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# The Language of Rock: Iranian Youth, Popular Music, and National Identity

Laudan Nooshin

## Introduction

There's a little spot  
In the heart of space  
It's a lovely planet  
Shining in its place  
On its holy face  
We are living together,  
Don't need the borders  
We are all one.  
Forever .... we are all one ...  
Forever

So begins the song “*Kabootarhā-ye Sepid*” (“White Pigeons”)<sup>1</sup> from the 2004 album *Ta Binahāyat* (“Till Eternity”) by *Arian*, arguably the most successful Iranian pop band in recent years. What makes this song so interesting is not just that it is the only example of a high-profile pop band in Iran singing in English, but that the song explicitly forefronts a kind of universalising discourse which has become increasingly prevalent among the grassroots rock music which forms the main focus of this chapter. Whilst the music of *Arian* sits firmly towards the “pop” end of the “rock-pop” spectrum, the immense popularity of the band and the high-profile of its music in the public domain raises interesting questions about the extent to which such discourses resonate with broader trends within Iranian society. I will return to *Arian* below.

In this chapter, I will examine the increasing use of English lyrics and universalising discourses amongst rock musicians in Iran, and suggest ways in which such discourses serve to problematise prevailing notions about what constitutes Iranian national identity.<sup>2</sup> I am particularly interested in the role of music in mediating notions of place, belonging and nationhood. As in other parts of the Middle East,

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<sup>1</sup> Music by Ali Pahlavan and Ninf Amirkhas; lyrics by Simon Amirkhas, Ninf Amirkhas and Ali Pahlavan.

<sup>2</sup> This research is based on several periods of fieldwork undertaken between 1999 and 2004, during which time I interviewed and talked informally with a large number of people, both musicians and others, as well as attending concerts and rehearsals, and following relevant debates in the print and broadcast media.

mass-mediated popular music arrived in Iran on the wave of Westernisation which swept the country in the period following the Second World War. Inextricably associated with modernity and Westernisation from the start, Westernised popular music (or “pop”) came to occupy the fraught intersections between local and global, between quasi-colonial dependence and independence, between tradition and modernity and between religious and secular. As such, this music became increasingly caught up in a web of polarised and competing discourses which reflected deep-rooted anxieties about loss of national identity and self-determination in the face of Western economic and cultural power. And it was mainly for this reason that pop music was banned following the 1979 Revolution and remained so for almost twenty years. However, with the cultural thaw that followed the election of President Khatami in May 1997, there was a gradual easing of restrictions, starting with a number of centrally-promoted pop singers, but very quickly extending beyond this. By the summer of 2000 a new local pop music industry had emerged and pop music was everywhere in Tehran and the provinces, increasingly up-beat, to the extent that some of the music was indistinguishable from the imported ex-patriate pop which remained illegal. Like all musicians, regardless of style or genre, pop musicians were required to obtain a permit from The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Vezeerat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Eslami*) for all live performance and commercial recording; but such permits were at least forthcoming, notwithstanding the usual bureaucracy, protracted process and certain continuing restrictions.<sup>3</sup>

It is not within the remit of this chapter to discuss the full implications of the (re)legalisation of pop music after 1997,<sup>4</sup> but I would like to focus on two points in particular. First, in legalising certain types of pop music - that is, bringing pop in from the “margins” where it had been relegated since 1979 - the government effectively blunted much of the subversive caché which pop music had acquired during the preceding two decades. There are some interesting parallels here with the situation of film, which like pop music was also branded as a form of cultural imperialism at the time of the revolution, something which led to attacks on a number of cinemas across the country. By the mid-1980s, however, film had been appropriated by the

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<sup>3</sup> Such as the ban on dancing in public and on solo female singing (except to all-female audiences).

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of this, and the situation of pop music in Iran in the 1980s and 90s, the reader is referred to Nooshin 2005a and 2005b.

government for its own purposes, domesticated and thereby rendered safe.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it seems somewhat surprising that the government took so long to adopt a similar strategy for pop music, particularly given that almost twenty years of prohibition did little to deter people from listening to pop music, indeed served to encourage its illicit consumption. The differential handling of music and film was almost certainly a result of the centuries long history of music's ambiguous status within Islamic doctrine, historical baggage which film was relatively unburdened with. For the post-revolutionary regime, the banning of pop music conveniently and simultaneously symbolised both its anti-Western and its Islamic credentials.

Second, the post-1997 legalisation inadvertently acted as a catalyst for something else: the emergence of an unregulated grassroots popular music movement, something quite new to Iran where popular music has, with a very few exceptions, tended to come from the "centre" (of power) or from outside the country. Throughout the period when pop music was banned (1979-1998), a few musicians continued to work "underground", but after the lifting of restrictions and with increasing momentum from the year 2000, a growing number of young people began to form bands and to create their own music. And it is this grassroots music which forms the central focus of this chapter. A predominantly urban, cosmopolitan and middle-class phenomenon, this music has effectively stepped into the peripheral and legally ambiguous space recently vacated by pop. Whilst musicians draw on a range of (predominantly Western) popular idioms, the music is primarily rock-oriented. Various terms such as *musiqi-e rāk* or *musiqi-e ālternātive*, the music is also known as "underground" rock (*rāk-e zir-e zamini*) since only a few bands have managed to gain authorisation from the Ministry of Culture and also because so many, by necessity, rehearse in the private basement spaces so ubiquitous of Iranian architecture. Ironically, then, in seeking to extend its control over pop music by bringing it in from the "margins" and legalising it, the government – unintentionally, it seems – left a vacuum which has been filled by this new music. One might say that rock has become the new pop: legally contested and problematic.

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<sup>5</sup> See Naficy 2002.

The emergence of a grassroots rock music movement in Iran is particularly significant given demographic factors. Following the steep population rise after 1979, an estimated 70% of the population is currently under the age of 30.<sup>6</sup> This so-called Third Generation of young people mainly born after the revolution is predominantly urban and increasingly connected to a global youth culture, primarily through the Internet. Moreover, there is an emergent youth culture within Iran itself.

A note on terminology. Since its arrival in Iran in the post-war period, Western and Westernised popular music has been referred to using the generic term “pop”. Indeed, whilst Iranian listeners distinguish between different styles of popular music (techno, heavy metal, punk, hip-hop, jazz and so on), “pop” served until relatively recently as a catch-all term. However, the post-1997 legalisation led to a bifurcation such that people now tend to talk in terms of two main categories: “pop” on the one hand (legal and largely accepted by the musical mainstream) and “rock” on the other (largely unauthorised and outside the mainstream). In reality, the situation is much more blurred than these bipolar categories suggest and indeed the whole question of terminology is phenomenally complex, partly because of the fluidity with which such terms are used in Iran and the speed with which terminology changes. Part of the confusion comes from the fact that “rock” is used both in a broad generic sense (as a synonym for “underground” or “alternative”) as well as in a much more specific sense as an indicator of musical style. In the first case, “rock” acts as a discursive category: what places something in this category often has as much to do with some subtle “alternative” quality as the actual musical sounds and indeed musicians themselves use a wide range of stylistic indicators to describe their music within this broad category. In the second case, “rock” serves as a purely musical category. In the early days of the grassroots movement, musicians felt the need to name the movement and hence the term “underground music” emerged. However, the term became increasingly problematic for bands seeking authorisation from the Ministry of Culture (and for the small number who managed to secure authorisation, the term became redundant) and musicians have therefore gradually dropped it in favour of the slightly less problematic “alternative” or even more neutral “rock”. Now, as the movement

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<sup>6</sup> The last Iranian census was in 1996, at which time 60.04% of the population was under the age of 25. See [www.sci.org.ir/portal/faces/public/sci\\_en/sci\\_en.Glance/sci\\_en.pop](http://www.sci.org.ir/portal/faces/public/sci_en/sci_en.Glance/sci_en.pop) (accessed 17.09.06). The extent of change since 1996 will become clear after the 2006 census (currently in process).

has expanded and matured, individual styles (such as metal, hip-hop, and so on) are gaining enough of a separate identity not to need the overarching labels which in the early days helped the fledgling movement develop a coherent identity.

