



IRAN

“Like a Flower Growing in the
Middle of the Desert”

To travel from Beirut to Tehran is to move between two poles of the “Shi’ite Crescent” that couldn’t be more different from each other. Beirut is a seaside city where even walking in the poor, Shi’i southern suburbs you can’t escape the Mediterranean culture. Its legendary nightlife a few kilometers uptown doesn’t stop even for suicide bombings and civil war. Tehran is roughly eight times the size of Beirut. With twelve million people, it is at least three times as large as all of Lebanon, yet the city seems devoid of character, and has no nightlife to speak of. At least aboveground.

My arrival at the recently opened Imam Khomeini Airport was quite a shock. The airport’s hypermodern glass-and-steel design puts Milan’s Malpensa or Paris’s Charles de Gaulle airports to shame. It seemed a world apart from the stern-looking photos of Khomeini that stare down at you from

various angles in the arrival terminal. I was nervous about getting into Iran—and even more so about getting out—given the tense state of relations between Iran and the United States and the United Kingdom. But the passport officer waved me through when he saw my American passport. No questioning, no heavy-handed security people following me. Just “Welcome to Iran,” and off I went.



“Let’s see . . . you’ve got the British hostages, the crackdown on insufficiently headscarved women, and the escalating nuclear showdown. There always seem to be at least three crises involving Iran these days, don’t there?” Behnam Marandi asked as we walked down Jomuri-ye Eslami street in downtown Tehran, about a block and a half from the British Embassy. A computer programmer and web designer by profession, Behnam is also one of the main forces behind *Tehran Avenue*, a semi-underground online magazine covering the arts, especially music. Not only does Behnam know every important musician in Tehran, he knows what they have to do to survive in the era of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Behnam was actually off by at least one crisis. There was also an American “tourist”—who some people claimed was a CIA operative (it turned out that he was a former FBI agent)—had disappeared on one of the small Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf. But where were all the protesters I had seen in front of the British Embassy while watching the BBC a few minutes earlier in my hotel room? This was only day five of the “British hostage crisis” that began when Iranian Revolutionary Guards detained a small British naval vessel

patrolling the waters close to (Iran claimed inside) the country's territorial waters. Surely I should have heard them chanting their amusingly histrionic 1970s-era chants, this close to the embassy.

But, as with almost everything in Iran, reality rarely corresponds to the images of the country we see on television. Aside from the 150 or so protesters, many of them either "professionals" brought in for the cameras (and indeed, many milled around until given the cue to chant and march for the cameras) or die-hard regime supporters, Tehran's 12 million or so residents apparently had better things to do that afternoon. Even a block away from the protest site life went on as usual.

Officially, Iran is a country still obsessed with past humiliations. Newly printed posters of martyrs from the Iran-Iraq war, now a generation removed from public consciousness, cover buildings and utility poles. If you drive by Palestine Square, it's hard to miss the giant bronze sculpture of a map of Palestine, with lifesize figures of women and children on one side, and fighters taking on the Zionist Goliath on the other. "But who thinks or cares about Palestinians?" a friend asked, with derision in her voice. As we walked by the former American Embassy, now home to a museum and offices of the dreaded Revolutionary Guards, we passed a huge, freshly painted mural on a building that read, ISRAEL SHOULD BE WIPED OUT, while the walls of the embassy featured numerous insults in Persian and English against the United States. No one pays much attention to them; and indeed the government allows Iranian Jews to visit mortal enemy, Israel.

Most Iranians don't want revolution; they just want to manage their lives with as little interference as possible from the government. It's not easy to stay out of the government's

way, however, when the Ahmadinejad regime constantly shifts the parameters of what's "Islamically acceptable" behavior, clothing, or music. Yet Iranians also seek to raise their standard of living by pressuring the government to maintain or increase public services and provide a better social infrastructure. It's the tension between these two desires that gives the ayatollahs breathing room to enforce a social and political system that few Iranians care for.

Officially, I had been invited to Iran to give some academic lectures and meet with members of the religious establishment. But my real reason for coming to Iran was to meet with musicians. "The first thing you need to understand about music in Iran today," Behnam explained, "is that you can't show instruments on TV because that's considered against religion. You can have people playing them on TV, and you can hear instruments and the music, but you can't see the musicians playing the instruments, except for the daf [a type of drum] or flute—unless, of course, you've got an illegal satellite dish."

We were looking for a quick bite to eat, but that's not easy to find in downtown Tehran. In most cities of the Middle East, you can't walk a block without passing several restaurants or food stands. There are small restaurants and fast-food-type storefronts in Tehran, to be sure, but compared with most of the region, there's never been much of a café and restaurant culture in Iran, so most meals are eaten at home.

Indeed, in a society where there's not much to do outside the home, dinner has become one of Iran's most important social lubricants. A member of Iran's top metal band, Ahoora, told me, "Our whole life is inside." Inside you don't need to wear your veil, you can blast your music, dance, watch pirated

copies of the latest Hollywood—or Bollywood—movies, kiss your girlfriend, and otherwise feel free.

Of course, most Arab/Muslim countries try to control the use of public space by citizens—both where and how they can come together and what they can do and say when they do so. But in Iran the level of control is greater than in any other country outside of Saudi Arabia; it's surely the envy of the Egyptian or Pakistani Interior Ministries. As in the old Soviet Union, there simply is no public sphere in the traditional meaning of the term, as a space where citizens meet publicly and freely discuss issues of social or political concern.

There is one big difference between the Iranian regime and its predecessors behind the Iron Curtain: East Germany and the Soviet Union had elaborate internal intelligence networks that reached deep into the private lives, of average citizens; in Iran, private space has become increasingly free of government interference in seemingly inverse proportion to crackdowns on the public sphere. Successive governments have come to understand that the majority of Iranians will not tolerate policing of their private lives anywhere near the extent that they'll accept control of their public identities and actions. And so, for the most part, the state leaves Iranians alone behind closed doors.

And even outside the home, Tehranians have long been adept at finding spaces to gather outside of the official gaze—publicly, if not politically. They often take to the mountains north of the city in order, literally, to “get away from it all,” particularly the control of the various arms of the state and its guardians of public morality, the *basij* (Persian for “mobilized”). This feared volunteer force is made up largely of young members of the Revolutionary Guards. For three

decades now, when not engaged in war, the *basij* have roamed the country's main cities, harassing anyone who violates their interpretation of proper Islamic conduct or dress.

The *basij*, and the interests they serve, have made it nearly impossible to find a good place to play or hear heavy metal in Tehran. For the most part, nontraditional music, and rock in particular, is heard not just indoors, but quite literally underground, in basements, the storage rooms of apartment buildings, and parking garages. Performances are occasionally allowed, but only under tightly controlled conditions, and even then they can be canceled with little notice, sometimes in mid-performance. Few countries in the world have repressed non-official public culture, and particularly music, as thoroughly as has Iran.



