



THE NATIONAL TRUST – SRI LANKA LECTURE ON
THURSDAY 28TH FEBRUARY 2019

“SUNIL SANTHA AND HIS INVALUABLE CONTRIBUTION TO SINHALA MUSIC”
by Dr. Tony Donaldson

The 114th Session of the Monthly Lecture Series of the **National Trust - Sri Lanka** will be held at the HNB Auditorium, 22nd Floor, HNB Towers, 479 T.B. Jayah Mawatha, Colombo 10 at 6.30p.m. on Thursday 28th February 2019.

Sunil Santha was born on 14 April 1915 in Ja-ela and died in Colombo on 11 April 1981. Although he lived for 65 years, his creative musical life was less than eight years, and yet the impact of these few years composing songs was profound on the Sri Lankan music world. His legacy remains permanent as his songs continue to be passed from generation-to-generation, and performed in public concerts, on radio and television, by military bands at state occasions, and at cricket matches, weddings, picnics and parties. While success came quickly, behind the public persona, he remained an essentially private man.

Sunil was also attracted to the visual arts, especially painting and photography – a subject that has received no attention in academic literature. His interest in photography began in the 1950s when he acquired a twin-lens Rollei flex camera. He went on to produce an intriguing body of works, which sometimes used dramatic lighting and shadows reminiscent of film noir – a cinematic genre popular between 1940 and 1959.

Drawing on a combination of images, sound recordings and live performances, this lecture will begin by contrasting the private man and public persona of Sunil Santha. It then presents an analysis of his photographic works. By examining the aesthetics and composition, I argue that while Sunil used a simple visual format, the meaning behind the works was enigmatic and cryptic. Deciphering his photographic works leads us to questions about the life, nature, and human conditions of Sri Lanka.

The final section of the lecture focuses on the remarkable craftsmanship he wielded into his music, which remains an integral part of this nation’s soul mainly because the power of words in his songs and the awe in which they are held informs much of the life and culture of Sri Lanka. Songs are not casual words like gossip, talk, or legends. They are like a document, an indication of the truth; the decorative and poetic side which is emphasized gives away to a stronger focus in life.



Tony Donaldson holds degrees in music and anthropology from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and a PhD in music from Monash University in Australia. His doctoral thesis investigated ritual music in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. He later worked as a lecturer for RMIT University, a Research Co-coordinator for the Monash Asia Institute, a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore and served as a consultant for the National Art Gallery in Singapore. Currently, he is the researcher and writer for the Malaysian-based Bare hands Arts Project to produce an academic book on its history which involves over thirty artists from Jordan to Japan. His publications are mainly focused on the arts and music in Asia, irregular warfare, and the history of special operations in World War II.

The National Trust – Sri Lanka conducts monthly lectures on the last Thursday of each month. The lectures are open to the members and the public at a nominal fee. The HNB Sustainability Foundation is the principal sponsor of the events of the National Trust – Sri Lanka.

Further information can be obtained from the Trust Office Tel 2682730 / 0778081214 at the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology, 407, Baudhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7.