

AFGHANISTAN

Music During the Civil War (1979–2001)



The 22-year civil war in Afghanistan, from Soviet occupation to Taliban regime, severely impeded artistic and cultural expression in the country. This album features music created against the backdrop of that political turbulence. At the time of recording in 1996, music was considered to be against public morals and contrary to the rules of Islam (*harâm*). Music performed in public was only allowed in the Northern provinces. A few tracks on the album, recorded in Kabul and Faizabad, were made in more private settings. Featured on the album are the Afghan *rubâb*, a double-chambered short-necked and fretted lute plucked with a plectrum, a variety of other kinds of plucked and bowed lutes, drums, portable reed organ, and the human voice, which is predominant in Afghanistan's folk traditions. The recordings are from various provinces and cities, including Mazar-i Sharif, Faizabad, Kabul, and the village of Kayan. 58 minutes, 17-page notes.

This is a previously-unpublished volume of the UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music, which was transferred to the Smithsonian to keep the series publicly available.





Group of Mohammad Hashim (left to right): Khalifa Gul Jân, *tanbûr*; Yasin, *zirbaghali*; Mohammad Hashim, vocals and harmonium; Kaka, *rubâb*; Mohammad Ashraf, *tâl*; Mohammad Akbar, *daf*. Faizabad, capital of Badakhshan Province, July 24, 1996.

COVER PHOTO
Sayyid Shâh Ewaz, singer and *dambura* player. Kayan, Baghlan Province (Hazarajat), August 6, 1998.

Track List

1. **Dar khâna dar âyi ki magar zud barâyi** (No sooner you came home than you were already gone) – 4:49
2. **Layli Layli Layli** – 4:56
3. **Hama râ biâzmudam** – 4:18
4. **Ay taza bahâr** (Oh, new spring) – 4:25
5. **Âhesta bero** (Walk slowly) – 6:02
6. **Saram qurbânat, ay mâh-e yagâna** (I give up everything for you, my one and only moon) – 5:49
7. **Henâ beyârid** (Bring the henna) – 6:59
8. **Mahtâb bibin khayma zada dar Jayhun** (Look at the moon; she is putting up a tent in the Jayhun River) – 4:20
9. **Mullah Mohammad Jân** (Dear Mullah Mohammad) – 3:29
10. **A. Qad bâla, ay sarw-e rawân Layla** (Oh Layla, high and graceful cypress)
B. Yâr-e bewafâ az ma jedâ-i (Unfaithful beloved, you are separated from me) – 7:41 (total)
11. **Goroghli** – 7:59

Music in Afghanistan during the Civil War (1979–2001)

Jan van Belle

Introduction

The political developments in Central Asia and 22 years of civil war (1979–2001) left deep scars on the cultural life of Afghanistan. Due to extreme censorship and the bad economic situation, many musicians were killed by the authorities or died, and well-known musicians fled to Western countries, while others went to the neighboring countries of Pakistan (city of Peshawar) and Iran (city of Mashhad, situated 238 km northwest of Herat). From 1979, the year of the Soviet occupation, until the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, an exodus took place among the intelligentsia and artists. The musicians who decided to stay or didn't have money to go abroad were living under poor conditions and had to find other jobs in order to survive with their families, sometimes even risking their lives by playing at local festivities. Since the end of the Taliban Emirate in 2001, the situation for the performing arts in Afghanistan has improved, with more freedom for musicians to travel and to play in public. The American invasion in September 2001 and the following inauguration of Hamid Karzai as President of the new Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2004 unfortunately reinforced the insurgency of the Taliban and conservative Islamic warlords. It will still take a long time to rebuild the musical infrastructure, to create the conditions for the return of musicians and instrument builders in exile, and to set up a new educational system.

Map of Afghanistan



Kabul River, market, and destroyed buildings. Kabul, August 17, 1996.



Musical Life in Afghanistan, 1979–2001

The Soviet occupation in 1979, the subsequent resistance and holy war (*jihād*) by the *mujahideen*, and especially the seizing of power by the fundamentalist Taliban in 1996, severely threatened musical life in Afghanistan. The famous Kucheh Kharabat, the street where most well-known musicians lived, was completely destroyed by rockets. Many musicians were killed. Censorship greatly intensified during the *mujahideen* regime of the orthodox Islamic leaders Gulbudine Hekmatyar and Borhanuddine Rabbani (1992–1996). Music was considered to be against public morals and contrary to Islam (*harâm*). Music venues, music schools, and cinemas were closed and music was banned from radio and TV, marking the end of Kabul as the center of musical life in Afghanistan.

