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SINGAPORE ROCK TAKES SEAT: The original line-up of Sweet Charity in 1967 (from left) – Rahman Sarbani, Wahid Warren, Joe Salim and Ramli Sarip (seated).



THEN AND NOW: Sweet Charity at their 1995 reunion.



BACK WITH AN AXE TO GRIND: Ramli at the 1995 concert with guitarist Rosli Moealim (right).

PAPA STILL ROCKS

Sweet Charity star Ramli Sarip once packed stadiums; his work still rings true with the current generation

IN 1984, a major music concert in Pahang almost ended in chaos. Thousands of fans forced their way into the stadium to watch their heroes, causing an unexpected stampede.

The concert went ahead, but not before the stadium's four main gates collapsed.

Devoted fans had flocked to Pahang from across South-east Asia to see one of the most popular music acts in the flesh.

It wasn't a young Michael Jackson promoting his album *Thriller*, or popular stadium outfit Van Halen.

Asians had come to see Papa Rock.

To dedicated followers of rock music, names are not necessary.

Across Malaysia, Indonesia and, of course, Singapore, there is only one Papa Rock. There is only one Ramli Sarip.

The Malay singer-songwriter made his name in the 70s with his band, Sweet Charity, often considered to be the most popular rock outfit this country has ever produced.

In their prime in the early 80s, Sweet Charity gigs were not merely a rock concert; they were an event.

Gigs sold out almost immediately and were eagerly anticipated. Diehards jostled to get to the front seats, while those without tickets stood outside the stadium just to hear the seven-member rock group play.

Consider this astonishing statistic: With the dynamic Ramli up front, Sweet Charity performed on the open ground at the Police Academy in Thompson Road in 1985.

And over 50,000 Singaporeans turned up to watch a Singaporean band play.

It's a scenario that's unlikely to be repeated.

By the time Sweet Charity disbanded in 1986, they had notched up nine hit al-

bums, each of which sold hundreds of thousands of copies in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia.

Even today, songs like *Jan-gan Tunggu Lama-Lama (Don't Wait Too Long)*, as well as *Hidup Bagaikan Mimpi (Life Is Like A Dream)* are still a hit with a new generation of fans.

Not bad for a band that began their career in 1967 by playing at Malay weddings.

"There's where our roots are," said the long-haired 53-year-old Ramli at the office of Warner Music at Keppel Towers recently.

"That's interesting, actually. I realise now that all my influences came from my childhood. That traditional Malay music I heard as a boy is now obvious in my music.

"Subconsciously, the music stays with you."

SWEET CHARITY, SWEET MEMORIES

In a fickle industry, Ramli remains as popular as ever.

In February, he was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award at MediaCorp TV 12 Suria's *Anugerah Planet Muzik 2005* awards. When he appeared on stage at the Suntec City Convention Hall to collect the award, he received a standing ovation.

Earlier this year, he released a box set documenting his 35-year career.

Entitled *Ruh Zaman (Soul of Time)*, it has since sold 35,000 copies in Malaysia alone.

It's been a long and colourful career, but the soft-spoken singer has never forgotten Sweet Charity's humble beginnings.

"The band was formed in 1967 right after I left Jalan Teck Whye Secondary School," he recalled, smiling at the memory.

"I was then living in the Bukit Timah area. We were away from Geylang and



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Katong, which in those days was known as the Liverpool of Singapore because a lot of talented musicians from the 1960s lived in the area, including The Quests and The Stray Dogs."

Living away from the musical didn't deter the fledgling band. "In 1968, Sweet Charity performed a lot at The Ocean Bar in Sembawang," he added.

"There was a naval base there back then and we used to perform for the sailors on the weekends. It was there that we got our exposure to rock 'n' roll."

"We weren't really into The Beatles or The Rolling Stones but we played them because that's what the sailors wanted to hear. We also played stuff by Cream, The Doobie Brothers and The Yardbirds; that was the kind of stuff

we were really into at that time."

LONG HAIR? NOT IN SINGAPORE

But Ramli, who's now married with a 25-year-old daughter, claims being in a rock band was frowned upon.

"Sweet Charity's image wasn't a favourite with the authorities," he said in a whisper.

"Rockers were seen as subversive, part of a hippy culture, because we had long hair.

"We were only into rock 'n' roll. We were brought up well so we didn't do drink or do drugs.

"That's quite funny though. We played in one of the most popular clubs in Singapore and, to be honest, we could've had whatever we wanted!"

Sweet Charity's popularity soared and they soon headlined gigs at the now-defunct National Theatre in Clemenceau Avenue in the late 1970s.

In its heyday, the theatre hosted an exotic mix of shows each month, ranging from Russian ballet to Hawaiian dance performances. But the venue was most popular for providing a platform for the



STILL ROCK HARD: Ramli at the Hard Rock Cafe in Singapore last year.

likes of Sweet Charity and Heritage to shine.

