
Persian Pop Music: At 'Home' in Exile and in 'Exile' at Home

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The Iranian Revolution in 1979 had a devastating impact on pop music in Iran. In the wake of the revolution, Persian pop was adopted as *the* symbol of the overthrown Pahlavi dynasty and it was completely outlawed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic fundamentalist regime. Seemingly overnight, a great number of Iran's most prominent artists, musicians and leftist thinkers, along with those Iranians who wanted to (and could afford to) resettle, left their homes fearing severe punishment.¹ A few years after the revolution, more than half a million exiled Persians found themselves on Southern California's sunny shores. They jestingly dubbed their new home 'Tehrangeles' and set up a flourishing music industry, one that re-released the music of pre-revolutionary pop stars and produced new, increasingly Americanised, music. Recordings by pre-revolutionary Iranian musicians, Bijan Mortazavi, Googoosh, Ebi and Dariush for example, are still banned in Iran (although they are widely available via the black market and online in mp3 format), but these artists still perform to immense crowds of Iranian exiles around the globe.² The music being created in exile now

¹ Punishment for anti-hegemonic political views is not a rarity in Iran. Prior to the Iranian Revolution Shah Pahlavi silenced many of his opponents with the help of his secret service, the SAVAK. The Islamic Republic has openly committed many executions since 1979 and imprisoned many free thinkers. Democracy Now! published an online article in 2001 describing the trial of Iranian feminist filmmaker Tahmineh Milani. Her controversial film *The Hidden Half*, unlike many others, had actually been approved for release by the Ministry of Culture, but she was put to trial for committing acts against the regime and faced execution if the charges were not dropped. She was eventually released on bail and received solidarity from many international filmmakers and President Khatami. In *We are Iran – The Persian Blogs*, Nasrin Alavi discusses the imprisonment, torture and home detention of many of Iran's oldest dissidents. At the age of 73, Ezatollah Sahabi was imprisoned in solitary confinement for over a year, and Daryoush Forouhar was murdered alongside his wife, Parzaneh Eskandari, the activist and writer, at the age of 70; they were stabbed and their bodies were left facing Mecca. See [no author] 'Iranian Filmmaker Faces Execution,' *Democracy Now!* 6 November 2001, <<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=03/04/07/0217211>> (accessed 30 May 2006); Nasrin Alavi, *We are Iran – The Persian Blogs* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005) 57.

² A fansite for Googoosh that is updated frequently by an Iranian man whose pseudonym is Pullniro (a conglomeration of his two favourite actors, Bill Pullman and Robert DeNiro), can be found at <<http://www.googoosh.tv>>.

harks only distantly to the pre-revolutionary sounds of orchestral harmonies, lilting off-kilter *shesh o hasht* (literally, 'six and eight' or 6/8) beats, and reverberant vocals. A quarter of a century later, the pop music being created in Tehrangeles—a trite, semi-nostalgic brand of digitised 6/8 dance music—no longer satiates the desires of Iranian youths born and living in Iran. They crave a music that speaks directly to, for and about them, so they are making their own, and at the same time subverting the regime.

This article is based on both extensive research and personal experience and the literature used is discussed below. In September 2006, I stayed in Tehran for one month and met the musicians with whom I had been communicating online for a year previously. I spent time in their studios and at their favourite places to meet for coffee; I listened to their demos, saw their music videos, and played music with them.

The first part of the subtitle for this article refers to the large body of Iranians who have emigrated, yet have retained their specifically Iranian identity by establishing a strong exilic community in their new geographic location; they are 'at home in exile.' The second part, and the part with which this discourse mostly is concerned, refers to those Iranians living in Iran who have been forced to subsume some of their most outstanding characteristics in order to avoid persecution by the present regime, consequently carrying out most of their sociocultural relations in private; they are 'in exile at home.' The nature of the repressive regime means that public events in Iran usually revolve around politics, protest or prayer. The women attending are all veiled (mostly with designer threads pulled back far enough to exhibit a coifed and highlighted fringe), but it is because the law requires them to be. However, this mass-mediated public image is by no means 'real,' and what goes on in the basements, lounge rooms, and gated premises of Tehran's apartment complexes, keeping outsiders out and insiders in, is deserving of greater exploration. While the public domain might be a place for wearing the *hejab* and attending Friday prayers, Christiane Bird, author of *Neither East nor West* (a *safar nameh* or travelogue, literally a 'travel letter' that narrates her three-month stay in Iran), notes that the private domain is:

for enjoying forbidden music and literature, watching banned videos and TV shows, wearing miniskirts and halter tops, drinking alcohol and doing drugs, and criticizing the Islamic government.³

