

## **Can You Stop the Birds from Singing: The Cultural Impact of Music Censorship in Afghanistan**

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“Music is not a vaccine. It doesn’t cure disease, feed the hungry or clean up toxic waste. Yet it is vital to human existence, and often goes unnoticed, like breathing. Music expresses a culture’s identity, informed by the past and envisioning the future. It speaks to the people and influences popular belief. It unites polarized sectors. Given this, it is not surprise the Taliban banned music from Afghan society.” (About our preservation project, Social change, n.d., para 3)

The Taliban, in the time they were in power – from 1996-2001, among other human rights violations banned all music. And at least 10 years prior to the Taliban’s rule, music censorship was rearing its ugly head. By the time the Taliban took over, stereo systems, video cassette players and TV sets were destroyed in public. Musicians tried to bury their instruments in order to hide them. One Afghan musician tells of hiding his precious sarinda in his woodpile. The innards of cassettes were ripped out and hung in effigy. Musical instruments were burned in the public stadium. The only “music” allowed were religious chants. Another musician, fearing he might lose his mind without hearing or making music, bought doves which he let loose in his house. He was then surrounded with the sound of “music.”

By 1996, under the Taliban rule the list of forbidden things grew: music, dance, theatre, film and television, cameras, photography, sculptures, magazines, newspapers, most books, festivities, children’s toys, applause, and even.....squeaky shoes. (Broughton, D.) “A woman could be arrested for humming to her child.” (Solomon, A.)

I spent two and a half years in Afghanistan from 1966-68 as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was there during what is now remembered as one of the most prosperous and peaceful times in Afghan history, before the Soviets, before the Mujahideen, before the Taliban. Life was good. Although Afghanistan was and continues to be a country of extreme poverty, the Afghans enjoyed life and music and dance and artistic expression flourished. Audio cassettes were commonplace in the bazaar. Radio Afghanistan, Afghanistan’s only radio station at that time, played an important role in not only providing Afghans across the country with a rich variety of ethnic and regional folk music but playing a unifying role by sharing the music of many ethnic and linguistic groups. During that time a number of Afghan women achieved fame.

As a Peace Corps volunteer I was first assigned to teach English to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade boys from the Provinces but after a year offered my services, given I was a newly certified teacher, with a degree in music, to teach music to children in schools around Kabul. I had noticed that there was little to no music in the schools and certainly no music texts. With the help of Afghan poets and musicians, we put together a small music book of sixteen songs. With a harmonium in hand, I tromped around from one school to another, sharing the songs to the delight of the children and their teachers. As an extra bonus, I shared my small supply of crayons and had the children assist me in illustrating the songbook with their delightful drawings. I left Afghanistan in 1968 with a small published book which was to be distributed to elementary schools in Kabul.

For almost forty years since my Peace Corps experience, I’ve followed news stories about Afghanistan. I read about the devastation, about the Communist coup, the defeat of the Soviets, the gain of the Mujahideen and finally the oppressive rule of the Taliban. With each new report my heart sank a bit more. I tried to imagine what was happening to the Afghanistan I came to

know and love. I wondered what happened to the children I taught and the families and friends I'd made. Had they survived? I wondered about the music.

Then, eight years ago, quite by circumstance, while rummaging around in my bookcase I came across my old copy of the songbook created while in the Peace Corps. Now torn and faded I leafed through the pages, sadly realizing that I no longer could read the Dari and although I knew the melodies, I couldn't remember the lyrics and had no easy way of translating them. As I stood in my living room, holding in my hands not only the songbook itself but all the memories that went with it, I came to the frightful realization, given the rigid decrees set by the Taliban, that perhaps these songs were in danger of being lost to Afghan culture forever. At that moment, I vowed to return them to the children, somehow, someday.

It seemed, in the moment, like the only thing to do. I suspect most of us would do the exact same thing. Truthfully, my thought process was very simple. The songs are going to be lost. They need to be preserved. I need to return them. I began checking out these assumptions with Afghans-Americans and unearthed responses that went far beyond what I imagined. They not only confirmed my worse fears that indeed the songs were rapidly disappearing from the culture but they were overjoyed at the idea of hearing them again. I made contact with some Afghans living in the Washington, DC/Virginia area and as a way to convince them of my credibility, I not only told my story and my desire to return the songs, but I sent them the photo, taken in Kabul in 1968, of me with a group of children headed home from singing class.

Much to my surprise, the photo itself brought Afghans to tears. When I look at the photograph, I find my focus goes to my rather strange haircut! However, each Afghan with whom I share this photo has the exact same response. They don't see me. In fact, they never even recognize I'm in the photo. What they notice are the green trees, green grass, happy children who are well-clothed and in uniform. "Those were the good times," they tell me. They cannot stop staring at the photo, dissecting every little detail, down to the pockets of the children's uniforms. They can't get over that children were happily singing.