In this chapter I use the term “rock” in its (broad) discursive sense; most of the bands referred to below also fall within the (narrower) musical category of “rock”, but some examples will be taken from other styles such as metal which, whilst musically distinct, still continue to be subsumed under the broad discursive rock/alternative umbrella. Incidentally, it is ironic that whilst there is now a certain ambivalence about the term “underground” in Iran itself (because of the issues mentioned above), it has belatedly become fashionable in diaspora where musicians and promoters have adopted the term in order to make the music appear risqué, whereas in fact most run no risk at all by using it.<sup>7</sup>

### **Iranian Rock and its Audiences**

Iranian rock musicians occupy an interesting, one might say quasi-liminal, position. Since few have had their music authorised by the Ministry of Culture they can only operate below the radar, rehearsing in private and circulating their music on pirate CDs or through the Internet. Whilst most complain about the difficulties of working in this way, the lack of access to and feedback from audiences, not to mention adequate rehearsal, recording and performance facilities, at the same time many capitalise on their enforced underground status to enhance their “outsider capital”, always useful to a rock musician’s street credibility. But maintaining the balance is extremely difficult: musicians clearly relish the *kudos* which comes with being rejected by the establishment, as well as the control which it affords them over their own music; but it comes at a great price and the pressure of working in this way often proves too much

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<sup>7</sup> For example, witness the appearance of a (UK-based) “underground band” - but which was in fact nothing of the sort - at the BBC Symphony Orchestra festival “Persepolis: Discovering the Music of Iran”, February 2006. [www.bbc.co.uk/orchestras/symphonyorchestra/learning/Iranproject.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/orchestras/symphonyorchestra/learning/Iranproject.shtml) (accessed 12.06.06).

Similarly, in October 2006, the London-based Iran Heritage Foundation held an “Iranian Underground Night” featuring a number of musicians, only one of whom was based in Iran. Despite this, the event publicity attempted to play up the link with “home”; and “underground” was clearly being used as a marketing label. See [www.iranheritage.org/iranianhiphop/default.htm](http://www.iranheritage.org/iranianhiphop/default.htm) (accessed 12.10.06).

The fact that the main website (based in Gothenburg, Sweden) serving Iranian alternative/underground/rock music is called [zirzamin.se](http://zirzamin.se) has effectively preserved the term where it might otherwise have fallen out of use entirely.

for bands. As Milad Tangshir, composer and lead guitarist of power metal band *Ahoora* states:

It's very hard. It's the hardest deal in all history! You give all you got, like money, time, soul, feelings, etc, but there is nothing that you gain. No release, no gig, no support, no future. It's so strange to be an underground band in Iran.<sup>8</sup>

The result is that bands regularly form and disband, and only a handful have managed to maintain a long-term working relationship.

How, then, do Iranian rock bands reach their audiences? First, it should be noted that the official position of the Ministry of Culture remains characteristically ambiguous. There is no law banning rock music as such, but like all musicians, rock bands have to submit their music for authorisation and few to date have been successful. There are exceptions, though: the Ministry of Culture authorised recording permits for the album *Dār-e Qāli* ("The Carpet Weaver's Frame") by the band *Raz-e Shab* in 2001 and for *Meera's* eponymous 2004 album (the first Iranian rock album to be distributed outside Iran with the backing of Australian manager, Nicholas Pattison). In addition to this, several bands have managed to secure permits for live performances. Moreover, a few university-based venues, such as the Milad Hall at the University of Tehran, lie outside the remit of the Ministry and do not require performance permits, and a number of bands have performed in these venues. Still, these instances are a drop in the ocean and even for bands with authorisation concerts are often cancelled at the last minute or even disrupted at the time of performance. Even as this chapter was being written in the late summer of 2006, several bands were advertising forthcoming concerts, mainly in Tehran, on-line.<sup>9</sup> It is not clear how many of these actually took place, but at least one - the concert by *Ahoora* - was physically broken up by members of the *basij* voluntary religious militia, and the Beethoven Music Shop which had sold

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Milad Tangshir (May 2006) on [www.zirzamin.se/interviews/inter\\_2006/ahoor.html](http://www.zirzamin.se/interviews/inter_2006/ahoor.html) (accessed 12.09.06). There does also tend to be a certain naivety among Iranian rock musicians about the realities of life for rock musicians in Europe and the US.

<sup>9</sup> *Hypernova* at the Taraneh Institute, Tehran, 11<sup>th</sup> Mordad 1385 (August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006) ([www.zirzamin.se/index.html](http://www.zirzamin.se/index.html)); *127* and *Sarakhs* at the Taraneh Institute, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Mordad 1385 (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> August 2006) ([www.127band.com/news.html](http://www.127band.com/news.html)); *Ahoora* at Rahil Concert Hall, Tehran, 28<sup>th</sup> Shahrivar 1385 (19<sup>th</sup> September 2006) ([www.zirzamin.se/index.html](http://www.zirzamin.se/index.html)); and *Seven Deadly Sins*, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Shahrivar 1385 (14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> September 2006) ([www.zirzamin.se/index.html](http://www.zirzamin.se/index.html)).



tickets for the concert, was shut down.<sup>10</sup> In other words, whilst there are some public outlets for rock bands, these are highly contested and there is little logic concerning which bands have had permit applications accepted and which rejected. The machinations of the Ministry of Culture are not open to external scrutiny, something which has led to much speculation about the decision-making processes. And since the election of President Ahmadinejad in June 2005, the situation has become even more uncertain, particularly in view of his reported intention to clamp down on manifestations of Western culture, something which has bolstered quasi-official groups such as the *basij*.

In the face of official restrictions, most bands are forced to look elsewhere for ways of distributing their music. Some make recordings using low-quality home studio equipment or, if they can afford it, a private professional studio. Such CDs are then circulated through informal networks; some are even sold in music stores, available “under the counter” for those who ask for them. By far the most important medium of distribution, however, is the Internet. Indeed, it could be argued that the new grassroots movement was only able to establish itself and expand because of the possibilities offered by the Internet.<sup>11</sup> Many bands now have their own websites, and there are also a number of generic Iranian rock sites. Musicians also link to and post their music on non-Iranian sites, including specialist genre sites such as [ultimatemetal.com](http://ultimatemetal.com) and such sites regularly post interviews with Iranian musicians. Thus, the Internet plays an important role in allowing musicians to communicate with audiences, but the communication tends to move in one direction only, allowing little in the way of feedback which musicians would normally benefit from in a live context. As a result, many musicians feel that they are working in a vacuum. To quote from another interview with Milad Tangshir of *Ahoora*, “... when you don’t have the chance to be heard and the chance to be seen, there will be no big improvements.”<sup>12</sup> One website which played a crucial role in the early days of the grassroots music movement and which continues to support this music, is [tehranavenue.com](http://tehranavenue.com) which hosted the “Underground Music Competition” (UMC) in 2002, an on-line music

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<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with concert attender, September 2006; [www.ahooraband.com/news.htm](http://www.ahooraband.com/news.htm) (accessed 26.09.06).

