Evolution of Thai Music Recording During the Reign of King Rama VII

วิวัฒนาการของการบันทึกเพลงไทยในสมัยรัชกาลที่ 7

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the evolution of Thai music recordings during the reign of King Rama VII, between 1925 and 1932. Utilizing documentary evidence and interviews, the research employed descriptive data analysis to present its findings.

The study revealed that during this period, Thai–owned entities conducting music recordings were divided into government agencies—such as gramophone record —and private enterprises including Suthadilok Department Store, The Gramophone Co., Ltd., Odeon Company, Columbia Company, Polyphon Werke A–G Berlin, Pathe Company, Polyphonewerke A.G. Berlin, Deutche Grammaphone Company, and Rattanamala Store. Seven record labels were identified: Rabbit Brand, Dog Brand, Serene Brand, Naree Srisumit Brand, Twin Elephant Building Brand, Columbia Brand, and Parophone Brand, indicating a diverse business landscape in the music industry.

Most of the recorded musicians were those recalled to serve in King Prajadhipok's royal ensemble. The ensembles used for recordings included Piphat ensembles, string ensembles mixed with *Khim* (Thai dulcimer), violin, organ, and Western string ensembles. Notably, violins were used to accompany vocals similarly to the *Saw–U* (a traditional Thai fiddle) in the Piphat Mainuam ensemble. The repertoire recorded comprised *Na Phat* songs, *Sam Chan* (third–level tempo) songs, single–tempo songs, and *Kret* songs. Musical phrases were adapted into linguistic accents, and new compositions were created in march and waltz melodies, reflecting the influence of Western culture on Thai music society.

Keywords : evolution, Thai music recording, King Rama VII

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาวิวัฒนาการของการบันทึกเพลงไทยในสมัยรัชกาลที่ 7 ขอบเขตการศึกษาระหว่างปีพ.ศ. 2468–2475 ในสมัยพระบาทสมเด็จพระปกเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว รัชกาลที่ 7 โดยศึกษาจากเอกสารหลักฐาน การสัมภาษณ์ นำเสนอด้วยการพรรณนาวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล

ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ในสมัยรัชกาลที่ 7 มีหน่วยงานที่ดำเนินการอัดเสียงเพลงไทยที่เป็นของคนไทยเอง แบ่งออกเป็น 2 หน่วยงาน คือ หน่วยงานรัฐ ได้แก่ แผ่นเสียงราชบัณฑิต และหน่วยงานเอกชน ได้แก่ 1) ห้างสุธาดิลก 2) บริษัท The Gramophone 3) บริษัทโอเดียน (Odeon) 4) บริษัทโคลัมเบีย (Columbia) 5) บริษัท Polyphon Werke A–G Berlin 6) บริษัทปาเต๊ะ 7) บริษัท Polyphonewerke A.G. Berlin 8) บริษัท Deutche Grammaphone 9) ห้างรัตนมาลา และมีตราสัญลักษณ์บนแผ่นเสียงที่พบจำนวน 7 ตรา ได้แก่ ตรากระต่าย ตราสุนัข ตราเศรณี ตรานารีศรีสุมิตร์ ตราตึกช้างคู่ ตราโคลัมเบีย ตราพาโรโฟน ซึ่งเป็นการดำเนินธุรกิจอีกด้านหนึ่งของดนตรี นักดนตรีที่บันทึกเสียงส่วนใหญ่เป็นนักดนตรีที่ได้รับการเรียกตัวกลับเข้ามารับราชการในวงดนตรีของพระบาทสมเด็จพระปกเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว วงดนตรีที่ใช้บรรเลงบันทึกเสียงพบว่า มีวงพิณพาทย์ วงเครื่องสายผสมขิม ไวโอลิน ออร์แกน และวงเครื่องสายฝรั่ง มีการใช้ไวโอลิน สีคลอร้องเหมือนซออู้ในวงปี่พาทย์ไม้นวม บทเพลงที่ใช้บันทึกประกอบด้วยเพลงหน้าพาทย์ เพลงสามชั้น เพลงชั้นเดียว เพลงเกร็ด มีการตัดทอนปรับสำนวนเพลงเป็นสำเนียงภาษา และประพันธ์เพลงใหม่เป็นทำนองมาร์ชทำนองวอลซ์ตามวัฒนธรรมตะวันตกที่ได้มีบทบาทต่อดนตรีในสังคมไทย