What most defines Iran for me is a particular musical interval, one traditionally unique to Persian and Indian music. Called the *koron* in Persian, and a “neutral third” by Western musicologists, the first time I heard the *koron* it literally stunned me, since it's almost completely unknown in Western classical or popular music. It is a microtone, an interval less than the semitone (for example, C to C#), which is the smallest interval traditionally used in Western music. The *koron* is formed by taking the major third of a key and lowering it by somewhere between a quarter-tone and a third-tone, which produces a very strange and unsettling yet somehow “neutral” sounding interval, so it's difficult for a westerner to tell whether the piece is being played in a major or minor key.

The *koron* is not used very often in Iranian metal because it's difficult for fretted instruments (and impossible for the

piano) to play microtonal intervals. But it helps us understand the complexity of Iranian culture more broadly—that is, the ability to hold two seemingly contradictory positions and achieve a kind of reconciliation, or harmony.

The Roots of Iranian Rock

Rock 'n' roll has long been popular in Iran. It came of age in the mid-1970s during the reign of the secularizing Shah, who placed far fewer restrictions on foreign cultural practices and products than did his successors in the Islamic Republic (one metal musician explained that his mother “was a big fan of Pink Floyd, Hendrix, and the Stones”). Heavy metal joined the sonic environment around the end of Iran’s brutal eight-year war with Iraq. Perhaps the first band to achieve something of a breakthrough in the metal scene was O-Hum (Illusions), founded in 1999. The band plays a well-orchestrated blend of Western hard rock and Persian traditional music and instrumentation, with many of the lyrics taken from the fourteenth-century poet Hafez. After its first album was rejected by the Ershad, or Culture Ministry, band members created their own website and offered free downloads of the album—one of the first Iranian examples of using the Internet to get around state restrictions on cultural production. By 2000, there were roughly fifty bands just in Tehran, but the scene had a hard time growing because it’s so difficult to make it as a musician in Iran and the government routinely cracks down on alternative cultural expression.

O-Hum also began playing publicly—or rather, privately—at venues such as the Russian Orthodox church in

Tehran and at a few charity concerts. This was a period when the Khatemi government mainly policed public “Islamic” spaces. So churches, foreign embassies, and private homes became quasi-public spaces where musicians could perform for sometimes hundreds of people without fear of harassment or arrest. This would change in 2007, when the Ahmadinejad government began to invade private homes and arrest metal fans.

Paradoxically, during the last five years more underground bands have approached mainstream popularity, even when officially banned. For some this has been a sign of success: “Unlike in other countries, we’re aggressive, we keep fighting to keep metal alive,” one artist told me. Others would prefer never to see the light of day: “Maybe it’s good that the best music is all underground. It keeps us on the edge. It keeps us fresh,” another musician said with a sigh. But everyone believes that the music must go on. “The death of metal would be the death of Iran,” explained a guitar player, “so we keep fighting to keep it alive.”

Despite the crackdowns, as recently as 2007, 3,000 fans could be expected to show up for shows such as the one performed by the band SDS at the University of Tehran, even though it wasn’t allowed to perform with vocals. “We were not allowed to headbang or even stand up,” one fan present explained to me. “It was ‘metal theater,’ not a metal concert,” continued Pooya, one of the founders of the scene who did the first, and to this day one of the only, public metal concerts with vocals. “Everyone had to sit politely. At one gig, at Elm-o-Sar’at (Science and Industry) University, we managed to play for forty minutes before the *basij* tried to force us to stop. They

weren't supposed to enter the university. So they drove up to the front and started roaring their motorcycles, and the manager of the place begged us to stop. We were the last metal concert with vocals."

Even without vocals, explained another musician, when bands played classic death-metal anthems, like the songs from Slayer's classic 1986 album *Reign in Blood*, "the whole crowd would fucking explode with headbanging, nobody could control them. They'd go so wild, you know? Needless to say, the next gig was canceled, because the whole thing was about control, and we were out of their control. We were arrested and charged with satanism."

A professor who works closely with the Miras Maktoob Institute (Institute for the Written Heritage) explained the larger phenomenon reflected by Iranian metal this way: "On the one hand, in the current political situation you can't come to the surface here; the 'real underground' is in Iran these days, and one would imagine that because of this we are isolated from the rest of the world. Yet Iran has been at the crossroads of culture since Cyrus the Great. We've always been open, that's why the Iranian government has tried, and failed, to suppress our instinctual drive to reach out and absorb other cultures."

Censoring the Uncensorable, Foregrounding the Underground

The restrictions the regime has imposed on the performance of music are many. As Behnam explained, "The most important thing is that you can't see women singing on TV, and they

aren't allowed to sing solo in public, so musicians have to do special arrangements of their music in order to have at least two women singing, or singing in the chorus of a performance featuring a male singer." Women are clearly the most heavily censored and filtered "item" on the Internet in Iran as well. Tens of millions of websites are blocked, as part of what one scholar terms the "gender apartheid of Iran," just because they contain the word "women" in them. The government automatically assumes that any website with women as a subject is "immoral."

Politicians, prophets, and even philosophers have been warning societies about the threat posed by music, and especially the female voice, to the social order since Homer introduced the Sirens to literature and Socrates urged the banning of eight types of music in the *Republic* on the belief that they encouraged drunkenness and idleness. Early Muslim leaders—although not the Qur'an—held similar views. After the Iranian Revolution, one newspaper explained, "We must eliminate music because it means betraying our country and our youth . . . Music is like a drug, whoever acquires the habit can no longer devote himself to important activities."

The mullahs weren't that far off the mark in comparing music-listening to drug use: more than one musician explained to me, in the words of one of the country's leading metal guitarists that "buying music was like buying drugs" when metal first arrived in Iran in the late 1980s. Even getting a black-market cassette was comparable to scoring; you had to take two taxis and meet at a neutral location and make the hand-off as quickly as possible before hiding the tape in your pants for the ride home.

On the other hand, the late Ayatollah Khomeini wavered on his opinion of music. He argued that “music dulls the mind because it involves pleasure and ecstasy, similar to drugs,” but he became more lenient after hearing a musician playing something he thought sounded beautiful outside the window of his home one day. Ultimately, the near-total ban on rock music during the Revolution’s first fifteen years was loosened a bit under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, who was more responsive to the demands of the younger generation than had been his predecessors Khamenei and Rafsanjani. Metal bands even managed to get permission to hold a few concerts during this period, but President Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005 led to the banning of all Western music from state-run TV and radio stations, making it harder—but not impossible—for fans to hear live metal in Iran.

