

# [The Soul of Molam \(18\) - Old roots and new blooms](#)

written by กองบรรณาธิการ | April 29, 2020

Credit cover photo The Isaan Record/Mike Eckel

*By Yodsapon Kerdviboon and Christopher Burdett*

*The Isaan Record* asked five molam performers of different styles and generations to share their views on the current state of molam, and their concerns and hopes for the future of the genre.



Nattapon Siangsukon (right) playing the cymbals with The Paradise Bangkok Molam International Band. Photo from the band's [Facebook page](#)

## **Paradise Bangkok Molam International Band: New blooms from old roots**

The Paradise Bangkok Molam International Band is arguably the most

famous molam band worldwide. Band leader Nattapon Siangsukon tells the story of how he founded the molam-fusion troupe and what he learned from the old masters of the genre.

While studying for his bachelor's degree in London, Nattapon began spinning records as DJ Maftsai in the pubs and clubs of Europe. He mixed various styles like Ethiopian jazz, Zamrock, and Pakistani Qawwali into a fusion of danceable songs.

Back in Bangkok, his record-hunting habit put him squarely on the trail of old and rare *luk thung* from all over the country, as well as some of the molam classics from Isaan.

“At first, it wasn't like, ‘Oh, my God! I love this music from Isaan! I didn't care where it came from. I just knew that I liked it,” Nattapon recalls. “So I started to nerd-out on the artists and I began to research the genre more and more.”

It inspired the young DJ to track down the aging artists who pioneered the molam sound that is so popular today. He got in touch with legends like Dao Bandon, Sak-Siam Phetchomphu, Angkanang Kunchai, Yenjit Phornthewi. They were still alive and kicking, and he managed to cajole them, despite their advanced years, into performing live concerts in Bangkok once again.

That's how the club night promoted as “Paradise Bangkok” was born. Each time there was a different singer who, if there was a molam hall of fame, would have been picked from the top-most entries.

But it was not without its teething problems and challenges; artists tended to insist that this or that musician from their old band come and back them on stage. The ex-band members then also had to be tracked down. Even if found and convinced to join in, it wasn't always easy to agree on a date.

“When [getting old band members to play] fell through, I'd have to try and find some other session musicians to play instead,” the 37-year-old says. “I really wanted to have the original band play, though, as much as possible. But it was hard, man, so hard. Sometimes it would take six to seven months to put this all together, just for a gig that would be over in

one night.”

So Nattapon formed a house band for the Paradise Bangkok concerts. As it turned out, the musicians he found to jam clicked so well and sounded so unique, he realized that the new band was too good to be just a backing band for guest singers. He then decided to promote the band members as musicians in their own right.

Molam-fusion bands like Paradise Bangkok might still reach only a small audience, but Nattapon believes they are like the salt and pepper of the genre; just a tiny sprinkling adds outsized flavor to the entire dish.

[“These days there are quite a few new bands like this, such as Junlaholaan, Rasmee Isan Soul](#), and some others. Before, you just wouldn’t see very many musical projects that had the Isaan sound, even if many of the artists themselves were from Isaan,” Nattapon says. “But when it started to come out, people got interested. The more interest they received, the more bands were encouraged to come out and do something similar.”

As for the future of molam, Nattapon thinks that artists need more encouragement and support in presenting their own original material.

“The trouble with [the music industry on the ground-level] is that there is this pressure to do covers all the time. If you don’t play covers, you won’t get any gigs. The venue owners want you to play songs that everyone knows, but if you keep doing this, you suck all the creativity and life out of the musicians. They keep being forced to play other people’s music instead of their own. So I decided to open up a venue where you can only play your own original music. Covers are not allowed. We’re doing the exact opposite.”

For Nattapon, being able to try out your own original songs with an audience is at the very heart of keeping the art alive.

“If you ask me whether I like the old-timey molam, I’d say, ‘Yeah. I do.’ But if we’re going to make our own music, why do we have to mimic the old sound? It’s already been done,” he says. “It’s like those elephant pants that were sold at Lumpini Night Bazaar, rows and rows of shops selling the same pants side by side. Yeah, it’s easy, but there’s no fun and

no creativity in that.”



