

HONG KONG  
Profile

# The man called Uncle

Nearing his sixth decade in the local music industry, DJ Ray Cordeiro has a lifetime of memories to share with listeners, writes **Annemarie Evans**

**D**eemed the world's "most durable DJ" by Guinness World Records, Ray Cordeiro is also perhaps the only DJ who has walked out on Rod Stewart.

The 57-year veteran of the music business and purveyor of nostalgia on Radio 3, RTHK, "Uncle Ray" recalls his meeting in the early 1980s with Stewart, the skinny singer with a fondness for tartan trousers, bonny blondes and soccer.

In addition to a press conference, two young Chinese reporters and Cordeiro had been offered one-on-one interviews. The only problem was that Stewart had been offered the chance to play in a soccer match that afternoon and the singer was keen to end the interview as quickly as possible.

"He was performing here with a group at the Hong Kong Football Club," Cordeiro said. "The two other reporters asked questions which he wasn't happy about, and then it was my turn and he said: 'I'll give you two minutes'. And I said: 'I don't need your two minutes and I don't need you', and I got up and walked away. He looked at me and he was shocked."

"I was so annoyed. I mean, two minutes, what can I possibly ask him in an interview? It's just a waste of

my time. And I didn't play his records for six months after that."

He has since relented. "Well, he's an immensely talented singer." Cordeiro, 82, still has the 10pm-2am slot weekdays on RTHK's Radio 3 for *All the Way with Ray*, two hours of requests followed by two hours of nostalgia, a programme he's had for the past 37 years.

After decades in the industry his talents were recently honoured with a lifetime achievement award nomination at the New York Festival, alongside broadcasting greats including American Stan Freberg, who won the prize.

"To be nominated is like a dream come true. To be named alongside such huge competition. My name would be read out and I'd have a moment to enjoy that and then they'd say, and here is..." said Cordeiro, who has received a lifetime achievement award in Hong Kong, but loves the international exposure the festival has given him. "I mean, we're talking New York."

Reinaldo Maria Cordeiro was born in 1924 in Hong Kong, of Portuguese descent, and was a refugee in Macau during the second world war. As a teenager he worked in the camp under a chef. "I could cook rice for 140 people without burning it," he said.

Cordeiro fell in love with music, particularly jazz, after hearing the Pinky Pinetta band play at a Christmas ball at one of the refugee centres.

"The spot that interested me was the drummer, because he seemed to be the centre of attention. So, I took up drumming by hitting the pots and pans in the kitchen with my mum shouting at me."

Hong Kong's infrastructure was devastated by the war, so when Cordeiro returned to the city from Macau, employment opportunities were thin on the ground.

He spent a year as a warder in Stanley prison before his father insisted that he work at Hongkong Bank for four years.

"It was the most horrible, boring time of my life. No computers in those days, of course, so you had these huge, heavy ledgers which you carried from desk to desk. So, I decided I had to become a drummer full-time. Of course, my father didn't like it at all. He's one of those old timers that stuck to his job for 40 years," said Cordeiro, completely without irony despite clocking 57 years at his own job.

"At that time, in 1949, Rediffusion opened. It was cable radio in those days." Tripling his bank salary, Cordeiro - who knew nothing about radio - started as a scriptwriter, before going on air with his first programme *Progressive Jazz* and later *Swing and Sway with Ray*.

Meanwhile, "Ray and his Band" played in restaurants, including the Repulse Bay Hotel. Early photos show a clean-shaven Cordeiro with heavy-rimmed glasses and a suit singing into a large microphone. He

stopped playing 20 years ago. "I think I can say I was a jazz drummer more than anything else. Unlike drummers of today, who just play with two sticks by banging away on skins and making a lot of noise, jazz drummers in those days played with feeling and a taste for the instrument. It doesn't have to be loud, but it was tasteful. I followed drummers like Buddy Rich and Joe Morello."

Cordeiro joined RTHK in 1960 as head of light music and introduced a show called *Lucky Dip*. It was a studio show for teenagers, who wrote in requests. Other teenagers would then practise their English by reading out the request letters carried from a barrel on air. The show ran for four series over 10 years. It was revolutionary as it was the first time Hong Kong had a show with live audiences and pop bands.

It was also when Cordeiro became "Uncle Ray", a nickname given to him by Anders Nilsson writing in the *Star* newspaper.

