

## *Allah Bless America*

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**A**T TWELVE-FORTY EACH DAY—GIVE OR TAKE A FEW MINUTES BUT without fail—the cascading wail of Arabic pours forth from the mosque at the corner of Soi 12 and Pattaya Dthai. I know this as the mosque is kitty-corner from our house and the chant is amplified enough for it to carry about two city blocks. There is neither a backbeat nor rhythm within this hymn that an occidental ear seeks. There is no familiar musical structure for the brain to process so that the legs below can do that two-step “hippy shake.” The scale is not the typical “do, re, me” of Julie Andrew’s fame, but one that a studied musician might label as an Eastern mode—similar to Phrygian but more likely something forcing a gag such as *maqam zirguleli suzinak*.

The chant seems to occur at regular intervals throughout the day, but I’ve yet to nail down the other exact times or bothered to research their significance. Oddly, upon these foreign hymns entering my home I’m neither compelled to face Mecca nor to walk in circles around the spirit house in the front yard. It’s not in my upbringing, and I’m not about to become a thirty-something crossover and jump on the *Hadj* bandwagon anytime soon. I am however compelled to seek out the source of this somewhat mesmerizing mantra much like the crowd sought out the Beatles when they performed atop Apple Studios for the movie “Let it Be.”

I have no discomfort in the knowledge that I’m a full-blooded infidel, yet when I hear this tune I often imagine that there are others just across the way that might clandestinely be planning my demise. This thought—however paranoid—is the unfortunate by-product of the fact that my only English speaking TV channel is CNN and that I’ve just finished reading *Fist of God* by Fredrick Forsyth wherein Americans are not so affectionately referred to as *Beni-al-Kalb* (sons of dogs) throughout the entire Arab world.

The second halfway serious rainstorm I’ve seen this year prevents me now from crossing the road and exploring their sanctum. It’s usually one thing or another that distracts me from actually performing any reconnaissance. Many times it’s the food. Perhaps, it’s the curried rice, *kebab*, and other Arab treats that hasten my retreat as I secret my lunch away from the Islamic street vendors in little plastic bags. Today, however, it’s the not so distant crack and rumble of thunder that has me seeking shelter from the fearsome voice of Allah.

Thank any and all gods that not all the news is focused on Islam these days. Sure there's the scintillating British cricket boycotts in Africa, the spellbinding picking and sorting of billion dollar of space bits, and of course the ever popular North Korean Row starring that other Kim fella with that crazy hair doo and a background in brinksmanship. Frankly, is "row" the right word here? I mean isn't a row something akin to wrangle, tussle, or brawl? I know "crisis" was used to death during the Gulf War and "standoff" has been reserved strictly for Cowboy George at the Eye-Racky Corral; and I guess it's better that "shootout" isn't used, but why is it that we can't just call a spade a spade and say, "The Gook's Got Nukes?"

Sometimes—you know—what my mind craves is the earthy news, so I turn off the boob tube and pick up the trusty *Bangkok Post*. Be it a brief on the uproar over Chinese restaurants serving human breast milk in their dishes or a photograph of a truant and rather unconscious policeman lying in his bed after a nefarious bargirl had "put the whammy on them" with a few well placed dabs of "date rape" drug on her nipples, the *Post* never fails to deliver at least one article that I can read nowhere else in the world.

Recently, here in Thailand there's a bit of local drama politique that you might have gleaned from an international headline or perhaps you've heard a brief news blurb on the radio. On 29 January a Cambodian mob ran amuck and looted several Thai owned businesses and set fire to the Thai Embassy in the capital of Phnom Penh. As it turns out, the people were actually incited to riot by a local, ex-Pol Pot genocide crony turned rabble-rouser seeking to gain just a little more of whatever there is to gain in this small corner of Southeast Asia. Ironically, the incendiary source of the jingoistic conflagration was the alleged dialog of a popular Thai soap opera star years back in which the character claimed that Angkor Wat should be given back to the Thai people. The Khmer raged, looted, and pillaged. It was basically idiotic. The only analogy I can conjure at this moment would be the ransacking of Taco Bell restaurants should the illustrious J. Lo, America's flygirl-cum-diva, make a flippant remark concerning the Alamo. I know it's a stretch. And crappy, idiotic one at that—tit for tat. Regardless, what you won't read in the news is the experience that follows when I found myself witness to some local repercussions of that Cambodian pandemonium.