คำสำคัญ : วิวัฒนาการ การบันทึกเพลงไทย รัชกาลที่ 7

Introduction

The recording of musical data using sound recording technology, which began during the reign of King Rama V and continued until King Rama VII, led to the popularity of recording Thai music onto vinyl records during that era. His Majesty King Prajadhipok (King Rama VII) had a profound interest in Thai music, resulting in an era in which Thai songs were recorded onto records under his royal agencies. These recordings are considered significant historical evidence in the field of music. However, during the period of political change, some of this data was damaged or dispersed. After the change, record recording was revived and has been continuously developed up to the present day.

During the reign of King Prajadhipok, a global economic depression caused budget deficits. Consequently, he conceived the idea to dissolve Krom–Mahorasop, now called the Fine Arts Department, by merging it with the Bureau of the Royal Household under the Ministry of the Palace on July 24, 1926 (Yupho, 1957). This was another cultural shift of that time. Despite the severe changes, he did not abandon Krom–Mahorasop. In a ministerial meeting, he sought opinions on whether it was appropriate to preserve the nation's at

art heritage and expressed his willingness to use his personal funds for this purpose. When he needed the expertise of former personnel, he graciously recalled officials who had been laid off back into service. He also established the Royal Mahori Ensemble, reviving and nurturing the nation's performing arts, dance, and music to continue (Sopha & Seelabutra, 2017).

The continuous introduction of technology to develop various sectors of the country during King Rama VII's reign included advancements in Thai music. Technology was applied to record Thai songs, and he showed great interest in continuing and building upon Thai music, similar to the eras of King Rama V and VI. With his far–sighted vision, he promoted the recording of Thai music onto vinyl records—a technology that had existed since King Rama V—to preserve musical data. This act safeguarded significant national works in Thai music during a time when many skilled Thai music teachers existed. It provided essential academic evidence for future generations to study and learn from the records made during his reign. This demonstrates his genius as a leader who both preserved existing arts and culture and simultaneously developed technology in line with the changing state of the country, seamlessly adapting knowledge and advancements to keep pace with societal trends.

Based on the aforementioned, the researcher is interested in studying the history and evolution of Thai music recording during the reign of King Rama VII. This includes historical aspects of Thai music recording, the technology used in sound recording, changes in recording technology, individuals involved in the recording process, and other developments. By examining documentary evidence of Thai music recordings preserved to the present day, the study aims to present information that has not yet been explored and to highlight the technology and significance of Thai music as a national heritage compiled and recorded through vinyl records. This compilation and dissemination serve as a guideline to help preserve and academically develop Thai music in the future.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the roles and influences of both governmental and private agencies in the recording of Thai music during the reign of King Rama VII.

Literature Review

The operations of the Royal Institute arising from the royal wishes of His Majesty King Prajadhipok are called "Royal Academy records" because the President of the Royal Institute is Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Krom Phraya Damrong Rajanubhab

requested royal permission for Department of Entertainment officials to play and sing using the venue in Bowon Sathan Mongkol Palace, where the sound was recorded, namely Issaresarachanusorn Throne Hall. There is Mom Princess Phatthanayudisakul. He is the commander of the control division. His Royal Highness Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong is an advisor. Luang Pradit Phairoh is the head of the music department. Phra Chenduriyang is the leader and conductor of international music. It can be considered that recording Thai songs on discs. The sound is supported by the Royal Institute, an agency under His Majesty King Prajadhipok. He also graciously allowed musicians who were government officials. The Department of Entertainment also plays the music to record on vinyl records (Sopha & Silabutr, 2017).

