

Anita Sarawak: The Consummate Entertainer

by Stephanie Ho, written on 31 December 2013

Anita is a professional entertainer known for her showmanship, powerful vocals and energetic performances. A versatile talent, Anita has performed in film, television and on stage. She is the first Asian to have carved a successful career in the United States, having been a mainstay at Vegas' Caesar's Palace lounge Cleopatra's Barge for many years. Anita continues to expand her horizons as a talk show host, actor and businesswoman.

Anita was born in Singapore on 23 March 1952 and named Ithnaini Mohamed Taib.¹ Entertainment was in her blood as her mother was celebrated Malay film actress Siput Sarawak (Ramlah binte Dollah) and her father, S. Roomai Nor (Mohamad Taib Salleh), was an actor, director and film producer. Originally from Kuching, Sarawak, Siput was a *bangsawan* performer and cabaret singer before moving on to film. She met her husband, Roomai, while filming her second movie entitled *Cinta*.²³ Anita was their only child together.

Childhood and early career

Anita's parents divorced when she was 9 months old and Anita spent much of her childhood with her father and his family. Anita grew close to her stepmother Umi Kalthum, another veteran actress, and stepsister Noorkumalasari who is a model, actress and singer. Umi remember Anita as a talkative and funny child. She said, "She (Anita) is the joker in the family. She still has this trait. She often makes me laugh. When you are with her, you sort of forget your problems and sadness."⁴

When she around 12 years old, Anita returned to her mother, Siput, who started preparing her for a career in acting. A childhood friend, Rosminah Mahmood, recalled that Anita's mother was strict and rarely allowed her outside to play. Instead she said Anita spent most of her time at home practicing ballet. "Anita loved to dance when she was young," she said.⁵ Anita also recalled listening to all kinds of music when growing up. She said, "I grew up listening to Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Dusty Springfield, Diana Ross, Supremes, Tom Jones, Tina Turner, Marvin Gaye and Carole King".⁶

Anita also had a dream of being a singer and entertainer. She cited her parents as her inspiration and appreciated their support. She said, "From the very beginning, my parents supported me, gave me education, love, determination and professionalism".⁷

Singing star

Anita entered show business in her teens. At 14, she acted in her first film *Dua Kali Lima* directed by Mat Sentul. Next she began singing at weddings and school

¹ Shuib Taib. (1996, April 19). Anita finds togetherness. *The New Straits Times*.

² Zainal Alam Kadir & Fatimah Abu Bakar. (1996, January 6). The return of a screen legend. *The New Straits Times*.

³ Dashing movie idol led an illustrious life. (1996, March 17). *The New Straits Times*.

⁴ Bissme, S. (2000, December 12). The return of a diva. *The Sun*.

⁵ Entertainment – The buzz. (2002, November 15). *Straits Times*.

⁶ Marina Abdul Ghani. (2000, April 22). Anita take on the fashion world. *The Malay Mail*, p. 3.

⁷ Chua, S. C. (2008, November 16). Showbiz icon. *Malaysian Business*.

functions. When she had completed school, her first professional job was at a Chinese restaurant where she learnt to sing in Mandarin and other Chinese dialects. Anita would later perform in other clubs such as the Neptune Theatre Restaurant and the Singapore Hilton hotel. At 19, she was already dubbed a “singing cyclone”.⁸ By the time she was 30, she was described as Singapore’s “First lady of song” who was not only a singer but also “a mimic, a comic, a dance, an actress”.⁹ Anita’s success was much a result of her perseverance. Her manager in the 1970s, Bunny Boscoe, said, “Anita’s played in any kind of room, under any condition. She’s played in the best and the worst. She’s geared to be a consummate entertainer”.¹⁰

Her performances led to her being spotted by EMI who gave her a record deal.^{11 12} Anita’s first EP was in English entitled *With a lot o’ soul*. This was followed by EP releases in both English and Malay. Anita’s first album in Malay was released in 1974, and her first English album, *Anita*, was released in 1976.¹³

Anita also teamed up with Ismail Haron, dubbed Tom Jones of Singapore, to release a string of successful EPs in the 1970s. They recorded duets such as *Alam Terpuja* (You make me feel brand new), *Rahsia-Mu Rahsia-Ku* (Sealed With A Kiss) and *Janji Tetap Janji* (My Girl). Ismail recalled that recording those albums with Anita was fun, and that Anita was always very professional. He said, “Give her homework and you can be sure she will get it done. We were like brother and sister.”¹⁴

From the mid 1970s, Anita was also recruited to be a singing ambassador for Singapore. She was sent by the tourist promotion board and partners to various countries including Hawaii, West Germany and Brunei for performances to lure more tourists to Singapore.¹⁵¹⁶ In 1976, Anita performed at an international convention in Monte Carlo to support Singapore’s bid to host the next general meeting of the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA).¹⁷ She also represented Singapore in the 1980 Yamaha Music Festival and World Music Festival.¹⁸

Las Vegas

By the 1980s, Anita was performing around the world and had set her sights on establishing her career beyond Singapore. She said in 1980, “My single biggest wish right now is to establish a reputation on the international scene. I don’t think about quitting. I feel as though I just started yesterday”.¹⁹

In order to expand her career, she took an offer at a club in Las Vegas. Despite her success in Southeast Asia, it was not easy for Anita to establish herself in the new

⁸ Shuib Taib. (2001, February 19). Anita's big birthday bash. *New Straits Times*.

