

Ramli Sarip: Rock to the Top

by **Perera, Loretta Marie and Perera, Audrey**, written in August 2010
National Library Board, Singapore

A Singaporean rock legend and arguably one of the country's most commercially successful artistes, Ramli Sarip has certainly earned the unofficial – and affectionate – title of Papa Rock, among fans here and in the region.

Recognised for his versatility, having gone from rock to soul to world music, and from singer/guitarist to lyricist and producer, Ramli Sarip first made waves as a founding member of rock group, Sweet Charity, before going on to a successful solo career.

Born in 1952 into a large family – he was one of 10 children – Ramli grew up listening to traditional Malay music at weddings and religious events, and shared a talent for music with his father and one brother, who were both singers, and another brother, who played the guitar and the double bass.

His father was the head of their *kampung* (village) and had a great influence over him. Always reminding his youngest son to respond to *Azan* (call to prayer) led Ramli to discover and embrace his culture – something he holds precious and is very grateful for until today.

In fact, a deep appreciation of his culture was to play a significant part throughout Ramli's career, from his musical influences to resisting the frequent temptations that were so much a part of the rock scene. He kept clean despite his long-haired “rocker” image, never indulging in cigarettes, alcohol or drugs. “There is no place for sex, drugs, and alcohol if you respect your art. This is the downfall of many talents who think that these are part of being an artiste.”

While having long hair was seen as a trend – unfortunately linked to drugs and criminal activity at the time – Ramli insisted that for him, “it’s not fashion, it’s me”. He was known to flee the scene every time his father, a mechanic who was also the family's part-time barber, tried to trim his hair. “Since my childhood days, my father would cut our hair as a part-time barber. But I (didn't) like it so I would always run away. So that's how it started. I will cut when I want to cut it, and will not be told how or when to do so. We may have been into rock and roll and we had long hair, but we always held on to our culture.”

While on the one hand, the young Ramli was exposed to the sounds of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley and Pat Boone – “I just listened but I didn't get really into these Western artistes because I think I was quite young” – it was his *kampung* that influenced him the most at that time. Hindustani (North Indian classical) music was also something he became familiar with in his early years, recognising the similarities between Hindustani and Malay music, both of which originated from Middle-Eastern, Indian and Arabic roots.

Then came other, stronger influences from the international music scene. Bands such as Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin provided a starting point for Ramli's band, Sweet Charity, formed in the late 1960s. This band, though, started out with a different name, under different circumstances.

Off to a Sweet Start

Ramli Sarip and Rahman Sarbani, schoolmates from Jalan Teck Whye Secondary School, would hang out together almost everyday, doing what they loved most: playing music. They were often joined by Ramli's *kampung* friends, brothers Wahid and Joe Salim who were studying at Toh Tuck Secondary School. The four, playing for the first time in a band, called themselves Funky Jewel, and went on to form the original line-up of what would become one of Singapore's most iconic bands, Sweet Charity.

“In that area of Sembawang, there were about four or five bands. They were pop, soul and country bands, while we were into rock.” And although they lived far from Siglap, the National Theatre and Victoria Memorial Hall, where the more established bands lived and performed, the group did not have to wait long before getting their big break. In 1969, the newly-renamed Sweet Charity began performing at Ocean Bar in Sembawang. The owner had heard about them and decided to try them out. It was a gamble which paid off; the patrons loved the band, which was engaged and went on to play there nightly for about five years. The band was paid S\$850 a month, a supplement to their day jobs. Ramli was working in Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) as a storekeeper where he was regularly reprimanded for his long hair, which at the time, was frowned upon.

Ocean Bar was located near the Sembawang naval base and drew a large crowd of British and American sailors who would request their favourite rock songs. This scenario was another factor which influenced the band, and of course, was another very welcome form of exposure.

On the recording front, the band was initially less successful. After two failed attempts to clinch a record deal, Sweet Charity won a contract with Warner Music, which was setting up operations in Singapore and was on the lookout for bands to sign on.