In July and August 1996, when these recordings were made, music in public was only allowed in the northern provinces controlled by the commanders Dostum and Massoud, and amongst the Ismailis, a Shiite minority in the Baghlan and Badakhshan provinces. The recordings in Kabul and Faizabad were made in more private environments. In September 1996, the fundamentalist Taliban took hold of Kabul and came into power, which led to a total ban on music in the main part of Afghanistan and the destruction of valuable instruments, reducing musicians to begging. It was one of the worst periods for music and culture in the history of Afghanistan. The musical life only began its slow recovery after the fall of the Taliban in 2001.



Left to right: Mullah Tâj Mohammad, vocals; Juma Gul, *rubâb*; and Nadir Shâh, *tabla*. Mazar-i Sharif, Balkh Province, July 28, 1996.

Music Genres

In general music in Afghanistan can be divided into classical music and folk music, but most of the music on this album belongs to the folk music genre (*musiqi mahalli*). A rich tradition and a great variety of folk songs and folk genres exist in Afghanistan. The human voice predominates. Instruments are subordinate to vocals and serve mainly as accompaniment; purely instrumental music forms only a small part of the folk repertoire.

In many cases songs (*khândanha*), or musical pieces and melodies in general (*âhangha*), are classified by the musicians according to the text, normally the first lines, or the refrain of the song. Songs were also classified according to the specific number of lines and syllables of the poetry: *bayt* (literally meaning one verse) is used as a general term for song; *dubayti* (two verses) (track 6); often indicated as *chahârbayti* (literally meaning four verses) refers to four half verses (*misra'*) that together make up only two total verses; *rubâ'i* refers to quatrains (track 5); *ghazal* is the name for a poem of five to fifteen lines with mono-rhyme (track 3); and *tasnif* is a song with no specific number of syllables in the half verses (track 1).

When musicians refer to songs, they can further specify them by their place or area of origin, like “song from Takhâr” or “song from North Afghanistan”; by language group; or by ethnic group. Some songs are specified according to their connection with domestic activities or festivities like wedding songs (*âhang-e arusi*) and lullabies (*lala'ik*). *Falak* is a genre connected with yearning, alienation, separation, or unattainable love (track 1) and is typically from North Afghanistan. *Goroghli* is originally an epic genre from Turkmenistan and was imported to Afghanistan, and is found especially in the northern part of the country (track 11).

Although there are two official languages in Afghanistan, Pashtu and Dâri (Afghan Persian/ Fârsi), these recordings are all in Dâri, because this is the main language spoken in North Afghanistan, where most of the recordings took place.

Left to right: Hasan Besmil, vocals;
Amir Jân, harmonium; Amin Jân,
clarinet. Mazar-i Sharif, Balkh
Province, July 26, 1996.



Modes, Melody, and Rhythm

Afghan musical terminology is mainly derived from Indian classical music. Most musicians performing on this recording, especially professional musicians from Kabul, could define the melodic mode (*râg*) they use. *Bairawi* is the most common mode in Afghanistan and can be compared with the Phrygian mode in Western classical music (tracks 2, 3, 4, and 9; see also Baily 1981). Sometimes melodies have similarities to more than one mode and are indicated as *râg-e mokhtalat* ("mixed mode," tracks 6 and 11). Most melodies have a relatively small range, often not exceeding the interval of a sixth (for instance, tracks 1 and 8), and the average duration of the folk songs is between four and six minutes. Double and triple rhythms are common in Afghan folk music, as well as asymmetrical meters like the seven-beat rhythm in track 5.



Mohammad Zaher, *rubâb*. Kabul, capital of Afghanistan, August 17, 1996.

Recorded Musical Instruments

The Afghan *rubâb* is one the most common instruments used in Afghan music. It is a double-chambered, short-necked, fretted lute plucked with a plectrum. The lower chamber is covered with skin; there are three main strings and a number of drone and sympathetic strings (track 7). The *dutâr* is a long-necked fretted plucked lute with a pear-shaped body. It originally had two or three strings, but its modern version has 14 strings, consisting of one main string and a number of drone and sympathetic strings (track 5). The *tanbûr* is a long-necked fretted plucked lute with metal strings and an oval shaped body; there are six melody strings and a varying number of sympathetic strings (tracks 7 and 10). The *dambura* is a long-necked fretless plucked lute with two strings and a pear-shaped body; it is typical for North Afghanistan (tracks 6 and 11).

