



CULTURAL MEDALLION 2021

RAHIMAH RAHIM

RAHIMAH RAHIM (b.1955) is a singer and performer. Her artistic journey began at the age of six as a child actress in a Malay film titled ‘Love’s Sacrifice’ (‘Korban Kasih’) produced by Cathay Keris in 1961. She also acted in Cathay films such as ‘Mother’s Love’ (‘Kasih Ibu’) and ‘Useless Effort’ (‘Masuk Angin Keluar Asap’). Apart from films, Rahimah is also known for her role in a Malay television sitcom ‘Mr Awang Temberang’ (‘Pak Awang Temberang’) produced by Radio Television Singapore (RTS) in the 1960s.

Rahimah’s musical versatility is well-known—she is adept in a range of genres from Malay pop to Jazz to Cantopop. At the age of 14, Rahimah made her singing debut performing with her late father, Rahim Hamid, a famous crooner known as Singapore’s Nat King Cole. Together, they performed at nightclubs, and in 1971, she released her first Extended Play (EP) ‘Where Has Your Mother Gone?’ (‘Mana Ibu Mu’) under Panda Records with guidance from her uncle, the late crooner Ahmad Daud. She soared to greater heights when she won the prestigious Kimi Koso Star held in Tokyo, Japan in 1974.

Rahimah became a sought-after artist with many fans from Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei. Since the 1980s, she has released 12 solo albums and multiple EPs comprising many hits like, ‘Girls and Flowers’ (‘Gadis Dan Bunga’), ‘Free’ (‘Bebas’), ‘Love Challenge’ (‘Cabaran Cinta’), ‘The Broken Heart’ (‘Hati Yang Rapuh’) and ‘Selamat Hari Raya.’

She also represented Singapore at many regional and international festivals such as the World Song Festival (1987), singing multi-lingual hits and performing alongside notable singers like Miami Sound Machine, Alan Tam, the late Leslie Cheung and the late Sudirman Haji Arshad. Locally, she has collaborated with orchestras like the Asian Cultural Symphony Orchestra and Jazz Association Singapore. Rahimah also performed at multiple National Day Parades and Singapore Day events overseas, most recently in London in 2019.

Rahimah believes that great artists must have creative and imaginative minds. They must also be able to change and adapt so as to be relevant and successful. At 66, she continues to celebrate her artistic life by contributing to the community through vocal coaching with WINGS and as an online presenter for Vintage Radio SG, which she uses as a platform to share information and educate seniors on current issues. She enjoys collaborating with young talents who are inspired by her larger-than-life personality.

In 2017, for her contributions to the local arts and entertainment scene, Rahimah was inducted into Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame by Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations (SCWO). In the same year, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award (Anugerah Perdana Emas) by Mediacorp Suria.



Performing on television entertainment show Hiburan Minggu Ini by Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), 1980
Photo courtesy of Rahimah Rahim

RAHIMAH RAHIM: AN ENDURING CULTURAL ICON

BY EDDINO ABDUL HADI



In the Malay performing and entertainment scene in Singapore, there has never been another artist quite like Rahimah Rahim.

Her enduring popularity through the ages is testament to her deep, unwavering commitment to her craft. From her beginning as a child actress in the 1960s, to her pre-eminence as an all-round performer on radio, television and live music scene in the 1970s and 1980s, to her current status as an evergreen entertainment doyenne, she is a veritable household name who transcends language and ethnic divides.

Dubbed a “legendary pop icon”¹ by Malay newspaper ‘Berita Harian,’ and affectionately known by her nickname “Kak Gerl,” she has been an inspiration to succeeding generations of performers. Host-producer-singer Najip Ali, who is a fixture in the Malay entertainment scene, has often cited Rahimah’s work in the 1970s as having inspired his move to the television and music industry.² Siti Nurhaliza, one of the biggest names in the Malaysian music scene, announced in a 2014 concert in Singapore that she grew up listening to Rahimah’s music.^{3,4}

That she has remained so influential over the decades can be attributed to several factors: talent, industry and a personable touch.

To start with, she is top of her game in the music arena, enviably at home across diverse musical forms. Her discography is vast and deep, boasting 12 solo albums and multiple songs which continue to



Rahimah as a young performer with her father, Rahim Hamid

Photo courtesy of Rahimah Rahim

be played on radio as well as draw millions of views and listens on streaming services. Few has her mellifluous range and distinctive tenor, which means she can take on multiple genres, from pop and dangdut to jazz and spiritual music.

For example, the title track from her 1982 album ‘Girls and Flowers’ (‘Gadis Dan Bunga’), straddles pop and dangdut, while a 1990 tune ‘Prayers’ (‘Doa’) sits on the other end of the spectrum as a spiritual ballad.

Like many great singers, her tone did not remain static. Over time, her voice took on a deeper, more mature pitch moulded by decades of singing. If one were to compare her early recordings from the 1970s with her most recent songs recorded in the last decade, one can detect a clear progression in the quality.

She does not employ vocal acrobatics often overused by torch singers; her strength lies in her ability to be in command of the little nuances in her phrasings and her impeccable sense of rhythm, a trait that she probably picked up singing jazz in her early years before she switched to pop music.

While most of her songs are sung in Malay, she has also taken on other languages such as English, Mandarin and Japanese. Some of her signature non-Malay cover songs include ‘The Evening Primrose’ (‘Ye Lai Xiang’) by Shanghainese diva Li Xianglan, ‘Sweet As Honey’ (‘Tian Mi Mi’) which she learned from the original singer, Taiwanese legend Teresa Teng herself, and ‘You To Me Are Everything’ by British soul group The Real Thing. When she takes on these covers, she does not simply mimic the original singers like other entertainers might do, she imprints them with her own style and musicality and makes these songs her own.

A consummate showman, Rahimah is adept at reading and entertaining a crowd, a skill borne out of countless hours spent on stage. She made it a point to study the moves of international artists such as Diana Ross, whom she watched live in Las Vegas⁵ and Stevie Wonder, whom she saw in concert at Wimbledon. In 1984, she even travelled to Los Angeles to take up a course in entertainment at the Dick Grove School of Music. Her showmanship extends to her charisma and presence in films and on television in Singapore and across the Causeway. Audiences remember her as a versatile actress who shone in a range of roles, be it comedic or dramatic.

It is no surprise that Rahimah comes from a legendary family steeped in showbusiness. Born in 1955, she grew up as the eldest of four children to two celebrity parents. Her mother, Mariam Baharom, was an actress with the major film studios Shaw Brothers and Cathay Keris Studio, and who had acted opposite P. Ramlee. Her father, Rahim Hamid, was a multi-hyphenate, being a film editor, a radio personality and a singer known as Singapore’s Nat King Cole who



Performing on President's Star Charity, 2017
Photo courtesy of Mediacorp

performed at top clubs such as Cockpit and Ming Court Hotel's Jade Lounge. Her siblings, too, are also established entertainers—brother Rahman is an actor, sister Rozie a singer, and half-brother Bat Latiff a former child actor and a dance choreographer.

Likewise, their extended family in Malaysia are prominent names in the entertainment industry. Rahimah's late uncle and vocal coach Ahmad Daud was an accomplished singer-actor in the 1960s and 1970s, while his daughter and her cousin, Ogy Ahmad Daud, is an actress-singer and stalwart of the Malay television and film industry.

Born into this environment, Rahimah showed her preternatural gift for entertaining and performing at the precocious age of six, playing a rich little girl in the Malay film 'Love's Sacrifice' ('Korban Kasih'). This led to a role in 'Mr Awang Temberang' ('Pak Awang Temberang'), a popular sitcom in the 1960s, as well as a string of appearances in variety television shows. Having made her name as a child star, she also acted in films such as 'Useless Effort' ('Masuk Angin Keluar Asap', 1963) and 'Mother's Love' ('Kasih Ibu', 1965).

If acting was something she took after her mother, singing was a passion and skill she picked up from her father. She started accompanying her father at his club shows at the age of 14 and had to be snuck in because she was below the age limit. After she left school in 1971, she made more frequent appearances onstage with her father.

A year later, in 1972, she made her debut as a recording artist with the release of her first EP, 'Where Has Your Mother Gone?' ('Mana Ibu Mu'). Backed by Indonesian band The Commandos, the title track is a Malay cover of 'Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep,' a song first recorded in 1970 and later made popular by Scottish band Middle of the Road.

Her star rose astronomically when in 1974, at the age of 19, she beat the competition to win the Kimi Koso Star, an Asia-wide competition in Japan. Although she was offered a contract to sing in Japan, she declined as her mother wished for her to return to Singapore. Still, the achievement led to many offers to sing in top Singapore venues such as clubs at the Mandarin and Apollo hotels. How hardworking was she? So dedicated she was that she sang every night at the Neptune Theatre Restaurant for three years— without taking any day off.

