

CULTURAL MEDALLION 2018

LOUIS SOLIANO



Louis Soliano on drums at the Scandinavian Food Festival, Adelphi Hotel, 1962.

Photo courtesy of Louis Soliano

Louis Soliano (b.1942) is known as one of Singapore's best jazz musicians and entertainers. His life story runs parallel to the history of popular music in modern Singapore.

Soliano was educated at St. Joseph's Institution. His training as a musician was provided by his family, his father Paul and uncles Jerry and Alfonso, all professional, touring musicians. Although he played the piano from a young age, he chose percussion and the drums as his primary instrument. He was also drawn to singing and dancing. He counts among his musical influences the great American jazz drummers Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich and singer Louis Armstrong.

His family introduced him to the local professional entertainment scene. From there he went on to perform in Malaysia, Thailand and then Vietnam in the 1960s during the Vietnam War. He returned to Singapore in the 1970s and settled into life back home where he was a percussionist with the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) Orchestra for 10 years.

On his travels and tours to different parts of the world he played with and accompanied artists such as Billie Daniels, Matt Monro, Anita O'Day, Rosemary Clooney, Sarah Vaughan, Shirley Bassey and many others.

In 1997 Soliano received the Artistic Excellence Award from Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) for his outstanding musicianship and his contribution to Singapore's music scene. In 2013 he was awarded the Fellowship Diploma of the London College of Music (FLCM) and in 2014 he received his Lifetime Achievement Award from Mr Lawrence Wong, then Minister for Culture, Community and Youth at the inaugural Singapore International Jazz Festival. Soliano has played for dignitaries such as then President George H.W. Bush of the United States and the late President Yang Shangkun of the People's Republic of China. Soliano continues to perform actively today and takes particular delight in mentoring young and up-and-coming musicians in the early stages of their careers. ■

PLAYING TO THE RHYTHM OF HIS OWN BEAT

BY PROFESSOR MICHAEL EARLEY



The Soliano Clan with Louis Armstrong, United States Embassy in Singapore, 1964.

Photo courtesy of Louis Soliano

“Musicians don’t retire. They stop when there is no more music in them.”

– Louis Armstrong

Louis Soliano is a living jazz legend, still active and making music in Singapore. There are few professional or amateur jazz musicians in Singapore who are not aware of his works on one level or another. He is a renowned drummer/percussionist and vocalist. Most jazz professionals in Singapore have worked and played with this wonderful musician. His music-making has garnered him praise as an artist who is also a living national treasure. Another Cultural Medallion recipient and jazz great, Jeremy Monteiro, has called Soliano “the godfather of Singapore jazz... in effect, Singapore’s first true international jazz ambassador.”

Soliano’s musical journey, from the age of 17 and right on up to the present, has been said to mirror the history of popular music in Singapore – particularly jazz and its associated musical genres. And his achievement lies in his ability to fuse the music of the West (American, British, European and Latin American rhythms and compositions) with the melodies and special harmonies of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia. His music reflects the geography and diversity of his travels and the associations he has made with other artists. And like a magpie, he has picked up the intonations and particularities of any song he has ever heard. Blending of sounds has been a hallmark of jazz in Singapore, and Soliano is a pioneer. Generations of young Singaporean musicians keep rediscovering him to this day and he has been a generous mentor to some of our finest developing musical talents.

No biography of Soliano would be complete without highlighting that he is an entertainer. Even a chance encounter or everyday conversation with him will lead to stories and anecdotes, which even if he had told them countless times, will still sound as if they were freshly minted specially for the listener. To hear him speak about jazz legends such as trumpeter and singer Louis Armstrong and drummer Buddy Rich is to experience these towering figures coming to life. His repertoire covers the extensive songbook drawn from other great legendary singers: Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Matt Monro and many more. It has been said that he also has the qualities of a good stand-up comedian drawn from his encounters with comedic masters such as Buddy Loren, Dick Emery, Freddie Starr, Joe Martin, Les Dawson and Ronnie Corbett.



In other words, Soliano is a complete entertainer packaged in one dynamo of a man.

Born in 1942, Soliano started his musical odyssey in the 1950s as the Malaysian Peninsula was just starting to build a cultural identity out of the ashes and suffering of war and occupation. He was educated at St. Joseph’s Institution, Singapore’s third oldest educational establishment. Coming from a musical family, he counts his father, Paul, as his first teacher and mentor, and his uncle, Jerry, and his godfather, Alfonso, as key influences on his musical education. All were travelling musicians and a life touring with music was the course that young Soliano set his sights on.

A fast learner and a precocious instrumentalist, he started playing the piano at age seven but drums became his area of specialisation and his signature instrument. At the age of ten, Soliano followed his father into the recording studios of Jalan Ampas, where music to be used for silent movies was recorded. This experience had a profound influence on his musical development. The family’s music business was Soliano’s music academy.

