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On the Death of the Kabul Tabla Player Javed Hussain Mahmoud

Markus Schlaffke

Abstract

This article examines the death of the Kabul-born tabla player Javed Hussain Mahmoud (1972–2024) as a lens through which to explore the fragile conditions of musical memory in the Afghan diaspora. Drawing on my long-standing engagement with Afghan musicians and on audiovisual, ethnographic, and archival materials, the text situates Javed’s biography within the larger history of Kabul’s hereditary musician community in the Kucheh Kharabat. Once central to shaping Afghanistan’s musical modernity, this community experienced displacement, marginalization, and the near-eradication of its artistic infrastructure after decades of political violence. Javed’s life—rooted in a lineage of masters yet marked by exile, ill health, and isolation—embodies this broader rupture. By weaving personal recollections, field notes, and analyses of online media traces, the text explores the tensions between lived memory, inherited artistic lineages, and algorithmically mediated forms of remembrance. It argues that the narratives articulated by musicians from the Kucheh Kharabat—insisting on their foundational role in creating Afghanistan’s modern art-music tradition—remain insufficiently recognized within dominant public discourses, both in Afghanistan and in diaspora contexts. This text is thus as much an act of remembrance as it is a methodological reflection on the media conditions under which such remembrance now takes place.

Keywords: minority memory, urban Kabul musical culture, Afghan Diaspora

Figure 1.: Javed Hussain Mahmoud, 2012 in Weimar, Germany ©Markus Schlaffke

A musician dies–nuances of silence

On the evening of September 29, 2024, the Kabul-born tabla player Javed Hussain Mahmoud died on the improvised stage of a private music room in Aachen, Germany. He suffered a heart attack and collapsed over his instrument in front of a handful of listeners. Resuscitation attempts were unsuccessful. Javed's music quite literally fell silent with his final breath. A mobile phone camera captured the very moment when both his tabla playing and his heartbeat abruptly ceased. The recording was streamed live on Facebook, making a small group of globally scattered viewers unwitting witnesses—and simultaneously catalysts of a digital echo accompanying Javed's final tones. Unlike the music, the stream of data did not break off, and for a fleeting instant, the virtually present listeners found themselves confronted with the very real finality of existence. The flow of emoticons, which had previously conveyed enthusiasm with rising hearts and clapping hands, shifted abruptly: the symbol of the tear-streaked face took over. As if to let that moment of silence resonate within a digital stillness, the Association of Afghan Musicians in Germany announced a three-day period of mourning on Facebook, during which no music was to be posted or published.

I had known Javed for over ten years. I cannot claim that I knew him well. Still, our acquaintance left a lasting impact on my engagement with Afghan music. Javed was one of the first musicians to introduce me to a soundscape that had previously been unfamiliar to me, and to lead me into a network that spans across several continents. The musical culture I encountered through him—however it may revolve around its place of origin—is fundamentally a culture of migration. Hardly any of my Afghan musician friends live in Afghanistan today. Most left the country in the wake of various waves of emigration since the 1970s, the latest following the collapse of international engagement and the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul in 2021. Their music is shaped by a sense of loss, a fragile memory of a distinct musical language, the traumatic experience of destruction, erasure, and imposed forgetting, the challenges of new beginnings in exile, and the reverberation of these experiences in the poetry of their songs–songs which speak of the painful existential condition of always being apart.

Nowhere, perhaps, does the silencing of a single artistic voice resonate so closely with the potential silencing of an entire culture as it does in Afghanistan. Javed's biography is emblematic of the precarious situation faced by many Afghan musicians who have chosen exile over the sustained violence and the collapse of artistic and material prospects at home. The diaspora has become their space of expression. Performances like Javed's final concert are characteristic of this context. They take place in living rooms, but their audience is dispersed across the globe and loosely connected via digital media and their algorithmic logic, which today play a decisive role in determining which musical memories remain alive and which disappear into oblivion.

Against this backdrop, Javed's death is more than the silencing of an individual artistic voice. In this context, when a single voice disappears, it takes with it an entire aesthetic frame of reference. This silencing is so saturated with nuances that it becomes difficult to discern precisely what has fallen silent, why it has done so, and who is affected by it.

In this text, I aim to recall my own memories of Javed Mahmoud and to ask what has truly been lost with his death. I will attempt to situate this silencing within a broader context—that of a counter narrative to Afghanistan's musical modernity, as represented by musicians like Javed who came from the hereditary professional musician community of Kucheh Kharabat, Kabul's historic music quarter. Their story preserves a distinct memory of how Afghan musicians in the twentieth century established an autonomous art music culture in Kabul, drawing on musical and literary

traditions to create new, modern identifications for a society in flux.

