



Printed herringbone suit and white cotton shirt by Burberry Prorsum, Chocolate brown silk tie by Louis Vuitton Shoes Joey Boy's own

THAIS RAK (LOVE) THAI RAP!

They say you're no Einstein if you think E = MC Hammer. But Joey Boy, Thailand's first and foremost rapper, disproves any preconceived notions you may have about rap artists. This is one smart player who hits the nail on the head with his razor-sharp wit, thought-provoking lyrics and catchy tunes.

Photography: Veerakij Vatcharasith
Stylist: Jaco Myburgh

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Becoming a rapper is arguably not the most predictable of career choices for a law-abiding Thai kid from a respectable 'hood'. In the 1990s rap music was fast gaining popularity in America and when Joey Boy – about 14 years old at the time – listened to Peter Piper by Run DMC, he was simply blown away.

“The first time I heard rap music, I didn’t even speak English. I didn’t understand a word,” he says. “All I know is that the music moved me and from that time onwards I just wanted to rap – I wanted to put Thai poetry to this kind of music.”

When Joey Boy walks into the studio where the interview and cover shoot are to take place, it’s hard to imagine this is Thailand’s most famous rap artist. Casually clad in jeans and white T-shirt, and adorned with the requisite bits and pieces of chunky jewelry (rings and chains he designs and sells in his shop in the Grammy building), the singer appears deceptively unassuming and laidback.

Although Bangkok life may seem a far cry from inner-city ghettos, gangsta shootings and other hardships Afro-American artists rap about, this self-proclaimed poet recalls that he felt an unstoppable need to express himself to the beat of this new and exhilarating sound.

“Whatever I rap about in my music very much comes from personal experience,” he says. The first song he wrote, at age 13, was a diatribe against Bangkok’s heavy traffic, inspired by his daily commute to school. “I had to take the bus every day from Chinatown to Bang Na – can you imagine how far that is!” Although, unsurprisingly, his frustration with Bangkok’s notorious traffic jams remains, he’s since sung about everything from politics, racism and religion, to drunk driving and spoilt rich kids, as well as other personal and social issues pertinent to his generation.

On Joey Boy: 4-buttoned wool suit and white cotton shirt by Burberry Prorsum
Striped blue and purple tie stylist’s own

On Gabby: Black strapless bra by La Senza
Black patent leather belt and lace-up heels by Burberry Prorsum
Metallic blue tights, pink wool legwarmers and pink Japanese umbrella stylist’s own

**“If you wanna talk
shit you better have a
damn good reason!”**

“It’s really a way of preserving the history of the era we live in, and about what’s going on in society,” he says.

Joey Boy, whose real name is Abhisit Opasiemlikit, is a third-generation Chinese who grew up in a traditional Asian family. At 18, he obtained a scholarship from ABAC University to study English at UCLA in California. He lasted exactly one month after finding out he’d secured a record deal. Upon his return to his home country, he broke the news to his parents of his intentions to become a professional rap artist, adding that school wasn’t for him. His mother wasn’t particularly thrilled. “You’re nuts!” she told him.

Fortunately, the short time spent in the US was long enough to strike up an acquaintance with the Black Eyed Peas. The story goes that he spotted Will.i.am outside a disco in San Francisco, went up to him and introduced himself. “We’re Thai rappers and we like your songs!” A decade-and-a-half later, Joey Boy was the opening act for the Black Eyed Peas on the two occasions the band performed in Thailand (2004 and 2006). A few years ago, Joey Boy even recorded a track, Asian girl, with the group. (The song has yet to be released pending approval from their respective record companies.)

Over the years, the 32-year-old singer has collaborated with scores of other international artists from the world of rap, R&B, reggae and dance hall, such as Canadian reggae musician Snow (best known for his 1993 number-one hit single Informer), and Asian artists like Toophat from Malaysia and Rude Boy Face from Japan.

With no rappers in Thailand on which to model himself, one of Joey Boy’s biggest influences was Thai rock band Carabao, a.k.a. ‘The Rolling Stones of Asia’. “Their songs are totally politically inspired.

On Joey Boy: Grey shirt and grey tie both by Burberry Prorsum
Black pants by CK, Hot pink suspenders and black-frame glasses stylist’s own

On Gabby: Blue and black top by Kenzo, Black leather gloves by
Burberry Prorsum, Yellow tights and bangles stylist’s own

Real suffering stuff,” is how he colorfully describes their music. Carabao tackled social issues, demanding justice for the Average Joe in the street, and at the time (the mid-90s) a couple of their songs were even banned.

Joey Boy is no stranger to controversy himself. Last year, he was forced to make a public apology for insulting the Muslim community in Thailand by using verses from the Koran in song, something strictly prohibited by the Islamic holy book. Joey Boy set the record straight on how one of the tracks managed to cause such an uproar.

“The song actually came out 10 years ago. The producer added what he thought were some nice-sounding chants to the track. No one involved realized what they were,” he explained. It was a bit disconcerting when years later, amidst the heat of the political unrest in the south, someone decided to dig up the old track and turn it into a major issue. “I came out and said sorry – that I never meant to hurt anyone’s feelings,” said Joey Boy.

