"I Hear a Tenor Saxophone, Who's Playing it, Chombi?"
P. Ramlee's Films as Music Classrooms

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Abstract

P. Ramlee (1929-1973) was a Malaysian film actor, director, singer and songwriter. Throughout his career, P. Ramlee was involved in more than sixty films and wrote more than 200 songs. Besides highlighting social foibles, taboos and issues, P. Ramlee's films were also canvases where he experimented with his musical ideas. His songs were as well known as his films - they were inseparable. Songs such as *"Getaran Jiwa"*, *"Di Mana Kan Ku Cari Ganti"* and *"Jeritan Batinku"* became hugely popular and made him one of the best singers/songwriters in the history of modern Malay music. His films were also "music classrooms" where audiences were taught basic knowledge about Western music such as theory, instrumentation and career prospects. This paper looks into the variety of musical influences that shaped his songs and how his films were used in educating his audiences about music.

Introduction

The title of this paper was a line taken from a film directed by P. Ramlee entitled *Ibu Mertuaku* (My Mother-in-Law). In this 1962 film, he played a musician named Kassim Selamat who married a girl from a wealthy family against the wishes of his mother-in-law. He was eventually tricked by his mother-in-law into believing that his wife had died and due to depression, he became blind. Aimlessly wandering the streets penniless, he was saved by a lady and her daughter named Chombi, who was also recovering from depression. It was at Chombi's house that Kassim heard someone practicing the saxophone. Curious, he asked, "Chombi, I hear a tenor saxophone, who is playing it, Chombi?" As a musician, what strikes me was that he used the specific word "tenor" saxophone, instead of just saying saxophone, which would have made no difference to the general Malay audience. What P. Ramlee was doing, was indirectly teaching his audience about the different categories of saxophones. From here, I found other examples of P. Ramlee using his films in educating his audience about music, which will be discussed in this paper.

Plate 1. The poster for the film "Ibu Mertuaku"

P. Ramlee

P. Ramlee was a charismatic film actor, director, singer and songwriter, many would add him as a comedian, musician, arranger, writer and to me, a music teacher. Son of an Achehnese sailor, P. Ramlee was born Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh on the 22nd of March 1929 in Penang, a small island north of the Peninsular Malaysia. He later used the stage name P. Ramlee, influenced by the names of famous Indian actors of his time. Due to his immense contribution to the Malay movie and music industry, he is considered a legendary artist in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

Plate 2. P. Ramlee

The Musician

P. Ramlee started playing the ukulele at the age of 13 and later took lessons in violin and guitar from Kamaruddin Idris, a music teacher in Kampong Patani, Penang (Harding and Ahmad, 2002). He formed his own group called *Teruna Sekampong* (Lads from the Village) in 1945 which grew in size to become *Orkes Mutiara* a year later. Together with Mohd Yusof, Ramlee formed a much bigger band called Pancharagam Mustika in 1948, which was based in Butterworth, on the mainland. In June the same year, while singing in Bukit Mertajam, Ramlee was spotted by B. S. Rajhans, an Indian film director working for Malay Film Productions (MFP) in Singapore. After much persuasion, Ramlee accepted Rajhans' offer to work in the film industry and went to Singapore a few weeks later. Ramlee was soon singing and given a small role in the film *Chinta* (Love), which was released in 1948. Seven

years later, Ramlee directed his first film *Penarik Becha* (The Trishaw Man) and it was the dawn of an illustrious career for Malaysia's greatest artist. For the next 17 years, Ramlee continued to direct another 33 films in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Similar to the earlier Malay films of the 1940's and 50's, Ramlee's films were still largely influenced by Indian films (Uthaya Sankar, 2005).

"Celluloid Whiteboard"

Films have been used in classrooms to teach subjects from world music (Chee-Hoo Lum, 2009) to history (Marcus, 2007). Students watch portions or an entire film selected by a teacher in a classroom as part of a teaching syllabus of a subject. However, in P. Ramlee's case, movie theatres are his classrooms.

