



# Then The King came to town

Old rocker *Anders Nelsson* recalls the heady days when, with inspiration from the "five Ps", pioneering local pop stars set the groundwork for the eventual birth of Canto-pop

**G**rowing up in Hong Kong in the 1950s, I often heard the term "cultural desert". It certainly applied to pop music.

The government radio station RHK (now RTHK, with the addition of television programming) played only the most insipid "middle of the road" music, certainly nothing that would inspire a pre-teen with musical aspirations. Rediffusion, a radio service that came to your home or office via cable, featured the same schmaltz.

The four "Ps" seemed to rule: The Platters, Patti Page, Pat Boone and Perry Como. In 1954, a fifth "P" - Elvis Presley - was about to make his recording debut. In those days, records took months to reach Hong Kong by sea. Television, let alone MTV, had yet to grace Hong Kong's colonial shores.

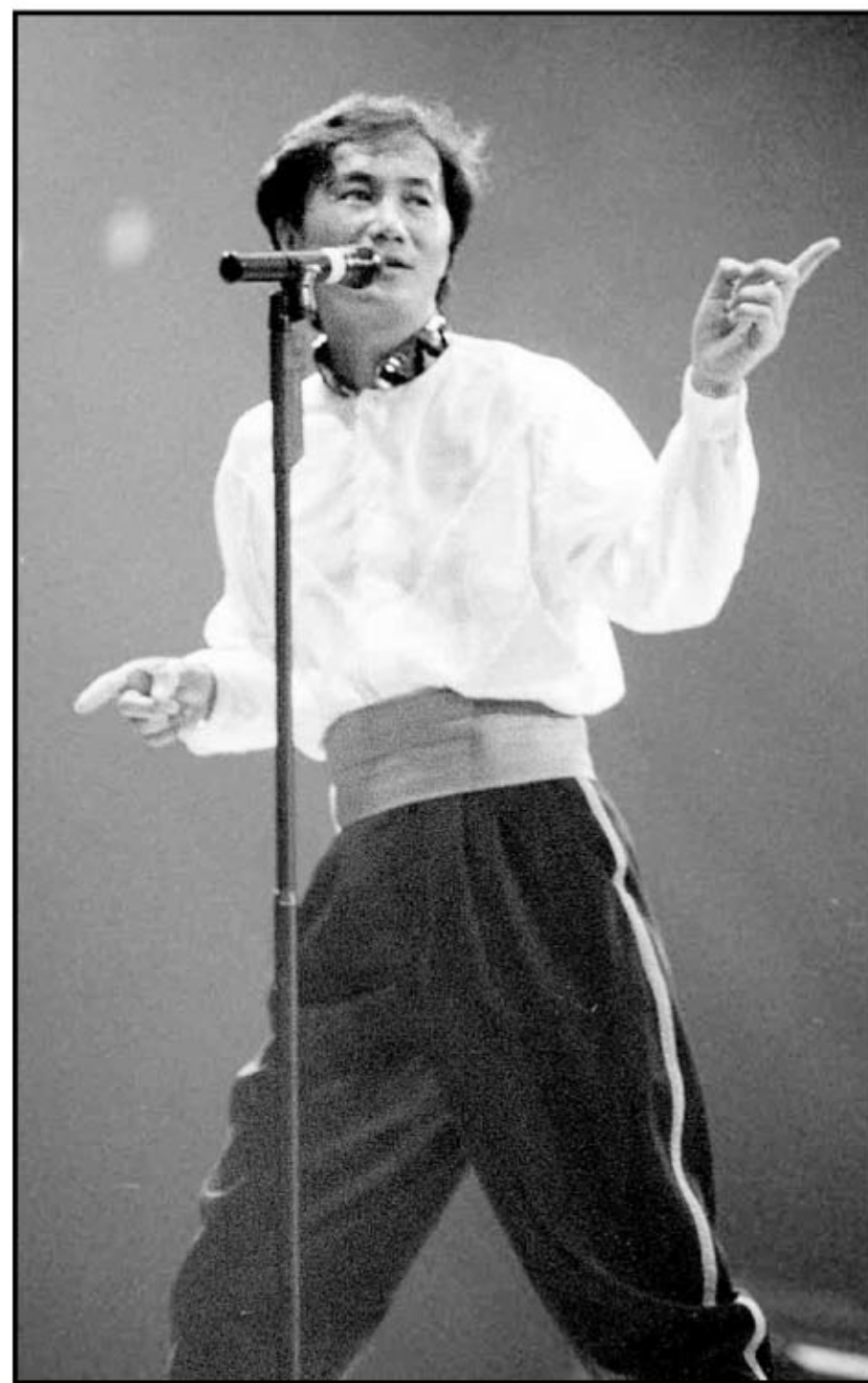
My "eureka moment" came on Cheung Chau late one evening in July 1954, where my Swedish Lutheran missionary family spent summer holidays.