The artist also produces music for other artists, mostly fellow rappers. Five years ago, he set up a record label called Gangcore Club (‘gangcore’ is a Thai boxing phrase meaning ‘protection’) and released an album entitled Gangcore Club I, a compilation of songs by the artists under contract. He underscores that the most important thing about being a rap artist is the ability to write your own rap and rhythms which convey a message to your audience.

Where American rap and hip-hop can have a menacing, even aggressive undertone, how does Thai language and culture, perhaps a bit on the softer side than English, translate into rap?

“To me language is like poetry,” Joey Boy reiterates. “There’s no need to be harsh to make your point.” In fact, he cautions the artists under his tutelage, “If you wanna talk shit you better have a damn good reason!” He firmly believes that “how you choose your words reflects how clever you really are”.

His second album, Gangcore Club II, was released last month and again is an anthology of songs by all rappers and groups currently signed up to his label. There are plans to collectively tour the

kingdom at the end of the year. Among the artists is a group called Buddha Bless. When religious authorities in Thailand got wind of the name of the band they demanded a copy of the CD to check it for blasphemy. “But after they listened to it, they gave us an award!” Joey Boy laughs. “Because the lyrics advocate being a good Buddhist.”

The songwriter himself seems blissfully undisturbed by the fact that he’s had to contend with censorship for most of his musical career. He claims that “it’s my weapon” as it guarantees publicity. Another successful tactic is writing songs with double entendres which escape the attention of the authorities - for example his catchy song Fun Fun Fun, which means something entirely different in Thai. “They don’t get it that I’m playing around with them,” he confides.

Meanwhile, Joey Boy has been rapping and touring clubs non-stop for the past 14 years – “half my life”, he says. During this period, his music has evolved from simpler poppy tunes to songs with a deeper meaning. “If you sit down and listen carefully, you’ll get something out of it,” says Joey Boy.

One single called Gakinang (We’re Buddies) was inspired by a racial dispute – one politician accusing another of not being 100% Thai but part Chinese, and thus unfit for office. With a rap in Thai and a bit of Chinese, Joey Boy drove the point home that Thais and Chinese have always lived together peacefully. “We’re friends, man!” The song became a smash hit, sales reached a million and the album went platinum.

He claims the secret to his popularity is that his fans don’t view him as an inapproachable celebrity but rather as an ally, a down-to-earth friend they can relate to. “They don’t see me as a star. When people see me on the street they come up and talk to me. I really enjoy it and I’ve never felt bad about losing my privacy,” he says. “I love it! It’s really positive energy.”

What’s his recipe for success? Besides a strong work ethic, instilled in him by his Chinese parents, he believes it’s a matter of courage and perseverance. “Don’t be scared to follow your dreams. Stay focused on what you do,” he says.

On Joey Boy: Black cotton parka by CK, Black cotton t-shirt with print and green corduroy pants by Louis Vuitton, Shoes Joey Boy’s own

On Gabby: Green padded double breasted zip coat by Burberry Prorsum, Silver metallic tights and black corset worn under jacket stylist’s own, Cherry leather lace-up boots by Louis Vuitton

“Don’t be scared to follow your dreams. Stay focused on what you do.”

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Joey Boy said one of the things that inspired him to set up his own record company is having the ability to give young artists opportunities which he was given when he first started out. “I grew up okay because I had all the right people teach me and guide me in the right direction,” he said.

It’s not only musicians who benefit from his guidance. The singer mentors high school and university students several afternoons a month. “I just sit down and talk to them ... I really want to know what they want to be when they grow up, kind of like an older brother. Afterwards we do a little show.” He conducts these workshops together with the other 14 members of the Gangcore Club about 25 times a year.

For this singer with a social conscience, rapping is a means of doing everything he’s ever dreamed of doing. Earlier this year, he wrote, produced and starred in a movie about a 60s rock band, the music of his father’s generation, Gao Gao (The Possible). When asked about his future ambitions, Joey Boy simply says he wants to continue to explore new avenues and grow as a human being: “Even though I’ve achieved some success in life, if I compare myself to a doctor or someone who’s really helped people, I’m still way behind. I’d jump at the chance to help!”

Last but not least, we can’t help but ask whether the rumors about him being a Thai Casanova are true. He’s been linked to actress Pooparia Suandokmai (“Poo”), one of FHM’s hottest women of the year, as well as a string of other actresses. The rapper attributes his sexy image to the pretty girls in his music videos. He said: “Most of my fans are guys and they’re probably sick of seeing me. So I try to give them something nice to look at ... I lead a totally normal life. If I had a girlfriend, I wouldn’t cheat on her. I’m really not some kind of superstar.”

On Joey Boy: Light grey wool sweater and black trousers by CK, Black cotton t-shirt by Louis Vuitton, Black leather lace-up boots by Burberry Prorsum, White Gucci sunglasses stylist’s own

On Gabby: Grey knit with silver armor embroidery, black wool tights and black patent leather lace-up heels all by Burberry Prorsum, Blue wool legwarmers stylist’s own





On Joey: Black suit and black knit sweater both by CK, frey wool shirt by Burberry Prorsum

On Gabby: Skirt work as dress by Burberry Prorsum, black patent high heels by Jimmy Choo, tights stylist's own.

Hair: Tip Pavadonsirisopa
Make-up: Tukta
Assistant Stylist: Keerati Sillapasook