Music Theory

In the film *Antara Dua Darjat* (Between Two Social Classes, 1960) Ramlee took the role of Ghazali, a small time musician who fell in love with a girl from a royal family. Ghazali was one day asked by Tengku Karim (Ahmad Nisfu) to teach his daughter Tengku Zaleha (Saadiah) the piano. In one scene, Ghazali taught the basics of Western music theory by explaining the staff lines of a treble clef using his fingers (Plates 2-4). He also taught the piano using the correct fingerings while playing the ascending and descending major scale (Plate 5). Here Ramlee used his knowledge and experience in music to effectively take on the role, while at the same time educating his audience.

Plate 2. Ghazali beginning his music lesson at Tengku Karim's house

Plate 3. Ghazali explaining the basics of music theory

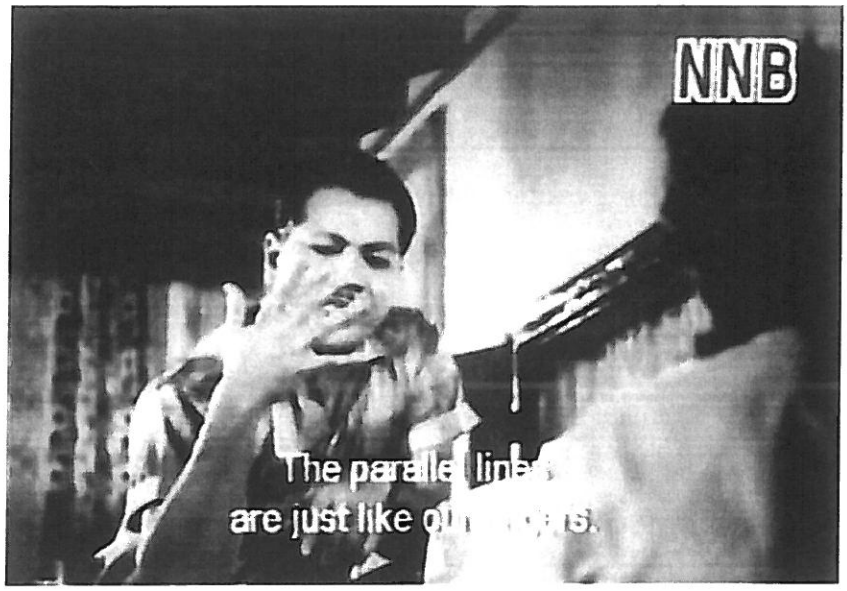

Plate 4. Ghazali using his fingers in explaining the treble clef

Plate 5. Using the correct fingering in teaching piano technique

Career

In the same film Ramlee exposed his audience of the different scope of work in the world of music. In one scene he was a neatly dressed singer and pianist playing in a birthday party. He also played a dedicated music teacher (Plates 2-5) and piano tuner (Plate 9) and in one scene showed him composing a song wearing a sarong in his small kampong house (Plate 8), in contrast from the glamorous image of a singer showed earlier. Ramlee also showed the role of a leader who not only sets the time of practice but also arranges music for his band (Plate 7). In *Tiga Abdul* (Three Abdul, 1964), he played Abdul Wahub who sells musical instruments, another possible career prospect. P. Ramlee was successful trumpet player in *Ibu* (Mother, 1951) and a saxophonist in *Ibu Mertuaku* (My Mother in Law, 1962) and *Masam Masam Manis* (Sweet Sour, 1965). In these films, Ramlee, as a musican himself, showed the audience the hard work and discipline needed to be a successful musician. While portraying the glamorous side and fun loving nature of musicians, Ramlee also showed the downside of being one.

