



# Kim

VIETNAMESE SINGER  
HIP-HOP ARRIVES IN VIET NAM

Her parents named her Le. Three years ago, when she started her singing career, she decided to call herself Kim because she wanted a name that everyone could easily remember. Le was born in 1991 in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam: about that time, her country began a phase of industrial and commercial development that brought far-reaching social change. Le's parents, for example, have jobs that did not exist twenty-five years ago: her mother works in a company that makes computer games and her father in a commercial office. Le went to public school, played, painted trees and suns, sang the songs that her older sister listened to: a normal life that sometimes actually bored her.

*Sometimes I thought that when I grew up I would be a teacher; sometimes I thought I wanted to be a businesswoman and own a company. I changed my mind all the time, never had the same idea for long. But I think that I wanted to do something different, because life seemed so boring.*

Until one day when it rained and rained Le heard a song. By then she was twelve; the rain kept her home and she was listening to a pop compilation CD that she had bought the day before. Suddenly, one of the songs brought her to her feet with a pull she had never felt before. Le looked at the CD cover: a group called Bone Thug-n-Harmony. It sounded totally different. Le had just discovered hip-hop. She had the feeling that nothing would ever be the same.

Le started looking into who these singers were and what other groups played similar music. She looked everywhere, but it wasn't easy to find songs like those. At first she only cared about the melodies; then she felt the need to know what the lyrics said. She couldn't make them out, but someone told her that if she went to an Internet café she could find the lyrics on the web. Her English was not very good, but she began to understand that the songs spoke about black life in the United States, about crime, drugs, sex, money, social dysfunction and clashes with the police.

*In Vietnam there are many songs, of course. But the lyrics are silly, they don't talk about real life: they are so false. When you listen to Vietnamese songs, you always hear the same words: you -love-, chia tay-break-up. For me it was a revelation to listen to songs that spoke about the lives of people, real things, freedom.*

By now, Le knew what she wanted to do with her life: she would be a rapper, a hip-hop singer. At that point she bought herself, for the first time, a book: a Vietnamese-English dictionary to help her understand the songs. Le spent hours every day listening and singing at top volume: her parents could not stand the noise, and they told her she could listen only when they weren't home. Her sister didn't like the songs either; Le felt lonely, but more and more determined.

*Some singers tell you that the road to music is rough; they make up stories. That's not how it was for me. My sister sang in a girls'*

*pop band, and she asked the head of her record company if he would let me audition.*

Le got ready. She was very nervous, but tried to calm down. That morning, she sang a song by Tupac, *Thugz Mansion*: “Shit, tired of gettin shot at. Tired of gettin chased by the police and arrested. Niggaz need a spot where we can kick it. A spot where we belong, that’s just for us.” While she was singing, she had the feeling that they weren’t paying too much attention. When she finished, the man told her to rest for a while. Le was sure she hadn’t made it, and her sister tried to calm her down: don’t worry, she said, we can always try somewhere else.

"I wrote a real song about the school. Usual songs talk about beautiful schools, lovely students, innocent teenagers. But look at the reality: students have sex, they steal..."

But that afternoon the man from the record company called her and proposed a two-month trial and training period. They had her sing other songs, first in English and then in Vietnamese, and they taught her how to move and dance on the stage. The producer

who trained her told her that if she wanted to become a singer, the first thing she had to do was learn to please the audience, to sing the songs they like. Sometimes that made Le sad; other times, she thought that was a sacrifice she had to make to be what she wanted to be.

The day her trial period was over, the record company’s boss told her that she had been given a contract. Back home, Le looked at herself in the mirror, and decided that from then on her name would be Kim. She was amazed: at the age of fourteen, she was going to have what every girl wanted. She was going to be famous, admired, desired: a singer. But she was also worried:

*I was scared I wouldn't be able to handle it, since I was so young. And the first times I had to sing in public I was frightened by the people down there looking up at me. I was also scared I would end up being a pop singer, when I wanted to be a hip-hop singer.*

Mostly, Kim didn’t want to sing the same old songs about pure love, breaking up and getting back together.