To make a government-approved CD, without which you aren’t allowed to perform legally, you have to take your music to the Ershad, or Culture Ministry, where several committees determine whether the music, lyrics, and presentation are technically professional and Islamically acceptable. The absurdity of the categories that must be approved in order to receive permission to release an album reflects the larger absurdities of Iran’s political and social orders today. Bad grammar, shaved heads, an “improper sense of style,” and even “too many riffs on electrical guitar and excessive stage movements” can all get your music banned. “It’s like this,” Behnam said, “When you submit a request, they have a department to check the music, especially vocal content. The Ershad will often order a singer or band to change the lyrics, melody, or rhythm in a song. Lyrics are especially important

for them. They need to check whether it's against the system, which is forbidden."

By "system," Behnam meant the entire ideological, political and economic apparatus of the Iranian state. So if a censor listening to a song decides that the guitar distortion is too intense, and therefore threatens state security by exciting emotions that the state can't control or that could be turned against it, the band will have to lighten up on the guitar. Or perhaps the melody is too Western, or just not Iranian enough, or the lyrics are a bit too risqué. You can imagine how death-metal bands might fare against an Iranian censor, which is why most don't bother trying to obtain government approval. But this tactic can be dangerous during periodic crackdowns by the government, which can use the "illegal" circulation of an artist's or band's music as a convenient excuse to arrest or otherwise harass them.

Schools have been on the frontline in the struggle for the soul of young Iranians since the Revolution. High schools were both where most metalheads were introduced to the music and where the government tried to clamp down on it from the start. Guitarist Ali Azhari, one of the most important artists in the Iranian scene, recalled with a smile, "The principal of my school had a shelf in his office filled just with my T-shirts and bracelets. He was trying to demetalize me," Ali said, coining a new word to explain exactly what was being done to him. "But it didn't work." Later on, when metalheads started to become a more public, if strange-looking, presence on the streets, the government began to accuse—and soon after, indict—them for being satanists, spreading Western culture, and simply for being in a metal band (which, when I

checked the Iranian penal code, was not actually a crime). Convictions of musicians were almost always overturned, but the government's point was made.



Almost every Arab/Muslim country has some sort of official censor of music, but Iran's has proved more proactive and aggressive than others'. Iran's mullahs have legitimate reasons to fear metal: it reflects the mood of a young generation (65 percent of the country's population) roiled by drug use, prostitution, increasing AIDS, and, most important, a nearly complete rejection of the values of the Revolution.

Perhaps the best indication of how strongly the country's metal community—and, by extension, a large share of the rest of Iran's younger generation—oppose the ethos of the Revolution comes from the popularity of the pioneering British metal band Iron Maiden. “For sure, Iron Maiden would have to be the most important band for us,” explained Armin Ghaouf, a twenty-eight-year-old mechanical engineer and guitar player who's been on the metal scene since its inception. Tall, with shoulder-length hair (it was much longer until the police cut it after arresting him) and a pleasant face, Armin plays a role similar to Slacker's in Egypt: he knows everyone and everything about the scene and connects all its dots, even though he doesn't play much these days. Sitting next to him, Ali Azhari agreed: “Maiden gives me a vision at a time when the chief symbol of Iranian culture is that of the martyr. Maiden is so visual—just think of the album covers with their tanks and other images of war and death—it's like a dream combined with music. The band allows you to imagine being somewhere else you can't physically be.”

Just a few weeks earlier, Ali, Armin, and I had stood about twenty feet from the stage watching Maiden's first-ever performance in the Arab world, at the Dubai Desert Rock Festival. The images of war's violence and futility—particularly as embodied by the band's mascot, the skeleton-monster war robot Freddy, blundering across the stage pretending to shoot the crowd—served as the perfect rebuttal to Khomeini's valorization of war and martyrdom as the holiest acts within Islam. As Ali pointed out afterwards, "There are so many images of war and guns on the streets and buildings of Tehran, it's the same symbolism really." Except that the Revolution's martyrs died "in the path of God," while Iron Maiden's die for nothing.

The mullahs celebrate violence; the metalheads critique it. Being a metal fan offers—however paradoxical it might seem—a "community of life" (as one musician described it to me) against the community of death and martyrdom propagated by the Iranian government. But the risks are both real and substantial. As Pooya explained, "Even my family thought I was dangerous." Pooya was arrested so many times he stopped counting. "I just wanted to dress like a metalhead, and I was arrested and beaten, first in the cars of the *basij*, then in jail." It wasn't just long hair that could get one in trouble. Ramin Sadighi, the founder of Hermes Records, said that during the long period when Western instruments were effectively banned in Iran, he had to rent delivery vans and travel well before and after rehearsal times to get his upright bass to rehearsal and performances. "We sacrificed so much," he informed me, "more than the current generation of musicians can understand."

Other musicians were accused of being Jewish or of looking like "savages" because of their long hair and metal attire.

In response, one metalhead offered the most pejorative insult in the Iranian repertory: “The government is Arab! It’s like we’re occupied. That’s why the music is so strong.” (Many Iranians are intensely nationalist, and harbor a millennium-old grudge against Arabs for supposedly overshadowing them in the larger Muslim world.) Armin recounted one such incident: “I was walking down the street and a passing police patrol car stopped and the cops asked, ‘Where are you going with long hair?!’ I said, ‘What’s the matter? None of your business,’ and they took me in and said, ‘We’ll call your father, we’ll take his documents, and if you let us cut your hair he’ll get them back.’ What could I do? After that I started to put my hair in a ponytail, tuck it in my collar, and tie it up, and walking around on the street it didn’t look like I had long hair. When we were playing or jamming, I took it out, that was it.”

Of course, musicians aren’t the only group targeted by the Ershad. Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, a well-known documentary filmmaker in Tehran, has also had his run-ins with the government, for two documentaries (*Back Vocal* and *Off Beat*) he made about the difficulties faced by Iranian musicians today. We watched the films in his apartment, since naturally they are banned from public view. Mojtaba explained that one Iranian jazz band had two concerts approved by the government, only to have the second show canceled hours before it was to start.

The government can prevent public performances, but in other ways music censorship is increasingly irrelevant in Iran. After three decades of a revolutionary regime, Iranian artists have gotten very good at making the best of a bad performance environment. Among the most interesting examples comes from Farzad Golpayegani, one of the top two or

three metal guitarists in Iran, and one of the country's most talented graphic artists as well. Although he loves to play outside Iran, "where at least kids can headbang," Farzad remains committed to building the rock scene in his country, and has become expert at putting on shows that defy the restrictions placed on him, often at the last minute, by authorities. "The last concert was half unplugged because we were not allowed to bring drums, so I tuned my acoustic guitar like a setar," he laughed. (The setar is a three-stringed country cousin of the sitar.) "Another time I played with percussionists and a video of my paintings projected on a screen behind me; we had about 500 people for that show."

