Enjoy What You Do



Harpo Gooneratne, is an entrepreneur who is passionate about music and work. Known as one of the first DJ’s in Colombo, he has come a long way from riding a push cycle to work to having his own business-Harpo’s Cafés and Restaurants. He always strives to introduce unique concepts to Sri Lanka. Harpo Gooneratne reveals that the key to becoming a successful entrepreneur is to be passionate about what you do.

By Krishani Peiris Photography Indika De Silva

Can you tell us about yourself and how you entered the hospitality industry?
I come from a family of four and I have an older brother. I was educated at St Thomas’s College, Mount Lavinia, which I left in 1979 to join Hotel School. Thereafter I followed a hotel and tourism diploma, but I always had a passion for working with people.

At the same time, I had the opportunity to become a DJ at a time when nobody knew who a DJ was. I was fortunate enough to be one of Colombo’s first DJ’s. I had the enthusiasm to balance music and education in hospitality simultaneously. I used to go to Hotel School to study and afterwards take a bus to Aluthgama and then go on a push cycle to Neptune or Bentota Beach Hotel in the nights with the records on my backpack to play music.

Subsequently, I was given the opportunity to set up a night club by the name of The Library at Ramada Renaissance, now Cinnamon Lakeside. The hotel recognised my capabilities and appointed me as the entertainment manager as well. I believe I was the first to be appointed as an entertainment manager in the country at a five star hotel as at that time people did not understand what event management was. There, I DJed during the night and worked during the day. I hardly had time to sleep, but what was most important was that I had the passion to do what I was doing and that was the key. Further, this drove me to make the Library what it is today. We

did several mini shows and we hosted international acts from The Wailers, Richard Clayderman to fashion shows.

From there I moved to the Colombo Hilton where Mr Gamini Fernando recruited me as their business development and entertainment manager. There again it was the music that guided me and I was recognised due to the contacts that I have made in the industry.

“I Was Able To Achieve All This By Being Humble And It Was The Passion That Drove Me Forward. That Passion Was Fuelled By Music, A Field That I Always Wanted To Be In Ever Since I Was A Child.”

Once Mr. Fernando passed away, I left Colombo Hilton to establish the Millennium Park, now Excel World. It was the first bowling alley in the country and I was instrumental in setting up that space. Soon after, I was recruited again, this time by Hilton International and I travelled to the Northern part of China to initiate a lounge. There I worked as an entertainment consultant for three months. Then the Hilton Osaka invited me to come to Osaka and while I was working there I received a request from Colombo Crescat offering me the position of General Manager.

Here a guy who was initially going to work on a push cycle had become a General Manager. I was able to achieve all this by being humble and it was the passion that drove me forward. That passion was fuelled by music, a field that I always wanted to be in ever since I was a child.

There are many people who helped me along the way. One such person is Gabo Peiris, He guided me and made me a DJ. He always told me, when I was young, that one day I will make heads turn when I walked in Colombo and he was right. Another is Mr Gamini Fernando who had a lot of class and charisma. Both of them influenced and guided me to be who I am today.

How did the name Harpo come about?
My father used to call me Harpo. That’s because with my curly hair I apparently looked like Harpo Marx, the comedian, of the Marx Brothers. Even when I went to

Mount Lavinia, at STC everyone called me Harpo. But actually I'm not Harpo, my real name is Lalith.

What inspired you to begin 'Harpo's Cafés and Restaurants'?
After working as the General Manager of Crescat for two years, I questioned myself as to where should I continue from here. I have achieved what I wanted to accomplish and with all the contacts that I had made over the years, I decided it was time for me to start my own business. It was a huge risk, but I always believe that there is a time and place for anything.

In December 1, 2004 I set up my own business-a management company. Initially I managed the Commons and Bay Leaf for the then owners and when they wanted to sell, I bought over the two properties. Starting from that point I began to establish different restaurants-Commons was the first, then Bay Leaf and Park Street Mews.