<sup>11</sup> For more information on Internet use in Iran, see the Internet chapter in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Milad Tangshir (June 2006) on [www.ahooraband.com/globalmetal.htm](http://www.ahooraband.com/globalmetal.htm) (accessed 17.8.06).

festival in which listeners could listen to tracks and vote through the tehranavenue website. UMC was unprecedented and served both to bring attention to the sheer number of bands operating underground and to give the emerging movement an identity. UMC was followed by two more festivals, “Tehran Avenue Music Open” (TAMO) in 2004 and “Tehran Avenue Music Festival” (TAMF) in 2005.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, the Internet also allows musicians to access audiences outside Iran, both in the Iranian diaspora and non-Iranians, and indeed the three tehranavenue festivals included both participants and voters from outside Iran.

Given the particular situation of rock music in Iran, and specifically the lack of live performance contexts, it is difficult to ascertain who the audiences for this music are, but the evidence (including my own interviews) suggests, not surprisingly, that Iranian rock appeals largely to the socio-economic and generational peers of the musicians themselves: urban, young, educated, relatively affluent, as well as modernist, internationalist and secular in outlook, lifestyle and aspiration. In many ways, these young people - with their mobile phones, their jeans, connected to the Internet, and so on - share as much with their cosmopolitan peers outside Iran as they do with their compatriots from the less affluent and more traditional, religious areas of south Tehran and the provinces. The audience for rock is relatively small, but evidently committed and enthusiastic; for many, this music represents youth, freedom of expression and is regarded as anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment.

In studying this music, I have become particularly interested in the verbal discourses which musicians use to position themselves and their music. In general, Iranian rock musicians are highly articulate (most are university students or graduates, but rarely *music* graduates) and are eager to define rock as an alternative space of youth experience. This is *their* music; for the first time in Iran, there is a music which belongs specifically to young people and to no-one else and over which they feel a sense of ownership.<sup>14</sup> And what is particularly interesting about the discourses of rock musicians is the extent to which they project a universalising and global consciousness which stands in stark contrast to the isolationist brand of nationalism

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://tehran360.com/main.php> (accessed 15.07.06).

<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Iranian pop music is ‘multi-generational’, primarily consumed in family and other social gatherings, including weddings.

which has been promoted by the government since 1979. Thus, statements such as “We have to become universal”<sup>15</sup> or “They think globally and see no geographical boundaries for their work”<sup>16</sup> are regularly encountered both in discussion with musicians and in published interviews. As well as representing a rejection of heavy-handed nationalist ideologies, such discourses are also clearly intended to link Iranian rock into a global marketplace. At the same time that musicians are seeking to nurture a local audience, they also aspire to attract listeners elsewhere. There is, of course, a significant diaspora audience, particularly among young Iranians who find in rock music a refreshing antidote to the nostalgia-laden excesses of ex-patriate *los angelesi* pop. But moving beyond diaspora, several of the musicians whose rehearsals I attended wanted to know whether their music might appeal to non-Iranian audiences in Europe and the U.S. Ironically, this seems unlikely unless the music becomes more obviously “Iranian” (and at the same time less Western) in its musical language. Balancing the local and the global is no easy task: for local audiences the meanings of Iranian rock lie largely in its peripheral, contested status, but also its rejection of narrow nationalism; such meanings are likely to be lost on non-Iranian listeners seeking the innovative and exotic.

### **The Language of Rock: Universalism in Sound?**

There are a number of ways in which Iranian rock music is subverting some of the long-accepted norms of Iranian popular music and I would like to mention three of these before moving on to discuss the question of song texts and language choice in greater detail. First, there is a new collaborative ethos with named bands and a collective identity which contrasts with the predominant “star solo singer and anonymous backing group” format of “mainstream” pop. Attending rehearsals, I was struck by how involved band members were in discussing and shaping each song. As Sohrab Mohebbi of the band *127* explains, “Not much of a captain here; everybody takes a part ... I write the lyrics and the music is usually a band collaboration. Anybody who comes with a good riff or an idea we take it in and make it around it.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is interesting to reflect on the parallels between this new *musical* collectivity and recent discourses on civil society and democratic pluralism in Iran in

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<sup>15</sup> Garshasbi, Hesam (2003) “The Story of the Elephant and Rock music”, Interview with *127*, [www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=175](http://www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=175) (accessed 23.05.05).

<sup>16</sup> Vatanparast, Shadi and Zebra (2002) “Mess to Amertad”, [www.tehran360.com/12-02-amertad.htm](http://www.tehran360.com/12-02-amertad.htm), December 2002 (accessed 04.03.03).

which a variety of voices are accommodated and valued, in contrast to existing models in which the social arena is dominated by a single world view.<sup>18</sup>

Second, there are the lyrics, which offer subtle commentary on a range of social and personal issues, and which strongly differentiate rock from the predominantly clichéd nostalgia of pop love songs. Lyrics range from the surreal to the intensely personal, but are rarely directly political; those that do touch on social issues tend to be oblique and heavily veiled. *Raz-e Shab*, for example, sing of the poor working conditions of carpet weavers, usually young girls, in the title song of their album *Dār-e Qāli* and the band *Fara* (which took first place in the 2002 UMC) has sung about runaway girls. These are unusual, though. Although many songs convey a sense of youth restlessness, most focus on the kinds of personal topics found in rock music the world over.

Third, there is a new musical aesthetic emerging quite unlike the somewhat formulaic nature of mainstream pop. Granted, rock musicians still draw predominantly on Western models; with so few local role models, at least until recently, bands have tended to look outside Iran for ideas and inspiration. However, musicians are drawing on a wide stylistic palate including blues, progressive rock, country, flamenco, metal, reggae, hip-hop, jazz and many others. Even within a single song, one often comes across a melange of musical styles; and published interviews and information on websites reveal musicians' eclectic tastes. Milad Tangshir, for example, lists a number of influences on his music including metal bands such as Iced Earth, Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden and King Diamond and progressive rock bands such as Pink Floyd, Camel, Eloy and Dire Straits.<sup>19</sup> Attempting to describe the musical style of *127*, Sohrab Mohebbi states:

Well, it's actually a blend of the sounds in our ears, born and raised in Tehran/Iran you come across lots of interesting material. From traditional melodies to the Los Angeles pop and also all the rock and roll and the poetry, basically everything. This music is like a raw, unexposed film and

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Sohrab Mohebbi (June 2006) on [www.zirzamin.se/interviews/inter\\_2006/127.htm](http://www.zirzamin.se/interviews/inter_2006/127.htm) (accessed 12.8.06).

