Ethnomusicological Research in Afghanistan: Past, Present, and Future

Research > Afghanistan

Little was known in the West about the music of Afghanistan until the 1950s, when a few LPs of an ethnographic kind were published, such as the Lubtchansky disc *Afghanistan et Iran* in the Collection du Musée de l'Homme, and the UNESCO collection *A Musical Anthology of the Orient*, recordings made by Alain Daniélou. Afghanistan was typified as "The Crossroads of Asia", a term which implied a variegated cultural mix. In the 1960s, several ethnomusicologists worked in Afghanistan, notably Felix Hoerburger from West Germany, Josef Zoch from Czechoslovakia, and Mark Slobin and Lorraine Sakata from the USA. My wife, Veronica Doubleday, and I were active between 1973 and 1977. Since then, there has been little opportunity for research.

By John Baily

When I started my research on music in Afghanistan in 1973, I held a Social Science Research Council Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship in the Department of Social Anthropology at The Queen's University of Belfast, in collaboration with anthropologist and ethnomusicologist John Blacking. Our research project focused on recent changes in the Herati *dutar*, a type of long-necked lute. Between 1950 and 1965 this was transformed from a small two-stringed instrument of rural amateur music making to a much larger and more versatile instrument with fourteen strings played by professional urban musicians (Baily 1976). This morphological transformation was of great interest in its own right as an example of dramatic musical change in a seemingly very traditional society, and also promised to provide new insights into relationships that exist between human bodies and musical instruments.

Having studied experimental psychology for seven years, culminating in doctoral research on human movement and motor control, I was in a position to investigate the changes in the human/musical instrument interface that occurred as the instrument changed, from two to three to five and then fourteen strings. I worked with a large number of *dutar* players, concentrating on a sample of fifteen individuals, recording their performances, later filming ten of them playing a standard repertory of five tunes, and making extensive recorded interviews. As part of my research, I also learned to play three versions of the Herati *dutar*, and another Afghan lute, the *rubab*.[1]

Two years later, I returned to Afghanistan for a second year of fieldwork on "the anthropology of music in Herat", which involved confronting a diffuse set of issues. I conducted research on a wide range of music making: urban and rural; amateur and professional; secular and sacred; and male and female. With regard to the last, Veronica Doubleday's research was crucial, for she worked with women performers and professional musicians, an area of music making practically inaccessible to me. She also learned to perform as part of her research, to sing and to play the frame drum. She eventually became a member of her teacher's women's band, going out to play at women's wedding parties.

Our work also extended into Kabul, with its large musicians' quarter (the Kucheh Kharabat). This took in several hundred hereditary musicians, some of whom descended from court musicians brought from India in the 1860s. Radio Afghanistan was of particular interest as a focus of musical activity and creativity. The popular music disseminated by the radio station since the early 1950s had achieved widespread currency and constituted an important arena for the emergence of an Afghan national identity (Baily 1994). Furthermore, the modernism of radio broadcasting had enabled a number of amateur musicians to cross over to professional status and had also allowed a number of women singers to achieve star status. We left Afghanistan in 1977. A year later the Communist coup of Taraki took place, followed by more than twenty years of civil war.

Josephine Powell, courtesy of SPACH.

Fragment of a stone relief from Ghazni illustrating female dancers framed by ornamental borders with scrolls. Formerly Kabul Museum.

Back in the UK, we both went through a long period of writing up our data, or at least some of it. Veronica Doubleday published her classic of narrative anthropology *Three Women of Herat*, while I published the more conventional ethnomusicological monograph *Music of Afghanistan: Professional Musicians in the City of Herat*. To a considerable extent, these two books deal with the same people, but in *Three Women of Herat* all the names have been changed. Together they provide an unusually full account of music making in a traditional Central Asian city, with largely separate domains of women and men. Our joint research publication in 1995 also made a significant contribution to the literature on musical enculturation. My studies of the *rubab* in Kabul and Herat also resulted in detailed studies of Afghan art music (Baily 1981 and 1997).

The coup of 1978 made the very idea of further fieldwork impossible; the "iron curtain" was now pulled across this part of Central Asia. There was little reliable news from Herat, described by Afghans as "our Hiroshima" (something of an exaggeration, as I later discovered). In 1985, now as an anthropological film-maker at the UK's National Film and Television School, I went to Peshawar for three months to research and direct *"Amir: An Afghan Refugee Musician's Life in Peshawar, Pakistan"*, a film which has been screened at many film festivals around the world, most recently at the Forum d'Anthropologie Visuelle 2002: Afghanistan: Culture(s) en Question. The film depicts the life of Amir Mohammad from Herat, now in exile in Pakistan and making a living as a member of a successful band of Afghan musicians largely patronised by Pakistani Pakhtuns. Above all else, the film expresses in a powerful yearning of the refugee to 'go home'.

