

Rahimah Rahim: The Evergreen Singing Sensation

By **Jaime Koh**, written on 15 December 2013

National Library Board

Rahimah Rahim is a veteran performer in the local music scene and one of the most popular entertainers in the 1970s and 1980s. Born to a singer father and actress mother, Rahimah was exposed to acting and singing from an early age. She came into her own when she won the prestigious Kim Koso Talentime in Japan in 1974. She returned to Singapore and performed at some of the most popular clubs. She also has more than a dozen recorded albums. Between 1989 and 2003, Rahimah faded from the entertainment scene. She returned to show business with a recorded album in 2003. Since then, Rahimah continues to make occasional appearances in functions, singing shows and on television.

Early life and education

Rahimah was born on 8 December 1955 to Rahim Hamid and Mariam Baharom. Rahim was known as the Nat King Cole of Singapore after he won the 1953 Xaxier Cugat singing competition.¹ He went on to perform at several of Singapore's popular singing clubs, such as the Cockpit,² Club 392,³ and Ming Court Hotel's Jade Lounge.⁴

Rahimah's mother was the popular actress Mariam Baharom. Rahimah described her mother as strict but protective of her children.⁵ It was through Mariam that Rahimah started acting.

Child actress

Rahimah's first foray into entertainment was as a child actress at the age of six. Rahimah recalled her mother, Mariam, bringing her to the studios of Cathay Organisation where her father worked as a background editor. During one of the visits, she was spotted by the producers who asked Mariam to let Rahimah try acting.⁶ Rahimah's first role was a little rich girl in the movie *Korban Kasih*.⁷

Rahimah recalled spending most of her childhood days at the studios. She would sometimes bring her homework to the studios while waiting for her turn.⁸ Learning the lines was not easy but Rahimah learnt them by parroting the adults: "They (the adults) talk, I repeat what they said."⁹

¹ [How he became Singapore's Nat King Cole](#). (1955, April 17). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

² [How he became Singapore's Nat King Cole](#). (1955, April 17). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

³ [Nightspot of 70s now a jazz club](#). (1987, September 18). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

⁴ [Jade Lounge goes disco and nostalgia](#). (1988, February 12). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

⁵ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

⁶ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

⁷ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

⁸ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

⁹ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History

Singing sensation

Rahimah recalled the first English song she sang was the Christmas jingle, *Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer*. “I was nine or ten years old. It was Christmas... I have to learn how to sing that song. It was very difficult. To sing (in English) was different, because the diction was different, those words were big for me. I remember late Eddy Gomez taught me how to sing.”¹⁰

When she was 14 or 15 years old, Rahimah would follow her father, Rahim Hamid, to the clubs where he sang. At the time, children under 18 years old were not allowed to enter the clubs, but Rahimah said that her father used to smuggle her into the clubs so that she could sing with him. This was how she began singing at the clubs twice or three times a week. Whenever there were spot checks, Rahimah would then hide under the grand piano or be sent outside.

It was these trips to the clubs that started Rahimah on her musical journey. “I started singing all the jazz numbers, like *Route 66*... *Our days will come*, Nat King Cole songs, Ella Fitzgerald, those music,” she said.¹¹

1974 marked a turning point in Rahimah’s singing career. After a successful audition, the nineteen-year old was chosen to go to Tokyo to take part in the Kimi Koso Talente. ¹² Rahimah won the first prize and was offered a three-year recording contract with music label Warner. ^{13 14} She wanted to stay on in Tokyo but her mother insisted she came back to Singapore. ¹⁵

On her return to Singapore, she started singing at Mandarin Court and Neptune Theatre. ¹⁶ Rahimah broke new ground by being the first Malay singer to perform at the Neptune. It was also there that Rahimah learnt to sing in different languages as she sang Japanese and Mandarin songs. ¹⁷

Rahimah had started recording albums even before she won the 1974 competition in Tokyo and started singing at local clubs. Her first EP was released in 1972 featuring the song *Mana Ibu Mu*, a Malay cover of the popular track, *Where’s your mama gone?* Most of Rahimah’s recorded albums are in Malay.

Hiatus

Centre.