At the same time, I started Harpo's Pizza, which I believe is the first home grown pizza brand. It is by chance that I started Harpo's Pizza. I was at the Fortress in Galle, when one of my friends called and asked, "you run an Italian restaurant, why don't you have pizza?" As soon as I returned to Colombo, I called my advertising agency, Grants and spoke to Laila Gunasekara about this. She said that it was a good idea and that we should call it Harpo's pizza. At that time though, I was not keen on having my name on motorcycles that went around the city. However, today we are lucky enough to be a leading pizza brand and we celebrated seven years this August while the Bay Leaf celebrated nine years of operation.

As a management company Harpo's Cafés and Restaurants includes event management as well, and I believe that event management and hospitality goes hand in hand. It is like an ideal marriage. I had already gained experience from DJing to coordinating shows such as Sharuk Khan and Brian Adams concerts with Ravi Shastri.

Most importantly I love being with people. And in the hospitality industry there is never a dull moment. If I step out of my office, I am bound to meet or talk to someone, there is always some form of interaction and there is always something to

do.

Each of the restaurants and concepts started under the Harpo brand have brought in something unique to the market. Can you elaborate on this aspect?

Bay Leaf is a 100-year old house and an Italian restaurant. The Commons is located in a house created by famed architect Geoffrey Bawa and offers a more relaxed environment. The Mews is an old stable and warehouse that we have converted into a restaurant. Many thought that it would be impossible to covert a warehouse into a restaurant, but we were able to do it. The Fort Café at the Dutch Hospital Precinct is a unique property as it is located in a building that is nearly 400 years old. Therefore, all our properties have a different twist.

“The Atmosphere At Our Restaurants Is Very Laidback. I Feel That There Is A Market For Such Restaurants Where People Would Like To Come, Experience ‘Street-Dining’, Like In The Mews, And Spend Some Time Relaxing… Therefore, We Try To Keep Things Simple And Uncomplicated.”

When it comes to the cuisine, the fare at the Bay Leaf is to an extent different as it is Italian. The Commons, which is a strong brand, is more popular for burgers and similar food items and is more for the younger crowd. Park Street Mews is a lovely private alley with people on the street where we have incorporated a restaurant and a Tapas Bar, the Curve. All of these places are remarkable in there own right as I always try to bring in original concepts to the market.

Most restaurants will require one to dress up, but at our restaurants one can walk in, dressed in any way they want to and we give priority to making them feel relaxed. That is very important.

The atmosphere at our restaurants is very laidback. I feel that there is a market for such restaurants where people would like to come, experience ‘street-dining’, like in the Mews, and spend some time relaxing due to the work environment and pressure that they go through. Therefore, we try to keep things simple and uncomplicated.

What are some of the challenges that you faced and how did you overcome them?
Setting up a company and running a business in the hospitality industry is a hands on task. If you talk to any owner of a restaurant here or in New York, they would say being a restaurateur would be the worst business to be in. Each day I receive many complaints; I am not grumbling but one has to have a good understanding to run such a business.

In anything you want to do, there are many challenges. But what matters is how one works around these challenges. To tell the truth though, I have not had that many difficulties as finding locations, licensing and government approvals were easy to obtain. But there are challenges ahead of us. And at the moment the biggest challenge the industry is facing, if I have to speak for myself, is finding good trained people. That is one thing all of us in the hospitality industry and even the government have to face. Otherwise we will not be able to progress in this sector.

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However, I must say that I am blessed with good people around me. Most of the employees here have worked with me from the day I started. We train our staff and sometimes we send them overseas as well. We try to make them understand the importance of being able to deliver. Without my staff, nothing can happen and I cannot be where I am today. At Harpo’s we are one big family and my door is open to anyone. I support each person 100 percent and everyone plays a huge role in my company.

What are your thoughts on the current hospitality industry of Sri Lanka and the progress achieved so far?
Sri Lanka is a beautiful country; where else can you play golf, visit beaches, wildlife parks, ancient cities and the beautiful city of Colombo. Therefore, one good thing happening in the industry is that tourists are coming into the country. For example, recently I went to Arugam Bay and I never realised that I was in Sri Lanka. It is

another world out there. I went to a shop, the place was filled with people and also finding a room to stay in the Eastern Province is very difficult.

