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Laudan Nooshin

## **Underground, Overground: Rock Music and Youth Discourses in Iran**

### *Prologue: On Basements*

The Tehran basement (*zir-e zamin*) is an interesting phenomenon. A standard feature of the ubiquitous apartment blocks that were built from the 1960s onwards and became one of the most prominent signs of modernity in the rapidly expanding city, the basement is rooted in traditional architectural designs in which the space below ground offered seclusion as well as coolness in summer and warmth in winter. Nowadays, the basement serves many purposes. More often than not a parking area, it also represents a liminal space in which the boundaries between private and public domains become blurred. Such boundaries remain important in Iran and are reinforced architecturally through the high walls and metal gates that surround residential buildings and protect the internal, private space from the outside world. But basements transcend this. Regularly used for wedding receptions or parties where men and women mix freely (in contrast to receptions held in public places), women's beauty salons are often located in basements away from the public gaze, but not quite in the private domestic realm. Basements also served as air raid shelters during the Iran-Iraq war.

In recent years, however, something else has taken refuge in the basements of Tehran where, twenty-six years after the 1979 Revolution, a revolution of a rather different kind is taking place. Following the relaxation of government restrictions on popular music in 1998, many young people began to form their own bands, something that has led to the emergence of a grass-roots popular music for the first time in Iran since 1979. In particular, many bands are developing a new style of music, largely rock-oriented, but also drawing on a range of other (predominantly Western popular) idioms, effectively creating a localized brand of Iranian rock.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The term "rock" is currently used in Iran as a broad umbrella term to refer to a wide range of alternative popular styles, and in particular to distinguish it from mainstream commercial "pop". The rock/pop polarity is deeply entrenched in popular usage and it is important to understand that what places something in the "rock" category often has as much to do with some indefinable

Variouly termed “rock” or “alternative,” this music is also known as “underground rock” (*rock-e zir-e zamini*) since only a few bands have so far managed to secure the necessary government authorization to place their music in the public domain. And since many bands choose to rehearse in the privacy offered by the basement, this music is both metaphorically *and* physically underground. Finding somewhere secluded to rehearse and perform is nothing new to Iranian musicians who have faced the censure of religious authorities for centuries. But for rock musicians, there’s an inherent problem: while the situation requires discretion and minimum leakage of sound, dominating the social space through volume lies at the very heart of what rock music is about.<sup>2</sup>

This article will trace the emergence of the new rock music and consider its significance in the context of a growing cosmopolitanism, youth consciousness, and civil society infrastructure in Iran.<sup>3</sup> Demographic factors are central to the discussion: following the steep population rise in the 1980s and the parallel growth in urban areas, the largest section of Iran’s population is now young, urban, and increasingly cosmopolitan.<sup>4</sup> Occupying as it does the fraught intersections

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oppositional quality as the actual musical sounds. In other words, “rock” is as much as discursive as a musical category. This article follows this local usage of the term, as well as using the broader “popular” to refer generically to all mediated western-style commercial music. Issues of terminology as they pertain to rock music will be discussed further below.

<sup>2</sup>There has been relatively little academic interest in Iranian pop music and even less in rock. Exceptions include Bruno Nettl, “Persian Popular Music in 1969,” *Ethnomusicology* 16 no. 2 (1972): 218–39; Peter Manuel, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World* (Oxford, 1988), 167–9; and Laudan Nooshin, “Tomorrow Belongs to Us: Re-imagining Nation, Performing Youth in the New Iranian Pop,” *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, ed. Laudan Nooshin (Aldershot, 2006), as well as a few scholars working on expatriate music in the U.S., including Ann Lucas, “America So Beautiful: The Politics of Popular Music in Iranglees” (paper presented at the 48th Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Miami, Florida, October 2, 2003) and Niloofar Mina, “Political Islam and Iranian Exiles’ Changing Views of Iranian Popular Music,” (paper presented at the 46th Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Southfield, Michigan, October 24, 2001). In addition, Anthony Shay discusses traditional popular styles such as *siyah-bazi* and *rubowzi* in “The 6/8 Beat Goes On: Persian Popular Music from *Bazm-e Qajariyyeh* to Beverley Hills Garden Parties,” *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, ed. Walter Armbrust (Berkeley, 2000), 61–87. For an interesting account of Iran during the 1980s and 90s, including numerous references to the situation of music, see the autobiographical novel *Reading Lolita in Tebran* by Azar Nafisi (London, 2004, first published London, 2003). I quote from Nafisi several times in this article because she so eloquently encapsulates the contradictions and complexities of cultural life in post-revolutionary Iran.

<sup>3</sup>This article is based primarily on material collected during four separate trips to Iran between 1999 and 2004. The research was conducted primarily, but not exclusively, in Tehran. I am most grateful to the musicians who so generously agreed to meet and discuss their music with me. Particular mention should be made of Ramin Behna and others at *Bam Abang* studio in Tehran, as well as members of the bands *Kam* and *127*.

<sup>4</sup>Current estimates put 70 percent of the population under the age of thirty (data from the most recent [1996] Iranian census can be found at [www.sci.org.ir/english/sel/f2](http://www.sci.org.ir/english/sel/f2) accessed 4/12/04). Regarding the urban/rural divide, at the time of the 1996 census, 62 percent of the population was living in urban areas ([www.sci.org.ir/index.htm](http://www.sci.org.ir/index.htm) accessed 4/12/04) as compared with only

between modernity and tradition, between local and global/cosmopolitan, and between religious and secular, Westernized popular music has been a highly contested domain in Iran since the 1979 revolution. But while commercial pop music has become less problematic in recent years, rock has remained on the periphery, partly because of its rejection by the power center and partly through the choices of musicians themselves. This has had significant implications both in terms of the kinds of issues that musicians face on a day-to-day basis and the verbal and musical discourses through which they define themselves and their music. Such issues and discourses will be explored in the course of the article, which is concerned particularly with the ways in which rock is serving as an alternative space of youth experience. The article will be framed by a consideration of two of the bands that I met in Tehran in the summer of 2004: starting in the basement with *Kam* and concluding with a detailed discussion of a song by the band 127.

### *In the Basement: Kam*

It seems appropriate to start in the basement, specifically that of an apartment block in Shahrak-e Gharb, a comfortable suburb of northwest Tehran. And it was here that I attended a rehearsal of *Kam*, a group of five young musicians all in their twenties: Mehrdad (vocals and rhythm guitar), Saeed (bass guitar), Pooya (keyboards), Elika (electric guitar), and Mehdi (Drums).<sup>5</sup> One of a growing number of grass-roots amateur rock bands, *Kam* has been working together since 2001 and is currently preparing material for their first album. They have performed in public at the Farabi Hall in Tehran's *Daneshgah-e Honar* (Art University) and at the *Honarestan-e Melli* (Tehran Conservatory), among the very few venues in the capital that don't require government authorization (*mojavez*) for live performances. Once a week, *Kam* rehearses in a small room in the basement of the drummer's home. Isolated from the public world above ground, this cramped and smoky room, its walls covered in artwork, could belong to any teenager in Europe or North America, and the female guitarist, Elika, would not have looked out of place on the streets of London or New York in her black gothic-punk clothes. Indeed, in many ways, these young people share as much with their cosmopolitan peers outside Iran as they do with their compatriot peers from the socially-deprived religious areas of south Tehran or the provinces (see Figures 1 and 2).

Much of the rehearsal involved playing through songs from the band's repertoire. In addition, band members brought new songs to the rehearsal, and these were scrutinized with everyone contributing to the discussion. There are a number of ways in which *Kam* and its music display some of the characteristics

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27 percent in 1950 ([www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup1999/WUP99CH4.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup1999/WUP99CH4.pdf) accessed 4/12/04).

<sup>5</sup>The rehearsal I attended took place between 6:30 and 9:00 pm on Monday 26 *Mordad* 1383 (16/08/04).

Figure 1. Member of *Kam* in Rehearsal, August 2004



Figure 2. Members of *Kam* in Rehearsal, August 2004



of the emerging rock music “movement” and which are challenging some of the long-accepted aesthetic norms of Iranian popular music.<sup>6</sup> These include a strong collaborative ethos, stylistic eclecticism, meaningful lyrics, and an increasing role for women musicians. For example, the extent to which band members were involved in shaping each song in rehearsal was quite striking. Moreover, in discussion, band members stressed the collaborative nature of their work, the importance of group decision-making, and the bond of friendship shared by the band. Elsewhere, I have suggested that this emerging collective ethos is indicative of current social discourses on democratic pluralism in Iran within which a variety of voices can be valued and accommodated and is starting to challenge existing models where the social arena is dominated by a single world view.<sup>7</sup>

Also significant in the context of such debates is the inclusion of a female guitarist. While women have assumed an increasingly prominent role as instrumentalists and composers within the classical music (*musiqi-e asil*) over the last two decades, in the popular domain, women have largely been relegated to the role of backing vocalists; this, however, is gradually changing. Musically, *Kam* draws on an eclectic range of influences, including punk, hard rock, heavy metal, and rock and roll and musicians such as Pink Floyd, The Beatles (particularly evident in their harmonic language) and Jimi Hendrix, among others. Like so many grass-roots bands, *Kam* is still shaping its identity: with few local role models, they are feeling their way through a combination of experimentation

<sup>6</sup>This is not restricted to rock music, but is also apparent in some of the recent “new pop” groups. See Nooshin, “Tomorrow Belongs to Us.”

<sup>7</sup>Nooshin, “Tomorrow Belongs to Us.”

and imitation. Most of the songs are composed by band members and all but a few are set to Persian lyrics. One song uses the (English) words to the nursery rhyme, “Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater.” When I asked about the decision to use these words, the band said that they had been inspired by the American poet/singer Shel Silverstein and were unaware of the nursery rhyme origin of the words. While they acceded that the lyrics could be interpreted as a commentary on the social position of women in Iran, this does not seem to have prompted the decision to use these particular words.<sup>8</sup>

But rock bands can’t stay in basements forever. They need an audience and they need feedback. One of the main issues facing bands such as *Kam* is that the law requires them to apply for a permit (*mojavvez*) for any live performance or commercial recording. Moreover, all music broadcast on radio or television is tightly regulated (and largely produced internally) by the state broadcasting organization, *Seda o Sima*. For live performances and commercial recordings, permit applications are submitted to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Veẓarat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Eslami*) where they are subject to scrutiny by a series of committees. So far, only a handful of rock bands have managed to secure government authorization. Musicians are therefore caught in a vicious circle: on the one hand, they can’t access audiences before securing *mojavvez*; on the other, bands tend to delay applying for *mojavvez* until they have material of sufficient quality to present to the ministry. And without a permit, bands are obliged to operate in an audience-free vacuum with no opportunity to legally present their work, even in informal settings. While many bands invite friends and family to attend rehearsals, this has to be done with caution since even the status of rehearsals (for unauthorized groups) is ambiguous. The question of audiences—their identity and how to reach them—is a serious issue for rock musicians. I was particularly struck by how eager members of *Kam* were to hear my views on their music; their thirst for feedback was an indicator of how important this aspect of performance is and what happens when musicians are deprived of it.