Iran was never formally colonised but Hammed Shahidian, a sociology professor, leftist and feminist activist, argues that in the years leading up to the revolution, the USA colonised Iran by sending its cultural product in to bat.⁴ Nowadays it is MTV and its cable TV cohorts that play the part of American ambassador to an Iranian middle-class who, in increasing numbers, have illegal satellite dishes hidden on their roofs.⁵ In contrast to satellite broadcasts, the Internet, another medium that the middle class have effectively installed in their private domain, proves an excellent tool for subversion because of its unique ability to unite a

³ Christiane Bird, *Neither East nor West: One Woman's Journey through the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002) 51.

⁴ Hammed Shahidian, 'The Iranian Left and the "Woman Question" in the Revolution of 1978–1979,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26.2 (1994): 230.

⁵ Afshin Molavi, 'Iran: It's My Party,' *Globalist Bookshelf—Global Culture*, 2002 [online resource], <<http://www.theglobalist.com/DBWeb/StoryId.aspx?StoryId=2837>> (accessed 12 July 2005).

geographically, politically, and ethnically diverse group of people who would otherwise be unable to organise collectives safely and with relative ease in the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) public domain. The regime, understanding the potential of the Internet, also attempts to control its usage, and this is explored in more detail below.

This article draws its data from the sundry Iranians I have met both online and offline. In writing it, I have also relied heavily on the Internet and its forums, blogs, networking communities (Myspace and Friendster), chat clients (MSN Messenger, Adium, Google Talk), fan clubs and both official and unofficial websites. Very few scholars have looked specifically at contemporary Iranian music from an ethnographic perspective until now, and it is because of this that my print sources are diverse. They include magazine and newspaper articles, graphic novels, films and CDs and one very comprehensive article by ethnomusicologist Laudan Nooshin.⁶ Here I examine the ways in which censorship affects musicians in Iran, however, in order to do so within the constraints of a journal article, I have referred solely to the case study of the band O-Hum. They were the first underground band to play outside Iran, at a music festival in Germany in 2004, and have had over six years experience in dealing with the government of Iran. O-Hum's experiences are not unique and, in my ongoing doctoral research (the thesis's working title is 'Subterranean Sounds and Reverberations of Dissent'), I will discuss further the production and distribution process as it impinges on the creativity of other groups, comparing those findings with the initial ones presented here.

Lysloff and Gay, editors of the volume *Music and Technoculture*, argue that technologies are brought into existence to control and to expand human capability and, that by doing this, technologies create ongoing tensions 'between cynical exploitation and utopian cooperation.'⁷ Lysloff and Gay say that technologies become imbued with social meaning as they attain a history of use, and posit that it is in the way that technology is used that meaning is found and contested. They call this space the 'intersection of human agency and technological artifact.'⁸ This article responds to their call for ethnographies that 'analyse and explain the cultural negotiations involved with global intersections—and local understandings.'

Cyberspace is a repository for collective cultural memory—it is popular culture, it is narratives created by its inhabitants ... it is real and it is virtual, it is ontological and phenomenological.⁹

The Internet has grown exponentially in popularity in Iran since the Unicode system was introduced to cyberspace, and in my 'Furl' archive (see Figure 1) I have listed a collection of websites presented in Farsi under the topic 'Farsi.'¹⁰ The surge in weblog popularity amongst

⁶ Laudan Nooshin, 'Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control, and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music,' in Annie J. Randall (ed.), *Music, Power, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 231–72.

⁷ René Lysloff and Leslie Gay, 'Introduction: Ethnomusicology in the Twenty-first Century,' *Music and Technoculture* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003) 18.

⁸ Lysloff and Gay, 'Introduction: Ethnomusicology,' 18.