<sup>18</sup> There is an extensive literature on this topic; the reader is referred to Banuazizi (1995), Amirahmadi (1996), Kamali (1998), Bashiriyeh (2001), Gheytonchi (2001), Kamrava (2001), Alinejad (2002), and Chaichian (2003).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Milad Tangshir (May 2006) on [www.ahooraband.com/InterviewWithUltimateMetal.htm](http://www.ahooraband.com/InterviewWithUltimateMetal.htm) (accessed 14.8.06).

you can add anything you want ... it's got the folk and the punk but it also has jazzy roots and funk but at [in] the end of the day who cares what it's called anyway[s].<sup>20</sup>

Whilst such influences may not appear especially broad to Western audiences, in the context of Iran there is a clear widening of musical horizons in comparison with the period before 1997, and certainly in comparison with mainstream pop. Even though musicians had access to various kinds of Western popular music during the 1980s and 90s, through the flourishing black market, the arrival of first satellite television, and later Internet technology has allowed relatively easy access to a wider range of musical styles than ever before. One consequence of this is that Iranian rock has become increasingly detached from its local roots musically.

In the context of the long-standing debate over Westernised popular music as a form of cultural dependency in Iran, what reading might be made of the new eclecticism? Whilst musicians clearly view rock as a space of youth expression, and even empowerment, critics dismiss this music as yet another manifestation of *Gharbzadegi* ("Westoxication")<sup>21</sup> and attempt to exclude it from the central space of cultural discourse. One particular line of criticism focuses on the fact that little Iranian rock sounds obviously "Iranian" in its musical language. This criticism rests on a deep-rooted but rarely articulated norm which places national identity (or at least, a particular view of what constitutes national identity) at the centre of aesthetic debates on Iranian music, and according to which music's value is measured primarily by the extent to which it wears its national identity "on its sleeve", preferably a pristine identity unsullied by modernity or Westernisation.<sup>22</sup> However, many rock musicians are refusing to be bound by such reductionist aesthetics and are formulating a new kind of aesthetic de-coupled from national identity. Since most view themselves and their music as much in an international as in a local context, they unambiguously position this music and its meanings in terms of youth expression and cosmopolitanism, as well as an increasingly self-generating local expression of a more

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<sup>20</sup> [www.zirzamin.se/interviews/inter\\_2006/127.htm](http://www.zirzamin.se/interviews/inter_2006/127.htm) (accessed 12.8.06).

<sup>21</sup> A term which originally entered the national consciousness primarily through the book of the same name by Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1973).

<sup>22</sup> The same criticism has been levelled at pop music. See Nooshin 2005a (p.255-8) for examples of published critiques which focus primarily on pop music's alleged lack of identity above other measures of quality. It is important to understand that such discourses are themselves directly rooted in, and represent a reaction against, the experience of identity loss associated with neo-colonialism.

widely shared “global” culture. In other words, whilst dependency discourses have changed little since 1979, for a new generation of musicians “... socialized within the cosmopolitan formation ...” (Turino 2003, p.68), eclecticism means something very different from the self-conscious imitation of the 1970s. For one thing, many of the styles which musicians draw on are gradually becoming assimilated and authenticated, no longer regarded as “external”, thereby shifting the boundaries between “Iranian” and “non-Iranian”.

The rejection of more than two decades of rhetoric from both politicians and other (primarily traditional) musicians does not mean that national identity is unimportant to rock musicians. In fact, I would argue that the music itself becomes a space in which to explore what it means to be Iranian. *127*, for example, describe their music as,

... an Iranian brand of alternative, because it is made by us and we are all Iranian ... when you listen to “Coming Around” ... it has an Iranian air. Not the Iran of the past, but our Iran today, where we have lived for last 20 years.<sup>23</sup>

Far from negating a national framework for their music, then, *127* seek to redefine it and move towards a new vision of national identity which is both rooted at home and is at the same time outward-looking and cosmopolitan. In the words of Turino, “Cosmopolitans project universalism, a common humanity unfettered by localized identities and locations, as basic to who they are.” (2003, p.62), a stance which in the context of Iran is wholly consonant with the broadening of the social sphere associated with an emergent youth consciousness and civil society infrastructure. Based on the evidence of interviews and discussions, it is clear to me that many rock musicians are deliberately forefronting stylistic diversity in order to transcend national boundaries, to engage in cultural dialogue and to force a debate about Iran’s relationship with the outside world, particularly the West, and her future in an increasingly global environment. In doing so, they engage in the ongoing process of contestation over national identity, what Rahimeh (2002) calls “The contradictory and ambivalent discourses of nationalism ...” (p.242), and which has been played out in

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<sup>23</sup> Garshasbi, Hesam (2003) “The Story of the Elephant and Rock music”, Interview with *127*, [www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=175](http://www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=175) (accessed 23.05.05).

the public domain for decades as those in power have successively sought to promote certain aspects of national identity over others (Islamic/pre-Islamic, traditional/modern, religious/secular, Persian-centric/multi-ethnic, and so on). In the case of rock, musicians are downplaying the very elements of national identity promoted by the government since 1979 (in particular, religious identity)<sup>24</sup>, instead projecting a different kind of national identity which reflects a growing secularism and cosmopolitanism among young people and which draws on very different signifiers (including occasional references to Iran's pre-Islamic heritage, for example in band names such as *Ahoora*). And the government, deeply divided on this issue, is caught between seeking to appease those who accuse it of abandoning the original aims of the Revolution and its intense awareness that "... the enfranchisement of this very generation is essential for the continued political existence of the Islamic Republic as a nation polity." (Alinejad 2002, p.35).

Whilst the musical language of Iranian rock music is indeed predominantly Western, it should be noted that some bands do draw on more localised sounds. For some, the rejection of a nationalist determination of aesthetics has led to what might be called a "placeless music", a term I borrow from Taylor's (2000) discussion of U.S. and European advertisers' use of a *mélange* of quasi-"world music" sounds to evoke an exotic and "...timeless Other and Elsewhere." (p.167), but which instead often create a timeless "nowhere". In such cases, the Persian lyrics and the vocal style and timbre are often the only "codes" of belonging, that which gives the music a sense of place. Other bands draw more directly on local sounds, with Iranian modal and rhythmic structures, as well as traditional instruments (particularly percussion) and even setting words by medieval mystic poets such as Molana and Hafez.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Language of Rock: Lyrics**

I have established that the *musical* language of Iranian rock is predominantly Western. When it comes to lyrics, however, rock musicians have tended to set Persian

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<sup>24</sup> The absence of religious signifiers in Iranian rock is striking. In contrast, a number of pop musicians have used religious imagery and texts (some musicians that I spoke to suggested that this is a way of more easily gaining government authorisation).

<sup>25</sup> For example, see the music of *Barad* which has a strong local flavour, particularly influenced by regional folk music traditions (*Bārād*, 2003, Hermes Records, HER-014). One of the songs entered for TAMF 2005 – "Oriental Request" by the band *Puzzle* – includes a quasi-orientalist, quasi-"tongue in check" emphasis of Middle Eastern sounds, but with English lyrics (see below).

words, with the exception of some cover versions of Western songs particularly in the early days of the rock movement.<sup>26</sup> However, even early on there were a few who used English lyrics for their original compositions, and it seems that a growing number of bands are now choosing to sing in English. Whether this is a trend or not is hard to say - certainly, these songs are still a minority – but one does regularly come across Iranian rock bands singing in English and more than a quarter of the bands which entered TAMF in 2005 sang in English (twenty five out of eighty eight entries).<sup>27</sup> The second half of this chapter will consider some of the reasons why rock musicians are choosing to sing in English and present specific examples of such songs, as well as exploring some of the highly emotive issues raised by language choice. The information is based on personal interviews and correspondence with musicians, as well as published interviews.