Working their way up from their first album, *Sweet Charity*, which they were dissatisfied with, to the fourth where the band was more closely involved in the production process and track selection, Sweet Charity fast became a household name with several hits that remain popular until today, such as *Kamelia*, *Musibah* and *Pelarian*.

“Singapore is a very small country, so in half-an-hour you can reach Jurong, half-an-hour you can reach Sembawang. It was very much word-of-mouth, when you say Sweet Charity is performing there, everybody would come.”

In addition to performing every night at Ocean Bar, Sweet Charity also played gigs at weddings and parties. This continued even after their second album, *Pelarian*, was released. “That was the only way to get near to the fans and sell your albums. We had lots of good musicians on the scene, but we didn't have the chance to break into the global market, because nobody knew Singapore at that time.”

In the '80s, however, the band began to feel internally challenged. Some members were married; most had bills to pay and despite their popularity, they knew that the music industry could not provide serious financial stability. In 1985, after more than a decade of gigs, hits and successes,

Sweet Charity disbanded. The band members went their separate ways, and Ramli decided to go solo.

“It was the scariest moment of my career,” he says. “But the elements, the chemistry, they didn’t work anymore. I couldn’t handle [the] guitar well; I played for myself. The other band members were more creative and more talented. It just wasn’t working anymore.

“Maybe we were good, but we were not wise. We [didn’t] really care about the pay, actually. We only wanted to play music. I even had to sleep in the toilet when I went to work, and sacrificed a lot in terms of energy, time, and money. When I look back now, I can smile.”

Sweet Charity co-founder and drummer Rahman Sarbani was once quoted as saying of Ramli’s decision: “We (felt) completely lost without him. He was our leader. Wherever he went and whatever he did, we just followed him. He was our strength and we admired his great discipline.”

Stepping Out

While Warner warned Ramli that he was about to “put on big shoes” by going solo, he accepted the challenge head-on. He had, after all, a dream: “I had the freedom to say, to write, or to do, or to produce the things that I wanted to, according to my style or my feelings. To me, you must have the right to explore or show your talent, to share your talent.”

He co-produced his first solo album in just 98 hours. *Ramli Sarip*, released in 1985, sold more than 25,000 copies. “I said to Warner: ‘This is only the beginning, it’s not started yet. One day I will be paid royalties, one day it must happen. I can feel it and touch it...’”

The following year, 1986, his second album *Bukan Kerana Nama* sold more than 50,000 copies, not taking into account the countless pirated copies which were prevalent then. These led the way to sell-out concerts at the Harbour Pavilion, Sentosa and other venues.

Going solo was perhaps the most important decision that Ramli Sarip made in his career, and provided him the opportunity to devote time to song-writing and to use it to create awareness about issues that he felt needed to be addressed – the Vietnam War, the environment and spirituality.

Inspired and influenced by vocalists such as Robert Plant (from Led Zeppelin), Rod Stewart, Joe Cocker, and Otis Redding, Ramli began to experiment with elements of cultural and world music to create something he called “rock music with an Eastern flavour”.

With a unique style emerging, he began to be invited to write songs for other regional artists such as Malaysia’s rock queen Ella, and Khatijah Ibrahim, the first female Malay artist signed by Warner, in 1979. He also produced the first album by Lefthanded, considered one of Malaysia’s best rock bands.

Eventually, Ramli moved to Kuala Lumpur. “My time in Singapore was good, but I needed to move beyond to keep my career going. The avenues in KL were much more,” he says, “and I

play spiritual music, folk, soul, rock and roll, a large enough repertoire to play to different audiences.”

He describes a life-changing moment when he performed two sell-out concerts at the Istana Budaya in 2005, playing with his band, Soul Journey. “It was the first time there was a rock concert at this very ‘traditional’ venue. We received a 20-minute standing ovation, with many people in tears at the power of the experience. It was a moment we shared, a beautiful experience.”