It was early February on a luscious, tropical night as I sat drinking an icy Singha beer. I was perched at one of the ubiquitous outdoor watering establishments along the upper reaches of Beach Road when a steady, low rumble distracted me from my girl watching; and no, it wasn't a fart.

Anyhow, I more felt the vibrations than I had heard the three Isuzu trucks that were slowly making their way down the street that was certainly far too narrow and overflowing with pedestrians for this to be accomplished in any manner of caution or safety. Yet, they progressed at an elephant's pace—slowly and formidably. Normally, I would have ignored them in my present state of reverie, but something rather exquisite had demanded my attention over and above the din of yet another night in paradise.

The trucks were filled with women! “Long live the King!” I cheered. “He’s come with reinforcements for these overworked lovelies!” It was a brief—but well enjoyed—quixotic delusion that promptly dissipated as I noticed that the girls were being put *into* the trucks and wouldn’t be performing any singing telegrams.

These trucks would be best described as cattle movers—which is what I think they must have been used for in their daylight operation: open-air in the back though secured with a sturdy, lockable cage. In these cages were clusters of tawny Cambodian bargirls—at least thirty in the first truck alone. It was a round up. Some sat and quietly sulked while others stood and stared out from the trucks wide-eyed as they watched us on the outside sit who sat drinking and watching this all happen as if it were part of the daily goings on. The Thai’s knew better muttering, “Khmen” under their breath with a newfound yet uncharacteristic loathing.

Un-official looking officials sifted through the streets checking the IDs of the Khmer girls offered up by the bar's *Mamasans*. It seemed to be an expected, pre-arranged happening as the girls surrendered peacefully, joined their fellow Cambodians in the convoy, and were trucked off on their way to the local “monkey house” for ultimate deportation. As the trucks moved out, on, and around the corner to the next group of beer bars, faint female voices could be heard singing above the throaty growl of the diesel engines. I could only imagine the words of the lilting hymn to be an ancient Khmer song. It was beautiful and poignant in that moment for it sounded proud yet sad, but what did I know? I was a just another drunk *farang*. Their voices trailed off and were cross-faded into the backbeat of the well-amplified thousand some-odd stereo systems that blared in competition with one another in the eternal cacophony of the Pattaya night.

Cacophony, which brings me back to the Arabs across the street. By the way, the 4:10 chant is up and roaring now, and I’m want to think that there’s a clock running fast over there. If you’ve never heard the plaintive cries from atop a far off minaret this might be hard for one to imagine, but the entire song—for lack of better term—seems to be sung with the letter “A” as the lyric. In every imaginable way, “A” is crooned, droned,

intoned, and murmured that is if it is indeed possible to murmur an “A.” Maybe, moaned is the better word.

As I sit here under a clickity-clack of my ceiling fan and absorb this onslaught of “*Ah aA A aaaaa Ah,*” I somehow have cross-faded this tune in my mind with the beginning of the overplayed Pink song, “Get This Party Started.” If you listen carefully you might be able to hear it now ...“*Ah aA A aaaaa Ah I’m coming out. So you better get this party started...*”

Well, I won’t begin to tell you the story about how I cross faded a monk’s Pali chant into “*Two ten o’clock girls go ‘round the outside, ‘round the outside, ‘round the outside...nya nya nya nya...*” for that’s another story all on it’s own. However, if you keep your ears to the airwaves you might soon discover for yourself that the Eastern modes have made their way further than ever imagined into the soul of American music.

Allah bless America!