To approach this memory, I turn to my own observations and notes, as well as to the digital media echo of Afghan music history that today circulates in countless audio and video fragments across social networks. This text is thus as much an act of remembrance as it is a methodological reflection on the media conditions under which such remembrance now takes place.

Tracing remains

Javed was 52 years old. Now, confronted with the sudden news of his death, I realize that I actually know very little about him. I attempt to reconstruct my memory of him with the help of the traces I possess and those he himself left behind.

Javed's Facebook page is still active. "Lives in Frankfurt, Germany. From Kabul, Afghanistan." A profile description now fixed beyond revision. Musician friends continue to post their shared memories there from time to time. Were it not for the funeral photographs also posted there, little would indicate that Javed's presence is now entirely virtual.

His official presence in Germany was first documented in the "Progress Report on Afghanistan, November 2012" (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung 2012), issued to inform the German Parliament on the status of Germany's activities in Afghanistan. In addition to detailing the security situation, the report noted that the federal government had supported the project "SAFAR–Music from Afghanistan," which aimed to preserve traditional Afghan music through professional audio recordings. („Safar", n. d.)

Javed was one of five Afghan musicians who participated in this project "*Safar*" (Dari for "journey") in 2012, performing music from the "old masters" of Kabul in a series of concerts across Germany. After ten years of German military and civil engagement in Afghanistan, these concerts were presented as evidence that such engagement had been worthwhile.

Figure 2.: The musicians of the "SAFAR" ensemble at the opening concert of their 2012 Germany tour. Javed Mahmoud front left. ©Markus Schlaffke

The website of the German Federal Foreign Office still features the speech delivered by then Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, three years after the initial "*Safar*" tour, on the occasion of the project's third edition in Berlin in 2015. Steinmeier quoted an Afghan proverb at the time: "First find a companion, then a path!" and he followed it with the assertion: "Germany and Afghanistan have now been travelling together for one hundred years."(Die Bundesregierung informiert | Startseite, n. d.) The Afghan-German cultural project, he emphasized, stood as a fine example of this continuity in mutual understanding between nations. But Javed was no longer on stage that evening. His participation in the *Safar* project had been a one-time appearance. After the first series of concerts in 2012, he had taken the opportunity to apply for asylum in Germany and never returned to Kabul. Even then, the prospect of successful nation-building in his homeland seemed too uncertain to him.

That decision marked the beginning of the arduous process of asylum. Javed had to prove that he, contrary to the prevailing narrative in Germany of Afghanistan's reconstruction, was, in fact, directly threatened there on account of his artistic work. His apprehension would prove well-founded, but with his decision to seek asylum in 2012—before the intensifying wave of migration from Afghanistan became apparent in 2015—he also became acutely aware of something else: that beyond the symbolically

charged "*Safar*" project, there were virtually no structures in place in Germany to offer Afghan musicians a sustainable future. The very moment Javed set foot in Germany, the shared public journey between Afghanistan and Germany, so ceremoniously affirmed, effectively ended for him. His music, having briefly been amplified on the stage of German foreign policy, fell silent for the first time in exile.

Figure 3.: Javed Mahmoud teaching at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music in 2012. ©Markus Schlaffke

June 2012

I recorded our first meeting on video myself. It took place in one of the small, wood-paneled teaching rooms at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music; the first state-run music school in Kabul, founded only two years earlier. Javed was teaching a group of young students at the time. They were in the process of learning a sequence of finger strokes on their tabla drums. It was visibly difficult for them to remember the order of the strokes. They were sweating, and the presence of foreign visitors with a camera made them nervous. Through the small window of the practice room, one could see the barbed wire atop the school's security wall, a reminder of the ongoing state of exception that shaped the atmosphere of this place. Gradually, the students' drumming became more fluid. Javed clapped the rhythm for them, reciting the *bols* (spoken syllables to represent a combination of strokes) with patient precision,

correcting their mistakes. In that little music room, time seemed to slow down. Watching the students struggle through their first musical steps, and sensing how far they still were from the mastery of their teacher, revealed something of the underlying fragility of cultural transmission as such. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Afghanistan, where decades of war and the fundamentalist Taliban regime had all but extinguished musical education. I began to grasp what it means when the embodied musical memory of whole generations disappears—and how arduous it is to restore that memory once it has been broken.

