

‘The best times’: An Interview with Lawrence Lee

From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, Lawrence Lee played bass guitar in The Checkmates, one of the resident bands of The Golden Venus, the venue remembered as the hotbed for rock ‘n’ roll in Singapore back in the Swinging Sixties. After the band dissolved, Lawrence worked in the oil and gas industry for more than 40 years.

Resuming music-making from the late 1980s, Lawrence has performed at Esplanade’s annual *A Date with Friends* festival celebrating local music icons of yesteryear. This is an edited transcript of an interview with him in April 2022, conducted as part of the research for the exhibition *Home Grooves: A History of Singapore’s Live Music Venues*.

Can you take us back to the days of Golden Venus? When did you first play there?

Well, it was 1963, when I was about 17 years old, still studying for my HSC, which would be A-Levels in today’s terms. The Checkmates were offered a contract at Golden Venus. It was a very interesting arrangement in that it was a semi-share arrangement. The Orchard Hotel, which owned the Golden Venus, would arrange the venue for us, while we would sell the drinks and the tickets. At the end of the day, we would split the proceeds. However, in the case of The Checkmates, we didn’t earn any money because all the money that we made at the Golden Venus was used to pay for the instruments that we had bought on loan.

It was one of the best times of our life. We were excited and nervous about it. Every time I appear on stage, there’s always that nervous tinge, the sense of excitement, when you’re wondering whether the sound will be right, whether you will make any mistakes, whether the repertoire is suitable for the crowd that’s coming, how they will respond to the songs. All these thoughts run through our heads—or at least through mine. We were feeling all this from the moment we woke up in the mornings till performance time. But at 2pm, when a gig started, all the feelings disappeared. It was showtime.

What was the audience like? How did they respond to your music?

Well the clientele of the Golden Venus were mainly members of the British armed forces. They were young and they loved their music and their beer. I have to say that they were a pretty rambunctious group. The chemistry between the crowd at the Golden Venus and us was fine, simply because they were British servicemen and were fans of British pop. We were able to play the kind of music that they liked—The Animals, The Kings, The Beatles, and all—but nobody cared after 4pm because they were all drunk. They just hip-hopped all the way until the end of the show.

So how long did you play there?

From 1963 or ‘64, until the late ‘60s. But unfortunately, after playing with The Checkmates for so many years, each of us had our own ambitions and our interest in playing together as a band waned, so at the end of the ‘60s, we felt it was time to go our separate ways. I decided that I would ease off on my music and sought an alternative career. My bandmates, Han, Benny and Amir, continued playing music. Amir drummed for quite a few notable bands in Singapore, and Benny decided to take up a music degree, which he did. He’s now one of the more established jazz musicians in Australia, so I’m very pleased for him.

What's your fondest memory of the place?

Well, the Golden Venus was home base. However, bands cannot survive on one venue and one source of income alone, so we had to seek out other venues to play at. Quite a few came to mind.

At that time, it was very popular for tea dances to be organised. They were local dances where tickets were sold at very reasonable prices. It was \$2.50 per entry, including a can or a bottle of Coke, and you could dance the whole night away without having to buy any additional drinks.

There were quite a few popular venues. One of the most attractive ones, to me, was the Fraser and Neave Hall at the end of River Valley Road. It does not exist anymore, but it was the venue for many, many dances on Friday or Saturday nights. There were usually about 2,000 people, all youngsters. At the time, playing in social dances was totally different from playing at the Golden Venus. This was mainly because at the Golden Venus, the patrons were servicemen. At local dances, the patrons were local youngsters, and their taste for music was totally different. The local dancers liked more formal dancing, like the cha cha, rhumba and waltzes, but in Golden Venus, it didn't matter what the beat was.

Outside of the F&N Hall, there were a few more venues, like the West Point, which I'm sure many people haven't heard of. It was a very quaint village-style restaurant-cum-dancing place at the end of Pasir Panjang. Unfortunately, it also longer exists, but it was a very serene and romantic place. We played music there on Saturday evenings, and couples would come to have dinner and listen to the music. They liked soft music, and they would dance for a while. But after a while, all the couples disappeared, and the band was left to play to no audience. I won't elaborate where they disappeared to.