The big recording of Thai music records, Prof. 1928, coincided with the reign of King Prajadhipok (King Rama VII), reigning for approximately 2 years. That recording was held at Suthadilok Department Store, which was one of the most famous foreign department stores in Bangkok. At that time, Suthadilok Department Store was located at the office building of the Department of Public Works at the foot of Phan Fa Lilat Bridge. Today, the Thai band that was chosen to record at that time was the Phinphat band of Bang Khun Phrom Palace, which is the residence of Her Royal Highness Princess Boriphat Sukhumbhan Krom Phra Nakhon Sawan Woraphinit. It is considered a Thai band. Leading in that era, the conductor of the band was Zhang Wang Thua Pat Yakoson, a famous music master and Thai people of Ban Phinphat Kalyanamit, Thonburi side. The person who controls the singing is Mother Charoen Patayakoson, a former singer with a beautiful voice at Ban Mo Palace of Chao Phraya Thewet Wongwiwat, who has a flourishing history since the reign of King Rama V. This recording uses electricity. There is a microphone made of charcoal (carbon), like ordinary, recorded on a hard wax sheet and sent to make a black lac sheet in 78 in Germany. This set of records was recorded by Carl Lindstrom AG of Germany. Its trademark name is Parlophon Record. It has a symbol in the shape of a machine. The pound sign that the sound recording the microphone would be better. During the reign of King Rama VI, because it appeared that a loud cymbal sound could be heard, it was heard that there was an ancient cymbal. During the reigns of King Rama V and King Rama VI, no sound recordings of the cymbals were heard. At that time, audio recording technology had not yet advanced sufficiently, and the limited frequency response of microphones prevented them from adequately capturing the high–frequency sounds produced by cymbals. (Amatyakul, 1997)

Expected Benefits

1. Understanding Historical Evolution: To gain a comprehensive understanding of the history and evolution of recording Thai music onto vinyl records during King Rama VII's era.

2. Information Dissemination: To disseminate detailed information regarding the evolution of Thai music recording in this period, thereby contributing to the academic field and aiding in the preservation and appreciation of Thai musical heritage.

Scope of Study

Population: Sound recording technology, musicians, and songs during the reign of King Rama VII.

Timeframe: 1925–1934 (B.E. 2468–2477)

Content: Investigate the evolution of sound recording technology during the reign of King Rama VII, focusing on its application in recording Thai musical data. This includes the individuals who played significant roles and the various formats involved.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology with an emphasis on documentary research. The research procedures are as follows:

1. Data collection from relevant documents: Gathering information from pertinent texts and documents such as archives, daily royal activities, official government records, historical evidence, photographs, motion pictures, and related vinyl records.

2. Interviews with experts: Conducting interviews with esteemed experts in the history of Thai music, scholars, artists, and researchers in the field of Thai music. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as detailed below:

– Emeritus Professor. Dr. Poonpit Amatyakul, Honorary member of the Royal Society, scholar in musicology, and advisor at Ratchasuda College, Mahidol University.

– Mr. Asdavuth Sagarik, Secretary–General of the Luang Pradit Phairoh Foundation (Sorn Silapabanleng).

The author has formulated the following questions for interviewing experts:

– The history of Thai music recording.
– The technology used in sound recording during the reign of King Rama VII.
– Changes in sound recording technology.
– Agencies responsible for sound recording.
– Individuals involved in the recording processes.
– Documentary evidence of Thai music recordings from the era of King Rama VII that

have been preserved to the present day.

3. Transcription and report compilation

The author will transcribe the interview data and compile a research report to present the findings.

4. Data analysis

The author conducted studies using relevant texts, associated vinyl records, and interviews with experts specializing in the history of Thai music recording. The collected data were then analyzed, and research findings were summarized using discographic methods. This approach involves the study and analysis of information related to music recordings or other audio media, focusing particularly on:

- Recording data, artist names, producers, and distributing companies.
- Details of the vinyl records.
- Information about the songs or music recorded, such as song titles, composers, and arrangers.
- Cultural context.

By employing these methods, the author aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the sound recording practices during the reign of King Rama VII, contributing valuable insights into the technological and cultural aspects of Thai music preservation.

Research Findings

The study reveals that the evolution of sound recording during the reign of King Rama VII encompasses three key aspects: (1) the sound recording business, (2) musical ensembles, and (3) musical compositions. This section focuses on the first aspect.

1. The Sound Recording Business

Sound recording in Thailand dates back to the reign of King Rama V and has continuously evolved. During King Rama VII's era, there was significant advancement with the full implementation of electrical sound recording technology. This development enhanced the quality of recorded sound far beyond previous methods. Additionally, Thai entrepreneurs established their own recording companies, operating under Thai ownership. The sound recording business during this period can be divided into two main sectors: government agencies and private entities.