Figure 4 & 5.: Javed Hussain Mahmoud, 2012 in Weimar, Germany. ©Markus Schlaffke

July 2012

In one of our later encounters, I documented the goal toward which such years of training were directed. This time, we were already in Germany. After a workshop in which the visiting Afghan musicians from the "*Safar*" ensemble had introduced their instruments to a German audience, Javed asked me to record a short solo. What followed was a moment of masterful ecstasy. Before my camera, Javed launched himself into a *tabla* solo with complete abandon. Sweat began to pour down his face. The pulse of his *theka* (basic rhythmic phrase on the *tabla*) developed a hypnotic pull; with tireless stamina, he fired off variation after variation from what seemed like an inexhaustible rhythmic reservoir. He drove before him a wave of intricate, syncopated beats until they finally resolved, released in a thunderous stroke on the *sam* (the first beat of the rhythmic cycle). At another time, in another place, the audience would have erupted in cries of rapturous admiration, but here I was the only witness to this extraordinary musical moment, and it felt as if Javed wanted to entrust my camera with something that would otherwise have been lost.

Silence amid the noise of narratives

In 2012, I travelled to Kabul for the first time, commissioned to document the German cultural funding activities on film and to communicate them to the German public. The German efforts focused on a group that had shaped Afghanistan's musical identity in fundamental ways: the descendants of those professional musician families who had formed the country's musical elite since settling in Kabul around 1860, under the patronage of the Afghan king Amir Sher Ali Khan, in what became the capital's music quarter, Kucheh Kharabat (Sarmast 2009). Organized along hereditary family lines, this guild of musicians claimed a special authority in defining Afghanistan's musical heritage. They were also uniquely affected by the country's history of violence: their neighborhood was destroyed during the civil war; many were driven into exile for decades; and under Taliban rule, they were stripped of their livelihoods. When some of them began returning to Kabul after 2001, it was to a city without the public or economic infrastructure necessary to reconnect with their former ways of music-making. In this context, the German Foreign Office had identified some of the most vulnerable bearers of cultural memory in Afghanistan.

Yet when I began speaking with members of the Kharabat musician community, I sensed unease about the prevailing narrative of heritage destroyed by the Taliban. Almost everyone I spoke to could recount some personal experience of violence: one had seen a precious family instrument smashed while fleeing, others had witnessed public punishments. But the years under the Taliban appeared in their stories more like an inevitable calamity, a force from which nothing else could have been expected, and about which nothing further needed to be said.

Instead, my interview partners wanted to convey something else. Rajab Ali, son of the legendary *rubab* player Mohammad Omar (1905–1980), lamented that the audience's tastes had changed irreversibly. The music his father's generation had shaped so decisively was no longer in demand; the market was now dominated by commercially produced pop music coming out of the diaspora. Rajab Ali spoke with resignation.

Rafi Bakhsh, grandson of the renowned Kabul singer Rahim Bakhsh (1921–2001), pointed out that the contributions of the Kharabat musicians to the building of the nation had gone unrecognized. Singers like his grandfather had helped shape Afghan national identity and had represented the country abroad. Today, he said, there was no public institution to support the families of these distinguished artists in any meaningful way.

A recurring theme ran through their accounts: more painful than the Taliban's ban on music was the deeper sense of dislocation—that something essential had been lost. What had disappeared was the resonance between their voices and those of their audience, the sense that their art was contemporary, that their work was acknowledged as a contribution to the musical memory of the nation. In this light, the Taliban regime did not appear as the root cause but rather as a predictable expression of a larger, structural rupture. The media's fixation on the Islamists' repressive regime had, in the process, eclipsed what the Kharabat musicians had actually come to say: It was not only about lamenting the decline of musical culture in Afghanistan, but about recalling that it was they—just as their fathers and grandfathers before them—who had played a decisive role in making a musical culture in Afghanistan, in its present form, possible in the first place.

