



Singer-songwriter Lam Peng Er (left), 57, says he is just beginning his musical childhood.
PHOTO: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Setting current affairs to music

Political scientist Lam Peng Er's debut album has songs inspired by topical events such as the Arab Spring

Eddino Abdul Hadi
Music Correspondent

By day, Dr Lam Peng Er is a political scientist who weighs in on issues such as the local political landscape and the state of the economy in Japan.

By night, he straps on a guitar and pens folk and rock songs inspired by current affairs.

The singer-songwriter recently released his debut album, *Oceans Without Fishes*, which contains 13 original tracks.

The 57-year-old, a senior research fellow at National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute, grew up to the music of rock greats such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan.

He was inspired to pick up the guitar in his teens, but it was only in the last few years that he started writing and composing his own music.

"I think I am just beginning my musical childhood, this is my genesis," says Lam, who is married and has a 19-year-old daughter.

"Traditionally, the age of 57 would be the autumn of my life. But these days, even when you're 67, that's a new middle age. For me, I'm just at the beginning of my musical spring."

In 2012, he stumbled upon The Guitar Gallery, a shop in Parklane Shopping Mall specialising in high-end guitars, and subsequently bought a few of the instruments. "Since the guitars sounded good, I had the incentive to practise more. Then I started wondering, why should I be doing

covers of other people's songs?"

Lam, who has authored numerous books and research papers, says that writing lyrics comes easily to him. "I've gone through enough experiences in my life and I have certain views of the world, so I was just inspired to put music to lyrics."

Many were based on social issues and topical events, such as the self-explanatory *Heads Up High: Paean To Arab Spring* and *Born Without A Horn*, a song about how humans are "naturally flawed".

Cacophony (I Refuse To Hear) was inspired by his daughter feeling overwhelmed by her examinations.

"I pulled out my guitar and started singing 'I hate school' and she spontaneously sang along," he recalls. "At that moment, music was a way of showing empathy. I was standing in solidarity with my daughter."

It was also through The Guitar Gallery that he met local music veteran Tony Goh, former singer in the 1970s band *Tony & Terry With Spencer*. Goh later invited him to record at his studio, The Green Room Suite, and they ended up co-producing the album together.

Lam's singing on the album might not be note-perfect, but he refused to use Auto-tune technology to manipulate his voice, explaining that he is more interested in conveying his passion and telling stories through his music.

He is already working on new songs for his next album, titled *Perfume And Branded Bags*, which reflects on gender relations and materialism. Still, he has no illusions about making a career out of his songs.

"I do it for the love of music. I cannot quit my job – it's impossible, I have responsibilities in this world."

A recent article he read on American music industry veteran and dance music pioneer Nile Rodgers struck a chord with him.

"What Nile Rodgers said was that the reward is not the fame or to make a living with the money. The reward is actually the process of making music. So in a sense, I have my reward already."

dinohadi@sph.com.sg

• *Oceans Without Fishes* is available on iTunes and Spotify.