- **Government Agencies' Sound Recordings**

Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, serving as the President of the Royal Academy (Ratchabandittayasapha), envisioned recording the performances of skilled Thai musicians of the time to preserve their works and compositions as national treasures. He entrusted

his daughter, Princess Phatthanaayu Dissakul, with the task of assembling musicians and singers and selecting various compositions for recording onto vinyl records.

Dr. R. Asmis, the German ambassador, offered to facilitate contact with the Odeon Company in Germany to assist with the recordings and pressing of the records for preservation. The recordings were initially made onto wax discs as masters, which were then sent to Germany to produce permanent records before being returned to Siam. This collection of records became known as the "Royal Society Records."

- **Private Entities' Sound Recordings**

The popularity of vinyl records during this era presented lucrative commercial opportunities. Consequently, numerous entrepreneurs initiated recording businesses to produce and sell records in the market. Notable private entities include:

(1) Suthadilok Department Store

Located at the base of Phanfaa Lilat Bridge, Suthadilok was a renowned department store that commissioned Mr. T. Ngak Chuan and a sound engineer from Parlophon to record performances by the Fine Arts Department. Mr. Ngak Chuan's initial recording venture occurred in 1925 (B.E. 2468) through this collaboration, leading to subsequent recordings. In 1928 (B.E. 2471), Parlophon label records were produced at the Suthadilok store.

(2) The Gramophone Company

The Gramophone Company established a new factory in Sealdah, near Calcutta, India. Records produced during the reign of King Rama VII, particularly after 1932 (B.E. 2475), were imported into Siam by Nam Thai Company Limited.

(3) Odeon Company

Founded in Germany in 1904 (B.E. 2447), the Odeon Company conducted recordings in Siam during two distinct periods: the first between 1908 and 1914 (B.E. 2451–2457), and later in 1928 (B.E. 2471). In its return, Odeon recorded the A229000 series, specifically for a Thai theatrical performance known as Lakhon Dukdamban.

(4) Columbia Company

The Columbia Phonograph Company General was the sole American company to record in Siam prior to World War II. In 1925 (B.E. 2468), the American branch was sold to its British subsidiary, Columbia Graphophone Company Limited, which continued operations in Siam.

(5) Polyphon Werke A.G. Berlin

This German company entered Siam to produce recordings for the "Seranee" brand, named after Lady Rambhandit Sitthiseranee. Polyphon also collaborated with Mr. T. Ngak Chuan for additional recording projects.

(6) Pathe Company

Originating from France, the Pathe Company produced records identifiable by a rooster emblem on the label. These records are believed to date back to the reign of King Rama VII, coinciding with the popularity of playing records using diamond styluses.

(7) Polyphonewerke A.G. Berlin

Lady Rambhandit Sitthiseranee (Yiam Suwong) entered into a recording contract with Polyphonewerke A.G. Berlin around 1929 to 1930 (B.E. 2472–2473). This collaboration further contributed to the diversity of recordings available during that period.

(8) Deutsche Grammophone Company

The German company Deutsche Grammophon conducted recordings at the Sri Krung Cinema. Master lacquer discs were sent to Berlin for pressing and subsequently sold at Mr. T. Ngak Chuan's shop in Bang Lamphu and at the Attangkang Nikhor Store on Charoen Krung Road.

(9) Rattanamala Store

Associated with His Master's Voice (HMV) of England, which had established a branch in Calcutta, India, the Rattanamala Store facilitated recordings during King Rama VII's era. Electrical recordings were made at this location, situated at the Phahurat Intersection in Bangkok, Thailand.



Figure 1 : Catalogue of Rattanamala Company Photographed

Source : Sagarik (2024)

The recordings produced by various entities were marketed under the following labels displayed on the records:

- **Rabbit Label**

The first recording by Mr. T. Ngak Chuan occurred in 1925 (B.E. 2468) with a sound engineer from Parlophon, commissioned by a Thai retailer named Suthadilok Department Store.

- **Dog Label**

Produced by His Master's Voice (HMV) from England, which had established a branch in Calcutta, India, during the reign of King Rama VII. Electrical recordings were made at the Rattanamala Store located at the Phahurat Intersection in Bangkok.

