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U Tin, Burmese Slide Guitar Master, Dies at 87

U Tin, right, at his home in an undated photo with U Ne Myo Aung of Gitameit Music Institute in Yangon, Myanmar. Mr. Tin was a master of the slide guitar and adapted it to the music of his country. *Patricia Campbell*

By [Mike Ives](#) and [Saw Nang](#)

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U Tin, a slide guitarist who became a global ambassador for Burmese music while working as a plumber under a military dictatorship, died on Feb. 5 in Yangon, Myanmar. He was 87.

His daughter Daw Win Win Toe said the cause was complications of diabetes.

Mr. Tin was one of several prominent Myanmar musicians who incorporated Western instruments into a diverse canon that spanned folk tunes, classical Burmese music linked to ancient royal courts, and songs from the country's 1950s-era [cinematic golden age](#). In addition to guitar, he played banjo, mandolin and Burmese harp.

Mr. Tin moved to Yangon in 1947, a year before the country, then known as Burma, gained independence from Britain. He found work as a plumber and began studying music.

After a military coup in 1962 plunged Myanmar into decades of isolation and extreme poverty, Mr. Tin kept his day job and mostly steered clear of the regime's state-sponsored traditional music and dance troupes.

But he kept playing music, and his reputation as a brilliant slide guitarist grew, thanks partly to people outside Myanmar who invited him to perform around the globe.

U Tin was born in the southwestern town of Kyaik Lat on July 8, 1931 to U Ba Aye and Daw Than Yi, both farmers. When World War II broke out, many residents of nearby Yangon, then known as Rangoon, fled to the surrounding countryside as the city came under attack by Japanese bombers.

Some of them turned up in Mr. Tin's town, and they happened to be musicians.

"I got the chance to learn from them," he said years later.

Mr. Tin's main instrument was a steel resonator guitar, similar to one played in American blues and country music by performers like Jerry Douglas and Son House. He played it sitting down, with the fretboard lying over his lap.

It is unclear precisely how these guitars, which have roots in Hawaiian music, made it to Myanmar.

One influence appears to have been Tau Moe, a Samoan guitarist who had been

educated in Hawaii and performed in Yangon in the late 1920s, said Kit Young, a Washington-based scholar of Burmese music and a founder of [Gitameit Music Institute](#), a nonprofit community center and music school in Yangon.

But Mr. Tin was not much interested in the American style. Instead, he tuned his guitar to a Burmese scale and played within the rich musical terrain he already knew.

Traditional Burmese music, from the country's Bamar ethnic majority, features gongs, drums, harps, oboes and bamboo xylophones, among other instruments. It typically has syncopated, staggered phrasing and a tonal system unfamiliar to most Western listeners.

Over the years, Mr. Tin studied with some of Myanmar's finest musicians, including the guitarists Weiza Ba Saw Gyi and U Sein Maung and the singer and harpist Daw Saw Mya Aye Kyi, who had herself learned from court musicians for King Thibaw, the country's last king.

He also played with several musicians who had made their name in Yangon's post-independence cultural heyday. A video from 1961 shows him playing with the Burmese singer U Aunt Gyi (and two Americans) on the lawn of the American ambassador's residence.

"We called him the living music dictionary," said U Ne Myo Aung, the director of Gitameit Music Institute.

In addition to his daughter Daw Win Win Toe, Mr. Tin is survived by his wife, Daw Cho Cho; two other daughters, Daw Win Win Nwe and Daw Myint Myint Nwe; and six grandchildren. His three sons died before him.

Mr. Tin won a number of national prizes and played on the Burma Broadcasting Service. But there was never much money in that, and he kept working as a plumber at the Yangon City Development Committee until he was 60.

Ms. Young said that Mr. Tin did not "kowtow" to the military junta that ruled the country for decades, and that the regime would not have wanted to send him abroad because the slide guitar was not a traditional Burmese instrument.

But in the twilight of his career, Mr. Tin was often invited privately to perform abroad as an ambassador of that very tradition. He performed in Japan, Thailand, Germany, the Philippines and elsewhere.

Ms. Young said his performances often received rapturous receptions, including a 2003 [concert](#) at the Asia Society in New York City.

"Everybody went bananas," she said.

In his later years, Mr. Tin also worked at Gitameit Music Institute. He saw his mission as to somehow keep the old songs he knew alive.

But the younger generation was not interested, he [told a reporter](#) in 2010, around the time that a half-century of repressive military rule was beginning to ease.

"If the music is lost," he said, "Myanmar will lose a piece of its soul."



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