Boonchuang Denduang (middle), 75, has been performing molam since she was 16 years old. *Screenshot from [YouTube](#)*

### **Boonchuang Denduang: Even monks stop to listen**

Boonchuang Denduang is a living legend of traditional molam. The kind of molam that would usually be accompanied by just a solitary khaen, but now also sometimes has a band or a synthesizer for backing.

The 75-year-old Boonchuang—who warmly goes by “*mae*” [mother] when speaking to most other people—has been involved in molam ever since she was 16. At that time, molam was not amplified and she would dance and sing while walking around the village in order to reach a wide audience.

But what sets her apart from many molam artists today is her verse; she mostly writes and sings verses that explain Buddhist teachings and the truths of life. This type of molam is getting harder and harder to find these days.

“I don’t sing that smutty stuff. I sing about scripture, about being born all the way to enlightenment, that kind of thing. I don’t do the sexual

innuendo and jumbling all kinds of different stuff in. You could say it's kind of like a sermon, I mean, even monks who walk by stop to listen when they catch my lyrics," Boonchuang says, laughing.

Boonchuang also points out that instead of being given to raucous displays of wild dancing, her audiences tend to be seated and listen intently to the content of the verses she sings.

Despite being at odds with the current zeitgeist, Boonchuang has no shortage of bookings. She is often hired to perform by the sponsors of large Buddhist ceremonies and funerals, and she's not going to get dressed up for less than 60,000 to 70,000 baht per gig.

Yet, Boonchuang has concerns about the future of molam after she is gone. Off the top of her head, she reckons that about seven or eight of her students are still performing molam the way that she does, "and they're all in their 40s and 50s now."

She ruefully admits to fearing that once she's gone, the formal art of intricately crafting her rhyming verses that go with the musical arrangement will go with her.

"When I'm not around, I doubt that there will be many others to keep this going. I'm afraid that the youngsters [referring to her students] won't be able to withstand the tide of new molam," Boonchuang says.

"There's a whole load of attention that goes into the details of the words and the way it matches the sound of the instruments. It's not like *molam sing* that's more rough and ready."



Dao Bandon performing live at the Soeng 3 Thai Dance Music Festival last year.

[Photo by Gorephat Chaimute](#)

### **Electrified and amplified: Dao Bandon, a pioneer of big-sound molam**

Dao Bandon is well-known in Thailand and has penned many songs for generations of molam and luk thung artists who came after his heyday as a singer during the 1970s.

Now 73 years old, he entered the monkhood at the age of 12 in order to receive an education. Yet, he could never let go of his dream of becoming a singer. Soon after turning 19, he left the saffron robes behind and, with the help of friends who were touring musicians, became a molam singer.

He was one of the first generation of molam artists to incorporate the now-standard electric guitars, drum kits, saxophones, synthesizers, and amplifier rigs in performances. The sound that he helped to pioneer, travelling from province to province and studio to studio, is the grand-daddy of the molam played on sound systems today.

After more than half a century as a singer and songwriter, Dao Bandon still doesn't entertain any thoughts of closing the door to change or freezing molam in any way. As far as Dao Bandon is concerned, molam is

still alive today precisely because it has remained open and adaptive to new influences.

“I think that bringing in the sounds from over there [the West] and adapting them to our sound over here—that’s what really made us stand out,” Dao Bandon says as he talks about incorporating the sounds he heard from western records. “You can tell just by looking at the audience that they dig it too. Okay, maybe it sounded a little weird at first but it’s kinda groovy, and you soon get used to it.”

Knowing that he has many descendants, musically speaking, Dao Bandon has a message for the new generations of molam artists:

“I want to tell the young kids involved in luk thung and molam today to do their best to keep Isaan art and culture alive. Keep it going for as long as possible; don’t let it disappear. Whatever you think, whatever you dream, you can make it happen as long as you really stand for something and don’t give up.”

[Dao Bandon himself also clearly stands for something, and has shown that he has lived by his own words. Putting his money where his mouth is, he was the first artist to agree to perform at a Paradise Bangkok concert.](#) In doing so, he has played a part in catapulting molam onto the global stage.