It is gratifying to know that thousands will pay to watch him perform, for instance, in 1996 when he played to a Merdeka Stadium audience of 30,000, the largest paid concert he had ever played. But, he says, it is not about the size of the audience, but the connection. “I’ve performed more than 1,000 concerts, from college concerts to music festivals, to concert hall shows, to formal dinner shows,” he says, adding that another of the visions he had earlier has come true. “I dreamed that I would play for kings and prime ministers and sultans, and it has happened.” He describes the experience of being asked to set to music a poem by former Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. “When it was played, he was moved to tears.”

Ramli has returned to perform in Singapore often, the most important concert being the one held in 2009 to mark the 40th anniversary of Sweet Charity, the band that started it all for him. Held at the Esplanade Concert Hall, it was, not surprisingly, a sell-out. “I miss Singapore and I love Singapore – I grew up there. But I have family in Malaysia too, so I do not see boundaries. And everywhere is God’s land, after all.”

As a solo artiste, Ramli released 12 solo albums between 1985 and 2002, with an average sales of 50,000 copies each. When asked to name his most important work, he says, “Every piece of work is special if it moves people. Sometimes a show with an audience of 300 can feel like 3,000 because of the energy and the connection. When you give and when people like it, it moves them, makes their hair stand...to me, that’s something. It’s not about how much money you pump into the production - you cannot buy that moment.”

“And there is nothing like the feeling I get when I hear 17-year-olds using my material and getting it right, and getting the spirit of the song! My message to them is this: Talent alone is not enough. You have to believe in your art and care about the way you do things and then you will get better and better.

“For me, it’s not about the money anymore. It’s also not for fun. It’s part of my spiritual journey. I pray to God: ‘If you think that art is a good thing for me, please open up the doors and bless me. If not, close them for me.’”

Quote

“Music is not just singing, it has a part to play in life. Anything that touches me, I try to share because I believe in giving sincerity...art is a pure thing.”

Awards***Platinum Disc for Best Selling Albums***

- 1980:** Pelarian with Sweet Charity
1981: Sejuta Wajah with Sweet Charity
1984: Koleksi with Sweet Charity
1986: Bukan Kerana Nama
1987: Perjalanan Hidup
1988: Pilihan Terbaik with Sweet Charity
1988: Istilah
1989: Seni dan Suara
1989: Warisan
1990: Ihsan
2003: Raja Rock

Gold Disc for Best-Selling Albums

- 1982:** Penunggu with Sweet Charity
1983: Batu with Sweet Charity
1985: Berita Gempa with Sweet Charity
1985: Ramli Sarip
1991: Rentak Hidup
1992: Radio Passion 99.9FM Award for *Most Outstanding Musician*
2003: Best Artiste Anugerah Planet Muzik

Discography***The Albums***

Year of Release	Artiste(s)	Album
1979:	Sweet Charity	Sweet Charity
1980:	Sweet Charity	Pelarian

1981:	Sweet Charity	Sejuta Wajah
1982:	Sweet Charity	Penunggu
1983:	Sweet Charity	Batu
1984:	Sweet Charity	Koleksi
1985:	Sweet Charity	Berita Gempa
1985:	Ramli Sarip	Ramli Sarip
1986:	Ramli Sarip	Bukan Kerana Nama
1987:	Ramli Sarip	Perjalanan Hidup
1987:	Duet with Ella	Puteri Kota
1988:	Ramli Sarip	Istilah
1988:	Sweet Charity	The Best of Sweet Charity Vol I
1988:	Duet with Khadijah Ibrahim	Khadijah Ibrahim '88
1989:	Ramli Sarip	Seni dan Suara
1989:	Ramli Sarip	Warisan
1990:	Ramli Sarip	Ihsan
1991:	Ramli Sarip	Rentak Hidup
1992:	Ramli Sarip	Best Collection of 1979-1985
1992:	Sweet Charity	Lagu Zaman
1993:	Ramli Sarip	Fanatisme
1993:	Ramli Sarip	Rock Blues Collection
1994:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Wings & Superfriends I & II
1994:	Ramli Sarip & Wings	4-CD Box Set 'Ziarah Seni'
1995:	Ramli Sarip	The Best of Sweet Charity Vol II
1995:	Sweet Charity	Tribute to Led Zeppelin at Hard Rock Cafe KL
1996:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Concert 'Sejuta Wajah' I & II (VCD)
1997:	Sweet Charity	Syair Timur
1998:	Sweet Charity	Ramli Sarip Alive

