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THE QUESTS

by Tony Fairbairn

Tony became a fan of The Quests when he saw them live in Singapore in 1964 and here he tells their story

Singapore in the early 1960s was an exciting musical crossroads of the world. The weekly evening Amah's noisily flaunted all the current UK and US hit parade records, and by day you could wander into C K Tang's department store on Orchard Road and pick up the Jumping Jewels new LP. On the live front, guitar bands were forming all over the place in response to the combined demands of an enthusiastic local audience and the enormous Commonwealth military presence on the island at that time. In retrospect it was something of a golden age for local music, a time of encouragement and opportunity for budding musicians.

Amongst the bands honing their skills at such venues as the Golden Venus was a group of very talented youngsters who had titled themselves The Quests and who were fast making a name for themselves. The band's fortune took a dramatic upturn in 1964 when they were spotted by EMI, for whom they wrote and recorded an instrumental called *Shanty*. To their delight it quickly topped the Far Eastern hit parade and kick-started them on a professional career that has now passed into Singaporean musical folklore.

Their story begins in 1961 with four teenage friends who used to meet to share their interest in the music of Paul Anka, Johnny Tillotson and The Ventures. Of the four boys, two - Chong Chow Pin (nicknamed 'Jap') and Raymond Leong - could actually manage a bit of nifty guitar work and were no mean vocalists. The pair were thus encouraged to form a singing duo and, armed with a modest Everly Brothers repertoire, to enter their first talent contest. The name they chose for themselves was The Quests, a title derived from the name of their school: **QUEenstown Secondary Technical School**. A disappointing third place in the talent bash simply prompted the foursome to form a 'proper' band, and the two remaining members of the circle of friends now stepped into the limelight, Henry Chua on bass (because no-one else was playing it!) and Lim Wee Guan (known as 'Wee') on drums. Henry recalls that they rehearsed some more Everly Brothers numbers and even added the odd Ventures piece, but that '.....Shadows instrumentals were our favourites. We

could play *Apache*, *FBI*, *The Frightened City* and *Back Home* by heart.’ Henry also took on the role of chord finder and says that he listened very hard to what Shadows bassist Jet Harris was up to in his efforts to master the bass guitar. One of Henry’s sisters was a trainee nurse at the St Andrews Mission Hospital in Singapore and two weeks before Christmas 1961 she asked if the boys would be interested in playing at the nurses’ Christmas party. They were thrilled at getting their first official gig and agreed instantly, practising hard to build up a repertoire of some 60 songs for the occasion. In order to make themselves heard they had to borrow electric guitars from other people, while Wee provided percussion on a basic drum kit of snare, bass drum and 10-inch crash cymbal that had once belonged to his uncle. Band and audience all had a ball, and for their four hours of effort and sore fingers the boys were paid \$20. Christmas thus became an auspicious time for The Quests and later on they would hold an Anniversary Dance on 25th December at the Singapore Badminton Hall.

Following the successful yuletide bash the band found themselves in great demand, particularly for weekend house parties which provided regular if not very lucrative business. Talent competitions were always a tempting opportunity for raising profile so they decided to try their luck in that direction again. This time they decided to compete as a fully blown group and duly put their names down for a Talentime being organised by the Majestic Hotel in New Bridge Road. The meagre proceeds from the house parties still meant that the boys couldn’t afford electric guitars and so borrowed instruments were again the order of the day. They belted out *The Frightened City* in the finals but, despite meticulously rehearsed choreography, first place went to The Jets with red suits and guitars to match, whose rendering of *Drifin’* and accompanying step caught the judges’ eyes. Although they managed only second place in the talent show, the boys learned much from the event. They needed to sharpen up their act as far as presentation was concerned. A proper four-string bass went to the top of the shopping list and clearly something was lacking in their guitar techniques. They noticed the flair of the guitarist in the hotel’s resident band so they picked his brains. Scales were the secret – they had to master scales. Third place in another Talentime at the Great World Amusement Park confirmed what they already knew – competition was keen.

Henry’s mother came to the rescue and bought him a Hofner bass guitar costing \$200, a lot of money in those days. Henry was delighted with the bass which added the missing punch to their sound. When they came to enter yet another Talentime, this one at the YMCA in Prince Edward Road, they struck gold as Henry remembers: ‘We entered the finals easily and picked The Shadows *Gonzales* for the final day. The choreography was rehearsed to death and with clockwork precision, right to the very sem-quaver timing. This time we clinched the first prize. That evening we were on cloud nine with all of us feeling 10 feet tall. We were on top of the world. This was our first taste of success.

That success now brought them the publicity they had sought and they were invited to appear on local radio and television music programmes. ‘We were absolutely delighted’ Henry recalls.. Two of the programmes which we frequently appeared on were Dandang Ria and Pop Inn. We

were paid \$80 for each programme – later increased to \$100. Just when The Quests fortunes seemed to be on the up, Raymond Leong dropped a bombshell and announced that he wanted to leave the band to become an engineer. Fortunately, the boys had become friendly with another of Singapore's top bands The Checkmates, and were particularly impressed by the musicianship of the lead guitarist, Reginald Verghese. Although it put The Checkmates in a bit of a spot they asked Reg to join them on lead guitar. Reg readily agreed, and The Checkmates weren't too put out, going on to release their own recordings.