“We’re returning the favor. We got a lot of new stuff from them. Now it’s our turn to give them something new to listen to,” Dao Bandon chuckles.



Ratri Sriwilai, 68, is credited with being one of the first to adopt the molam sing style that would become the most popular modern molam genre. *Photo credit:*

[คลังทรัพยากรการศึกษาแบบเปิด](#)

**A word to the wise: don't be so drunk on the new that you forget your roots**

[In the 1980s, molam was reinvented with the rise of \*molam sing\*](#)-a flashy, more modern version of molam often paired with wild dance moves.

Ratri Sriwilai (real name Sriwilai Bongsitthiphorn) has been popularly



dubbed, “the Queen of Molam-Sing,” as she is credited with giving birth to this genre of molam. She was one of the first to combine the traditional *lam klon* verses with modern musical arrangements. Uniquely, at the time, she also turbo-charged the pace of the music and added dollops of salacious innuendo to the verses and the dance moves.

“It’s got rude words in the lyrics, and lots of dirty words, too. No Buddhist scripture, no trying to get people to become enlightened, none of that high morality,” the 68-year-old explains. “Listen to how fast the beat is; it’s just all about having fun.”

As an “old-school” molam artist who practically invented this genre, she believes that there’s room for plenty more than hip-thrusts in molam sing. The lam klon verses are good for relating what’s going on in society, too, she says. They can be used to teach, to inspire, and to remind people of a few truths in a melodious way.

“There’s a saying: don’t become infatuated with the old, and don’t get drunk on the new. Don’t be so drunk on the new that you forget your roots; try to stay somewhere in the middle,” Ratri sings out.

For Ratri, it’s not molam if there isn’t at least a little nod to some traditions; there’s got to be at least one “[oh la no](#)” in there somewhere. Many modern molam artists are not making the most out of the rich seams of rhythm and rhyming styles contained in the more traditional molam, and adapting them for modern usage, she believes.

In closing, Ratri Sriwilai sang a message to the new generation of molam artists:

*“All art has the promise of happiness,  
Even in sadness, the heart is not alone,  
The spirit of Isaan our home,  
I ask our young to remember,  
We’re racy but true to the truth of Isaan art,  
Hold it up and let it stand,*

*Keep passing it on forever”*



Phichai Phorahomphui, a 74-year-old molam artist from Chaiyaphum, recognizes the need for molam to change but urges the new generation to preserve the traditional styles.

### **Phichai Phorahomphui, a molam klon artist**

[Molam klon](#) is a traditional form of molam in Isaan. In molam klon, folktales, legends and epics are sung, sometimes with hundreds of verses. The khaen provides the only musical accompaniment.

A key feature of this kind of molam is that it involves a duet between two molam singers, who sing in reply to each other in what's called a "jot kae." There may also be actors playing the parts of the various characters as the molam artists tell the story.

Phichai Phorahomphui, a 74-year-old molam artist from Chaiyaphum, says that it is getting harder to find this kind of molam, mainly because the audiences tend to be well in their 60s or older.

"Another thing is, the big molam [sing] groups can put on a much better show than a smaller molam troupes. They've got the stage, the costumes, the whole band that can play all kinds of beats. It's just more fun than a

lone molam singer,” says Phichai.

Molam sing evolved from molam klon, Phichai points out. The molam klon style of singing and rhyming is still there, but the beat is now much faster.

“Molam sing today tends to be mostly about love and sex, and hardly ever about Isaan literature or Buddhism, morality, and the truths of life,” Phichai explains.

Another reason why molam klon has fallen out of favor in recent times is that it is no longer a competitive medium for the content that it expresses.

“Kids these days can find all kinds of information on the internet, whether it’s for school or for life. Molam klon can’t compete with that. That’s why it’s disappearing,” says Phichai, who understands well that the times are changing. “As an old molam klon artist, I just want to pass on my hope that the newer generations of molam won’t forget molam klon. I hope that they will find a place for it and adapt it into their own art somehow.”

“You don’t have to stick to the old ways of performing because that could stunt its development,” Phichai says. “Molam needs to constantly adapt and develop, just as the molam bands and troupes developed from molam klon and molam sing developed from the molam bands.”