*I wanted to talk real. I talk about the life around me. In my first song I talked about how much I loved hip-hop. It did not work.*

*It didn't attract the audience. But I kept on writing about our lives. I wrote a real song about the school. Usual songs talk about beautiful schools, lovely students, innocent teenagers. But look at the reality: students have sex, they steal, they do some bad things. Nobody write that, they just write nice things. As a composer, I write about those others things too.*

Economic development has meant that young people in Vietnam become: more autonomous, more mobile, and they have more places to get together; it is a life style that can expose them to earlier sexual debut. But for many, sex is still a taboo subject. In a recent survey, just over half the respondents said that contraception is only for married people.

*So I write about teenage sex, pregnancy. Girls like popular boys in the class. These boys must be rich, act cool, smoke. And when they are in love the boy says, if you really love me we must have sex.*

*And you think it's bad for teenagers to have sex?*

*Well, it is not a bad thing. It depends on what you think. If you think the guy is good, a person you can trust... But you and*

*he are teenagers; he does not have a job, and you may get pregnant. He cannot take care of you because he lives with his parents and he has no job...*

Kim was not intransigent: in her concerts she mixed some pop songs in with the hip-hop; while pleasing the audience, she showed them the songs that she really cared about. And, little by little, she became the leading Vietnamese hip-hop singer. Kim sings in English with a *Viet-Harlem* accent. She sees no contradictions in singing American songs. After all, the war was long ago:

*There have been many events to heal the war. It's like the sun shining after the rain. I like tolerance and forgiving. It is my character to forgive and I like others to forgive. The war has become part of the past. Why look into the past, and not into the future?*

Her first album, *Kim*, came out in September 2006, and it sold well. Its songs were played on the radio and some even made the charts. Kim had concerts, sang on television and represented her country at international festivals. At that time, a Dutch NGO, Medical Committee Netherlands, asked her to do something different: to work



with a group of women ex-drug addicts with HIV who wanted to put together a band. Kim encouraged the women to rap to the audience about their own stories: that is how Cactus Blossoms was born.

*It was really moving. I understood how I could help others through music. These women spoke of how they had been infected, what it was like to live with HIV, the discrimination and stigmatization they experienced. Some people cried when they heard them.*

Kim also had to deal with ignorance: her parents and friends told her to be careful when she was with the women with HIV, not to get too close or touch them.

*Most people don't know anything about HIV-AIDS; they believe falsehoods. That's why I thought it was good to do this work, so that they would learn the truth about it.*

It wasn't so easy: some members of the Cactus Blossoms asked that the show not be broadcast on television because they were concerned about discrimination against their families.

In 2007, a song by Kim, *Playing Hard*, was chosen as the official song of the Asian Football Cup: that was a major breakthrough. Though Kim is becoming well-known, she still has doubts: her producers ask her to keep including pop songs

in her concerts to avoid disappointing that segment of her audience; and for the time being she accepts. Being pragmatic, her next album will include two or three pop songs.

*Why?*

*I care about the audience. I have to care about it.*

*To sell more records?*

*Yes, I sing hip-hop for teenagers, but older people don't want to listen to that. And I want them to buy my albums too.*

*Do you care about being famous?*

*Yes, we all care about that. Who doesn't want to be famous?*

*How do you imagine yourself at the age of thirty?*

*Uh, by then I will be too old to sing. But I imagine that I will have a lot of money and own my own record label. I will have a big house and help new singers. I imagine myself releasing a clothing line and having a place for kids to play x-games... But I am*

*not going to tell you anything else, because when you talk about your projects they just don't happen.*

Right now, some of Kim's projects are about to happen. With UNFPA support, she is going to record a video clip and do a tour with songs about domestic violence, adolescent sexuality, reproductive health. In these songs, Kim keeps talking out loud about things that most Vietnamese people speak of in hushed tones, if at all:

“...Everyone has found their happiness:/ That's their family./ Why do we build up our families? It's to have a thing to love./ And No... I... Please, let's look at those children's eyes./ What do you see?/ I can only see tears flowing from the hurt children./ Is this the house that you are expecting?/ Or does it look like the collapse caused by a hurricane?/ Come now just think, is this the house of pain?/ Parents seem to be civilized, but inside they hide a lot of torture./ Being beaten, threatened and no one cares about them...”.