1999:	Ramli Sarip	Siratullah
2000:	Ramli Sarip	Best of Rock 3 Dimension
2000:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Expressi Ramli Sarip (CD & VCD)
2001:	SCharity/Lefhanded/Bl ues Gaang	3 Dimensi Pop Rock Lelaki Terbaik
2001:	Ramli Sarip	ilham Bicara
2001:	Ramli/Saleem/Nash	Tribute to Sweet Charity
2002:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Puteri Rock
2002:	Duet with Ella	Raja Rock
2002:	Ramli & Undergaround Artiste	Ramadhan & Shawal
2002:	Duet with Ella	Kenangan Di Hari Raya
2002:	Ramli Sarip	Seruan-Lambaian Suci
2002:	Ramli Sarip	Nyanyi Puas Puas! Koleksi Irama Malaysia
2002:	Ramli Sarip	Nyanyi Puas Puas! Koleksi Muzik Dunia
2002:	Sweet Charity	Nyanyi Puas! Puas! Koleksi Duet/Nyanyian Ramai
2002:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Nyanyi Puas! Puas! Koleksi Rock Balada
2002:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Nyanyi Puas! Puas! Lagu Rancak
2002:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Identiti
2002:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Gema Hari Raya
2003:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Hits Filem
2003:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Sentuhan Terbaik M Nasir
2003:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Kalam Kesturi
2003:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Take it & Shuvit again...
2003:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Cinta Sonata (CD & VCD)
2003:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Sekarang Dah Jadi...
2004:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Satu Impian Wira Pop (MTV/Karaoke)
2006:	Ramli & Various	Zaman The Concert LIVE at Istana Budaya (2 VCD)

2007:	Artistes	Fahamilah Hati Kekasih DiHari Raya
2007:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Raja Rock (VCD Karaoke)
2007:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Sweet Charity vs Blues Gang
2007:	Ramli Sarip	Penjuri 4 Lelaki Pilihan
2007:	Ramli & Pop Shuvit	Reprint of Syair Timur
2008:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Nostalgia Abadi – Duli Kini Dan Selamanya (Double CD)
2008:	Ramli & T S Dato' SM Salim	Nostalgia Abadi – Ramli Sarip & Sweet Charity
2008:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Irama Pop Asli
2008:	Ramli Sarip	Memori Hit
2008:	Ramli & Various Artistes	Ramli Sarip vs Ella
2009:	Ramli Sarip	Father's Day Concert LIVE at PWTC (VCD)
	Ramli & Various Artistes	Ramli Sarip vs M Nasir (CD & Karaoke)

References

Oral History Interview, Performing Arts in Singapore (Music), (2006, January 5), National Archives of Singapore, Interview with Ramli by Joseph Pereira.

Sweet Charity Profile (n.d). Senasi Selebriti. Berita Hiburan. Retrieved February 20, 2010 from <http://www.budiey.com/sweet-charity-profile-rahman-sarbani-ramli-Ramli-wan-ahmad-aj-masron-rosli-mohalim/>

Amrantx3 (2006, July 24). Ramli Sarip (Sweet Charity). *Amrantx3's Site*. Retrieved on February 20, 2010 from <http://amrantx3.multiply.com/reviews>

Ramli Sarip. In Wikipedia. Retrieved February 20, 2010 from http://ms.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramli_Ramli

Tommy Koh, ed. (2006). *Singapore The Encyclopedia*. Editions Didier Millet and National Heritage Board.