

Zubir Said playing the piano at his home in Joo Chiat Place, 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005388 - 0075).

# COMPOSER ZUBIR SAID WAS ESTRANGED FROM HIS FATHER FOR THREE DECADES. “MAJULAH SINGAPURA” FINALLY REPAIRED THE BREACH

In a BiblioAsia+ podcast, music director Julian Wong reveals little-known details about the composer of Singapore’s national anthem.

**W**orking with theatre company Wild Rice, musical director Julian Wong put together a critically acclaimed production on the life of Zubir Said (fondly known as Pak Zubir) that mixed history, music and memory in a moving show, *Don’t Call Him Mr Mari Kita*. Performances were sold out in 2022 and 2024. Editor-in-chief Jimmy Yap interviews Julian Wong on his research on Pak Zubir’s life and the challenges of putting up the show.

**Jimmy:** What’s the most interesting thing you learned about Pak Zubir from your research?

**Julian:** I think the most interesting thing to me, and I didn’t know this until I researched about him, was that he was not Singaporean. He was from

Bukit Tinggi [in Sumatra]. And that he had come here to Singapore as a way of rebelling against his father, the village chief, the *penghulu*, who didn’t allow him to pursue music because music was *haram* [forbidden or unlawful in Islam].

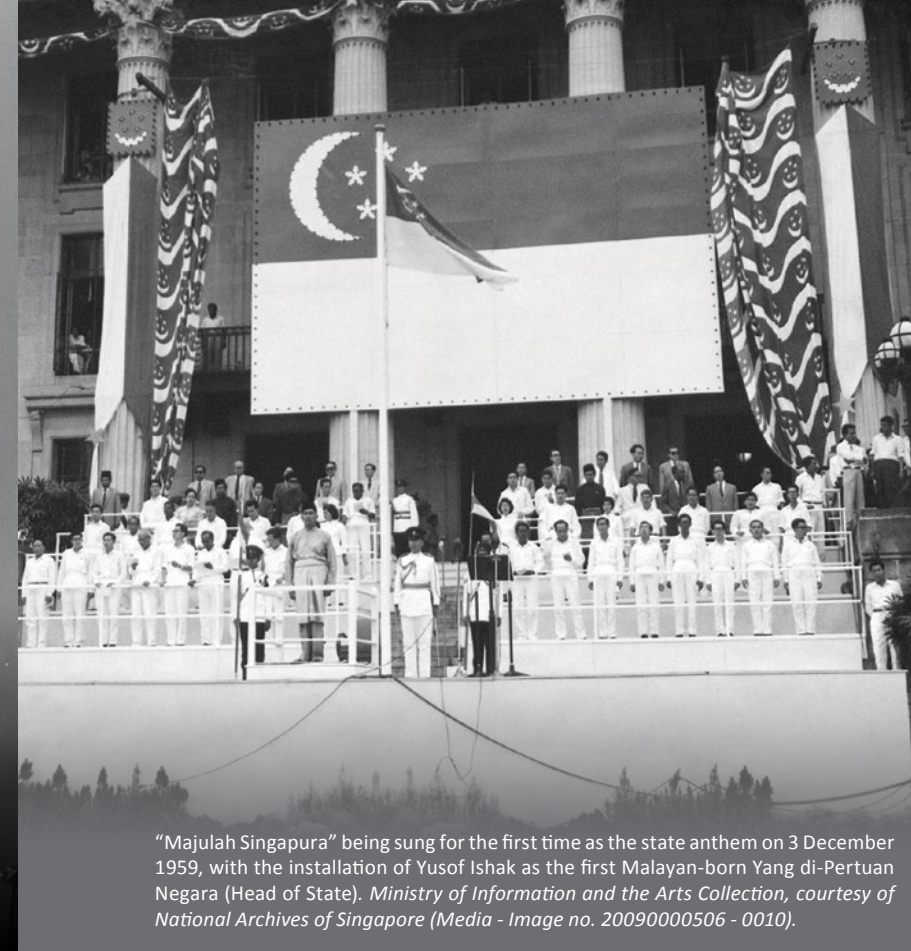
When he was 21 years old, Pak Zubir fell very ill. His father took him to the hospital and gave the doctor a shroud, and said, “If my son dies, please bury him in this. If my son lives, please tell him to come home.”

So, after one-and-a-half months, miraculously Pak Zubir recovered, and then he thought life was too short to stay in Bukit Tinggi. So he walked and took a horse cart to Pekanbaru and then a ferry to Singapore because a friend told him, “You want to be a musician? Singapore might be a better place.”

And he used the shroud as a towel. Just the shirt on his back and that shroud.



Musical director Julian Wong, recipient of the National Art Council’s 2023 Young Artist Award, Singapore’s highest award for young arts practitioners. Photo by Jimmy Yap.



“Majulah Singapura” being sung for the first time as the state anthem on 3 December 1959, with the installation of Yusof Ishak as the first Malay-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State). Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20090000506 - 0010).



Yang Di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak conferring the Certificate of Honour on Zubir Said, composer of Singapore’s national anthem “Majulah Singapura”, 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980000462 - 0077).

**Jimmy:** It’s an amazing story.

**Julian:** When he came here, he worked as a violinist with the *bangsawan* theatre companies. Then he learned how to read Western music notation and became the arranger, the conductor and music director.

Then his father found him and wrote to him, “Please come back home. A Dutch officer’s daughter wants to marry you. You can come back, marry her and lead a good life.” And he wrote back to his father, used his words against him: “But marrying a non-Muslim is *haram*.”

**Jimmy:** Oh, wow. Okay.

**Julian:** He made such a name for himself. Of course, he went through a terrible time in the war, but brought up his family here. And for me, the most touching thing was, how his father at the age of 101...

**Jimmy:** Tell us that story.

**Julian:** 3 December 1959 – the premiere of what we know today as the official version of “Majulah Singapura” – Pak Zubir’s father, Datuk Said, travelled to Singapore and went to the Padang to look for his son. They had been estranged from 1928 to 1959 – 31 years. And after he heard “Majulah Singapura”, he broke down and told his son, “You were right. I was wrong.” And Pak Zubir said that day was special to

him, not because it was the peak of his career, but because his father finally forgave him.

After knowing that story, when you hear “Majulah Singapura”, and especially because Pak Zubir said “Majulah Singapura” is a prayer, you hear it in a totally different light. That’s why there was no way I could do a version of “Majulah Singapura” and sing it during the show.

**Jimmy:** It would be weird to do it in the theatre.

**Julian:** Pak Zubir said it’s a prayer. So let’s do it quietly in a personal way.

**Jimmy:** I’m glad nobody stood up to sing. It was lovely to have the strains of “Majulah Singapura” wash over you.

**Julian:** Till today, I’m surprised by the reaction of the audience because we didn’t know if anybody would come. It was the title *Mr Mari Kita*, Zubir Said, and then who’s this guy Julian Wong? And then it was Covid, right? So when we opened, we didn’t know what the reaction would be and certainly did not expect it to be this warm. ♦

Listen to the full interview with Julian Wong on the BiblioAsia+ podcast, “More Than Mr Mari Kita: The Life and Legacy of Zubir Said”.