One the main reasons which rock musicians give for setting English lyrics is that the natural rhythms of Persian do not suit rock. A review of *Meera*'s CD in the Iranian national newspaper *Iran* (11<sup>th</sup> *Tir* 1383 [July 1<sup>st</sup> 2004]) says it all: “*She’r-e Fārsi Barāy-e Rāk!*” (“Persian Lyrics for Rock!”), and this sentiment is echoed over and over by musicians themselves. Metal band *Ahoora* worked for two years attempting to set Persian lyrics but eventually gave up and started singing in English because, according to Milad Tangshir, the structure (*sākhṭār*) of the Persian language is incompatible with metal.<sup>28</sup> He explains, “Persian is a melodic language which has many extended sounds and a lack of short, detached sounds, whilst rock and metal (and perhaps Western music in general) has the ability to break into different rhythms and beats. In general, in my view, this combination has no natural basis and is doomed to failure.”<sup>29</sup> Gay Breyley reports a similar response from metal musicians Damon and Farhad who considered Persian lyrics “soft” and therefore less suited to

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, the practice of “covering” Western popular songs dates back to long before the Revolution when a number of singers did so, including Farhad, Viguen (singing in Spanish), Mehrpooya and Leila Forouhar, among others (personal communication, Amir Mansour, August 2006). See [www.persiandiscography.com/45S.htm](http://www.persiandiscography.com/45S.htm) (accessed 10.08.06). There were even a few original songs in English, including Googoosh’s 1972 “Sixteen Dandelions” backed with “I Believe”, recorded in Italy. See [www.geocities.com/googooshdiscography/](http://www.geocities.com/googooshdiscography/) (accessed 21.09.06). I am grateful to Amir Mansour and Dario Margeli for bringing these sources to my attention.

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful Sohrab Mahdavi, Editor of [tehranavenue.com](http://tehranavenue.com) for providing this data.

<sup>28</sup> [www.ahooraband.com/interview.htm](http://www.ahooraband.com/interview.htm) (accessed 14.8.06).

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication, September 2006 (translation by the author).



their music than the more “decisive” rhythms of English.<sup>30</sup> Elika, guitarist and composer, formerly of the band *Kam*, claims that no-one really likes to hear Persian lyrics in rock music because of the inherent incompatibility and that the only reason most bands sing in Persian is that the Ministry of Culture is unlikely to authorise English lyrics.<sup>31</sup> According to Elika, there were differences of opinion between members of *Kam* (now disbanded) regarding the choice of lyrical language. Pooya, another member of the band, points to two further dimensions of this debate: first, the historical absence of local role models; and second, the central importance of lyrics to Iranian music of all kinds:

When *Kam* first started, our goal was to sing in Farsi, because it was new at that time and we wanted to be progressive. We had 12 Farsi songs and we tried our best to avoid singing in English. On the other hand, singing rock in Farsi is not so easy; we didn’t have any model from the past and all of us used to listen to rock songs with English lyrics. All of these issues made the job harder. And, as you know, Iranians have always been interested in the lyrics rather than the music in a song ... so we were very picky about the lyrics and tried to attract our listeners by lyrics and music equally.<sup>32</sup>

Whilst I have been unable to corroborate Elika’s claim regarding the Ministry of Culture,<sup>33</sup> it is significant that a large number of bands are choosing to avoid lyrics altogether, largely it seems because of the difficult issues which they raise, particularly in relation to permits. Twenty one of the eighty eight entries to TAMF (2005) were instrumental pieces without lyrics (that is, almost as many as were sung in English; the remaining forty two were sung in Persian); indeed, going back to the initial period following the relaxation of restrictions on commercial popular music, a concert which I attended in July 2000 comprised only instrumental cover versions of Western pop and rock songs, including John Lennon’s *Imagine*.<sup>34</sup> Whilst the absence of lyrics is not unusual for the kinds of musical styles closely followed by rock

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<sup>30</sup> Personal communication, September 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Personal communication, August 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Personal communication (in English), September 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Although it should be noted in this regard that the album *Meera* (2004) was given a permit despite including a track in English, an unacknowledged cover version of the song “Soldier of Fortune” by Ritchie Blackmore and Dave Coverdale (formerly of the hard rock band Deep Purple), originally released in 1974.

<sup>34</sup> Concert by the group *Imaj*, Ebn Sina Cultural Centre (West Tehran), July 2000. Milad Tangshir makes the same point, specifically in relation to contemporary metal bands: “... in order to gain more chance to perform, most of them decided to be instrumental bands!” [www.ahooraband.com/globalmetal.htm](http://www.ahooraband.com/globalmetal.htm) (accessed 17.8.06).

musicians, particularly progressive rock, it is fairly unusual in Iranian music generally. Despite the gradual acceptance within the classical tradition of instrumental music without a vocalist in recent decades, still Iranian listeners usually expect to hear a singer in a musical performance. The question of role models is also important, as Sohrab Mahdavi, editor of *tehranavenue*, explains “Most of these musicians are young and as such only want to imitate their favourite bands, which happen to be Western ones. In a few years, however, when these musicians start to develop their own styles, we will be able to say how this trend will develop.”<sup>35</sup> Whilst Mahdavi was responding to a question about lyrical language, clearly his statement applies equally to the music as well.

In contrast to the views expressed above, there were others who did not accept that Persian lyrics are incompatible with rock music. Most were aware of the arguments, but countered them by pointing to the many groups who have successfully combined the two. For example, Ramin Behna, composer and leader of the band *Raz-e Shab*, the first rock band to gain a permit for its album *Dār-e Qāli*, regarded the combining of Persian lyrics and rock music as something which has enriched Iranian rock by “... creating new accents and rhythms for this music” and by helping to develop the music, thereby make it better known outside Iran.<sup>36</sup>

Another reason for the use of English lyrics is that it completely severs music from the nationalist discourses, discussed earlier, to which it has been tied for centuries; and at the same time resonates with a desire to be accepted into a trans-national community which goes beyond national and ethnic boundaries. Interestingly, I found this viewpoint articulated less often and less explicitly than the justification based on purely musical reasons. However, some musicians are up-front about this and even use the verb “*jahāni shodan*” (“to become global”) to describe the process. In part, this relates to the neo-colonial inheritance and the global spread of English as an “international” language, an important dimension of which is musicians’ awareness of the cultural power associated with the English language and the access that it gives them to a potential global audience; the importance of this is no doubt heightened by the difficulties in accessing audiences in Iran. If Iranian rock musicians

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<sup>35</sup> Personal communication (in English), August 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Personal communication, August 2006 (translation by the author).

want to reach audiences outside Iran, then English is clearly the language of choice. To quote again from Milad Tangshir, “because we wanted our music to be recognised on an international level and to be able to compete and be heard globally. And using Persian lyrics would be a strong factor working against this.”<sup>37</sup> Some even regard the setting of English lyrics as a potential ticket out of Iran.<sup>38</sup> Babak Khiavchi of Bamahang Productions in Toronto reports that he regularly receives demos and samples from musicians in Iran, including some who sing in English “... with the goal of reaching a global market and the justification that Rock music should only be sung in English, which I totally disagree with.” He goes on to complain that whilst “The effort to write and sing in English is impressive, but sadly the thick and heavy Iranian accent ... overshadows the lyrics by making them totally indiscernible.”<sup>39</sup> Several of the “expert” judges for TAMF (2005)<sup>40</sup> commended the song “Oriental Request” (set to English lyrics) by the band *Puzzle*, but significantly it was only US-based singer Mamak Khadem whose judgement was based primarily on the fact that the song could be enjoyed by anyone outside Iran and for whom “Listenability anywhere in the world” was an important criterion.<sup>41</sup> It is also interesting to note the number of bands which have adopted English names, even those which sing only in Persian.