Kim sings at a feverish pace with a mix of anger and compassion in her eyes. Sometimes, she says, she forgets that she is seventeen years old, but usually she sees herself as a normal girl, who goes to school, does her homework, sings her songs, and goes out with her friends.

*Do you have a boyfriend?*

*No.*

*Don't you want to?*

*Yes, I do. But when I like some guy, I don't know how to approach him, what to tell him. So the guy doesn't know I like him. And there are some that like me, but I don't like them. So I don't really know what to do to have a boyfriend ...*

## POPULAR YOUTH CULTURE TAKES ON THE WORLD

Global communication, the Internet and TV are changing the way young people grow up. A UN report calls it a “global media-driven youth culture”.<sup>1</sup> It is appearing in all parts of the world, especially in cities and towns. The global youth culture offers young people a frame of reference for their questions about the adult world as they explore the culture of their families and communities.<sup>2</sup>

Young people from all parts of the world are developing aspirations, values and attitudes at times in contradiction to the traditions of their culture. Youth-specific consumer goods and targeted marketing are found wherever young people have purchasing power and access to the media.<sup>3</sup> These consumer goods and lifestyles, and cultural influences centred around music, movie, fashion, and sports stars, have produced a shared consciousness among young people and new patterns and forms of social contact. By way of videos, text messages and chat rooms, young people express themselves in ways that largely exclude adults.<sup>4</sup> The process challenges and breaks down tradition, questions and alters authority structures.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, wide variations continue within and among countries, and intergenerational relations are still to a large extent shaped at the local level.<sup>6</sup> Young people use, adapt and interpret global media messages and products

in unique ways based on their own local and national cultures and their personal experiences, and create hybrid cultural forms in the process.<sup>7</sup> As Kim’s story shows, hip-hop music may have originated in the United States, but it has become something different in other parts of the world.

So youth culture is both a global phenomenon and a local response and adaptation to it. This raises the question of who owns youth culture; and to what extent youth culture is produced by young people themselves or produced for them by the global media industry. Until recently a handful of corporations dominated the global music industry, but fans and commentators have regularly criticised popular music as being too commercial or fake.<sup>8</sup> Now the Internet has changed the marketplace beyond the corporations’ capacity to control it, offering an opportunity for musicians and small entrepreneurs to reach limited but highly particular audiences. In this as in other areas, young people are finding ways to satisfy their individual tastes.

There are many examples of artists who have used their art to transmit social messages, in the same way that Kim is singing to her Vietnamese fans about gender equality and women’s empowerment. Music, movie and sports celebrities have become spokespersons

for social issues and humanitarian causes, influencing debate and action around them—and their own status with their global audience. Their popularity can help raise the profile of specific issues and draw the attention of mass media and young audiences. UNFPA’s goodwill ambassadors include a former Miss Universe, Mpule Kwelagobe, and Mary Banotti, an Irish representative in the European Parliament. Several UN agencies supported the Staying Alive campaign launched by Music Television International (MTV) which carried messages to young people about HIV prevention.

For those who have access, there is an unlimited quantity of mass media material; but quantity does not necessarily mean quality or variety. To offset the power of global producers, and ensure that young people can create, share and use material which suits their own tastes, demands support for innovation, and regulation of public as well as commercial providers. Young people, just like adults, should not be exposed to harmful content or material they have not chosen. At the same time, arguments about young people’s vulnerability do not justify denying them access to knowledge and power. Producers of cultural material should reflect young people’s own perspectives. They should be held accountable to the audiences they claim to serve.