⁹ Jan Fernback, 'The Individual within the Collective: Virtual Ideology and the Realization of Collective Principles,' in Steven Jones (ed.), *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety* (London: Sage Publications, 1997) 37; my emphasis.

¹⁰ Unicode is now the standard character set for computers, and is automatically installed with most new Internet browsers. It allows for a vast collection of symbols and characters to be typed, including the Arabic script, which makes typing in Farsi possible.

Figure 1. Screen capture showing how ‘My Archive’ at Furl.net is laid out. The websites I have catalogued are named, ranked and categorised, and the built-in browser enables searching of the articles using keywords. See <http://www.furl.net/members/persian_subversion> and <<http://www.furl.net/members/ballofyarn>>.

The screenshot displays the Furl.net interface. At the top left is the 'LookSmart FURL | Your Personal Web File' logo with the tagline 'Where To Look For What You Need.' On the top right, there is a search bar with the text 'Search for' and a 'Look' button. Below the search bar are 'Find', 'Save', and 'Share' icons. A navigation bar contains tabs for 'Home', 'My Archive', 'My Tools', 'My Settings', and 'Help'. Below the navigation bar is a breadcrumb trail: 'Get Started · Furl Features · Latest Headlines · Most Popular · Others' Archives · Tell a Friend'. The main content area is titled 'The persian_subversion Archive' with '(Private view · Public view)' and an 'RSS subscribe' button. It features a search bar with 'Date Any' and a 'Look' button, and a 'Filter by topic All' dropdown. The article list is sorted by 'Date · Title · Popularity · Rating' and includes the following entries:

Article Title	Rating	Date	Views
Iran Photos TrekEarth Gorgeous photos of Iran – and lots of them. http://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Middle_East/Iran/	Rated 5 in Photos	Oct 24, 2005 at 13:09:21 GMT.	60 views
GOOGOOSH . TV Pullniro and friends banded together to design this website as a gift for the diva. http://www.googoosh.tv/	Rated 5 in Googoosh	Oct 24, 2005 at 12:58:09 GMT.	59 views
iranian.com: Googoosh get well messages Googoosh underwent spine surgery to relieve her severe backache. Presented here are many get well soon cards made by fans. http://www.iranian.com/Googoosh/getwell.html	Rated 3 in Googoosh	Oct 24, 2005 at 12:52:30 GMT.	57 views
BBC NEWS Bloggers unite to fight Details of Sina Motalebi's arrest and other information about the wave of Iranian bloggers. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/2992401.stm	Rated 3 in Article	Nov 11, 2005 at 22:25:42 GMT.	52 views

The right sidebar contains four advertisement boxes: 'Advertising and Media' (NYTimes.com), 'IT Business News' (SMH.com.au/BizTech), 'News and Commentary' (www.aclon.org), and 'Earn Cash: Write Here Now' (www.Helium.com).

Iranian intellectuals and youth is covered in a lengthy article by the urban sociologist Amir-Ebrahimi, who surmises that the Internet allows its users to redefine the self and in so doing is able to consolidate lost or hidden identities.¹¹ On, or more specifically *in*, the Internet, Iranians can abandon the ‘self’ that they must perpetually perform publicly in order to please traditionalists and the regime. Nasrin Alavi, in her 2005 book *We are Iran – The Persian Blogs*, painstakingly translated excerpts from some of the 60,000 Persian blogs she reviewed; the Persian blogs have a regular readership and the dissident word now spreads quickly.¹²

Regulation of information on the Internet is problematic. In Iran, all Internet service providers (ISPs) must be approved by the theocracy—who are given a large list of websites that they must filter—to ensure that their customers cannot view them. Many exilic websites

¹¹ M. Amir-Ebrahimi, ‘Performance in Everyday Life and the Rediscovery of the “Self” in Iranian Weblogs,’ *Bad Jens Iranian Feminist Newsletter* 7 (September 2004) [online journal] <<http://www.badjens.com/rediscovery.html>> (accessed 19 September 2005).

