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# Rock and a hard place

by Cheryl Fenton | October 17, 2011



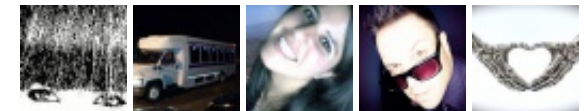
We've all done it - turned up the headphones on a teen-tested, parent-unapproved song, or downloaded some scandalous album we hope no one will notice lurking in our iTunes library. (Okay, fine. We're really just embarrassed that we suddenly rediscovered the Spice Girls.) But imagine an entire country whose citizens are forced to hide their music. Their own artistic aspirations are likewise stifled. And punishment is more than a slap on the wrist or a stern



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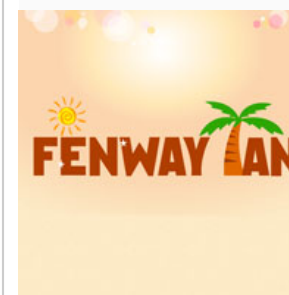
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word.

Such is life without liberty in Afghanistan. From 1992 to 2001, recorded music was

banned outright. The region's musicians and youth are more empowered these days, but Taliban threats remain. And Afghanistan is not alone: radicals from Iran to Uzbekistan continue to threaten and harass musicians.

This is something rocker Brian Viglione couldn't abide.

"Self-expression is at the very core of our existence as people, from when we cry to be fed as infants on out," explains Viglione, one half of the Boston-founded punk-cabaret band the Dresden Dolls and collaborator on numerous other projects. "It's how we experience the world; we take it all in, process it, and then exhale it back out," he continues. "When it's taken away as a method of control by others, it naturally finds another way to manifest."

Though he's usually found sitting behind his drum kit, Viglione took a stand for self-expression when he became rock ambassador for Sound Central (soundcentralfestival.com), Afghanistan and Central Asia's first post-Taliban rock-music festival. Four Afghan rock bands, as well as bands from elsewhere in Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan, all performed in Kabul at this exciting (and nerve-wracking) event for a crowd thirsty for musical freedom.

Beginning in mid-September and stretching into October, this month-long festival was produced by Combat Communications, musician and

photojournalist Travis Beard's Kabul-based group that promotes free expression through work with youth in Afghanistan. With the help of Argus Productions and HELO Media, the events made a daring and poignant attempt to build solidarity in a non-political way.

Unlike most modern rock fests, heralded with Facebook invites and Twitter promotions, Sound Central was billed as the world's first "stealth" music festival. Secrecy was a necessary evil for safety reasons. In fact, the event was so hush-hush that when this piece was written, the exact dates, times, and venues for certain events were still unannounced. The details were only released the day before musicians took the stage.

"It breaks my heart. This isn't the kind of 'stealth' like, 'Let's have a stealth concert in the old, abandoned warehouse, and if the cops show up, we'll all get in trouble,' " says Viglione. "The Taliban is admittedly targeting those who they feel contradict their beliefs, and there is blatant risk involved."

It was this volatile environment that kept Viglione from making the trek to Kabul. He instead spoke directly to musicians in videoconferencing workshops. The topics raised in his Q&A sessions ranged from musical collaboration to drumming techniques to the ins and outs of the music business. But throughout the workshops, one theme kept resonating: dreams matter.

"I was taught to believe in myself and that my dreams were valid and worth pursuing," Viglione says. "Everyone needs some form of guideline and vision when they're starting a band. I wanted to help these musicians bring that into focus for themselves."

In this war-torn yet rebuilding region, the festival sought to

encourage people to find their voices through music - amid a culture where that concept is largely unwelcome.

"I hope that the festival [planted] the seed in the people to pursue that path," says Viglione. "This is a very important first step. Music, like anything powerful, has the ability to unite."

"While so many people responding to crisis focus on what's going wrong, here is a perfect example of people looking at what is going right and building on it," adds Daniel J. Gerstle, humanitarian-aid worker, media producer, and founder of HELO Media. "Afghan youth and their neighbors, despite the war and political uncertainty, are hungry to imagine what a future peaceful Afghanistan will look like. Here's their chance." That's something worth shouting about.

*Cheryl Fenton is a freelance writer who also blogs at [EasyPeasyBlog.com](http://EasyPeasyBlog.com).*

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