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Life After Dark

A series by Providence Journal staff writer Michael Corkery, chronicling the profound change that has swept over Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban.

Men of note

06/12/2002

BY MICHAEL CORKERY Journal Staff Writer

KABUL, Afghanistan -- It's a big night and Fardine Ada, 23, can't find anything to wear. He slips on a turquoise shirt and pulls up a tie, already knotted and ready to wear.

The tie, which Fardine saves for special occasions, is printed with the image of Michael Jackson.

His brother, Abdul Rahman Ada, 21, sitting on the couch in the living room, shakes his head.

No good.

Fardine rips off that outfit and tries again. He returns from his bedroom wearing a black and white checked shirt and a slender gray tie.

Abdul nods with approval. Fardine plops down on the couch next to him and swats away the flies that have invaded their apartment and, it seems, all of Kabul on this hot spring afternoon.

Fardine and Abdul Rahman Ada are musicians who dream about making it big. Right now, they are a two-man band. Fardine sings while Abdul Rahman plays the accordion.

In three hours, the brothers have a gig in Wazir Akbar Khan, the ritzy part of Kabul, where most of the houses have been spared the decades of destruction. This could be their big break. Since the Taliban left town, ending restrictions on music, the Ada brothers have played mostly at weddings, engagement parties and birthdays. This party promises something more: a band complete with drums, influential people from Kabul's arts scene and, the brothers have been told, Western women.

Fardine walks over to a table by the front door, picks up a bottle of "Man" eau de toilette, dribbles the last of it on his palms and smacks his cheeks.

BEFORE THE brothers leave, they decide to practice one last time. Abdul Rahman hoists his accordion onto his lap, as Fardine closes his eyes and bows his head of curly black hair.

When he opens his mouth, a bass voice emerges with such ferocity, it feels like it could rattle the windows.

"The rooster sings when it's time for prayers.

My girl has spent the night with me.

And when the rooster sings, she must leave."

Only a few months ago, a song like this would have gotten the brothers in trouble. The Taliban had little tolerance for music that was not religious. They had even less tolerance for songs about love.

But the brothers kept making music, though quietly. They used to close the windows in their fourth-floor apartment in the Microroyan. They posted two of their friends at either end of the block, like watchdogs. If the Taliban's vice squad was nearby, the friends would run and warn the brothers, playing upstairs.

During the civil war, as rockets rained on the Microroyan, residents would cower in the basement of their apartment building and Fardine would sing for them.

"Music is like food for me," Fardine says. "It is necessary for human beings."

The Ada brothers learned to make music when they were children. Their uncle taught Abdul Rahman to play the accordion and encouraged Fardine to sing. Their father, who now lives in Germany, is a poet and songwriter.

The brothers' biggest influence comes from Ahmad Zahir, the legendary Afghan musician and cult hero.

Zahir was killed shortly after the communist takeover in 1979 in a car accident in the Salang Tunnel, a treacherous mountain pass into northern Afghanistan.

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A large man, with a striking resemblance to Elvis, Zahir was known for his lovesick lyrics -- and his collection of lovers. Some think Zahir was killed by the family of one of those women. Others, however, say it was the government.

For years, his monument in a Kabul cemetery was a shrine, where young people would come to sing and pay homage to Zahir, Afghanistan's closet thing to a rock star.

That is until the Taliban blasted the monument with a rocket.

The Ada brothers are determined to bring back Zahir's music to Kabul. Most of their songs come from Zahir, learned after years of secretly listening to his scratchy cassettes.

"We haven't seen a man like him in 23 years," says Abdul Rahman. "Everyone tried to take his place, but no one could. We are trying to be next to him, but not take his place."

Fardine and Abdul Rahman live with their mother in the Microroyan. She lets them practice from 3 to 5 in the afternoon. Fardine is looking to move into his own place so the brothers can play music whenever they want.

THE BROTHERS climb into a yellow and white striped van and head across town to the party, a full two hours before it's supposed to start.

In a hushed tone, they discuss the endless possibilities of the night ahead.

"I've heard this party could last until the morning," Abdul Rahman whispers from the back seat. "There could be many beautiful women."

The driver, glancing in the rearview mirror, raises his eyebrows and nods his head approvingly. The van falls silent. The brothers stare out the open windows, smoking cigarettes.

Fardine was in love once. The girl lived in Block 24, next to his building in the Microroyan. They used to watch each other through their windows, until one day when they finally met. Fardine asked the girl, then 16, to marry him. But the girl's father, an army officer, did not approve of the relationship because Fardine was too poor.

The girl ended up marrying an influential Taliban official. They moved into a house in Wazir Akbar Khan. Fardine was crushed.

"After her, I have no one," Fardine says. He corrects himself for the record. "There are a lot [of women], but the others don't know about love. I will marry someone, but I won't love them," he says.

Fardine is trying to write a song about heartache, "but it's difficult," he says.

THE SUN is setting over Kabul, as the brothers pull up to a two-story house set behind a large metal wall in the Wazir neighborhood. A paper sign on the door reads: Global Exchange.

The brothers walk through the gate into a lush garden of trees and flower beds. There's a long table set with food platters and bowls brimming with fruit. From inside the airy house come the beating of drums and the twang of the guitar-like Robab.

Everywhere there are women -- their faces exposed to the world.

Many of them are Americans from northern California, touring the country with the group Global Exchange. They are dressed casually in tank tops, black pants, floral skirts, sandals and flip-flops, talking to the men and taking pictures.

The brothers are speechless.

They walk into the living room, where Toorpekai Usnatanha, an Afghan actress, sits on the sofa. She's starring in a new film about the Loya Jirga, promoting national unity.

Holding a cigarette aloft, Usnatanha talks to the Afghan singer, Homoyoan Nalah, who is dressed in a black suit, multi-colored tie and white golf shoes with spikes in them.

Usnatanha lived for many years in Europe and only recently returned to Afghanistan. Her son lives in the United States.

"When I came to Afghanistan, I felt like all the younger generation were my sons," she says.

Daoud Zahir, the grandson of the recently returned ex-king Mohammad Zahir Shah, sits at a table in the front yard. A London-based photographer, Zahir came to Kabul with his grandfather this spring. A guard from the royal security force, dressed in gray fatigues and a bulletproof vest, stands nearby scanning the crowd.

Zahir moves into the living room, joining a crowd of about a dozen people, as Fardine and Abdul Rahman kneel on the ground, ready to perform.

Abdul tinkles the white keys of an instrument resembling an accordion, while Fardine closes his eyes and belts out a tune of Ahmad Zahir -- of course.

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"Look to me, beautiful girl," Fardine sings, his voice booming, the veins in his tanned neck bulging. A man bangs on the Tabal, keeping the beat. Abdul Rahman jams on the keyboard.

Fardine sings louder. The crowd in the living room grows larger, clapping to the music. After the show, the ex-king's grandson asks Fardine to perform at an upcoming party. The brothers are thrilled.

It's dark now. Abdul Rahman stands outside at the end of the long table, eating dinner.

A young American woman comes over to the table with her plate. Abdul Rahman suggests that she try the rice dish. She thanks him.

Freedom never tasted so good.

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