In 1994, I was able to spend nearly two months in Herat. This was the time of the Coalition of Mujaheddin Parties, under President Rabbani. Herat, under its own Mujaheddin commander, Amir Ismail Khan, was peaceful and undergoing extensive reconstruction. But many restrictions were in place, and the situation of music and musicians was symptomatic of these. Musicians had to be licensed and constrained to performing songs in praise of the Mujaheddin or of a mystical nature. They were also to perform these without amplification. Despite such constraints, musicians were not allowed to perform in public, but they could play at home and in the private houses of their patrons. Cassettes of music were freely available in the bazaar, and a little music was played on local radio and television. In Kabul, the restrictions were less severe, and in Mazar-e Sharif the climate was even more free. The restrictions of the Rabbani period anticipated the complete ban on music imposed when the Taliban came to power, when audio cassettes of music and musical instruments were destroyed.[2] The Dutch researcher Jan van Belle was the only ethnomusicologist actively performing fieldwork in Afghanistan after the Taliban took Kabul. He made several hazardous recording trips to parts of north-eastern Afghanistan free of Taliban control [see article by J. van Belle in this issue].

After my visit to Afghanistan in 1994, I started to become interested in the whole question of music in the Afghan transnational community. How was music being used to maintain and communicate a sense of Afghan identity? How could music serve a therapeutic role at both individual and community levels? I carried out a number of short research trips to Peshawar (Pakistan), Mashad (Iran), and Fremont (USA). Hamburg (Germany), with its large Afghan population, was also a designated site for investigation. In principle, this research design should allow one to compare what is happening to music in different parts of the transnational community, factoring in variables such as geographical distance between countries of origin and exile; language, religion, and other kinds of cultural similarity; and prospects for the future in terms of security, employment, and eventual integration. A six-week visit to Fremont, California in 2000 was particularly revealing; the new kinds of Afghan music being produced in the USA, bringing together elements of Afghan and Western music, were certainly involved in the creation of a new Afghan-American identity (Baily 2000).

The Present and Future

In response to the developments, Goldsmiths College, University of London, has created an Afghanistan Music Unit (AMU). The purposes of AMU are twofold. Firstly, it aims to document the process of re-establishing music in Afghanistan, especially with respect to radio and television broadcasting, and performances of live music in traditional venues such as theatres, wedding festivities, Ramadan concerts, and spring country fairs (see Baily 1988). Music is a sensitive indicator of wider attitudes, especially those appertaining to modernity and liberalism. Freedom of musical expression suggests that other freedoms and human rights are also in place. Secondly, the AMU seeks not only to document the "re-making of music", but to assist with the process when appropriate. Afghans in exile have a wealth of professional expertise and many are ready to go back to undertake voluntary work to help restore their country. Another positive development concerns education; music was never part of the school curriculum in Afghanistan and there has already been a request from a local minister in Herat to a UK NGO about education programmes and the availabilty of any materials related to arts and music.

The Freemuse report took for granted that the Taliban would remain in control of most, if not all, of Afghanistan for the foreseeable future, and made various recommendations intended to consolidate Afghan music in the transnational community. The completely unforseen departure of the Taliban radically changed the situation. One of the first signs of the end of Taliban control in a city or town was the sound of music in the streets and over local airwaves. In the past, music was closely connected with festive occasions and, as such, was appropriate to mark the end of Taliban oppression. Bringing out the previously carefully hidden music cassettes, sound systems, and musical instruments was an act of defiance. Above all, the sound of music was a sign of a return to normality. <

***Dr John Baily** is currently a reader in ethnomusicology at Goldsmiths College, London.*
E-mail: j.baily@gold.ac.uk

Notes >

1. An account of these findings is given in Baily (1985a).
2. The history of recent music censorship is explained in my report published by Freemuse (Baily 2001).

Ethnomusicology

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Doubleday, Veronica, John Baily, Jan van Belle, Nabi Misdaq, "Afghanistan" chapter in Alison Arnold (ed.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Vol. V*, New York: Garland/ Routledge (2000); 803-841.
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Video Interview

Jan van Belle interviewed by Dr John Baily at WOMEX, Rotterdam, 25/10/2001: "Music life in Northern Afghanistan as opposed to the total ban on music in the Taliban areas", web: www.freemuse.org)

Discography

Van Belle, J. and **G. van den Berg**, "*Badakhshan, Mystical Poetry and Songs*", PAN Records, 2024 CD, Leiden (1994)
_________, "*Madakhani, Ghazalkhani, Dafsaz, Religious Music from Badakhshan*", PAN Records, 2036 CD, Leiden (1997)
Van Belle, J. "*Shirin Dahani, Music of North Afghanistan*", PAN Records, 2089 CD, Leiden (2001) <