One member of the enthusiastic audience was [now legislator] Emily Lau Wai-hing. "She was really horrid in those days, very loud. She used to really bug me," he said.

Cordeiro has met and interviewed many famous singers and bands over the years in Hong Kong, going back to Ella Fitzgerald, Matt Monro, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr, Quincy Jones, Lionel Richie, the Shadows, Cliff Richard - "my favourite VIP" - and the Beatles,

whom he interviewed three times in one week in 1964.

Cordeiro remembers that year as one of the best of his life. He was in London for a BBC course. He was able to conduct interviews with Manfred Mann and the Searchers, among others, but top of his list were the Beatles, who that year had several hits, including *She Loves You*.

Borrowing a large and heavy green tape recorder from EMI,

**Any DJ would give his right arm to meet and interview the Beatles just once in their lifetime, but I met them three times**

Cordeiro headed for his first interview with the four Liverpudlians at a press conference, to talk about their upcoming world tour. On the way, he bought a copy of *FAB Magazine*, with the Beatles on the cover, for 2 shillings and sixpence. Paul McCartney opened the door and asked if he could look at the magazine.

Cordeiro asked if he would mind signing it. McCartney went one better and autographed every photograph that featured him. John Lennon, seeing what McCartney

had done, followed suit, as did George Harrison and Ringo Starr.

Cordeiro has the magazine under lock and key. "A friend of mine asked someone at Christie's what it would be worth. I saw recently a postcard with all four Beatles signatures was auctioned for US\$25,000, so what would this magazine be worth? Christie's said they would first need to check if the signatures are genuine. I know they are because I watched them sign."

The following day in London, the Beatles had a press conference for "foreign correspondents". "I was staying at Hong Kong House in London, a place for students from Hong Kong and I thought, well, I'm a foreign correspondent."

"When I arrived, Paul said 'You again?' and asked me where I was from. The Beatles were due to fly to Hong Kong and Paul wanted to know about Hong Kong, as all he knew was the name. So I told him about Chinese girls and cheongsams and he was very excited. And when they arrived in Kai Tak a week later, I was there again to meet them."

"The meetings with the Beatles were very special, because any DJ would give his right arm to meet and interview the Beatles just once in their lifetime, but I met them three times - even now it's like a dream that never ends."

In those days, Hong Kong was often referred to as a cultural desert with few visiting international acts. "We didn't have live

performances like today, very few came by, but the ones that did were at the top - Sammy Davis Jr, the Carpenters, Andy Williams, great personalities," said Cordeiro, although, other than Stewart, he tends to give a sunny version of all the characters he's met.

In 1987, Cordeiro received an MBE at Buckingham Palace from Queen Elizabeth - his trademark white flat cap traded in for a top hat and morning suit.

In 1997, he received a lifetime achievement in broadcasting award in Hong Kong, presented to him "by one of my favourite pop idols, Paul Anka". Unfortunately, Cordeiro has a heart condition that prevented him from going to New York for the festival award ceremony.

He has no plans to retire - sitting and spinning records is not tiring, he says. Even if the four-hour slot is reduced, the likelihood is Cordeiro will continue for a while longer.

Although Radio 3 still is on the AM frequency, from midnight to 2am Cordeiro takes Radio 4's FM frequency. He also hopes to pick up more listeners on the mainland through the internet.

"Music is my life, in fact it's been all my life. You have to do it straight from the heart and make the audience feel personally involved, as if that song was played especially for him or her. That is how the show has intimacy. You love them and they love you."

## When the war on terror comes home to roost

Paul Salopek

The grey-faced young man lying in bed number 15 of the rundown hospital wasn't much of a talker. In truth, few people were these days in Jijiga, a desert town whose tense streets were patrolled by swarms of Ethiopian police.

But Nur Omar Ali, 25, had a particularly good reason for being silent: his throat had been cut. He'd been attacked and left for dead nine days earlier at his remote village. Asked to identify his assailants, the camel herder's eyes shone with hate. "Christians," he rasped, clamping a hand to his stitched-up neck. "Ethiopian soldiers."

Then, scowling, he turned his back on his hospital visitors. After all, one was a reporter from the US, a nation closely allied with the Ethiopian government that was conducting a fierce anti-insurgency campaign in the Ogaden Desert - a civil war in Ethiopia's impoverished Muslim east that appeared to be worsening thanks, at least in part, to the global confrontation between the US and Islamic radicalism.

