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For the love of music

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By Alan Teh Leam Seng (/authors/alan-teh-learn-seng) - March 11, 2018 @ 2:00pm

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Yeoh performing with his friends in the 1950s.

The soft notes of Edelweiss echo gently through the spacious corridor, catching my attention as I make my way towards the lobby area. Looking at my watch and realising that there's still time to spare before my appointment, I make a quick detour and trace the source of this hauntingly beautiful music.

My search ends at an elegantly-decorated fine dining outlet called '1885'. Standing to the side of the entrance and craning my neck as far as possible, I finally catch sight of the lone pianist playing at the end of the dimly-lit room filled with diners enjoying their evening meal.

An approaching waitress gives me an understanding smile when I gesture towards the performing musician. Judging from her reaction, there must have been countless others before me whose presence had been the result of curiosity. Rooted to the ground as I listen to the show tune from the 1959 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical production, I suddenly feel a gentle tap on my right shoulder.



Yeoh on the piano and Nancy (second from left) singing at a function

It's my long-time acquaintance, Eileen Chong who happens to be the Eastern and Oriental Hotel's communications manager. Stepping out into the corridor so we can chat, I compliment Chong and the hotel, affectionately known as the E&O, for having a resident pianist who not only plays well but also selects tunes that evoke nostalgia.

"Apart from tunes from the *The Sound of Music*, Philip Yeoh plays a wide repertoire of evergreens too. His parents, Albert Yeoh Keng Teik and Nancy Lim Siew Har, were the undisputed monarchs of the E&O lounges from 1948 to 1996," explains Chong before she excuses herself to attend to some guests.

Intrigued, I decide to extend my Penang visit by a few more hours and return to the hotel after dinner. I'm fervently hoping that I'll be able to cross paths with Philip after his performance.

My dinner conversation with friends in nearby Penang Road inevitably skews towards Yeoh and Nancy. I listen in awe as the Penangites start speaking affectionately about Yeoh's music and Nancy's vocal prowess when they attended wedding functions, company events and dinners at the E&O. Most of them turned green with envy when I tell them of my plan to meet up with Philip later that evening.



How it began

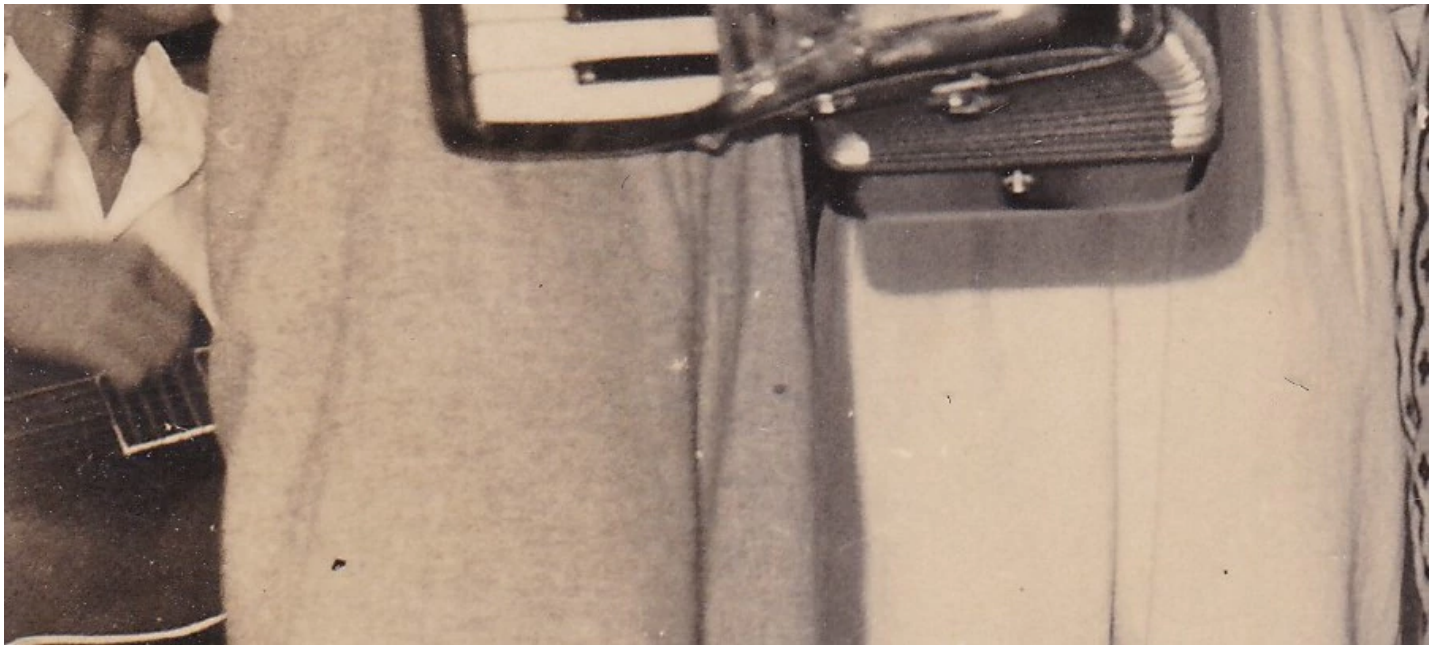
I time my return perfectly and manage to catch up with Philip just as he's packing up for the day. Much to my elation, he accedes to my request to learn more about Yeoh's passion for music and how it has impacted his own life.

