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## Zapin Petuah: Documentary Film as Applied Ethnomusicology in Preserving the Musical Legacy of Zulham Djais

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#### Abstract:

Melayu Deli music faces extinction due to minimal documentation and regeneration. Zulham Djais (1970-2024), a maestro of Melayu Deli music from Batubara, left a rich musical legacy that remains inadequately documented. This research explores how the documentary film "Zapin Petuah" functions as an applied ethnomusicology method in preserving ZD's musical heritage. Through a biographical-cinematic approach, this study reconstructs ZD's life journey from a fishing village in Batubara to becoming a prominent Melayu Deli singer, analyzes the influence of locality on his creativity, and investigates his musical philosophy that unifies vocal and dance as one entity. Ethnographic qualitative research was conducted through in-depth interviews with ZD's family and musical colleagues, participant observation at GMS Sanggar and significant locations in Batubara, and audio-visual archival documentation. The hybrid documentary film production process combining fictional narrative with documentary inserts serves simultaneously as an instrument for data collection and dissemination. Findings reveal that ZD's biographical journey from Batubara (1970-1988), Medan (1988-1999), Jakarta (1999-2002), returning to Medan (2002-2024) shaped his distinctive musical characteristics: Melayu grenek with Batubara dialect influences, repertoire inspired by coastal life, and a philosophy of "music that breathes with nature." Documentary film proves effective as an accessible applied ethnomusicology medium for cross-generational cultural transmission. This research contributes to

visual ethnomusicology methodology development and offers a documentation model for Indonesian traditional music artists.

**Keywords: Malay Deli music, Zulham Djais, Applied Ethnomusicology; Documentary film;**

Musik Melayu Deli menghadapi ancaman kepunahan karena minimnya dokumentasi dan regenerasi. Zulham Djais (1970–2024), seorang maestro musik Melayu Deli asal Batubara, meninggalkan warisan musikal yang kaya namun belum terdokumentasi secara memadai. Penelitian ini menelaah bagaimana film dokumenter “Zapin Petuah” berfungsi sebagai metode etnomusikologi terapan dalam upaya melestarikan warisan musik ZD. Melalui pendekatan biografis-sinematik, penelitian ini merekonstruksi perjalanan hidup ZD dari sebuah desa nelayan di Batubara hingga menjadi penyanyi Melayu Deli terkemuka, menganalisis pengaruh lokalitas terhadap kreativitasnya, serta mengkaji filosofi musikalnya yang memadukan vokal dan tari sebagai satu kesatuan. Penelitian dilakukan dengan metode kualitatif etnografis melalui wawancara mendalam bersama keluarga dan rekan musik ZD, observasi partisipatif di Sanggar GMS serta lokasi penting di Batubara, dan dokumentasi arsip audio-visual. Proses produksi film dokumenter hibrid menggabungkan narasi fiksi dengan sisipan dokumenter berfungsi sekaligus sebagai instrumen pengumpulan data dan media penyebaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perjalanan biografis ZD dari Batubara (1970–1988), Medan (1988–1999), Jakarta (1999–2002), hingga kembali ke Medan (2002–2024) membentuk karakteristik musikal khas: gaya Melayu grenek dengan pengaruh dialek Batubara, repertoar yang terinspirasi kehidupan pesisir, serta filosofi “musik yang bernafas bersama alam.” Film dokumenter terbukti efektif sebagai medium etnomusikologi terapan yang mudah diakses untuk transmisi budaya lintas generasi.

**Kata Kunci: Musik Melayu Deli, Zulham Djais, Etnomusikologi Terapan; Film Dokumenter;**

## 1. Introduction

Melayu Deli music represents one of the most significant cultural expressions in North Sumatra, Indonesia, embodying centuries of cultural amalgamation between indigenous Malay traditions and influences from Arab, Indian, Chinese, and broader Malay archipelago cultures. As a living tradition centered in Medan and its surrounding regions, Melayu Deli music has historically served as a vital medium for cultural identity, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transmission within Malay communities. However, contemporary socio-cultural transformations including rapid urbanization, globalization of popular music, and the diminishing spaces for traditional performance have positioned Melayu Deli music in a precarious state of vulnerability.

The challenges facing Melayu Deli music preservation are multifaceted. The shift in public taste toward dangdut, pop, and rock music since the 1970s has significantly reduced the market for traditional Melayu orchestras, while the high cost of hiring complete ensembles has made them economically unviable for many community events (Kartomi, 2012; Yampolsky, 2015). Most critically, there exists a severe documentation gap regarding the lives, creative processes, and philosophical foundations of Melayu Deli musicians. While ethnomusicological attention has been directed toward courtly Malay music traditions and certain folk genres, the biographical and musical contributions of contemporary Melayu Deli artists remain largely undocumented in academic literature.

Zulham Djais (1970-2024) emerged as a pivotal figure in Melayu Deli music during this period of cultural transition. Born in Batubara a coastal regency with strong Minangkabau cultural influences ZD's musical journey encompassed the transformation of Melayu Deli music from traditional to modern contexts, spanning from fishing villages to university life in Medan, survival as a migrant musician in Jakarta, and ultimately establishing himself as a respected teacher and artist back in Medan. Through these experiences, ZD developed a distinctive musical voice characterized by his mastery of "grenek" (Malay vocal ornamentation), his integration of vocal and dance traditions, and his prolific songwriting that reflected both personal narrative and collective Malay identity. Despite winning national BR TV (Bintang Radio) singing competitions in 1994 and 1996, performing internationally in Qatar, Dubai, Yemen, and Malaysia, releasing multiple albums, and establishing GMS Sanggar (Grenek Melayu Serumpun) in 2006, ZD's contributions remain largely unknown beyond regional Malay music circles. His passing in 2024 represents not merely the loss of an individual artist but the potential disappearance of invaluable knowledge regarding Melayu Deli musical practice, pedagogy, and cultural philosophy

exemplifying a broader crisis in Indonesian traditional music: the systematic loss of cultural memory due to inadequate documentation of living traditions and their practitioners.

Applied ethnomusicology has emerged as a critical subfield concerned with the practical application of ethnomusicological knowledge to address real-world cultural issues, actively engaging in cultural advocacy, preservation, education, and policy development (Seeger, 1996; Titon, 2020). Within this field, biographical approaches have gained recognition as powerful tools for understanding musical practice in its social, cultural, and historical contexts, allowing researchers to trace how individual musicians negotiate tradition and innovation while embodying broader community values (Bendix & Finnegan, 1991; Nettl, 2015). Furthermore, visual ethnomusicology has expanded the methodological toolkit through documentary film, which captures performative dimensions impossible to convey through text alone, creates accessible materials for community use, and reaches audiences far beyond academic circles while enabling what MacDougall (2009) terms "embodied knowledge"—understanding conveyed through sensory experience rather than purely intellectual discourse.

