

HUA HIN, THAILAND

## THE ELEPHANT WHISPERERS

THAILAND'S LAST SURVIVING ELEPHANT SPIRIT MEN PROVIDE AN ANCIENT PEP TALK



On a blisteringly hot day, four frail, elderly men from the forests of northern Thailand approach a makeshift altar. Their arrival causes the assembled crowd to fall silent. Even the elephants, standing stiff and attentive nearby, seem impressed.

There's no shortage of VIPs here today. The King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament is a big event in Thailand, and attendees this year include beauty queens, sports stars and business leaders. But it's

the Khru Ba Yai, the last of Thailand's elephant spirit men, who command the most attention.

"We come here today to ask the spirits to look upon us with luck and success," intones spirit man Meu Sala-ngam, 87. Then, ceremonial brush in hand, he approaches each elephant, looks into its eyes and starts whispering.

Historically, the Khru Ba Yai entered the forests to pacify these potential beasts of burden so farmers could capture them.

The gift of the Khru Ba Yai is said to be passed down through the generations, but there's not much call for elephant charming these days—their sons and grandsons do "normal things"—so these four may be the end of the line.

Today, on a rare outing, the spirit men are working with "street elephants," the riffraff of the pachyderm world, a fact that makes the spectacle all the more remarkable. "Down!"

Sala-ngam commands in his ancient dialect, and the elephants kneel dutifully before him. He dips the brush in water and sweeps each elephant's trunk, while another man places a garland around its neck.

Shortly, the game begins, transforming the arena into a fury of sound, color and movement. The elephants, trumpeting and galloping across the field, seem to be having a blast.

—HILLARY RICHARD

## THEY LOVED YOU YEAH YEAH YEAH

TAKING STOCK OF THE GLOBAL BEATLEMANIA EPIDEMIC, 50 YEARS ON



This month marks the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' first foray into the American screaming-and-fainting-teenage-girl market. A few months after they released their debut U.S. album, *Introducing ... the Beatles*, the mop-topped Liverpudlians held the top five slots in

the *Billboard* chart simultaneously, and went on to record a whopping 20 No.1 U.S. hits. But America, as the following by-the-numbers examples amply demonstrate, is by no means the only country to have been bitten by the Beatle bug. —CHRIS WRIGHT

## CANADA

**\$31,000**

The amount paid by Alberta dentist Michael Zuk at a U.K. auction in 2011 for John Lennon's decaying molar. Zuk explained that he hoped to retrieve enough DNA from the tooth to one day create a clone of the former Beatle.

## CUBA

**2000**

Year a statue of John Lennon was unveiled in Havana's aptly named John Lennon Park (despite the Beatles being banned in Cuba for decades). The bespectacled bronze figure can still be seen sitting cross-legged on a park bench, a long way from Penny Lane.

## GERMANY

**1960**

The year Paul McCartney and then-Beatle Pete Best were deported from Germany for allegedly setting fire to, depending on which report you believe, a prophylactic device, a tapestry or rags in a movie theater, a hotel room or their van.

## UNITED KINGDOM

**4**

Total number of Beatles songs banned by the BBC in 1967. One of them, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," was given the heave-ho after censors realized its lyrics didn't, in fact, refer to a well-heeled woman flying in a commercial aircraft.

## ICELAND

**65**

Height (in feet) of the Imagine Peace Tower, near Reykjavik, which shoots a column of light into the sky between the anniversaries of John Lennon's birth (Oct. 9) and of his death (Dec. 8), and on other significant dates, to convey "wisdom, healing and joy."

## ARGENTINA

**7,700**

The total number of Beatles artifacts owned by Buenos Aires fan Rodolfo Vazquez in 2011, earning him a nod in that year's Guinness Book of World Records. The collection, which continues to swell in numbers, includes life-sized models of the Fab Four.