

## **Afghanistan: Music Emerges from the Rubble**

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Afghan music, used and abused by successive regimes, appears to be undergoing something of a revival.

Kharabad street in down-town Kabul was once the bustling heart of Afghan music. Renowned musicians trained and worked there. Shops and cafes rang out with song. Now the street is a shattered, deserted ruin.

Only a year ago, it was not uncommon to see instruments strung up from lampposts like reviled criminals. The Taleban had banned music and for five years persecuted anyone suspected of making or listening to it.

But 23 years of war had already taken a heavy toll on Afghanistan's artistic heritage before the Taleban appeared. It was used and abused by all sides in the various conflicts. Its darkest hours began with the fall of the Soviet-backed Najibullah government and the arrival of the mujahedin.

Romantic songs were banned from TV and radio and women barred from performing. Instead, audiences were restricted to a diet of patriotic and jihad music. Tribal, linguistic and cultural prejudices led to some musicians' work being destroyed.

The Taleban repression drove most artists abroad. Those who could afford to went to the West, others sought shelter in neighbouring countries. With so much of its glorious past trampled underfoot, Afghan music is now gasping for air.

But there are some optimistic signs. A new music market is beginning to emerge. Musicians in the capital and the provinces have begun setting up offices and studios, and video and cassette shops are popping up all over.

Yama, a shopkeeper in Kabul, said he began selling cassettes after his jewellery store was looted following the arrival of the Northern Alliance forces in the capital.

"I lost everything I had," he said. "Meanwhile the ban on music was lifted and people really love it. The market started booming. So I borrowed some money and opened a tape shop.

"Everyone has different tastes, but most go for traditional folk music. People don't care that much about the quality of the poetry in a song. They just want something that has got a good beat."

Musician Ahmad Shah, however, is worried by this trend. "When our artists left the country, they took with them a lot of artistic richness," he said. "We see the results of it in Iranian, Tajikistani and Pakistani music - but sadly our artists have lost their initiative.

"They don't learn or create anything new. They work with the same old stuff. The market for singing meaningless songs is booming. The more meaningless the song the more attention it gets from the market dealers."

Shah acknowledges that music needs to be liked by people, but he believes an artist has a duty to use his skills as a musician to raise public tastes and educate the listener. "Some of the new music coming out of Peshawar is an insult to Afghan art and artists," he said, bitterly.

He is also dispirited by the lack of respect afforded to artists in Afghanistan.

"Those who take people's lives and belongings are respected figures in our society. They have houses and titles and cars. They receive honours and bonuses. The only sound that ever comes out of their mouths is the sound of gunfire and explosions," he said.

"We, on the other hand, who play soothing music, and who try to bring peace to man's soul, to bring a message of hope and humanity, are rewarded with nothing and do not even get paid for what we do. Instead we get insulted."

Lack of stability, the threat of renewed conflict and poverty make it hard to eke out a living as a musician in Afghanistan. Some musicians who returned from Pakistan when the Taleban fell have been forced to go back.

Noor Agha Sarmady, a veteran from Radio Afghanistan, where he also taught music, agrees few are likely to return to the country soon.

"I think no one is going to come back before they can be sure that their lives, property and dignity will be respected," he said. "The atmosphere isn't right for artists and there aren't enough opportunities for them."

The Afghan minister of information, Makhdoom Raheen, has said that the government is trying to pave the way for artists to return. As a first step, it is planning to stage cultural festivities around the Afghan New Year celebrations, Nawroz, which begin on March 21. A special programme is to be broadcast on TV.

Afghan music can only truly begin to recover, however, when peace is secure and musicians, singers and composers can return in safety and begin to earn a living.

Hafiz Gardish, a former singer, is now working as a freelance journalist in Kabul

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