Plate 6. A singer and pianist

Plate 7. A band leader and arranger

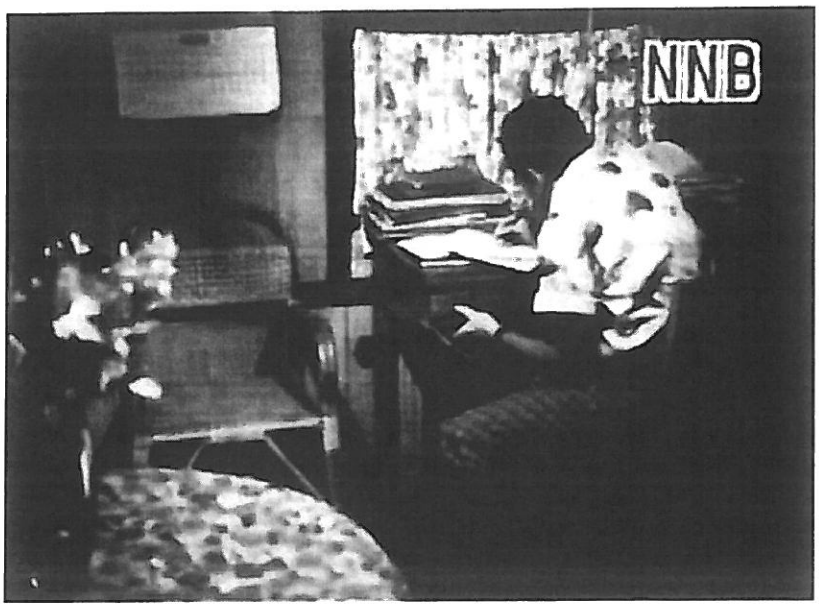

Plate 8. A composer

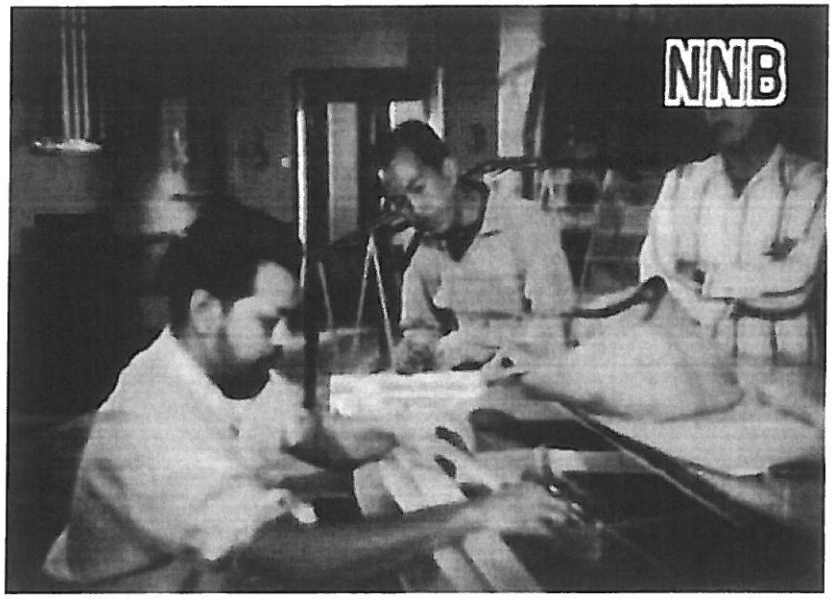

Plate 9. A piano tuner

Musical Instruments

In *Ibu Mertuaku*, P. Ramlee played the role of Kassim Selamat/Osman Zailani a famous saxophonist, who fell in love with Sabariah, a fan from a wealthy family. The first scene showed Kassim Selamat's group doing a live recording on radio and later each player and instruments used were read out by the announcer. Here, the audience could also see how a live recording session was carried out in the studio.

Out of the 34 films Ramlee directed, 18 were comedies and musical instruments were used as part of his comedy sketches in his films. In *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (The Warrior Bachelors, 1959), the guitar was wrongly introduced as a violin and piano by both Mustar and Sudin (Plate 10-11) while the bongo was comically pronounced by Aziz Sattar (Plate 12). In "Antara Dua Darjat" (1960), Sudin serenades using the double bass in trying to win the heart of a girl (Plate 13). Also in the same film, the piano was wrongly gestured by Wak (played by Mustarjo), Tengku Zaleha's gardener (Plate 14-15).