¹² Alavi, *We are Iran*. At the time of the Iranian Revolution, Khomeini’s speeches were smuggled, on cassette, back to Iran via the black market. Modern communication technologies mean that messages of dissent can now be reproduced and spread more quickly, cheaply, easily and effectively.

are blocked, particularly those that house politically subversive material.¹³ The theocracy, realising the subversive potential of the Internet, has built its own prolific presence. Iran's new President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and the official, government-authorised Islamic Republic News Agency all have Farsi websites with English translations.¹⁴ This is not their only form of countersubversion, and the picture gets grim after a visit to the 'stop.censoring.us' website.¹⁵ The Islamic government claims to block only pornographic websites, yet *stop.censoring.us* reports that over 100 billion websites have been blocked in the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹⁶ Most of the filtered websites are pornographic in nature, but a great number of them are Iranian blogs or websites that are anti-establishment in orientation. In late July 2006, three weeks before I entered Iran for my first fieldwork trip, Myspace, the online networking tool that I had used to initiate communication with many of my research participants became filtered and remains so.

The Internet is a social space, a political space, a cultural space and a public space. Many people form intimate relationships online without expecting these to be consolidated by face-to-face meetings. Networking communities such as Myspace and Friendster allow people to connect themselves to others via friends and expand their social circle.¹⁷ Iranians can interact online in a way that is not possible in the physical public sphere where every move is governed by a seemingly omnipotent theocracy. The Islamic Republic of Iran officially allows only professional and academic access to the Internet but, in the words of Vivienne Walt, the Revolution created two spheres in Iran—the 'official' and the 'real'.¹⁸ Iran established its first Internet connection in 1992, had tens of thousands of users by 1999, and the number of users continues to grow astronomically.¹⁹ It is possible to buy cheap pre-paid dialup Internet cards from every corner store in Iran's major cities, so all one needs to get connected is a computer and a phone port.

Myspace allows users to 'browse' through *millions* of other users, whilst narrowing the range of potential friendship candidates by selecting any number of criteria, ranging from, for example, favourite musicians, movies and pastimes, to religious and political tendency and geographic location. In the case of music, the Internet is proving to be an exceptional tool,

¹³ The website of Reza Pahlavi, son of Mohammad and the grandson of the first Pahlavi Shah, operates from American exile. It is available online at <<http://www.rezapahlavi.org/>>, but is filtered in Iran.

¹⁴ See <<http://www.president.ir/eng/>> for the President, <<http://www.khamenei.ir/>> for the Supreme Leader, and <<http://www.irna.ir/en/>> for the Islamic Republic News Agency.

¹⁵ The *stop.censoring.us* website could be found at <<http://stop.censoring.us>> throughout 2005 and 2006. When this article was being prepared for publication in early 2007, I found that the website had been removed, and that the domain name was up for sale. Further research could not clarify why this had happened.

¹⁶ Peykeiran, '100 Billion Pages Filtered,' *stop.censoring.us* (2004) [online resource], <<http://stop.censoring.us/archives/011478.php>> (accessed 1 September 2005).

¹⁷ Myspace.com <<http://www.myspace.com>> and Friendster <<http://www.friendster.com>> are two of the Internet's most popular networking websites. They are based on the 'six degrees of separation' theory that claims that any person can be connected to another by linking no more than six people, or degrees. Myspace and Friendster are much more elaborate versions of the original Sixdegrees.com that is now defunct.

¹⁸ Vivienne Walt, 'Persian Pop vs. the Revolution,' *Salon News* (2000) [online resource], <http://archive.salon.com/news/feature/2000/02/24/iran_culture/index.html> (accessed 1 May 2007).

¹⁹ M. Rabasco, 'The Internet and the Evolution of Civil Society in Iran,' in M. Mazarr (ed.), *Information Technology and World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 116.

as musicians can upload, share and distribute their own music with ease. Providing that the group or musician already has access to a computer with an Internet connection, it is also free. Artists can connect to their contemporaries with ease and find a niche audience that may not necessarily share the same geographic location as they do. This is particularly important in Iran where the public is so highly physically regulated. After years of vicarious subversion, young Iranians are creating music that speaks their truth, and that is empowering to a people repressed for so long.