He even studied dance – starting with Filipino folk dancing – at the age of 14, going on to study ballet and modern dance at the Art of Dance Studio, a bungalow situated at Scotts Road where the Sheraton Hotel now stands. By the time he was 17, Soliano was performing at regular gigs with live bands, from trios to quartets and quintets. In 1959, he took part in the Gene Krupa Drum Contest, organised by the Cathay Organisation, to inaugurate the premiere of the Hollywood movie ‘The Gene Krupa Story’ starring Sal Mineo. Soliano won the competition. By his twenties he had mastered a wealth of popular musical genres: Dixieland, tango, waltz, and the rumba, as well as Chinese and Malay traditional music. Notice how these are all dance genres: the life of dance fused with the life of music in Soliano’s life. His performances are still marked by dance turns when he is not sitting behind a drum kit.



Louis Soliano with Jerry Soliano Quartet and Theresa Khoo (pianist) at the Scandinavian Food Festival, Adelphi Hotel, 1962.

Photo courtesy of Louis Soliano



Louis Soliano with Matt Monro, Cathay Restaurant, 1963.

Photo courtesy of Louis Soliano



Louis Soliano on Dendang Ria show, Radio Television Singapore (RTS), 1963.

Photo courtesy of Louis Soliano



Jam session with Buddy Rich, organised by the Singapore Musicians' Union, Lido Night Club, 1960.

Photo courtesy of Louis Soliano

Over the decades, Soliano made his way to other parts of Asia, Europe and then to America; always encountering and collaborating with international musical and film celebrities. In the 1960s, at the height of the Vietnam conflict, he was playing for American troops, often as gunfire and bombs were exploding around his performances in a kind of macabre syncopation. As a great drummer attuned to everything he hears, the irony of the percussion of conflict cannot be ignored. It is intriguing to think how his signature explosive drum solos, that owe much to American drummers Buddy Rich and Art Blakey, were also due to Soliano's experience of war. While performing in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, he had to carry a weapon for protection. He also worked with Hollywood legends like actresses Jane Russell and Bette Davis, who were also performing in Vietnam to boost the morale of the American soldiers.

Back in Singapore during the early 1960s, Soliano's growing local reputation was forged by working with musicians like Sam Gan and his quintet at the Sea View Hotel, his uncle Jerry at the Adelphi Hotel and also his father and primary mentor, Paul, alongside the Jose Daroya Quartet at the Cathay Restaurant. Family influence has always been a central part in Soliano's success and life.

In 1961, he met the great American drummer Buddy Rich, who came with the Joey Adams Show to the old Victoria Theatre. The Singapore Musicians' Union organised a tea party at Rosee d'Or and Soliano was invited to sit in with the Buddy Rich Sextet. This brief encounter pushed his career forward. From Rich, he learnt various techniques and tricks. As his work and reputation grew, Soliano's local agent in Singapore, Freddie Eu (Eu Tong Sen), got him further gigs, sometimes of the unlikeliest sorts, such as with the German Dare Devil Circus Show in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang, Malaysia.

In early 1966, Soliano then went to Bangkok, Thailand where he worked in a series of nightclubs, including the Café de Paris. His big break came when he performed at Chao Phya Hotel, then partly an American Officers' Rest & Recreation (R&R) Club called the Boom Boom Room, where he accompanied a whole range of American international jazz musicians and top celebrity singers, including Anita O'Day, Ann Margaret, Billy Daniels, Brenda Lee, Dakota Staton, Jimmy Witherspoon, Julie London, Rosemary Clooney, Sarah Vaughan plus many others; gigs that were arranged by his then agents, Dave Wolfe and John O Salvesen. To this day the music of that period continues to influence Soliano's work. The vintage sounds of 1950s' and 1960s' popular music, jazz accented by a strong crooner or chanteuse, memory and nostalgia-evoking songs reign supreme in Soliano's repertoire. The easy, brushed rhythms of sultry standards is something Soliano would bring back to the Singapore music scene. But first there was Vietnam.

A diminutive drummer with a huge musical stature, Soliano found himself part of the big entertainment complex that came to Vietnam to entertain weary troops seeking rest, relaxation, and much-needed fun as a respite from the fortunes of war. The popular American comedian, Bob Hope, whose compered



shows were famous during this difficult period, featured Soliano as an opening act for his shows. Together with American saxophonist, Noel Jewkes, and Filipino guitarist, Narding Castaneda, Soliano and his trio warmed-up the audience before Bob Hope would come onstage to loud cheers to deliver one of his patented monologues, often swinging a golf club as a prop. To this day Soliano is still warming up audiences, and from those Vietnam performances, he learned how to capture the attention of a huge crowd and kept them enthralled. The Bob Hope shows were approaching stadium-size concerts before there was such a musical phenomenon. At this point, too, Soliano developed a range of trios that would be a favoured grouping of musicians for him going forward.

