little brother Andrew were born in America, their parents raised them to have a deep appreciation for the opportunities they have in America. At home, her parents opted to speak English to prevent her from speaking with an accent. She was also, however, able to learn very basic Khmer through her grandmother. When Laura was young, she always felt guilty about being luckier than others and yearned of some day helping other Cambodians and her parents’ homeland. As a child, she relished life while enjoying the freedom her parents provided. Her experience was quite different from other Khmer children because Khmer culture often keeps emotions hidden.

Laura grew up watching Chinese Kung Fu soap operas, which she relates to her mother’s fondness for Chinese martial arts comic books. Her mother shared with her Eastern philosophical ideas, such as yin and yang, and Buddhist concepts of body and mind. Laura reflects, “I have always treated life as if I am constantly improving my fighting style and attempting to understand what it takes to become a real master, who is reaching an enlightened
sense of control and balance.” Laura’s passion for music and physical education reflects her father’s influence. From the age of ten, she was involved in many activities, including traditional Cambodian dancing, as well as tae kwon do. Performing Cambodian classical dances required that Laura be “soft and graceful” while, on the other hand, tae kwon do demanded that she be “tough and quick.” While she enjoyed learning about Khmer culture, throughout her youth, her older cousin, best friend and future bassist, Helena Hong, introduced her to the world of contemporary music styles like hip hop, alternative rock, and dance.

Although Laura attended a diverse and “mediocre” high school, it was there that she discovered various forms of artistic expressions. She became fascinated with guitar, freestyle rap, and dance. Cambodians were sparse as her high school consisted of mostly Vietnamese, Filipino, and Mexican Americans. Thus, feeling alienated and dealing with a divorce at home, she found herself struggling academically and psychologically. An outreach program changed her. She says:

My rescue came when I was accepted to the Southeast Asian Student Coalition week-long shadow program at UC Berkeley for its inaugural program. This program dramatically changed my life, making me feel connected to the Southeast Asian community for the very first time in my life and finding other young students like myself who felt extremely alienated in American society. Furthermore, receiving mentorship from Berkeley students gave me the support I needed and something to hope for.

Laura later attended UC Berkeley, majoring in anthropology. Helping Cambodia was still on her mind, so it became her area of specialization. She analyzed the world through the lens of anthropology, which, she says, “shares a lot of similarities with Buddhism in the sense that one must look at life with an eye of impartiality at all times.” During the period, Laura was productive: writing music and studying Khmer and French. During the summer of 2008, she was awarded a scholarship that allowed her to go to Cambodia and study advanced Khmer for two months in Phnom Penh. This experience solidified “my love and loyalty to Cambodia and its people,” she says. Laura witnessed firsthand Cambodia’s legacy of colonial exploitation, and the continued struggle to rebuild following the Khmer Rouge era, but also, “the pure resilience and pure hearts of the people.” Her experience there would set up a desire to dedicate a lifetime to Cambodia’s future and welfare. After college, she was employed at a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that does conservation and preservation work at World Heritage Sites in developing countries, including Banteay Chhmar on the Thai border. By day, she worked for preservation, and by night, she was a starving artist yearning to connect with Cambodians. By employing YouTube and other social media,
Laura and her band, The Like Me’s, embarked on a fully sponsored music tour to Cambodia in February 2011.

After seeing the reactions by the Cambodian people to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia’s decision to give Khmer Rouge executioner Comrade Duch a measly 35-year sentence, despite being responsible for over 15,000 lost lives, Laura began to realize that Cambodian people were going to need a culturally sensitive and internalized sense of justice to achieve real peace and reconciliation. She says, “The mood among many of the Cambodians I knew was hopeless and despairing.” Laura realized that Cambodians generally did not have a space to express their complex emotions from the trauma of the genocide. Furthermore, most Cambodians already hold a negative cultural perception of Westernized therapy to deal with traumatic emotions. To make matters worse, the trauma experienced by Cambodians living in Cambodia and those living in the diasporic communities vary widely.