I’m happy to see that the Tourist Board is promoting the country in Europe as we need a considerable thrust into those markets. China is becoming a major player in the Sri Lankan tourism industry and we see many Chinese tourists coming into the country. But we need the big players such as CNN and BBC to further tap into Europe-namely the UK and Germany-and also to China and India, where there is a huge market that is left to be explored. We need to encourage more airlines to fly into the country and have an open sky policy, similar to the Maldives. Having an open sky policy is very important and is keyin promoting tourism.

There are many high rise apartment complexes being constructed as well. This shows that investors are very confident about the country. We need such investors to come to Sri Lanka and they would not be here if they haven’t seen the potential that the country has. I always say if there is a ‘down’ there has to be an ‘up’. During the 30-year long conflict we suffered, but afterwards there has to be a positive side to the suffering and now we are progressing towards a constructive future. And I’m sure in time to come, the country will be great.

However, we need more people in the industry to serve the tourists who are coming in. We need to encourage the younger generation, especially from schools, to come into the industry. We need to introduce a relevant curriculum or syllabus related to the hospitality sector into the O level and A level streams.

The hospitality industry is a difficult one to be in with long working hours. But it’s a very interesting career as you can travel, see the world and serve people. But not everyone can sustain in this sector with that motivation and that is why we have to teach young people the value of the industry.

“Rome Was Not Built In One Day. As Such Anything Takes Time. It’s A Process And The Process For Development Of The Country Is Taking Place At The Moment. We As A Brand And Individuals Are Happy To Contribute To This Progression As All Of Us Will Benefit From The Advancement That The Country Is Achieving.”

I am also happy to see that international hotel schools such as William Angliss Institute, which is one of the top five schools in the world, entering Sri Lanka. It's fantastic and we need more ventures like this to help bring in new people to the industry. The hospitality sector will have to think fast, especially with the profit standards that we hope to achieve soon. Another major problem that the industry is facing is that once you train new people, they tend to leave Sri Lanka to find more lucrative position in the Middle East or Maldives. We cannot blame them for doing so as they want to build their homes, look after their wives and educate their children. If you inquire from any hotelier, this is the challenge that many are facing. And once the big players such as The Shangri-La, Sheraton and the Marriott open their doors, they will pose a threat to us, as employees will be tempted to go to those places due to the prominence attached to the names.

The government has contributed much to enhance the tourism industry of the country. How has this helped your business and how would you describe Harpo's role in the growth of the hospitality industry?
Rome was not built in one day. As such anything takes time. You cannot say that I will build a brand, and by next day it will be there. It's a process and the process for development of the country is taking place at the moment. We as a brand and individuals are happy to contribute to this progression as all of us will benefit from the advancement that the country is achieving.

Sri Lanka is the place to be right now. I always tell my daughter and other young people that they are lucky, because it is our generation who went through the tough times. Even at our age, though we are seeing the growth, it is they who are really going to see the development, especially the Colombo Port Development and the highways that are to come. And the development we have seen so far was achieved within five years after the conclusion of the war.

Ten years ago, the entertainment industry was very different as we were in the midst of a war. There were check points everywhere and access to clubs were limited. But now the whole landscape has changed. Clubs, bars and Cafés have opened and more are gearing to enter the market. In any country that is developing or is developed-for example Singapore or Malaysia-the entertainment industry is very strong and you need that kind of boost in Sri Lanka as well. Not long ago I learnt that the government is planning to develop the Beira Lake where it will be

turned into an impressive water front-we need developments of this nature to provide a support to the entertainment industry of the country.

