



## MUSICAL TASTES

From Lam Truong to Son Tung M-TP, **Thomas Barrett** takes us through the last 20 years of Vietnamese pop music and reveals why Vietnam could become Asia's next big thing for pop



John Lennon famously said: “Music reflects the state that society is in”, so perhaps there can be no greater barometer of how Vietnam has changed since 1997 than looking at its pop music. Singing sensation Son Tung MT-P recently became the first Vietnamese pop star to win YouTube’s Gold Play Button, a prize which rewards accounts with one million subscribers on the video platform.

MT-P’s brand of quirky pop is a far cry from crooners such as Lam Truong who dominated the airwaves with their slushy ballads and sentimental warbling during the late 1990s. Pop music and musical tastes have since evolved to represent a more modern and global Vietnam.

### LAM TRUONG

Like many respectable pop stars the world over during the 1990s, Lam Truong’s career was forged out of the ashes of a boy band. He went on to embark on a solo career that would see his smash hit *Tình Thôi Xót Xả*

(Love Stops Hurting) become the anthem for Vietnamese youth.

In 2001 he even starred in a Pepsi commercial with Britney Spears, before settling into a career of filling up karaoke machines with a steady stream of emotive love songs. Truong could probably be described these days as a bit of a housewives’ favourite; he always looks immaculate, projects nothing too raunchy, and his lyrics continue to tackle familiar themes of love, loss and heartbreak.

Crucially, music has always been a part of the authorities’ plan for modernising Vietnam. In 1996 the government published a report which stated that “given conditions of a market economy and expanded international exchanges, particular attention should be given to preserving and enhancing national cultural identity, inheriting and promoting the people’s ethical traditions, fine customs and practices, attachment to the nation’s origin and national pride. Culture is the spiritual foundation of society, being

both the objective and the driving force for socio-economic development.”

It adds that the aim of culture is to help build “plentiful, cultured and happy Vietnamese families, making the family the sweet home of each and everyone.”

Lam Truong with his wholesome messages of love and morality is a rock-solid example of dependable, if a little bland, goodness. Fast forward 20 years, what, if anything has changed in the pop world?

### SON MT P

Son Tung MT-P travelled to Ho Chi Minh City from his home town of Thai Binh in 2012 with dreams of becoming the next singing sensation of Vietnam. His ascent to pop royalty was cemented when he was plucked from relative obscurity to feature in the 2015 edition of TV talent show, *The Remix*. If male pop stars in the 1990s came from boy bands, then in the 2000s and 2010s, the talent show is king.

Hong Lang runs one of the many

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Facebook pages dedicated to supporting their hero, and she explains that the cross-over appeal of MT-P is rooted in the belief that he brings something completely new to the table, with his versatility and fluid expression of national identity being something that young Vietnamese can identify with in an increasingly globalised world.

“He is able to apply the model of the international pop star to the Vietnam entertainment industry,” says Lang. “He isn’t just a singer but also a songwriter, an actor, a fashionista, an idol. That maybe, is common in developed entertainment industries but in Vietnam it’s unique.”

MT-P’s music follows the electronic dance music (EDM) trend that has had a stranglehold on world pop in recent years. But with it, he adds his own touches and quirks to make music that to many is identifiably Vietnamese. One of his biggest hits, *Lac Troi*, is a fusion of futuristic sounding electro-pop and traditional Vietnamese music,

and it’s this welding of old and new, foreign and Vietnamese, that is something that his fans are especially proud of.

In an interview earlier this year, MT-P stressed the importance of Vietnamese artists modernising if they are to make it big on a global stage. He said: “Vietnamese artists have invested more in making their product professional from the audio to the visual effects. It’s wonderful. Vietnamese artists now stand on the international stage.”

### CONSUME

The ways in which young people consume music has undergone a worldwide revolution over the last 20 years. Whereas the likes of Lam Truong relied solely on performances and often pirated CDs and VCDs to promote their music, YouTube is now the main way young people listen to music, which has made it easier for the music to gain more international exposure, as well as providing a decent revenue stream for the artists. For the first time, eyeballs are

now directed towards Vietnam as a potential new hub for pop music in Asia.

Soobin Hoang Son from Hanoi is another new breed of pop star who, like MT-P, has used the internet to grow his brand and promote his music. Soobin fan Hong Lang explains: “Social media and YouTube has changed how musicians approach the listeners. Artists don’t need to connect with TV or radio channels to bring their sound to the world, they just need a personal YouTube channel.”

### GIRL POWER

The Spice Girls and ‘girl power’ was at its peak in 1997, and a *Viet Nam News* article titled, “Women rule the music scene” reported on the booming popularity of female singers in Vietnam.

Indeed, the first Vietnamese recorded and produced CD was *Gia Tu Di Vang* (Farewell to the Past), a single by female diva Phuong Thanh. Twenty years on, female artists such as Dong Nhi and Bich Phuong have



gone from strength to strength, they are a vital part of the pop ecosystem in Vietnam and are presenting a version of femininity that isn't two-dimensional, and is in line with the hopes and aspirations of modern Vietnamese women.

Dong Nhi recently became the first Vietnamese pop star to win an MTV EMA award. Upon winning she said: "I really want to bring Vietnamese music to the world and learn more from the world to bring back to Vietnam."

To V-Pop fan Quynh, these singers are positive role models to young women in Vietnam. "Dong Nhi represents the youth in Vietnam. She's energetic and flexible in various styles."

Similarly Bich Phuong has been racking up the YouTube views this year with her brilliant *Bao Gio Lay Chong?* (When Will You Get Married?). The video is witty and modern, and packs a punch as it pokes fun at traditions and everyday life in Vietnam for a young woman.

## WHERE DOES IT GO FROM HERE?

But has V-Pop's drive for international success come at a cost? Son Tung M-T-P's rise hasn't been without its controversies. In 2016 his song *Chung Ta Khong Thuoc Ve Nhau* (We Don't Belong to Each Other) was criticised for having more than a little resemblance to Charlie Puth's omnipresent hit *We Don't Talk Anymore*. He's also been lambasted by fans of K-Pop for cynically aping their style. But this is pop music — hasn't it always been that way?

V-Pop fan Hong Lang puts it best when she says: "Pop music has the power to communicate to young people and reflects the rhythm of their lives." It sums up the eternal appeal of pop stars from Lam Truong to Son Tung M-T-P.

As for Lam Truong, he is now a judge on TV talent show *The Voice*, searching out new talent in the hope of discovering the next Son Tung M-T-P.

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