With boredom setting in, I started fiddling with the massive Telefunken radio that held pride of place in the spartan living room. It was there for those summer typhoon reports and the BBC overseas news service that my father, Daniel, tuned into faithfully at every breakfast and after dinner. I don't recall it ever having been tuned to any other frequency than RHK.

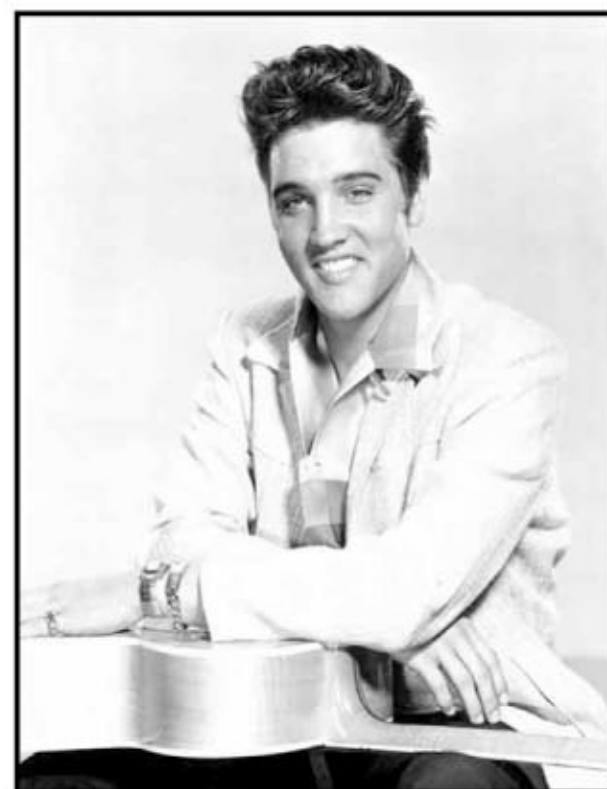
Making sure I would find my way back to RHK's frequency before I started my first adventure on the airwaves, I tentatively turned the dial. In an attempt not to disturb the rest of the family, my left ear was glued to the speaker as I pushed buttons and twiddled knobs with my right hand. There was plenty of hissing and crackling, and broadcasts in myriad languages.

Then came rock 'n' roll. I had found the Far East Network. The DJ said he was broadcasting from Hokkaido, but I eventually found similar broadcasts from several American military locations in Asia.

This was just my first taste. When Elvis started singing *That's All Right*, I swear I levitated!



Sam Hui, using a rock 'n' roll beat and an attitude that owed more than a little to Elvis Presley (top right), gave birth to the phenomenon of Canto-pop in Hong Kong in the early 1970s. Elvis was not the only influence, though: there was always the four "Ps" (right, clockwise from left): Perry Como, The Platters, Patti Page and Pat Boone. Photos: SCMP Picture, AFP



I had never heard anything so exciting. I looked guiltily around the room to see if other family members had noticed. My goosebumps felt enormous. Judging by the calm around me, no one else could hear the man who would soon be crowned "The King".

I ached to crank up the volume and let my body move to the rhythm, but somehow I felt this would be viewed as sinful.