Recently I met a foreign gentleman and we visited the Dutch Hospital Precinct, and he was very impressed by the building. When I used to work at the World Trade Centre and Hilton, I too used to look out of the window and admire what a great property it was. During the war it was a place where ammunition was stored and access was restricted. But what the government has done within a short span of time by turning this 400 year old building into an amazing place with the World Trade Centre as a backdrop is exceptional. If you go past the Independence Square or even the Diyawanna Oya, you will be able to see a large number of people visiting these spaces. We require places such as these as recreational facilities are needed for a country that is recovering from a war.

If you go to Europe, you will see people eating and drinking out-it is a trend. Once you finish work, you go out with friends and family to have some food and drinks. We need to bring that same culture to Sri Lanka and the numbers need to start coming, especially through tourism, which I see happening and picking up momentum. Otherwise some of these places will be left empty. Therefore, tourism has a huge role to play in the development process. Also the government has plans to go to Kurunegala and various other cities around the Island and that is important as well.

One day I met Mr Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development and as we were looking at the RaceCourse, which was converted into the Colombo Racecourse Sporting Complex, he said, “Harpo this was a condemned building.” But, he took that structure, and made it into such a majestic building. Recently a lady who writes to New York Times met me and wanted to know who has done all this new development. I was fortunate enough to get the Secretary on line and he gave her an interview and she said she cannot believe that Sri Lanka is such a beautiful and clean country. Today if I drop even a clip on the road, my family would reprimand me. This shows how conscious people are of the environment today. Even a friend from Geneva once told me that Colombo is much cleaner than his country. We should be really proud of that.

We need Colombo and all other towns in Sri Lanka to look good, but these things cannot happen overnight. There is a process and we have to support the development taking place.

If I talk about my growth in this economy, as a brand we stand out in the industry. I did not wait for anyone to set up my own place, I did it on my own because I saw that there would be an expansion in the hospitality sector. Recently, I met this lady from Singapore who has advised the Bhutanese government on tourism. We are inviting her to Sri Lanka for a one day seminar and panel discussion on how we can move forward in the industry. Likewise we will contribute in any way we can to the government and Tourist Board by bringing in people with expertise and by opening new properties. I am looking at opening a new property along the East Coast because I see a huge demand there and the government is promoting investment in the area as well.

I have my own hotel school, Harpo's Hotel School where I teach young people, about 30-40 individuals at a time, in Galle and find them employment. We do not even charge a fee from some students as I feel that the industry needs people. Some of the students who complete the programme are absorbed into my organisation while some venture abroad. I also manage two hotels, 16 and 12 roomed properties, in Negombo and Nuwara Eliya, which come under Harpo's brand.

What are your future plans?
We are intent on taking Harpo's Pizza to major suburbs around Colombo and to other regions in the country. Currently we have an outlet in Odel and we will be opening up a big outlet in Nugegoda this coming October. We are also looking into the possibility of opening shops in Galle, Kandy and Negombo. I am developing Harpo's Pizza because I feel that there will be much support from the poeple in this country as we are local entrepreneurs. Its a good brand which people enjoy as we do a very traditional wood fired pizza while making our own pasta.

"Another Fact Is To Be Positive. If You Take A Negative Role You Will Never Succeed. You Will Always Face Obstacles, But By Staying Positive, Focused And Loving What You Do, You Can Do Anything."

Expanding Harpo’s Pizza is my way forward. I do not think I will open anymore restaurant as I already have five and I think that is good enough. I will also exert more effort to advance the Harpo’s Hotel School. We are looking at taking the hotel school to the Eastern Province and setting up a satellite school there. I’m also looking at the possibility of opening a pizza outlet and a hotel in Jaffna. This is all done by us as an individual business and we see that Jaffna has the necessary potential.

Final thoughts?

I enjoy what I do and that is crucial. I get up and drive with passion to work and I never say I am going to work. When I am going to DJ they would ask me “are you going to work?”, I’d say, “no I’m going to have a good time”. That’s the way you should look at work or any other matter if you want to be a successful entrepreneur.

Another fact is to be positive. If you take a negative role you will never succeed. You will always face obstacles, but by staying positive, focused and loving what you do, you can do anything.


Colombo Fort Café