It's also relatively easy to buy foreign music in stores, while the Internet and music downloading have made it impossible to control the spread of "illegal" music. Yet if the central government has reached a seeming truce with young Iranians concerning what goes on between their headphones, local governments are closing music schools and jailing and even lashing people caught listening to "thumping tunes in their cars."

Is This Music or Magic? How Metal Invaded Iran

The practice of tightly policing music goes back to the start of the Revolution, but it is one of the ironies of Iranian political culture that the very technology and clandestine means of communication that made the Iranian Revolution possible (in particular, the circulation of contraband cassette tapes of the Ayatollah Khomeini's speeches) were also used by the early metalheads to spread the word about, and the music of, heavy

metal. Khomeini realized the possibility for cassettes to be used against him in the same way he used them against the Shah, so he banned them after taking power. Nevertheless, by the time Khomeini died, cassette tapes of the world's best metal were circulating to a small but fanatical community of metalheads in Tehran and other major cities like Isfahan, Shiraz, and Mashad.

Indeed, metal "fever" had spread among young Iranians at the very moment that the fever of the Revolution began to dim. As Pooya put it during yet another four-course meal at the home of a musician, "Out of the death of Khomeini the flowers of metal grew." Another musician picked up on the paradoxical image of metal as beautiful and life-affirming, explaining that when it first hit Iran, metal was "like a flower growing in the middle of the desert" of Iranian politics and culture.



I never thought it was possible to find a musician as devoted to death metal as Marz until I met Ali Azhari. "I remember when I was thirteen years old," Ali said during our first meeting in his apartment, "I was looking for serious music, not just party music or music to get drunk to. I was into reading books and wanted to be, I dunno, an important guy. And I remember I listened to—can you believe it—Def Leppard, and I said, "Whoa! What is this? Is this music or is this magic? Is it a kind of spell?"

I got lost trying to find Ali's house in northern Tehran, the upscale part of the city whose numerous high-rise condo developments, many of them with apartments costing well over \$1 million, begin to look the same after a while (in one

neighborhood the high-rises are all painted white, blending into the snow-covered mountains above them). Ali's apartment is in a nondescript building in a neighborhood where dozens of satellite dishes are illegally set up away from the street. "It doesn't matter, though," he explained. They [meaning the *basij*] know it's here. They'll come by and rip them out eventually, and then everyone will wait a while and put them back in."

Ali is one of the best guitarists in Iran. He plays incredibly fast and cleanly, and he has a taste for the theatrical that gives his music an added sense of importance. His round face yet sharp features, long jet-black hair, and black metal T-shirt give him the look of a young Iranian Alice Cooper, although his videos might make even Alice Cooper a bit queasy.

The first thing you notice about Ali's apartment (after realizing that he seems to be one of the few metalheads in the Middle East who doesn't live with his parents) is that it's quite dark, even in the middle of the day. The second thing you notice is how neat it is. This is not the abode of the typical metaler; there are no beer cans or crumpled fast-food wrappers or potato chip crumbs lying around. Ali is much too artistic and professional for that.

As I inhaled the scent of Persian incense burned to keep out the malevolent spirits of the Revolution, my ears were assaulted by an extreme metal video by the group Hate Eternal, blasting from his television. Slowly the apartment came into focus. It was laden with 1970s goth-futuristic furniture and stuffed animals—real ones, including a fox with a squirrel in its mouth and a couple of birds of prey as well.

At the other end of the apartment is Ali's control room, a two-by-three-meter padded room with just enough space for

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his computer, a mixing board, and a window to connect to the even tinier “live” room. The walls are covered with posters and stickers of metal and rock bands, including Hendrix and Bob Marley. Ali’s Marshall TLS 100 amp and a couple of microphones took up the entire room. “I used to have the dual-lead Marshall,” he explained, but even though he had almost no chance of ever playing in a space big enough to use it, “I moved up to the triple,” an even more powerful amplifier.

On Ali’s computer desktop is a huge photo of Twisted Sister frontman Dee Snyder. “Metal owes him because he stood alone against the PMRC [Parents Music Resource Center], and others trying to demetalize the world,” Ali said proudly. “When you’re a kid in the middle of a war, it stays in your mind for a long, long time. Heavy metal was considered totally Western and unacceptable, but we heard it and said, ‘We like it and we’re gonna get it.’ We started trading tapes and starting bands with old instruments not destroyed during the Revolution, and when people would travel we’d ask them to buy tapes.”

Armin, a long-time friend of Ali, remembered, “Everyone was greedy and hungry to get albums, and they would be copied literally a million times, which meant you wanted to make sure to get one of the first copies, because cassettes lost quality with each copy. And we were also tricky. We’d always keep a song for ourselves, and people would have to beg to get it. Of course with the Web, you can’t play those games anymore,” he said with a laugh.

Ali laughed too, at the thought of all the changes that have occurred in the last decade. “I remember a female friend asking, like this sixty-year-old guy, ‘Would you please bring me this CD?’ and it was, like, a Cannibal Corpse CD. Naturally

the guy hears the name and says, 'Lady, this kind of music is not for you!' And she lies and says, 'Oh no! I don't want it for myself, it's not for me, it's for someone else.' "

The clandestine "microshows" that characterized the early Iranian metal scene (and are still one of the few ways to hear metal performed live today) were ad hoc and improvised. To many of the attendees, the shows could be truly disorienting, almost like religious experiences—the perfect antidote to the hyper-ritualized, formulaic, and in-your-face Islam propagated by the Islamic state. For Armin, "The first show I played at left me so dizzy. It was in someone's home because there were no discos to play in, and there were maybe thirty kids. The host asked my band to play "Altars of the Abyss" by Morbid Angel, and everyone just freaked out, they couldn't bear the level of extremity, they couldn't take it after five minutes. You know, the timing was perfect, because metal hit Iran at the same time DM [death metal] became big. It was the perfect time because it was just after the war ended and death was everywhere, and then, boom, it [metal] exploded."

Strolling Down Tehran Avenue

As the sun set, I headed with Behnam to the apartment of Sohrab Mahdavi, on a pretty, tree-lined street in the well-heeled Fereshteh neighborhood in the hills of northern Tehran. Sohrab is one of the gentlest and purest souls I ever met. He and his wife Mahsa Shekarloo, a UNICEF official in Tehran working on women's issues, are keen observers of Iranian culture and politics.

