

# Calendar

## The Lao Madonna

### New Year Celebration

**I**t's a combination of Mardi Gras and Fourth of July," says Ketsana, the "Princess of Lao Pop-Rock," in trying to compare the importance of the New Year celebration of her native country to an American holiday. "Yeah. It's huge," she says by phone from her home in L.A. "We will celebrate for three days — throwing water at each other, which represents cleaning all the nasty stuff that's happened in the past year. It's like rejuvenating yourself."

Ketsana and three other Lao and Thai music royals will perform at Sycuan this weekend. Ketsana selected her stage mates and produced the show after the idea was brought to her by James Cullen of Anthem Artists, a

booking agent based in Carlsbad. Ketsana says he called her after she drew a

Filipino and Thai nightclubs. She got around the age limit by dressing to look older. She was singing pop, a lot of covers, Linda Ronstadt, Diana Ross. Then came Madonna. "They used to bill me as the 'Lao Madonna.'" She is still called that sometimes, even though she doesn't do Madonna's songs anymore and is moving away from her own early-Madonna-like compositions ("Under You" ... *Under your body/Under your soul/Under your shade/Under your everything*). The ones that rely on electronics are difficult to do live.

Inviting Asian performers and hosting Asian holiday celebrations, including Chinese New Year and the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, have become familiar marketing strategies for gambling venues around the country. Those who run casinos like Sycuan and Viejas understand that Asian immigrants, particularly refugees, are a big share of their market. Social gambling is part of many Asian cultures. Immigrants find American casinos don't exactly duplicate their old-world experiences, but what they do find is recreation where good command of the English language isn't necessary.

When Asians go to the show this weekend, they will hear Ketsana and the others sing in English, Lao, and Thai. "Mekong River" is one track on Ketsana's latest CD that has no words; it's purely instrumental, reminiscent of a Buddhist chant. Does she remember the Mekong River? The song was written while she was living in New York in the 1990s, she says. It wasn't until 1998 that she saw her homeland (and her remarried father) again after

two decades. She stayed in Southeast Asia for five years, performing to crowds she numbers in the thousands.

Ketsana doesn't know how many people will be at Sycuan. "Asians don't buy tickets in advance. It's *gunn ain*," she says, using the Laoian slang meaning "loose and very relaxed" — the equivalent of "laid back." "And they don't show up on time. It's 'Lao time.' They're supposed to be there at eight o'clock? At ten, it's still *gunn ain* — it's like, yeah, that's okay, we're loose, we're cool."

Asked to describe the musical styles of the other performers, Ketsana obliges.

Swanthong, the "Queen of Lao Country-Folk Music," sings all her own original music, somewhat in the style of Bonnie Raitt. She, too, is a Laoian refugee who lives in Orange County.

Phousomsanook (a.k.a. Paul Somsanook), the Thai "Prince of Folk-Rock Music," sings ballads in English. He could be compared to James Taylor. He has several albums out in Thailand. He was born in Laos, grew up in Thailand, and is a Thai citizen.

Koong Kittikun, the Thai "King of Folk-Rock Music," lives in Bangkok. Why is he the king? "You know, when you go to one of those concerts where all the women are screaming, even if they have a husband? All the divorced ones are going 'Ahhhhh!'" He sings a lot of love songs." It's Tom Jones style, she says. He's in his late 40s, although she says he looks much younger.

Ketsana has never attempted to break into the mainstream, but she has a new manager who wants her to try. "Don't crack up laughing," she says before announcing that country music is what he has in mind for her. The Lao Loretta Lynn? Well, not quite, she says. "No fiddling. A little Faith Hill, with an Asian edge." If she succeeds, she believes it will be a first for Nashville.

— Jeanne Schinto

**New Year Celebration**  
**Wednesday, April 14, 8:00 p.m.**  
**Sycuan Casino & Resort**  
**5469 Casino Way, El Cajon**  
**\$20**  
**619-445-6002 Ext. 1139**

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### LOCAL EVENTS

crowd at Viejas in January.

"I have a fan base here in California," says Ketsana, who came to the United States as a seven-year-old refugee in 1978. She arrived in Chicago during an April blizzard. "It was white all over the place," she recalls. Her father did not accompany the family. "He was left behind. He had no choice." A pilot who had studied in the United States, he was sent to a reeducation camp in the new Lao People's Democratic Republic after the war. "That's why we had to leave." And her mother? "It crushed her, but you know..."

Ketsana began performing "with a real band" at age 12 in a Chicago suburb. In high school she sang in



Ketsana

