

THE STAR

DATE: 16/08/2007

# From love song to anthem

The Star - 16/8/2007

Despite his initial hesitation, the author helped Tunku create the *Negaraku* from a love song, the *Terang Bulan*, on the eve of independence.

By **DATUK AHMAD MERICAN**

**A**LTHOUGH Tunku was not a musician, he had a natural feel for music. I joined Radio Malaya in 1953 prior to Tunku's appointment as Chief Minister of Malaya and before the Ministry of Culture had been established.

Tunku had a passion for culture, in particular music and dance. He loved to throw parties at The Residency.

Tunku was a good dancer, the joget being a favourite. Even the younger generation was no match for Tunku, who took to the floor with such amazing grace and spontaneity.

Dol Ramli was the Head of the Malay Service in Radio Malaya and I was the department's music supervisor when one day Dol Ramli said: "The country is going to have its independence soon. We do not have an anthem. How do I go about it?"

We told him that we were not trained musicians and that the best option would be to co-opt the services of trained musicians like Lanthall (the Director of Music for the Malay Regiment), Croft (the Director of Music for the Police Band at Gurney Road) and Bert Read (the Chief of Radio Malaya).

We also requested the services of Alfonso Soliano, a local musician who was then leader of Radio Malaya's Studio Orchestra. All of us then - Lanthall, Croft, Bert Read, Soliano, Dol Ramli and I - got together to make recommen-



*Malaysiaku Gemilang*

Excerpt from  
**Prince Among Men**  
Published by Arkib Negara

dations for a new composition.

The birth of Malaysia's National Anthem was the product of Tunku's creative vision. It was Tunku who chose the sentimental song *Terang Bulan* to be translated into what is now the *Negaraku*.

We told Tunku politely that it was a sentimental love song, hinting that it might not be suitable as a national anthem.

Tunku insisted that the melody *Terang Bulan* be "anthem-ised". He wanted the anthem to be nothing short of the grandeur of *God Save The Queen*.

Tunku suggested a drum roll introduction. He also wanted a repeat finale at the end of the

anthem. (Most of the anthems have what is known as a "coda" or repeat of the last eight bars).

So here was a man with no knowledge of music telling musicians what to do!

It took him just two evenings to convince us. A piano score was then done. And he wanted the music recorded within the week. The lyrics were to be left to him.

With a small technical team from Radio Malaya, I was asked to record the anthem played by the Police Band in their depot hall at Gurney Road.

The rehearsal and the recording were completed in just three days. It was quite an experience having to record this prestigious 50-piece band in a non-acoustic environment, with the background noise of traffic and children making our job difficult.

However, Tunku sorted this out by getting the Police to impose "an audio curfew" around the area. Even the flights landing at the Sungai Besi Airport had to be delayed.

He wanted the anthem to be played at midnight on Aug 31, 1957 just as the Malaysian flag was being raised at the Selangor Club Padang. It was only after the anthem was introduced that Tunku would shout "Merdeka!" seven times.

Tunku also wanted us to use our contacts with composers in both Malaya and Singapore to create national songs or *Lagu-Lagu Kebangsaan*, which he knew would stir the

masses, elevating the emotions of a nation achieving independence.

Tunku was also responsible for the formation of the Merdeka Choir. In particular, Tunku requested me to recruit choral singers from the churches in and around Kuala Lumpur.

On the actual occasion, singers who were good in Malay sang from the front row, led by conductor Tony Fonseca.

By the time Malaysia came into existence on Sept 16, 1963, preparations were already underway for the country to have a television transmission of its own and it was about that time too that I was appointed television producer.

On Dec 28, 1963, Tunku launched Malaysia's first black and white television transmission from the Jalan Ampang Studios.

For the first time in his life, Tunku had to don make-up before presenting his address. My make-up assistants were of course there to wipe it off but were taken quite aback when Tunku declined the offer. Unabashed, he left for home saying, "I want my wife to see how I look with make-up!"

□ *Musically talented, Datuk Ahmad Othman Merican has made a name for himself in local music and television. Upon retirement after 20 years with the Radio Television Malaysia (RTM), Ahmad pioneered TV3 in June 1984, before becoming the vice-president of operations in NTV Encorp.*