Sohrab and Mahsa's apartment is a bit sparse, but tastefully decorated, with a nice sound system. As soon as we

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arrived, Sohrab laid out a delicious meal of *kuku*, an omelet with minced vegetable, rice, yogurt, and some fresh *sabzi*, a plate of local herbs that normally includes mint, basil, dill, parsley, coriander, cilantro, tarragon, and watercress.

After dinner, we had tea and snacked on salted marijuana seeds. Not surprisingly, these are popular with college students because they help them to stay awake during long nights of studying for exams (before going to bed, students will chew poppy seed to come down). As we drank and ate, we listened to some traditional setar music.

Like the sitar, the setar has movable frets that make it possible to play various modes of Persian music and the combination of semitones, quarter-tones, and *korons* that characterize it. I was aware of how versatile the instrument was, but I'd never listened to the kind of traditional Persian music Sohrab was playing for me, particularly the songs based on the *segah* mode, which combines a *koron* with a semi-flat *re*, or second, for a truly haunting sound.

Sohrab is the founder of *Tehran Avenue*, where Behnam works. The online zine was created in 2001 to explore cultural life in Tehran. "Basically, *Tehran Avenue* is a bunch of people trying to find out what's going on in their society," said Behnam. While it was started with only a small group of writers, in the last six years it has grown into a sizable community to "push the limits of understanding" of Iranian culture. Sohrab and his team see the site as a means of bringing the vibrant underground scene of Tehran aboveground. Aided by the "back alleys of the website," they employ both English and Farsi to bring expatriate and local Iranians into one community.

The activity that put *Tehran Avenue* on the global cultural map was Sohrab's idea to hold a virtual battle of the bands in

2004. Called Tehran Avenue Music Open, the competition prompted interest from hundreds of bands—itsself an indication of how big the underground music scene is just in Tehran—with dozens sending in their music to be judged. A couple of years earlier, *Tehran Avenue* ran an “Underground Music Competition,” the existence of which was spread entirely by word of mouth and, in a non-publicized manner, via the Internet. But sympathetic officials from the cultural establishment let them know that calling the competition “underground” could actually put the bands who participated in harm’s way, so they decided to make it an open, albeit virtual, forum. Both competitions helped to solidify the identities of the country’s emerging rock and metal bands.

The submissions showed how many great young musicians were coming of age in Tehran, and also pointed to the desperate need for an accessible space for them to get together and share their music. As of 2007, there were three Web-based competitions. Sadly, it’s not yet possible to arrange live competitions to determine the winners, but the competitions have helped Iranian rock artists learn more about their own scene, and have opened their music to the world at large.

Like Walking Without Legs

Very soon after the Revolution, Tehran was transformed into what the anthropologist Roxanne Varzi aptly describes as an “Islamic revolutionary space.” Old monuments were replaced by new ones celebrating the Revolution, billboards featured photos of clerics and Islamic symbols instead of ads for the latest Western goods, and women could no longer walk the city’s wide boulevards in anything but the full-length outer

garment known as a chador. “An all-encompassing Islamic reality” was created, according to Varzi, and it didn’t include rock ’n’ roll.

The Islamic public sphere became even more narrowly focused once Saddam Hussein attacked Iraq in late December 1980. The war intensified the already powerful cult of martyrdom in post-Revolution Iran. The massive casualties produced by the war, and particularly by the Iranian tactic of using human waves to counter Iraq’s superior firepower, required that Iranians—not just the young men fighting, but the families sacrificing them—have a thirst for martyrdom.

After Khomeini’s death in 1989, Iranian society gradually opened up during the Rafsanjani and particularly the Khatemi governments of the next decade and a half. Increasing numbers of young people became disaffected with the cult of martyrdom and complete self-sacrifice. Instead of the religious idea of *bi-khodi*, or self-annihilation, being the dominant mode of religious expression, the more liberal idea of *khod-sazi*, or individualistic self-help, began to take hold among young Iranians disillusioned by the waste of war. Some of them were led to metal as an alternative value system rather than just as a form of musical escapism. As Armin Ghaouf explains, “What makes heavy metal so important are the eight years of brutal war—twice the length of America’s involvement in World War II. I remember the missiles coming to Tehran, so wearing a metal or Maiden T-shirt with a tank on it is very relevant to me. We didn’t know if we’d live through the war. And even today, at twelve years old we are still forced to learn how to use AK-47s and to defend against chemical weapons.”

With such experiences, it’s no wonder that death metal

became popular among young people. But how do they make it part of their everyday lives on the streets of Tehran? They do it by blasting music in their cars until the *basij* pulls them over, or by wearing skimpy headscarves until the *basij* force them to pull them completely over their scalps; and by wearing their iPods or Walkmans, which, especially for women with their mandatory headscarves, has become a favorite way to tune out the existing regime and into one's own world while walking down the street. Some even tag the logos of their favorite metal bands on walls across Tehran—whether in their bedrooms or on the street—claiming their bit of territory from a society in which they feel they have little stake.

Finally, Iranians connect with their music through the Internet, not just in English but in Farsi as well (while only one in sixty people in the world speak Persian, the language ranks fourth in frequency of use in Internet blogs). As Behnam explained about *Tehran Avenue's* focus on creating a web-based community of artists and fans: "Increasingly we've chosen to go through the cyberworld because of the ban on live shows." But, I wondered, how do you do music without live shows? Behnam thought for a second and agreed, "Yes, it's like walking without legs. Music is supposed to bring people together and create communities—real, not virtual. If you can't do that, then something is missing."

But even without the chance to perform in truly public settings (and therefore in front of large crowds), metal musicians argue that playing metal gives them confidence for life, and a safe place to work out feelings of aggression and hopelessness that otherwise would lead to more-unhealthy activities (from violence to drug use), which are commonplace in Iran today despite the regime's self-image as a paragon of

Islamic virtue. As Armin puts it, “Metal is like an asylum. A mental asylum that rejuvenates you and gives you hope.”

New Gods and Old Martyrs

“When you breathe in our country, it’s political,” admitted Ali Azhari. “But even so, we’re not doing stuff to harm the system, we’re just trying to survive.” Ali was trying to convince me of his innocent intentions. But it was hard to take his protestations of innocence very seriously when he was wearing a T-shirt that read, YOUR GOD IS DEAD. Ali’s T-shirt, but not his argument, made more sense when he introduced his new project, Arthimoth. “Arthimoth is a newborn god I created myself, a combination of an ancient Persian name with the Greek goddess Artemis [the goddess of the wilderness and fertility]. I thought that this is the time to re-create ancient gods as a legacy of our fathers. Musically, we try to remix very old, traditional Iranian village music with contemporary music and especially extreme metal. In other words, we root the metal in our culture.”