The few bands which have managed to achieve some level of international visibility evoke very conflicted responses from audiences and other musicians in Iran, as the following quotation from Pooya (formerly of *Kam*) illustrates:

There are good bands in Iran like 127 who play good music and sing good lyrics. I don't want to criticize them. They have chosen their way smartly and they know what they are doing. And they have enough ingredients to do so. But there are lots of bands in Iran which try to have English songs and they sound horrible!!<sup>42</sup>

In fact, *127* has divided opinion strongly by the decision to sing only in English and the fact that the band has, since 2005, been invited to perform at a number of festivals

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<sup>37</sup> Personal communication, September 2006 (translation by the author).

<sup>38</sup> [www.ahooraband.com/InterviewWithUltimateMetal.htm](http://www.ahooraband.com/InterviewWithUltimateMetal.htm) (accessed 14.8.06).

<sup>39</sup> Personal communication (in English), September 2006.

<sup>40</sup> The competition was judged by a combination of on-line lay audience voting and a panel of “experts”.

<sup>41</sup> [www.tehran360.com/main.php?page\\_name=articles&article\\_id=10](http://www.tehran360.com/main.php?page_name=articles&article_id=10) (accessed 14.09.06).

<sup>42</sup> Personal communication (in English), September 2006.

outside Iran (something which is no doubt related to the choice of lyrical language).<sup>43</sup>

Lead singer and composer Sohrab Mohebbi defends the use of English:

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 ... 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>44</sup>

As well as illustrating the internationalist stance, Mohebbi raises an important question: why, for many rock musicians, the use of “foreign” lyrics is problematic but a “foreign” musical language is not. In part, the answer would seem to lie in the centrality of language to notions of Iranian national identity, at least a Persian-centric view of national identity. Thus, English lyrics touch a raw nerve which Western musical styles do not. This relates closely to the question of audiences: there is a fine line between appealing to listeners abroad and alienating those at home. In Iran, those most likely to listen to this music are from a social class where some understanding of English is not unusual; but there are others who are undoubtedly excluded by the shift from Persian to English, a shift which perhaps represents the ultimate move towards (or pandering to?) an international audience and a global market. As Farzam Rahimi (vocalist and composer in the band *Meera*) comments:

I myself wrote some rock songs in Farsi just for Iranian people who wanted to feel what rock music is talking about; and for those guys who were walking their first steps to know this style, it was better to have an opportunity to understand the lyrics. The second reason was I just wanted to trial and error on Persian lyrics in rock music, and I found that Farsi lyrics has its own potential for this style; I mean I like that and the feedback from the fans proved it much better.

It depends who your audiences are; you're gonna say something internationally or are you just sharing your thoughts with your own

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<sup>43</sup> Although, like all Iranians, musicians face great difficulties in obtaining the necessary permits and visas to travel abroad, as seen in the following statement issued by *127* in the summer of 2006 ahead of its proposed tour: “Announcement to the fans! Dear friends: We will never make it to these dates and the future seems too vague. It's both because of the TWI (travelling while Iranian) issues and also LID (living in Iran dilemmas). We hope someday we can tour like a normal band, but we don't see that much of a bright future ...” ([www.zirzamin.se/index.html](http://www.zirzamin.se/index.html) accessed 16.09.06).

<sup>44</sup> Hesam Garshasbi, “The Story of the Elephant and Rock music”, Interview with *127*, [www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=175](http://www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=175), 2003, (accessed 23.05.05).

people? Till now I shared my thoughts with my own people, but nowadays I'm thinking that there are some elements which I have to share internationally!! Americans and Europeans don't know today's situation of many of the people in Iran: they think most Iranians are terrorists or instead of cars they're using camels ...<sup>45</sup>

For *127*, success abroad may come at a price. Despite their growing international profile, and despite having come third in the 2002 UMC, *127* did not even make the top 20 in TAMF 2005, even though other groups singing in English did. Finding themselves on the defensive, *127* have made clear their frustration at being questioned so often about their lyrics and have pointed to the original roots of rock to justify their position, as well as to examples of rock bands in other countries:

... I am so tired of answering this question. Do you guys ask Sepultura or Air or Bjork why they don't sing in their native tongue?<sup>46</sup>

... that's the language of Rock music ... This phenomenon started in England and the U.S. 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 Sepultura [sic], the German metal groups Jane and Eloy that are famous worldwide, make use of English lyrics.<sup>47</sup>

Others have made the same point. Milad Tangshir suggests that “rock and metal are musical genres which much more than other genres are rooted in the culture and society of the West, so how can this music be combined with the Persian language which has arisen from very different roots?”<sup>48</sup>

Another reason for singing in English, and which again relates directly to the issue of audiences, is where bands want to convey a specific message to listeners outside Iran. A good example is *127*'s “My Sweet Little Terrorist Song” (2003), which Mohebbi describes as “... a lament from [a] bunch of middle-eastern second class citizens of this planet. Under pressure from both sides of the fuss”, a dylan-esque critique of

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<sup>45</sup> Personal communication (in English), September 2006.

<sup>46</sup> [www.zirzamin.se/interviews/inter\\_2006/127.htm](http://www.zirzamin.se/interviews/inter_2006/127.htm) (accessed 12.8.06).

<sup>47</sup> Hesam Garshasbi, “The Story of the Elephant and Rock music”, Interview with *127*, [www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=175](http://www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=175), 2003, (accessed 23.05.05).

<sup>48</sup> Personal communication, September 2006 (translation by the author).

Western foreign policy in the Middle East.<sup>49</sup> Ironically for a song directed primarily at audiences abroad, this track was dropped at the last minute from inclusion in *The Rough Guide to the Music of Iran* CD.<sup>50</sup> Another example is the anti-Iraq War music video “Fed Up” by the band *Mute Agency*, the text of which begins as follows:

I’m fed up  
Yeah, I’m fed up  
With the humdrum of the war.

I’m going deaf,  
Yeah, I’m going deaf  
Leave me alone, I can’t stand it anymore.<sup>51</sup>

Although less sophisticated poetically than “My Sweet”, the simple message of this song is reinforced by hard-hitting images of tanks, war planes and exploding bombs.

In a similar vein, but using more positive imagery, there are songs such as that with which this chapter began – “*Kabootarhā-ye Sepid*” (“White Pigeons”) by the pop band Arian - with its message of global harmony and its universalising discourses: “Don’t need the borders; We are all one.” Each of the three verses of this song is in a different language: English, Arabic and Persian, returning to English at the end. What sets this song apart from much of the rock music discussed above is that Arian’s musical language lies firmly within the pop domain and is heavily coded as “Iranian”; for Iranian listeners, there is no doubt as to where this music belongs.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, far from challenging dominant discourses on nationhood in the ways that many rock musicians do (primarily through their musical language and English lyrics), the Persian lyrics of the second half of verse 3 serve partly to reinforce such discourses with the reference to the Iranian flag, although it should be noted that this is framed explicitly within a projected message of peace, something which has particular resonance given the current international relations situation.

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<sup>49</sup> Quotation from [www.zirzamin.se/index.html](http://www.zirzamin.se/index.html); See Nooshin 2005b (p.489-93) for a detailed discussion of this song.

