

Mixing medicine & melody



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By day, they are professionals with high-flying careers in healthcare and academia.

In their downtime, they turn into singers and musicians who play gigs, release albums and sing on television.

Meet three Singaporeans juggling day jobs and music – medical officer Steph Yeap, dentist Saminthaaraj Kumar and political scientist Lam Peng Er.

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Dr Steph Yeap goes by the stage name Stephycube as a singer and songwriter. ST PHOTO: FELINE LIM

For Dr Steph Yeap, her two lives as a doctor and singer-songwriter have often intertwined.

For instance, the 27-year-old, who performs under the moniker Stephycube, has a song called Emergency Room, one of her most-streamed songs on Spotify.

She is now a medical officer in the ear, nose and throat (ENT) department at a public hospital.

Because of her passion for singing, she developed an interest in laryngology, a branch of medicine dealing with the voice box.

"When I was a very young medical student, there were these ENT doctors I talked to and they said that I loved singing and said, 'If you're interested in singing, you

should do laryngology,'" says Dr Yeap, who took piano lessons as a child and joined a rock band as a co-curricular activity in junior college.

"I found out that I really liked this aspect of medicine, which is both surgical and medical. It's something related to the voice, which I can incorporate into my work."

As a singer, she came to prominence when she was selected for the National Arts Council's Noise Singapore music programme in 2015.

In 2019, the same year she graduated from the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, she released her debut EP, *Most Of All*.

At the time, she says, she was "doing my housemanship, which a lot of people would argue is quite a busy time".

"But my main impetus for putting out the EP was because it was a passion project. I wanted to prove to myself and everyone that you could juggle both work and something you love."

Before the pandemic put a stop to live performances, she would schedule evening gigs in cafes, a few hours after putting in 30-hour shifts.

Her music has been added to Spo-

Doctor's double life as a singer-songwriter

tify and Apple Music's curated playlists, and she has performed at venues including the Esplanade and "Scape".

She wrote Emergency Room, which is taken off her EP, as a poignant tribute to her late grandfather. The then medical student was the first person to reach him when he was admitted to the accident and emergency department at National University Hospital.

In 2020, the song gained traction worldwide when Spotify users

added it to their Covid-19 themed playlists.

A fan from the United States wrote to Dr Yeap and told her how his daughter – a dancer who had been admitted to the emergency department – was deeply moved by the song and ended up using it for a performance.

While Dr Yeap has had less free time since the pandemic started, the music has not stopped.

In 2020, she worked with Creative Nation Singapore, a collective by the National Youth Council, to come up with a playlist and perform for front-liners.

Her most recent performance was in December, at a show celebrating Singapore General

Hospital's 200th anniversary.

At her wedding in the same month, she moved her husband – who is also 27 and works in finance – to tears by singing a song she wrote for him.

She reckons her next album will be ready in two or three years.

In the meantime, she is planning a collaborative album with musician friends and has been writing music that can be used commercially or sung by other artists.

She has also motivated medical students to pursue music.

"I have juniors come up to me who said the release of the EP and my social media presence have inspired them to pick up music and go for vocal and guitar lessons."



Dentist Saminthaaraj Kumar does covers of English and Tamil songs and regularly posts videos of himself singing on TikTok. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

Going to the dentist can be daunting for some.

So while his patients are in the chair, Dr Saminthaaraj Kumar helps them that ease by singing.

"Some patients are very stressed when I am doing surgery for them. You can see it in their eyes that when I am singing, they become relaxed," says the 46-year-old, who has sung multiple times on local Indian television and radio, as well as at events such as the 2000 National Day Parade and venues like community centres.

For the chief executive of Nuffield Dental Holdings, singing is a daily affair – be it at the office or at home.

"I've quite a number of dental and medical clinics under my leadership. At the moment, we're talking about 13 clinics and a few other companies. It can be very stressful and people ask me, 'How do you run so many things and you are always smiling?'" Dr Kumar says.

"To relax, I sing a song that appeals to me. At the end of a busy day, music relaxes the soul and the mind. It's a very powerful way to destress both myself and my patients."

When he was in Anglo-Chinese School (Primary), his teachers

were so impressed with his singing that they got him to croon on Tamil radio and television.

In 1998, his singing aspirations got a boost when he became a contestant on the televised Tamil Talentime series, *Uthaya Tharagai '98*.

Then a dental student at the National University of Singapore, he was a crowd favourite and came in fourth.

He went on to secure invites to sing at live events and television variety shows. "At one point, I was singing on television every week," he recalls.

It was also during that time that the self-taught singer took formal lessons for classical Indian singing.

Fans approached him for autographs. In an interview with *The New Paper* in 2000, he spoke of how one fan tracked down his pager number and left him multiple love messages.