Topography of a site of memory

> *"Like the soul of Kharabat I am, the beloved of Kharabat. At times the throne, at times the footstool, at times negation, at times affirmation I am. At times I dwell in the mosque, at times the temple, at times the Kaaba and the place of pilgrimage. Tonight I am drunk on the pure wine, the forsaken one of Kharabat."*
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> — Mastan Shah Kabuli (ca. 1890), (Kabuli 2008, author's translation)

I remember vividly how Javed showed me the place of his birth in 2012. He had agreed to take me through the Kucheh Kharabat—a narrow street in Kabul's old city. At that time, walking through Kabul in the company of unknown Western visitors was not without risk. Kidnappings and bombings were a regular occurrence. Javed was in a hurry to show me the most important houses of the quarter. We jumped over open sewage trenches that exhaled an unbearable stench, and clambered over piles of rubble. Wherever we paused, we were quickly surrounded by children and neighbors. I found it difficult to read their expressions; were they curious or suspicious? We moved briskly through the musical geography of the place, whose coordinates were defined by the houses of Kabul's musical aristocracy: the home of Ustad Rahim Bakhsh, the home of Ustad Mohammad Omar, the home of Ustad Hashem—Javed's famous uncle. This hurried walk through the Kucheh Kharabat was an act of performative

remembrance. As we passed, Javed greeted acquaintances and explained their tangled family relations: here the son of Ustad Mohammad Omar, there the nephew of Ustad Rahim Bakhsh, this one a grandson of Ustad Sarahang, and so on.

Javed was born here in 1972, and grew up during the final decade of relative peace—at the crest of the political modernization and secularization process that had been underway in Afghanistan since the turn of the century. But his birth year already marked a turning point, the beginning of an accelerating spiral of political violence. The following year, King Mohammed Zahir Shah would be overthrown in a military coup by Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan. Five years later, the Communist Party would take power, prompting the Soviet intervention (1979-1989), the formation of the *mujahideen* resistance (backed by the United States), the outbreak of civil war (1996–2001), the rise of the Taliban, and finally the U.S.-led intervention in 2001.

As a boy, Javed would have experienced his birthplace as a site of charged contradictions. His immediate environment was shaped by the professional ethos of the musical authorities around him—an ethos marked by ambition, rivalry, inspiration, strictly supervised chains of transmission, and a code of conduct that still echoed with the gestures of courtly ceremony. The artistic community of the Kucheh Kharabat was especially protective of its genealogical narratives. Family ties were tightly interwoven, yet they drew meticulous distinctions between those residents who descended from the first generation of musicians—who had arrived from India in the 1860s and settled in Kabul—and those who had joined later (see among others Saghar 2020). Equally significant to them was the genealogy of teacher-student relationships. The strict observance of these lineages served not only to ensure economic loyalties within the professional networks of musicians, but also fulfilled an aesthetic function: it preserved a stylistic history of the musical repertoire that we now recognize as distinctly “Afghan.” (On the genesis of a national musical identity in Afghanistan, see: Baily 1997; Sarmast 2009)

At the same time, things were in motion. The musical authorities who lived here regularly made their way across town to work in the studios of Radio Afghanistan. And from the more affluent districts of Kabul’s modern quarters came young men and women from respectable families, eager to receive music lessons from the *ustads* (teachers) of Kucheh Kharabat—men who had once passed on their knowledge only to their own sons. Increasingly, unfamiliar listeners from the West also began to appear—travelers en route to India along the so-called hippie trail. Javed was seven years old

when the German rock band Embryo stopped in Kabul and played with some of the Kharabat *ustads* in the garden of the Goethe Institute. The Afghan musicians engaged with these psychedelic improvisation sessions from the West with a mix of curiosity and amusement.

By then, Javed had already begun his *tabla* training and was developing his first conscious memories of the sounds and rhythms around him. He heard Sufi devotees chant themselves into trance at nearby shrines. He heard how, at musical gatherings among the Kharabat musicians, singers would compete in weaving verses of Rumi from memory into free-flowing song, accompanied by *tabla*, *rubab*, and harmonium players who framed the vocals with virtuosic ornamentation. And he heard how Ahmad Zahir (1946–1979), the prime minister's son, stirred an entire generation with his voice, backed by drums, bass, and electric organ. The Kucheh Kharabat was one of the centers from which the diversity of Afghanistan's musical modernity had radiated outward—and where many of its strands converged until the neighborhood's eventual destruction.

But the vibrant simultaneity and multiplicity of lived realities that unfolded in Kabul's musicians' quarter must not obscure the fact that the Kucheh Kharabat was also a site of deep social inequality. Its residents—despite their visibility in public life—were not part of the country's social mainstream. The profession bore an old stigma, culturally entrenched and morally reinforced. Kharabat musicians provoked offence for several reasons: they lived outside the dominant social and moral conventions; they offered services of sensual enjoyment; and, not least, they spoke in the idiom of mystical love poetry—full of double meanings, allusions to the physical beauty of the beloved, ecstatic experiences of transcendence, and a wild, self-determined, lawless relation to the divine that defied both the conservative theological tradition of Islam and the rigid social norms of Afghan society.