<sup>50</sup> Largely because of sensitivities over the word “terrorist”, particularly following the London bombings of July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005. The CD was published shortly after the bombings. World Music Network RGNET1165CD (2006).

<sup>51</sup> Available on [www.zirzamin.se](http://www.zirzamin.se) (accessed 16.09.06).

<sup>52</sup> Arian have elsewhere reinforced the link between their music and discourses of nationhood, for example in the song *Iran* on the 2001 album, *Arian II - Va Amma Eshgh ...* (“Arian II – And Now Love ...”) (see Nooshin forthcoming); and more recently in the song “*Ey Jaavidan Iran*” which they wrote for the 2006 football World Cup Iranian national team (see [www.arianmusic.com](http://www.arianmusic.com), accessed 20.07.06).

### Verse 3

*Too āsemoon-e tarānehā mā kabootarhā-ye sepidim*  
(In the sky of songs, we are white doves)

*Gozashtim az tanhāiā o be shahr-e eshgh residim*  
(We've passed loneliness and reached the city of love)

*Bā golhā-ye sorkh, bā barghā-ye sabz*  
(With red flowers, with green leaves)

*Bā harir-e sepid-e solh, bā seh rang-e Iran*  
(With the white silk of peace, the three colours of Iran)

*Parchami too delhā keshidim*  
(We have drawn a flag in the hearts)

### Postlude

We are white pigeons, white pigeons  
Which fly through the sky of your hearts

We are white pigeons  
Which bring peace when our love song starts

We are white pigeons, white pigeons  
Which fly through the sky of your hearts (forever ...)

Thus, this song seems simultaneously addressed to a dual audience: on the one hand there are the discourses of universality, which can be understood by audiences both at home and abroad; on the other, there are the more nationalist sentiments of the Persian lyrics understandable only to local audiences and diaspora Iranians.<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that as well as being one of the rare instances of Iranian pop musicians singing in English, this is also the only example that I have come across of such universalising discourses within Iranian pop music.

Returning to rock, quite often there is no particular reason for musicians to sing in English in terms of a wider message. As already mentioned, many rock lyrics are highly personal and are often enigmatically surreal to an extreme. Sohrab Mohebbi is

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<sup>53</sup> This song also raises the question of what gets lost in (poor) translation. Arian have translated “*Kabootarhā-ye Sepid*” as “White Pigeons” rather than the more accurate - and more meaningful to English-speaking audiences - “Doves”.

a master of such poetry, as evidenced by the lyrics available on *127*'s website<sup>54</sup> and by Figure 1 which presents the words of "Coming Around" (2001), the song which came third in the 2002 UMC and which helped to launch *127*'s career. According to Mohebbi, this is one of his favourite compositions.<sup>55</sup> An example of a song which draws on a much darker, almost psychedelic, and quite disturbing surrealism can be seen in Figure 2, the lyrics of "Beyond the Reasonable Doubt of a Lunatic" by Milad Tangshir of the metal band *Ahoora*, a song which was entered for the 2005 TAMF. Emulating the kinds of imagery used by metal bands outside Iran, the lyrics convey a strong metal identity, the use of English in this case allowing the band to establish a genre identity which connects it with metal musicians elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> It is interesting that whilst *127* has hitherto eschewed social comment in their songs (with the stunning exception of "My Sweet"), they have recently started to move in this direction, as seen in the lyrics to "The Gift" in Figure 3.<sup>57</sup>

Whilst the main focus of this discussion has been on English - since this is the language which bands choosing not to sing in Persian have tended to set (unless they eschew lyrics altogether) - it should be noted that other languages are also used. For instance, the rapper Salome came fourth in TAMF (2005) with a dual-language song "*Mayoos Nasho*" ("Don't Lose Hope"), a collaboration with German-based Iranian rapper, Shirali, with whom she established a "cyber" working relationship without ever having actually met. In the on-line commentary which accompanies the results of the TAMF voting, Mamak Khadem praises the "blending of two languages with a similar purpose."<sup>58</sup> Salome has also worked with the underground Turkish rapper Pusat, with whom she wrote a Persian-Turkish anti-war song called *Petrolika*.<sup>59</sup> Another interesting dual-language and virtual hip-hop collaboration is between UK-based Iranian rapper Reveal and Iran-based Hichkas, with Reveal rapping in English and Hichkas in Persian.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> [www.127band.com/lyrics.html](http://www.127band.com/lyrics.html) (accessed 28.07.06)

<sup>55</sup> Personal communication, September 2006.

<sup>56</sup> These connections are clear on *Ahoora*'s website which lists interviews and reviews of the band's music on generic metal sites such as [www.ultimatemetal.com](http://www.ultimatemetal.com) and [www.metalsites.net](http://www.metalsites.net). See [www.ahooraband.com/](http://www.ahooraband.com/) (accessed 12.09.06)

<sup>57</sup> I am grateful to Sohrab Mohebbi for permission to print these lyrics which are not yet available on the *127* website.

<sup>58</sup> [www.tehran360.com/main.php?page\\_name=articles&article\\_id=10](http://www.tehran360.com/main.php?page_name=articles&article_id=10) (accessed 14.09.06)

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Salome on [www.kolahstudio.com/Underground/?p=192](http://www.kolahstudio.com/Underground/?p=192) (accessed 12.09.06)

<sup>60</sup> Hichkas's first solo track, "Flame", was also dual-language Persian and English.



Such collaborations touch on the complex relationship between musicians in Iran and those in diaspora. As far as rock/alternative music goes, musicians in Iran have certainly led the way, although a diaspora rock scene has now established itself, following developments in Iran. Until recently the only Iranian popular music produced in diaspora was a nostalgia-laden pop music which has changed little since 1979. This music exists in “an ethnic-linguistic ‘closed circuit’” (Hemmasi 2006) in which musicians have tended to emphasise their “Iranianness” in order to appeal to diasporic audiences. The few pop musicians to have crossed over to the mainstream have done so by using “... languages other than Persian and they have not made ethnicity the basis of their artistic persona ...” (Hemmasi 2006).<sup>61</sup> Thus, the move from “racialized” margins to “de-racialized” and “naturalized” centre has generally been marked by a shift from Persian to English. Hemmasi (2006) discusses an interesting exception to this, Swedish-based singer Arash Labaaf, the “first person to ever have a Persian-language song top the pop charts in Sweden”, and indeed across Europe, with his first single “*Boro Boro*” (“Go Away, Go Away”, 2004). Having persuaded a sceptical Warner Sweden to take a risk by allowing him to sing just in Persian, Arash chose lyrics that would be relatively easy for non-Iranian audiences to imitate and assimilate, even if they did not understand the meanings. Thus, unlike rock musicians in Iran who attempt to erase difference in order to enter a global market (by singing in English and sounding like Western bands), Arash *uses* difference to sell his music – not just his “Iranianness” but also by drawing on other exotic imagery, particularly Indian - and difference is what the Western capitalist thirst for exoticism demands. However, as Hemmasi points out, foreignness has to be mediated to make it acceptable and Arash’s “crossover success has depended on making difference *palatable*” (2006). It is interesting to note that there is a similar debate among contemporary visual artists and filmmakers in Iran. Some have been criticized for using exotic imagery aimed at Western audiences, whilst others have over-compensated for this by avoiding local elements so as not to be seen as exoticizing (Keshmirshakan 2006). The outcome is remarkably similar to the situation of much rock music, with art devoid of local references, but the motivations are very different. In the case of rock musicians, it comes partly from a misreading of what Western audiences want: many seek to make their music sound more Western,

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<sup>61</sup> Hemmasi cites the examples of the US-based dance music team, *Deep Dish*, and the Swedish-based rock singer Laleh.

apparently unaware that it is precisely their *difference* that is most likely to attract listeners outside Iran.

