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INTERVIEW

Creating his own karma

A globe-trotting British musician and record producer has finally come to rest in a small fishing village in Chon Buri _ and it sounds like he might be here to stay

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Creative juices begin pumping practically with the first steps up the stairs to Karma Sound Studios.

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Only another few paces and you're in a reception area equipped with couches, but keep going and you reach the pool and gardens _ nothing stands in your way.

It may seem like a 5-star resort, but within these grounds is a recording studio which is rapidly making a name for itself at home and abroad.

Creating an atmosphere of openness and ease was essential when owner Chris Craker began developing plans for this facility only a few minutes' walk from Bang Saray Beach, just south of Pattaya.

"I always dreamed of setting up a creative utopia where musicians could come and do their best work away from the distractions of the real world," Craker said.

The studio has already attracted some top Thai and international musicians, who have dropped by to record work of theirs or just to hang out. Visitors to date include Bullet For My Valentine, Jessie J and Jimmy Page plus local bands Bodyslam and Big Ass.

Craker knows the importance of a good space to foster creativity. He became a professional musician in his late teens and has been dipping his toes in different aspects of the industry ever since.

Music became more than just an interest for him at the age of 14 when he decided he wanted to pursue a career as a clarinet player. All the practice proved worthwhile, as after graduating from the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester he quickly found work, playing with a number of orchestras, before landing his dream job with the London Symphony Orchestra. He went on to contribute to albums by the likes of Alan Parsons, Sarah Brightman and Elton John.

"That was my life, but because it all happened quite early on and I was playing at that level from the age of 18, I thought that I wanted to explore other avenues and I was always fascinated by the record business," Craker explained.

As with the clarinet, here, too, he jumped in head first, so anxious was he to familiarise himself with all aspects of

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the music industry.

"I borrowed 1,000 (now 47,000 baht) from my dad and bought my first digital tape machine. One thing led to another and I acquired enough equipment to go do location recordings for classical and jazz [performances] and then I got a huge contract quite quickly with a record company."

He later set up his own record label, Black Box, and went on to release 75 albums before selling the business to do freelance work for companies such as EMI, Sony BMG, Universal and Warner. This gave him the freedom to travel widely and he began forging connections with music-industry players worldwide.

Alight breeze wafts through the foyer at Karma as I sit there chatting to Craker. It's hard to believe that this laid-back man in white button-up shirt and jeans has racked up so much experience in so little time: classical musician, composer, record and production company owner, author, senior vice-president at Sony BMG Masterworks. And all this before he hit 50.

It was just over five years ago that Craker decided to hang up his various hats and focus on opening a recording studio of his own. During visits to Thailand over the past 20 years, Craker had developed a good relationship with ML Usni Pramoj, the respected conductor, and worked with the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra. He collaborated with Amita "Tata" Young to produce Reach For The Stars, which became the theme song for the 13th Asian Games, and also got the opportunity to produce two albums to mark the 60th anniversary of HM the King's accession on the throne.

"It seemed that I was coming [to Thailand] almost every month," Craker recalled. "I used to make a tally of the trips because my passport was getting really full with stamps, as I had to keep renewing them [entry visas]."

So when the time came to build his own studio, Thailand seemed like the perfect place to set up this creative oasis.

"It was the start of a massive adventure that was full of thrills and spills and difficult moments," he said.

After two years of construction work and ironing out various design kinks, the Karma team had a full year to test the waters before officially opening the studio in 2010. Since then the doors haven't stopped swinging.

"Here at Karma we brush with all genres. It can be literally anything. We welcome anyone who wants to do interesting projects We have had string quartets, electronic dance music, everything," he said.

One particularly well-known client was British jazz-funk act Jamiroquai.

Rumours that the band was recording at Bang Saray spread through the area. One day lead singer Jay Kay was wandering down the beach, Craker said, and stopped to chat with a bunch of locals who hadn't recognised him because he wasn't wearing one of his signature hats. They couldn't wait to pass on the gossip about the famous group recording in the area, completely oblivious to the fact that they were face to face with Jamiroquai's frontman.

And that, Craker explained, is one of the aspects big foreign bands really appreciate about working at Karma.

"They absolutely love the anonymity, being away from the public eye and the paparazzi. It's a distraction. Here you live with us and you just come down and get treated like a normal person with no hassle and you just go to work."

Making great music in a resort atmosphere is not the only thing that Craker plans to offer visiting artists. His next step is to expand the premises to enable the filming and editing of videos and the hosting of live events.

And Karma will soon have its own in-house label which, Craker is hoping, will benefit emerging Thai artists by giving them more international exposure.

"We're giving them very affordable studio time and showing them how to make world-class studio records and disseminate them globally," he explained.

As a sudden downpour creates its own beat outside, the sound within the studios remains pristine. Karma's sophomore year has proved successful and Craker feels that this reflects well on the studios' ethos.

"I chose the name very carefully," he said. "I felt if I put my heart and soul into it... good things would come back. That we'd make great music, might have some success and be able to expand."



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