

“I Followed The Music...”

By Brian B Donaldson, 27 February 2011

In 2007, the movie August Rush was released. The Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com) summarized the movie as “A drama with fairy tale elements, where an orphaned musical prodigy uses his gift as a clue to finding his birth parents.” Although the movie is very good and has a tinge of Oliver elements, there are some lines spoken by the characters that sums up what music really is.

When August (played by Freddie Highmore) meets Wizard (played by Robin Williams) for the first time, Wizard asks “What are you doing here?” August answered, “I followed the music!”

I didn’t follow the music to Afghanistan, but I sure did find the music here. In Forward Operating Base (FOB) Fenty, there is a diverse cultural mix of Afghans, Bosnians, Filipinos, Canadians, Americans, you name it and it will probably be found here. So with this mixture of ethnic origins, there is bound to be a mixture of ethnic music. But where does one go to find such music?

One does not have to look any further than the Base Chapel. There one will find a mix of rock and gospel music to raise one’s soul. But on Friday nights, one will find a different kind of music. Music that originates from the very heart of the country we are in. The music of Afghanistan.



The music that filled the tiny chapel on Forward Operating Base Fenty is a mixture of Dari (Afghan language), Pashto (Afghan language), and Farsi (Persian language). There was a sampling of both modern folk songs or “Ghazai” and classical folk songs. The songs were local to the Kabul region of Afghanistan but also had a flavoring of Indian Bollywood songs. Although entertaining, I missed the ever popular Indian Bollywood dance that is associated with the Bollywood culture.

Ghazai is mainly Pakistani in origin, but like the regions, one style of music never stays put in one location. Ghazai is based off of the Tappa, a form of poetry which was set to music. My discerning ear could only identify the music of the Dari and Farsi languages having lived in Iran for many years. Dari is very close to Farsi, as Canadian French is very close to French. They each have developed slang or pronunciation differences to their cultures.

Whatever song that Ali sang, it seemed that everyone in the audience, except me, knew the words and would sing along. I found myself bobbing my head and tapping my foot to the exotic rhythms being produced by Tom’s Tabla playing.



Ali Sadiqyar, was born in Kabul Afghanistan and emigrated to the United States in 1983. He taught himself to play the Harmonium and uses this instrument to accompany his singing. Ali is a linguist at FOB Fenty and has been working there for 3 months. Before being assigned to Fenty, he worked at the main military base in Bagram (26 miles north of Kabul) for two months, and FOB Gardez for 10 months.

The Harmonium is small reed-type organ that operate with a hand bellows. The sound is somewhat similar to an accordion which operates in the same manner. This particular instrument has 4.5 octaves and Ali plays both chords and melodies with his right hand while operating the bellows with his left.

Tamim “Tom” Assifi was born in Helman province, Afghanistan. Tamim is also a linguist at FOB Fenty and has been here for four year. Tamim and his family migrated to the United states in 1980. Tom, as he is known to all his friends, started playing the Tabla at the ripe old age of five. His father played the Sitar and required someone to accompany him so Tom was chosen. Tom’s mastery of the Tabla is evident in his ability to play multiple rhythms mixed within a standard tempo. During the playing I don’t think I heard Tom ever lose the beat.

The Tabla consist of two individual percussion instruments. The Dayan is the smaller, higher pitched of the two. The Baya is the larger and is used to keep the main beat, much like the kick drum of a modern rock band.



The most prominent sound heard from the Bayan is the deep boing sound made when pressing the heel of the hand against the head of the drum.

One of my favorite lines in August Rush came to mind when I sat and listened to Ali and Tom. Just the sound of the music which filled the chapel that evening brought to mind the question asked by Robin Williams character, do you know what music is? The answer? "God's little reminder that there's something else besides us in this universe, a harmonic connection between all living beings, every where, even the stars."



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