### **Concluding Comments**

Ultimately, the question is what all of this means, both to musicians and to audiences. The late 1990s thaw in Iran's international relations, the diaspora network, the emergence of a cosmopolitan youth culture and, of course, the Internet have all served to link Iranian youth into a trans-national cultural network. In this context, do English lyrics, stylistic diversity and universalising discourses represent a calculated pandering to international markets and an inevitable consequence of the global power of Western culture; or a genuine attempt to challenge isolationist discourses of nationalism, to forge trans-national identities and to stake a claim in a new outward-looking vision of what it means to be Iranian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In this chapter, I have suggested a number of reasons why rock musicians are choosing to set English lyrics. Whilst most still continue to sing in Persian, the use of English certainly tells us a great deal about the desire of young Iranians to participate in a global culture, and it also raises questions about how we understand trans-national social formations in an increasingly interconnected world.

It is clear from published interviews and my own discussion with musicians that the level of agency is high. At the same time, such agency should not eclipse the significance of centre-periphery dynamics. The fact is that the West continues to hold immense prestige value for Iranian rock musicians, who tend to look "westwards" rather than to other peripheries for their musical ideas.<sup>62</sup> In practice, being "universal" or "global" usually means drawing from the "centre"; indeed distinguishing between what is "global" and what is "Western" is not always easy.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, in seeking to understand the cultural inheritance of neo-colonialism, what Lipsitz (1994) calls the "Postcolonial Politics of Sound" (p.22), we are compelled to ask whether Iranian rock

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<sup>62</sup> Notwithstanding recent critiques of "centre-periphery" discourses (for example, see Featherstone 1995, p.12-13), such discourses continue to play an important role in Iranian cultural life.

<sup>63</sup> It is interesting to compare the kinds of "universality discourse" used by Iranian rock musicians with Taylor's (2000) work on the use of "world music" sounds in advertising. Composer Karl Jenkins, for instance, claims to have wanted to "...create a sound that is universal and timeless." (p.169) in the piece *Adiemus* composed as advertising music for Delta Airlines. Clearly, "universality" can have quite different meanings to different musicians in different contexts, a topic which warrants further exploration in its own right.

is fated to remain a symbol of cultural dependency for evermore. If so, there is a central irony in the fact that the self-imposed isolation which resulted from Iran's reaction against neo-colonialist influence was itself a product of colonialism. In the words of Dabashi (2002), there has been a "... failure to recognize the formation of the so-called 'native' or 'traditional' mode as something of itself deeply colonial." (p.122)<sup>64</sup> And, since "Cultures have always borrowed from each other then appropriated what is borrowed and transformed it into their own style." (Tapper 2002, p.20),<sup>65</sup> at what point does the appropriation of what most rock musicians regard as a form of global culture – that is, available to all – become transformed into a local cosmopolitan aesthetic?<sup>66</sup>

Whatever the reasons for linguistic and stylistic choices, it is clear that the recent emergence of a grassroots rock movement in Iran is providing a space for music which blends a cosmopolitan consciousness with a sense of being rooted "at home". In the words of Alinejad (2002), "The growing critical, and inevitably modern, discourses of civil liberty, political pluralism and individual rights ... [are] being increasingly articulated in terms of a discursive field of public expression where new identities are constructed and seek recognition, at both symbolic and political levels." (p.26). Thus, through their music, Iranian rock musicians are imagining and projecting new understandings of national identity which embrace modernity, plurality and cosmopolitanism. Not only does this allow for the symbolic expression of a particular vision of Iran's future in a global context but through the act of performance itself such a vision becomes one step closer to reality.

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<sup>64</sup> And indeed, deeply modern. See Abrahamian 1993 on the modern nature of the 1979 Revolution.

<sup>65</sup> Or, in the words of Leila Ahmad (quoted in Rahimeh 2002) "After all and in sober truth, what thriving civilization or cultural heritage today, Western or non-Western, is not critically indebted to the inventions and traditions of thought of other peoples in other lands?" (p.252).

<sup>66</sup> There are many examples of this. Cohen, for instance, discusses the ways in which musicians in 1960s Liverpool appropriated and transformed American country music (as an expression of trans-national popular culture) into a form of local heritage (2005).

**Figure 1:**

**“Coming Around” (2001)  
Lyrics and music by Sohrab Mohebbi  
From [www.127band.com/lyrics.html](http://www.127band.com/lyrics.html)**

coming around

was just a coming around  
"us" going around  
it was just a coming around  
a "me", "you", an "us", "we weres"  
a coming around, falling around  
thoughts walking around  
things going around ,all together

someone, somewhere, seeing things  
knowing, there ain't nothing  
that i'm not  
"you weres", "they weres", "i was"  
seashells, sun shine  
ain't nothing  
that i'm not

was just about words  
when words are wordless  
was just about time  
when seconds timeless  
actions wrongless  
harm, harmless  
walking around thoughtless  
it's about between  
weight and lightness  
feeling thoughts  
and think senses

**Figure 2:**

**“Beyond the Reasonable Doubt of a Lunatic”**

**Lyrics by Milad Tangshir, Music by Milad Tangshir and Kiavash Kia**

**From the album *Ahoora* (2006)**

**[www.ahora-band.com/beyondlyric.htm](http://www.ahora-band.com/beyondlyric.htm)**

I love the moon, more than any sun  
Every time I see the sun I have to close my eyes  
But moon is kind, I can watch her now  
As long as I want, and how I like  
Me, moon and my shadow, play together for hours  
Sometimes I rest and they play and play

I can't hide it anymore, wanna be alone,  
You shadow, I hate your dark look  
You're with me since dawn of my time, same look and smile  
How can I love you with that ugly smile

Time slowly passed me by, but you're still here  
You shadow, why your sick eye doesn't leave me alone

You leech, if you'd go one step further  
I wouldn't hate you like this  
Every time I close my eyes, I dream of you  
Dead, with no eyes and no mouth  
Filthy vision of your smile: the nightmare of truth

Stay ... away, you stay away from me  
Stay ... no ... away, you ... no ... no ... oh god

Now, that I've hung myself, I can't believe you're standing by me, smiling  
I smile too, but not as ugly as you ...  
Me, moon and my shadow, play together for hours ...

**Figure 3:**

**“The Gift” (2005), verses 4-8.**

**Lyrics and music by Sohrab Mohebbi**

I've got a right to live  
Isn't that a gift, isn't that a gift  
And on through the days I drift  
Isn't that bliss, isn't that a bliss

Have a right to be hit by the bats  
Hold the rights for my teethe to be smashed  
And when I finally go insane and will nothing remain  
I gain the rights to go sing in the rain

Have a right to be report and deported  
Have a right to follow the orders  
Have a right to take the scorn and a right to be torn  
Have a right to regret being born

Have a right to be ignored and neglected  
Have a right to be segued and be raided  
Have a right to be dammed a right to be jammed  
Have a right to be sanctioned and banned

And we're all brothers in times of blitz  
We're all brothers in times like these  
But where are my brothers in times of blitz?  
Where are my brothers in times like these?

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### **Discography**

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