Initially I thought I'd just copy my old songbook and send it back, but it soon became apparent that that idea was not feasible. My copy, not the original, was in terrible shape and I had, solely by ear, written the notation to each song. I was quite sure there were errors. I was also not sure if the songs represented the total Afghan population. It occurred to me that the best way to return the songs was to actually create a new songbook, based on the old collection that not only included the songs themselves and the musical notation but a recording of each song, preferably sung by Afghan children.

After much searching I found an Afghan musician living in Toronto, Vaheed Kaacemy. I told him about my project and he agreed to look over the old songbook. Vaheed is a musician and composer. Before moving to Canada, Vaheed was a Kindergarten teacher in Kabul. He had the perfect combination of skills and background for this project. When I spoke to him on the phone about the project, he was thrilled and eagerly awaited the arrival of my songbook. I sent him a copy of the old songbook and a copy of my old photo. His reaction was profound. He burst into tears at seeing songs that had long gone from his memory. He jumped headfirst into the project, hunting down the original sources for each melody and poem and finding Afghan children in the Toronto area to work on the recording. After he had recorded the first couple of songs, he sent them to me. I was delighted and hearing children sing the songs made the project come to life.

I headed off to Washington, DC to meet with the Afghan Ambassador's wife, Mrs. Shamim Jawad who I hoped would help fund the project through her organization, Ayenda. I told her my story and my vision and then gave her a pair of earphones and had her listen to the first two

songs we'd recorded. She sat still, began to listen and then gasped – actually she practically stopped breathing. With tears in her eyes she said, "I haven't heard that song since I was a child. I never thought about the power music can have. I thought we needed to send computers to the schools. This is what the children need. They need their music back."

Rather than bore you with endless details of what ensued from that moment on, I will fast forward to the present. Let me just summarize those first formative years of the project by reiterating that there continued to be incredible support from the Afghans. There was nothing but words of encouragement and many Afghans couldn't stop thanking me for saving what they had all but forgotten and given up as lost forever. Clearly, never having experienced such censorship, I found myself wondering - Do songs disappear from people's consciousness? What really happens when music is forcibly removed from a culture? What is the impact of this kind of oppression?

A defining moment that stands out among many and shed light on these questions occurred in March of 2007, at the release party of the first printing of 3500 songbooks. The party was held at the Afghan Embassy in Washington, DC. Two hundred Afghan-Americans attended the event. I spoke, telling the story of the book and then showed a short video of Afghan children singing one of the traditional songs, Momardene Afghane. It's a song much like the American song, This Land is Your Land – a song that speaks of the beauty of Afghanistan and how Afghans are united as one people in one land. This certainly is not the message we hear in the media about Afghanistan, is it?

As the video played, one woman in the crowd shouted out, "We all know this song. We should all be singing." With that, 200 Afghans began to sing. The room filled with their voices and as I turned around to look at them, I realized that every person in that room had tears running down their face. At that moment, I began to realize the vital power music has to hold cultural identity and to hold people together in a way I had hitherto never experienced. The moment was breathtaking.

Today, thanks to the support of generous individuals, foundations and recently the U.S. State Department, there are 30,000 songbooks distributed across Afghanistan. All the songbook packages include a CD and cassette tape. They are given out to schools, orphanages, and women's centers. From President Karzi to the Minister of Education, to individual mothers, who are simply grateful to have songs to sing to their children, the response has been overwhelming. Afghans had, indeed forgotten their childhood songs. They were not permanently erased from their memory but left unattended for so many years that even when music making was permitted, the act of singing was slow to re-emerge, particularly with women and children.

For all of us, as people who care deeply about music, who study it, dissect it, analyze every element of it, what can we learn from this? I find myself continuously surprised if not in awe by the impact. I am surprised to be so surprised. My life centers around music. I teach music to teachers and continuously preach about the profound importance music has on our lives and the lives of children and families.

Why then does the reaction to this project catch me so by surprise? For one, I've never considered life without music. Most of us can't imagine a day or as it recently occurred to me as I spoke to a group of fifth and sixth graders about this project, they can't possibly imagine 20 minutes without music. None of us can fathom years of silence.