The collective memory of the Kharabat musicians thus included not only the history of their artistic achievements and cultural contributions, but also the fact that these were realized in the face of persistent resistance and daily discrimination.

Requiem for musical modernity

باشم تو آرزوی در بمیرم که نفس آن در
باشم تو کوی خاک که جان دهم امید بدان
برآرم خاک ز سر که قیامت صبح وقت به
باشم تو جوی و جست به خیزم تو گوی و گفت به

In the moment I die, may I be longing for you.
With that hope, I give my life—to belong to the earth beneath your path.
On the morning of resurrection, when I rise from the soil,
may I rise to speak with you, to seek you.

"*Dar Aan Nafas*," Saadi (1210–1292) (Shīrāzī 1941, author's translation)

Figure 6.: Mohammad Hashem Chishti, undated, in the studio of Radio Television Afghanistan, Kabul. ©Ustad Hashem - Dar Aan Nafas, n. d.

These verses are sung by Ustad Hashem (Mohammad Hashem Chishti, born in Kabul, died 1994 in Germany), Javed's famous uncle and one of three exceptionally gifted brothers from the musical community of the Kucheh Kharabat. His performance is preserved in an early broadcast by Afghan national television, which began operations in 1978. This makes his appearance one of the first musical contributions televised across the country. In this recording, Javed's uncle sets to music a 700-year-old poem by the Persian poet Saadi (Abu Mohammad Mosharraf al-Din Mosleh bin Abdallah bin Mosharraf Shirazi, 1210–1292). In doing so, he exemplifies a core element of how the musicians of Kucheh Kharabat understood themselves—and what played a defining role in the history of Afghanistan's musical modernity: namely the way the Sufi-mystical realm in Islamic literature, philosophy, and everyday religious practice were kept alive, and how Sufi-inspired ideas were made resonant with the lived experience of modernity (On the Sufi spirituality of Afghan musicians, see: Baily 2011).

باشم تو آرزوی در بمیرم که نفس آن در
باشم تو کوی خاک که جان دهم امید بدان
برآرم خاک ز سر که قیامت صبح وقت به
باشم تو جوی و جست به خیزم تو گوی و گفت به
عالم دو شاهدان درآیند که مجمعی به
باشم تو روی غلام دارم تو سوی به نظر
بخسبم سال هزار گر عدم خوابگاه به
باشم تو موی بوی به آگه عاقبت خواب ز
نبویم بهشت گل نگویم روضه حدیث
باشم تو سوی به دوان نجویم حور جمال
رضوان ساقی دست ز ننوشم بهشت می
باشم تو روی مست که حاجت چه باده به مرا
رفتن تو وجود با است سهل بادیه هزار

In the very breath in which I die, may I be longing for you.
With this hope I give my life:
that I may become the dust of your path.
At the dawn of resurrection, when I rise from the soil,
May I rise to speak with you, to seek after you.
At the gathering where the witnesses of both worlds appear,
Let my gaze be fixed on you,
let me be a servant of your face.
Should I sleep for a thousand years
in the abode of nonexistence,
Let me awaken at last from that sleep
by the scent of your hair.
I will not speak of paradise gardens,
nor seek the scent of heaven,
Nor long for the beauty of the houris—I will run toward you.
I will not drink the wine of paradise
from the hand of Ridwan the cupbearer,
For what need have I of wine,
when I am intoxicated by your face?
A thousand deserts are easy to cross,
if I am in your presence.

"*Dar Aan Nafas*," Saadi (1210–1292)
(Shīrāzī 1941, author's translation)

This *ghazal* (poem) by Saadi is a quintessential example of Sufi poetry, saturated with the core metaphors of the mystical terminology. With metaphysical confidence, it evokes an image of the hereafter, entirely suffused by the vision of the divine. It begins by grounding the listener in the familiar Quranic discourse on the final things, only to expand into a vision of the otherworld shaped by the sensual world: the fragrances, colors, and sounds of earthly life. Behind the countenance of God appears the face of the beloved. The intoxication of wine becomes the closest earthly analogue to divine rapture.

It was in the space of such metaphoric reversals that the musicians of Kucheh Kharabat found a point of resonance with modernity. The lament for existential separation, expressed in ever new variations by the Sufi poets, echoed in the dislocations felt across modern life. And the vivid metaphors of divine love—grounded in earthly experience—resonated with a rising urban middle class seeking to live love and longing outside of inherited norms, as though the poems had been written just for them. In this way, the Sufi poetry offered bridges across increasingly divergent social realities (see Schmeding 2023).

