

**Zubir Said: A Man Made of Music**by **Perera, Loretta Marie**, written in August 2010

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*Driven by his love for music, Zubir Said's work, headlined by Singapore's national anthem Majulah Singapura, has become an important part of the nation's history and culture. Despite rapid social change and development, his traditional yet modern works, underscored by a timeless sensibility, remain as relevant and evocative as they have always been.*

Born in Bukittinggi, Minangkabau in West Sumatra, Indonesia, on July 22, 1907, Zubir Said grew up under the care of his uncle, a musician, after the death of his mother when he was seven years old. He never had an interest in studies until a teacher introduced him to *Solfa* music, the teaching of notes sung to a syllable (*do, re, mi*). This served as the starting point of what would become a lifelong love affair with music.

Once regarded as “the most respected maestro in both practical and theoretical aspects of Malay music”, Zubir showed a strong inclination towards music from an early age, learning the flute in primary school, followed by the guitar and drums in middle school. Despite strong objections from his father, who wanted his eldest child to succeed him as village chieftain, he became a member of a *keroncong* group instead.

While travelling through Sumatra with his group, a sailor friend told him of the “glittering lights, *kopi susu* (coffee with milk) and butter” of Singapore. He then made his way to Singapore in the hope of developing a career in music.

Starting out as the band leader of a *bangsawan* (Malay opera) troupe until 1936, he went on to work as a recording supervisor at His Master's Voice (GMV), a recording company. While travelling through Indonesia and Malaysia to talent-scout, he met a popular *keroncong* singer, Tarminah Kario Wikromo, in Jakarta, and they got married in Bandung, West Java, in 1938.

The couple returned to Zubir's hometown shortly before World War II, where from 1941 to 1947, he spent much time providing entertainment to Japanese soldiers and prisoners as the Japanese Military Band conductor. After the war, Zubir and his wife made their way back to Singapore where he continued composing and performing music while working part-time as a photographer for the newspaper *Utusan Melayu*.

Remembered by many as a “true Malay soul”, his expertise in music led him to the position of orchestra conductor at Shaw Brother's Malay Film Production from 1949 to 1952. To make ends meet, he also took Identity Card (IC) photographs for villagers, as ICs had become mandatory by then. He then took on the role of songwriter and score composer for Cathay-Keris Film Productions' Malay films.

Pak Zubir, as he was affectionately known, was also a mentor to fellow composers such as P. Ramlee during what was considered the Golden Age of Film in Singapore. There were 267 productions between 1950 and 1969, most of which were Malay and Chinese films.

As a father of five children (four daughters and one son), Zubir was extremely devoted and giving – he once sold part of a prized book collection for \$15 to fund his daughter’s education – but also had high expectations, and was strict and disciplined. He made sure that his children received a good education and stayed away from the music industry, as he felt that a career in music would lead to a hard life.

Described by his daughter, Dr. Rohana Zubir-Habid, as a man truly devoted to his art, Zubir consistently prioritised music over money throughout his career, a trait clearly demonstrated in his decision to stop work for a film company when asked to dub existing music onto background music in order to cut costs.

With much of his work centred around the piano, whether composing or teaching, Zubir was firmly grounded in his beliefs. He preferred teaching music, which he did until his death, to working with material that was not entirely original. This devotion to originality in music left him a happy man, but not a rich one; Zubir had only S\$20,000 to his name when he died at age 80 on November 16, 1987.

Over the course of his career, Zubir composed more than 1,000 songs, although less than 10 per cent of them were released or even recorded. Recognition finally came to Zubir when he was 50 years old, at a public performance of his music at the Victoria Theatre.

### **Onward, Singapore!**

Through his most recognised composition, *Majulah Singapura*, Zubir Said and his simple yet heartfelt message have secured a firm place in Singapore’s past and present more than 50 years after it was written.

Zubir originally composed Singapore’s national anthem as a theme song for the City Council of Singapore – the administrative council that oversaw much of pre-independent Singapore’s infrastructure in the 1950s and 1960s - at the request of Ong Pang Boon, the Deputy Mayor at the time.

The first outline was soon delivered, followed by a piano recording which was subsequently revised and improved to tie in with the newly renovated Victoria Theatre and its motto, *Majulah Singapura*. On its opening night, the song was thus named and completed, after a year of composition and perfection. It was carefully crafted to be powerful, yet simple enough to be understood by all. The reopening of the Victoria Theatre on 6 September 1958 thus made history with the first performance of *Majulah Singapura* by the Singapore Chamber Ensemble.

Upon achieving self-government in 1959, an anthem for the new nation was needed; Zubir’s already popular composition, after some revisions, was the obvious choice.

*Majulah Singapura*, which means Onward Singapore, holds the message of uniting Singaporeans to work towards success and togetherness. During an interview in 1984, Zubir explained the philosophy behind the song with a Malay proverb: *Di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung* (You should hold up the sky of the land where you live).

The national anthem was first heard by the public at the Padang, an event attended by Zubir's then-estranged father. The moving performance led to a timely reconciliation between the two; Zubir's father passed away a few years later.

Another well-loved composition is *Semoga Bahagia*, a song sung by primary school children on Children's Day every year.

His complete works, which until recently remained with his family, have been signed over to Universal Music in Malaysia. While the copyright of the songs remains with his family, Universal now holds the management rights to all of Zubir's music. His family hopes that his music will continue to live on and inspire young musicians. Fittingly, Singapore's School of the Arts (SOTA) campus in Singapore is housed on a street named Zubir Said Drive.

### A True Original

Throughout his career, Zubir maintained a strict code of ethics when composing his music, a respectable and inspirational direction aptly summed up by his daughter, Dr. Rohana: "He valued honesty and sincerity in his work and placed importance on purity and originality, whether in his music, lyrics or style of singing."

More than two decades after his death, the purity and originality that Zubir Said was known for lives on in his music, a generous and treasured contribution to Singapore's history and culture.

### Awards

**1963:** *Sijil Cerulean* (Certificate of Honour) presented by Yusof bin Ishak, Singapore's first President

**1963:** *Bintang Bakti Masyarakat* (Service Star)

**1971:** *Jasawan Seni* (Contributor to the Art)

**1987:** ASEAN Cultural and Communications Award

**1995:** 1<sup>st</sup> Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Lifetime Achievement Award*

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