The Afghans spent years without music, not by choice but by decree. In the film, *Breaking the Silence: the music of Afghanistan*, an Afghan musician speaks to this era of silence. His observation made a profound impact on me. In the film, he walks around an area of Kabul that

was once the “mecca of music.” Any time of the day or night you could hear music floating out windows of homes, from open-air bazaars, to shopkeepers stalls. At the time of the filming (2002) he stood in what was then vacated ruins filled with debris and wreckage. “It was not about the rubble,” he points out, “the destruction of the buildings, or the loss of homes. It is not about that loss. When they took our music, they took our soul. It was the loss of our soul our spirit. When they took the music, they took the soul of this country.” (Broughton,D. )

I share one more story to illustrate this point. In the fall of 2009, I returned to Afghanistan to assess the project and determine next steps. I met with many teachers, principals, administrators, and funders and was fortunate enough to be able to deliver songbooks to children in various schools across Afghanistan. One particularly memorable trip was to Kunduz, a village located about 150 miles north of Kabul. Unsafe to travel by car, I flew, accompanied by Rauf, a young man whose mother ran the local kindergarten for 250 children. We brought songbooks to give to every child and as we landed we were met with by a group of eager children, all dressed in their finest outfits for the big event. A soldier, with his machine gun slung over his shoulder, waited by the side of the dirt runway seemingly uninterested in what was going on. The next day, Rauf and I returned to the airport, now with suitcase, filled no longer with songbooks but with plastic flowers and thank you cards! The same soldier was standing guard and when we approached him, he stopped us and insisted on checking our luggage. Rauf handed over his suitcase for inspection. Then the soldier turned to Rauf, and nodding at me said in Dari, “I’m not going to inspect her luggage because she has done something for the children of Afghanistan.” I was incredibly moved by his comment. What seemed to me to be a seemingly uninterested soldier recognized the value of music in his culture. And he recognized the importance of giving music back to the children. He had no other way to thank me but to wave the inspection of my luggage.

I work in education and daily I face teachers who tell me their music program has been cut, that music is considered frivolous. They then explain to me that the need for testing does not allow for time to sing and to make music together.

I then recall what I’ve learned from this project. I think of the Afghan children. I think of the Afghan Americans in that room, singing as if it were the last thing they were ever going to do, singing truly from their heart. We cannot afford NOT to have music. It is not simply about “singing together.” Clearly the Taliban were quite clear the music isn’t frivolous or they would not have spent so much energy eliminating it, threatening people with their lives for uttering even a sound. It’s threatening because it strengthens our souls, it builds community, it gives voice to those needing to be heard. It allows individuals to express themselves in creative, imaginative ways. It maintains and keeps cultures alive. Music isn’t frivolous; it’s serious business.

I share this project with you and encourage us, in the work we do, to continue to spend time researching songs, learning about their meaning, context, history, composition. But I also encourage us to remind those we work with, those whose songs we are studying, that this music is precious and must not be forgotten. It is the glue that keeps cultures alive and well. It’s a national treasure.

A leading miniature artist, Hafiz Meherzad, had to bury all his work during the Taliban era. His sense of cultural responsibility is acute. When asked in an interview in 2001 about moving away from the traditional miniatures into more innovative work he responded, “I do not believe in innovation in this field,” If you make changes in this work, you will destroy even the past. You in the Western world can innovate because your past is safe. Here is Afghanistan, we need to secure out past before we begin to create a future.” (Solomon, A.)

Our future is safe but it is up to us to keep it safe and to keep it alive, to honor it. Nothing should be taken for granted. “There is a kind of joy that can be known for people who have grieved deeply; happiness is not only a quality of its own but also an effect of contrast. Hearing Afghans make music again, as I have witnessed, is magical. Every note counts and is filled with meaning.” (Solomon, A.)

Ustad Mah’al, one of Afghanistan’s greatest painters posed the question “Can you stop the birds from singing?” in 1994 in response to the extreme music censorship that was already occurring in Afghanistan. (Bailey, J.) I asked my daughter, an ornithologist, this very question. Can the birds stop singing? She replied, “Yes. Actually, they can. If young birds do not hear their own music, if their parents are silenced or disappear, the music is lost.” There are many stories of Afghan musicians fearing they would forget. One musician, Abdul Rashin Mashinee, caught by the Taliban playing a sarinda, was told that they would cut off his hands if they ever found him playing again. He spent the dark years working as a butcher, but, he says, “I practiced my instrument diligently, every night in my dreams.” (Solomon, A.)

The timing of this project was fortunate. The songs were returned during a time when there was still a generation who holds a memory of this music. They are now committed to passing those memories on. The project continues to flourish. The songbooks also now include an accompanying Teacher’s Guide, outlining creative lessons to not only honor Afghan musical culture but enhance basic reading and writing skills. Each songbook package contains a little notebook and 2 pencils. Imagine trying to improve literacy with no paper and pencil! And work on a second songbook is in process, lead by a talented young Afghan woman who has already collected traditional women’s songs and is very interested in assisting with this project.

Thank you for allowing me to share this story. For more information, I encourage you to go to the Afghan Songbook website – [www.afghansongbook.org](http://www.afghansongbook.org) where there are videos of children singing, photos, a blog from my return visit in 2009 and an English version of the songbook for sale (all proceeds go to supporting more printing in Afghanistan.)

Tashakor (Thank you)

## References

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