

Do Van Tron: A Poet, a Publisher and a Vietnamese American Life at Sea

From Pleiku to California, from refugee boats to radio towers, the writer and media pioneer built a life around language, memory and service.

By Ho Huan Cao



(Đỗ Văn Tron, Photo by Thái Thanh Tùng)

There are lives that can be explained by a profession, a hometown, a business card. Do Van Tron's is not one of them. To describe him only as a poet is to miss the publisher. To call him a publisher is to overlook the refugee. To remember the refugee is to forget the philanthropist who later helped restore sight to thousands. His story begins in the Vietnamese highlands, crosses the South China Sea, and eventually settles in the freeways, studios and immigrant neighborhoods of California, where a displaced young man built a Vietnamese-language media network and a literary life that has stretched across more than four decades.

In the Vietnamese American community, Do is known by several titles: poet, writer, broadcaster, cultural organizer, businessman. But the thread running through all of them is simpler and more enduring: he has spent much of his life trying to keep a language alive. For a community scattered by war and migration, language was more than a tool. It was shelter. It was a map back to home. It was proof that a people had carried something essential with them across the ocean.

Every life has a place where it begins. For Do Van Tron, that place was Pleiku, the misty highland city of red earth, pine hills and slow evenings. Long after he moved to the United States, Pleiku continued to appear in his poems and prose not as scenery but as a pulse. The old slopes, mountain rains and childhood roads became part of the emotional geography of his work. A person can leave a homeland by foot, by boat, by airplane. But some landscapes never leave the soul.

Yet the place that altered the course of Do's life was not Pleiku, nor even Saigon, where he studied as a child. It was the sea. After 1975, as millions of Vietnamese lives were remade by loss, separation and uncertainty, Do joined the dangerous exodus of boat people seeking freedom. He attempted the journey 13 times. Thirteen departures. Thirteen confrontations with fear. Thirteen times standing before the horizon with the fragile hope that somewhere beyond it there might be a future.

Some journeys failed. Some were turned back. Some ended before they truly began. But eventually the sea opened a narrow passage. In February 1981, Do reached the refugee camp at Songkhla, Thailand. A few months later, in June, he arrived in California. Pleiku had given him memory. The sea had given him destiny. California gave him the chance to begin again.

He arrived with little more than willpower and the instinct of a writer. In the early years, he contributed to Vietnamese-language publications and worked with well-known literary figures in exile, including the poet Du Tu Le. He wrote for community outlets and contributed to BBC and VOA programming. Those were modest beginnings, but they carried a larger idea: Vietnamese refugees in America needed not only jobs and housing, but also newspapers, radio, music, conversation and a public voice of their own.

In 1982, in San Jose, Do began building what would later become Vien Thao Media. He published Tuan Bao Yeu and the USA Vietnamese Telephone Directory, then expanded into radio, television and entertainment programming. Over time, his work grew into a media system serving Vietnamese communities across the United States, including San Jose, Orange County, Portland, Seattle, Dallas and Atlanta. For many listeners, his stations were not simply commercial outlets. They were morning companions, weekend music halls, community bulletin boards and living archives of a language carried into American life.

For immigrant media, survival has never been easy. Newspapers rise and disappear. Radio stations struggle for advertisers, technical reach and relevance. Younger generations drift toward English. But for decades, Do continued to build, adapt and broadcast. His vision was practical, but also cultural. Vietnamese, he believed, should not be confined to living rooms, cassette tapes and occasional community gatherings. It should travel with people in their cars, along American highways, between work and home, through the ordinary rhythms of daily life.

That ambition made him a recognizable figure beyond the Vietnamese community. The San Jose Mercury News once described him as a 'San Jose media mogul in a strange land,' a phrase that captured not only his success but also the improbability of the journey behind it. A former refugee had entered one of the most difficult and competitive fields in America and carved out a space for a minority language that might otherwise have remained on the margins.

His name also appeared in international biographical references and cultural records, including publications connected with intellectual, literary and media achievement. In 1994, he received a media fellowship from major American magazine organizations to attend a publisher and editor program at New York University. For a man who had once risked his life at sea, stepping into a New York classroom devoted

to American publishing was more than professional recognition. It was a sign that a Vietnamese voice had found its way into the institutions of the new country.

A decade later, in 2004, Do received a New California Media Award for essay writing and journalism. Among Vietnamese Americans, the honor carried special meaning because only a small number of Vietnamese media figures had reached that level of recognition in the ethnic press. Do stood in the company of pioneers who helped define Vietnamese-language journalism in exile.

But to stop at media is to offer an incomplete portrait. Behind the broadcaster and publisher was always a poet. Literature came to Do not as an ornament to success, but as a way of preserving what history had scattered: Pleiku, Saigon, the sea, separation, lost loves, old friendships, the ache of memory and the stubborn tenderness of a person who had survived dislocation without surrendering to bitterness.

