

THE STAR

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Songbirds: The Merdeka Choir in one of their studio recordings. Photo provided by Robert Fonseca.

The man behind the first choir to sing *Negaraku*

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WHILE it was a performance anticipated by the entire nation, most members of the Merdeka Choir who sang the national anthem when the country proclaimed independence 50 years ago did not know that they had such a massive audience.

"We thought we were only going to sing in the studio!" said Robert Fonseca with a laugh.

"I did not even expect to go on TV. I disliked make-up, I couldn't imagine having to put on make-up throughout the long hours of filming," the Merdeka Choir member reminisced when interviewed recently at his brother's residence in Kelana Jaya.

Robert, 64, was with his siblings Carol, 60, and Alfred, 59. Their father Tony was the conductor of the choir originally known as Radio Malaya Studio Choir.

As told by his father, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj contacted Datuk Ahmad Merican, who was then the music supervisor for Radio Malaya, to form a choir for Merdeka. That, as he remembered, was several months before the big day.

"My father was tasked to find



»My father used to think that many people did not sing the *Negaraku* correctly, so he came up with the recorded version«

ROBERT FONSEKA

the members. Although he did not say it, we knew he had a difficult time finding the right candidates at schools and churches in and around Kuala Lumpur," he said.

"He was just a teacher who would take anybody as long as he or she showed the passion in singing, but you can't fool around. You have to be really committed and you cannot miss a single practice!" Carol chimed in. She joined the Merdeka Children's Choir several years later after Merdeka.

In the end, 40 teenagers were roped into the choir and they were expected to sacrifice an hour or so on weekends for the practice at Federal House, located near Dataran Merdeka.

"As we were still so young, most

of us had to rely on the RTM van that came to fetch us from our houses. Most interestingly, 90% of us did not know head or tail about music!" Robert recalled.

"It was no easy time during the practice. Of course we were all eager to learn to sing, but my father was very strict and he shouted at us all the time. However, he was an affable man outside the studio," he added.

The choir was the first to record *Negaraku*. The version was done with four-part singing encompassing soprano, tenor, bass and alto. It was then played at all official functions nationwide.

"My father used to think that

> TURN TO PAGE 4

Choir dissolved after Fonseka's death

> FROM PAGE 3

many people did not sing *Negaraku* correctly, so he came up with the recorded version, he did arrangements for the band and the voices," Robert added.

The news that they had to sing in front of the nation came abruptly. The conductor just came into the studio one day and straightforwardly told his young students that they had to do it. He imposed greater pressure onto the youngsters by showing them a letter from the government.

"Of course I was very scared. Although I was only one of the 40, the thought of having to sing in front of so many people sent shivers down my. But soon, there was no time to be scared, I was too busy remembering my parts," he said.

As Merdeka Day drew nearer, practice intensified only slightly because the choir members were already able to master the renditions. Even though they did not sing when the national flag was hoisted for the first time on Aug 31, nor when Tunku shouted "Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!", the group played a prominent part in the variety shows on Merdeka eve, actual day and day after, sharing the stage with the likes of P.Ramlee and Saloma.

The first show, which was also their public debut, saw them singing on a float at Lakes Garden. The spectators and the Jungle Squad filled up the area. "It was still during Emergency," Robert noted. The group also sang at the Stadium Merdeka to a full-capacity hall.

"I was very young but I felt really proud. Who wouldn't? It was your father's choir," Carol said with a smile.

In retrospect, Robert felt that it was a dreamy and distant experience.

"I wonder why I could sing at that time. I guess if my father were not that strict, I wouldn't have been able to do it," he said.

MANY RACES, ONE VOICE



Tony Fonseka rehearses

Committed:
A 1960 newspaper clipping showing the dedicated Tony Fonseka coaching members of the Merdeka Children's Choir.



Remembering Dad: (From left) Robert, Carol and Alfred, reminiscing about their father and his contributions to the country through music.

Since then, the Merdeka Choir was the national choir that was requested to perform at all major official functions. It had three albums, featuring famous numbers such as *Bendera Malaysia* and *Trek Tek Tek* written by the conductor.

They also sang for the Malaysian soldiers that were sent to serve in Congo as United Nations peacekeepers. The songs were recorded and sent to the soldiers

during Hari Raya to soothe their homesickness.

Another unforgettable experience was to be involved in an international Christmas carolling whose participating national choirs were singing the songs in synchronisation from their respective countries.

Alfred, who kept quiet throughout the interview, emphasised that his father did it out of love for music, the choir and the

nation.

"I vividly remember this scene in our small kampung house lit by oil lamp, dad and mum lay RM5 and RM10 notes on the floor and divided them into many small stacks. That must be tokens he received for the performances, and they were preparing to give it to his choir members. He never took anything for himself," he said.

There was a tinge of sadness in Alfred's tone. "My father was not given due recognition before he passed away," he said. He also spoke of his "small request", that RTM give the Fonsekas a copy of the short video produced by Merican detailing his father's contributions.

The choir slowed down and was later dissolved after the conductor passed away in 1965, when he was 59 years old. Robert and Carol said they have lost contact with other members of the choir.

However, the musical spirit lives on in their families. The grandchildren all know how great the Merdeka Choir, its conductor and members were.