

Now known by just one name, like John, Paul, George, Ringo and Mary, Lana stepped onstage clad in a red velvet bustier, a leopard-print miniskirt, black lack gloves, and thigh-high leather boots with stiletto heels. My heart would have paused at the boots, the heels, the flat, smooth slice of her belly, naked in between the miniskirt and bustier, but the combination of all three arrested my heart altogether and beat it with the vigor of a Los Angeles police squad. Pouring cognac over my heart feed it, but thus drenched it was easily flambéed by her torch song. She turned to the heat with her first number, the unexpected “I’d Love You to Want Me,” which I had heard before sung only by men. “I’d Love You to Want Me” was the theme song of the bachelors and unhappily married males of my generation, whether in the English original or the equally superb French and Vietnamese renditions. What the song expressed so perfectly from lyric to melody was unrequited love, and we men of the south loved nothing more than unrequited love, cracked hearts our primary weakness after cigarettes, coffee, and cognac.

Listening to Lana sing, all I wanted was to immolate myself in a night with her to remember forever and ever. Every man in the room shared my emotion as we watched her do no more than sway at the microphone, her voice enough to move the audience, or rather to still us. Nobody talked and nobody stirred except to raise a cigarette or glass, an utter concentration not broken for her next, slightly more upbeat number, “Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down).” Lana’s version of Bang Bang layered English with French and Vietnamese. The last line of French version echoed Pham Duy’s Vietnamese version, We will never forget. In the pantheon of classic pop songs from Saigon, this tricolor rendition was one of the most memorable, masterfully weaving together love and violence in the enigmatic story of two lovers who, regardless of having known each other since childhood, or because of knowing each other since childhood, shoot each other down. Bang bang was the sound of memory’s pistol firing into our heads, for we could not forget love, we could not forget war, we could not forget lovers, we could not forget enemies, we could not forget home, and we could not forget Saigon.

We could not forget the caramel flavor of iced coffee with coarse sugar; the bowls of noodle soup eaten while squatting on the sidewalk; the strumming of a friend’s guitar while we swayed in hammocks under coconut trees...the workingmen who slept in their cyclos on the streets, kept warm only by the memories of their families; the refugees who slept on every sidewalk of every city...the sweetness and firmness of a mango plucked fresh from its tree; the girls who refused to talk to us and who we only pined for more; the men who had died or disappeared; the streets and homes blown away by bombshells; the shadows cast by candlelight on the walls of wattled huts...the barking of a hungry dog in an abandoned village; the appetizing reek of the fresh durian one wept to eat; the sight and sound of orphans howling by dead bodies of the their mothers and fathers; the stickiness of one’s shirt by afternoon, the stickiness of our situations...and while the list could go on and on and on, the point was simply this; the most important thing we could never forget was that we could never forget.