- **Seranee Label**

Khun Ying Yiam created her own record label, known as the Seranee Label. From that point onward, contracts with foreign companies led to the gradual emergence of Thai record labels. However, the lower edge of the records still indicated that they originated from Gramophone. During King Rama VII's era, Lady Rambhandit Sitthiseranee (Yiam Suwong) made recordings with a German company.

- **Naree Srisumit Label**

Managed by a German company under the supervision of Phra Sucharit Suda.

- **Twin Elephant Building Label**

The Odeon Company, through the Building Label, reinvented itself to record exclusively modern Thai songs. The label design was altered to feature two elephants standing with their front legs on a square pedestal inscribed with the word "Odeon," the original company name. The original building image remained on the pedestal, and both elephants raised their trunks high above the circular design. Thais commonly referred to these as the "Twin Elephant Building Records."

- **Columbia Label**

The Columbia Company recorded almost all musical works from Bang Khun Phrom Palace, producing records under the Columbia Label, the Building Label (Odeon), and the Parlophon Label.

- **Parlophon Label**

Palophon Werke A.G. Berlin entered Siam to produce records under the Parlophon Label.

- **Siam Label (Three–Headed Elephant)**

Deutsche Crystalate G.M.B.H. from Germany arrived around 1930 (B.E. 2473) to produce recordings under this label.



Figure 2 : Example of Vinyl Records photographed

Source : Seemuang (2018)

2. Musical Ensembles

The utilization of musical ensembles in sound recordings: From the study of vinyl records recorded during the reign of King Rama VII, it was found that there were developments in the types of ensembles used in recordings, categorized into three forms:

- **Piphat Ensemble**

There was a progression from using hard mallets to using padded mallets, and the addition of the Saw–U (a low–pitched bowed string instrument) to accompany vocals. It is hypothesized that these developments were made to facilitate the recording of Lakhon Rong (a form of Thai opera) during that era.

- **String Ensemble with westerm musical instruments mixed**

Instruments such as the Khim (hammered dulcimer), violin, and organ were incorporated into the traditional string ensemble. Additionally, the violin was used to accompany vocals, similar to how the saw u was employed in the Piphat ensemble with padded mallets.

- **Western String Ensemble**

In addition to recording Thai music using the Piphat ensemble and the mixed string ensemble, during the reign of King Rama VII, Western string ensembles were introduced to accompany music recordings. It is presumed that this was to support the recording of Lakhon Rong performances by the Nakorn Banthung troupe. This led to the evolution of musical ensemble formats in Lakhon Rong recordings as well. Musical characteristics were adjusted according to Western performance principles—including instrumentation, playing techniques, vocal methods, and rhythm—resulting in adaptations that introduced greater novelty.

3. Musical Compositions

The recording of music during the reign of King Rama VII highlights the evolution of musical compositions. Traditionally, recordings featured classical Thai music passed down from previous generations, which included genres such as Phleng Na Phat (ceremonial songs), Phleng Kret (narrative songs), Sam Chan songs (slow tempo), Song Chan songs (mid tempo), and Chan Deaw songs (fast tempo). There were also pieces where melodies were abbreviated or adapted into different linguistic accents.

Beyond traditional Thai music, Western musical pieces were also recorded, illustrating a shift influenced by Western musical trends. New compositions were created as part of incorporating music into Lakhon Rong (Thai opera). Some of these new songs adopted march and waltz melodies, expressing musical characteristics more aligned with Western styles. This adaptation showcased an increasing openness to Western musical influences, resulting in compositions that blended traditional Thai elements with Western harmonies and rhythms.