The Persian pop music being made in Southern California today is a largely meretricious genre that is disconnected from the reality of today's Iran. Hamid Naficy, an author who examines film and television produced in the Middle Eastern diaspora, says the anger towards the Islamic regime in the exilic music industry of the 1980s was replaced in the 1990s by an overwhelming sense of nostalgia for pre-revolutionary Iran.²⁰ Exilic music videos, wistful in nature, often borrow imagery from Islam and the directors use it in a subversive way to show their disdain for the theocracy coercing their country. Post-production on the new music videos is heavy; the exilic pop star is often superimposed over Iranian landscapes. The result is a quite surrealist view of the homeland, but all the same, the nostalgic imagery that these videos evoke is 'not for the frozen images of a distant past, created from exile, but for the intimate sounds, images, smells, and other senses of a living people and culture.'²¹ One of the major exceptions to this statement is the artist Arash, a Swedish-Iranian pop star.²² Arash Labaf was born in Tehran in 1977, two years before the revolution, and his namesake is an Iranian mythological hero. His song 'Boro Boro' (literally 'go away') topped the charts in Europe and, with its mix of simplistic Farsi (enabling a person with no knowledge of Farsi to sing along with the chorus) and Bhangra-borrowed beats (the most recent dance craze), it quickly became a club hit. I heard 'Boro Boro' played in the Persian grocery store in Auckland, New Zealand, then in a shoe shop in France, then at the houses of friends in Iran.

Pop music was banned and recordings were contraband for nearly twenty years after the 1979 revolution. Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Khatami's election to the position of Iranian President in 1997 led to a large number of reforms in the cultural sector.²³ For the first time in the Islamic Republic of Iran certain types of pop music became legalised. The theocracy had effectively empowered pop music by banning it, yet Iranians were still consuming illicit popular culture in an attempt to remain connected to the outside world. The regime had hoped to claim back the potency of pop music for itself by allowing an approved version to exist. Nooshin asks a very poignant question: 'What happens when a form of cultural resistance is appropriated by those against whom the resistance was originally directed?'²⁴ When the regime began to assent to certain kinds of pop music they were attempting to dilute the power of the exilic brand of Iranian pop. However, the new reforms enabled another group of musicians,

²⁰ Hamid Naficy, 'Identity Politics and Iranian Exile Music Videos,' in R. Young (ed.), *Music, Popular Culture, Identities* (New York: Rodopi, 2002) 259.

²¹ Naficy, 'Identity Politics,' 259. The ways in which today's underground Iranian rock bands are using imagery from Iran's pre-Islamic past and syncretising this with the instruments of rock is worthy of further investigation, and is alluded to briefly in the section below describing the music of O-Hum.

²² Arash's website is available online at <<http://www.arash.se>>.

²³ Nooshin, 'Subversion and Countersubversion,' 231.

²⁴ Nooshin, 'Subversion and Countersubversion,' 232.

unauthorised and coming from within Iran, to slipstream in the wake of the new official pop music. The ambiguity of the new laws governing music in Iran, set in place and enforced by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, allowed underground Iranian musicians a degree of creative interpretation.²⁵ Clarifications given by one religious authority are overruled or renege upon by another, which creates a 'liminal space' where people are unsure of what is allowed at any given time.²⁶ This lack of clarity creates opportunities for creative subversion and, as many of the laws are unenforceable in the private domain, it is here that Iranians, 'very adept at resistance after centuries of one form of oppression or another,' have their greatest opportunity for dissension.²⁷

An example of the creative subversion Nooshin describes comes in the form of 'UMC,' an underground music competition that is organised by TehranAvenue, a website started in 2001 by a group of young writers who wished to provide an alternate discourse for the youth of Tehran. The UMC is presented at a partner website of TehranAvenue called Tehran360.²⁸ The competition first ran in 2002 and 'clearly demonstrates the opportunities that global technologies offer musicians to enable them to circumvent government censorship and control.'²⁹ It is critical to note here that after the revolution, Iranians in Iran continued their consumption of popular culture, but were not creating a product that was widely disseminated. The babies of the revolution have now come of age, and it is estimated that more than seventy per cent of Iran's 67 million people, and half of the electorate (sixteen is the legal voting age), is younger than thirty.³⁰ The new generation is 'speaking with their own voice instead of using someone else's music as an indirect statement of resistance.'³¹

