

Ethnic Dance Music in Northern Indiana

Vietnamese New Year Celebration

IH206 Fort Wayne - January, 31, 1987. Speeches, songs, music for dancing.

Loi Tran (keyboard-electric bass-drums), Vu Hien (keyboard),
Ngo Nguyen (electric guitar) & unknown (kb-eg-eb-dr)

Vietnamese Association banquet at Trinity Episcopal Church; recorded by Paul L. Tyler.

This New Year's celebration was hosted by the Fort Wayne Vietnamese Association. Special guests included the American host families of the refugees who found new homes in Fort Wayne. Dan Nguyen, who I had been told was knowledgeable about Vietnamese dance traditions, invited me to attend and gave me permission to record the event.

The celebration was attended by nearly 300 people, three quarters of whom were Vietnamese. The number of young children and babies was great. The participants sat at four rows of tables that ran the length of the hall without a break. There were also a half dozen round tables set up on each side of the hall and an equal number in the back. All the seats were filled, and children and teenagers were crowded into all the available space at the back and along the sides of the hall. At the front, on the floor to the left of the stage, was a podium with a microphone. A string of firecrackers was suspended from a stick that protruded from the front of the podium. To the left of the podium stood a lotus (?) tree with paper leaves. This was the background for a number of posed snapshots taken by various participants. To the right of the stage, also on the floor, was the sound system controls and the band area. The sound system included an amplifier (with heavy reverb), a tape deck, and four large speakers (two small ones on the stage and two giant ones on stands in the front corners of the room). The band set up in a square area with a drum set, an electric guitar, a bass guitar, and two synthesizers (set at right angles to each other).

The celebration began when the curtain was drawn to reveal a Vietnamese flag, an American flag, and a colorful banner with an outline of Vietnam wrapped in the coils of a large snake. An altar with candles, flowers and incense was set up just below and in front of the banner. The stage was lit with a row of colored lights at the front. Several microphones on stands were on the stage.

The proceedings opened with the singing of the Vietnamese national anthem, performed onstage by a choir of young women and a few men, followed by a series of speeches by members of the Association. Each speech was first given in Vietnamese and then in English. The speeches were given from various points: the podium, on the floor at the center of the stage, and from the stage. The opening speech welcomed everyone to the celebration sponsored by the Vietnamese Association, and wished everyone a Happy New Year. Other early remarks were given (in English, then translated into Vietnamese) by the Minister of the host church--who wished for the Vietnamese the same thing that he wished for the Vietnam War Veterans, a "welcome home"--and by a spokesman for a Vietnam veterans association. It was announced that there would be a prize given for the youngest baby in attendance. Also, at one

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point in the program, people were invited to go on stage and pay their homage to their homeland. Several older men did, showing reverence and bowing before the altar.

The main speech was given in Vietnamese by the President of the Vietnamese Association. It was then translated into English. The gist of his remarks was that the Communists remain the enemies of the South Vietnamese people, both in Vietnam and in their new homes. He spoke with hope that the Communists would be defeated and the Vietnamese could return to their homelands.

After this speech, the string of firecrackers was set off (a remnant of the string was later lit surreptitiously in the bands area), and with a surprising suddenness the Dragon [two dancers] and Buddha appeared to shrieks of joy and excitement from the participants, especially the children. The Buddha went in front of the Dragon, dancing backwards, facing the Dragon. They danced at the front of the hall, and then danced slowly up and down the crowded aisles between the rows of tables. A number of people held out gifts of money with which they 'fed' the Dragon. At the back of the hall, the Dragon dancers made a switch of personnel and danced through the hall again.

After the Dragon left, dinner was served from the kitchen. Young people carried big trays of disposable plates and trays of cider and juice in styrofoam cups (these had been served throughout the evening) which were handed out to all the guests. Members of the Association had prepared all the food in the church kitchen. The meal included fried rice, steamed vegetables (cauliflower and carrots), a piece of chicken, and an egg roll.

During the meal, the band played almost continuously. After the meal the stage curtain was opened again (the altar was now gone from the stage) and the after dinner program began with the singing of a young women's choir directed by Loi Tran. A woman served as M.C. and announced performances by a series of young women solo vocalists, one young male vocalist (who brought his sheet music with him), and a troupe of folk dancers, sixteen women of high school age. Throughout the evening, the dancers performed three numbers performed to tape recorded music. Between the stage performances, the curtain was closed and the band played several numbers.

Near the end of the evening, prizes were given away. The first prize was for the youngest baby in attendance. Other door prizes were drawn for (using numbered tickets) and eight to ten gift-wrapped prizes were given away. The last five or six winners were asked to unwrap their gifts in front of the audience. Most of these prizes were kitchenware, which brought laughter if the winner was a young man. The last two prizes were bottles of champagne which were opened and shared by the winners (including the Episcopal minister), the officiants, and friends. One of the Dragon dancers took the ticket barrel around and chose members of the audience to draw the winning tickets. In all but one case the person asked to draw a ticket from the barrel was a white male guest.

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The celebration ended abruptly. The audience, half as large as it had been earlier, got up to leave or help clean up. The evening was not over however, for a dance to taped music was to follow. One young man told me the dance was primarily for the young people. I asked him if there would be any Vietnamese music, or just American music. At first he looked puzzled, and then answered that it would be rock and roll music.

Dan Nguyen

Mr. Nguyen was identified for me as someone in the local Vietnamese community who would know about Vietnamese music and dancing. When I first contacted him he told me that they would bring in a band for the celebration. Then when I talked to him on the day of the celebration, he said that he had not gotten any professional musicians, but that some local musicians would play.

Mr. Nguyen and his wife had done most of the planning for the celebration. Mrs. Nguyen taught the folk dancers.

Loi Tran

Loi led the informally organized band, even though he didn't seem to be sure who everybody was who played. He played synthesizer, bass, and drums. Others also played these instruments at various times, including Vu Hien (keyboard) and Ngo Nguyen (electric guitar).

When I asked if I could record, Loi apologized for the band, saying they were only amateurs. They all had learned to play music in American schools and from American friends. They were trying to play Vietnamese music, and some French music.