⁹ Ngui, C. (1982, October 30). Nothing quite like Anita ‘live’. *Straits Times*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Anita’s ‘guiding hand’. (1982, June 3). *Straits Times*, p. 1.

¹¹ Kwee, M. (1971, May 9). Popular artistes make it to the top of S’pore charts. *Straits Times*, p. 16.

¹² Shuib Taib. (2001, February 19). Anita's big birthday bash. *New Straits Times*.

¹³ Alphonso, J. (2005, November 8). Speak of the diva. *The Sun online*. Retrieved from <http://archives.thestar.com.my>

¹⁴ Ismail ‘Tom Jones’ is back to entertain. (2009, November 29). *New Sunday Times*.

¹⁵ After Hawaii, it’s Berlin for Anita. (1975, February 19). *Straits Times*, p. 9.

¹⁶ Anita show to sell S’pore to Brunei. (1980, May 29). *Straits Times*, p. 7.

¹⁷ Anita for Monaco on special mission. (1976, November 12), *Straits Times*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Chiang, M. (1980, June 4). Take what you find, sang Anita and Helen did! *Straits Times*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Chiang, M. (1980, June 4). Take what you find, sang Anita and Helen did! *Straits Times*, p. 3.

environment. “I encountered a lot of hurdles, but I was able to make it because I worked harder than any American artist,” said Anita.²⁰ Through hard work and perseverance, Anita worked her way up. She moved from lesser-known nightspots to Cleopatra’s Barge at the famed Caesar’s Palace.²¹

Returning home

Even when she was based in Las Vegas, Anita would make regular visits to Singapore and Malaysia. For instance, every April, she would return to Malaysia to stage a concert at one of the Hilton hotels for Secretaries Week.²² From 2000, Anita began to diversify from singing and performing by investing in real estate and establishing her own fashion line.²³ She also began to develop and star in television programmes such as talk show, *Speak of the diva*, and Malay variety show *Bersama Anita*.²⁴

In 2001, Anita announced that she would be retiring from Caesar’s Palace and would be spending more time in Singapore and Malaysia. Anita and her manager husband Mahathir Abdullah (formerly Martin Cox) decided to steer Anita’s career towards television production, hosting and even film.²⁵ In 2002, she starred in a sitcom by Singapore’s Suria channel, *2A* and in 2003, she started hosting a Malay talk show, *Anita*, for Malaysia’s Astro Ria channel. Anita was happy with the response to the talkshow and said, “It’s definitely a chance to do something different in my life, to use my talents to give something back to society, and I thank God for that chance”.²⁶ These were followed by Anita’s own cooking show *Chef Diva*, and a turn in a Malay sitcom, *Agensi Melor*.²⁷

Anita’s recording career was revitalised when she signed up with Malaysian recording label KRU and released the album *Seksis* in 2004. A reviewer for the *Malay Mail* wrote that the album was “energetic, adventurous and pure fun”, and puts Anita “on a level where young listeners can relate to her”.²⁸ In 2006, she released an English album of Jazz standards entitled *Another dimension*.²⁹

Throughout her long career, Anita constantly pushed herself to do better. She said in an interview in 2010, “Whenever I do concerts, the next one has to be better than the last one, so I’m always looking for something new, something different. I want to keep the whole thing exciting for my fans and myself”. She also revealed that passion was what kept her going. “You really have to be hungry for this. You have to know a little bit of everything in the business, you don’t just dress up and go on stage. It’s a jungle, it’s harder than working nine to five”.³⁰

Quote

²⁰ Hera Diani. (2001, November 25). Anita Sarawak happy to be home again. *Jakarta Post*.

²¹ Shuib Taib. (2001, February 19). Anita’s big birthday bash. *New Straits Times*.

²² Bissme, S. (2000, December 12). The return of the diva. *The Sun*.

²³ Zainal Alam Kadir. (2000, December 27). Keeping in step with Anita. *New Straits Times*.

²⁴ Ho Zheng. (2001, March 19). She bears it so well. *Straits Times*.

²⁵ Jad Mahidin. (2002, September 2). Home is where the work is. *The Malay Mail*.