I wanted to see the face of the man who caused this sensation. It would be months before I saw Elvis on the cover of a Hollywood gossip magazine in a beauty salon in Kowloon where I was waiting for my

**"EVEN WITHOUT THE INTERNET OR MTV TEENAGERS JUST KNEW THEY SHOULD FORM BANDS, GROW LOTS OF HAIR AND CREATE SOUND WAVES WITH HIGH DECIBELS"**

mother, Solveig, to have her hair done.

I wanted that Elvis hair. I wanted a guitar. And I wanted to be Elvis.

The local "live" music scene consisted mainly of Chinese and Filipino bands, and every self-respecting hotel had a nightclub. There were also independent nightclubs and ballrooms, but the music remained the same.

It wasn't until Commercial Radio Hong Kong started broadcasting in 1959 that pop music took off - just in time for the huge changes in pop culture that were about to explode around the world thanks to Elvis and other

dance was as much as some workers' monthly wage.

We competed for the hearts of fans with Joe Junior & The Side-Effects, Teddy Robin & The Playboys, The Menace, The Mods, The Lotus and the Astro-Notes. Irene Ryder, the Chopsticks and Marilyn Palmer did their best to set the male hearts aflutter.

The English-language *Star* newspaper held a talent contest and at one stage a band a day was featured, from Monday to Friday, and it never seemed to run out of pimply-faced youths to interview.

There was, of course, popular music in Cantonese and Putonghua, but to the younger generation this was terribly unfashionable. The word *naff* hadn't been invented yet.

**I**n the early 1970s, Japanese-influenced Mandarin pop from Taiwan briefly was the rage and it almost convinced the more conservative teenagers as well as their parents.

Then the wild frontman of the popular band Lotus went solo and sang in Cantonese. But he kept the rock 'n' roll beat, the hair, and the Elvis attitude. Sam Hui Koon-kit had given birth to Canto-pop and Hong Kong had its own sound.

English-language pop held its ground in the mid-70s. I fronted a group called Ming, and our main rival was an all-local band called The Wynners, but from time to time Canto-pop took over. But it wasn't until the 1980s that it really hit the mainstream.

Karaoke helped. It emerged from the Japanese words of *kara* meaning empty and *oke* which is short for orchestra - an "empty orchestra" because there was no lead singer. That was until Tom Wong, Dick Leung or Harry Lau came along and filled that space, along with Suzie Lee, Jenny So and Annie Wan.

Suddenly everyone was a pop star and the scene boomed with people demanding the original recordings to learn from and the karaoke tracks to sing with.

Today's Canto-pop industry is struggling both from the effects of illegal downloading and piracy as well as a stagnation in creativity and overexposure.

Of course, there is always an exception, and in this case it was Sam Hui, who had unsurprisingly been dubbed the godfather of Canto-pop, who came out of retirement to stage 10 comeback concerts last June.

Many pundits have started looking to the mainland as the possible source of the next big music trend in this part of the world.

I have seen some fascinating, talented up-and-coming musicians across the border.

They are penning original songs, some are growing their hair and others have revived the rock 'n' roll of the 1950s.

So another music cycle begins.



Anders Nelsson (far left) with his band the Continentals. Some gigs were more freeform than others...

## POP IDOL'S MANY HAPPY RETURNS

**Growing up with his missionary family in a Sha Tin village, Anders Nelsson was an unlikely 1960s celebrity. He recalls how one song saved his life**

**S**he was indescribably ugly. Some people are born plain, but this young woman had gone out of her way to emphasise the fact. It was the 1980s, her green-and-orange hair looked like she had stuck her fingers in an electric socket to get a semi-Afro effect. And her makeup appeared to have been in place for six months. I put my life at risk with this unfavourable description. Read on to understand why.

Her question sparked memories of one of the strangest episodes in my musical career in Hong Kong. "Do you remember having to sing *Happy Birthday* almost 20 times in one afternoon?" she asked in an accent that placed her from some chinatown in Canada.