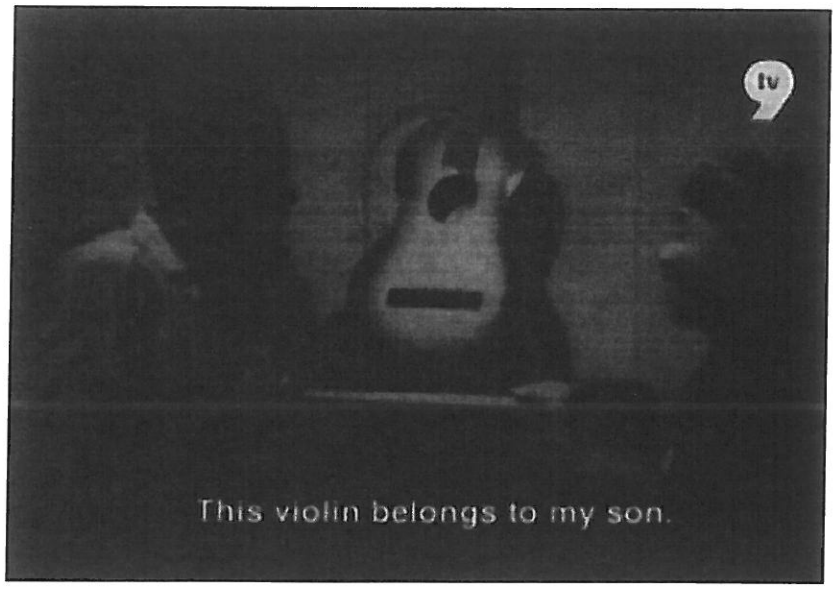

Plate 10. Mustar wrongly introducing an instrument to Sudin in "Pendekar Bujang Lapok"

Plate 11. Sudin replied by also wrongly introducing the guitar as a piano

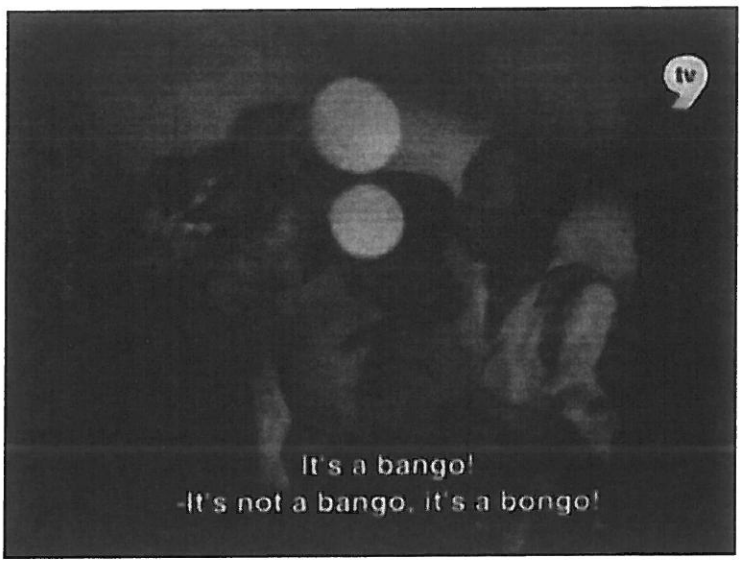

Plate 12. Aziz showing how the bongo should be pronounced

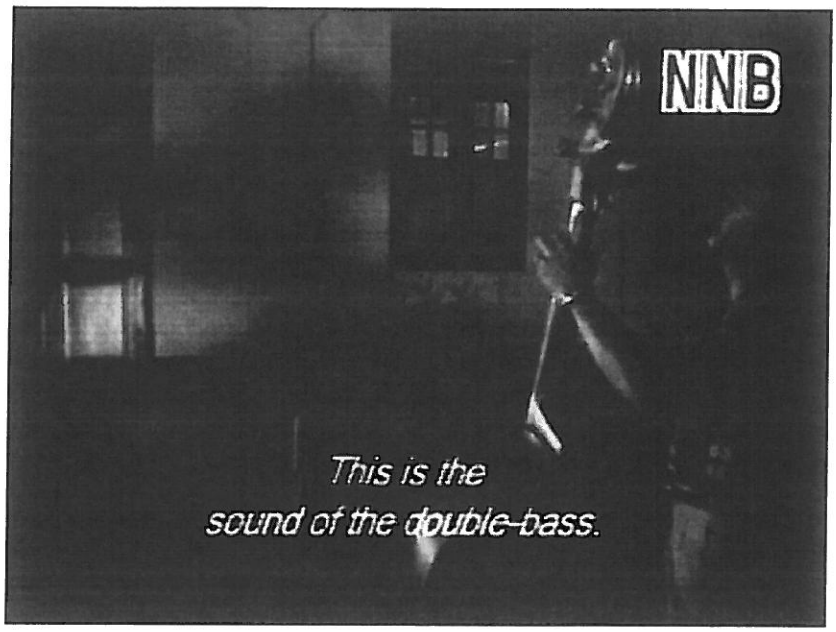

Plate 13. Sudin serenading using the double bass

Plate 14. Wak wrongly gesturing the way a piano is played

Plate 15. Wak scolded by Tengku Karim for wrongly gesturing the way a piano is played