The relationship between geographical place and musical identity constitutes a central concern in contemporary ethnomusicology, with places operating not as passive backdrops but as active agents shaping musical aesthetics, performance practices, and cultural meanings (Connell & Gibson, 2003; Stokes & Zarbock, 1995). Batubara, as ZD's birthplace and primary source of inspiration, exemplifies this place-music relationship. As a coastal regency whose economy centers on fishing, agriculture, and songket weaving, Batubara's cultural landscape is characterized by the rhythms of maritime life, the tactile traditions of textile production, and the oral culture of Minangkabau-influenced Malay society. The dialect of Batubara Malay distinguished by its "O" pronunciation and harder tonal quality compared to Medan Malay reflects the region's distinct cultural genealogy. These local particularities are not external to ZD's music but constitutive of it, shaping everything from his vocal technique to his lyrical themes to his philosophical understanding of music's relationship with nature. The concept of "sense of place" (Zhang et al., 2023) becomes particularly relevant when examining how ZD's music articulates Batubara identity, with his song "Rindu Kampung" (Longing for Home), written during his Jakarta migration period, exemplifying how place operates simultaneously as physical location, emotional anchor, and cultural memory.

Despite Melayu Deli music's rich cultural heritage and historical importance in North Sumatran society, academic research remains limited. Existing studies have primarily focused on historical documentation of Malay sultanates' court music (Susilo & Kartomi, 1975), analysis of specific genres like zapin and inang (Hughes-Freeland & Nor,

1994) or general surveys of Indonesian regional music (Yampolsky, 2015). Biographical studies of individual Melayu Deli musicians are virtually absent from ethnomusicological literature, creating a significant gap in understanding how this tradition has been lived, practiced, and transmitted in contemporary contexts.

This research addresses multiple interconnected gaps by providing the first comprehensive biographical documentation of Zulham Djais, examining the relationship between Batubara's cultural landscape and musical creativity, developing documentary film as both research instrument and applied ethnomusicology intervention through "Zapin Petuah," and contributing a replicable model for documenting endangered musical traditions through biographical-cinematic approaches. The significance extends beyond academic contribution: for Melayu communities in Medan and Batubara, it serves as cultural memory preservation and resource for future generations; for GMS Sanggar and ZD's students, it provides validated historical record and pedagogical material; for Indonesian cultural policy, it offers evidence supporting systematic documentation of living traditional music practitioners.

This study is guided by three primary research questions. First, how did Zulham Djais's biographical journey from Batubara to Medan, Jakarta, and back to Medan shape the characteristics and philosophy of his Melayu Deli music? Second, in what ways does Batubara's cultural landscape its maritime economy, songket tradition, Minangkabau-influenced Malay culture manifest in Zulham Djais's musical repertoire and creative philosophy? Third, how can documentary film function as an effective method of applied ethnomusicology for preserving and transmitting endangered traditional music knowledge? To address these questions, this research reconstructs a comprehensive biographical narrative through systematic collection and analysis of oral histories, archival materials, and site-specific research; analyzes ZD's repertoire characteristics including vocal technique (grenek), lyrical themes, genre innovation, and performance philosophy in relation to biographical experiences and Batubara cultural context; documents and analyzes the "Zapin Petuah" documentary film production process as applied ethnomusicology method; develops a replicable methodological framework for biographical-cinematic documentation; and contributes to theoretical discourse on place-based musical identity, biographical approaches, and visual ethnomusicology methods.

This research focuses specifically on Zulham Djais's life (1970-2024) and musical legacy within Melayu Deli music tradition. The geographical scope encompasses Batubara (birthplace and primary cultural reference), Medan (main career location), and Jakarta (migration period 1999-2002), with temporal focus on key periods: childhood in Batubara (1970-1988), musical formation in Medan (1988-1999), migration to Jakarta (1999-2002), and

career consolidation in Medan (2002-2024). Several limitations must be acknowledged: the lack of comprehensive written archives regarding ZD's business relationships and detailed performance history limits certain career analysis aspects; reliance on oral history and family memory introduces potential subjective biases, though triangulation with multiple sources mitigates this concern; and the researcher's dual role as documentary filmmaker and ethnomusicologist raises methodological questions about objectivity and representation that will be addressed reflexively in the methodology section.

## 2. Literature Review

Applied ethnomusicology emerged in the late 20th century, challenging the traditional separation between scholarly research and cultural intervention by positioning ethnomusicologists as active participants in cultural sustainability, advocacy, and community empowerment rather than detached observers (Seeger, 1996; Titon, 2020). The field encompasses diverse activities including cultural preservation, policy advocacy, education, and cultural rights activism, emphasizing that researchers must "take responsibility for the effects of our work" and recognize that research inevitably influences the communities we study (Harrison et al., 2010). For this research, applied ethnomusicology provides the foundational framework for understanding documentary film production as both research method and preservation intervention, positioning the "Zapin Petuah" project as scholarly investigation and practical contribution to Melayu Deli music sustainability simultaneously. The theoretical foundations draw from critical musicology, cultural studies, and participatory action research, requiring navigation of complex ethical terrain by balancing academic rigor with community needs, respecting local knowledge systems while contributing external perspectives, and acknowledging power dynamics inherent in researcher-community relationships. This research adopts a collaborative approach where ZD's family, students, and musical colleagues are positioned as co-creators of knowledge rather than mere informants, with the documentation process itself becoming a space for cultural reflection, intergenerational dialogue, and collective memory construction.

Biographical methodology in ethnomusicology recognizes that individual lives provide crucial windows into broader cultural processes, revealing "how people actually live their musical lives" and illuminating the negotiation between cultural tradition and personal creativity (Nettl, 2015). Life history approaches capture the temporal dimension of musical practice—how musicians develop their craft, respond to changing contexts, and position themselves within evolving cultural landscapes—while demonstrating that musical biographies are never purely individual stories but are deeply embedded in social networks, economic structures,

and cultural values (Bendix & Finnegan, 1991). The biographical approach offers particular advantages for documenting endangered musical traditions, as master practitioners take with them not only technical knowledge but also embodied understandings, aesthetic sensibilities, and philosophical perspectives that cannot be fully captured through generalized cultural descriptions (Howell, 2005). However, biographical research must navigate methodological challenges including memory's selectivity, informants' self-presentation strategies, and the researcher's interpretive role in constructing narrative coherence from fragmented recollections. This research addresses these challenges through triangulation comparing family accounts with those of musical colleagues, verifying claims against available archival evidence, and maintaining reflexive awareness of how the documentary film's narrative structure inevitably shapes biographical representation.