Creating other gods, however metaphorically, is certainly a good way to get into trouble in Iran—even more so when it’s obvious. As Ali and Armin admitted, “We chose this metal in order to communicate. We write on behalf of the kids.” Yet if you watch Ali in the recording studio, Baphomet shirt drenched with sweat as he records a brutal vocal that sounds—and looks, if the grimace on his face is any indication—like it’s coming from his bowels, it’s hard not to take his theology seriously. Certainly the government does—to a certain degree.

As we were talking, Ali loaded the video for “Baptize”

onto his computer. Ali is rightfully proud of the video because it demonstrates his skills as a metal songwriter, guitarist, and filmmaker. It's among the most disturbingly powerful music videos I've ever seen, riffing on the futility of violence first brought to metal cinema with Metallica's groundbreaking video "One" (which depicts a horrifically wounded soldier—without arms or legs, blind, deaf, and mute—using morse code to tap out a message to his doctors to kill him). But "Baptize" takes the message of "One" to a far higher degree of intensity than Metallica's innovative video—both musically, as the chromatic minor riffs of the song have enough of a hint of the unsettledness produced by the *koron* to keep the listener constantly off balance, while the drums never settle down into a beat you can groove to, and visually (something I wouldn't have imagined possible before seeing his video).

Ali uses the word "baptize" to indicate how Iranians are forcibly submerged, body and soul, in a system in which there is no room for independent thought. The video's lead actor is a man, mostly naked, who is led, seemingly willingly, to a chair. Immediately upon sitting down, he has the top of his head sawed off; his brain is shocked with electrodes and then nibbled on by a rat while another man screams into his ear from an occult-looking book (Ali actually used a Hebrew book because using the Qur'an would have really gotten him into trouble). The images move back and forth between shots of the band headbanging in unison and Ali singing as the rat eats the man's brain. Finally, as the song ends, the "doctor" sews the man's scalp back on and he stumbles away, like a zombie, into the world.

Ali's studio was raided while he was completing production for the video. The original masters of the video were

confiscated, and he was questioned by the secret police. But he managed to hide another master copy and upload the video onto YouTube, where he's received comments from both Israel and Lebanon with the same message: "Don't let religion ruin your art; 'keep it brutal.'" It's a sentiment that's shared by many Iranian metalheads. A member of Iran's hottest young metal band, Tarantist, put it this way: "Metal is in our blood. It's not entertainment, it's our pain, and also an antidote to the hypocrisy of religion that is injected into all of us from the moment we're born."

From Boom Boxes to Mobile Phones: Tehran's Streetcorner Public Sphere

Bahman, rhythm guitarist for Tarantist, explained that in Iran the idea of a unique Iranian identity is so strong that "anything that looks like a foreign culture is frowned upon. Especially if it comes from the U.S." Yet hip-hop, which even more than heavy metal is identifiable as a product of the "Great Satan," has had an easier time of it in Iran than its hard-rock counterpart (the baggy clothing preferred by rappers does have the advantage of being more Islamically acceptable than the tight leather pants, T-shirts, and menacing-looking jewelry that define metal style). Indeed, rap has played a central role in creating a broad sense of community against the grain of the regime's wished-for Shi'i utopia, very often without arousing the suspicion that it's doing just that.

The Iranian rap scene is still small compared to the much better established hard rock scene, but its rapid growth is described by many metalheads with envy. That doesn't mean that rappers are off the government's radar screen; several

were arrested around the time I was in Iran, including one of the country's leading rappers, Hich-Kas, for being too overtly political. But in general, hip-hop in Iran is more tolerated than heavy metal, as long as it doesn't deal directly with sexual issues or take on the government.

While it has strong working-class and lower-class roots, many rappers and fans are from the wealthier segments of society. No matter their origin, most Iranian rappers have chosen the genre both because of its connection to worldwide musical trends and because of rap's history of political and social criticism. One of Iran's rising female rappers, Salome, explained: "The true meaning of hip-hop culture [is] a lot deeper than it looks on the surface. It's become much more eclectic than it was previously, and much more out in the open. As important, it's become Persianized instead of just copying the West. For example, I only use natural instruments, without samples [the digitally recorded bits of instruments or other songs that has long been the foundation of hip-hop production] in my songs."

Salome is half Iranian and half Turkish, and makes her living as a designer since doing so as a rapper is out of the question. (That she can make a living as a fashion designer in the Islamic Republic says something about the complex politics of cultural production in Iran today.) When we met in the office of *Tehran Avenue*, she was dressed, fashionably, in black, including her headscarf, which she kept adjusting as we spoke. A connoisseur of alternative hip-hop in the States, Salome is a fan of Dead Prez, Immortal Technique, and Paris. She raps in Persian and Turkish on top of beats influenced by these artists, yet unlike her heroes, she goes out of her way to define herself as apolitical: "I'm not political, just social, so I'll

do songs about our rage at all the Iranian rappers who say meaningless stuff imitating commercial American rap, stuff that has no connection to our culture.”

When rappers in the Arab/Muslim world say they’re “social, not political,” it means they’re not critical of their own government; foreign governments are another matter entirely. After the United States invaded Iraq, Salome wrote a rapid-fire, nationalistic America-basher called “Petrolika.” But while she doesn’t mind performing abroad (as she did at the Intergalactic Music festival in Amsterdam in 2006), in Iran “I want to stay underground. I don’t want to do interviews, to make that sacrifice, particularly being a woman.” Rapping is not high on the Ahmedinejad list of approved feminine vocations.

Iran’s male rappers are equally aware of what lines they can publicly cross without getting arrested or otherwise harassed. This was clear from a visit to one of Tehran’s best—but still underground—hip-hop recording studios. The studio, which has no official name, is located in a wealthy neighborhood, but—as usual—it’s in the basement so that neighbors, at least those outside the building, won’t know it’s there (although the steady coming and going of young men in hip-hop clothing, or with instruments slung over their shoulders, must surely indicate that something un-Islamic—from the regime’s point of view—is going on there). As soon as I entered, I had a case of *déjà vu*; its smell and look reminded me of almost every other studio I’ve been in. Cigarette smoke filled the air, mixed with the odor of fried fast food, while chips and empty soda cans were scattered on tables and the floor.

It was here that I met two of the leading rappers on the

Iranian scene, Reveal and Hich Kas. Reveal grew up largely in the UK and is currently completing a degree in Persian language at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Hich Kas, whose name means “nobody” in Persian, is a home-grown rapper who chose his name specifically as a play on rappers who try to blow themselves up with pompous-sounding names. “I just wanted to show that somebody that calls himself ‘nobody’ can say big things.” Both rappers are critical of the current situation in Iran and the problems their fans face, but neither was very comfortable talking explicitly about politics.