*Kam* is an interesting example of a relatively unknown band still working out its ideas and finding its identity. The positive energy and enthusiasm of the group contrasted poignantly with anxieties over issues such as gaining permission, accessing audiences, and establishing a place for rock music in Iran, issues raised repeatedly in my encounters with rock musicians. Like the many other new bands, its discourses are those of the cosmopolitan social formation from which this music has emerged and whose members are primarily urban, young, educated, relatively affluent, as well as modernist, internationalist and secular in outlook, lifestyle, and aspiration. And it is largely in these terms that the social meanings of Iranian rock are being defined.

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<sup>8</sup>At least, this was not openly acknowledged. The nursery rhyme is as follows: “Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater/Had a wife and couldn’t keep her/He put her in a pumpkin shell/And there he kept her very well.”

*The Emergence of a Grass-roots Music*

I offer this snapshot of *Kam* as an entry point into discussing the significance and meaning of rock music in contemporary Iran. The growing rock presence is part of a broader grass-roots popular music that began in the late 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Among the factors that led to the emergence of this music, perhaps the most important was the relaxation of restrictions on Western-style pop music as part of the cultural thaw following the election of President Khatami in May 1997. Throughout the 1980s and for much of the 1990s, popular music of all kinds had proved problematic for the government, both in general terms because of music's religiously-contested status, and specifically popular music's associations with dance and bodily movement. This was compounded by the fact that Western-style Iranian pop had been heavily promoted by the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi monarchy as part of its modernizing (or "pseudo-modernizing"<sup>10</sup>) policies. For all of these reasons, popular music was officially banned in 1979. However, many people continued to listen to pop music in private, including Western pop, pre-1979 Iranian pop, and post-1979 expatriate pop, which were all available through a thriving black market.<sup>11</sup> Between 1979 and 1998, there was virtually no creation of popular music inside Iran. Instead, the *consumption* of pop became a way of symbolically defying official restrictions. Although a very small number of pop/rock bands were operating underground at this time, their activities were severely limited because there were few opportunities for performance or means of disseminating music to audiences.<sup>12</sup> The post-1998 relaxation was therefore crucial in

<sup>9</sup>The general background to this phenomenon is discussed in Laudan Nooshin, "Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control, and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music," in *Music, Power, and Politics*, ed. Annie J. Randall (New York, 2005), 259–62. According to Niloofar Mina, there is some evidence of grass-roots rock bands in Iran before 1979—even as early as the 1960s—but very little has to date been written on this music (personal communication, August 2005) and the relationship between such bands and the current generation of musicians is unclear. Certainly, operating in a socio-political environment in which Western music was not only unproblematic, but strongly promoted, the meanings of Iranian rock for audience in the 1960s and 70s would have been very different from contemporary rock.

<sup>10</sup>Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran. Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926–1979* (London, 1981).

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Nafisi's account of her family's clandestine listening to music by The Doors and Michael Jackson, *Reading Lolita*, 60–1.

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion of the situation of pop music in the 1980s and 90s, see Nooshin, "Subversion and Countersubversion," 238–45. The earliest pop concerts, of which a very few took place from 1996 onwards, mainly consisted of bands playing cover versions of Western pop/rock songs, usually without the words. Nafisi describes one such concert (in 1996): "It is hard to conjure an accurate image of what went on that night. The group consisted of four young Iranian men, all amateurs, who entertained us with their rendition of the Gipsy Kings. Only they weren't allowed to sing; they could only play their instruments. Nor could they demonstrate any enthusiasm for what they were doing... Yet despite these restrictions and the quality of the performance, our young musicians could not have found anywhere in the world an audience so receptive, so forgiving of their flaws, so grateful to hear their music," *Reading Lolita*, 300. As Nafisi observes, "It is amazing

the revival of a local popular music industry and the subsequent emergence of a grass-roots popular music movement.

However, it should be noted that despite recent changes, Westernized popular music continues to be problematic for the government and has in particular served as a focus for ongoing struggles between so-called reformists and conservatives. The discussion that follows should therefore be understood in the context of a government deeply divided on this issue, as on many others. Moreover, because responsibility for music lies with three main governmental bodies—*Veżarat-e Ershad*, *Seda o Sima* and *Howzeh-ye Honari*—all partly in competition with one another, music is often used to serve specific agendas. While the resulting porous and inconsistent regulations are often frustrating for musicians, the ambiguities can be used to their advantage. The uneven lifting of restrictions has caused particular difficulties for rock musicians trying to enter the public domain: in contrast to pop, for which it has become relatively easy to gain a permit, permission is not readily granted to rock musicians for reasons that will be discussed.

Among other significant factors, one can point to the opening up of Iranian society to an increasing diversity of voices through concepts of civil society and democratic pluralism. Alongside this, the emergence of a youth consciousness—and with it the desire to give voice to a growing urban, modernized, and cosmopolitan youth—has led to a fledgling youth culture, fueled largely by the steep population rise and rapid urban expansion since 1979. Many young people now have relatively easy access to cultural products from abroad, partly because markets have opened up greatly since the mid-1990s and partly through the expansion of satellite and Internet technologies. Moreover, many Iranians are connected through family and friends to the large diaspora population (mainly in Europe and the U.S.), and the regular movement of people between home and diaspora brings with it the movement of cultural goods. As such, young people are able to identify with—and indeed imitate—aspects of what is increasingly regarded as a global youth culture.<sup>13</sup> For musicians, increased contact with the outside world since the mid-1990s, as well as the opportunities offered by the growth in communications technology, have meant greater access to affordable (but still comparatively expensive) equipment (including studio equipment) and instruments.

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how, when all possibilities seem to be taken away from you, the minutest opening can become a great freedom" (28).

<sup>13</sup>In fact, the emergence of a modernized, cosmopolitan youth dates back to the 1960s. The current significance of what has been called Iran's "third generation" (Alinejad 2002: 35) is discussed at length by a number of writers; see Mahmoud Alinejad, "Coming to Terms with Modernity: Iranian Intellectuals and the Emerging Public Sphere," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 13 no. 1 (2002): 25–47. See Laudan Nooshin, "Tomorrow Belongs to Us." For a consideration of cosmopolitanism in Iran in the light of Thomas Turino's writings about cultural formations in "Are We Global Yet? Globalist Discourse, Cultural Formations and the Study of Zimbabwean Popular Music," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 12 no. 2 (2003): 51–79.

Among the earliest rock bands were *O-Hum* and *Pedjvak*; both were formed in 1998 and recorded their first albums in 1999. However, since neither album was able to obtain government authorization at the time, *Nabal-e Heyrat* (*Sapling of Wonder*) was circulated unofficially and made available on *O-Hum*'s website<sup>14</sup> while *Pedjvak*'s *Bar Bastar-e Laghẓan-e Zaman* (*On the Slippery Shores of Time*) was released in the U.S. (and only later in Iran).<sup>15</sup> The first rock album to gain government authorization in Iran was *Dar-e Qali* (*The Carpet Weaver's Frame*, 2001) by *Raz-e Shab*, also the first band to present a live rock concert (in January 2002, see footnote 33).<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to convey a sense of how profound the recent changes have been. Writing in 2002, Saeedi observes that from a situation in which all popular music was banned, "Rock and pop music have now dominated the country's musical scene. There is no stopping this tide. Handful of bands are already playing music to limited audiences. Many are waiting for their turn."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Mafi reflects on the first *Raz-e Shab* concert by drawing comparisons with the loosening of restrictions on *musiqi-e asil* in the late 1980s "when the first official [post-revolutionary] concert of Shahram Nazeri went on stage, none of those who had waited in line for the concert ticket could believe that such a night, tonight, would be possible."<sup>18</sup>

Young people in Iran have long been consumers of a wide range of Western popular styles, including rock, heavy metal, techno, rap, reggae, and so on. Not only did many continue to listen to Western popular music in private throughout the 1980s and '90s, but this was often their music of choice. Interviewing teenagers and "twenty-somethings" between 1999 and 2004, I found that many still preferred Western to local popular music, even though (or perhaps because) much of the former is still officially banned.<sup>19</sup> As such, the

<sup>14</sup> [www.o-hum.com](http://www.o-hum.com)

<sup>15</sup> Published by Shahram Music Books, SITC-438.

<sup>16</sup> *Dar-e Qali* (Beethoven Music Centre, 2001). See [www.raz-e-shab.com/](http://www.raz-e-shab.com/). One of the leading musicians in this band, Ramin Behna, was also the main force behind an earlier group, *Avizbeh*, which performed a fusion of jazz and Iranian music. Although not a rock band per se, *Avizbeh*'s 1998 concerts at the Arasbaran Cultural Center in Tehran and the release of two albums played an important role in paving the way for rock music, first by "breaking the mold" (for example, by presenting purely instrumental popular music) and secondly by introducing new sounds, in particular the possibility of fusing Iranian music with Western popular styles outside mainstream pop (Interview, *Bam Ahang* studio, 10/08/04).

<sup>17</sup> Sima Saeedi, "Rock Ages," [www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec\\_editorial\\_rockages.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec_editorial_rockages.htm) (2002, accessed 23/9/04). The Internet sources referred to in the current article were all published in English, and direct quotations are presented as in the original (including occasional linguistic idiosyncrasies).

<sup>18</sup> Ali Mafi, "Mystery of the Night," [www.tehranavenue.com/old/ws\\_concert\\_raz.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ws_concert_raz.htm) (2002, accessed 5/4/02).