Three bowed lutes are used in Afghanistan, the *ghijak*, the *sarenda*, and the *delrubâ*. The *ghijak* is very popular in North Afghanistan. It is a spike fiddle, generally with a tin can resonator and sometimes with a wooden belly or a corpus covered with skin, two or three gut or metallic strings. The bow consists of horsehair tied to a curved stick (track 1). The *sarenda* is a double-chambered bowed lute with the lower chamber covered with skin and an open upper chamber (track 7).

The *zirbaghali*, *daireh*, *dohl*, and *tabla* are the most common drums. The *zirbaghali* is a goblet shaped drum, made of pottery or wood, and also called *tablak* in North Afghanistan (track 1). The *daireh* (known as *daf* in Badakhshan Province) is a single skinned frame drum and generally considered a women's instrument, used in domestic settings but played by men during public performances in the Badakhshan Province (tracks 3 and 8). The *dohl* is a double headed barrel drum beaten with sticks (track 9). The same name is often given to a smaller double headed barrel drum played with hands, also called *dohlak* (track 5).

The *tabla* is a pair of small kettle drums, played with the hands and imported from India (tracks 2 and 9). The harmonium is a portable reed organ, especially used in India (for instance, tracks 3, 4, and 5). *Tâl* is a pair of small cymbals (track 3).



Left to right: Abdul Rachid Machinaï, *sarenda*, and Abdul Jabbar, *tula*.
Kabul, August 17, 1996.

Musicians

Most of the players in Kabul are professional musicians who were once employed by Radio Kabul. Many of them are hereditary musicians, who learned from performing with their father or other members of their family; the term is generally restricted to males. A well-known musician is **Gul Mohammad Istalifi**, a professional non-hereditary musician born in Kabul Province in 1935. **Abdul Rachid Machinaï** was born in Logar Province in 1936. His father is the famous Ostâd Durai Logari, a professional hereditary musician. **Aziz Ghaznawi**, born in Ghazni Province in 1941, is a professional non-hereditary singer, who became Head of Music of Radio/TV Afghanistan in Kabul after the fall of the Taliban.

Rahim Takhâri, recorded in Mazar-i Sharif, was born in Tashkurghan district in 1922. He is a professional, non-hereditary musician, who played *dambura* and specialized in the music of North Afghanistan.

Malang Nejrabi was born in the Nejrab district in 1935 and died in France in 2000. He was a professional, non-hereditary musician, and one of the best *zirbaghali* players of Afghanistan. **Hasan Besmil** was born in Balkh Province in 1946, and his band consists of local amateur musicians, playing mostly domestic festivities.

Mullah Tâj Mohammad, born in Sar-i Pul Province in 1932 and living in Sheberghan, is an amateur singer well known in North Afghanistan. He used to sing for Radio Kabul. He was accompanied by local amateur musicians from Mazar-i Sharif. **Shamsuddin Masrur** is a professional, non-hereditary singer, composer and *dutâr* player; he was general director of the Music Department of Radio Kabul and is a versatile musician. **Mohammad Rasul** is an amateur musician from Mazar-i Sharif and was born in the Parvan Province in 1940. He and his son are barbers (*salmâni*), which is the traditional occupation of *sornâ* and *dohl* players.

Mohammad Hashim lives in the Faizabad district, where he was born in 1955. He is a professional non-hereditary singer who has sung for Radio Kabul and is well-known in North Afghanistan. He was accompanied by members from the band of the former orchestra leader Mohammad Akbar. **Sayyid Shâh Ewaz** from Kayan was born in the Bamiyan Province in 1935. He is a professional, hereditary musician who played in the orchestra of Radio Kabul.



Destroyed houses in the streets of Kabul. August 27, 1996

Conditions of Musicians during the Recordings

Due to the civil war, all musicians on this album—professionals as well as amateurs—were living in poor conditions. The famous *zirbaghali* player Malang Nejrabi, whose house in Kabul was destroyed by rockets, was living in a refugee camp near Mazar-i Sharif and had formed a band with Rahim Takhari. Shamsuddin Masrur, a former general director of Radio Kabul (later called Radio Afghanistan) was (unpaid) director of the radio station in Mazar-i Sharif, which needed repair and functioned badly. As a musician he formed bands with various other musicians to earn money at weddings. Mohammad Hashim, once employed by Radio Kabul, went back to his hometown Faizabad, where he made a living as shopkeeper at the bazaar, only singing occasionally. Here the influence of conservative Islamic warlords was growing, so the recordings took place without any involvement of the authorities.