O-Hum is an underground Iranian rock band that uses the lyrics of Rumi and Hafez (two of the most well-known classical Persian poets from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, respectively), the rhythms of progressive rock (a la Pink Floyd and Yes), and traditional instruments such as the *kamancheh* (literally 'little bow,' a spiked-fiddle with a skin covered hollow wooden body in the register of a violin, but played vertically like a cello) and *daf* (a large frame-drum with small interwoven cymbals, much like an oversized tambourine) to reach a population of youth which has not had a cultural product of its own to consume for over twenty years. A study of this group illustrates Nooshin's examination of 'subversion and countersubversion' in the new Iranian rock music. O-Hum has had many encounters with Ershad, which must be consulted at all stages during the album-recording process, in an attempt to seek approval for commercial release. In order to satisfy Ershad, all musicians hoping to release an album must submit the complete recording to the Council of Music and a copy of the lyrics to the Council of Poetry, two of the many departments of the Ministry. Some singers must also submit a 'vocal test' recording that is scrutinised by a small group of musical

²⁵ Ershad ('guidance') is the soubriquet of the Vezerat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Eslami [Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance], and will be shorthand for this governing body throughout the rest of this article.

²⁶ Nooshin, 'Subversion and Countersubversion,' 242.

²⁷ Nooshin, 'Subversion and Countersubversion,' 242.

²⁸ Tehran Avenue's website can be found at <<http://www.tehranavenue.com>> and its partner site, Tehran360, the host of the UMC, can be found at <<http://www.tehran360.com>>.

²⁹ Nooshin, 'Subversion and Countersubversion,' 260.

³⁰ Alavi, *We are Iran*; Ramin Jahanbegloo, 'Pressures From Below,' *Journal of Democracy* 14.1 (2003): 126–31.

³¹ Nooshin, 'Subversion and Countersubversion,' 261.

traditionalists. The vocal test must be a raw demo, digitally unaffected, and the singer can be accompanied only by a piano or acoustic guitar. If Ershad do not give their seal of approval, the band's music cannot be commercially released in Iran.

O-Hum's singer, Shahram Sharbaf (see Figure 2), was made to sit the vocal test. Ershad objected not only to his voice but also to his appearance, his shaved head and his *jelf* ('tacky') attire.³² Sharbaf summed up the problems that O-Hum experienced when dealing with Ershad:

We also move and shake and dance while we play, and that was another point of contention. That's the way we play our music, and the way rock music should be played: Loud and Wild. Music should excite us first, so [that] others will walk along with us too. But that was not acceptable to them [Ershad]. Ershad had said that I should pass a vocal test again. I had done one before and it was horrible, which is another long story we can talk about later. Later that day [they] called us and said that the tape had failed and [been] rejected and that I couldn't sing. They extended their generosity by [saying] O-HUM 'could play this concert instrumental,' but that no one could sing on this show, [not] even another singer ... We posted a message on our website saying that we would have to cancel the next week's concert.³³

While watching a live video of the well-known Tehrani underground indie rock band Hypernova, which was recorded at an officially sanctioned concert held in Kashan, a college town outside Tehran, it became obvious to me that movement must be kept to a minimum. The audience looked tentative when they raised their bodies in synchrony to appreciate the band at the end of their performance, and Hypernova's stage presence was much less energetic than their performance had been in their studio room, or at the Intergalactic Iranian Music Festival in Holland in 2006.³⁴

Shahrokh, the other founding member of O-Hum, says that their concept of combining the lyrics of Hafez with rock music is understandably difficult for the cultural establishment—who are firmly governed by an Islamic theocracy—to accept.³⁵ After permission to release their 2002 album *Hafez in Love* commercially in Iran had been denied by Ershad three times, O-Hum decided to subvert the regime by releasing compressed versions of their videos and albums over the Internet, via their website (<http://www.o-hum.com>), free of charge. The theocracy reacted swiftly and countersubverted by requiring ISPs to block O-Hum's website so that no one in Iran was able to access it. According to Fariborz, writing for the online magazine *Qantara.de* in 2004, O-Hum has only ever performed one concert in Iran.³⁶ It was in 2001, when

³² Zebra, 'Humming in Exile (1),' *TehranAvenue.com* (2002) [online resource], <<http://www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=195>> (accessed 1 September 2005).