For the musicians of the Kucheh Kharabat, this placed them on a narrow ridge within a divided social and political public in Afghanistan. On the one hand, they offered a model of national cultural identity, emphasizing the distinctiveness of local artistic forms—particularly the sound of instruments like the *rubab* and *tabla*—and drawing explicitly on a poetic language formed within Islamic cultural traditions. On the other hand, they also reproduced a longstanding rift between orthodox and mystical interpretations of Islam. When the Taliban first came to power in 1994, this division re-emerged in the form of their militant opposition to music and unfolded along two familiar lines: one normative-ideological, the other rooted in a logic of control.

The normative claim rests on a selective reading of Quranic verses and insists that music—its performance and its enjoyment—is incompatible with Islam, by virtue of prophetic injunctions. But the practical exercise of this belief always goes further: it seeks to police both thought and body, to control not only abstract ideas but lived forms of expression, such as gesture, rhythm, verse, intoxication. It targets both the content of poetry and the sway it holds over listeners' bodies, both the aesthetic training and the marginal social environment that sustain such practice.

Around 1980, Sufi spirituality found renewed public resonance when Ustad Hashem's musical setting of Saadi's poetry gained traction as a contemporary genre on Afghan

television. It bridged not only toward an alternative mode of subjectivity for its listeners but also toward an alternative vision of collective life.

In retrospect, this was already a swan song for a fading past. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran had brought the secular modernist project there to an end. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan would momentarily delay a similar development, but only briefly: the collapse of many of the bridges built by Sufi poetry into a secular modern world was only postponed.

To the rhythm of a new time

Another video on Youtube (Pamir Studio TV 2019) documents how the musical tradition of the Kharabat continues to move in the interstices of collective memory: between remembrance and oblivion. It shows Ustad Hashem in 1993, recording in Germany with the popular Afghan singer Ahmad Wali (b. ca. 1940). In this scene, something seems to come apart. The various threads of Afghanistan's musical modernity no longer converge in the way they once did.

Ahmad Wali belongs to a generation of musicians who did not come from the hereditary lineages of the Kucheh Kharabat but emerged from the new urban middle class. He had achieved immense popularity in the 1970s and had already collaborated with Ustad Hashem in Afghanistan. Like Hashem, he emigrated to Germany in the early 1980s. In 1993, the two met again in Bonn, at the studio of Pamir StudioTV, a private media outlet for the Afghan diaspora, to resume their collaboration. Ahmad Wali asked Ustad Hashem to record the *tabla* accompaniment for one of his new compositions. What followed was a laborious process of negotiation between the two artists, which ultimately ended in the failure of the recording.

Wali played through his composition. Hashem began to accompany him in the unmistakable Kharabat style that had been documented in countless recordings of Afghan national radio: While the singer unfolded the lyrics in sweeping melodic arcs, the accompanying instruments produced a dense rhythmic fabric beneath them. The *tabla* would often drag behind in slow, heavily syncopated passages to the point that the underlying pulse was nearly imperceptible, only to pick up force again during the instrumental interludes between stanzas, surging into ever more elaborate rhythmic cascades. The poetry remained at the center, but it was constantly underlined, disrupted, intensified by the rhythm, which formed a kind of turbulent commentary.

This was the unique contribution that seasoned *tabla* players like Ustad Hashem brought to a successful *ghazal* performance.

Figure 7.: Ustad Hashem, 1993, Pamir StudioTV, Germany. ©Pamir Studio

But in 1993 in Germany, this distinctive form of musical synthesis no longer seemed to work. Ustad Hashem overloaded Wali's simple composition with an overabundance of rhythmic flourish, as if he were trying to pour all his accumulated knowledge into this one moment. He shifted between time signatures without connection or contour; rather than supporting the melody, the *tabla* part overpowered it, competing for attention. The two musicians were unable to communicate their musical intentions. The sound engineers eventually asked Ustad Hashem to record his *tabla* part to a metronome click track. He put on the headphones with visible reluctance. His playing stumbled alongside the mechanical pulse, as if resisting the rhythm of this new era.

In the YouTube comments under this video, a heated debate unfolds over whether Ustad Hashem was willfully refusing to cooperate, or whether he simply no longer could. The mixture of bafflement, reverence, and dismissive derision in these remarks reveals just how fractured, uprooted, and disoriented Afghanistan's diasporic musical discourse had become by that time.

