



Tradition: Pashtun Music

The Pashtun (PASH-toon) are an ethnic group from the region that covers both northwestern Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. Pashtuns are organized by tribes with a total population of over 15 million. Pashtuns are divided up amongst 350 tribal groups. While traditionally nomadic, pastoral peoples, meaning they move with their animals from place to place rather than stay in a single home, many Pashtuns have settled in major cities like Peshawar in Pakistan, and Kabul in Afghanistan. With such a large and diverse number of people and tribes, there are many types of music that was historically connected with Pashtuns.

In the Pakistani city of Peshawar (Peh-SHAA-waar), Pashtun music is characterized by the rubab (ruu-BOB) played to the beat of hand drums and songs about nature, love, or politics. The rubab is a stringed instrument carved from a single piece of wood and has both melody and drone strings that the musician strikes, and strings which are not struck but vibrate to create a shimmer and echo effect, seemingly singing along with the main strings. Uniquely, the strings are made from both nylon and steel.

Starting in the 1970s, conflict in Afghanistan spilled over into Pakistan and disrupted life throughout the region. By the mid-1990s the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group, took power in Afghanistan and had a strong foothold over the border in Northwest Pakistan. In Afghanistan, they enacted strict rules about how people should live and behave, often limiting people's freedoms, imposing a conservative version of Islam that included outlawing all concerts and public music enjoyment or risk serious consequences. In Pakistan, those same rules were applied not by the government but enforced via religious groups and cultural pressure. Concerts once held as communal gatherings in courtyards disappeared, instrument makers put down their tools and musicians were forced to perform in secret or give up their instruments altogether; pushing this music to the brink of extinction. Adding to these challenges, within more well-to-do Pashtun communities in Pakistan, music and instruments long held in esteem within the culture were now thought of as belonging to lower class. As Khumariyaan rubab player Farhan Bogra recalled, "I remember giving a rubab to a friend [in 2006]. But his father broke it, gave him a guitar instead and said that the rubab is the sound of the lower-class of [rickshaw] drivers."

What happens to a culture when it no longer has a way to express itself? The band Khumariyaan (KU-maar-ee-yaan) was formed out of this moment in time. They formed their style of music that gives back a musical voice to a community nearly stripped of it, with the goal of renewing a pride in Pashtun music and culture. In the years since the band formed, the environment in Peshawar has become safer for musicians to gather and perform publicly. The Taliban was mostly neutralized, but remnants of its damaging impact on the music has remained. Today, Khumariyaan leads a new movement to revive the once flourishing music of the Pashtun's, bringing it to both their own communities and around the world.

Artist: Khumariyaan

Khumariyaan (KU-maar-ee-yaan), meaning "people in a state of bliss," is on a mission to re-awaken a once vital musical tradition of the Pashtun people.

The group's founder, Farhan Bogra, didn't start playing the once ever-present stringed rubab until he was an adult. After befriending one of the last remaining elder masters of the rubab, Bogra set out to learn this complex instrument himself, eventually surrounding himself with a group of like-minded musicians. Together they used the different elements of the rubab to anchor to a new sound, rooted in the past while energetically pushing towards the future.

When Farhan Bogra decided to create a new rock and roll sound with the rubab, he was charting new territory. There were very few bands in the region, let alone rubab-centered rock bands. He wanted to create a BIG rock sound that could move crowds and attract the younger audiences that had moved away from more traditional Pashtun music. Khumariyaan officially formed in 2009 with the understanding that the band needed both a steel string guitar player and nylon string guitar player to mimic the strings of the rubab so it wouldn't get lost in the big rock sound. The members are Bogra on rubab alongside musical friends Shiraz Khan on a goblet shaped drum called zerbaghali (zee-baar-lee), Sparlay Rawail on lead guitar and Aamer Shafiq on rhythm guitar.

Khumariyaan became a sensation almost instantly amongst young Pashtun's eager to identify with their own musical and cultural history. Combining their culturally Pashtun musical roots with a rock edge sent audiences into a frenzy. In a Khumariyaan live performance, you will often see guitarist Sparlay Rawail set down his instrument to dance. He is soon joined by his bandmates in a circle dance that builds in tempo and energy in the centuries old traditional **Attan** dance, serving as a reminder of a long and powerful cultural history for the Pashtun people. Speaking to the deep importance of dance to Pushtan culture, guitarist Sparlay Rawali explains: "They say the ultimate form of torture [for a dancer] is to tie him to a tree and play music around him."

Khumariyaan's repertoire often consists of traditional Pashtun music re-worked for their unique instrumentation. They recently added singer Obaid Khan, a powerful vocalist who sings in multiple languages, which is helpful in a country where nearly 80 languages are spoken.

Place: Peshawar, Pakistan

Peshawar is the largest city of the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KAI-br Paak-tung-kwa), located in the northwest corner of the country sharing its northern border with Afghanistan. While the country of Pakistan gained its independence from Britain in 1947, Peshawar is itself an ancient city. Archeological records show settlement in this location dating back at least 2,000 years. Located in the midst of a vast valley known as the Khyber Pass, it was a key stopping point on the Silk Road, an ancient trade route that connected the Indian subcontinent to Asia and Europe.

Peshawar is populated by Pashtuns who abide by a series of social codes known as **Pashtunwali** (paaSH-toon-waa-lee). A primary rule of Pashtunwali is **Melmestia (meel-meeST-ya-YAH)**, which means to be a good host including providing food, shelter and protection to guests, regardless of who they are or where they came from. Aside from a few mild winter months, the city is extremely hot and dry. The welcoming impulse of the melmestia helped to inspire the creation of **hujras**, or community centers where both locals and visitors can visit any time of the day to eat or socialize or just take a break from the heat. As a point of cultural pride, wealthier Pashtuns often build their own hujras to welcome guests. These meeting spaces are often at the heart of Pashtun culture and can be seen dotting the city as a visual reminder of this unique and welcoming aspect of Pashtun life.

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