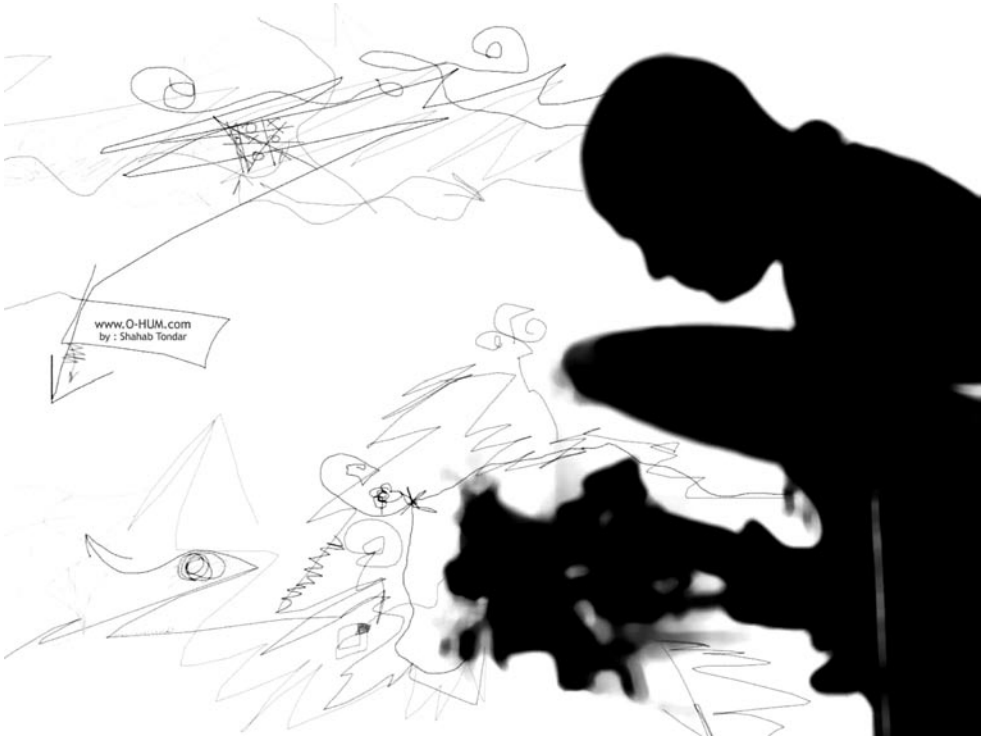
³³ Zebra, 'Humming in Exile (2),' *TehranAvenue.com* (2002) [online resource], <<http://www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=196>> (accessed 1 September 2005).

³⁴ Video footage from the Intergalactic Iranian Music Festival, along with photos and information about the event can be found at <<http://www.iranianmusicfestivals.com/>>, <<http://www.zirzamin.se>>, or <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cve3yBhsoUE>>. King Raam, the lead singer from Hypernova has a YouTube account, and a short excerpt of Hypernova's performance in Kashan can be found at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcVfCj3NWw8>>.

³⁵ Zebra, 'Humming in Exile (1).'

³⁶ A. Fariborz, 'A Tightrope Walk between Adaptation and Protest,' *Qantara.de*. (2004) [online resource], <http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-310/_nr-47/i.html> (accessed 1 September 2005).

Figure 2. Desktop ‘wallpaper’ designed by Shahab Tondar for the fan’s artwork section of O-Hum.com in 2003. Sharbaf, O-Hum’s trademark bald singer, is silhouetted against Tondar’s creative squiggles. Image reprinted with permission and available online at <<http://www.o-hum.com/fanz-03.htm>>.



their popularity was just beginning to soar, and Khatami’s second term as President of Iran had just begun. O-Hum performed at the Russian Orthodox Church, which in the IRI enjoys ‘custodian rights’ over cultural events held on their premises. The plasticity of Iranian laws is exemplified by the fact that O-Hum was able to perform a concert live, but never release an album. Hypernova, a new band following in the footsteps of bands such as O-Hum, might just be better at playing the game, though their track record for performing live is also limited to a scattered few concerts over two years, and they have not developed enough material as yet to release an album, although they are currently in the process of recording one.