Soliano returned to a diverse and independent Singapore following several years in Vietnam, building a career that was becoming increasingly international and richly local. He not only led the popular Louis Soliano Trio, playing in the rising number of jazz clubs in Singapore, but for the next 10 years he settled back into Singapore life and played drums and percussion for the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) Orchestra. Then he was frequently featured at the Singapore International Jazz Festival, throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

As a great drummer attuned to everything he hears, the irony of the percussion of conflict cannot be ignored.



Performance with James Morrison at the Singapore International Jazz Festival where Louis Soliano received the Lifetime Achievement Award, Marina Bay Sands, 2014.

Photo courtesy of Louis Soliano

Jazz up your favourite drink with the Louis Tan Three-O.



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A great place to be.

Louis Tan Trio, with the late Iskandar Ismail and Eddie Jansen, Singapore Hilton Hotel, 1980.

Photo courtesy of Louis Soliano



Louis Soliano with then President Tony Tan at Jazzy Christmas, Esplanade Concert Hall, 2013.

Photo courtesy of Louis Soliano

The encounter with legendary musicians did not stop and in 1971 Soliano went to United Kingdom for two years where he played at popular cabarets and jazz clubs, like La Dolce Vita in Birmingham and the Cavendish in Suffolk, United Kingdom. Connections with British musicians and entertainers developed not only his musical knowledge but also his skill as an entertainer.

From 1974, Soliano settled back in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia using it as bases to create a web of musical relationships through a series of trio and big band combinations. This is when his relationship with the cream of Singapore's musicians began: people like Andrew Lim, Aya Sekine, Don Gomes, Iskandar Ismail, Jeremy Monteiro, Joshua Wan, Wen Ming Soh and others.

Today, Soliano has become a firmly established presence in the local music scene. Apart from his popular gigs, he has been engaged by the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board for promotional events, and performed at key international platforms such as the 32nd ASEAN Summit. He has also performed for several Presidents of Singapore, including Mr Devan Nair, Dr Wee Kim Wee, Mr S.R. Nathan and Dr Tony Tan, as well as visiting leaders and dignitaries, including then President George H.W. Bush and the late Chinese President Yang Shangkun. The generation of jazz musicians he has influenced has helped make his life a notable one of consummate artistry.

It then seems fitting to reflect on Soliano's remarkable music journey and distinguished career of several decades with these words from the man himself: "Despite the extensive background and devotion to jazz music, I believe that the secret is being sincere and having an earnest desire to make my audience happy." ■

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About the writer

Professor Michael Earley is Dean, Faculty of Performing Arts at LASALLE College of the Arts. He writes about acting and theatre, and was Publishing Director of Methuen Drama, London.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

With thanks to my family, especially my father Paul Soliano, uncle Jerry and godfather Alfonso who deeply influenced me as a drummer and percussionist. During my youth I was fortunate enough to witness their performances (Uncle Jerry at Adelphi Hotel and my father Paul with the Jose Daroya Quartet at Cathay Restaurant), and to also participate with them in gigs which exposed me to various music genres.

Agent Freddie Eu (Eu Tong Sen) employed me with the German Dare Devil Circus show in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang, Malaysia.

In Bangkok I was at the Café de Paris, Sani Chateau and other nightspots. My major break came from the Chao Phya Hotel, an American Officers' Rest & Recreation (R&R) Club, where I performed with many American international jazz artists such as Stan Getz, Billy Daniels, Anita O'Day, Rosemary Clooney, Julie London, Jane Russell, Bette Davis and many others. Thanks to agent Dave Wolfe.

To the Hilton Hotel Chain for 15 years of engagement.

American entertainment agent John O Salvesen employed me in Saigon during the Vietnam War with Leigh Ann Austin (Miss Texan, 1964) with the Basil Green Trio.

For two years, Dave Packet, an Englishman, gave me the opportunity to perform at platforms such as the La Dolce Vita and its sister club, the Cavendish in Birmingham, England with: Music artists – Roy Castle, Kathy Kirby, Labi Siffre and Julie Rogers. Comedians – Paul Melba, Dick Emery, Ronnie Corbett, Les Dawson, Freddie Starr and Wee Willie Harris.

On returning to Singapore in 1974, I would like to acknowledge my collaboration with Singaporean musicians:

Seniors – Jerry, Paul and Alfonso Soliano, Benny Kleinman, Ernesto and Jose Daroya, Charles Lazaroo, Ahmad Jaffar, Sam Gan and Rufino Soliano.

Juniors – Ricky Ho, Jeremy Monteiro, the late Iskandar Ismail, Dr Sydney Tan, Dick Lee, Aya Sekine, Joshua Wan, Andrew Lim and Wen Ming Soh.

To Bubi Chen, pianist, father of jazz in Indonesia for the album 'Virtuso'. And finally to Ben Chia (Absolute Sound) for producing an audiophile CD album titled 'Impromptu' in 2004. ■