Reveal is one of the most educated rappers I’ve ever met, but for sheer grandeur of vision the prize has to go to the eighteen-year old Tehran rapper Peyman-Chet. “The ‘chet’ means ‘stoned,’ ” Peyman explained to me as we sat in a tiny rehearsal/recording studio on the third floor of a working-class neighborhood of central Tehran. This was not the Tehran I had grown used to. The streets were narrower, the buildings older. Peyman chose his stage name not because he likes drugs, but rather as a play on the way rap and drug culture are mixed in the States—“It’s quite the opposite in Iran, where it’s more techno and rock and dance music that attract the drugs. I chose the dope imagery to focus on addicted people.” Drugs are in fact a huge problem among Iran’s youth. According to a 2005 UN report, the country has the highest addiction rate in the world, especially for heroin and related drugs. “Natural and synthetic heroin, even synthetic crack; we got it all in Iran,” a member of the metal band Ahoora admitted. “Yeah, we have an abundance of everything here—drugs, oil, money—everything except freedom,” another band member chimed in.

Ahoora and Peyman are seemingly from opposite sides of the tracks. Peyman practices in a dingy studio with old equipment, Ahoora has a state of the art Protools recording system in the villa of the guitar player's father, a wealthy pistachio merchant whose faux-1920s Hollywood-style home boasts an intricately carved wood-paneled barroom that must have seen its share of fabulous parties in the Shah's day. Peyman has a new Yankees cap, Ahoora's lead guitarist has five electric guitars (two Jacksons, one Ibanez, one BC Rich, and one I'd never seen before), three Marshall amps (a JCM 2000, a Valvestate 2000, and a G30R), sixteen effects pedals, and an eighteen-button effects board hooked up to a rack-mounted digital effects system.

Of course, being a rapper, Peyman doesn't need any of that stuff. All he needs is a pen, a notebook, and a few hundred dollars to record a song that will be downloaded by thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people all over the world soon after he uploads it to his site. And while his name parodies hip-hop's fascination with dope, his clothing is as authentic as it can get when you're living 8,000 miles east of New York: baggy pants, sports jersey, baseball cap, and a big gold chain. "I wear baggy clothes because when people see me it makes them think. It shows that I want change," he explained.

The small studio, which was normally used by rock bands, was filled with posters of Pantera, Megadeth, and Cowboys from Hell, a cheap drum set, and a small amp, on which rested, of all things, a menorah with *Shalom* written in Hebrew and English in the middle of it. "What's that doing there?" I asked incredulously. "I think it's cool. It's beautiful, and it pisses off the state," said the owner of the studio, who prefers that I do not use his name because, while Iran's

25,000-strong Jewish community faces almost no persecution in the Islamic Republic, thinking menorahs are cool is not something you want to advertise publicly.

Although he's very young, Peyman enjoys a certain notoriety as a result of his music's distribution over the Internet and a video of his being broadcast on Dubai or European channels. He doesn't just see himself as a rapper. "I became interested in Persian poetry and Irfan—mysticism—and try to mix all of that into my raps and send it to the streets with a bit of Tupac thrown in. We're like modern Firdusui or Rumi [the two most famous Persian poets]," he argued. He played me the rhythm of a new song he's working on while he rhymed in a strange mixture of classical and postmodern Persian. "Eminem inspired by Rumi," he said.

As I chatted with Peyman, I understood why rap was spreading so quickly and deeply in Iran: rappers have succeeded in reclaiming public space for themselves in a way that metalheads can only dream of. "There's around 1,000 rappers just in Tehran," Peyman explained, "and we constantly meet and have battles in the parks. One of the most important is [the appropriately named] 'Joint Park,' or 'Cigari Park' in Persian. Basically, when we want to meet and have a battle, the word goes out through SMS messages or announcements on Persian-language rap sites. At least two times a month we have these gatherings, and up to 200 rappers and fans show up. Once we have a critical mass of people"—and he took out his mobile phone to play me a video of one of these battles while he was talking—"someone takes out a mobile phone and plays a beat that's stored on it, and we start rhyming. But it's not just the park, we get together and rap on streets, sidewalks, corners, even though it's illegal. Usually the *basij* check us out

and leave us alone, and so do the cops, but we can disperse and regroup very quickly if the cops hassle us.”

Peyman is very focused on “doing something that will be loved on the streets.” But in Iran, street cred doesn’t come from the gangsta or thug life. Instead, it comes from writing a song that is an innovative combination of Persian and Western music and raps, and deals with real social issues without focusing the regime’s attention on you. “The problem is, nothing is underground in Iran. You can do a political song in a third-class studio in Tehran and you’ll be caught in a week. They have spies everywhere. My friend did a song called ‘Objection’ against everything that’s going on, and he was caught and put in jail for a week. He had to sign something saying he’d never do a political song again. I just drop some of Tupac’s more political lyrics into my songs. Those who know, get it.”

Despite the government’s overwhelming power, Peyman feels that “the only way to push the government is to grow the movement beyond the point it can easily be destroyed. That’s why I focus not on gangsta rap but on our problems here. Yet those rappers who rap about drugs and sex, or are hard-core nationalist, get more famous than those who rap about social problems. Kids today are much more interested in drugs and sex than in fighting to change society,” he said with disgust. “But if someone could give them the energy and inspiration to do something, things would change.”

Needing Each Other, or Needing to Defeat the Other?

I thought about how the Iranian government must view the growing popularity of rappers like Peyman Chet and their

metal counterparts as I sat in the Tehran office of Massoud Abid, a professor of philosophy and human rights at Mufid University in Qom (the center of Shī'i scholarship in Iran). Although he is a Hojatul Islam, the rank just below ayatollah, if anyone from the establishment would be sympathetic to—or at least tolerant of—the dreams of young music fans, it would be Abid, who is well known to Iranian scholars and activists as one of the more progressive religious scholars and officials in Iran.

Neither my spoken Persian nor his English was fluent enough to carry on a complicated conversation solely in either language, so we spoke in Arabic mixed with the other two. The trilingual texture of the conversation symbolized one of Abid's key points, which is that Iran is becoming ever more globalized today, even as the United States seeks to isolate it politically and economically. And along with being globalized, Iranian young people are becoming more politicized, he felt, contrary to what Peyman-Chet had said. "Viewed from the outside, it might seem that young people are increasingly depoliticized and alienated from the state today," Abid argued. Yet, from his position on the inside, things looked very different. The public sphere was neither absent nor deep underground: "It's just developing in less noticeable ways, outside of mainstream popular culture. Just look at the large increase in the number of NGOs in Iran in the last last four to five years."

But at an even more basic level, the universities are where much of the most interesting developments are taking place, according to Abid. He sees this especially in how students in seminaries and "secular" universities are combining religious and nonreligious courses of study. "Seminary students are

taking courses in human rights or sociological theory, more women than ever are enrolled in universities; you can see the change in the personality of students, as the focus on politics of the post-Revolution generation has also given way to more of a focus on personal issues,” he explained.

