

INSIGHT



Story and photos by Roy Hamric

In the 1990s, a lonely gang of Chiang Mai writers and raconteurs banded together on Friday nights to compare notes, gripe about editors, talk about writing and spin tales about their next projects.

The group called its gatherings the "Friday Night Follies."

Fast forward to today. The original gang members – plus many more writers, photographers and journalists – continue to gather every Friday evening, at the Writers Club & Wine Bar.

The bistro atmosphere and insider chatter might be the closest thing you'll find to a true writer's hangout in the country. It's not really a club – if you walk in and sit down you're a member. And if you go there on any given Friday, chances are you'll be sitting next to a name you've seen on a byline in magazines or newspapers or a book. And, being writers, they're probably hungry for good conversation about anything from Asian politics and culture to literature, folklore or art.

Owner Robert Tilley, who worked as a *Daily Telegraph* correspondent in Germany, and his wife, Tong, opened the club in 2004. Exuding the nonchalant air of a classic, easygoing English gentleman, Tilley was the lifestyle editor of *Asia Inc.*, living with his wife in a small village outside Lampang in early 2002. He didn't have email or the internet, and his paychecks were delivered by bus in an envelope that read, "To the farang."

The couple moved to Chiang Mai, and Tilley started looking for a press club or a place where media people gathered, but couldn't find one.

"In my mind, I wanted a place that catered to my own needs: where I could find articulate, witty, instructive conversation," he says. "With some arrogance, I actually thought I'd be the only real working freelancer up here, but they're everywhere!"

The club, on a lazy street in old Chiang Mai, has a complex atmosphere, somewhere between a Parisian bistro and a college dorm room. A small teak bar seats about seven people. It's usu-



Joe Cummings, when not traveling, likes to be onstage with his band.

ally two-deep by 10pm. Two bookcases are crammed with a hodgepodge of paperbacks and a set of encyclopedia. Paintings by Burmese artists hang on the walls. Daily newspapers and tourist magazines spill over onto the bar.

But the real scene is the crowd, which ebbs and flows weekly depending on who's in town.

When he's not traveling or playing a gig with his rock band "The Tonic Rays," Joe Cummings, well-known for his work writing the *Lonely Planet Thailand* guidebook, is a club regular. With an outgoing personality and a smooth social skills, Cummings is a master at juggling different projects at the same time.

Recently, he formed a rock band that plays three or four nights a week at local clubs. He's just completed a prolonged period of traveling and writing for *Lonely Planet* guides on Bangkok and Sri Lanka, while working on other projects. Beginning to feel the weight of 25 years of travel writing, he says he's casting about for other types of book projects.

Cummings recently pitched an outline for a novel to high-powered Los Angeles editor Judith Reagan. An international mystery, the plot revolves around an amateur palm reader who predicts a murder. "It starts in Mexico and ends up in Thailand with other countries in between."

He's also preparing for the release of his newest book, *Lanna Renaissance*,

'Somewhere between a Parisian bistro and a college dorm room.'

with photography by Luca Invernizzi Tettoni, and he's considering doing a book on classic Thai restaurants and cuisine. "A generation of cooks are dying," he says, "and we're losing their knowledge."

Cummings settled in Chiang Mai in the mid-90s because of the easy international flight connections, colorful expat community and good weather. The Writers Club is "our own little correspondents club," he says.

Another club regular, Mo Tejani, says it was Cummings who introduced him to the place. An Asian born in Uganda, Tejani, a careful observer, has knocked around Thailand since his Peace Corps days in 1979. He settled in Chiang Mai two years ago.

During that time, he wrote *A Chameleon's Tale* (Paiboon Publishers), a vivid autobiography that recounts his life weaving in and out of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the US while working for NGOs and teaching English. An AFP Asia reviewer recently wrote, "Tejani's writing, at its best, holds the promise of a cross-cultural Kerouac." The book is scheduled for release today.

Tejani read several sections of his book at the writing workshops held in Tilley's apartment directly above the

Northern lights

Inside Chiang Mai's expat literary club



Robert Tilley, and his wife Tong, opened Chiang Mai's Writers Club in 2004.

club.

