



A musical journey from west to east

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Thanh Bui discovered a passion for American soul music while growing up in Australia as the son of Vietnamese parents. It led him to a life as a performer, teacher and songwriter. Now, having written songs for some of the world's biggest acts in Japanese and Korean pop, he is passing on his knowledge to the next generation.

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Singer-songwriter Thanh Bui describes himself as “180 west and 180 east; together they make 360”.

Bui is the son of asylum seekers who fled Communist Vietnam for Australia in the '80s. A passion for music led him from boy band to Australian Idol finalist in 2008 to composer of No. 1 hits, before he decided to take everything he had learnt in Australia back to share with the people of his parents' homeland.

Bui now lives in Ho Chi Minh City, where he has set up a music school he is developing into an arts education and entertainment empire. The Soul Music and Performing Arts Academy (SMPAA) caters to about 1000 students, aged from six months for the Kinder Musik program – in which Thanh's twin toddlers also participate – and upwards.

The business has expanded to include two live venues, a television station, television production facilities, a record label and distribution arm. This year, the singer-songwriter will also release an English language album under his own name, with collaborations from the likes of apl.de.ap from the Black Eyed Peas.

The journey begins

Bui is a pioneer in the arts in Vietnam, a country which has only been open to the world since the '90s. “To think that I'm 35 and I've had a 17-year career in the arts is gobsmacking,” he says.

“If it wasn't for the equality of the Australian society I wouldn't be where I am today. “I know that so much of the work I do today is the result of my experiences in Australia.”

Bui began playing classical piano and singing at the age of 10. He had lessons at the Eastern Hill Conservatorium of Music and the Johnny Young Talent School, which the Minogue sisters, Kylie and Dannii, also attended.

His parents wanted their son to have the opportunities that had been denied to them, but despite giving him a thorough music education as a child, this did not include him becoming a professional musician as an adult.

“In the back of their minds they wanted me to be a doctor or ... a lawyer ... Music wasn't supposed to be the

main event.”

A compromise was reached: Bui would go to university and continue to follow his passion. While studying for a Bachelor in Information Technology at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, he was persuaded to join the four-piece boy band North.

Bui believes in working hard. “As long as you love what you’re doing and you’re passionate about it then do it,” he says.

Charted territory

North released two albums and had Top 10 hits throughout Southeast Asia. When they disbanded after two years, Bui set up his own music schools and began a songwriting and publishing company with fellow North member Alfred Tuohy. Bui travelled the world collaborating with other songwriters in Europe and America, and scored chart hits in Spain and Germany, as well as No.1s for boy band Arashi in Japan and pop duo TVXQ in South Korea. He also wrote Danger for BTS, a seven-piece that is currently K-pop’s most popular boy band. The music video has more than 100 million views on YouTube.

He says the classic Australian attributes of being direct, down to earth and laidback are an asset on the international scene.

“I know when I travel around the world and I say that I’m Australian, there’s a certain respect that people give us, especially in America. My American friends say, ‘you’re so relaxed, but you still get the work done’. That’s the Aussie way.”

A vision for the future

Bui says he will “forever be an Aussie”, but moving to Vietnam has given him a new sense of self, and he has started to develop a musical about the Vietnamese experience.

“I hope it will be a story for the ages. When you think about immigration, this is not just the story of the Vietnamese people, this is the story of humanity. And I think it’s important that we be reminded of what happened in the past, so that we know what we have to do for the future.”

The musical and the school and its extensions are all part of his vision to put Vietnamese culture on the world stage.

“Right now when people think about Vietnam, people don’t think about the arts, people don’t think about our musicians or our artists and it’s time, with our incredible history, to have a voice on a world stage. My life’s work is dedicated to that now, and how to reconcile the west and the east.”

Find out more about [SMPAA](#).