We're lucky to find a quiet corner at Sarkies Corner, E&O's colonial-styled coffee shop. Within minutes, Philip starts weaving a most interesting tale about his illustrious parents. "My father started playing the guitar in 1941 as a 14-year-old boy. He immediately fell in love with music, practising daily and performing for friends whenever he could. Even the onset of the Japanese Occupation, a year later, failed to dampen his passion. Despite that difficult period in our history, my father managed to form a five-piece band, playing regularly at an amusement park restaurant in George Town," recalls Philip.

His eyes twinkling, he continues: "Ordinary teenagers would have been preoccupied with other activities such as going to social events, falling in love and joining friends for picnics and outings. But my father was very different. He was already performing gigs and earning his keep!"

The Second World War ended in 1945 and Penang, like the rest of Malaya, underwent a period of consolidation and rebuilding. The E&O, which was used by the Japanese Army and later by the returning British forces, slowly began opening its doors to guests again.





A young Yeoh with his accordion.

In 1948, Yeoh secured his first performance at the E&O. Despite his tender age of 21, Yeoh felt confident enough to expand his band, turning it into a seven-piece set up. Named simply as Albert Yeoh and His Band, it consisted of two trumpets, a double bass, guitar, drums and piano.

Word began to spread about Yeoh's new performing venue and within a short period of time, the E&O ballroom was packed to capacity every night as hundreds of patrons turned up to listen to his music. Back then, most guests were either Europeans or locals with high standing in society. Stiff colonial protocol meant that the E&O was no place for the ordinary man.

"In those days, my father and his band were obligated to play the British national anthem God Save the Queen each time the Penang British Resident Councillor entered the ballroom," adds Philip as he recalls the stories told by his parents.

While admitting that he doesn't have details about Yeoh's and Nancy's courtship, Philip volunteers an image from his smart phone. It shows a youthful Yeoh serenading his bride on their momentous day. "My parents' wedding must have been a big event as this photograph was published on March 26, 1957 in the Straits Times!" exclaims Philip, his eyes lighting up with pride.



Yeoh serenading Nancy on their wedding day.

Power couple

Their wedding reception, adds Philip, was held here in the E&O ballroom. "If only my mother knew then that nine years later her fate would also be intertwined with this hotel!" Nancy, I duly learn, became a part of Yeoh's ensemble by pure chance. Sometime in 1966, the hotel's regular singer failed to turn up for a gala birthday celebration dedicated to a local tycoon.

"The hotel manager at that time hit the panic button. He didn't know where he was going to find a replacement to sing Happy Birthday at such short notice. As a last resort, he turned to my mother who happened to visit my father. Her ad hoc audition revealed a warm contralto voice which even caught my father by surprise," says Philip, chuckling.