Across more than 40 years of writing, Do produced poetry, fiction and essays read by Vietnamese audiences in the United States and abroad. His titles include *Noi Niem Mang Theo*, *Mua Pho Nui*, *Toi Ve Tren Nhung Dam Gai Dam*, *Thu Gui Dau Yeu* and other published and unpublished works. His short story *Vet Tram* received a literary award in 1985, an early milestone in a writing life that would continue to develop alongside his media career.

His prose is not noisy. It does not chase spectacle. Its force comes from lived experience: the memory of leaving, the dignity of longing, the silence that follows loss, the strange comfort of carrying a homeland inside oneself. For Do, literature has been less a performance than a refuge, a private room where the past can be addressed without being simplified.

Perhaps that is why his poetry found another life in music. Few poets are fortunate enough to see their words carried by major composers and sung by celebrated voices. Do's poems have been set to music by such prominent Vietnamese composers as Vu Thanh An, Tu Cong Phung, Song Ngoc, Mai Hoai Thu, Tran Duy Duc and others. Songs connected to his poetry and lyrics include *Hat Giong Tinh*, *Sai Gon Buon*, *Giong Song Buon*, *San Jose - Anh La Ai*, *Dem Khong Ngu* and *Nho Nhau*.

Through music, private memory became public feeling. Poems left the page and entered concert halls, recordings and community gatherings. They were performed by well-known singers, including Khanh Ly, Diem Lien, Leu Phuong Anh, Quang Dung, Tran Thu Ha, Cam Van, Quynh Mai, Y Lan, Tuan Ngoc and others. In that transformation, Do became not only a writer of his own sorrow and tenderness, but also a vessel for a wider Vietnamese experience of exile, nostalgia and belonging.

If media was his public work and literature his inner life, philanthropy may be the most quietly luminous part of his story. For decades, Do helped organize cultural programs and benefit concerts to support people affected by storms, floods, poverty, disability and hardship in Vietnam and the United States. In those events, the stage became more than a place for performance. Music became an appeal. Community became a moral act.

The most significant of those efforts was *Khoi Nguon Anh Sang*, a humanitarian program aimed at helping poor people in Vietnam suffering from cataracts and other conditions that had left them blind or nearly blind. The premise was simple and profound: for many people, a relatively modest operation could restore the ability to see, yet the cost remained beyond reach.

Over time, the program helped bring sight to more than 20,000 poor blind people in more than 20 provinces in Vietnam. Behind that number are older people seeing their grandchildren again, parents returning to work, families regaining a measure of independence and dignity. Do, together with friends and donors, contributed more than \$1 million to support the effort. Some achievements are measured by awards. Others by assets or buildings. This one is measured in eyes opened to daylight after years of darkness.

The arc of Do's life eventually returned to the sea, but in a transformed form. If the sea of his youth was a place of danger, separation and escape, the sea of his later years became a stage for reunion. Through Hoi Ngo

Trung Duong, he developed cultural voyages on international cruise ships, gathering Vietnamese from different countries for music, memory, performance and community. The idea carries a striking symbolism: the water that once divided families and scattered a people could also become a place where they meet again.

For the Vietnamese diaspora, the ocean is never just scenery. It holds grief, risk, loss and rescue. To place music and reunion on that same ocean is to change the meaning of the water. It is not to erase the past, but to answer it. The sea that once meant flight becomes a place of return. The waves that once carried fear now carry songs, laughter, language and the possibility of belonging.

Looking back, Do Van Tron appears not as one figure but as many: a poet, a writer, a journalist, a broadcaster, a producer, a businessman, a cultural organizer, a philanthropist. But above all he is a Vietnamese American who built much of his life around the conviction that memory must be protected, language must be spoken, and success is incomplete unless it gives something back.

He did not build monuments of stone. He built radio signals, newspapers, poems, songs, benefit stages and cultural crossings. He helped create places where Vietnamese Americans could hear themselves, remember themselves and recognize one another. He turned words into music and music into connection. He turned community gatherings into acts of compassion. He turned the sea, once a symbol of peril, into a metaphor for reunion.

From Pleiku to Saigon, from the South China Sea to Songkhla, from California's refugee neighborhoods to broadcast studios and cultural stages across America, Do's journey belongs not only to him but to a generation of Vietnamese who passed through history's storm and built new horizons from the fragments that remained.

In the end, the most enduring measure of his life may not be what he accumulated, but what he gave away: a voice, a language, poems, songs, light, and the belief that even after exile, a people can preserve beauty, carry memory and make meaning wherever they land.

The open sea is behind him. The horizons are still ahead.