Frustrated with the oppression they were feeling at the hands of the Islamic regime, O-Hum decided to shift to Vancouver in 2002. Zebra, with ‘Humming in Exile (2),’ presents the next installment of the O-Hum interview. Sharbaf reiterates the sentiment that a lot of my online Iranian art and music-minded friends share: Iran is a beautiful place, but the repression makes cultural enterprises hard to pursue:

We’ve decided to stay here [Vancouver], anywhere else except Iran, as long as it’s going on like that back there ... we’ll stay here for at least 3 or 4 years ‘till we get established and managed. Then we could think of doing something in Iran or returning or whatever. We lost 3 valuable years of our lives messing around with Ershad ... As long as we can do it [play music], it really doesn’t matter where we are. If it was Tehran, it’s cool.

But it can't be, so we should move somewhere else ... Life is much more valuable than spending it fucking around with some dogmatic people. I prefer fighting our own way, which is making Persian Music and getting it to people's ears.³⁷

The level of frustration that Sharbaf expresses in the above excerpt is indicative of the creativity inhibiting actions of the government. They did not find success in Canada, and it could be suggested that this is due to the fact that in Canada O-Hum's potential audience is limited mostly to the exilic Iranians living there, but in Tehran alone there are millions of youths waiting ravenously to consume popular music. The members of O-Hum have since returned to Iran and they have recorded a new album, *Aloodeh*, which is not commercially available in Iran. New technologies have meant that O-Hum's latest works can be sampled on their website and then downloaded from the iTunes store. The ability to sample O-Hum's recording relies, of course, on the use of proxies and anti-filtering websites to skirt around the filter that still cloaks their website in Iran.

For two decades young Iranians had been consuming the music produced by their compatriots in exile without producing a popular music of their own. Christiane Bird noted, presaging Nooshin's remarks about the plasticity of Iranian laws, that:

the ground in Iran is constantly shifting. What's true today will not be true tomorrow. And what's true in one town, city, or establishment may not be true in another. For the most part, Iran lacks strong centralized administrative offices and so laws are often elastic and subject to interpretation.³⁸

Iranians, after centuries of invasion and revolution, are used to dealing with oppression and the young musicians living in today's Tehran are no exception. This article has examined the ways in which the regime plays cat and mouse with underground rock bands, and it has presented a broad overview of the state of popular music in Iran at the turn of the millennium. While I was in Iran during the September of 2006 conducting preliminary field research, I witnessed satellite dishes being confiscated; word spread quickly amongst friends about a raid on the home studio of a heavy metal band; and Beethoven Music Centre, the largest independent music store in Tehran, was temporarily closed. In January 2007, Hypernova were invited to perform at the SXSW (South by Southwest) music festival in Texas, the largest showcase of global independent bands in the world, an annual festival that the band 127 performed at in 2006. 127 have had their music included on compilations outside Iran and have just received an invitation to play in a music festival in Slovakia in July 2007. While it is difficult for these bands to perform and record within the borders of Iran, their popularity and presence in the global independent music scene continues to grow. The Internet has allowed an underground community to burgeon in Iran, the products of which are now globally available to the digitally informed. The new Iranian rock music and blogs updated from within Iran have been informing exilic Iranians about the multiple realities of today's middle-class Iran, forming a coalition of subversion against the fundamentalist regime in a nonviolent form of protest. Some Iranians, particularly those royalists who fled with the shah to an exile in California, call for another revolution, but when one surveys the vast amount of

³⁷ Zebra, 'Humming in Exile (2).'

³⁸ Bird, *Neither East nor West*, 11.

Iranian cultural commerce that has entered the mainstream in the last five years (filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami and Bahman Ghobadi, photographers including Shirin Neshat, and the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Shirin Ebadi), it is clear that a revolution of sorts is already taking place. It is a step forward that this music is now globally available, yet it is disappointing that the music, film and photographs of the new generation of very politicised Iranians often cannot—or cannot with ease—be consumed in the physical public spaces of Iran by those for whom it originally was intended.