<sup>19</sup> While recordings of Western pop singers are still largely illegal (although instrumental versions of their songs are often broadcast on national radio), certain kinds of Western popular music are sanctioned and openly on sale. Styles such as jazz (mainly instrumental) and flamenco seem to lie on the border of the permissible. For jazz, perhaps its intellectual associations render it less problematic than certain other styles and this may partly explain why the Iranian-jazz

musical tastes and experiences of those now forming their own rock bands have been strongly influenced by Western popular music: this is music with which they identify. In this context, rock musicians are creating an alternative music that both challenges the aesthetic norms of mainstream pop and offers a space for the expression of a growing youth consciousness. Above all, this is *their* music. For the first time in Iran, a music is emerging that belongs specifically to young people and to no one else and for which they feel a sense of ownership.

### *Cyber Rock: The Underground Music Competition*

In the absence of *physical* spaces in which to perform or the means by which to distribute music, the Internet is playing a crucial role in enabling musicians to communicate with each other and with audiences, effectively forming a virtual rock community. To quote from the lead singer of the band 127, “The only club we have for playing is our website.”<sup>20</sup> With increased access to the Internet from the late 1990s, particularly among the middle classes, many musicians established their own websites, thereby making it possible for rock to be publicly available without having to pass through government channels. In comparison with existing means of circumventing central control—the black market or private concerts, for example—the Internet offered a relatively cheap, risk-free, and infinitely more flexible medium to access audiences, both inside and outside Iran. And since the advent of the Internet happened to coincide with the late 1990s period of cultural thaw, many were able to take advantage of the benefits of the Internet. In fact, it wasn’t long before the government itself started to use the Internet for its own purposes.<sup>21</sup>

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fusion band *Avizbeh* was able to gain authorization some time before rock bands. Musicians such as Kenny G., the Gypsy Kings and the Greek singer Yanni have long been popular in Iran, and flamenco musician Juan Martin gave three concerts in Tehran in September 2004. It is interesting to note which Western popular styles are allowed and which remain problematic. In the summer of 2004, I found recordings of Jean Michel Jarre, Richard Clayderman, Kenny G., and Yanni in Tehran shops. Incidentally, during this period, recordings of certain Western classical and “non-Western” musicians were being heavily promoted, including Luciano Pavarotti, Andrea Bocelli and *qawwali* singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. In general, these styles have proved less problematic than Western popular music.

<sup>20</sup>Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, *Saz-e Mokbalef* 16 mm, produced in Tehran, distributed by P&S Film, Germany, 2004: 28’30” Quotations from this documentary film are translated from the original Persian into English by the current author.

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, *Seda o Sima’s website* ([www.irib.ir](http://www.irib.ir)), as well as those of President Khatami ([www.president.ir](http://www.president.ir)), and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamene’i ([www.khamenei.ir](http://www.khamenei.ir)) among many others.

The Internet has been a crucial decentralizing factor in recent years. In the words of Mousavi Shafae, “It appears that the Internet has allowed for the creation of a virtual society in the heart of Iran,” Seyed Masoud Mousavi Shafae, “Globalization and Contradiction Between the Nation and the State in Iran: The Internet Case,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 12 no. 2 (2003): 194. Mousavi Shafae also provides statistics on Internet users in Iran and notes the recent

One website has played a particularly pro-active role in promoting rock music and was responsible for what was arguably the most important watershed in the rising tide of rock. Established in 2001 to provide information and reviews on current cultural and artistic events, primarily in Tehran, [tehranavenue.com](http://tehranavenue.com) (henceforth referred to as TA) hosted the first online rock music festival, the "Underground Music Competition" (or the UMC) in 2002. Aware of the growing number of grass-roots bands unable to gain authorization, the site sought to offer a platform for rock music. The UMC was originally the idea of TA writer Hesam Garshasbi, who lists the following aims of the competition:

Introducing new talents and non-official musical currents, the centralization of scattered efforts to encourage synergy between various bands ... preventing young talents from being ignored and their introduction to proper channels. We also wanted to open the discussion of the place of rock music, as a popular form, in Iran.<sup>22</sup>

News of the competition was circulated through informal networks and twenty-one bands eventually participated, each submitting one song. These were made available for one month in the autumn of 2002, and listeners could access the tracks and vote on-line. According to TA, "In the one month that [the] UMC was on-line, we had over 200,000 successful downloads from various cities and countries around the globe, cities that possibly house no Iranians. Sixty percent of downloads were from outside the country."<sup>23</sup> The UMC was unprecedented: as well as highlighting the level of grass-roots activity and giving the fledgling movement a coherent identity, it marked the point at which musicians started talking of a rock music "movement" ("*harekat*"). Moreover, the UMC provided a channel of communication through which bands could reach audiences and audiences could offer (albeit limited) feedback through the voting process. As TA's editor, Sohrab Mahdavi, observes:

[The] UMC had repercussions that went beyond our expectations and the full consequences are yet to unfurl ... we simply intended to present works of young Iranian music aficionados. We foresaw some of the consequences: bands coming out of their isolation, listeners realizing that there were other types of music being produced. . .<sup>24</sup>

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astounding increase in Internet use, particularly among young people. However, while the Internet does potentially allow for more pluralistic modes of dialogue (particularly with the wide availability of Internet cafés), there are clearly social and financial barriers to participation.

<sup>22</sup>*The Underground Music Competition*, [www.tehran360.com/umc.html](http://www.tehran360.com/umc.html) (accessed 29/1/04).

<sup>23</sup>*The Underground Music Competition*, [www.tehran360.com/umc.html](http://www.tehran360.com/umc.html) (accessed 29/1/04). A list of bands that participated and a breakdown of the voting can be accessed at [www.tehran360.com/umc.htm](http://www.tehran360.com/umc.htm) (accessed 12/08/04).

<sup>24</sup>[www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/tamo.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/tamo.html) (October 2003, accessed 6/9/04).

While audiences were naturally self-selecting (in the sense of needing access to the Internet, having an initial interest in rock music, and also the time to listen to a large number of tracks online), the UMC generated a great deal of interest and exposure for rock music in Iran. The fact that both participation and voting was open to anyone symbolically flagged the democratic nature of the project.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, neither participation nor voting were restricted by national borders: a few of the bands that took part were based outside Iran and, as we have seen, so were 60 percent of voters. While the organizers assumed that the latter were mainly Iranian (which seems likely), it is impossible to know for certain. TA operates its website in English, and the UMC was thus potentially open to non-Persian speakers.

For the bands that participated in the UMC, the competition offered much-needed public profile. The winners were given webspace, studio time, and contact with more experienced musicians. TA also arranged a live concert for the first four bands, billed as a “Rock Fest” and scheduled to be held at the Farabi Hall, but it was cancelled two days before the event.<sup>26</sup> Several of the bands have since given concerts and recorded albums, and *Amertad* (which came second in the UMC) has recently been signed to a major record producer, *Taraneh* Shargee.<sup>27</sup> The UMC was followed by another competition, “Tehran Avenue Music Open” (or TAMO) in the spring of 2004.<sup>28</sup> It is not my intention to discuss the UMC or TAMO in detail here, but simply to note the important role that the UMC played in raising awareness of Iranian rock at a critical juncture when the groundswell of grass-roots activity was starting to gain momentum.

### *Creating an Alternative Space I: Discourses and Issues*

Having considered the general context within which the new rock music has emerged, I would like to explore a number of questions concerning the significance of this music and its meanings for young people. Drawing on my

<sup>25</sup>This is in contrast to the many officially organized music festivals/competitions for regional music and *musiqi-e asil* where selected specialists adjudicate competitions in private. In particular, the grass-roots voting for the UMC and TAMO contrasts strongly with the “top-down” adjudication of the popular music section of the annual Fajr Arts Festival (Laudan Nooshin, “Tomorrow Belongs to Us”).

<sup>26</sup>According to Mirtahmasb, *Saz-e Mokhalef*: 36’38”. According to Mirtahmasb, the Farabi Hall management had originally agreed to host the concert on condition that the title changed from *Concert-e Rock* (“Rock Concert,” billed in English as “Rock Fest”) to *Hamayesh-e Concert-e Rock* (2003: 34’58”). *Hamayesh* translates as “conference” or “seminar,” a subtle addition intended to lend the event a certain academic respectability. According to TA, “Four musicians and specialists were invited to speak on the occasion, analyzing the place of alternative music in Iran,” ([www.tehran360.com/umc.html](http://www.tehran360.com/umc.html), accessed 29/1/04).

<sup>27</sup>See [www.amertad.com](http://www.amertad.com)

<sup>28</sup>As this article was nearing completion (May 2005), TA announced a third online music competition, Tehran Avenue Independent Music Festival or TAMF ([www.tehran360.com/](http://www.tehran360.com/), accessed 16/05/05).

discussions with musicians and published interviews, this section will consider some of the issues facing rock musicians today as well as the ways in which musicians talk about their music.<sup>29</sup> What becomes immediately apparent is how articulate many of these musicians are (which is hardly surprising when one considers that most are university students or graduates, although rarely music graduates) and how concerned they are to define themselves and their music. What particularly interests me here are the verbal discourses that musicians use in order to create an alternative musical space.

The many concerns expressed by musicians range from practical and financial issues (finding suitable rehearsal spaces and affordable instruments, spare parts and sound equipment, and so on) to broader questions, such as gaining authorization, reaching audiences, and establishing a secure place for rock music in Iran. Discussion of the music itself is always framed by an intense awareness of the charged atmosphere in which musicians work, the contested nature of their music, and the fact that so much time and energy is necessarily diverted away from the music into activities such as seeking permission. But there's a paradox here: while the absence of an anxiety-free space severely hampers musicians, at the same time it is through these very restrictions that rock music derives much of its power. There are interesting parallels with the case of pop music, which, since 1998, has lost much of the symbolic power it had during the preceding two decades of prohibition. Moreover, the situation has been made more complex by the fact that certain conservative factions in the government have recently changed tactics and started to support pop music in order to appeal to young people. Since 1998 then, pop music has shed its former peripheral status and has been largely embraced by the establishment, something which has restricted its ability to challenge. In the same way, full legalization may bring advantages to rock musicians, but there may also be unforeseen consequences: for a music that largely defines itself as alternative, the official stamp of approval that would necessarily accompany legalization may not be wholly desirable.