Martin Stokes (1995) fundamentally reframed ethnomusicological thinking by arguing that music is "socially meaningful largely because it provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them," with music not simply reflecting geographical place but actively constructing sense of place, creating sonic territories that carry emotional, social, and political significance. Place in this framework is neither fixed nor objective but emerges through ongoing practice and experience, with local music scenes embodying specific geographical imaginations, encoding regional histories, and articulating place-based identities in the face of globalizing forces (Connell & Gibson, 2003). Steven Feld and Keith Basso's (1996) concept of "sense of place" emphasizes the phenomenological dimension of place-making through sound, where places are known through sensory experience and music both emerges from and contributes to these sensory landscapes. For coastal communities like Batubara, the soundscape of waves, fishing boats, and maritime activities forms an acoustic ecology that shapes musical aesthetics and performance practices, with Zhang et al. (2023) notion of "acoustemology" knowing through sound suggesting that ZD's music encodes specifically Batubara ways of sensing and understanding the world. This research adopts a multi-dimensional understanding of place encompassing physical geography (coastal landscape, fishing economy), cultural infrastructure (songket weaving tradition, Pesta Tapai festival), linguistic particularity (Batubara Malay dialect), and emotional geography (nostalgia, belonging, cultural pride), revealing how Batubara locality is not merely thematic content but constitutive of ZD's musical language itself.

Visual ethnomusicology recognizes that music is fundamentally multimodal combining sound, movement, visual display, and spatial arrangement and therefore requires research methods that capture these multiple dimensions, with video documentation enabling analysis of performance aspects invisible to audio recording alone including gesture,



facial expression, dancer-musician interaction, audience participation, and spatial organization (Rice, 2003). Documentary film as ethnographic method carries specific affordances and constraints, with different modes observational, participatory, and poetic embodying different epistemological assumptions about truth, representation, and the filmmaker-subject relationship (MacDougall & Espinosa, 2009). This research employs a hybrid documentary approach, combining observational footage of actual locations and community members with a fictional narrative framework (the character Maburur's journey) to address two challenges: the impossibility of capturing ZD's life directly given his passing, and the need to create an engaging narrative that appeals to younger audiences. Bill Nichols (2001) argues that documentary truth is always constructed through cinematic choices framing, editing, voiceover, music and that reflexive acknowledgment of this construction enhances rather than diminishes documentary credibility, leading this research to adopt a reflexive stance, treating the documentary production process itself as ethnographic data and analyzing how cinematic storytelling can serve ethnomusicological knowledge production while maintaining scholarly integrity.

This research synthesizes these theoretical strands into an integrated framework for biographical-cinematic ethnomusicology that positions documentary film as simultaneously research method (structuring fieldwork and generating data through interviews, observation, and archival research), analytical tool (requiring intensive engagement with material through editing to identify patterns and interpret significance), and applied intervention (serving preservation, education, and advocacy functions while making research findings accessible to diverse audiences). The biographical-cinematic approach offers several advantages: addressing the urgency of documenting master practitioners before their knowledge is lost, producing materials directly usable by communities for cultural education and intergenerational transmission, reaching audiences beyond academic specialists to potentially influence public understanding and cultural policy, and capturing embodied and performative dimensions of musical knowledge often lost in text-based documentation. However, this approach also presents challenges including the resource intensity of film production, the technical expertise required, the ethical complexities of visual representation, and the tension between artistic storytelling and scholarly accuracy, which this research addresses through transparent methodology, community collaboration, reflexive analysis, and maintaining parallel textual scholarship that provides analytical depth complementing the documentary's accessibility.



### 3. Methods

This research employs a qualitative ethnographic approach integrating biographical life history methodology with visual ethnomusicology to achieve dual objectives: scholarly analysis of Zulham Djais's musical legacy and creation of accessible cultural preservation materials. The study design is inherently interdisciplinary, combining ethnomusicological fieldwork with documentary film production within a participatory paradigm where ZD's family, students, and musical colleagues are positioned as collaborators rather than mere subjects, contributing to both knowledge construction and creative decision-making throughout the process. This collaborative stance aligns with applied ethnomusicology's ethical commitment to reciprocity and community benefit. The research timeline spanned eighteen months (January 2024 - June 2025), encompassing preliminary research, intensive fieldwork, film production, and analytical writing phases. The methodological framework integrates three interconnected components: ethnographic fieldwork (interviews, observation, archival research), documentary film production (scripting, filming, editing), and reflexive analysis (examining the research process itself as data). This integration means that film production activities constitute the research process itself location scouting generated geographical and cultural insights, interviewing for the documentary simultaneously produced oral history data, and editing decisions required deep analytical engagement with material, embodying what Sarah Pink (2013) terms "digital ethnography" where digital media production and ethnographic knowledge creation are inseparable.

The research was conducted across three primary geographical sites representing significant phases in ZD's biographical journey: Batubara Regency (particularly Lima Puluh subdistrict and Simpang Dolok area) for understanding formative years and cultural landscape, including fishing villages, songket weaving communities, Istana Lima Laras, and Pesta Tapai festival sites; Medan (specifically Johor area where GMS Sanggar is located) for accessing professional networks, students, and institutional affiliations, with the sanggar functioning as both research site and repository of archives including photographs, recordings, performance costumes, and awards; and Jakarta (reconstructed through informant narratives about the 1999-2002 migration period). Research participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to represent different dimensions of ZD's life. Primary informants included Jamilah (widow), Edo (son-in-law and primary student who manages GMS Sanggar), and Ara (daughter). Secondary informants included Butong Olala (Jakarta GMS colleague), Rudi Hernanda and Zulfahmi (university friends from USU Ethnomusicology), Maisaroh (Batubara songket weaver), former students, GMS Sanggar members, and community elders who remembered ZD's childhood performances. All participants provided informed consent for

