

P. Ramlee: A Champion Composer

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National Library Board, Singapore

Born on March 22, 1929 in Penang, Malaysia, P. Ramlee has become a household name in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia for his vast contributions to Malay entertainment. A celebrated director and actor in Malay films, P. Ramlee also excelled in music as a singer, composer and lyricist with more than 250 songs to his name.

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From his humble beginning in Penang amidst Indian night-soil carriers, young Teuku Zakaria created the name he would be known by for the rest of his career – Ramlee Puteh, abbreviated South-Indian style to P. Ramlee. His childhood experiences also led to an affinity with Indians and fluency in the Tamil language.

Having attended several schools in Penang, Ramlee began his involvement in the performing arts at an early age as a singer. He was also the village *muezzin* (prayer caller). During the Japanese Occupation from 1942-1945, he worked at a tin factory before enrolling as a cadet in the Japanese Navy School where he learnt to sing Japanese songs, a skill that proved useful during the war.

With little formal education, Ramlee was a member of musical groups Sinaran Bintang Sore (The Glittering Evening Star) and Teruna Sekampung (The Village Lads). He was a student of Cikgu Kamaruddin, a famous music teacher at the time, and his path to success began when he participated in the Radio Pulau Pinang singing competition for three consecutive years, working his way up from third to first place in 1947.

A pivotal moment took place the following year, in June 1948, when the young entertainer captivated a Shaw Brothers film director and talent scout, B.S. Rajhans, who offered him a job as a playback singer for Studio Malay Film Productions. Later that year, Ramlee boarded a train for Singapore, bound for the film studios in Jalan Ampas – and a career of legendary success.

With his passion for film-making, Ramlee got involved wholeheartedly and worked in many capacities, from playback singer to clapper boy, to assistant cameraman, to composer. His big break came in 1955 when he directed his first movie, *Penarek Beca*, which featured one of his award-winning compositions, *Azizah*. With this, he became the first successful Malay director. He went on to act in more than 61 films and directed 37, many of which were highly acclaimed and are considered classics until today. Many of his compositions were used in the movies he directed.

Always extremely meticulous about his music and the way lyrics and melody had to complement each other, Ramlee was also creative and innovative, adapting traditional Malay music with the popular rock and roll tunes of the time – inspiration from artistes such as Elvis Presley kept his music modern, while a careful balance of lyrics and tempo ensured that his more conservative listeners would remain satisfied. A fine example of this skill can be heard in the 1964 film *Tiga Abdul* (The Three Abduls), which features the song *Bunyi Guitar* (The Sound of Guitar). Ramlee's preferred instruments were the guitar, piano, violin, clarinet, flute and saxophone.

A key influence for this fusion of musical styles stemmed from fellow composers Osman Ahmad and Yusoff B, both of whom combined traditional and modern styles in their music. Ramlee was also a student and staunch admirer of Zubir Said, who he described as a true Malay composer.

Moving to Kuala Lumpur in 1964 where he remained until his death, Ramlee worked for Studio Merdeka where he directed 18 films. His career came to a sudden end when he passed away on 29 May 1973 from a heart attack. He was just 44 years old, and he left behind seven children from three wives including a stepson from his third wife, singer Salmah Ismail, and three adopted children. His last film was *Laksamana Do Re Mi* (Do Re Mi Warriors), and his last song was *Airmata Di Kuala Lumpur* (Tears in Kuala Lumpur), which spoke of his unfulfilled dreams. His legend lives on with regular screenings of his movies on television in Singapore and Malaysia where his audiences continue to grow in appreciation.

His Greatest Work

Widely regarded as his greatest composition, Ramlee's *Getaran Jiwa* (Yearning Heart) was also the theme song for his film, *Antara Dua D'arjat* (Between Two Classes), an equally credited work released in 1960. Delving into class issues, the movie tells the story of a humble musician and the wealthy girl he falls in love with. The song, *Getaran Jiwa*, serves as a link between the couple from their courtship, through their trials to their final reunion. The song was later adapted by American folk singer Lobo, who entitled it *Whispers in the Wind*. Many of his works have also been adapted into Japanese and Chinese.

Quote

The impact of P. Ramlee, who was born into a humble way of life, and passed on having made a name for himself without riches, is best summed up by Singaporean actor and director Jins Shamsudin: “P. Ramlee adalah manusia biasa yang luar biasa.” (“P. Ramlee was an ordinary human being who was extraordinary.”)

Awards

P. Ramlee has been credited locally, regionally, and internationally for composing, acting, and directing. He has picked up multiple awards in the Asian Film Festival for Best Musical Score (*Hang Tuah*) in 1956, Best Actor (*My Son, Sazali*) in 1957, Best Comedy Film (*Nujum Pak Belalang*) in 1960, Best Versatile Talent (*Ibu Mertua Ku*) in 1963 and Best Comedy Film (*Madu Tiga*) in 1964.

In 1962, he became the first actor to receive the title *Ahli Manngku Negara* (Nation's Artist) by the King of Malaysia.

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