An interesting debate has emerged around the name of the new movement. In the early days (before the UMC) the term "underground" was adopted as a seemingly appropriate name for a music that did not yet enjoy an officially-sanctioned public presence. As such, TA used the term and indeed helped to crystallize it in the title of the UMC. After the UMC, however, it became clear that this label would not be helpful to bands seeking authorization; as Mahdavi explains, "The word 'underground' posed many problems with the earlier competition ([the] UMC)... We were later told, indirectly, by those in the cultural establishment (officials and decision-makers) to avoid calling the bands 'underground' ..."<sup>30</sup> Not only did the term have troubling implications, but

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<sup>29</sup>Partly modelling themselves on Western rock celebrities, many musicians have presented interviews, particularly on the Internet, both on band websites and through sites such as Tehran Avenue and [interconnect-iranian.com](http://interconnect-iranian.com)

<sup>30</sup>[www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/tamo.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/tamo.html) (October 2003, accessed 6/9/04).

“underground” suggested an up-front oppositional stance rarely found in this music, which tends instead to follow the centuries-old Iranian tradition in which social commentary is subtly veiled. Thus, while the term “underground” continues to be used informally among musicians to mark the boundaries between authorized and “non-authorized” bands, the term “alternative” has taken its place and is regularly found on websites and in interviews (incorporated into Persian)—“*alternative rock*,” “*musiqi-e alternative*,” and so on—and seems particularly apt for a music wanting to simultaneously mark its difference while also seeking entry (however provisional) into the mainstream.

The ways in which rock musicians position themselves in relation to pop music is particularly revealing. Contemporary popular music in Iran is widely classified according to the two broad categories of “rock” and “pop,” and many rock musicians are particularly critical of the ways in which the latter has been promoted by the government since 1998. The strong anti-pop rhetoric among musicians that I spoke to is also evident in published interviews.<sup>31</sup> Rock musicians clearly separate themselves from mainstream pop music, which is generally dismissed as “mere” light entertainment, undemanding on audiences, and pandering to the market. Pointing to the fact that rock tends to attract a select audience (and not just in Iran), musicians regularly invoke specific discourses of difference to set rock and pop clearly apart from one another by drawing on dualistic distinctions: for example, challenging/easy listening; intellectual/physical (or at least a certain kind of erotic physicality associated with Iranian dance); meaningful/“shallow” lyrics; select/mass audience; largely “underground”/“overground” and accepted by the establishment; artistically-led/market-led; and so on. In reality, such distinctions are highly blurred and do little justice to the range of music being produced by contemporary pop musicians. The point is that they allow rock musicians to position themselves in a relation of alterity to pop: in other words, rock needs its peripheral status, something that has no doubt been influenced by similar discourses outside Iran. Not only has the recent legalization of pop created a convenient “other” against which rock can define itself, but it has allowed rock to step into the alternative peripheral space recently vacated by pop. This brings us back to the problem outlined above: rock musicians clearly want to gain acceptance for their music, but they also want to preserve their aura of independence in order to challenge from the margins (or, at least, be seen to challenge).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup>The one exception I found to this was an interview with Ramin Behna where he defended pop bands such as *Arian* in the interest of musical diversity: “We need such bands. . . Music is a vast sea and all are floating in it, none shall [should] be rejected or put aside.” Quoted in Shadi Vatanparast and Zebra, “Neither Formal nor Cheap Stuff,” interview with Ramin Behna and Hooman Javid, [www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec\\_feature\\_zibazi.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec_feature_zibazi.htm) (December 2002, accessed 28/02/03).

<sup>32</sup>In the words of Shadmehr Aghili (a successful post-1998 pop singer who has since moved to Canada): “Being on TV in Iran is like antibiotics: The more you appear, the less popular you are,” since it is assumed (quite legitimately) that those who appear are in favor with the government

Such issues are coming increasingly to the fore as a slow trickle of rock bands manages to secure permits, to attract promoters and sponsors, and to shift in status from “underground” to “overground.” A few, such as *Raz-e Shab* and *Meera*, have obtained authorization and released albums, and many more are currently in the process of recording or have already submitted albums to *Veżarat-e Ershad*. According to TA, eight such albums had gained authorization by the beginning of 2004, and there have been a number of rock concerts, mainly in Tehran.<sup>33</sup> *Meera* is a particularly interesting case, as it was the first rock band to be signed to a producer and to have its music distributed both inside and outside Iran. Giene Records, an Iranian-Australian partnership, is overseeing worldwide distribution of *Meera*’s first album (*Meera*, 2004) across Europe, North America, Dubai, and elsewhere where there are Iranian diasporic groups. The large advertizing billboards in Tehran in the summer of 2004 (the first such public advertising for a rock band) suggested that Giene had invested substantially in promoting *Meera*.<sup>34</sup> As mentioned earlier, *Taraneh* Shargee is in the process of producing and seeking authorization for the first album by *Amertad*.

Ironically, for many bands, gaining authorization was not their main concern initially. In the tentative early stages of the rock movement, musicians were cautious and their ambitions circumspect. Most were simply grateful for the liberal atmosphere of the late 1990s, which made it possible for them to gather and rehearse. In the words of one member of *Amertad*, “When we first started this work, we weren’t thinking about permits at all. We thought the best thing was to do what we liked . . . if we wanted to shout, to shout; if we wanted to have a female singer, to have a female singer . . .”<sup>35</sup> However, as the rock movement has matured, expanded, and gained in confidence, it has started to outgrow its informal underground status.

While the recent success of *Meera* and *Amertad* in securing a producer and (in the case of *Meera*) an album authorization seems to bode well for the future, most bands still face difficulties. Many have had applications for *mojavvez* rejected,

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apparatus. Quoted in John Ward Anderson, “Roll Over, Khomeini! Iran Cultivates a Local Rock Scene, Within Limits,” *Washington Post*, Thursday 23 August 2001.

<sup>33</sup>These include concerts by *Raz-e Shab* (Milad Hall, Tehran, January 2002, Ali Mafi, “Mystery of the Night”); *Pedjvak* (Harekat Hall, Tehran, May 2002, see Nima Kasraie, “Iran Rock: Honar nazd e Iranian ast o bas, *Even if that honar Belongs to the West*,” [www.iranian.com/Music/2002/June/Rock/index.html](http://www.iranian.com/Music/2002/June/Rock/index.html) [June 17th 2002, accessed 23/5/05]); *Piccolo* (Farabi Hall, Tehran, September 12–14, 2002; see [www.tehranavenue.com/old/ws\\_concert\\_piccolo.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ws_concert_piccolo.htm) [September 2002, accessed 4/10/04]; see also [www.picoloband.com](http://www.picoloband.com)); *Rumi* (Harekat Hall, January 2003, [www.tehranavenue.com/old/ws\\_concert\\_rumi.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ws_concert_rumi.htm) [February 2003, accessed 23/9/04]); Babak Riahipoor (Milad Hospital Hall, Tehran, October 2003, [www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/concert/babak.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/concert/babak.html) [November 2003, accessed 6/9/04]); *DNA* (Mahak Hall, Tehran, January 2004, [www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/concert/dna\\_concert.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/concert/dna_concert.html) [January 2004, accessed 6/9/04]; see also [www.dna-band.com](http://www.dna-band.com)); and *Meera* (Farhang Hall, Tehran, September 2002 and Harekat Hall, 23–25 February 2003, [www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/concert/meera\\_concert.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/concert/meera_concert.html) [March 2003, accessed 6/9/04]).

<sup>34</sup>See [www.meera.com](http://www.meera.com)

<sup>35</sup>Mirtahmasb, *Saz-e Mokhalef*: 24’36”.

concerts are regularly cancelled, and there is widespread frustration and resentment, much of which has become focused on the differential treatment of pop and rock, specifically the fact that pop has been rendered largely unproblematic in recent years while rock has been kept “out in the cold.” When I asked musicians why this should be, many pointed to the original roots of rock music, suggesting that rock is by its very nature critical (*enteqadi*), requiring the listener to engage at an intellectual level and to think, something that many claimed the government did not want young people to do.<sup>36</sup> In other words, rock is problematic as much because of what it represents as a genre as because of the specific sounds and lyrics musicians use. Also problematic is the prominent bodily movement that is so much a part of rock performance and reception. Discussing *O-Hum*’s application for permission to present a concert at Milad Hall in 2002, lead singer Shahram Sharbaf explains, “They further objected to the way we dressed . . . We also move and shake and dance while we play, and that was another point of contention. That’s the way we can play our music, and the way rock music should be played: Loud and Wild.”<sup>37</sup> Before going on stage for their January 2002 concert, the band *Pedjvak* “. . . was reminded by [the concert hall] Security that they should avoid idiosyncratic moves on stage, anything that could provoke the audience dancingly.”<sup>38</sup>

One of the main difficulties for rock bands applying for *mojavez* is the lack of clear criteria for acceptance. The application process comprises several stages: first, lyrics (if there are any) are submitted to the *Shora-ye Sb'er* (“Lyrics Committee”), after which the *Shora-ye Musiqi* scrutinizes the music, and finally the *Shora-ye Farhangi* (“Cultural Committee”) ensures that the final recording or live performance meets Islamic “standards.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, singers are sometimes required to take a vocal test.<sup>40</sup> Once the music has passed through each committee (and submissions are often referred back to musicians at each stage, sometimes more than once, or rejected outright with no opportunity to appeal), permission is given to

<sup>36</sup>A view regularly expressed by musicians was that the government had promoted local pop music precisely in order to detract young people from engaging with serious social issues (interview, *Bam Abang* studio, 10/08/04; see also John Ward Anderson, “Roll Over, Khomeini!”).

<sup>37</sup>[www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec\\_interview\\_ohump1.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec_interview_ohump1.htm) (August 2002, accessed 5/4/03). *O-Hum* has faced repeated rejection by *Vezarat-e Ershad*, both for concert performances and for the release of their 1999 album, *Nabal-e Heyrat*. Band members attribute this to their choice of words: *Nabal-e Heyrat* is set to the lyrics of medieval poet Hafez. According to guitarist Shahrokh Izadkhan: “The concept of combining Hafez with rock music is neither [not] acceptable by the cultural establishment of Iran. . . .” ([www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec\\_interview\\_ohump1.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec_interview_ohump1.htm) [August 2002, accessed 5/4/03]). The above web-reference includes a detailed account of the events that led to the cancellation of a concert in 2002. While *O-Hum* has since disbanded its original formation, Sharbaf has continued the band in the form of an “open project with other Iranian musicians,” [www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/shahram.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/shahram.html) (May 2003, accessed 6/9/2004).