### Ethiopia Civil unrest

Human rights groups and media reports have accused Ethiopia - a key partner in Washington's battle against terrorism in the volatile Horn of Africa - of burning villages, pushing nomads off their lands and choking off food supplies in a harsh new campaign of collective punishment against a restive ethnic Somali population in the Ogaden, a vast wilderness of rocks and thorns bordering chaotic Somalia.

Ethiopia has denied the charges, which it blames on propaganda spread by the rebel Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). "We don't see any basic violations of human rights," said Bereket Simon, an adviser to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. "Abusing the people doesn't make sense. You abuse people and they look to the subversives. It's counterproductive."

Yet in Jijiga, residents told of the secret arrests of ethnic Somali

businessmen with purported links to the rebels - hotel owners, construction contractors and traders in qat, the intoxicating plant chewed by millions in the region.

One man described walking eight days through the bush to escape a war-ravaged zone called Fik, where he claimed he saw torched villages. And a camel herder told how his village close to the Somalia border was emptied by the Ethiopian army and its residents trucked to garrison towns such as Shilabo - a counterinsurgency tactic, once used by the US in Vietnam, to deprive the rebels of their civilian support base.



SCMP GRAPHIC

"They loaded people into trucks and just abandoned them there," said Farah, 60, who, like most people in Jijiga, refused to give his full name for fear of police reprisal. "They treated us like animals."

Mostly, though, the whispered talk was about hunger. The army had locked down immense swaths of the Ogaden, blocking all roads and smuggling trails to commercial traffic, and thus triggering desperate food shortages in a desert already prone to famines. A teacher from the central Ogaden town of Kebredehar said most shops in that area had closed for lack of stock. The prices of remaining foodstuffs such as rice, he said, had rocketed 400 per cent - far out of reach of ordinary Ogadenis.

"It's not just hunger any more. People are starving," said a worker with the Ethiopian Red Cross.

Humanitarian groups met the Ethiopian military earlier this month to appeal for roads to be reopened, several aid workers in Jijiga said. The army agreed - hinting that the crackdown on the troubled region may be winding down, possibly due to the start of the rainy season.



Ethiopian soldiers are blamed for ongoing atrocities in the east. Photo: AFP

However, nobody expects the lull in fighting to last. Indeed, most expect the killing to accelerate.

Bloodstained by more than a century of Ethiopian conquest, revolts against European colonial rule, cold war proxy battles and abortive independence movements, the current cycle of violence began early this year, soon after Ethiopia decided to invade Somalia to topple an emerging Islamist regime - with the blessings of the US.

As in Afghanistan and Iraq, that blow against a perceived terrorist threat yielded unexpected fallout. In the case of Christian-dominated Ethiopia, it helped reignite the quietest rebel movement in the Muslim hinterland of the Ogaden, experts said.

Emboldened by Ogadeni sympathy for their co-religionists across the Somalia border, and taking advantage of the Ethiopian army's preoccupation with taming Mogadishu, the Ogaden National Liberation Front rebels began successfully attacking towns.

The insurgents had long accused the "colonial" Ethiopian military of mass rapes and executions in the isolated villages of the Ogaden. But the rebels came under scrutiny, too. Recent grenade attacks blamed on ONLF sympathisers killed some civilians in Jijiga. And a devastating rebel assault on a Chinese-run gas and oil exploration project in the Ogaden in April left 74 dead, many of them unarmed workers.

The ONLF claimed that the oil

workers were gunned down by the Ethiopian army. "As far as the US is concerned, what better way is there to create [Islamic] extremism than to oppress people the way the Ethiopians are?" rebel spokesman Qamaan Hersi said.

Ethiopia's crackdown in the Ogaden has put the US in an awkward position, with Washington resisting Ethiopia's request to list the ONLF as a terrorist group. Two weeks ago, the US embassy in Addis Ababa convened a meeting of humanitarian organisations to discuss ways of getting aid into the war zone.

American civil affairs soldiers once built schools and drilled water wells around Jijiga. In the Ogaden, these hearts-and-minds programmes were now on hold.

"I'm not sure the Americans would be very welcome any more," said Kassahun Gebregioris, an independent human rights worker in Jijiga. "The Ogadeni clans associate them too much with the Ethiopians. And they don't forget."

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