"I was really passionate about singing at that point and actually thought of giving up pursuing a

This singing dentist performs on TV

career as a dentist," he says.

"Then I spoke to my parents. I don't come from a very wealthy family, so it was better that I concentrate on my career first."

He also faced opposition in school.

"The dean of the faculty called me up and said, 'You shouldn't be singing, this is bad for you. Stop dancing on TV, it's bad rep. We don't want to have this reputation of dentists dancing around on TV,'" Dr Kumar says.

But when he was in Britain furthering his studies at the Royal Free & University College Medical School – now known as UCL (University College London) Medical School – the reaction from the school was the complete opposite.

"When they found out I could sing, they told me I was incredibly talented and wanted me to sing at more school events and shows."

Because of the pandemic and his workload, Dr Kumar has not performed live in the past two years.

But he maintains an active presence on social media. He has a TikTok account where he regularly posts videos of himself doing renditions of Tamil and English pop songs, as well as a page on music streaming website SoundCloud with his covers of classical Tamil songs.

During the circuit breaker in 2020, he composed an original tune titled *In This Together* and performed it for the *In This Together Singalong* Challenge organised by The Straits Times and e-payment service provider Nets.

A few months ago, he sang on Tamil radio station Oli 96.8FM, taking on numbers by Indian singing icon S.P. Balasubrahmanyam.

Dr Kumar, who is married to a teacher, encourages his 13-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter to pursue music as a passion – just like he did in his school days.

"It was a conscious decision to pursue dentistry, rather than singing, as a professional career," he says. "But these days, for youngsters, the world is their oyster. There are many people who pursue singing professionally even though they already have a mainstream career – because of platforms such as YouTube and TikTok."

Six years ago, political scientist Lam Peng Er made headlines as the academic who dropped a rock album, *Oceans Without Fishes*, with self-written songs inspired by global events.

He is no flash in the pan.

The 63-year-old, who counts classic rock acts such as Bob Dylan and Electric Light Orchestra as influences, has recorded another album of original tunes which he plans to release some time this year.

And while the first album comprises songs that referenced social and political events such as the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, Dr Lam wrote "semi-autobiographical" lyrics dealing with emotions such as joy and sadness for his upcoming album, *Black Hole In My Heart*.

The principal research fellow at National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute (EAI) sings and plays some guitar on the tunes, which span genres from progressive rock to samba funk.

Dr Lam, who started playing guitar in his teens and sang in his school choir, admits he is not a great singer.

"I really believe in the democracy of music. I'm not saying all music is good. I let myself be led by the heart and just let the cards fall."

He produced 300 CD copies of his debut album, most of which were given away to friends, associates and fellow academics. Some were sold at local music store Roxy Records & Trading.

The album is also available on Spotify. According to statistics from the streaming platform, Dr Lam's top listeners are from Ukraine, Russia and the United States – three countries hogging global headlines now.

"I have no idea why," he says. "But a Russian friend once told me that my songs' progressions and melodies reminded him of Russian folk songs."

Like what he did for his first album, he worked on his new songs with veteran musician Tony Goh from home-grown trio Tony, Terry

Political scientist to release his second album

And Spencer. The tracks were mostly recorded in 2018 and 2019.

There was a small break when the pandemic hit, but when Goh's music studio, Greenroom Suite, reopened, the academic composed and recorded two more songs in 2020 and last year.

Dr Lam, whose wife is a vice-president of investment facilitation at the Economic Development Board, roped in his 24-year-old daughter, a graphic designer, to illustrate the album cover.

Since the pandemic, Dr Lam has been working mostly from home. Last year, he and EAI senior research fellow Ryan Clarke wrote a monograph titled *Coronavirus Research In China: Origins, International Networks And Consequences*. It was published by the Consortium of Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia, a network of think-tanks and research organisations.

He also took on a new position,

setting up and heading Korea Centre, EAI's new research facility.

The study room at home, which serves as his home office, houses not just a library of books, but also his collection of high-end, boutique guitars. These include an acoustic one he designed with local guitar store Guitar Gallery, with a Merlion emblem to mark Singapore's Bicentennial in 2019.

Working from home means he gets to play his guitars more often. "When I'm exhausted from frequent Zoom meetings, I unwind by playing my guitar and composing lyrics and melodies," he says.

He has upgraded his audiophile sound systems, which are found in several rooms throughout his three-storey house in Bukit Timah.

He also has a sizeable vinyl and CD collection that encompasses genres such as classical music, alternative rock, jazz and pop. Dr Lam is already planning his third album, which he says will be inspired by current events – most notably the pandemic and the crisis in Ukraine. "The songs will probably sound heavier and have a more metal feel."



Academic Lam Peng Er unwinds by playing the guitar and composing new songs. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN