

# NONA ASIAH



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NONA ASIAH DRESSED IN HER SELF-DESIGNED OUTFIT, 1950S  
Photo courtesy of Nona Asiah

Asiah Aman (b. 1930) is a singer-actress extraordinaire. Fondly known as Nona Asiah, she is famous for being the singing voice on the silver screen in the early 1950s and 1960s. She is one of the first female singers to be offered a recording contract by HMV record label and this resulted in a sold-out record of her song *Chiumku Lagi* (Kiss Me Again), a Malay recording of the famous Mexican ballad, *Besame Mucho*.

By the age of 19, Asiah had established herself as a singing sensation, having recorded over twenty songs, performing regularly on Radio Malaya and as a successful playback singer for popular leading ladies during the golden age of Malay film industry in Singapore. One of her first performances for Shaw Brothers was also one of her most notable duets with the late P. Ramlee in the movie *Chinta* (Love, 1948), as the singing voices of power couple, Siput Sarawak and S. Roomai Noor. Composer of Singapore's National Anthem, Zubir Said, took Asiah as his protégé and eventually composed a song especially for her titled *Chempaka Biru* (Blue Magnolia). *Chempaka Biru* and *Bunga Sakura* (Sakura Flower) contributed to her reputation as the famous songbird. Throughout her singing and acting career, Asiah was the vocal coach of singers of over three hundred songs which have become part of the cultural memory of the Malay community, including children songs such as *Dua Angkasawan* (Two Astronauts), *Sakit Gigi* (Toothache) and *Selamat Hari Raya*, all of which are still being sung today and used as part of schools' enrichment curriculum.

Recognising the importance of arts education, Asiah was one of the lead coaches of *Bengkel Kanak-Kanak* (Children's Workshop by Radio Malaya) which enabled her to inspire and groom a whole generation of creative professionals, many of whom continue to contribute significantly to the local music and media industry such as Najib Ali, Rilla Melati, Khairudin Samsudin, and her sons Indra Shahrir Ismail and the late Iskandar Mirza Ismail (Cultural Medallion recipient, 2008). Enterprising and progressive, Asiah continues to lend her expertise to various television programmes and publications on the history of music and film in the *nusantara* (Malay Archipelago).

For her contribution to the Malay film and music industry, Asiah was honoured at the Seri Temasek 2011 Gala Night and Awards Ceremony, supported by FINAS (Malaysia National Film Development) and Majlis Pusat Singapura. In 2015, the Malay Festival of Arts at the Esplanade, Pesta Raya, paid tribute to Asiah with a concert in her honour as well as an exhibition of her clothing designs. In 2003, Asiah received the Lifetime Achievement Award at MediaCorp's biannual Pesta Perdana Award Ceremony for her contribution to the arts and entertainment industry. ■

# NONA ASIAH: A GOLDEN VOICE

BY EDDINO ABDUL HADI

The Malay entertainment world in Singapore would have been a markedly different place without the talent, drive and vision of Asiah Aman. As a singer with a distinctive, golden voice, and a mentor responsible for grooming later generations of talents, Nona Asiah, as she was known by all, made her mark throughout the evolution of the entertainment medium, from radio, to film and television.

Nona Asiah is one of the last few surviving icons of the Golden Age of Malay cinema, the illustrious period from the 1950s and 1960s that gave birth to Malay films now hailed as classics in Singapore and Malaysia. Dubbed “The First Lady of Entertainment”, her singing became one of the hallmarks of the films produced by Singapore’s two major studios of the time, Malay Film Productions (owned by Shaw Brothers) and Cathay-Keris. In the 1970s and 1980s, she was a mentor who moulded young talents for Malay television in her Lorong Melayu house where she still stays, teaching them the finer art of singing and instilling in them the confidence to put on a show in front of any crowd.

Much of her story revolves around family, beginning with her parents, steeped in

the arts, and continuing in her children who have gone on to make great strides in the local and regional music industry.

Her father was painter, singer and musician Aman Ahmad, better known as Pak Man. He painted the sets for the Dean Tijah *bangsawan* (Malay opera) troupe where her mother, Rahmah Osman, was the prima donna. The young Nona Asiah grew up on set and it was there that her love for singing and music was nurtured.

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Her professional singing career can be traced back to the Japanese Occupation, when a 12-year-old Nona sang for Japanese troops, sometimes at makeshift stages in the jungle. She was paid in rations – precious bread, sugar and other basic necessities that helped her family survive the harsh war years.

After the war ended, a 16-year-old Nona Asiah was hired by Radio Malaya as a narrator, programme host and singer. It was then that the seeds of Nona Asiah, the entertainer and educator, was

planted. Much of her early works on radio were centred around the educational programmes for schoolchildren helmed by acclaimed Malaysian educator and historian Buyong Adil. She also sang Malay and Indonesian song requests in a weekly show, backed by a trio of musicians, *Tiga Serumpun* (Three Get-Together), and together with her future husband, Ismail Kassim.

The popularity of her radio shows led to British music company HMV, or His Master’s Voice, signing her on and releasing her records under its Pathé label. One of her distinctive trademarks was giving a Malay touch to songs originally sung in a foreign language. Two of her most memorable tunes were the Malay renditions of Mexican songwriter Consuelo Velázquez’s iconic 1940 song *Bésame Mucho*, renamed as *Ciumku Lagi* (Kiss Me Again), which was also her first record, and a Japanese folk song, *Bunga Sakura* (Sakura Flower).

Nona Asiah had already made her impact by the time she was 19. An article in The New Straits Times dated 5 May 1950, described her as “One of the famous popular Malay women singer in Malaya”, with a voice “familiar to most Radio Malaya listeners” and an artist who is also “a favourite on gramophone records”.



NONA ASIAH DRESSED IN HER SELF-DESIGNED OUTFIT, 1950S  
Photo courtesy of Nona Asiah



NONA ASIAH WITH ORKESTRA KAMPONG GELAM, 1950S  
Photo courtesy of Nona Asiah



SONG WRITTEN BY ZUBIR SAID TO RECORD FOR RADIO SHOW, 1960  
Photo courtesy of Nona Asiah

Her film career started with Shaw Brother's *Chinta* (Love), a 1948 film that had Zubir Said, the man who would go on to compose the national anthem *Majulah Singapura*, as music director. *Chinta* was a landmark project – it was the first Malay film to feature playback singers, with Nona Asiah lending her voice for main actress Siput Sarawak's singing parts while Malay entertainment icon P. Ramlee sang the male parts for main actor S. Roomai Noor.

The film's success would lead to her singing on more notable movies like *Nasib* (Luck) (1949), *Nilam* (Sapphire) (1949), *Rachun Dunia* (World Poison) (1950), *Hujan Panas* (Hot Rain) (1953) and *Bujang Lapok* (Raggedy Bachelors) (1957). When Zubir Said moved to Cathay-Keris, he would continue using her singing voice for popular actresses like Rose Yatimah and Latifah Omar.

Nona Asiah and the composer worked closely together. When Zubir Said invented Solmisasi, his own system of reading music, Nona Asiah was one of his earliest students. He later engaged her as the singing voice on two Solmisasi instructional records for children released by Columbia Records. While her voice took centre stage in the movies, Nona Asiah also took on acting roles in two films. *Pelangi* (Rainbow) (1951), the first film produced by Nusantara Film Company, starred her and then future-husband Ismail Kassim while *Abu Nawas* (1957), again starring the couple, was produced by Malayan Film Unit. She married Ismail, a draughtsman who also acted and sang, in 1955.

Like many entertainers, Nona Asiah understands the important role aesthetics has in maintaining her appeal. In that aspect, she was a fashionista whose keen eye for adding cutting-

edge touches to Malay garb made her a trend-setter, the era's equivalent of today's influencers.

She would design and sew her own baju kurungs and kebayas, and embellish them with sequins. Wanting to emulate her sense of style, other actresses and singers like Saloma, Kartina Dahari, Julie Sudiro and Momo Latiff would ask her to design and sew their baju kurungs and kebayas for them. In 2014, part of her collection, many of which are kept in pristine condition, were displayed at The People's Collection – A Special Exhibition, at the Singapore National Museum.

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Her influence, drive and tenacity is perhaps most manifested in her own children. All five were taught music and two of them, the late Iskandar Mirza Ismail and Indra Shahrir Ismail, went on to become illustrious and decorated names in the Singapore music industry.