Reg was a real shot in the arm for the band, and with earnings from gigs at RAF clubs around the island they bought him a \$700 Fender Stratocaster. They also took on a new singer, Siri Pereira, whom Henry describes as '...the Charlie Chaplin of Singapore. Give him a hat and stick and he would have the audience in stitches.' Siri was soon replaced by Wilson David, who had won a local Cliff Richard contest and who settled in quickly. The band was now delighted to secure a regular slot at Singapore's prestigious Goodwood hotel whose primarily European and American clientele immediately took to The Quests.

In addition to club and hotel work the band now turned their attention to theatre performances and in mid-1964 began their first major tour, during which they put on 13 shows in the Malaysian towns of Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang. A couple of months after this tour they got their big break and were invited to audition for EMI. They worked very hard, practising to perfection the numbers they had prepared for the audition. On the day, they loaded all their gear into two taxis and made their way to EMI's MacDonald House. At the end of the audition, EMI's A&R Manager, Daisy Devan, said 'OK boys, we are going to sign up The Quests. You will come back next week for the first recording session, but I want two original numbers.' The Quests were overjoyed – but unfortunately Wilson David was not included in the contract. The deal was going to be an instrumental affair.

EMI had issued a tough assignment, and Henry recalls: 'I went home wondering how we could ever come up with two original tunes. We had never tried our hand at composing before.' Reaching for his faithful Rossino F-hole guitar he began strumming a few chords. Eventually he came up with a catchy melody based on a four chord progression, and thus was born *Shanty*. Two days later Reg Verghese caught a taxi to Henry's place repeatedly humming a tune (lest he forget it – none of the band could read or write music) which would soon be titled *Gallop in*'. Thus it was that on 24th August 1964 The Quests recorded *Shanty* as the A-side with *Gallop in*' as the flip after only three takes. Henry was just 17 years old and Reg a few months younger.

Following its release in October '64 *Shanty* kept climbing the charts and went on to top the Singapore and Malaysian hit parades. In Singapore it remained at the top for over 12 weeks, ousting The Beatles *I Should Have Known Better*. Years later it would be recorded by European groups The Invaders and Danny and The Electro Strings, and it became the first single by a Singapore group to sell 20,000 copies. 'We were amazed and delighted by our achievement and in the next few weeks it

was not possible to tune into the radio without listening to *Shanty*. It was our signature tune.'

After the runaway success of *Shanty* Daisy Devan called for a quick follow-up release, preferably another original composition and, true to form, Henry came up with a number he called *Tea Break*. The B-side was a haunting rendition of the Pop Inn theme *Watch Your Step*. *Tea Break* charted for many weeks and even became the signature tune of a similarly named radio programme. At the tail end of 1965 they released the first instrumental EP by a Singapore group, which included a bouncy number called *I'm Feeling Good* written by Reg and on which he played a keyboard chorus. Events took an interesting turn in 1965 when, during one of their many gigs at Singapore's Royal Air Force bases, they met up with a guy called Keith Locke. Henry remembers him as '...a likeable British national of Jamaican descent. He was actually an RAF radio operator at the time. A colourful, confident character, Keith got up on stage to sing with the band and his antics were well received by the audience. He quickly and naturally became a permanent vocal fixture and the band was now Keith Locke and The Quests. Like everyone else, EMI's Daisy Devan took a shine to him and he too was offered a contract. 'Keith Locke and The Quests brought the house down at almost every show' Henry recalls.

Keith, however was a full time RAF technician and his bosses gradually lost patience with him spending more time with The Quests than on his RAF duties. He was soon in trouble but his career as a singer came to an end when he was posted back to the UK in 1966. His place was taken by Vernon Cornelius who took over the vocal slot in time for the band to cut their first album entitled *Questing*. This was a pleasing mix of six instrumental and seven vocal tracks. It was the first long player in English by a Singapore band.

By 1967 the band had reached its pinnacle and Henry Chua was speculating on the future. He concluded that they were not going to make it big in the USA or Europe. He therefore reluctantly decided to leave and was replaced on bass by Sam Toh from a band called The Blackjacks. The following year the new line-up secured a three-month contract at the Mocambo Club in Hong Kong and for this recruited keyboard player Jimmy Chan. They were soon being featured on Hong Kong TV and continued to record for EMI. The Hong Kong stint was an exhausting one and the band finally returned to Singapore in late 1969. After short spells in various residencies they finally settled at the Kelong Niteclub in Orchard Road, where Peter Richards joined on keyboards following Jimmy Chan's decision to remain in Hong Kong. They finally disbanded in 1971. Reg Verghese went into musical production, retiring in 1992 and later receiving a Meritorious Award from the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore. Jap Chong continued to work as a musician, Wee Guan became a professional percussion teacher, while Henry Chua formed a band called The reQuests. Singer Vernon Cornelius became a researcher with the Singapore National Archives. The Quests are an important part of Singapore's musical heritage and if, like me, you were lucky enough to see them live in their heyday you would never forget them. They were superb.