Similarly, there was a fishing pond called Springdale, which went defunct a long time ago. It was a fishing pond, but the owner decided that he would hire a band to attract more customers, so he had The Checkmates. We played there on weekends on and off for about a year or so. Apparently, it did not pan out because he didn't make any money from it, so the arrangement ended. But it was a nice experience to play by a fishing pond. No one was dancing—they were fishing and listening to our music. When the gig was over, we packed up and went home. It was very strange.

You also played at the National Theatre. What was that like?

The National Theatre was the mecca in terms of pop music. Before the National Theatre, we were playing in venues like Badminton Hall and New World. The acoustics were really bad. It didn't matter what you played—everything would bounce off the ceiling and come crashing back on you. It was a wall of noise. When the National Theatre came up, all the shows migrated there. As I said, it was something to look forward to.

Of course, the only difference was that the National Theatre had seats. Because it had seats, the audience had to stay where they were supposed to be. But in the Badminton Hall, you know, the seats are all around, and there was free movement, so during the course of the show, the audience could come down around the stage. It was great to be able to play music with the audience below you clamouring and shouting. But in terms of sound quality, even though it wasn't the best, the National Theatre provided some semblance of professional sound. So I think the audience probably enjoyed shows at the National Theatre much more than those at the Badminton Hall or New World Stadium if they wanted to listen to the music.

In 1961, Cliff Richard and The Shadows played to some 20,000 people in Singapore (over four shows) at the Happy World Stadium.¹ What was the impact of that on the young musicians like yourself, who went on to start playing at events?

At that time, Cliff Richard and The Shadows was the most important act of the era outside of Elvis Presley. Elvis wouldn't travel out of the US, but Richard came in 1961, and everyone who knew music was there. It blew our minds. Everybody listened to them, and they had a string of number one hits, so we were very excited when we heard the announcement that he was coming; the tickets were sold out, just like that. What we saw live was even more invigorating and exciting than what we had heard from the discs. Every male teenager at that time, after watching the show, was saying, "I want to be like Richard," so those who were able to sing would try to sing the songs and those who aspired to play guitar learned all their songs. I can safely say the Cliff Richard and The Shadows performance was the catalyst for all Pioneer Generation musicians and bands in Singapore. Even now, every time they play together, there are always several Cliff Richard or Shadows songs.

What did you learn from your experiences playing in the 1960s?

Well, I have to answer that question retrospectively. At the time, we were all youngsters. I don't think we were looking for lessons in life at that age. All we wanted was to have a good time. But now, looking back, I can think of a few.

Number one, I think music is quite a few things, but it is mainly discipline and expression. I think most musicians mainly look at the second aspect, expression. But they forget that before you can express yourself, there must be discipline—discipline in interpretation, and discipline in application. You need to have the discipline to do the right thing at the right time before you're able to express yourself. I think that is also applicable in life, in that you have to do things properly. You don't do things haphazardly—you do the right things at the right time, and you do right by people. And you're able to feel this by the way you express yourselves to them, and how they take that expression. So that is a lesson that I learned from playing music at the time.

The other thing I think is very important, now that I'm in the twilight of my life. I'm very happy that I was able to learn to play music at that time of my life, because with the ability to play music, I can get together with like-minded friends. We get together and we play music. It's so enjoyable as it's an avenue we can use to maintain our social life. And for us, the Pioneer Generation, having a vivid, active social life is so important.

***Home Grooves: A History of Singapore's Live Music Venues* is an exhibition at the Esplanade Concourse. It is free of charge and runs until 18 August 2023.**

¹ Mark Wong. (2022, August 11). Archives Unlocked: Pop Lives -- Oral Histories of Singapore's English-medium Pop Music Pioneers [online presentation]. National Library Board, Singapore.