That incident marked the beginning of Nancy's illustrious singing career at the E&O. While still maintaining her teaching position at the St George Girl's Branch School (now Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tunku Puan Habsah) in Sepoy Lines, Nancy juggled between her new found passion and taking care of her two boys, Philip and his brother, Kenneth Yeoh.

"At that time, Kenneth and I were still very young. We were living in our first family home, a double storey terrace house in Tanjong Tokong's Fettes Lane. Our father regularly invited his musician friends over to practice and we were exposed to music at a tender age," explains Philip.



Philip still performs at the E&O during weekends.

Although he started taking piano lessons at the age of six from his aunt who lived in Pulau Tikus, Philip confides that he didn't find music appealing at the beginning. "My father was very strict and kept on insisting that I should not give up. After some time, my love for music blossomed and I've not looked back since," confides Philip who's now a private piano teacher in addition to his work at the E&O.

Inspired by their father, the two brothers formed their own band during their secondary school days. The group was called Flinkstones after drawing inspiration from the popular Hanna-Barbera animated Stone Age series.


"With me on keyboard and Kenneth playing bass guitar, our five-piece band helped out regularly at the E&O while performing at other venues as well. In the 1970s, the E&O was the most popular venue for wedding functions in Penang. Each group member was paid \$50 for each session and as students, that was a large sum of money," recalls Philip, adding that the money was used primarily to upgrade their musical instruments.

In order to improve further, Philip and his band members would regularly watch Yeoh perform. I listen intently as he walks down memory lane and describes guests dancing the tango, waltz or foxtrot to tunes like When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, You'll Never Know or even Rose, Rose I Love You. Towards the end of his career, Yeoh was said to have no less than 3,000 songs in his repertoire.

"Prior to his retirement, a typical day would start with his 9 to 5 job at the Mercantile Bank (now Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation). Then, he'd come home for a quick dinner before heading to the E&O where he'd play continuously from 8pm to 12 midnight without any breaks in between," adds Philip, awe in his voice.

Yeoh only started taking breaks after Philip raised his concerns in the late 1970s. "I told him that he couldn't continue at that pace. But, even then, his breaks were very short," says Philip, as he compares his father's breather to his school day canteen breaks. "They were so short that I doubt he had any rest at all."

After retiring from the bank in 1987, Yeoh maintained a hectic lifestyle by selling insurance during the day and tinkling the ivories of the grand piano at the E&O during his nightly gigs.



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A calling card promoting Yeoh and his band in the 1970s.

Curtain call

Finally it was curtains down for Yeoh and Nancy when the hotel closed temporarily for restoration and refurbishment in 1996. The duo were celebrated with honour and dignity befitting a deserving historical institution. They played at all the grand farewell parties at the E&O that year, each time signing off with mournfully nostalgic wartime songs like Vera Lynn's classic We'll Meet Again.

With a slight choke in his voice, Philip recounts the events leading to Yeoh's demise on Aug 4, 2007. "Prior to the massive embolic stroke that happened a month before his death, my father suffered a milder one in 2005 which he recovered from admirably. Unfortunately, this second bout was very devastating. The right side of his body was completely paralysed and his speech impaired," recalls Philip.

"Towards the end, his breathing became laboured and his heart rate increased. On the day of his passing, I received an urgent phone call from the hospital and hastily rushed over. Unfortunately, he died before I arrived. Several of my relatives who were by his side said he opened his eyes briefly to look at them. I'm convinced that he was happy to see their familiar faces," says Philip, his voice low. His mother, Nancy, passed away on Sept 8, 2012.

Yeoh's final funeral farewell at the Wesley Methodist Church was a stylish affair, lavishly adorned with bouquets from grateful admirers, including an enormous wreath with a touching message from the hotel, thanking Yeoh for '... all the beautiful musical memories over the years that we all share in our hearts. Your music will live with us forever at the E&O.'

On my drive back home that evening, a question played in my mind: will Penang ever produce such a dedicated musical maestro like Albert Yeoh again? Until that's answered, adoring fans can rest assured that Philip will continue his father's legacy by filling the corridors of the E&O with melodies of yesteryears.

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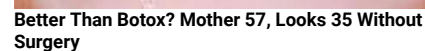
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