In Mazar-i Sharif music was still allowed by General Abdul Rashid Dostum, and the authorities were helpful in finding a location for recording. The musicians in the village of Kayan, (which is part of the *Hazarajat*, the area of the Hazara ethnic group) (see map), are Ismailis (a Shiite minority), and music is integrated in their belief so recording them was not a problem. Their local spiritual leader (*pir*), Sayyid Mansur Naderi, organized my trip to his second residence in Kayan, where I could record the musicians.

The musicians in Kabul depended on family and friends and earned some money at domestic festivities. Playing in public was already quite dangerous. In Jurm-i Now, Mohammad Rajab first refused to play for this recording, stating that he was too poor to give his visitors a proper reception according to his rules of hospitality, and he only agreed after much persuasion. Tracks 1, 5, and 9 were recorded in the library of the Cultural Centre in Mazar-i Sharif, tracks 2 and 4 in private houses in Mazar-i Sharif, tracks 3 and 8 in the former and empty office of Ariana Airways in Faizabad, track 6 in the school building of Kayan, track 7 and 10 in the dilapidated location of the Music Department of Radio Afghanistan in Kabul, and track 11 in the house of the performer.



Rahim Takhâri, singer and *ghijak* player. Mazar-i Sharif, Balkh Province, July 24, 1996.

Track Notes

Jan van Belle

1. Dar khâna dar âyi ki magar zud barâyi (No sooner you came home than you were already gone)

Râg: bairu; poetical genre: tasnif; musical genre: falak

Rahim Takhâri, vocals, *ghijak*; Malang Nejrabi, *zirbaghali*

Recorded in Mazar-i Sharif

Typical for most *falaks* is the descending melody contour towards the end of the phrases, and the lengthening of final syllable(s), mostly the *i* sound at the end of the last word of the refrain line (*barâyi*) in this song.

2. Layli Layli Layli

Râg: bairawi; genre: dubayti

Mullah Tâj Mohammad, vocals; Juma Gul, *rubâb*; Nader Shah, *tabla*

Recorded in Mazar-i Sharif

The title of this love song from Herat is derived from the refrain:

Ay Layli Layli Layli

Tur mâyem kheyli Layli

Cherâ ay Layli jân ba mâ nadari mayli

Cherâ ay delrubâ ba mâ nadâri mayli

Oh Layli, Layli, Layli

I want you very badly, Layli

Why don't you want me, dear Layli

Why don't you want me, oh sweetheart



Shamsuddin Masrur, singer and *dutâr* player. Mazar-i Sharif, Balkh Province, July 24, 1996.

3. Hama râ biâzmudam

Râg: bairawî; genre: ghazal

Mohammad Hashim, vocals, harmonium; Khalifa Gul Jan, *tanbûr*; Kaka, *rubâb*; Mohammad Akbar, *daf*; Yasin, *zirbaghali*; Mohammad Ashraf, *tâl*
Recorded in Faizabad

This is a love song with the refrain:

Hama râ biâzmudam ze tu khushtaram nayâmad
Chu furu shudam ba dariyâ chu tu guharam nayâmad

I tasted everything, but nothing is more delightful than you
When I dived in the river, I didn't find a pearl like you

4. Ay taza bahâr (Oh, new spring)

Râg: bairawî; genre: ghazal

Hasan Besmil, vocals; Mohammad Ibrahim Kamran, *tanbûr*; Amir Jân, harmonium; Gul Agha, *tabla*; Amin Jân, clarinet; Hashim Mir, *rubâb*
Recorded in Mazar-i Sharif

This song refers to the New Year festivities and rituals at the (supposed) shrine of the prophet 'Ali in Mazar-i Sharif. The clarinet is not a usual instrument in ensembles in North Afghanistan.

5. Âhesta bero (Walk slowly)

Râg: pilu; genre: rubâ'i

Shamsuddin Masrur, vocals and *dutâr*; Abdul Rahman, harmonium; Shirzamân, *dohl*
Recorded in Mazar-i Sharif

This song is played at traditional weddings, when the bridal procession takes the bride to the place where she uncovers her face in front of a mirror and for the groom. The rhythm is asymmetrical, in a 7/8 meter.



Sayyid Shâh Ewaz, singer and *dambura* player. Kayan, Baghlan Province (Hazarajat), August 6, 1998.



Mohammad Hashim, singer and harmonium player. Fayzabad, capital of Badakhshan Province, July 24, 1996.

