

Welcome to AMERICAN MOSAIC from VOA Learning English.

I'm June Simms.

Today, we play hit songs from the songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.

We also talk about "The Great Gatsby," the movie that opened the Cannes International Film Festival this week.

But first we explore the culture of Cambodia on display this spring in New York City.

Season of Cambodia

Most of Cambodia's artists -- an estimated 80 percent -- were killed when the Khmer Rouge ruled the country in the 1970s. The artists were among about two million victims of Khmer Rouge rule. Their skills and knowledge were lost because Cambodian

culture is largely oral, passing from person to person through word of mouth.

In the past 20 years, a new generation of Cambodians has sought to reclaim those traditions and invent new forms of art. Steve Ember tells about a cultural program designed to help support that effort.

The program, called "Season of Cambodia," is taking place all around New York City. It began with a gathering of Buddhist religious workers. There have been musical performances, films, art shows and dance by more than 120 visiting Cambodian artists.

Phlouen Prim leads Cambodian Living Arts, the group that organized the festival.

"It's one step further to fulfill the organization's vision, which is having that, you know, kind of dream of re-imagining Cambodia being seen in the world for its arts and culture, and not just for the killing field."

Dance is the most-popular Cambodian art form. At the Guggenheim Museum, seven male dancers performed a new dance called “Khmeropédies III.” The dancers were trained at an early age to perform the part of the monkey. The animal often represents something important in traditional Cambodian stories.

Choreographer Emmanuèle Phuon worked with Eric Sargis, a specialist on primates, to study monkeys and apes.

“Such as in Africa chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and Eric explained how these particular animals move or how they behave, and we observed that and we made a dance out of that.”

Khema Wright was a child when her family fled Cambodia.

“So to see my culture actually here in the United States, in New York, it’s amazing.”

Her friend Chhaya Chhoum directs a community group for Southeast Asian immigrants.

“You know, a lot of our community members talk about how, you know, they just want to live to die, because they’ve suffered so much. And I think the art really rejuvenates and awakens peoples’ sense of community, trust and love for one another again.”

Members of Chhaya Chhoum’s group helped to connect flowers to a work by Cambodian artist Leang Seckon. The image of a soldier was made with a parachute that fell to earth in the American bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War. The work was used in a “ceremony of reconciliation,” that included Cambodians and former American soldiers.

Arn Chhorn-Pond helped to launch Cambodian Living Arts. He told the group how playing his musical instrument, a flute, saved his life -- first by protecting him from the guards at the work camp where he was sent, and then from his desire to punish his

captors. Now, he says, he is using his art to help Cambodians heal.

“I never thought that the flute and speaking is power. I thought that only the burial of guns that’s power. But I was wrong.”

“The Great Gatsby”

Director Baz Luhrmann’s “The Great Gatsby” opened the famed international film festival in Cannes, France, this week. This was an unusual choice for the festival, which usually opens with a new movie. But “The Great Gatsby” has been showing in theaters around the United States for more than a week. It has also played in Canada and a few other countries.

“The Great Gatsby” is based on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s book of the same name, which was published in 1925. It tells about how some rich New Yorkers lived in the “Roaring Twenties.” For Jay Gatsby and his friends, life was full of music, parties and alcohol - - as well as cheating, lies and spiritual emptiness.

Jay Gatsby is played by Leonardo DiCaprio. Carey Mulligan plays his longtime love, Daisy Buchanan. And Tobey Maguire is Nick Carraway, who tells the story.

The book has been made into a film at least twice before -- a 1926 silent film based on a stage play and a famous version released in 1974 that starred Robert Redford as Gatsby.

Mr. DiCaprio told reporters he loved the book when he first read it as a teenager. But he said he did not understand it fully then. He noted the book's power to still be read and discussed 90 years after it was first published.

This version of "The Great Gatsby" is getting mixed reviews. The St. Louis Dispatch calls it "swooningly romantic and giddily energetic." But the Chicago Tribune says the movie is "all look and no feel."

Director Baz Luhrmann says he does not care about the reviews. He says he is used to scoring in the middle when it comes to critics. He says he is just happy people are going out to see it.

And they are -- theaters in the United States sold 51 million dollars worth of tickets on the movie's opening weekend.

Along with the film's stars, "The Great Gatsby" features music from the jazz age as well as more modern offerings from Beyonce, Jack White and others. Jay-Z is an executive producer.

Songwriters Leiber and Stoller

The songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller helped develop rock and roll music. Among their hit songs are "Hound Dog" and "Kansas City." Jerry Leiber died in 2011, but Mike Stoller is still writing songs in Los Angeles. Jim Tedder tells us about how the songwriting team made music history.

"Jailhouse Rock" was one of more than 20 Leiber and Stoller songs recorded by Elvis Presley. It was very popular. But, another song, "Hound Dog," was an even bigger hit.

Along with Presley and other artists, Leiber and Stoller were at the center of the rock and roll revolution. Mike Stoller says he started writing with Jerry Leiber when they were 17 years old.

“I’d be jamming at the piano and he’d be walking around and shouting phrases out, anything that came into his head.”

The two men wrote and produced a number of songs made famous by The Coasters. The hits included “Yakety Yak,” “Poison Ivy,” and “Charlie Brown.”

Many Leiber and Stoller songs were recorded by different artists and climbed the record charts at different times. “Ruby Baby” was a hit for The Drifters in 1956, and then again for Dion six years later.

The Clovers and The Coasters performed another hit by the songwriting team, “Love Potion No. 9.” And more than 100 artists recorded the Leiber and Stoller song, “Kansas City.”

Leiber and Stoller worked with singer Ben E. King to create the hit song “Stand By Me.”

“Benny has basically the tune pretty much in his head. He started signing. I went to the piano and started sussing (working) out the

chords, and then I came up with the bass pattern – boom, boom, boom-boom-boom, boom...”

“Stand By Me” is considered an American standard, a song that seems especially American and has stood the test of time. Mike Stoller sometimes sits at his piano and lets the memories flood his mind.

What is his favorite song? Stoller says it changes.

“My favorite song is always the one I’m writing at the moment because I can’t get it out of my head.”

At age 80, Mike Stoller continues writing songs and celebrating those from his past.

I’m June Simms. Our program was written by Christopher Cruise and Caty Weaver, who was also the producer. Carolyn Weaver and Michael O’Sullivan provided additional reporting.



Do you have a question about American life? Send an e-mail to mosaic@voanews.com.

Join us again next week for music and more on AMERICAN MOSAIC from VOA Learning English.