	<p>both research participation and documentary film appearance, understanding the dual nature of their involvement.</p> <p>Data collection employed multiple methods. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and Malay dialect, designed to elicit biographical narrative, musical knowledge, and cultural context while allowing flexibility for emergent themes. All interviews were video-recorded for documentary purposes and audio-recorded separately for transcription, with durations ranging from 45 minutes to 3 hours. Participant observation was conducted at GMS Sanggar during rehearsals, music lessons, and informal gatherings, and in Batubara during songket weaving sessions, fishing community activities, and experiencing local soundscapes. Field notes documented observations, reflexive thoughts, and emerging analytical insights. Archival research involved systematic review of materials held by ZD's family and GMS Sanggar, including photograph collections, audio and video recordings of performances, performance costumes (particularly songket), awards and certificates, and personal documents including song lyrics manuscripts. Digital copies were made with family permission, creating a preservation archive while enabling detailed analysis. Site-specific documentation in Batubara captured the physical and cultural geography central to ZD's identity through photographing and filming coastal landscapes, fishing activities, songket weaving processes, Istana Lima Laras architecture, Pesta Tapai festival elements, and daily life in Lima Puluh communities.</p> <p>The documentary film "Zapin Petuah" employs a hybrid narrative structure combining fictional storytelling with documentary elements. The fictional component follows Maburur, a young ethnomusicology student searching for the "soul" of Melayu Deli music through investigating ZD's life, serving multiple functions: providing emotional engagement for audiences less familiar with Melayu music, creating a structural framework for presenting biographical information, and modeling the research process itself. The documentary elements include interview footage with actual family and colleagues, archival photographs and recordings, and observational footage of contemporary Batubara. This hybrid approach addresses the impossibility of directly filming ZD while creating accessible, emotionally resonant content for younger audiences. The production process unfolded in iterative phases: pre-production (script development, identifying key locations and interview subjects, planning visual aesthetic), principal photography over eight weeks (three weeks in Batubara for location filming, four weeks in Medan for interviews and sanggar footage, one week for fictional narrative scenes), and post-production (reviewing over 60 hours of footage, transcribing interviews, identifying thematic patterns, editing into coherent storytelling, creating the final 75-minute documentary). The editing process required constant negotiation between cinematic effectiveness and ethnographic accuracy.</p>
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Data analysis proceeded through multiple interconnected strategies. Narrative analysis of interview transcripts identified recurring themes, biographical turning points, and patterns in how informants constructed meaning around ZD's life and music, revealing how ZD's identity was narrated differently by family (emphasizing personal character), musical colleagues (emphasizing artistic philosophy), and community members (emphasizing cultural contribution). Thematic coding organized data around key conceptual categories including biographical phases, musical characteristics, place-based identity, pedagogical philosophy, and cultural values, emerging both deductively from theoretical framework and inductively from data immersion. Musical analysis examined ZD's recorded repertoire, focusing on vocal technique (particularly grenek ornamentation), lyrical content and themes, genre characteristics (langgam, zapin, joget, mak inang), instrumental arrangements, and stylistic evolution across his career, informed by consultation with Melayu music scholars and practitioners. Spatial analysis interpreted how Batubara's cultural landscape manifests in ZD's music, examining references to coastal imagery in lyrics, incorporation of maritime rhythms, and the influence of Batubara Malay dialect on vocal delivery. Reflexive analysis treated the documentary production process itself as data, examining how cinematic choices shaped knowledge representation, including script decisions, editing choices, the use of fictional narrative to frame documentary content, and audience reception of the hybrid format.

This research adhered to comprehensive ethical protocols addressing the unique challenges of biographical research and visual documentation. Informed consent processes clearly distinguished between participation in academic research and appearance in documentary film, with separate consent forms addressing interview participation, video recording, photograph use, and public dissemination. Consent processes were conducted in Indonesian language with careful explanation, and participants were offered the option to review their footage before inclusion. Family collaboration was central to ethical research practice, with ZD's family involved in research design, granting access to private archives, reviewing documentary drafts, and providing feedback shaping the final film. This collaborative approach respects family authority over ZD's legacy while maintaining scholarly independence. Cultural sensitivity guided all aspects of research, including appropriate dress and behavior, respectful representation of Islamic practices, careful handling of cultural materials like songket, and attention to local protocols. Research findings and the documentary film were shared with participants and communities before wider dissemination. Intellectual property considerations addressed the complex status of ZD's musical works, archival materials, and the documentary film itself, with agreements establishing that while scholarly analysis and documentary film are the researcher's work, ZD's original compositions remain family property and any commercial use

would require separate negotiation.

Several methodological limitations require acknowledgment. The temporal constraint of conducting research after ZD's passing meant relying on retrospective accounts rather than direct observation, introducing potential memory biases and incomplete information, partially mitigated through triangulation across multiple informants and archival evidence but leaving gaps regarding business relationships and certain performance details. The archival gaps reflect that ZD did not systematically preserve documentation of his career, resulting in incomplete discography, missing performance records, and limited business correspondence reflecting broader patterns in Indonesian traditional music where formal documentation is often absent. The researcher's dual role as ethnomusicologist and filmmaker created methodological complexities, with filmmaking requirements sometimes conflicting with ethnographic ideals, requiring case-by-case negotiation with ethnographic integrity generally taking precedence though acknowledging necessary compromises for creating an effective documentary. The researcher's positionality as an ethnomusicology student and filmmaker rather than Melayu community member shaped access, interpretation, and representation in ways requiring ongoing reflexive attention, with outsider status potentially limiting cultural understanding but also enabling analytical distance. Finally, the hybrid documentary format raises questions about truth claims and representation by blurring boundaries between factual reporting and creative storytelling, though this research takes the position that this hybridity, when deployed reflexively and transparently, can serve ethnomusicological goals by creating emotionally engaging content that transmits cultural knowledge effectively while maintaining scholarly integrity through parallel textual analysis.

#### **4. Results**

##### **4.1. Biographical Trajectory: The Making of a Malayu Deli Musician**

Zulham Djais's musical journey from a fishing village in Batubara to becoming a respected Malayu Deli maestro embodies the complex negotiation between tradition and modernity that characterizes contemporary Indonesian traditional music. Born in 1970 into a fish-trading family in Lima Puluh subdistrict, ZD's musical talent emerged without direct familial precedent, challenging assumptions about traditional music transmission occurring primarily through family lineage. His father, recognizing his son's vocal abilities, regularly brought young Zulham to perform at community events, establishing his identity as cultural contributor from childhood. The coastal soundscape of Batubara—waves, fishing boats, the "gubang" (fishermen's wind-calling songs), and the rhythmic clacking of songket weaving looms formed an acoustic ecology that profoundly influenced his later musical aesthetics. ZD would later

articulate this influence through metaphor: music as interwoven threads where "each note has its place, like each thread in songket, and beauty emerges only when all elements are unified." Significantly, ZD taught traditional Malay dance to village children during his youth, embodying early his core philosophical belief that "singing and dancing are inseparable in Melayu tradition." The Batubara Malay dialect, with its harder "O" pronunciation compared to softer Medan Malay, instilled linguistic characteristics that would distinguish his vocal timbre and grenek ornamentation patterns throughout his career.

ZD's migration to Medan in 1988 to study Malay Literature at Universitas Sumatera Utara marked his transition from intuitive musician to conscious cultural practitioner. His friendships with ethnomusicology students including Rudi Hernanda and Zulfahmi exemplified productive exchange between academic and practitioner knowledge, with ZD gaining analytical vocabulary for articulating his embodied musical expertise. The period 1990-1993 represented his "wilderness years" of repeated failure in BR TV (Bintang Radio) singing competitions, experiences that prompted critical self-assessment and the decision to seek formal training with Lia Grup, led by Hj. Dahlia Kasim. This informal conservatory systematically developed ZD's technical skills, particularly his mastery of "grenek"—Malay vocal ornamentation involving melismatic passages, microtonal inflections, and rhythmic flexibility that expresses aesthetic values of subtlety, refinement, and emotional depth. His breakthrough came in 1994 and 1996 when he won national BR TV competitions in Aceh and Bandar Lampung, victories that validated his training and established his reputation within Melayu music networks. These successes opened professional opportunities including international performances with Sinar Budaya Grup at Universiti Malaya (1994), exposing ZD to Malaysian Malay musical traditions and reinforcing awareness of Melayu culture's transnational dimensions.