"We read each other's stuff, and we analyzed techniques: how to do dialogue and plot, first person and third person viewpoints – useful things," says Tilley, who estimates that four writers have honed their books to completion in the workshop over the past two years.

Two members of the original Follies gang, writer-editor Andrew Forbes and photographer David Henley, have seen the media and writing community in Chiang Mai evolve steadily since the early 90s when they founded CPA Media.

They experienced hard years struggling to survive on freelance stories aimed at the local and regional press. Today, CPA's work focuses heavily on providing content for worldwide publishers of travel books, cultural studies and editorial media.

A Brit and a former academic with a conversational knack for sharing his wealth of knowledge about the Middle East and all things Asian, Forbes is nearly finished writing *Phoenix Reborn: Travels in the New Vietnam*. He and Henley also have travel projects underway for books on China, Malaysia, Goa and India and are completing *Ancient Chiang Mai*, with text and



Andrew Forbes and David Henley started the original 'Friday Follies.'

photography.

The number of writers and media people in Chiang Mai increased rapidly in the mid-90s, Forbes said, with the advent of email and the internet. "People suddenly realized they didn't have to be in Bangkok, and they could do their work anywhere."

"The idea of a writers' circle goes back to 1994 when Roy Hudson, now 87, one of Chiang Mai's longest resident Westerners, came around the old CPA office one Friday and suggested a drink after work," Forbes says. "He turned up again the next week, and the custom was born – rather easily, as it was both pleasant and useful to meet like-minded people."

Forbes recalls early well-known visitors to the Follies such as the late Gavin Young of *The Observer*, who wrote many books on Asia; Nick Cumming-Bruce of the *International Herald Tribune* and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*; Michael Vatikiotis and Shawn Crispin of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*; and Andrew Marshall, author of *The Trouser People*. That tradition continues today with recent club drop-ins including Irish poet and novelist Mary O'Donnell, human rights activist Guy Horton, British rocker-turned-writer Nick Pyatt, novelist Christopher Moore and Bangkok writer Steve Van Beek.

Greg Kennedy, a former Silicon Valley corporate lawyer who's now two-years into writing a book about today's India, credits the club with helping him stay the course during alternating periods of research trips and solitary bouts of writing.

"You know it's there, and you can always see people and get grounded," he says.

Sometimes it's hard to understand what makes a place special. One regular offered, "It's just a difference that makes a difference."

A recent club visitor put it another way: "I felt I was in a writer's hangout when I saw the opened dictionary lying on the bar," he says. "The clincher was when I saw several people using it."



Mo Tejani's autobiography was honed in the club's writers workshop.

The scribes

ROBERT TILLEY:

Tilley, who opened the club, worked as a *Daily Telegraph* correspondent in Germany and was lifestyle editor of *Asia Inc.*

JOE CUMMINGS:

Cummings has given advice to hundreds of thousands of tourists through his writing for the *Lonely Planet* guides to Thailand.

MO TEJANI:

Tejani is the author of *A Chameleon's Tale*, an autobiography that recounts his life weaving in and out of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the US.

ANDREW FORBES:

Forbes, co-founder of CPA media, is a writer/editor.

DAVID HENLEY:

Henley, co-founder of CPA media, is a photographer.

Earlier members of the club and drop-ins have included:

GAVIN YOUNG:

Young was an author/journalist who wrote many books on Asia and was a foreign correspondent for *The Observer*. He died in 2001.

NICK CUMMING-BRUCE:

Cumming-Bruce has written for the *International Herald Tribune* and is former Bangkok bureau chief of the *Asian Wall Street Journal*.

MICHAEL VATIKIOTIS:

Vatikiotis is a former editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* who now writes for the *International Herald Tribune*.

SHAUN CRISPIN:

Crispin, a former *Far Eastern Economic Review* correspondent, is the Southeast Asia editor of *Asia Times Online*.

ANDREW MARSHALL:

Andrew Marshall, author of *The Trouser People*, is a journalist who writes for a wide variety of publications, including *Time*.

CHRISTOPHER MOORE:

Moore is a well-known Canadian writer who has written 17 novels and one collection of interlocked short stories.

STEVE VAN BEEK:

Van Beek is an author, freelance writer and filmmaker. He has written 23 books.

The Writers Club & Wine Bar

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