Ensemble Instrumentation

During the 1960s and early 1970s, young Malays, like much of the world, were influenced by Western pop music, especially rock and roll. Groups such as the Beatles and the Platters were hugely popular among the youths. Although uncomfortable with these new musical trends, Ramlee succeeded in adapting to the changing times and maintaining his popularity. In a radio interview in 1965, Ramlee said that "I am after all, in the entertainment field. For this reason I have to write songs that can be acceptable to the majority of listeners, songs that can achieve popularity. Even so, one should not neglect to write songs that are educational and which pass on knowledge".

Instruments of a band were introduced in the film *Tiga Abdul* at the height of the rock & roll era of the sixties, when electric guitars were widely used (Plate 16). In one scene, while attending to customers in his music shop, Abdul Wahub met with three musicians who formed the basic rhythm section of a typical 60's band. Each individual instrument was introduced, sounded and later combined in the song "Bunyi Gitar".

Plate 16. Intruments of a rock & roll band were introduced in the film "Tiga Abdul"

Musical Styles

The film was P. Ramlee's canvass in experimenting with his musical ideas. He kept in touch with current trends (especially from the West) and introduced them in his films. Ariff Ahmad (2005) noted that, "P. Ramlee was successful in maintaining the public's fascination towards his compositions for decades because he was smart in using current tastes in producing his songs" (pp. 264). Growing up in Penang and later Singapore, which were colonial port cities, Ramlee was surely exposed to the latest music styles and trends of the 1940's and 1950's. While introducing and popularizing musical styles from the West, Ramlee also revitalized traditional Malay music in his films. His strong traditional roots was evident in many of his compositions as observed by Ariff Ahmad, "it is not known whether P. Ramlee tried to retain the form of Malay traditional music purposely or not, but traditional Malay form is very evident in his works" (*ibid.*). He composed new songs in the traditional styles of *masri*, *zapin, inang*, *joget* and *asli,* in an effort to introduce them to the younger generation. In *Madu Tiga* (Three Wives, 1964), Ramlee inserted "Gambus Jodoh", a *zapin* song he wrote for a wedding scene. A number of *joget* songs were also written which later became classics, such as "Joget Tari Lenggang" written for the film *Hang Tuah* (1956) and "Joget Si Pinang Muda" for *Anak-ku Sazali* (My Son Sazali,1956).

P. Ramlee loved the style and sophistication of Western music. Many of his compositions are influenced by jazz and latin music. Songs such as "Getaran Jiwa" and "Pukul Tiga Pagi" have In *Masam Masam Manis* big band was introduced in one of the scenes.

Conclusion

P. Ramlee was a musician first and foremost. In a radio interview in 1965 he said, "...before becoming a film actor I was active in music, mainly on the creative side. To this day, I am still very much involved in music. It has become a part of me, my flesh and blood". Through his films, Ramlee was a social critic, showing the realities of life amid the changing social landscape of a developing country, a nation searching for its cultural identity. As observed by Mahadi J. Murat (2005), "Malay films started to show stark elements of their 'Malayness' when a Malay son was given room to be a director in the mid 1950-s" (pp. 34).. Ramlee's 'Malayness' can also be heard and felt through his music. Although using Western styles, including sophisticated progressions and arrangements, his many compositions were still Malay in spirit, due to the way they were delivered. His films are a celebration of the musical diversity available during his time. Ramlee further said in the interview, "...within the past ten years, I have immersed myself in films and have taken advantage of the various opportunities film-making offered me. Regardless of all that, music has always remained my primary mission."

He did take full advantage of the medium in not only conveying his messages but also sharing his music. Just before his death in 1973, he said "it is my heartfelt desire that the songs I have created will be preserved for posterity and will be appropriate at all times". Since his death, Ramlee's films are being repeatedly played on Malaysian TV throughout the year and will continuously be shown for generations to come. P. Ramlee's work will surely be preserved for posterity and appropriate at all times, and no wonder he remains a legend, an icon, arguably Malaysia's greatest artist in film and music.

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