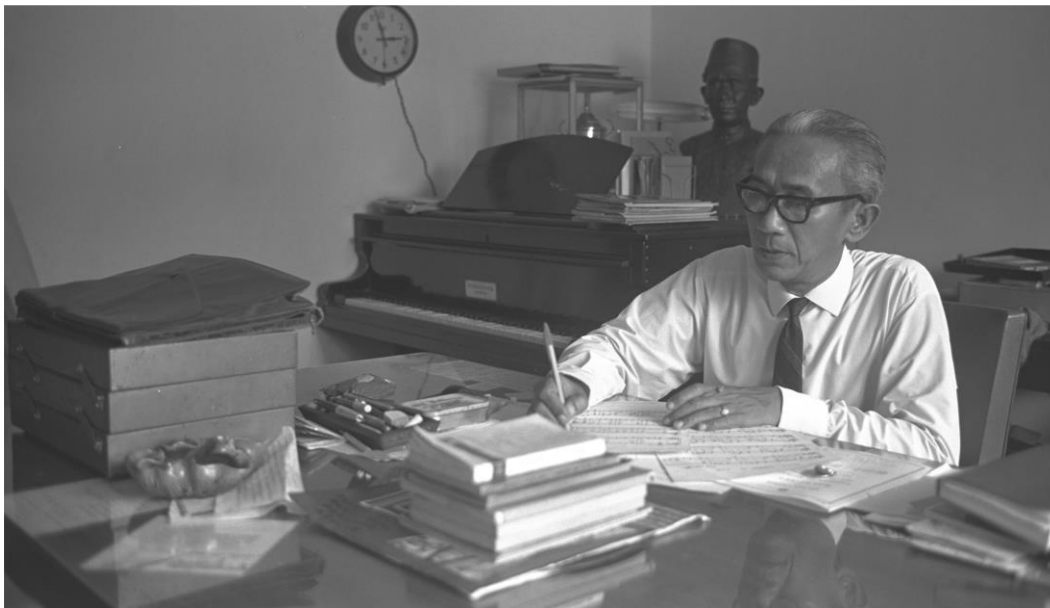




Zubir Said: the man who loved music — and his country



Zubir Said at his desk, writing music scores. His trusty piano is in the background in this 1967 photo. [Photo: Ministry Of Information & The Arts Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore]

NG YI-SHENG pays tribute to a remarkable music composer who was devoted to Singapore.

Every morning before school, you and your friends sing *Majulah Singapura*, the national anthem of Singapore. It is a beautiful song, full of hope for the future. Have you ever wondered who wrote it?

It was a man named Zubir Said. He was a great composer of Malay music. The story of how he overcame hardship to fulfil his dream was featured in the National Day Parade in August. About ten years ago, several events were held to mark the 25th anniversary of his death. A film festival was held in his honour at the National Museum, and a concert of his songs was performed at the Esplanade.

His daughter, Rohana Zubir, was present at both events. Dr Rohana said Pak Zubir (as he liked to be called) was extremely proud of having written the national anthem. However, the song also brought him sorrow. “In composing it, he experienced both **elation** and despair,” she said.

Pak Zubir's life

Pak Zubir was not originally from Singapore. He was born in 1907 on the island of Sumatra, in Indonesia. Back then, as Indonesia was a Dutch colony, he attended a Dutch school. It was there that he discovered his love for music. With his music teacher's help, he and his friends formed their own band.

Unfortunately, his father did not approve of music. He was the chief of the village, and he believed that good Muslims should not become musicians. He hoped his son would be able to follow in his footsteps and lead the village someday. Despite this, the young Pak Zubir left school at the age of 18 and became a full-time musician.

In 1928, he sailed to Singapore. He was 21 years old, with no belongings but a towel and the clothes he was wearing. Yet, he made a career for himself. He played the violin for a *bangsawan*, a Malay opera troupe, and ended up leading the band. He also worked for a recording company, working with singers from many different races.

A golden age

The period of the 1940s to the 1960s is now known as the Golden Age of Malay Cinema. Lots of wonderful black-and-white Malay movies were made in Singapore. These movies were enjoyed all over Malaysia and Indonesia. Some were based on traditional ghost stories, like *Sumpah Pontianak*, while some were modern-day romances, like *Tunang Pak Dukun*.

Pak Zubir wrote music for a lot of these films. He was the first person to create background music for these films, to influence the mood of the audience. He was also the first to introduce voice dubbing. When an actress sang a song on screen, he might record a more professional singer and use her voice in the film instead.

People loved the music he created. This was why he was asked to write a song for the reopening of Victoria Concert Hall in 1958. This song was an early version of *Majulah Singapura*. It was so popular that, one year later, the song was chosen as the national anthem.

When Pak Zubir heard the news, he was delighted, but also nervous. While he was adapting his original song, he wondered if he should try to make a song as grand and majestic as the British anthem, *God Save the Queen*. Then, he changed his mind. "I was determined to be different — to compose an anthem which is stirring to our youth and embodies the spirit of challenge," he wrote

Songs for Singapore

On 3 December 1959, *Majulah Singapura* was performed for the first time as a national anthem. 300 children from different races sang the song in front of President Yusof Ishak. Pak Zubir invited a special guest from Indonesia to come for the event. It was his father, who was by then 101 years old. Finally, the chief could be proud of the success of his musician son.

Pak Zubir wrote many other patriotic songs. One you may have heard of is *Semoga Bahagia*, our official Children’s Day song. The song is filled with fatherly advice to children — to take care of themselves, to show respect and care for others, to work hard and pursue their dreams.

After the mid-1960s, life changed for him. He was no longer asked to write movie music. The studios he worked for decided to move from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. They also decided to save costs by using pre-recorded music instead of original music for their shows.

A lasting legacy

Meanwhile, in Singapore, schoolchildren stopped learning Malay as the national language. This led to a generation of citizens who did not understand the words of *Majulah Singapura*. There were even suggestions that the anthem should be changed to an English-language song.

In 1986, a man wrote to *The Straits Times*, recommending that *Count on Me, Singapore* be chosen as the new anthem — even though that song was written by a Canadian advertisement writer! Pak Zubir was heartbroken by this. He said that it was like “a slap in my face”. He wrote an essay pointing out that the national anthem was made up of only eight sentences and 25 words. Surely it was easier to remember than most English pop songs.

A year later, he passed away. For the past two decades, he had worked as a piano teacher. He did not leave his family much money, or even a home, because he had insisted on renting his flat instead of buying it. But, he left behind a great **legacy** of music.

“He was a man who left behind his name, like the tiger that died leaving its stripes,” said his daughter, quoting a Malay proverb.

Pak Zubir may not have been born a Singaporean. In fact, he did not become a Singapore citizen until 1967. However, he was a man deeply in love with his adopted country. His songs still inspire us today, and will continue to do so for many years in the future.



Zubir Said’s *Semoga Bahagia*, the Children’s Day song, was performed by some of Singapore’s top singers in this video.

VOCAB BUILDER

elation (say “i-lay-shen”; noun) = great happiness.

legacy (say “le-ge-see”; noun) = something precious inherited from the past.

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Thank you. — News For Kids, 5 April 2022