One year after this memorable session, Ustad Hashem was murdered in Germany by one of his students—under circumstances that remain officially unresolved.

Ruins and absences

When Javed guided me through the Kucheh Kharabat in 2012, I had in mind the images from John Baily's documentary *A Kabul Music Diary* (Baily 2003). A decade earlier, the London-based ethnomusicologist had been among the first Western scholars of Afghan music to record the condition of Kabul's musicians' quarter after the fall of the Taliban regime. The film is a harrowing document. Baily captured the Kucheh Kharabat as it had remained since the bombing campaigns carried out by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's militias between 1992 and 1996. The entire neighborhood had been levelled. Former residents struggled to identify the outlines of their homes beneath the heaps of rubble.

Figure 8.: Javed Mahmoud in the Kucheh Kharabat, Kabul, 2012. ©Markus Schlaffke

When I visited the Kucheh Kharabat, the dusty clay brown of the hastily rebuilt houses on old foundations dominated the scene. The remaining mounds of debris were covered by a sediment of plastic waste. Scattered in between were a few façades and doorways painted in pigeon blue, ochre red, or turquoise, children's clothes in bright colors, and the call of the ice-cream vendor. The atmosphere was unsettling. There was a tension in the air which I experienced as simultaneously threatening and full of life. The alleyways echoed with the voices of a new generation growing up here once again,

while the silence of the ruined homes, into which no one had returned, still lingered like a trauma.

Javed showed me the spot where Ustad Sarahang's family home had once stood. Mohammad Hussain Sarahang (1924–1983) had, in his generation, embodied the pinnacle of the Kharabat musical tradition. When he died in 1983, hundreds gathered to carry his coffin through the lanes of the Kucheh Kharabat. Thousands lined the streets as the funeral procession made its way to the cemetery, paying their final respects to the singer. They knew what kind of absence this musician would leave in the collective hearing of many Afghans.

Today, the site of his family home is one of the few remaining mounds of rubble in the Kucheh Kharabat. The plot has been left undeveloped, as if to demonstrate that at the very heart of Kabul's music quarter—as in the collective memory itself—a literal void remains.

Figure 8.: Javed Mahmoud in front of the ruins of Ustad Sarahang's father-in-law's house in the Kucheh Kharabat, Kabul, 2012. ©Markus Schlaffke

As I stood there, I heard in my mind the song that had become part of Ustad Sarahang's musical legacy: *Man Jan-e Kharabatam* ("I am the soul of Kharabat"):

I am the soul of the Kharabat, the beloved of the Kharabat.
At times the throne, at times the stool, at times negation, at times affirmation, am I.
Now in the mosque, now in the temple, now in the Kaaba, now at the pilgrimage site.
Tonight I am drunk on pure wine, abandoned of the Kharabat.
Take heed, o cupbearer—I am the forsaken of the Kharabat.
Now I dwell in the Friend's mountain, now I seek the Friend's meadow.
I know not myself—I am the aim of the Kharabat.
In the cloister of existence, there is no path for us.
Blame me not, confidant—I am the proud one of the Kharabat.
Listen, o knower, to the secrets of my words:
I have lost a hundred souls to be the soul of the Kharabat.

کرسی گهی عرش گه خراباتم جانان خراباتم جان چون
و کعبه گه دیرم گاه و مسجد گاه اثباتم گه نفی گه
ساقی مرا دریاب خراباتم مخمور نابی زمی امشب میقاتم
طالب گاه دوست کوۀ ساکن گه خراباتم مهجور
صومعۀ در خراباتم منظور نمیدانم برخویش رویدوست
خراباتم مغرور همراز مکنی عیبم راهی نبود مارا هستی
صد ام شده بیجان مقالاتم رمز از عارف ای شنو خلص
خراباتم جان تا جان

Mastan Shah Kabuli (ca. 1890), (Kabuli 2008, author's translation)

(Ustad Sarahang 2023)

The *ghazal*, written by Mastan Shah Kabuli (19th c.), turns on one of the many-layered terms in Persian Sufi poetry. Kharabat refers not only to the tavern, where the "pure wine" of divine presence is poured, but also to the ruin—a place where the opposing structures of the human ego must be levelled to dissolve in God's omnipresence.

Now I stood before the actual ruins of the singers house, whose signature song spoke of the collapse of illusory inner worlds. It was a desolate sight. It felt as if these inspired singer-poets had been made into examples. Their home—the Kucheh Kharabat—whose name already carried the idea of transcendent self-erasure, had itself been violently razed to the ground, as if to brutally affirm the triumph of real violence over the fragile power of art.