<sup>38</sup>Saeedi “Rock Ages.”

<sup>39</sup>Interview with musicians at *Bam Abang* studio, 10/08/04.

<sup>40</sup>[www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec\\_interview\\_ohump1.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec_interview_ohump1.htm) (August 2002, accessed 5/4/03).

record an album in a government-approved studio and/or to perform at a time and place designated by *Veẓarat-e Ershad*.<sup>41</sup> Such approvals are often subject to stipulations, for example, that only instrumental pieces should be performed (without a singer) or that a band should replace one of its members with another musician. As already mentioned, in the case of live performances, even those who gain government permission are often forced to cancel at short notice, usually without any kind of explanation. While many published interviews address this issue, musicians are generally unable or unwilling to speculate on the reasons for such cancellations, which most seem to accept as one of the attendant risks of being a musician in Iran. One of the reasons given for the cancellation of the planned *O-Hum* concert in 2002 was that the Milad Hall “could not guarantee the security for such an extraordinary concert with such music and excitement, since all concert attendees would be young energetic boys and girls . . .”<sup>42</sup> The situation is made more complex by the fact that, as well as authorization from *Veẓarat-e Ershad*, concerts need permission from the Office of Realty Supervision,<sup>43</sup> and must also satisfy individual venue managers on questions of security.<sup>44</sup>

Given the current trends, it seems likely that an increasing number of bands will shift from “underground” to “overground” (and from amateur to professional) in the near future and that promoters and sponsors will actively seek out bands for their economic potential (a number of pop and rock concerts have already attracted sponsorship from international corporations such as Tissot, LG, Marshall, and Godin [guitars]). And for many, this is their primary aim. Although they relish the “street credibility” that being underground offers, most bands recognize that their ultimate survival may depend on moving out of the periphery. As Mahyar, the drummer of *Amertad*, explains, “I don’t think being underground (*zir-e zamini budan*) will satisfy us . . . because we can only make our music known by giving concerts and having contact

<sup>41</sup>See Ameneh Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran Since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organizations,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 9 no. 2 (2000): 44–48 for further information on the process of applying for *mojaveẓ*. It should be noted that *Veẓarat-e Ershad* regularly changes its regulations and procedures.

<sup>42</sup>[www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec\\_interview\\_ohump1.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec_interview_ohump1.htm) (August 2002, accessed 5/4/03).

<sup>43</sup>Shadi Vatanparast, “Office of Realty Supervision and Concert Cancellations,” [www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec\\_feature\\_cancellation.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec_feature_cancellation.htm) (August 2002, accessed 4/9/2003). According to Vatanparast, in the summer of 2002, the head of this government body, “. . . Sardar Qalibaf, sent a letter out to hotel amphitheatres in general banning all rock musical performances in them.” Since the late 1990s, it had become common practice for music to be performed in hotel lobby areas. In September 2004, Vatanparast reported on new regulations that have made it even more difficult for musicians to stage concerts, including a 15 percent charge on concert earnings levied by Tehran City Council (*shabrdari*) and new security clearance required by *Veẓarat-e Ershad* for musicians visiting from abroad, both Iranian and non-Iranian (“Music, Municipality and the Ministry,” [www.tehranavenue.com/old/ws\\_music\\_municipality.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ws_music_municipality.htm) [September 2004, accessed 7/10/04]).

<sup>44</sup>This is true particularly since concerts have been targeted and disrupted by volunteer religious militia. Such disruptions were common between 1998 and 2002, but have become less frequent in recent years.

with people (*mardom*).<sup>45</sup> Asked what the band would do if required to make changes to their music in order to come overground, he responded, “If the changes are to an extent that they don’t spoil our music . . .” then after a pause, “in any case, we more or less know what changes are needed,”<sup>46</sup> implying that musicians are so familiar with the system that they practice subliminal self-censorship long before the music reaches official channels. In an interview with a different band on the same film, one musician said that he would be unwilling to seek *mojavvez* if outsiders were going to tell him what to do.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, musicians said that they were rehearsing hard in the hope that one day they would secure *mojavvez* and come overground (*ru-ye zamin*).<sup>48</sup> The question of control is central here: being underground, musicians are able to exercise considerable control over the creation and production of their music. Coming overground represents a trade-off, an exchange of independence and control for the benefits of operating in the public domain. The extent to which those who gain authorization can maintain such control—and, crucially, their underground “feel”—remains to be seen.

### *Rock Audiences: The Local/International Nexus*

So, who are the audiences for Iranian rock? What evidence there is (including concert reviews, mainly online) suggests, not surprisingly, that this music appeals largely to the socio-economic and generational peers of the musicians themselves: young, cosmopolitan, urban, educated, and relatively affluent, a generation with little memory of pre-revolutionary Iran. The audience is still relatively small, but evidently committed and enthusiastic. The fact that most rock bands follow Western models matters little to them. With so few local role models (until recently), musicians have tended to look outside Iran for ideas and inspiration. It will clearly take time for this music—still so young and faced with so many restrictions—to find its own voice, but this is already starting to happen.<sup>49</sup> While much of the music is still largely derivative, to focus on this would be to miss the point of what rock means to young people for whom the music’s underground associations define it in other terms: as representing youth and freedom of expression and as being anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment. Indeed, while local critics point out that little of this music sounds obviously “Iranian” (although there are exceptions), this is partly what the

<sup>45</sup>Mirtahmasb, *Saz-e Mokbalef*: 23’49”.

<sup>46</sup>Mirtahmasb, *Saz-e Mokbalef*: 24’20”.

<sup>47</sup>Mirtahmasb, *Saz-e Mokbalef*: 10’07”.

<sup>48</sup>Mirtahmasb, *Saz-e Mokbalef*: 10’36”.

<sup>49</sup>See, for example, Mashkouri’s description of the band *DNA*: “What you hear is funk, psychedelic rock from the ‘70s and thrash metal, but still somehow original enough to be recognized as a promising young Iranian instrumental rock band with a creative and contemporary music view,” [www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/dna\\_interview.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/dna_interview.html) (January 2004, accessed 6/9/04).

music is about: challenging another long-accepted norm by which Iranian music and national identity have been intimately bound as if by an invisible thread and according to which music is so often judged as much by its display of “Iranian-ness” as by purely aesthetic criteria. Not that all bands are necessarily averse to their music having an Iranian flavor, but for most this is not an overriding consideration since they see their music as much in an international as in a local context. Discussing this issue with *Kam*, band members said that they had consciously decided not to include traditional Iranian instruments (like the band *Rumi* has done, for example) since they have had little direct experience of traditional music and did not feel confident to incorporate “Iranian” elements, although this was something they might consider in the future. In general, discussions and published interviews with rock musicians suggested that few actively and regularly listen to Iranian traditional music.<sup>50</sup>

The question of audiences intersects interestingly with the ways in which rock bands position themselves in a local/international context. Broadly speaking, rock discourses in Iran are pervaded by an internationalist perspective entirely consonant with the outward-looking stance characteristic of the cosmopolitan formation with which this music is so strongly associated.<sup>51</sup> In part, this represents a rejection of the particularly narrow and isolationist brand of nationalism that has dominated the social arena for the last twenty-six years. Moreover, such discourses are clearly intended to reach out to international audiences by linking Iranian rock into a global marketplace. While those that I spoke with were concerned to build up an audience-base for rock within Iran, they also aspired to attract listeners elsewhere. Ironically, it seems doubtful whether such bands will attract Western audiences unless their music becomes more obviously “Iranian” (that is, more clearly differentiated from Western rock): such audiences are more likely to be looking for conspicuous markers of exotic difference than something that sounds not unlike their own music. Rock musician Reza Abae poses a number of questions on this issue to TA readers:

I want to know, can an Iranian musician become a worthy competitor in an international arena . . . Can the Iranian musician influence the international scene with works that are fresh, attractive, and enduring? . . . Is it possible to bring elements of our own music to the work without isolating it from external tendencies? Can this music carry the marks of this culture without being limited in scope?<sup>52</sup>

Balancing the local and the global is no easy task: some bands, such as *Meera*, are starting to develop a more localized sound (not least through the sound of

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<sup>50</sup>In *Kam*, the main exception was Elika, the daughter of a traditional singer, who told me about her many memories of well-known musicians visiting and performing informally at her home during her childhood (interview 16/08/04).

<sup>51</sup>As described by Turino in “Are We Global Yet?”

<sup>52</sup>[www.tehran360.com/tamo.html](http://www.tehran360.com/tamo.html) (accessed 29/01/04).

Abae's *geyback* playing) while holding on to their internationalist aspirations.<sup>53</sup> And yet it is hard to tell whether this is in response to the perceived demands of an international market (bearing in mind that *Meera* is the only Iranian rock band to have released an album abroad). Either way, the internationalist position adopted by many bands has interesting implications in terms of musical meaning: for musicians and local audiences the meanings of Iranian rock lie largely in its peripheral, alternative and contested status, but also—by appealing to discourses of universalism—its rejection of narrow nationalism.<sup>54</sup> It seems likely that such meanings will be lost on non-Iranian audiences seeking the stylistically exotic. Whether musicians can simultaneously appeal to both remains to be seen. Incidentally, such internationalist discourses are another example of the dualistic positioning of rock in relation to pop, the latter generally represented as strongly “Iranian” and rooted at “home”<sup>55</sup> in contrast to rock’s cosmopolitan eclecticism.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>It should be noted that the terms “local” and “global” are not used in an oppositional or mutually exclusive sense here, but represent necessarily provisional categories that are only useful in the context of specific ethnographic data. Commentators have quite rightly pointed to the fact that “global” is nowadays regularly used as a substitute for what is, in effect, “Western,” often masking the uneven flows of power, money, and culture. And, indeed, for many outside the metropolitan power centers of Europe and the U.S., becoming “global” (or “universal” in the words of 127, see below) means just that: becoming “Western.” At the same time, there is little doubt that an increasingly globalized economy allows musicians outside such power centers unprecedented access to “global” audiences. Moreover, it is important to recognize that discourses of local/global continue to have great potency in Iran and are central to debates over national identity and Iran’s relationship with the outside world. Such discourses have had an immense impact on Iranian rock which, perhaps more than any other kind of Iranian music, represents the “global in the local.”