6. Saram qurbânat, ay mâh-e yagâna (I give up everything for you, my one and only moon)

Râg: mokhtalat (mixed); genre: *dubayti*

Sayyid Shâh Ewaz, vocals and *dambura*

Recorded in Kayan

This is a Hazara song about unrequited love.

7. Henâ beyârid (Bring the henna)

Râg: pari; genre: *rubâ'i*

Gul Mohammad Istalifi, vocals; Mohammad Zaher, *rubâb*;

Mohammad Yusuf, harmonium; Mohammad Rasul, *tanbûr*; Ustâd

Nasim, *tabla*, Abdul Rachid Machinaî, *sarenda*

Recorded in Kabul

Henna is a reddish brown dye obtained from the leaves of the henna plant. In Muslim countries, it is especially used to color women's hands and feet on holidays. This song from Kabul is always played at traditional weddings. The musicians enliven the song by changing the pitch (one whole step higher after the second *rubâ'i*) and by playing the refrain once in double speed.

8. Mahtâb bibin khayma zâda dar Jayhun (Look at the moon; she is putting up a tent in the Jayhun River)

Râg: bairu; poetical genre: *rubâ'i*; musical genre: *falak*

Mohammad Hashim, vocals and harmonium; Kaka, *rubâb*;

Mohammad Akbar, *dambura*; Yasin, *zirbaghali*

Recorded in Faizabad

This song makes reference to the separation between Layla and Majnun, as represented in the poem of Nezami. Jayhun is the old name for the magical Oxus River, now called Amu Darya.



Mohammad Rasul, *sornâ* (right) and his son Ali Jân, *dohl* (left). Mazar-i Sharif, Balkh Province, July 24, 1996



Mohammad Rajab ("Goroghli Khan"), singer and *dambura* player. Jurm-i Now, Badakhshan Province, August 24, 2001.

9. Mullah Mohammad Jân (Dear Mullah Mohammad)

Râg: bairami

Mohammad Rasul, *sornâ*; Ali Jân (son of Mohammad Rasul), *dohl*

Recorded in Mazar-i Sharif

Like track 4, this song refers to the New Year's festivities in Mazar-i Sharif on March 21. In this instrumental version the *sornâ* player is not applying the usual technique of circular breathing—the technique that allows the player to continually blow air through the instrument without ever stopping for breath.

10. A. Qad bâla, ay sarw-e rawân Layla (Oh Layla, high and graceful cypress)

10. B. Yâr-e bewafâ az ma jedâ-i (Unfaithful beloved, you are separated from me)

Râg: kesturi (a and b); genre: *tasnif* (a) and *dubayti* (b)

Aziz Ghaznawi, vocals; Mohammad Zaher, *rubâb*; Mohammad

Rasul, *tanbûr*; Mohammad Yusuf, harmonium; Shirin Agha, *dohl*

Recorded in Kabul

This is a love song from Kabul.

11. Goroghli

Râg: mokhtalat; genre: *goroghli*

Mohammad Rajab ("Goroghli Khan"), vocals and *dambura*

Recorded in Jurm-i Now

This is an epic song from Badakhshan Province. The recording represents only a small segment of this originally Turkmen epic genre, which can last for hours. It tells the story of the legendary hero Kôroglu.

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Jan van Belle's Biography

Jan van Belle is a musicologist, music teacher, and musician (now retired) from the Netherlands, specializing in the musical cultures of Central Asia. He holds a MD in Musicology and has studied, taught, and published extensively on Ismaili culture and musical traditions in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

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Map courtesy of Jan van Belle

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About Smithsonian Folkways

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding among peoples through the documentation, preservation, and dissemination of sound.

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The UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music includes more than a hundred pioneering audio recordings of the world's traditional musics, published between 1961 and 2003 on a number of recording labels, including Bärenreiter-Musicaphon, EMI, Philips, Auvidis, and Naïve. The series was launched in collaboration with ethnomusicologist Alain Daniélou (1907–1994) and the International Music Council (IMC, created by UNESCO in 1949), joined in 1963 by the International Institute for Comparative Music Studies and Documentation (IICMSD), and from 1994 stewarded by the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM). The Collection comprises mostly field recordings made on location, in their original context. Each recording is accompanied by scholarly annotations and photographs. Together, these albums are a reflection of the immense variety of music-making and of the position music holds within cultures around the globe. Between the late 1980s and 2003, 115 albums were issued on CD but went out of print in 2005. In 2010 UNESCO and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings forged an agreement to make the UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music available to the general public again. In addition to the previously released titles, 12 never-released albums will also be available as digital downloads and on-demand physical CDs.

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