Figure 9.: A conversation with residents in the Kucheh Kharabat, Kabul, 2012. ©Wolfram Höhne

A few steps further on, we were surrounded by residents and a curious group of children. We asked what the younger generation knew of the place's history. A neighbor prompted a boy to recite the local artistic lineage. Embarrassed by the pressure in front of the foreign visitors, the boy remained silent. The neighbor answered for him: "You must say that Ustad Sarahang lived here, Ustad Rahim Bakhsh lived here, Ustad Hashem lived here! The most famous artists of Afghanistan lived here!"

Departure

Our final meeting took place not long after we had first met. In July 2012, the "*Safar*" Ensemble's first concert tour through Germany ended in Berlin. I had accompanied Javed and his fellow musicians throughout the tour, filmed their performances, conducted interviews, and documented this promising beginning of a German-Afghan cultural exchange in full. On the night of their final concert at the "House of World Cultures" (*Haus der Kulturen der Welt*), when the last applause had faded, I met Javed in a state of emotional disarray in the street outside the hotel where the group was staying. He had tears in his eyes. He told me he would not return to Afghanistan and

instead intended to disappear in Germany and apply for asylum. In that moment, the carefully maintained narrative of cultural heritage preservation in Afghanistan collapsed before my eyes. I realized I had come close to the heart of the real story. This was the moment I should have been filming. But I chose not to pick up the camera, and I let what may have been the most telling moment of our encounter remain undocumented. We said goodbye. I wished him well and watched as he took the same step his uncle had taken thirty years earlier.

Javed's decision was ill-fated. Over the years that followed, he suffered from serious health issues, underwent multiple surgeries, became depressed, and took little part in the musical life of the Afghan diaspora. In an obituary posted to Facebook, the Afghan Musicians' Association wrote that this final evening in Aachen had been an attempt "to draw him out of his isolation and depression, to invite him for one night of shared music-making, so that he might reconnect with his art and overcome the sense of loneliness and alienation." That night, he overcame it forever.

Resonance in the archive

A quick search for Javed's name on YouTube returns just over a dozen videos. These results are soon overtaken by clips featuring the world-famous Indian *tabla* virtuoso Zakir Hussain, who shares not only a name and the instrument, but also passed away just three months after Javed. A handful of videos remain accessible on Javed's Facebook page. No doubt many more were recorded over the course of his career—scattered across phone storages or hidden deep in the folds of the YouTube algorithm.

What appears here on a small scale is a dynamic that has unfolded globally over the past decade: cultural memory has become a matter of digital media and archival infrastructure. In the case of Afghan music, whose transmission is so visibly precarious, every surviving audio document gains particular weight. A musicologist's field recording captured in a fleeting moment of peace, my own footage made possible by the brief window of a supportive cultural policy, the precious TV recordings salvaged by courageous Afghan radio employees before the Taliban took over, audio-tapes of an impromptu living room concert in Kabul—forgotten in an attic, rediscovered, digitized, and shared on Facebook—these recordings have become both testimonies in their own right and stand-ins for the countless undocumented performances that left no trace.

Alison Landsberg has referred in this context to “prosthetic memory”(Landsberg 2004), fragments of remembrance that circulate outside their original frame of reference and, in doing so, enable new forms of appropriation. This idea of a prosthetic memory built from a handful of circulating digital shards aptly describes current practices of preserving Afghan music. Not a minute passes without someone, somewhere in the global Afghan community, recording and sharing music—filling the storage banks of social media. This productivity draws on the shared reservoir of cultural memory, working with historical fragments that are pushed to the surface or pulled under by the current of digitization. Where individual “communicative”(Assmann 2018) memory is absent, algorithms now assist in shaping collective remembrance.

The silencing of a single musical voice stood at the beginning of this inquiry into memory. What is lost with it is a specific form of auditory testimony. What Javed could attest to from personal experience was the core narrative of the musicians of the Kucheh Kharabat—a narrative insisting that their contribution to Afghanistan’s musical modernity was genealogically grounded, fought for against social and ideological resistance, offering a vision of alternative modernization and spiritual renewal, and carrying with it an unfulfilled demand for civic inclusion. When voices like Javed’s fall silent, we lose not only a virtuoso musical experience, but also a thread of those narratives that, within the wide and diverse field of Afghan music today, lay rightful claim to authorship.

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