<sup>54</sup>Clearly, there is another side to such rosy universalist discourses that relates to the immense prestige value that Western culture has long had in Iran and young people’s fascination with things Western. For further discussion of the dynamics of cultural power in terms of Iran’s relationship with the outside world (particularly with Europe and the U.S.), see Laudan Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion,” 232–5. As discussed by Nooshin, the post-1998 changes prompted a very interesting public debate over whether the new local pop music represented yet another form of cultural imperialism or a means of empowerment for young Iranians. See Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion,” 255–8. In the context of such debates, the suggestion that local rock music can serve as a means of countering the “onslaught” of Western culture is particularly interesting (see Vatanparast and Zebra, “Another Round of Music Competition,” [tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=384](http://tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=384) [May 2005, accessed 16/05/05]).

<sup>55</sup>Even pop music from the diaspora, which has tended to emphasize home and national identity above internationalism.

<sup>56</sup>There are, moreover, interesting parallels with the internationalist outlook of 1960s progressive rock in Europe and the U.S. as discussed by Whiteley: “Was it, as Richard Neville wrote at the time, just symptomatic of an ‘intense, spontaneous internationalism?’ ‘From Berlin to Berkeley, from Zurich to Notting Hill, Movement members exchange a gut solidarity, sharing common aspirations, inspirations, strategy, style, mood and vocabulary. Long hair is their declaration of independence, pop music their Esperanto . . .’” (quoted in Sheila Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes. Rock and the Counter-Culture* (London, 1992), 1.

The band that has perhaps gone furthest down the internationalist route is *127*, who have made a conscious decision to set all their songs in English, raising important issues in relation to the points above. *127* is not unique in using English lyrics (among the groups mentioned in this article, *Kam* and *Meera* have both done so),<sup>57</sup> but it is the only Iranian rock band to date that sings just in English. In response to the criticism that this has provoked from commentators and other musicians, *127* has defended its position:

Because that's the language of Rock music. . . . This phenomenon started in England and the US. For instance, German Rock is never sung in German, and if it is, it will never go beyond German borders. Prominent bands such as the Brazilian *Sepulture*, the German metal groups *Jane* and *Eloy* that are famous worldwide, make use of English lyrics.

We have to become universal. In our opinion, even if we want to demonstrate our native and regional spirit in any kind of music the way to convey it would be through the music itself and not the language of the lyrics. We can also express our local concerns through the lyrics but that doesn't mean we'd have to change the language. . . . Using Persian lyrics on western music doesn't necessarily bring about the Iranianization of that music; many have tried that and although the language has changed to Persian the feeling remains Western.<sup>58</sup>

I quote at length from this interview because it illustrates well some of the points discussed above: the internationalist stance (“We have to become universal”), the need for any rock music to look beyond national borders, and the firm placing of Iranian rock in a global context alongside its spiritual “cousins” in other countries.<sup>59</sup>

As well as implying a certain hypocrisy among critics of *127*, who themselves sing Persian lyrics as though they were singing English, the final sentence raises a more fundamental question: why, for those within the movement, is the use of an

<sup>57</sup>Moreover, in the early underground years, many bands were playing cover versions of Western pop/rock songs and therefore singing mainly in English. As musicians started to compose their own songs, most chose to use Persian lyrics. Reporting on the earliest rock concerts by *Raz-e Shab* and *Pedjvak*, Saeedi observes: “. . . Rock musicians are now singing their songs in Farsi, something they never imagined doing in their years of underground grind” (Saeedi, “Rock Ages”). Similarly, Mafi’s surprised response to the same *Raz-e Shab* concert was “Rock! With Farsi verse . . .” (“Mystery of the Night”) The issue of lyrical language has been the subject of intense debate, in particular the question of whether it is possible to satisfactorily combine Persian words with rock rhythms.

<sup>58</sup>Hesam Garshabi, “The Story of the Elephant and Rock Music,” interview with *127*, [www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec\\_feature\\_127.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec_feature_127.htm) (2002, accessed 28/2/03).

<sup>59</sup>Similar quotations can be found elsewhere. For example, writing about *Amertad*, Vatanparast and Zebra observe: “They think globally and see no geographical boundaries for their work.” (“Mess to Amertad,” [www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=177](http://www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=177) [December 2002, accessed 4/3/03]).

overtly Western musical “language” largely unproblematic (indeed, encouraged), while the setting of non-Persian lyrics seems to touch a raw nerve? Perhaps the shift from Persian to English lyrics represents a step too far in the direction of the global marketplace, thereby distancing the music from its local roots, audiences, and meanings. The section “127: *My Sweet Little Terrorist Song*” will consider the ways in which 127 capitalizes on the use of English to comment on issues of international concern.

Clearly, choices regarding lyrical and musical language relate closely to debates concerning the relationship between the national/local and cosmopolitan/global. Moreover, such choices represent more than just a challenge to accepted norms. In one sense, 127’s decision to use English words serves to disengage music from the nationalist discourses to which it has been inextricably tied for centuries; at the same time, by forefronting questions of national identity, 127 is actively involved in redefining what it means to be Iranian. Describing their music as “an Iranian brand of alternative, because it is made by us and we are all Iranian,” 127 goes on to explain, “When you listen to ‘Coming Around’ [the song that came third in the UMC], although it is sung in English, it has an Iranian air. Not the Iran of the past, but our Iran today, where we have lived for last 20 years.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, far from negating the national framework within which their music is created, 127 seeks to redefine that framework and create a new vision of Iranian identity that is both rooted in the past and is simultaneously outward-looking and cosmopolitan.

This would seem an appropriate point at which to mention Iranian rock bands in the diaspora. The rise of rock music in Iran has been mirrored in the diaspora, where a number of bands have formed (some including non-Iranian musicians). While discussion of diaspora bands lies outside the scope of this article, a few points are worth noting here. Unlike pop music, which since 1979 has had a strong diaspora presence, particularly in Los Angeles, rock music is relatively new. Indeed, the emergence of such bands more or less coincided with the rock movement in Iran itself. The home-diaspora dynamics are complicated, and there is a great deal of interaction and networking between bands in Iran and those abroad. Many of the latter have made their music available on the Internet and therefore accessible to listeners in Iran, and indeed a few of the bands that entered the UMC were based abroad, including *Khak* (Germany), *Fanoos* (Sweden), and *Nabx* (U.S.). Particularly interesting in the context of this discussion are the increasingly blurred boundaries between bands at “home” and those in the diaspora: when visiting band websites, for example, it is often hard to tell whether they are based in Iran or abroad.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup>Hesam Garshasbi, “The Story of the Elephant and Rock Music,” interview with 127.

<sup>61</sup>Looking at the ways in which diaspora-based Iranian websites present Iranian rock bands in diaspora and at “home,” the latter tend to be treated as exotica with which to attract listeners. For example, see web-based Iranian Alternative Radio on [www.iranian.com/radio.html](http://www.iranian.com/radio.html) (accessed 23/9/04).

*Creating an Alternative Space II: Musical Discourses*

In what ways, then, does rock music represent an alternative discourse in the context of contemporary Iran? I have discussed how musicians use verbal discourses to emphasize the differences between rock and its principal “other:” mainstream pop. But how are such differences inscribed in the music itself? As suggested earlier, one of the primary ways in which musicians mark such differences is by challenging some of the taken-for-granted aesthetic norms that have dominated Iranian popular music. For example, the stylistic eclecticism that characterizes Iranian rock is quite new and contrasts strongly with the highly formulaic nature of much Iranian pop. In fact, the adoption of “rock” as an umbrella term belies a situation in which musicians draw on a wide range of musical styles.<sup>62</sup> For example, *Raz-e Shab* uses influences from classic rock to jazz and country music in its 2001 album *Dar-e Qali*, and *Amertad* and *Sarakhs* describe their music as “Gothic Death Metal” and “alternative/grunge” respectively.<sup>63</sup> The UMC’s successor, TAMO, included a stylistic description of each track alongside the list of bands, indicating a bewildering array of every shade of rock from “Rock” itself to “Hard Rock,” “Alternative Rock,” “Punk Rock,” “Soft Rock,” “Regge-Rock,” “Classic Rock,” “Rock Blues,” “A-P-Rock,” “Experimental Rock,” “Progressive Rock,” “Funk Rock,” and even “Pop Rock.” Then there were various “Metals:” straight “Metal,” “Death Metal,” and “Alternative Metal.” All but eight of the forty-two bands fell under the two broad categories of “rock” and “metal;” the others were listed as “Acid Jazz,” “Techno-Rap,” “New Age,” “Alternative,” “Pop,” “Regge-Pop,” “Fusion,” and “Gothic Trance.”<sup>64</sup> While the distinction between these categories is often hazy, the emergence of such a wide range of stylistic markers is indicative of both an increasingly diverse popular music market and a desire among musicians to brand their music in a particular way. The fact that “rock” continues to serve as a blanket descriptor can be partly explained in terms of convenience: a single term lends coherence and identity to a movement that is diverse, but that shares a broad vision. And indeed, despite the diversity, rock does continue to be the predominant musical style. But there is more: musicians are very conscious of the historical associations of rock in the West—specifically its anti-establishment ethos—and which they regularly invoke. “Rock” is therefore more than just a label of convenience; it is deeply symbolic. While a distinct rock subculture has not yet (quite) emerged,

<sup>62</sup>What Garshasbi refers to as the “*sabke motefaveh*” (“varied style”) of Iranian rock ([www.tehranavenue.com/ws\\_articles/ws\\_m.../ws.music.raz.concert.main.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/ws_articles/ws_m.../ws.music.raz.concert.main.htm) [accessed 14/07/02]).

<sup>63</sup>[www.tehran360.com/news.html](http://www.tehran360.com/news.html) (accessed 29/1/04) and [www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/sarakhs\\_interview.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/sarakhs_interview.html) (June 2003, accessed 6/9/04).