The Jakarta migration (1999-2002) represents perhaps the most transformative period in ZD's biography, fundamentally reshaping his artistic perspective and producing his most emotionally resonant work. Precipitated by his wife Jamilah's graduate studies in Yogyakarta, ZD resigned from his teaching position at YP Al-Azhar to accompany his family—selling their only motorcycle to finance the journey by ship and train, embodying the material hardship of migration. In Jakarta, he joined other displaced Melayu musicians including Butong Olala to form Grenek Melayu Serumpun (GMS), a collective providing mutual support and income through performances at weddings and institutional events, backing vocals for established artists, and informal trade—purchasing songket in Medan to sell in Jakarta, bringing batik from Yogyakarta to sell at Taman Mini. This diversified economic activity reflects the precarity of traditional musicians' livelihoods in contemporary Indonesia. The GMS collective produced a compilation album "Bunga Tanjung" (2000-2001) that achieved limited commercial success, and by 2002 financial pressures

and homesickness led to the group's dissolution. Yet this period of migration, struggle, and displacement generated profound creative material. ZD's song "Rindu Kampung" (Longing for Home) emerged from late-night writing sessions in his shared Jakarta room, articulating migrant experience through lyrics referencing coastal imagery, fishing boats, and the warmth of community transforming personal nostalgia into collective cultural expression that would become one of his most recognized works.

ZD's return to Medan in 2002 initiated his most productive period. YP Al-Azhar remarkably invited him to resume teaching, and over two decades he became known for strict discipline combined with genuine care, his "galak" (fierce) reputation paradoxically making him beloved among students. In 2006, he established GMS Sanggar at Jl. Pintu Air IV Gang Melayu 2, providing space for teaching Melayu dance and music to younger generations and functioning as hub for Melayu cultural activity. His recording career flourished with three albums: a 2008 solo album featuring ten tracks across Melayu genres from langgam to joget; a 2010-2011 release with original compositions and traditional folk songs; and "Batubara Bertuah" (2011) supported by Batubara regency government, explicitly celebrating his birthplace coinciding with its emergence as independent regency. The digitalization of his catalog (2021-2023) on Spotify ensured his legacy's persistence beyond physical media. Throughout this period, ZD continued international performances in Qatar (2005, 2006), Dubai, Yemen (2006), and Malaysia (2018), positioning him as cultural ambassador representing Indonesian Melayu tradition globally while maintaining his identity as local teacher and community member.

ZD's final years (2022-2024) were marked by intentional legacy planning and physical decline. After performing hajj pilgrimage with his wife in 2022, he experienced profound grief when his sibling died, followed by serious health issues including diabetes that forced retirement from teaching. During approximately two months of illness, his former student Edo who had studied nursing provided devoted care that exceeded typical student-teacher relationships. Recognizing in Edo someone who embodied the values and dedication needed to continue his work, ZD proposed that Edo marry his daughter Ara. The marriage occurred forty days before ZD's death, allowing him to formally transfer responsibility for both family and sanggar to Edo. This succession reflects traditional Indonesian arts knowledge transmission patterns where mastery passes through intensive personal relationships rather than institutional credentialing. ZD's legacy persists through multiple channels: Edo's continued operation of GMS Sanggar, his recorded music accessible via streaming platforms, former students carrying his pedagogical influence, and the "Zapin Petuah" documentary film translating his life into visual narrative that serves educational purposes for future generations seeking connection to Melayu Deli musical tradition.



## 4.2. Musical Analysis: Characteristics of Zulham Djais's Artistry

### 4.2.1. Grenek: Vocal Technique and Aesthetic Philosophy

The concept of "grenek" is central to understanding ZD's musical artistry and his contribution to Melayu Deli tradition. Grenek refers to vocal ornamentation technique involving melismatic passages where single syllables are extended across multiple pitches, microtonal inflections that create subtle pitch variations beyond Western tempered scale, rhythmic flexibility that interprets melodic rhythm expressively rather than metronomically, and dynamic shading that uses volume variation for emotional effect. Grenek is not merely decorative embellishment but carries aesthetic and cultural significance. Edo explained that ZD taught grenek as expression of "halus" (refinement), a core Malay cultural value emphasizing subtlety, indirectness, and emotional restraint. Proper grenek demonstrates singer's technical mastery while communicating emotional depth without crude directness.

Analysis of ZD's recorded performances reveals distinctive grenek characteristics that constitute his personal style within broader Melayu conventions. His ornamentation tends toward longer melismatic passages than some contemporaries, creating flowing, wave-like melodic contours that informants explicitly connect to his coastal Batubara origins. His microtonal inflections incorporate quarter-tone and smaller intervals, creating ambiguous pitch areas that enhance emotional expressivity. His rhythmic interpretation demonstrates significant flexibility, stretching and compressing melodic rhythm in response to lyrical meaning and emotional intensity. Comparative analysis with other Melayu Deli singers reveals ZD's grenek as more elaborate and emotionally demonstrative than the restrained style of some traditional singers, yet maintaining cultural authenticity through adherence to fundamental Melayu aesthetic principles.

The Batubara dialect influence on ZD's grenek is particularly significant. Batubara Malay's harder "O" pronunciation and generally more forceful articulation compared to Medan Malay creates timbral characteristics that distinguish ZD's vocal quality. This dialectal specificity allows knowledgeable listeners to identify regional origin through vocal sound alone, demonstrating how linguistic geography becomes encoded in musical performance. ZD's grenek thus operates simultaneously as personal artistic signature, regional cultural marker, and embodiment of broader Melayu aesthetic values—illustrating how individual musical style emerges from nested layers of cultural identity.

### 4.2.2. Repertoire and Genre Mastery

ZD's repertoire demonstrates comprehensive mastery across Melayu Deli's



generic taxonomy, which organizes songs into three primary tempo-based categories, each associated with specific emotional content and social functions. Langgampieces employ slow tempo, minor or ambiguous modality, and lyrics typically addressing romantic longing, separation, or melancholy. ZD's performances of traditional langgam like "Sri Deli" and "Kuala Deli," as well as his original composition "Rindu Kampung," exemplify this genre. His langgam interpretations emphasize sustained tones, extensive grenek ornamentation, and deeply emotional delivery that informants describe as particularly moving. The autobiographical content of "Rindu Kampung" adds additional emotional layer, as audiences aware of ZD's Jakarta migration experience hear personal testimony within conventional generic form.