Abid believes that most Iranians want better relations with the West. “We have to do two things: first, get rid of this conflict between Islam and the West; and, second, learn how to understand the West for both good and bad. The changing position of the religious establishment toward music is a good indication of the possibilities for such a rapprochement. Today most senior ulema [Muslim legal scholars] are opposed to rock not because of religious reasons as much as because it’s not part of Iran’s cultural heritage.”

The hope is that as Iran’s overwhelmingly young population expands the horizons of what is a legitimate part of Iranian culture, that too will change. Indeed, Abid expressed confidence that a rapprochement with the United States, and with the West more broadly, would ultimately occur. In the end, he told me as I got up to leave, “the two sides need each other a lot more than they need to defeat the other.”

Abid’s philosophy is certainly far from the politically dominant conservative philosophy of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. But there is a well-developed strand of relatively progressive theology and social and political thought in Iranian Shi’ism today, especially around the issue of women. As Ziba Mir Hosseini describes it in her book *Islam and Gender*, “If clerics want to stay in power they cannot ignore popular demands for freedom, tolerance, and social justice.” Whether it’s women working through sympathetic ayatollahs to reinterpret Islamic law in less oppressive ways, or metalheads

using online zines to pry open their society's public sphere, most Iranians refuse to yield to the repressive dreams of their leaders. This has produced a cultural tug-of-war that will continue for the foreseeable future, and metal and hip-hop will be an important part of its soundtrack.

Iran's Unplugged Heavy Metal Heroes

During my last few days in Iran, I was lucky to meet up with two of the bravest and heaviest musicians in the country. The first was Mahsa Vahdat, one of the best young singers of traditional Persian music in Iran, who gained international notice with her beautiful duet with British singer Sarah Jane Morris on the celebrated 2004 album *Lullabies from the Axis of Evil*. Mahsa's soft face, long dark hair, and captivating eyes draw people toward her the moment they see her, and her almost-whisper when she speaks brings you even closer. But when she starts to sing, her rich, sad, trembling voice is commanding.

"It's not easy to perform in Iran today," Mahsa explained, given the restrictions on women singing solo, and on live performances by women more broadly. "We are forced to perform outside the country if we want to perform our material as it's supposed to be played." But Mahsa has been lucky; at least she can write new music and record it in Tehran despite the cultural clampdown by the Ahmedinejad government. "The problem isn't religion. Everything in Iran is in the end about politics; religion is just the excuse."

It's also about power—wielded by men over women—which frustrates her more than most any other dynamic. "On the face of it, it's hilarious, their policy of restricting people

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and telling them that you can only sing for women. But it's also humiliating." Ironically, the very thing that limits her opportunities to perform in Iran—being a woman with an exceptional voice—makes it easy for her to get invited to international festivals and collaborations with artists from Europe and the United States. It's far harder for most rock bands, the success of Tarantist and Hypernova notwithstanding.

One artist who should be getting lots of offers in and outside Iran is Mohsen Namjoo, one of the country's most respected younger musicians. Mohsen plays the light and airy setar, though he looks like a weathered rock star of at least forty-five—a kind of Iranian Keith Richards with better teeth and skin. In fact, Mohsen is in his early thirties, but he's been through enough pain, drugs, and suffering in the last few years to last a lifetime.

When we finally managed to arrange a joint performance, at the apartment of one of Tehran's leading gallery owners, I understood just how heavy Persian rock could be, even unplugged. Most of the artists I've met in Iran believe, as one metal musician put it, that "you can't make a career out of music in Iran unless you are willing to compromise." Mohsen clearly hasn't heard about that philosophy. He lives purely and only to play music, and couldn't care less about the latest trends in pop music or the most recent three political crises. His years studying in some of Iran's most prestigious conservatories have produced an improbably wild yet somehow controlled style of setar playing, with a voice that can change from growled whispers to howls to tearful falsettos in the space of a measure.

With his talent has come quite a bit of ego (as more than one musician who's worked with him warned me); the best

strategy I could think of halfway through our first song together was to play a simple rhythm on the guitar, or setar when we switched instruments for a couple of songs, and let him do his thing. This was exactly what everyone at this party had come to hear (several brought camcorders or mp3 players to record the “show,” which quickly made its way onto YouTube). As I quickly learned, Mohsen’s thing includes blues progressions seemingly shorn from Robert Johnson and heavy-metal riffs drawn directly from Deep Purple and Black Sabbath, interlaced with the intricate melodies of the *segah* mode, which he has transformed into an Iranian all-around blues-rock mode that left me, and most of the small audience, trying to figure out whether he was playing an Iranicized version of Western rock or blues, or a Westernized version of traditional Iranian music.

Mohsen might be an ex-junkie whose prodigious talent is matched only by his outsized ego. But he seems to have figured out the best strategy to defeat the mullahs and the repressive Iranian state that keep going after other musicians: ignore them. Rather than take them on with political lyrics, just get everyone high on your infectious music. Tear at the legitimacy of the regime with each *koron* and each three-stringed power chord strummed—when necessary, with a paper clip bent over a broken nail—with violent intensity on your setar. Get the metalheads and the traditional artists to give you props and support you, move from party to party and, when possible, from concert to concert, with a ferociously joyful music that links together almost every style heard in Iran, from the Zoroastrian era to the arrival of hip-hop.

As Mohsen explained in his very broken English, he just “lets the music do the talking, and the music will set you

free.” It’s a sentiment that more and more members of Iran’s metal, rock, and hip-hop scenes are taking to heart. It’s not an easy task—at almost the same moment I was flying out of Tehran, an Iranian American colleague of mine at UC Irvine, Ali Shakeri, was arrested at the airport, and languished for months in jail or under house arrest with several other Iranian Americans on charges of being CIA agents and “velvet revolutionaries.” Yet only a few months later I was able to meet up with Farzad Golpayegani and his band in Istanbul, where we—three Iranians, a Brit, and an American Jew—performed before 30,000 fans at the biggest (and perhaps the only) peace festival in the Muslim world. That’s the way life goes in Iran today, and however disheartening it can be, no one I know would risk the status quo for the risky and dangerous business of another revolution (“Look what happened last time we had one!” was the universal response I received every time I broached the subject).

Everyone agrees that the struggle for Iran’s soul will be long and hard, but if the activists, intellectuals, and artists I’ve met, religious and secular alike, can muster enough patience and strategic foresight, there’s a good chance that they’ll succeed in cracking open the public sphere a bit more each year. And soon enough, it will grow so wide that no one—be it Ahmadinejad, the *basij*, or the ayatollahs—can force it closed again.