The idea of bringing about full-scale peace and reconciliation for all Cambodians truly seems daunting. Nonetheless, Laura notes, “what became apparent to me over time after several profound experiences with music, [is that] I realized that music is transient and can provide the culturally sensitive properties needed for real reconciliation that the UN Tribunals cannot offer.” Furthermore, music, she says, “can be used as a resource for achieving full-scale reconciliation by illuminating the common factors of the trauma experienced among Cambodians living in so many different situations while still addressing the specificities of each personal experience.” Mediated through advances in Internet technology and social media, music, according to Laura, is “easily transmitted,” which she “believes can act as a gateway of safe communication that can foster the necessary expression and analysis of traumatic emotions by every generation of Cambodians.”

Musical expression can assist in bringing about peace for the people of Cambodia, as it has in Laura’s own reconciliation with genocide and its effects on her family. One of the most influential experiences in her life came from the special relationship she has with her only surviving grandmother on her mother’s side, Ean Bun, who always gives her special love and attention as she believes Laura to be the reincarnation of her lost husband, who was killed by the Khmer Rouge shortly after the evacuation of Phnom Penh. Laura’s grandfather, a patriotic congressman, believed he should stay and help Cambodia despite the warning signs when the Khmer Rouge began killing members of his political party. According to her family, her grandmother was very broken the moment he was taken away. It was in college that Laura began to “appreciate why she would sometimes call me by his name and reiterate to everyone how I counted money like him, drove like him, and played music like him.” Laura understood her grandmother, a farmer’s daughter with little
education, “using Buddhist concepts of good merit and reincarnation to not only accept the loss and probable violent death of her husband, but to justify it.” Laura notes, “In her mind, since he was such a good person and experienced such a horrible death, it only made sense that he would be reborn into a life in America that is completely peaceful, full of opportunity and close to the family.” It became apparent to Laura that her cultural interpretation of his death and her birth was key to her grandmother achieving peace and reconciliation. This story then inspired Laura’s own trans-generational reconciliation with trauma by instilling in her a belief that she is the reincarnated spirit of her grandfather. Like him, she is inspired by Cambodia.

Later, Laura co-authored the song, “Grandmother’s Devotion,” with her mother and used reincarnation as a focus point of hope and reconciliation. After touring with the song, she received extremely emotional and positive responses from Khmer people living abroad and in Cambodia, which re-enforced the idea that reconciliation had to be inspired on a community-wide level in a culturally sensitive way. What became apparent to Laura, “was that music had the unique power to communicate shared emotions experienced by all human beings while simultaneously providing a space in lyric writing to illuminate culturally specific examples of reconciliation.”

In another example of the communicative healing properties of music, The Like Me’s performed and created a music video for a cover of a 1960s Cambodian song sung by Pan Ron called, “Sva Rom Monkiss.” The music video features the story of a mother and a daughter experiencing culture-related conflicts, a flashback from the 1960s during the Cambodian music revolution, and a common love for dance uniting the daughter and mother as the final climax of the storyline. Laura explains:

The reason we created the music video was to address a major problem that persists in many Cambodian diasporic communities, which is the gap of understanding between the younger and older generations of Cambodians due largely to language barriers and the fact that Cambodians who experienced the genocide generally do not speak about the past.

Laura says, “This problem has created large gap in cultural understanding and cultural pride for much of the younger generation.” The goal, she says, “with the music video was to viscerally exemplify scenes of Cambodian history thereby creating a sense of curiosity about the period before the Khmer Rouge, directly address the issues of the generational gap, and create a space for dialogue between both generations.” After receiving large-scale positive feedback from Cambodian viewers, Laura and her band realized that their music allowed the younger generation to ask their parents
about Cambodia beyond the experience of the Khmer Rouge, and encouraged Cambodian parents to teach their children about their own lives and experiences beyond the Khmer Rouge. Laura comments, “Thanks to the incredible forum-like atmosphere provided by the Youtube comment section, a simple music video was able to create necessary dialogue between many of the Cambodians online and allowed them to find commonality in addressing the issue of the generational gap.” From this experience, Laura notes, “I realized that the most important step that music could provide for peace building and reconciliation is creating the . . . the space for dialogue, which I believe is key to initiating a full-scale reconciliatory movement for Cambodians everywhere.”

