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# Cambodian Surf Rock

## How two wandering Jews revived Southeast Asian psychedelia

by [Theodore Ross](#), January 12, 2007

TAGS: [Cambodia](#) [Dengue Fever](#) [Los Angeles](#) [Music](#) [music](#) ["Wandering Jews"](#)

I first heard the band [Dengue Fever](#) at [Zen Sushi](#), a restaurant in the Silverlake section of Los Angeles with the feel of an unused Kurosawa movie set. Fake bamboo and plastic shoji screens abound, and the menu features mysterious comestibles with names like the Golden Buddha and the Love Boat. A fair assortment of with-it types had come that night to order the bad sushi and get laid. The evening's sole celebrity, a sallow and porcine Matt Dillon, loitered by the restaurant's small stage, rubbing elbows with the exquisitely tattooed swells pounding cocktails amid the mood lighting.



**Wandering Jews:** Dengue Fever live in Phnom Penh The band, five young men done up in vintage store suits and poorly thought out facial hairstyles, took the stage at midnight. Their music was an eerie, astral mixture of warbling Farfisa organ, crunching bass, and thwack-thwack drums, the sound equal parts hippie-era jam, surfer zip music, and Heroin Age jazz. Fine. Interesting, even. But then Dengue Fever's lead singer, Chhom Nimol, took the stage and unleashed her voice: a ghostly trill in a mystically alien language, rising and falling on the enigmatic patterns in the backing music. Her hands swirled in sensual arcs around her figure, gliding on rhythms direct from the Ramayana. She owned the joint.

Given this description, one might easily assume that Nimol, a Cambodian-born Buddhist, *is* Dengue Fever, and that the band behind her is merely window dressing. Yet Dengue Fever is actually the brainchild of two Jewish brothers, Zac and Ethan Holtzman, a couple of chronic-addled surfer types from Topanga Canyon, CA.

The Holtzman boys, in a fashion that walks a knife's edge between cultural evolution and devolution, represent a mutation of Jewish-American identity, one that still remains singularly Jewish. Matt Gross, of the New York Times, described it to me as "the next phase of the Wandering Jew idiom," in which we choose to co-opt parts of a foreign culture that bears a certain resemblance to our own—the shared experience of Holocaust, for example — as an expression of security within the culture of our home country. Collective trauma washed with the astringent detergent of pop culture—such is Dengue Fever.



**Cambodia's Answer to Billie Holiday:** Chhom Nimol Contemporary Jewish-Americans—in particular artists—have always struggled to understand themselves as Jews. Thinking about God in the strictest sense rarely suffices. More than half of America's Jews don't believe in her existence; little more than a quarter regularly make their way to synagogue. Allen Ginsberg was a Buddhist, MCA is only half-Jewish, and even the rapper 50 Shekel has [converted](#) to Christianity. Yet these very same individuals cling to their identity and insist on definitions that go beyond

prayer or ritual. For many of these artists, the best way to make art as a Jew is to look outside of Judaism; even Bob Dylan had to become a Dust Bowl-style folksinger before he could become Bob Dylan.

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Ethan Holtzman first learned about Khmer rock music during a late-90s backpacking swing through Southeast Asia, and Zac fell in love with it shortly thereafter. They found Nimol singing Khmer pop standards on Long Beach's seedy all-Khmer café-and-nightclub circuit. Zac writes many of the band's lyrics, which Nimol then translates into Khmer and sings (Zac handles the backup vocals, also in Khmer, a language he hardly speaks; he learns most of the lines phonetically). Their two albums, "[Escape from Dragon House](#)" and "[Dengue Fever](#)," have earned the band a cult following in Los Angeles, and they are slowly being recognized nationally, with songs on the soundtracks of Dillon's movie "City of Ghosts," Jim Jarmusch's "Broken Flowers," and even the romantic comedy "Must Love Dogs."



**Golden Voice of the Royal Capital:** Ros Sereysothea The Holtzman boys weren't bar mitzvahed, and the only religious activity Ethan can recall from his youth is reading "the three questions" at his family's Pesach seders. So, on one level, interpreting Dengue Fever through the prism of religious identity would seem unfair. One could perhaps more readily define them in the context of Asian exoticism and foreign lust, an ethos dedicated to a world where the five flavors of hip can rub elbows with the twelve steps of chic and the four paths to enlightened plastic surgery and still call itself "spiritual." Yet this view provides only a partial picture of what the band represents.

One of the odder cross-cultural adhesions to emerge from the Vietnam War era in Southeast Asia was the pop-music supremacy of [Ros Sereysothea](#), a Khmer vocalist who built a large following in Cambodia in the 1960s and early 70s. Sereysothea eventually earned the title "Golden Voice of the Royal Capital" (take that, Grammy!), an honor bestowed on her by the Khmer monarch, Norodom Sihanouk. Channeling the rock music blaring from GI radios, Sereysothea (along with the male crooner [Sinn Sisamouth](#)) formed the vanguard of a short-lived but utterly unique Cambodian-rock sound, which one contemporary reviewer has described as "bits of surf, wild R & B, girl-group vocals, post-garage psychedelia [...] even some pre-punk snarling."



**Cambodia Rocks:** A Sinn Sisamouth album from 1966. Little is known of Sereysothea’s fate under the Khmer Rouge, although it is assumed that she perished. The main surviving artifacts of her existence are the compilation albums [“Cambodia Rocks.”](#) which were first released by the tiny Parallel World label in 1994. They contain several of her songs, as well as ones by other Cambodian contemporaries. From this music, which Zac says he learned of “from different friends, people whose opinions I value, who tell you about things you write down on napkins and then go check out,” came the idea to start a Cambodian band. Consider, then, the music’s convoluted provenance: American rock is converted into a Khmer musical argot born of carpet-bombing and Buddhist prayer. Decades pass and the music fades into obscurity. Finally, it falls to two Jewish hipsters to resurrect it, with the stated goal of mimicking a sound that is in itself an imitation.

Despite this tail-chasing musical heritage, both Zac and Ethan feel that adopting the guise of the Other has been liberating. Still, Zac does admit he was concerned that he was “avoiding himself” by making Khmer music. It is hard at times for one to listen to Dengue Fever without feeling a little duped by their pseudo-spirituality; the mysticism of their sound can feel hollow, like celebrity Kabbalah or hippie Wicca or any iteration of a New Age religion that demands next to nothing of its adherents.

Ultimately, though, this doesn’t take away from the immediate satisfaction of listening to the band. After all, Cambodian rock is no less foreign to Southern California than American rock once was to Cambodia. For his part, Zac says that once he began bringing his own emotions and experiences to his music, questions about the language and the oddity of “Cambodian rock and roll” became irrelevant. All of a sudden, he was no longer aping Cambodian music—he was making it.

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Theodore Ross's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in Harper's Magazine, Tin House, the Believer, McSweeney's, Saveur, the Mississippi Review, and elsewhere. He is an editor of Harper's Magazine and lives in Brooklyn. This is a photo

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