Mak Inang occupies the medium tempo range and encompasses diverse lyrical content including advice, social commentary, courtship, and cultural celebration. Songs like "Mak Inang Selendang" and ZD's compositions "Mak Inang Cina" demonstrate this genre's versatility. Mak Inang's moderate tempo makes it suitable for accompanied dance, and ZD's performances often incorporated choreography or were designed with dance accompaniment in mind. His philosophy that "singing and dancing are inseparable" found particular expression in mak inang repertoire where vocal and kinetic elements integrate seamlessly. Joget represents the fast tempo category, characterized by upbeat rhythms, major tonality, and playful or humorous lyrics. ZD's joget performances including "Joget Anak Siapa," "Joget Selendang Merah," and "Joget Anak Tiung" showcase technical virtuosity required for rapid-tempo singing while maintaining grenek ornamentation and clear lyrical articulation. Joget's social function as dance music and entertainment makes it popular for celebrations, and ZD's joget performances were consistently described as energetic and joyful.

Beyond these primary categories, ZD's repertoire included zapin, a genre with distinct Arab-Islamic cultural associations involving specific rhythmic patterns and often religious or moral lyrical themes. His composition "Zapin Petuah" (which gives title to the documentary film) exemplifies this genre, offering advice through poetic lyrics accompanied by zapin's characteristic rhythmic drive. ZD also performed timang, lullaby songs like "Timang Anak" that demonstrate Melayu music's integration into domestic life and child-rearing practices. This generic diversity establishes ZD as comprehensive practitioner rather than specialist, able to perform appropriately across social contexts from religious gatherings to wedding celebrations to informal community events.

#### 4.2.3. Original Compositions and Lyrical Themes

ZD's original compositions reveal consistent thematic preoccupations reflecting his biographical experience and cultural values. Place and belonging constitute a dominant theme, most explicitly in "Rindu

Kampung" but also evident in "Batubara Bertuah" and references to coastal landscapes throughout his work. These compositions articulate emotional geography, mapping feelings onto specific locations and creating sonic representations of home. The lyrics employ concrete sensory imagery—waves, fishing boats, village sounds—that evoke place phenomenologically rather than merely describing it abstractly. Social relationships and obligations appear frequently, with songs addressing family responsibilities, inter-generational respect, and community harmony. "Wak Alang Ke Undangan" discusses social protocol around invitations and gatherings, while "Timang Anak" expresses parental love and hopes for children's futures. These compositions embed Melayu social values within musical form, functioning as both entertainment and subtle moral instruction.

Cultural continuity and change emerge as themes in compositions like "Zapin Budak Sekarang" (Zapin of Today's Youth), which addresses generational shifts in cultural practice and implicitly advocates for maintaining traditional values amid modernization. This theme reflects ZD's own concerns as educator and cultural preservationist witnessing declining youth engagement with Melayu arts. Romantic love and courtship appear in multiple compositions, treated with characteristic Melayu subtlety and adherence to Islamic propriety. Songs like "Jodoh Tak Kemana" (Destiny Won't Go Anywhere) express romantic feeling within frameworks of faith and patience, contrasting with more explicit contemporary popular music approaches to romantic themes.

ZD's compositional process, as described by family members, involved late-night writing sessions where he would work on lyrics, often soliciting feedback from his wife Jamilah and later from Edo regarding lyrical refinement and cultural appropriateness. Melodies were typically developed through improvisation, singing potential tunes until finding one that properly expressed the lyrical content. This process reflects oral tradition composing practices where written notation plays minimal role and musical ideas emerge through performative exploration. The collaborative dimension—involving family in compositional refinement—demonstrates how ZD's creative work was embedded in social relationships rather than isolated individual authorship.

#### 4.2.4. Performance Philosophy: "Singing and Dancing Are One"

ZD's most distinctive philosophical contribution to Melayu Deli practice was his insistence on the inseparability of vocal and kinetic performance. Edo consistently emphasized this principle as central to ZD's teaching: "Pak Zulham always said, if you can sing Melayu songs, you must be able to dance while singing. They are not separate arts but one art with two expressions." This philosophy challenges contemporary tendencies toward specialization where singers focus exclusively on vocal technique and dancers on choreography. ZD's position reflects older, more holistic Melayu

performance traditions where practitioners developed multiple competencies simultaneously.

The practical implications of this philosophy shaped ZD's pedagogy at GMS Sanggar, where students were expected to develop both vocal and dance skills regardless of primary interest. This approach mirrors traditional Southeast Asian arts training where multidimensionality is valued over narrow specialization. ZD's own performances embodied this integration—he regularly sang while dancing, demonstrating how bodily movement could enhance vocal expression and how vocal phrasing could articulate dance rhythm. This integrated performance style connects to broader aesthetic principles in Malay culture where boundaries between art forms are more fluid than in Western classical traditions, and where performative events involve multiple sensory and expressive modalities simultaneously.

The philosophical justification ZD articulated for this integration invoked metaphors of organic unity. Edo recalled ZD comparing singing without dancing to "a bird trying to fly with one wing," suggesting incompleteness and imbalance. The metaphor of breath was also significant: ZD described both singing and dancing as requiring proper breath control, and argued that coordinating breath between vocal production and physical movement created unified artistic expression where each element enhanced the other. This breath-centered understanding connects to broader Southeast Asian performance philosophies where breath (*nafas*) carries both physiological and spiritual significance, serving as animating force that brings performance to life.

#### 4.3. Place-Based Identity: Batubara as Musical Landscape

Batubara's geographical character as coastal regency fundamentally shaped the cultural context from which ZD emerged and to which his music repeatedly returned. The regency's economy centers on maritime activities—fishing, aquaculture, coastal trade—creating social rhythms governed by tides, monsoons, and fishing cycles. This maritime orientation produces distinctive cultural patterns including gendered division of labor (men in fishing, women in fish processing and textile production), social organization around fishing cooperatives, and cosmopolitan exposure through coastal trade. The fishing economy generates specific soundscapes—boat motors, fish market activities, waves, the "gubang" wind-calling songs fishermen sang at sea—that constitute an acoustic ecology influencing musical aesthetics. Batubara's songket weaving tradition represents another crucial economic and cultural element, with production primarily conducted by women in household settings creating distinctive sonic environments where the rhythmic clacking of weaving looms forms constant background sound. ZD explicitly invoked songket as metaphor for his musical philosophy, with the metaphor operating at multiple levels: structurally (music as interwoven melodic and rhythmic threads), aesthetically (evoking refined craftsmanship), and culturally

(connecting music to broader Malay artistic traditions and gendered labor practices). Agricultural production, particularly rice cultivation, creates seasonal rhythms and ritual occasions requiring musical performance, exemplified by Pesta Tapai festival celebrating agricultural abundance through music, dance, and communal feasting. This economic diversity—combining fishing, agriculture, and craft production—creates cultural richness and multiple overlapping social networks that prevent insularity while maintaining distinct regional identity.