¹⁰ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

¹¹ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

¹² Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

¹³ [This is Rahimah](#). (1989, July 1). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

¹⁴ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

¹⁵ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

¹⁶ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 3. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

¹⁷ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 3. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

In 1989, when Rahimah was at the height of her career, she decided to quit show business. Her marriage to national footballer Mohammad Noh Hussein whom she married in 1977 had broken down and she was fighting for the custody of their child. Rahimah said, “(I)t’s my work or my child. Of course, my child is my first priority,” adding that the decision to quit the business was “very difficult”. “It’s like you’re torn between two lovers. You don’t know what to do. It’s a big sacrifice for me,” Rahimah said.

Shortly after her divorce, Rahimah went on an umrah (a short visit to the Islamic holy land)¹⁸ and later went on the haj.¹⁹ In 1994, she married Remy Taib.²⁰ She stayed out of the show business to become a full time housewife. She later went to work as a customer relations officer at a budget car rental and maid agency. Her decision to go back to work was because she “can’t sit still” for long.²¹ Subsequently Rahimah dabbled in various businesses with a share in a hair salon, a Kuala Lumpur-based film company and recording company among others.²²

Return of the diva

In 2003, Osman Arifin, the general manager of Live Records approached Rahimah to cut an album of her greatest hits. It was an offer she could not refuse. That record marked Rahimah’s return to the show business, although at this point, she regarded entertainment as just a hobby. Her family still came first.²³

With the release of the album, many old contacts began calling Rahimah again. She began performing mostly in Malaysia, and even acted in several dramas for the Malaysian television network, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM).²⁴²⁵ She also started appearing in Singapore television productions. In 2005, she was the main judge of MediaCorp TV 12 Suria’s talent show *Anugerah*.²⁶ In 2006, she made a guest performance on *Singapore Idol*.

Rahimah has a pragmatic view of music: “There will be a day when you will go down. The young ones will go up.”²⁷ Up or down, Rahimah is happy just to sing for the love of it.

Quote

“Once you’re on stage, you have to please them (the audience). We are like clowns. No one wants to see you cry...People pay to watch you, they want to smile and be happy when they go back. They want to bring back some memories... What you want

¹⁸ [This is Rahimah](#). (1989, July 1). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

¹⁹ [This is Rahimah](#). (1989, July 1). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

²⁰ The singing star. (2010, May 23). *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²¹ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 5. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

²² [This is Rahimah](#). (1989, July 1). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

²³ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 3. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

²⁴ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 3. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

²⁵ Tan, D. W. (2006, April 26). Nobody pays to see you cry. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁶ Rahimah returns; From 70s siren to Anugerah judge, veteran singer's happy to be back in the spotlight. (2005, November 16). TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁷ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 3. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

from the audience is, eh I want to watch you again.”²⁸

Awards²⁹

1974 Japanese Kimi Koso Award for Best Pop Singapore

Albums^{30 31 32 33}

- 1971 Mana Ibu Mu (with The Commandos) (Panda Records)
- 1972 Permuda Tampan (with The Stylers)
- 1972 Senangkan Hati (with The Commandos)
- 1972 Soreh-soreh (with The Commandos)
- 1973 Jaga Jaga Kalau Berkata (Panda Records)
- 1973 Kebersehan Satu Keimanan (with The Nite Walkers)
- 1973 Zaman Pancharoba / Rumah Itu Shorga Ku / Burong Layang Layang / Baju Merah Dari-nya (with the Commandos)
- 1974 Kisahku Dikolam Ikan (Panda Records)
- 1974 Bintang Sukanku (Senada)
- 1974 Posnita (Senada)
- 1975 Renungan (Senada)
- 1975 Engkau Ku Sanjung / Kasih Ayah / Tepat Pada Waktunya / Joget Si Mandi-Mandi
- 1982 Gadis Dan Bunga (Josal Records)
- 1984 Bebas (Josal Records)
- 1990 Doa
- 2003 Suatu Memori
- 2006 Awal & Kini

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²⁸ Rahimah Rahim. Oral history interview (Accession no: 003141). Reel 1. Singapore: Oral History Centre.

²⁹ [This is Rahimah](#). (1989, July 1). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

³⁰ Rateyourmusic.com, retrieved from http://rateyourmusic.com/artist/rahimah_rahim

³¹ 45cat.com, retrieved from <http://www.45cat.com/bigartist/rahimah-rahim/sg>

³² Teo, P. L. (2006, December 4). The simple life. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva

³³ Azman Ahmad (2003, July 7). Rahimah Rahim returns. *The Malay Mail*. Retrieved from Factiva.

back in the spotlight. (2005, November 16). TODAY. Retrieved from Factiva.

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