<sup>64</sup>[www.tehran360.com/lv.html](http://www.tehran360.com/lv.html) (accessed 29/1/04). According to Sohrab Mahdavi, most of these labels were provided by musicians themselves, although a few were chosen by the competition organizers (personal correspondence, September 2004).

there are strong counterculture elements highly reminiscent of the 1960s in the West.<sup>65</sup>

The range of styles listed above reflects musicians' epicurean listening habits. Dipping into a selection of personal and published interviews reveals that Iranian rock musicians listen to a wide range of music, including (among many others) bands such as *Pink Floyd*, *Dream Theater*, *Depeche Mode*, *Massive Attack*, *Nirvana*, *Cream*, *Camel*, *Sound Garden*, *Collective Soul*, *Radiohead*, *Sade*, *Liquid Tension*, *Planet X*, and *Tool*; they also listen to musicians such as John Petrucci, David Gilmour, Al Di Meola, and Ron Zarzombek as well as more mainstream artists such as *Oasis*, *U2*, Sting, John Lennon, and Christina Aguilera.<sup>66</sup> The point is that after many years of relative isolation, rock musicians are thirsty for any musical style they can access, something that is clearly reflected in their music.

As suggested earlier, the new eclecticism partly represents a reaction against the formulaic stylistic norms of Iranian pop; musicians are pushing the boundaries of what has hitherto been considered possible. Describing the 2003 album *Zibazi*, singer Hooman Javid says, "we are using Sufi poetry with disco music ... *Zibazi* is a suggestion that all these styles are possible in Iranian music."<sup>67</sup> Indeed, I would argue that this diversity represents the musical counterpart both to the outward-looking and internationalist discourses regularly invoked by musicians and to the previously-mentioned precepts of plurality associated with an emerging civil society. Just as those involved in building civil society are attempting to create a more diverse social space, so stylistic eclecticism might be viewed as a means by which musicians can create a more diverse

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<sup>65</sup>Although, interestingly, there has been little attempt to draw on the associations between rock music and the 1960's "sexual revolution." There is a substantial literature on 1960s rock counterculture, and the reader is referred to Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (Faber & Faber, 1971) and Sheila Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes*, among many others.

An interesting phenomenon in recent years has been the translation and publication of song lyrics (without the music) by a number of musicians and bands including Queen, Bob Marley, Tracey Chapman, and Bob Dylan. I first came across these collections of lyrics in Tehran bookshops in the summer of 2004, but it seems that they have been available since 2002 (Wendy DeBano, personal communication, April 2005).

<sup>66</sup>See, for example, interviews with *DNA* ([www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/dna\\_interview.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/dna_interview.html) [January 2004, accessed 6/9/04]), *Sarakhs* ([www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/sarakhs\\_interview.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/sarakhs_interview.html) [June 2003, accessed 6/9/04]) and Shahram Sharbaf of *O-Hum* ([www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/shahram.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interviews/shahram.html) [May 2003, accessed 6/9/04]). Progressive Rock bands of the 1970s are particularly well represented in such lists.

<sup>67</sup>Vatanparast and Zebra, "Neither Formal nor Cheap Stuff." *Zibazi* was published by the Beethoven Music Centre, Tehran. Elsewhere, Arash B.T. discusses the hesitance of audiences "still afraid to take a leap from decades of listening to singers who did not deviate from the norm formula. Or could it be that the listening public is only barely beginning to scratch the surface of possibilities that exist in the future of alternative Iranian music?" ([www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/articles/sarakhs.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/articles/sarakhs.html) [February 2003, accessed 6/9/04]).

musical space.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, as already mentioned, the question of civil society relates to another important aspect of Iranian rock that musicians regularly comment on: the emerging group ethos in which band identities transcend individual members. As members of *Jam* (which came eighth in the UMC) observe, there seems to be a new “impulse that desires music not represented entirely by the voice of the singer or any single musician but is produced collectively and performed by a group.”<sup>69</sup> I would suggest that there are parallels to be drawn between this new musical collectivity and the recent growth of civil society institutions in Iran. At the same time, it should be noted that many bands have found it difficult to sustain long-term relationships partly because of the pressures they face. Alongside the new group ethos, there has been a tendency for bands to break up and reform in new combinations.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, musicians often work with more than one band at the same time.

Another aspect of musical style that contrasts notably with both *musiqi-e asil* and Iranian pop is the use of the voice, whether in “de-centering” the solo (male) voice from its dominant position or in the vocal style itself. Iranian singing is characterized by an intensely emotive and decorative style, a nasal timbre, and a relatively high range, particularly apparent in the melismatic passages known as *tabrir*. However, many rock singers have adopted a very different style (partly modelled on Western singers): less emotive, intense, and ornamented and more relaxed and deeper in tone, to the extent of using a bass vocal range that has hitherto simply not been part of the Iranian vocal aesthetic.

Alongside stylistic eclecticism, what most characterizes Iranian rock are the lyrics, many of which offer subtle commentary on a range of social and personal

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<sup>68</sup>Nafisi draws similar parallels with literature, specifically concerning what she calls the “multivocality” of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*: “We needed no message, no outright call for plurality... All we needed was to read and appreciate the cacophony of voices to understand its democratic imperative” *Reading Lolita*, 268.

Detailed discussion of the connections between civil society discourse and music lies outside the scope of this article (but see Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion,” 257, 262; “Tomorrow Belongs to Us”). Specifically on the question of civil society in Iran, the reader is referred to Ali Banuazizi, “Faltering Legitimacy: The Ruling Clerics and Civil Society in Contemporary Iran,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 8 no. 4 (1995): 563–78; Hooshang Amirahmadi, “Emerging Civil Society in Iran,” *SAIS Review*, 16 no. 2 (1996): 87–107; Masoud Kamali, *Revolutionary Iran: Civil Society and State in the Modernisation Process* (Aldershot, 1998); Hossein Bashiriyyeh, “Civil Society and Democratization During Khatami’s First Term,” *Global Dialogue* 3 no. 2 & 3 (2001): 19–26; Elham Gheytnchi, “Civil Society in Iran. Politics of Motherhood and the Public Sphere,” *International Sociology* 16 no. 4 (2001): 557–76; Mehran Kamrava, “The Civil Society Discourse in Iran,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28 no. 2 (2001): 165–85; and Mohammad A. Chaichian, “Structural Impediments of the Civil Society Project in Iran. National and Global Dimensions,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 44 no. 1 (2003): 19–50.

<sup>69</sup>Shadi Vatanparast and Zebra, “Jamming Jams,” interview with *Jam*, ([www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec\\_feature\\_jam.htm](http://www.tehranavenue.com/old/ec_feature_jam.htm)) [August 2003, accessed 2/9/04].

<sup>70</sup>As this article was at proof stage in the summer of 2005, I discovered that Elika had recently left *Kam* and is now working with her own band.

issues.<sup>71</sup> A good example is *Pasbeh* (“Mosquito”), the winning song of the UMC, by the band *Fara*. *Pasbeh* is a conversation between a person and a mosquito in which the refrain is a desperate plea, “*digeh az jun-e man chi mikhai*” (“what else do you want from me?”). In the context in which they are presented, it is hard not to interpret these lyrics as a satirical commentary on the relationship between individual and state. According to Mahdavi:

Fara has many songs whose lyrics are socially important. For example, one talks about runaway girls ... How many young people in Iran today talk about such issues?<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, in the song *Mordab* by *Sarakhs*:

... the simple words strike a chord with any listener who is not afraid to search for the message ... I for one cannot stop myself from shouting out “*tow ham mesleh man, asir-eh in Mordabeeeeeeee ... az in زندان rah-eh farar nadar-eeeeee*” (just like me, you are the captive of this swamp ... and there is no escape from this jail).<sup>73</sup>

Few rock lyrics, however, are quite so candid. Most present a surreal, often intensely personal, alternative to the clichéd nostalgia of mainstream pop, simultaneously invoking an alternative space of youth experience and an oblique challenge to the status quo: rebellious rather than directly political. Nevertheless, as will be discussed below, rock musicians also use their peripheral position to express the concerns of young people.

Rock musicians have a fine line to tread. On the one hand, they are unlikely to gain authorization for songs with overly-candid lyrics; on the other, musicians clearly derive much artistic satisfaction from “saying something” through their music, and indeed many suggested to me that one of rock’s most important qualities lies in “being current” (“*dar jaryan budan*”).<sup>74</sup> At the same time, it should be noted that rock’s strong associations with both the West and a broadly “anti-establishment” ethos mean that its musical “language” is sufficiently challenging in itself (and therefore the lyrics don’t necessarily need to be). For twenty years, official discourses problematized Western-style popular music and branded it as a symbol of Western decadence, thereby forcing it into a position of alterity. As a result, the musical language of rock continues to embody an oppositional quality precisely because of where official discourses have placed it, even when song lyrics are apparently innocuous.<sup>75</sup> In other words, there is no “neutral space” where rock music can exist apart from the meanings that such discourses

<sup>71</sup>Something rarely found in Iranian pop music, but see Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion,” 265.

<sup>72</sup>[www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interview/tamo.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/interview/tamo.html) (October 2003, accessed 6/9/04).

<sup>73</sup>Review of *Mordab* by Arash B.T. on [www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/articles/sarakhs.html](http://www.interconnect-iranian.com/pages/articles/sarakhs.html) (February 2003, accessed 6/9/04).

<sup>74</sup>[www.tehranavenue.com/ws\\_article/ws\\_music](http://www.tehranavenue.com/ws_article/ws_music) (February 2002, accessed 14/07/02).

confer on it. Of course, there are certain advantages to this and, as we have seen, many musicians exercise a symbolic “self-othering” in order to distinguish rock from other styles and to claim a certain level of control over it.

Ultimately, rock’s meanings are shaped by a series of discourses: official government discourses through which its peripheral position has been largely defined; the verbal discourses of musicians themselves, which oscillate between capitalizing on their enforced peripherality while also recognizing the need to become part of the “center”; and finally, the discourses of the music itself. And it is the latter that have become a unique space of empowerment, a forum in which young Iranians—politically marginalized for so long—are making their voices heard.

### 127: *My Sweet Little Terrorist Song*

In order to illustrate some of the above points, specifically the ways in which rock is being used to express the concerns of young people, I’d like to focus on one particular song by the band 127.<sup>76</sup> *My Sweet Little Terrorist Song* (recorded 2003; CD cover and lyrics in Figures 3, 4 and 5) is particularly interesting because it addresses a highly topical issue and one that impacts the lives of many Iranians, but that is largely controlled by forces outside Iran. The song is therefore rather unusual in being directed as much (and perhaps more) at an external as at an internal audience. *My Sweet* is a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the experience of being an Iranian in the current international climate. Interweaving the broad political situation with the highly personal, 127 speaks for the many Iranians who since 1979 have lived with the stark reality of dispersal, long periods of separation, and the many obstacles to travelling abroad to visit family. The first decade after the revolution was the hardest in this respect, and since the mid-1990s it has become much easier to travel abroad.<sup>77</sup> Still, those who overcome the first hurdle and manage to secure a visa are often unprepared for what follows; as soon as they set foot outside Iran they are branded as a potential security threat (“Legally I’m nobody, when I cross the border/I’m somebody mean;” “This is just about how I’m defined”). Those travelling abroad are regularly detained, fingerprinted, and so on, and indeed this applies equally to Iranians in diaspora, including those who have lived outside Iran for many years or

<sup>75</sup>Indeed, this can be convenient for musicians seeking authorization, who can point to the harmless neutrality of their lyrics in songs where the primary challenge has shifted into the musical domain.