Batubara's cultural distinctiveness within North Sumatran Malay culture derives significantly from its Minangkabau genealogy. Unlike Deli Malay culture which emerged from Malay sultanate structures with Acehese and Batak interaction, Batubara was settled by Minangkabau migrants traveling through Kampar River routes, establishing communities that maintained Minangkabau social patterns while adopting Malay cultural identity. This substrate manifests in the absence of patrilineal clan (*marga*) systems common in Batak-influenced areas, dialect characteristics including harder pronunciation and specific vocabulary, and aesthetic preferences in textile design, architecture, and performance. The Batubara Malay dialect, distinguished by its "O" pronunciation pattern (where other Malay dialects might use "A" or softer vowels), creates tonal qualities that directly affect singing. Informants consistently identified ZD's vocal sound as distinctly Batubara, attributable to these dialectal patterns that shaped his speech and consequently his singing voice. Language operates as embodied culture—pronunciation patterns learned in childhood become neurologically and muscularly ingrained, affecting vocal production even when singing. ZD's *grenek* ornamentation, while following general Melayu conventions, carried Batubara-specific timbral qualities recognizable to experienced listeners, demonstrating how regional linguistic variation creates musical micro-diversity within broader ethnic traditions. Batubara was historically governed through the Lima Laras system—five administrative divisions each led by a *datuk*—rather than centralized sultanate structure, fostering relatively decentralized, community-based cultural practices. Istana Lima Laras, the historical palace complex now in ruins, symbolizes this distinctive governance history, with ZD's incorporation of visits to this site in cultural activities and the documentary film's use of this location reflecting consciousness of Batubara's specific historical trajectory.

The song "Rindu Kampung" represents ZD's most explicit articulation of place-based identity and serves as crucial case study for understanding how geographical consciousness becomes encoded in musical form. Composed during ZD's Jakarta migration period (1999-2002) and later formally recorded in Medan, the song expresses migrant longing for home through lyrics referencing specific Batubara landscapes, activities, and sensory experiences—coastal imagery, fishing boats returning at dawn, the sound of waves, and the warmth of community gatherings—creating a

sonic portrait that operates simultaneously as personal memory and collective regional identity. Musical analysis reveals how the composition's formal elements reinforce lyrical themes: employing langgam style with slow tempo and minor modality communicating melancholy and longing; melodic contour featuring descending phrases suggesting sadness and resignation while occasional ascending passages express hope for eventual return; and ZD's vocal performance emphasizing extensive grenek ornamentation, the melismatic extensions creating temporal stretching that mirrors the psychological experience of longing where time becomes elastic when separated from desired persons or places. The emotional authenticity derives from its autobiographical origins, with Butong Olala's testimony that ZD wrote the lyrics late at night while experiencing actual homesickness grounding the composition in lived experience rather than merely conventional sentiment. This authenticity communicates to audiences, making "Rindu Kampung" one of ZD's most recognized and emotionally resonant works. The song's appeal extends beyond personal expression to articulate collective migrant experience many North Sumatrans have left home for economic or educational opportunities, and "Rindu Kampung" gives voice to widely shared feelings of displacement and desire for return, functioning as what Stokes (1994) terms "identity marker," creating sonic space where particular cultural identity (Batubara Malay) can be performed, recognized, and emotionally experienced.

The relationship between Batubara's sensory landscape and ZD's musical imagination operates at levels beyond explicit lyrical reference. Phenomenological analysis suggests that places are known through multi-sensory experience, and this embodied knowledge shapes creative production. ZD's formative years involved daily immersion in coastal soundscapes—waves with different qualities depending on tide and wind, boat motors of various types, marketplace cacophony, the regular clacking of weaving looms, muezzin calls echoing across flat coastal terrain—forming an internalized acoustic template against which other sounds are measured and from which creative inspiration draws. Informants' descriptions of ZD's compositional process suggest he drew consciously on this sensory memory, with Edo recalling ZD describing how he would "listen for the rhythm of waves" when developing new melodies, or how particular grenek ornaments reminded him of specific Batubara sounds. The concept of "sense of place" (Feld & Basso, 1996) proves analytically productive here, as places are not merely coordinates on maps but are constituted through experience, memory, and cultural meaning-making. For ZD, Batubara operated as emotional anchor, creative wellspring, and identity foundation. His music can be understood as attempt to recreate Batubara through sound—to make the homeland portable and shareable, with performance of "Rindu Kampung" or other place-referencing compositions in Medan or Jakarta functioning as temporary sonic

reconstruction of Batubara, allowing both performer and audiences to imaginatively inhabit that place regardless of physical location. This understanding positions music not as abstract sonic structure but as embodied cultural practice deeply entangled with particular places and the people who inhabit them.

## 5. Discussions

### 5.1. Documentary Film as Applied Ethnomusicology

The production of "Zapin Petuah" documentary film represents methodological innovation within applied ethnomusicology, demonstrating how visual storytelling can serve scholarly, preservation, and community engagement purposes simultaneously. Traditional ethnomusicological output consists primarily of academic articles, monographs, and sound recordings with analytical annotation. While valuable for specialist audiences, such formats reach limited populations and require significant cultural capital for effective engagement. Documentary film offers alternative approach that prioritizes accessibility while maintaining ethnographic integrity, creating materials usable by communities for cultural education and intergenerational transmission. The decision to employ hybrid documentary format combining fictional narrative with documentary elements addresses specific challenges: ZD's death before research began precluded direct observational documentation of his practice, and while interviews and archival materials provide substantial data, they lack the immediacy and embodied dimension that filmed performances would offer. The fictional narrative featuring Mabur, a young musician investigating ZD's legacy, serves multiple functions: providing structural framework for organizing biographical information, creating identification figure allowing audiences to vicariously experience the research journey, and modeling the process of cultural learning and transmission central to applied ethnomusicology's goals. The character Mabur is positioned as proxy for younger generation seeking connection to traditional culture, addressing the documentary's primary intended audience youth who may have limited exposure to or interest in Melayu music. The hybrid format raises methodological questions about truth claims and epistemology, with "Zapin Petuah" deliberately blurring boundaries between factual representation and invented narrative. This approach aligns with recent documentary theory recognizing that all documentary involves construction and interpretation rather than transparent representation of reality (Nichols, 2001), with preliminary screenings suggesting the hybrid approach successfully engages audiences while communicating historical and cultural information effectively, though some viewers initially expressed confusion about which elements were fictional versus documentary.