The Like Me’s formed in March of 2009. Bonded by simultaneous heartbreaks and empowered by the love of music, band members shared an understanding that music and art can be used as a means to heal, empower, and most importantly, discover. Furthermore, with Southeast Asian women being extremely underrepresented in the music-making world, they wanted to be the first Southeast Asian female band to provide a positive and empowered example for young and underrepresented youth. Given many of the similar social problems found in contemporary Southeast Asian communities, domestically and internationally, they hoped to discourage negative outlets of expression and encourage the next generation to find healing, understanding, and empowerment through artistic expression.

In addition to creating reconciliatory dialogue among Cambodians through music, The Like Me’s toured in Cambodia in February 2011 and communicated directly to the Cambodian people their desire to bridge the gap between Cambodians living domestically and abroad. While in Cambodia, they played many shows that fundraised for NGOs and/or worked directly with Cambodian children. The Like Me’s also further accepted roles in becoming Friends International Ambassadors and the world’s first ChildSafe Rock band. During the tour, they headlined and sold out a fundraiser show for the organization, Cambodian Living Arts (CLA). CLA works to give a stipend to children living in shanty-towns in exchange for their learning of Cambodian traditional performance arts. They spoke to the students about the absolute importance of artists in Cambodian society and about the growing need for art in Cambodia’s future. Their desire was not only to directly inspire hope, empowerment, and cultural pride, but to encourage other Cambodians artists to evolve and grow, adding to the cultural dialogue. Laura says, “We like to believe that the students were inspired to become artists after performing for a screaming crowd for the very first time in their lives.” Additionally, Laura and her bandmates participated in intimate counseling sessions with the girls of each grade from kindergarten to high school, and had colorful and successful talks with the girls about image issues, female empowerment, the future of Cambodia, and what it meant to be Cambodian women. The Like Me’s ended
their tour with a free show on Koh Pich Island and were able to perform a song they wrote for the victims of the Stampede tragedy that took place on Koh Pich Island Bridge for a crowd of 5,000 Cambodians.

The Like Me’s creed is, “Healing through Expression, Interpreting Adversity, and Celebrating Adventure.” The message they wish to convey is that all individuals should honor the process of healing and treat the process as a positive experience that can provide for a meaningful path in life. Laura says, “In our belief, it is the healing of the deepest wounds that gives the individual the most wisdom and the community the most strength.” She also notes, “The Cambodian community domestically and internationally is divided, at best.” Therefore, she says, “In my belief, only with a full and conscious understanding and healing of Cambodian trauma can the Cambodian people move forward and channel their traumas to benefit the country as a whole.”

The cultural and artistic peacemaking work that Laura and The Like Me’s are engaged in is difficult. They represent the voices of the new post-genocide generation, actively engaged in a better, healthier, peaceful tomorrow. They carry the hopes and dreams of their survivor parents and grandparents, and are vehicles for the voices of the suffering and of the dead. Justice is internal, it is spiritual, and personal: This is the source of creativity and inspiration. This is where Cambodian American music is born.

Wei Ming Dariotis is Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies, specializing in art, literature, and mixed heritage studies. She has a strong interest in how war relates to Asian American identities and experiences. E-mail: wmdariotis@yahoo.com

Jonathan H. X. Lee is Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University. Lee specializes in Southeast Asian and Sino-Southeast Asian American histories, cultures, folklore, and religions. He is the author of Cambodian American Experiences: Histories, Communities, Cultures, and Identities (2010) and co-editor with Kathleen M. Nadeau of the three-volume Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife (2011). E-mail: jlee@sfsu.edu