As a composer, arranger, producer, music director and musician, Iskandar's works spanned the region and encompassed anything from Chinese pop hits and musicals to National Day Parades and club performances. Awarded the Cultural Medallion in 2008, he credits his mother's encouragement as one of his principal motivation in excelling in music. He passed away of cancer in 2014. His younger brother Indra, a child pop star in the 1970s, helms the music in major productions like regional Malay awards show Anugerah Planet Muzik as



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Photo courtesy of Nona Asiah



LAST EVER PERFORMANCE FOR RTM SENIMAN SILAM WITH LATE HUSBAND HAJI ISMAIL KASSIM AND MOMO LATIFF, 1975  
Photo courtesy of Nona Asiah



RECORDING SESSION FOR THE GROWN UP MAT YOYO KIDS, 1992  
Photo courtesy of Nona Asiah

well as concerts by Cultural Medallion composer and singer Dick Lee.

Nona Asiah's exceptional abilities in moulding her children's music artistry at a young age led to parents and producers sending their budding talents to her singing classes. More than just training their singing abilities, she also built up their confidence and instilled in them the ability to perform their best in front of any crowd. Host, singer and producer Najip Ali, one of the most recognised talents in the local Malay television industry, is one protégé who has gone on record to say that his entertainment career would not be where it is today without Nona Asiah's tutelage when he was still a child. Other eminent names in the Malay entertainment industry who started their lasting entertainment careers with Nona Asiah's classes are hosts and actors Rilla Melati Bahari, Shahrin Azhar and Djohan Abdul Rahman, better known by his nom de plume Bobo, and radio deejay Suriani Kassim. Many young talents who appeared on iconic children television series Mat Yoyo that aired on the then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation in the 1980s were groomed by her.

#### About the writer:

Eddino Abdul Hadi is a music correspondent with The Straits Times, Singapore Press Holdings, since 2007 and sits on the board of directors at Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS).

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Nona Asiah's legacy has been recognised with accolades in recent years. She received the Anugerah Seri Temasek, awarded by Malay-Muslim non-profit organisation Majlis Pusat, the Malaysia National Film Development Corporation (Finas) and events company Hann's Entertainment in 2011. In 2015, the Esplanade staged a major concert in honour of Nona Asiah's legacy. Titled *Si Cempaka Biru – Celebrating the Life of Nona Asiah*, a new generation of Singapore Malay singers like Aisyah Aziz, Imran Ajmain, Amni Musfirah Abdul Rashid and Rudy Djoharnaen breathed new life into her songs.

The concert title is a reference to *Cempaka Biru* (Blue Cempaka), one of her signature tunes and specially composed for her by Zubir Said. It has to be noted that the Cempaka flower that inspired the song only comes in two colours – white and yellow. Inventing a blue variant for the song was his way of making the tune special, befitting of an artist who now stands as a doyenne of Malay music. ■

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## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

Selain ibu bapa saya, saya sangat berterima kasih kepada ketua Radio Orkestra, alahyarham Ahmad Jaafar yang telah memberi saya kesempatan untuk mewakili Singapura di Malaysia, Sarawak dan Brunei anjuran Kementerian Kebudayaan.

Saya juga berterima kasih kepada penerbit siaran radio ke sekolah-sekolah di seluruh semenanjung Tanah Melayu dan Singapura, iaitu alahyarham Cikgu Buyong Adil.

Yang telah banyak memberi saya tunjuk ajar dalam bidang nyanyian dan muzik – alahyarham Pak Zubir Said dan Pak Othman Ahmad.

Juga kepada alahyarham Wandī Yazid, bagi peluang untuk membuat rakaman suara latar untuk lagu-lagu filem.

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I thank my late parents.

I thank the following legends for their guidance, patience and encouragement throughout my singing career:

- The late Ahmad Jaafar, band leader of Radio Orchestra, for the opportunity to represent Singapore, touring Malaysia, Sarawak and Brunei with the then-Ministry of Culture;
- The late Cikgu Buyong Adil, head and producer of the radio station to Malay schools in Singapore and Malaya;
- The late Pak Zubir Said and late Pak Othman Ahmad – the two who taught me everything I know about singing and music; *and*,
- Finally, to the late Wandī Yazid for giving me the opportunity to sing for our films.