The following decade proved to be the pinnacle of her singing career: she cemented her popularity and became a household name in Singapore in the 1980s with a slew of albums that included 'Girls and Flowers' ('Gadis Dan Bunga', 1982) and 'Free' ('Bebas', 1984), the title track of the latter becoming one of her more enduring hits.

She made regional inroads too. Aside from her multiple television appearances and performances in Singapore, she travelled to Australia, Thailand, India, Taiwan and Hong Kong, performing with



Rahimah's solo concert at Esplanade in 2017, where she performed alongside her sister Rozie Rahim
Photo courtesy of Rahimah Rahim

superstars such as Alan Tam and the late Leslie Cheung. During this period, her influence went beyond music and she became known as a trendsetter and style maven, and opened her own bridal and hair salon.

In 1989, she announced her retirement from singing full time to focus on her family and released what she said then would be her final album, 'The Broken Heart' ('Hati Yang Rapuh'), the following year.⁶

In the subsequent decades, she made sporadic television appearances, including a hosting segment in 1997 on Malay television channel Suria. In 2003, she made a significant comeback to the music industry⁷ when she released 'A Memory' ('Suatu Memori'), comprising re-recorded versions of her hit songs. In the next few years, she would also help groom a new generation of singers with her involvement in television singing competitions Anugerah and Singapore Idol.⁸ She released another album, 'Before and Now' ('Awal & Kini'), another compilation of her old songs, in 2006.⁹

Despite a low-key presence, she does not rest on her laurels. Impressively, she sang in Russian for the first time at the premiere of a symphony, 'Singapore: A Geopolitical Utopia,' in 2007,¹⁰ and acted in her first English-language musical, Dick Lee's 'Fried Rice Paradise,' produced by the Singapore Repertory Theatre, in 2010.¹¹ The acting bug got her again, as she showcased her thespian chops by appearing in an English musical/comedy film, '3688' (2015), Hokkien television drama 'Eat Already?' (2017), and Malay telemovie 'Scissors/Cut' ('Gunting') (2017).

That year, 2017, was particularly momentous as she was feted for her body of works. Besides receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Malay television award show 'Pesta Perdana,' she also became the first pop singer to be inducted by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame.¹² She also staged her first major headlining show at one of the most prestigious stages in Singapore, the Esplanade Concert Hall, and released a single, 'Glass of Love' ('Gelas Gelas Cinta'),¹³ her first new song in more than a decade. She continued to sing and perform on the national stage,¹⁴ and, two years later, was one of the artists invited to sing the 2019 National Day Parade (NDP) theme song 'Our Singapore.'

Today, Rahimah has shown how she has done it her way, and on her own terms.

As a public personality, her sartorial choices over the decades have sparked trends in the community.¹⁵ In the early 1980s, she dyed a part of her hair green, a style she made her trademark long before it became common to dye the hair in loud colours.¹⁶ In the latter part of the decade, when she started to adopt a more modest form of dressing,¹⁷ her style of scarves and head coverings became a selling point for clothes sellers among the Malay community.