The documentary production process itself functioned as ethnographic method, with filmmaking activities generating research insights alongside



creating final product. Location scouting in Batubara required identifying sites significant to ZD's biography and representative of Batubara culture through extensive consultation with family and community members, generating detailed knowledge about local geography, history, and cultural practices. Interview filming required developing questions addressing both scholarly research interests and documentary narrative needs, shaping protocols to include emotional dimensions and personal anecdotes crucial for creating emotionally engaging film. The filmed interviews generated richer data than audio-only recordings would provide, capturing informants' gestures, facial expressions, and emotional responses that constitute significant communicative information. Reviewing footage during editing required intensive engagement with material, watching interviews multiple times to identify key themes, narrative arcs, and moments of particular significance a process paralleling traditional ethnographic analysis while producing documentary film rather than written text. The collaborative dimension proved methodologically valuable, with the research involving cinematographer, sound recordist, and editor bringing specialized expertise and perspective. Production discussions about how to film songket weaving or represent coastal soundscape required articulating analytical understanding in ways comprehensible to non-specialists, clarifying thinking through explanation. Presenting rough cuts to ZD's family and GMS Sanggar members for feedback functioned as member checking, validating interpretations while providing additional insights as informants responded to seeing their knowledge represented visually.

Beyond its research function, "Zapin Petuah" serves direct preservation purposes by creating permanent audiovisual record of informants' testimonies, cultural practices, and geographical locations, capturing embodied and performative dimensions that text-based description struggles to convey the specific quality of grenek ornamentation, the movement vocabulary of Melayu dance, the atmospheric qualities of Batubara landscapes. The film's educational utility operates at multiple levels: for GMS Sanggar, providing teaching material that can introduce new students to ZD's philosophy; for Batubara communities, documenting local cultural heritage in accessible format for schools and community centers; for broader audiences unfamiliar with Melayu culture, providing introduction through personal story creating emotional engagement. Preliminary community screenings revealed diverse audience responses informing understanding of the film's effectiveness. Melayu community members, particularly older generations, expressed appreciation for recognition of ZD's contributions and preservation of his memory, noting specific cultural details captured accurately. Younger audience members responded positively to Maburr's character and narrative journey, with some expressing that the film inspired renewed interest in learning about Melayu music and considering participating in cultural activities,



suggesting the documentary achieves applied ethnomusicology goals of cultural engagement and transmission.

The documentary film approach presents limitations requiring acknowledgment. Film production is resource-intensive, requiring equipment, personnel, time, and funding that may not be available to many researchers, suggesting it works best in combination with other approaches. The editorial power inherent in documentary filmmaking raises ethical concerns, as filmmakers make countless decisions about what to film, how to frame shots, which interview segments to include, and how to sequence material choices that fundamentally shape representation. This editorial control creates power asymmetry between filmmaker-researcher and community members whose lives are represented. The research addressed this through collaborative review processes, but ultimately the filmmaker retained final decision-making authority, a power dynamic meriting critical reflection. Informed consent processes required particular care given video documentation's higher stakes compared to audio recording, with video capturing detailed personal information creating privacy concerns. All participants signed consent forms specifically addressing video recording and public distribution with the option to review their footage before inclusion. However, the persistence of video documentation and its potential circulation beyond intended contexts means consent is never fully informed participants cannot anticipate all future uses or audiences, requiring ongoing ethical vigilance and commitment to protecting participants' dignity and privacy.

## 6. Conclusions

This research has explored the musical legacy of Zulham Djais through applied ethnomusicology, demonstrating how documentary film can serve simultaneously as research method, analytical tool, and preservation intervention. Through biographical reconstruction, musical analysis, and examination of place-based identity, the study reveals how ZD's artistic voice emerged from the intricate interplay of personal experience, geographical locality, and cultural tradition.

The biographical analysis establishes that ZD's musical identity was fundamentally shaped by three geographical contexts. Batubara provided the acoustic ecology and cultural foundation coastal soundscapes, songket weaving traditions, and Minangkabau-influenced Malay dialect that informed his distinctive vocal timbre and philosophical understanding of music as interwoven threads. Medan offered formal training and competitive validation that transformed intuitive talent into conscious artistry, particularly through his mastery of grenek vocal ornamentation with Lia Grup. Jakarta, despite its hardships, generated profound creative material as migration experience crystallized into "Rindu Kampung" and other compositions articulating displacement with emotional authenticity.

This geographical trajectory demonstrates how place operates not as passive backdrop but as active agent shaping musical aesthetics, performance practices, and cultural meanings.

Musical analysis reveals ZD's distinctive contributions: grenek technique combining elaborate ornamentation with Batubara dialect-specific timbre; comprehensive mastery across generic categories (langgam, mak inang, joget, zapin); original compositions integrating traditional structures with personal narrative; and his philosophical insistence that "singing and dancing are one," challenging contemporary specialization while advocating holistic performance practice rooted in older Malay traditions. The documentary film "Zapin Petuah" represents methodological innovation, with its hybrid format combining fictional narrative with documentary elements creating accessible content for younger audiences while maintaining ethnographic integrity. The production process itself functioned as ethnographic method, generating research insights through location scouting, interview filming, and collaborative editing. Preliminary screenings suggest the film successfully engages diverse audiences while effectively communicating cultural knowledge.

This research contributes theoretically by advancing biographical approaches as preservation methodology, extending place-based identity theory through analysis of how specific localities become encoded in musical practice, and developing frameworks for documentary film as ethnomusicological tool. Practically, it provides a replicable model for documenting endangered musical traditions through visual narratives serving both scholarly analysis and community transmission needs. Several limitations require acknowledgment: reliance on retrospective accounts rather than direct observation, archival gaps reflecting informal documentation practices, methodological tensions between filmmaking and ethnographic requirements, and epistemological questions about hybrid documentary formats. These suggest directions for future research including comparative studies of other Melayu Deli musicians, longitudinal impact assessment of documentary interventions, and continued theoretical development of visual ethnomusicology.

The urgency extends beyond academic contribution. For Indonesian cultural policy, this research evidences the need for systematic documentation of living traditional practitioners before knowledge disappears. For applied ethnomusicology, it demonstrates how scholarly rigor and community accessibility can coexist through thoughtful methodological design. For Melayu communities, it offers validated historical record and educational resource. ZD's legacy maintained through Edo's sanggar management, recorded music accessibility, former students' practice, and the documentary film represents hope that traditional knowledge can persist across generations through

collaborative preservation efforts. His journey from Batubara's shores to international stages, from Jakarta's struggles to teaching classrooms, embodies the resilience of traditional musicians navigating contemporary Indonesia. As his grenek once wove through melodies like golden threads through songket, his legacy now weaves through Melayu Deli tradition, connecting past to present and inspiring future generations to carry this cultural inheritance forward.

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Link of "Zapin Petuah": <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-81u2qPyMC-79STA7KsReTnxCDXK4rC1>

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