²⁶ Lee, J. (2003, September 17). Moving the world. *The Malay Mail*.

²⁷ Shuhaidah Saharani. (2005, February 2). Anita’s new sitcom star. *The Malay Mail*.

²⁸ Meor Shariman. (2004, March 2). Anita joins Elite. *The Malay Mail*.

²⁹ Yushaimi Yahaya. (2006, March 7). Anita steps back in time. *The Malay Mail*.

³⁰ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2010, June 9). Anita’s so in love. *Straits Times*.

*“Having talent alone is not enough. One has to have a professional attitude. An entertainer must be able to put aside his or her unhappiness and discomfort. The first priority is to entertain the audience.”*³¹

Television

Speak of the diva (TCS 5, 2001)
Bersama Anita (Suria, 2001)
2A (Suria, 2002)
Anita (Astro, 2003 -)
Chef Diva (2004)
Agency Melor (Astro, 2005)

Awards

Berita Harian Award – Anugerah Khas Bintang Popular (2000)³²

Selected EPs and Albums^{33 34}

1969 With a lot o’ soul (EP)
1970 *Rinduku Hilam* (EP)
1971 *Papa Ku Pulang* (EP)
1972 La la la lu
1973 Beautiful Sunday
1974 *Antara Aku Dan Dia*
1976 Sophisticated lady
1976 Anita
1979 Anita Sarawak
1980 For the love
1984 *Kenangan manis*
1985 *Aku Menyayangimu*
1989 *Asmara*
1990 *Cinta nan satu*
1992 *Antara Yang Manis*
1993 *Bisikan cinta*
1997 Look after love
2001 Superstar
2003 Anita Love songs
2004 *Seksis*
2005 Another dimension
2008 Anita Sarawak: her complete evergreen collection
2010 *Cinta Anita*

References

After Hawaii, it’s Berlin for Anita. (1975, February 19). *Straits Times*.

Alphonso, J. (2005, November 8). Speak of the diva. *The Sun online*. Retrieved from <http://archives.thestar.com.my>

³¹ Bissme, S. (2000, December 12). The return of a diva. *The Sun*.

³² Siti Nurbaiah Nadzmi. (2000, November 17). Tribute to legends. *The Malay Mail*, p. 3.

³³ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2010, June 9). Anita's so in love. *Straits Times*.

³⁴ Given the large number of releases in different languages and lack of documentation, this listing is only of selected albums that are more often referred to in the readings.

Anita for Monaco on special mission. (1976, November 12), *Straits Times*.

Anita show to sell S'pore to Brunei. (1980, May 29). *Straits Times*.

Anita's 'guiding hand'. (1982, June 3). *Straits Times*.

Chiang, M. (1980, June 4). Take what you find, sang Anita and Helen did! *Straits Times*.

Chua, S. C. (2008, November 16). Showbiz icon. *Malaysian Business*.

Bissme, S. (2000, December 12). The return of a diva. *The Sun*.

Dashing movie idol led an illustrious life. (1996, March 17). *The New Straits Times*.

Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2010, June 9). Anita's so in love. *Straits Times*.

Entertainment – The buzz. (2002, November 15). *Straits Times*.

Ho Zheng. (2001, March 19). She bears it so well. *Straits Times*.

Hera Diani. (2001, November 25). Anita Sarawak happy to be home again. *Jakarta Post*.

Ismail 'Tom Jones' is back to entertain. (2009, November 29). *New Sunday Times*.

Jad Mahidin. (2002, September 2). Home is where the work is. *The Malay Mail*.

Kwee, M. (1971, May 9). Popular artistes make it to the top of S'pore charts. *Straits Times*.

Lee, J. (2003, September 17). Moving the world. *The Malay Mail*.

Marina Abdul Ghani. (2000, April 22). Anita take on the fashion world. *The Malay Mail*.

Meor Shariman. (2004, March 2). Anita joins Elite. *The Malay Mail*.

Ngui, C. (1982, October 30). Nothing quite like Anita 'live'. *Straits Times*.

Shuhaidah Saharani. (2005, February 2). Anita's new sitcom star. *The Malay Mail*.

Shuib Taib. (1996, April 19). Anita finds togetherness. *The New Straits Times*.

Shuib Taib. (2001, February 19). Anita's big birthday bash. *New Straits Times*.

Siti Nurbaiyah Nadzmi. (2000, November 17). Tribute to legends. *The Malay Mail*.

Yushaimi Yahaya. (2006, March 7). Anita steps back in time. *The Malay Mail*.

Zainal Alam Kadir. (2000, December 27). Keeping in step with Anita. *New Straits Times*.

Zainal Alam Kadir & Fatimah Abu Bakar. (1996, January 6). The return of a screen legend. *The New Straits Times*.