<sup>76</sup>127 was formed in 2001 and has five regular members (see [www.comingaroundmusic.com/](http://www.comingaroundmusic.com/)). *My Sweet Little Terrorist Song* has not been published, but was broadcast by the BBC Persian Service as part of an interview after 127’s two concerts in the Farabi Hall on 22 and 23 May 2004 (see [www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/story/2004/05/040521\\_ag-127.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/story/2004/05/040521_ag-127.shtml) [accessed 14/4/05]). The song is also available on [www.beethovenmb.com/htmls/main.htm](http://www.beethovenmb.com/htmls/main.htm) (accessed 12/2/05) and [www.127band.com/my-sweet-little-terrorist-song.mp3](http://www.127band.com/my-sweet-little-terrorist-song.mp3) (accessed 23/5/05).

<sup>77</sup>Moreover, internal changes have attracted many in the diaspora to visit Iran or to return permanently.



Figure 5. Lyrics for *My Sweet Little Terrorist Song*, music and words by Sohrab Mohebbi

I'm detained  
Captured, "in-framed"  
I'm detained  
And I destroy  
I deny  
I'm on a decline  
This is just about how I'm defined.  
And I'm a walking weapon  
Don't touch me  
Cus I just might blow.

Legally I'm nobody, when I cross the border  
I'm somebody mean  
My international rights are in some politician's thoughts  
I'm just a dream  
As I turn to this microphone and scream.

I just wanna watch Dylan play live  
I won't fly into Pentagon alive  
And if they catch me on a plane from Amsterdam  
Believe me it's not for a political crime.

I'm a living catastrophe  
Look how important I've become  
And my brother in Palestine  
He's even ten times more strong  
But when they went to Afghanistan  
Or fled to free Iraq I was singing in my room  
When it bloomed in Japan  
And all the years of Vietnam  
I wasn't even born  
This miserable world.

We appear on their TV shows like creatures from another planet.  
If they ever knock on my door, it's just for the oil  
Or mysteries left from my ancient parents.  
I got my friend in California I die to see her but I can't  
And my sweet cousin in Paris  
Believe me, she just wants to show me around.

But I'm detained  
I'm captured, 'in-framed'  
I'm detained  
From the Axes of Evil  
I'm the right hand of the devil  
I'm a terrorist though I haven't killed anyone yet  
I'm a suicidal bomb, be careful, I might go off in [at] the end of this song.

who may never even have been to Iran. Positioning Iranian youth firmly in a global context, *My Sweet* leaves the listener in little doubt that these musicians are in touch with the outside world and are well aware of how Iran is represented in the West, particularly by media corporations.

*My Sweet* is an intensely personal song (the lyrics are in the first person throughout) that expresses the anguish of an individual seeking quite ordinary things (to watch Dylan, to visit his friend in California, his “sweet cousin in Paris/Believe me, she just wants to show me around”) and caught up in circumstances beyond his control. The song points to the propaganda surrounding the so-called “war on terror,” the representation of aggression as liberation, and the labelling of the protagonist as a terrorist even though, “when they went to Afghanistan/Or fled to free Iraq I was singing in my room.” Offering a frank commentary on the motives for war, the underlying subtext alludes to the fact that many of Iran’s recent troubles have been related directly to its critical role as a supplier of oil and the resulting interference in its affairs, particularly by Britain and the U.S. “If they ever knock on my door, it’s just for the oil” hits the nail on the head and speaks volumes about the current conflict through the lens of Iran’s own history. Alongside this, the references to Hiroshima, Nagasaki (“When it bloomed in Japan”), and “all the years of Vietnam” serve to position contemporary conflicts within a continuing history of aggression, and the phrase “I wasn’t even born” contrasts the protagonist’s innocence with the stained history of those now branding him a terrorist. The musical “hero” of the song—Bob Dylan—provides another Vietnam connection, as will be discussed. As well as commenting on the ways in which Middle Easterners are portrayed as “other” (“We appear on their TV shows like creatures from another planet”), *My Sweet* goes one step further. By following this line directly with that already quoted (“If they ever knock on my door, it’s just for the oil”), the song suggests a clear connection between symbolic control of “others” and real control in terms of economic and military power. There is also a reference to even earlier spoils, the removal of historical artefacts (“mysteries left from my ancient parents”) from Iran to museums in the West, once again suggesting that recent events are rooted in earlier neo-colonial control.

Of course, the ultimate irony is that labelling people as a threat not only renders them potentially more powerful (“Look how important I’ve become/And my brother in Palestine/He’s even ten times more strong”), but can be self-fulfilling (“And I’m a walking weapon/Don’t touch me/Cus I just might blow”). The last verse plays on this (“I’m a terrorist though I haven’t killed anyone yet”) and concludes with a simple message that branding people as terrorists and then depriving them of self-respect and self-determination is a sure way to breed terrorism. The song ends with a bleak warning (“I might go off in [at] the end of this song”), and the simulated sound of an exploding bomb on guitar, implying that the West has finally created a terrorist out of the protagonist. Symbolically, the reverberations from the final chord continue to resonate long after it has been struck.

Musically, *My Sweet* is based on a simple guitar-riff accompaniment and the singer, Sohrab Mohebbi (who is also the composer-lyricist) uses a declamatory vocal style whose resemblance to Dylan is unmistakable. Clearly, Dylan is the musical model here: simple guitar chords accompanying solo voice, the reference to Vietnam (verse 4), as well as the direct reference to Dylan in verse 3. In comparison with other songs by 127, the accompaniment is sparse, allowing the words, so obviously important in this song, to be heard clearly (besides the guitar, there are two soprano trombones that only break into the foreground briefly between verses 4 and 5). The Dylan connection is a loaded one: in associating themselves with another musician protesting a different war thousands of miles away and that began almost forty years before the song was recorded, 127 points to the uncomfortable continuities between Vietnam and the contemporary Middle East, and at the same time positions the group in a long history of rock music as protest.

As noted above, *My Sweet* is unusual in being directed at a dual audience, at home and abroad. Rather than addressing internal issues (as some bands have done), 127's critique focuses on the impact of the current international situation on the lives of ordinary Iranians. To this extent, their use of English makes a great deal of sense. If Iranian rock musicians want to reach an international audience, then English is the language of choice. But there's clearly a fine balance between appealing to an international audience and possibly alienating audiences at home. What makes this song particularly interesting is that it gives voice to a topic that is central to the recent collective memory of Iranians and that is regularly talked about, but has never been sung about: the impact of Western involvement in Iran. While this is not the central focus of the song, *My Sweet* embeds Iran's own experiences within a general critique of Western policy in the Middle East. There is also a sense in which the song serves as a cautionary tale to those at home who, at the time of the Iraq invasion (in March 2003) were able to countenance a similar fate for Iran. Above all, *My Sweet* is a cry from the heart of a young Iranian ("As I turn to this microphone and scream") that speaks to the frustration of ordinary people dealing with difficulties at home and who simultaneously face demonization on the global stage. Significantly, the emergence of Iranian rock has given musicians the confidence to sing about such things.

### *Concluding Remarks*

In this article, I suggest that much of rock music's significance in contemporary Iran lies in the fact that it offers young people an alternative space in which to express themselves, to assert their "personal freedom: the freedom to experience and enjoy"<sup>78</sup>, and to make their "declaration of independence."<sup>79</sup> As such, it

<sup>78</sup>Middleton and Muncie, quoted in Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes*, 81.

<sup>79</sup>Middleton and Muncie, quoted in Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes*, 1.

ultimately serves as a site of youth empowerment in a country where the largest section of the population is urban, young, and increasingly vocal. The fact that rock represents much of what official government discourses have rendered peripheral since 1979—the cosmopolitan, young, modern, secular, and Western—has made it eminently suited to such an alternative role, one that for almost twenty years was played by pop music. However, as pop has started to relinquish its position as the primary “other” of Iranian music, rock has gradually taken its place. Moreover, as discussed in this article, as well as representing an alternative space, rock embodies an alternative set of discourses that serve to negotiate a series of highly contested relationships, for example, between individual and society, between modernity and tradition, between local and global, and between secular and religious. In particular, I suggest that the internationalist outlook of rock musicians—as reflected in the music itself and in the ways that musicians position their music—challenges dominant discourses on questions of national identity and what it means to be Iranian.

To a large extent, then, rock represents an alternative discourse precisely because of its rejection by the power center and its problematization within the dominant discourses. At the same time, musicians have capitalized on their peripheral status, which offers them a certain license as well as control over their music. However, they are now faced with a difficult choice: whether or not to relinquish this control in return for access to wider audiences. It will be interesting to see whether bands such as *Kam* decide to remain underground or seek authorization and how those who manage to come overground negotiate the transition from periphery to center. Underground or overground, one thing is certain: this is a movement that continues to grow and to make its presence felt in the public domain. For each of the bands mentioned here, many more are rehearsing in private basement spaces. I’d like to end with a quotation from Azar Nafisi who, writing about her experiences teaching English literature at the University of Tehran in the early 1980s, describes how “art and literature became so essential to our lives: . . . [because they offered] the possibility of a boundless freedom when all options are taken away.”<sup>80</sup> During this period, Nafisi became intensely aware of how important the classes were for her students: “how crucial it was that I should go on [talking about literature] at all costs . . .”<sup>81</sup> and despite the many difficulties. Twenty years on, and like Nafisi’s students, rock musicians in Iran are clearly in no doubt as to how crucial it is for them to continue making themselves heard through their music. There can perhaps be no better testimony to music’s ability to give young people agency and a space of their own than the energy, enthusiasm, and commitment of these musicians, often against extreme odds.

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<sup>80</sup>Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 23–4.

<sup>81</sup>Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, 68.