My mind rewound to Bayside Nightclub in Chungking Mansions, circa 1963. It was late September. Tea dances were the rage and my band, the Continentals, had one of the most lucrative gigs locked in.

Chungking Mansions and the Bayside were new and teenagers of all nationalities flocked to the Saturday and Sunday afternoon sessions to hear us play a mix of originals and the latest out of America and Europe; mostly England's Merseyside.

On that Sunday afternoon we were constantly interrupted by a tough young "teddy boy" who insisted we sing *Happy Birthday* for his *loh ban* (boss).

Even after half a dozen times, a little voice told me to just "go with the flow". By the end of the two-hour session, we had sung "Happy Birthday, dear Frankie... Happy Birthday to you" 17 times. Each rendition was greeted with increasingly raucous cheering from Frankie's table.

I left the club a nervous wreck and soothed those shattered nerves with my favourite comfort food - a steaming bowl of Shanghai noodles. But imagine my horror

when from a far corner of the famed eatery, I heard chorus after chorus of "Happy Birthday, dear Frankie" over and over.

I was about to pay the cashier when Frankie's flunky recognised me. He wouldn't take "no" for an answer and I spent the rest of the night chugging down the best brandy money could buy as if it were a cola. I soon understood that Frankie was no ordinary *loh ban*. In fact "godfather" would have been a more apt title.

It was lucky I had heeded that little voice. I had briefly achieved a modicum of celebrity as my band had just topped the local charts with a ditty written by member Roy

**"FRANKIE WAS NO ORDINARY LOH BAN. IN FACT 'GODFATHER' WOULD HAVE BEEN A MORE APT TITLE"**

Davenport (who had been talked into leaving the Durham Light Infantry to join the Continentals).

And to "Godfather" Frankie, this meant that he had been given face on his birthday because this was before Canto-pop's heyday when the local idols sang in English and were a mixture of Chinese, Filipino, and expats. The Continentals had five different nationalities.

**F**ast forward to the 1980s when I met the orange-and-green haired woman. She told me Frankie, her grandfather, regaled every family gathering in Hong Kong and Canada ad nauseum about the pop star who gave him face all those years ago.

During those years, Hong Kong's music scene emerged from the innocence of the early 1960s - when fans just wanted an autographed photo - to the end of that decade when audiences could be young US soldiers from Vietnam or giggling schoolgirls

from the Maryknoll Convent School. But somehow the scene became much more serious. Young Duane from Macon wept openly as he hugged the speaker at the front of the stage as we played our rendition of *Georgia On My Mind*, and the surfers in the house sang along with *California Dreaming*.

Iron Butterfly's *In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida* brought a roar of approval and we could see the bar girls furtively rolling joints for their companions for the week in the dark corners of the club where my band of the moment was performing.

The latter day "Suzie Wongs" met the servicemen at Kai Tak airport or off the Wan Chai waterfront, took their money for the week and provided for their every need. Music, sex, shopping, food. Somehow they knew what was required, drugs included.

The understanding was that those "Suzie Wongs" would keep what was left in the kitty at the end of the week.

The servicemen were barely out of their teens and never knew whether they would ever make it home from Vietnam. I never told my missionary parents about the nightmares I had after listening to tales from Danang, My Lai and other hellholes in Vietnam.

It took only a few hours to bond with music fans to whom Jimi Hendrix was God, the Beatles could do no wrong and *Light My Fire* by The Doors was requested as frequently as Frankie's friends had asked for *Happy Birthday*.

In the following years and well into the 1980s, I often felt invincible. I adopted the Kowloon swagger.

One night at Tsim Sha Tsui's then very hip Hollywood East disco, two groups of rival triad punks had decided to fight. I stood in the middle and played peacemaker, which was perhaps a foolish move in hindsight. Revellers and management must have thought I was mad.

But I didn't know "Godfather" Frankie had told his merry men that the *guai chai* pop star should be looked after. After all, the pop star had given him face by singing *Happy Birthday* 17 times in one afternoon.