- 1 ‘Ucapan khas Presiden Halimah di konsert Hari Kebangsaan pada 9 Ogos,’ ‘Berita Harian,’ 30 Jul 2021, p. 2.
- 2 ‘Simply outrageous,’ ‘The Sunday Plus,’ 14 Mar 1993, p. 14.
- 3 ‘Siti here, there, everywhere,’ (2014 April 14), ‘The Straits Times,’ 14 Apr 2014, p. C8.
- 4 ‘Body set up to champion Malay musicians,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 31 Jan 1994, p. L14.
- 5 ‘Generation M: The Queen Of Entertainment,’ Offstage: The Esplanade, 15 Apr 2021.
- 6 ‘Swansong,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 7 May 1990, p. L6.
- 7 ‘Oral history interview with Rahimah Rahim,’ National Archives of Singapore, 3 Apr 2007.
- 8 ‘A ‘rolling good time’ with Rahimah Rahim,’ Channel NewsAsia, 24 Jul 2008.
- 9 ‘The Simple Life,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 4 Dec 2006, p. 4.
- 10 ‘Pitch perfect in Russian,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 3 Mar 2007, p. 4.
- 11 ‘Embarking on a new stage,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 16 Aug 2010, p. C2.
- 12 ‘Pop stars among S’pore women honoured,’ The Straits Times,’ 9 Mar 2017, p. B1.
- 13 ‘Rahimah’s highs and lows’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 8 Nov 2017, p. D6.
- 14 ‘Rasa sayang S’pura Rahimah kongsi kegembiraan,’ ‘Berita Harian,’ 10 Aug 2021, p. 12.
- 15 ‘Rahimah’s old clothes still a hit with fans,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 13 Dec 1990, p. 20.
- 16 ‘Nobody pays to see you cry,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 26 Apr 2006, p. 5.
- 17 ‘This is Rahimah,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ p. S2.1 - S2.2.
- 18 ‘ComChest’s virtual charity concert raises over \$2.7m,’ ‘The Sunday Times,’ 10 Jan 2021, p. A17.
- 19 ‘Radio app for seniors, presented by seniors,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 15 Sep 2020, p. C3.
- 20 ‘Rahimah tebar sayap jadi pembimbing vokal,’ ‘Berita Harian,’ 20 Jan 2019, p. 20.
- 21 ‘Rahimah Rahim ajak warga emas segera divaksin,’ ‘Berita Harian,’ 2 Sep 2021, p. 1.
- 22 ‘Roadshows educate seniors on Merdeka Generation benefits,’ ‘The Straits Times,’ 21 Oct 2019, p. B4.

Progressing beyond traditional platforms, she has also gladly embraced technology in her craft, especially in the past year when the pandemic halted live music performances. She has no qualms performing at online events, including a virtual concert organised by The Community Chest in early 2021.¹⁸ In an online Esplanade concert, ‘The Lady and The Flower,’ named after her hit song, she sang with contemporary pop singer Fathin Amira in a show that was part of the arts venue’s A Date With Friends series for seniors. She is currently one of the star anchors on Vintage Radio SG, a radio service available online and on mobile apps that plays classic pop tunes from the 1950s to the 1970s.¹⁹

With live performances making a comeback in a limited capacity, she is lending her support too. At the Evergreen Symphonic Jukebox show at Victoria Theatre, part of the 2021 Silver Arts festival, she was on stage with beatboxer Charles Stitch Wong as well as the Asian Cultural Symphony Orchestra. At the Pesta Jazz concert at Capitol Theatre, she sang jazz tunes with the Jazz Association (Singapore) Orchestra.

These days, she advocates for the love of singing and music in the community, most notably through her regular vocal coaching classes through WINGS, a non-profit organisation that helps women in their later years.²⁰

Admirably, she uses her fame to do good. In the past few years, she has worked with Health Promotion Board’s live events to encourage health screenings within the Malay community,²¹ and was one the prominent personalities in the campaign to extol the benefits of the Merdeka Generation Package to her peers.²² More recently, she sang and danced in a music video, ‘Have You Been Vaccinated?’ (‘Sudah Divaksinasi?’), part of a campaign urging seniors in the Malay community to get vaccinated against the coronavirus.

Being a performer is both “a passion and a responsibility,” and as long as the fans want her, as long as she is able, she will not stop with her craft, she says – an ethos which has guided her career and mission in life.

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Eddino Abdul Hadi is the music correspondent for The Straits Times, and has written about music for various publications such as music magazine ‘BigO’ since the early 2000s. He also sits on the board of directors of the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS).



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I would like to forward my deep gratitude and praise to the Almighty for His Blessings through the ups and downs of my artistic journey which made me who I am today. To both my parents who have passed on, my family members, you are and always will be my source of inspiration and strength.

My heartfelt gratitude to the ones in the arts and entertainment industry who discovered my talent and opened the doors of opportunity for me like the late Ahmad Daud, the late Kassim Masdor, the late Hussin Hanif, Yusnor Ef, Johari Salleh, Mokhzani Ismail, Baharudin Ismail, Fauzi Marzuki, Suhaimi Jais, Habsah Hassan, Osman Arrifin, Jimmy Loh, Dick Lee, Royston Tan, Annie Pek, Jeremy Monteiro, and other show organisers, musicians, artists and producers whom I have had the pleasure to work with.

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Finally, to all my fans and good friends who still believe in me, I am truly honoured, humbled and grateful. I have many others to thank and I apologise for names not mentioned but you know who you are.

It has been a wonderful 60 years entertaining all of you!