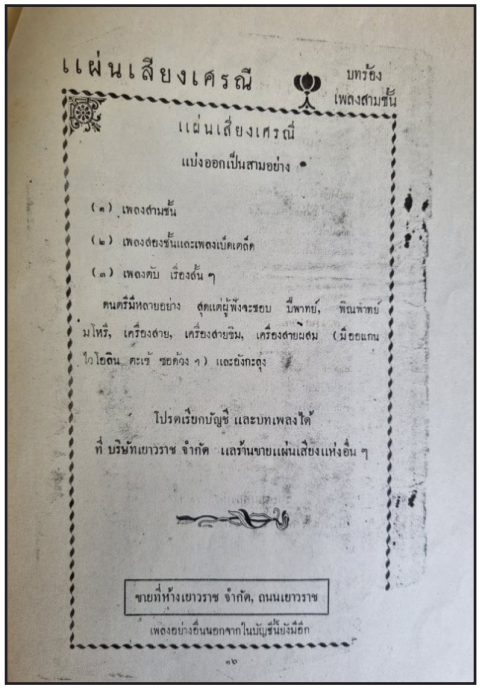


Figure 3 : Advertisement for Seranee Records, Illustrating the Types of Songs and Musical Ensembles Used in the Recordings photographed

Source : Sagarik (2024)

Research Summary

This study aims to investigate the evolution of Thai music recording during the reign of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) between 1925 and 1932. The findings indicate that sound recording activities of this era can be categorized into two primary sectors: state–operated initiatives, such as the recordings of the Royal Academy, and private enterprises, including the Gramophone Co., Ltd., Odeon, and Polyphon Werke A–G Berlin. These recordings encompassed performances by Piphat ensembles, string ensembles, and hybrid orchestras that incorporated Western instruments such as violins and organs. The sound recordings not only preserved traditional Thai music but also reflected Western cultural influences, such as the adaptation of march and waltz rhythms into Thai compositions.

The role of sound recording was pivotal in safeguarding Thailand's musical heritage and fostering cultural development. Although the global economic downturn and political transitions of the time disrupted recording activities, royal patronage, particularly the initiatives of King Prajadhipok, laid a critical foundation for the advancement of sound recording in Thailand.

Discussion of Results

This research demonstrates that Thai music recording during the reign of Rama VII was not merely a technological progression but also a process embodying cultural transformations in an era of East–West integration. The adoption of Western technologies, such as sound recording devices, within the context of Thai music illustrates King Prajadhipok's visionary leadership in recognizing the importance of cultural preservation while adapting to modernity. The monarchy's role as a cultural leader underscores the significance of state support in preserving and promoting the arts. Thai music recordings served not only as an archive of musical sounds but also as a documentation of Thailand's historical and cultural identity.

The findings align with prior studies. For instance, Prachumpol (2008) explored the use of Edison cylinders and the history of sound recording in Siam, documenting antique audio devices and the business ventures of record companies. Similarly, Kanchanapradit (2018) studied solo performances on early phonograph records, highlighting their importance within Thai music culture from 1903 to 1963. Seemuang (2018) examined recordings of female court musicians, identifying 13 record labels featuring works by six court artists across six musical genres: two–part songs, three–part songs, tab songs, Thao songs, Thoy songs, and theatrical songs performed with various ensembles. Hinaon (2018) researched theatrical songs from the Preedalai Drama Troupe, revealing that this style originated during the late

reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and declined under King Prajadhipok. Eleven troupes were identified, but only four produced recordings. These recordings included both traditional Thai melodies and newly composed theatrical songs, performed by diverse ensembles incorporating Piphat, string instruments, and Western influences like organs and bowed fiddles.

Despite advancements, the development of recording technologies during this period faced challenges, such as resource scarcity and a lack of skilled personnel, which affected both the quality and dissemination of recordings. This study highlights the importance of developing expertise and policies to support technology in the arts and culture sector to ensure sustainable preservation and future development.

Recommendations

The study of sound recording during the reign of King Rama VII presents several aspects worthy of further exploration. For instance, investigating the technological developments of sound recording during this period is particularly intriguing. However, relevant information may need to be sourced from foreign countries, which would require time to research and align with the corresponding recording timelines.

Acknowledgement

Professor Dr. Poonpit Amatyakul (interviewee) is an honorary academician and a distinguished scholar specializing in musicology, currently serving as an advisor to Rajasuda College, Mahidol University. The second interviewee holds the position of Secretary–General of the Luang Pradit Phairoh Foundation. Both individuals are dedicated collectors of phonograph records and related archival materials. Together, they offer comprehensive insights into the history of phonograph records during the reign of King Rama VII, including the key figures involved in sound recording, the development of phonograph labels, the contributions of musicians, and the operations of record companies.

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