When it closed in 1984, it signalled the end of the Singapore rock music scene, according to Ramli.

"Closing the National Theatre back in the 1980s was the biggest mistake ever. That place was where all the biggest rock concerts were held and the history of Singapore music was written there," he said.

"Had they managed that place better and maybe even upgraded the equipment for concerts over the weekends, it would have been fantastic."

As the opportunities dried up, many Malay musicians – including Khalid Mohbin from popular metal band Rusty Blade and pop star M Nasir – left for greener pastures across the Causeway.

Ramli admitted that most of his commitments are now in Malaysia, where he is booked solid until next year for concerts and private shows. He also writes music for Malaysian singers Misha Omar, Ning Baizurah and Amy Search.

APPRECIATING ICONS HERE

It's a common thread. Dick Lee is idolised in Japan, Cleopatra Wong is often discussed at Quentin Tarantino's dinner parties in Hollywood and Ramli is revered in Malaysia.

Why are veterans in the Singaporean entertainment industry often more appreciated overseas?

"It's natural," said Ramli, sighing. "Back in the 50s and 60s, all the major musicians and film-makers in the region came from Singapore but, by the 70s, all of them had relocated to Malaysia.

"It's a sign that our country doesn't care enough about the arts. The authorities are really trying to rebuild the arts scene here, but it's difficult when you sometimes have businessmen pushing something that should be driven by passion, rather than by dollar signs."

Does he fear that his achievements will be forgotten?

"No, it's all recorded history so people will eventually know," he said. "I've had a few milestones. In 1987, I was the first local musician in a long time to hold a concert before 12,000 people.

"But life goes on. As long as you make good, quality music, people will remember you."

His musical legacy has already reached the next generation.

"The other day I heard one young boy playing my song while I was on the way to break my fast. It was a bit out of tune but he played it with passion," said Ramli with a laugh.

"Instances like that give me the faith to continue – to know a boy that young is interested to get into music because of me."

"Never mind the fact that I'm probably old enough to be his grandfather!"

PICK YOUR icon

Two months ago, PLUS asked the question: Does Singapore have a national icon?

From the Merlion and the Kucinta cat to HDB flats and *rajak*, various monuments, buildings, symbols and culinary delights were dissected.

Several PLUS readers wrote in to suggest that Singapore already has an icon: The people.

It's true, but they're not always given the recognition they deserve.

In the entertainment and lifestyle industries, this tiny island boasts pioneers, veterans, heroes and, in one or two special cases, legends.

So PLUS started the ICONS series. We've featured radio veteran Brian Richmond; Singapore's original Golden Girl Pat Chan; TV pioneer Duncan Watt; musician Dick Lee; and now rocker Ramli Sarip.

The series features veterans who have somehow managed to survive in a fickle industry for decades; pioneers who paved the way for others to follow; and legends who simply defy categorisation.

They come from various facets of the entertainment and lifestyle industries: Some are national heroes, others on a much smaller scale. And this interview series is unique because YOU can choose some of the icons.

Who is your Singapore icon?

Email plus@newstoday.com.sg and let us know who should feature in our ICONS series.

— Neil Humphreys,
Deputy Plus Editor



TIMELINE

1967: Leaves Jalan Teck Whye Secondary and forms Sweet Charity with childhood friends
1968: First gig at The Ocean Bar in Sembawang playing to sailors from the naval base
1975: Plays at National Theatre for the first time
1976: First concert at Panggung Emas BNU in Jakarta
1978: Holds sell out concerts at Victoria Theatre, Jurong Stadium and St. Johns Island

1979: Releases debut album *Sweet Charity*
1980: Releases signature Sweet Charity tune *Kamelia*
1981: Third album *Sejuta Wajah* (A Million Faces) is released, acknowledged as a classic
1985: Sweet Charity plays in front of 50,000 fans at the Police Academy. Ramli releases self-titled debut album, which sells 25,000 in the first week
1986: Sweet Charity disbands and Ramli

releases his best-known album *Bukan Kerana Nama* (Not For Name)
1993: Teams up with M Nasir for the *Konsert Pertemuan Legenda* (Meeting of Two Legends) at World Trade Centre Harbour Pavilion
1994: Releases *Ziarah Seni* (Journey of The Art), a box set detailing his career
1995: Sweet Charity reunites for a one-night only concert

1999: Performs on main stage of Womad (World Of Music Arts Dance) at Fort Canning Park
2000: Opens for 70s rockers Jethro Tull in KL
2004: Performs at Made In Singapore! a concert featuring the best homegrown acts from over four generations
2005: Receives Lifetime Achievement Award at MediaCorp TV 12 Suria's Anugerah Planet Muzik 2005 awards