Behind the Music: Rock Rolls Once More In Iran as Hard-Liners Back a Pop Revival

By Daniel Pearl

TEHRAN, Iran -- In a basement studio here, Iranian pop singer Alireza Assar and his crew are mixing their latest rock ballad. Mr. Assar's strong solo voice rings out in Farsi, singing, "We should find love in the rain." As the music swells, an electric guitar begins to wail, and women's voices take up the song.

If Iran's political hard-liners ever heard this, there'd be hell to pay, right?

Wrong. In fact, the conservatives sponsor Mr. Assar. They own this digital recording studio, they promote his $5-a-ticket concerts, and they approve each of his songs before its release.

Pop music, prohibited for most of the Islamic Republic of Iran's two decades of existence, has made a comeback in the past two years. And its revival owes more to the nation's conservatives than to its reformists. Iranian TV, a hard-liner stronghold, gave most of the new popular-music stars their start. A related record label is the nation's biggest producer of pop. Iran's most original recording, critics say, is Mr. Assar's 1999 debut album, which was conceived by an arts center aligned with the hard-liners.

On the surface, this nation's hardliners are doing all they can to prevent cultural change, but the reality is more complex. These days, the real political struggles here are over the pace of change -- and who gets the spoils. That shows in the hard-liner's strategy of championing the new home-grown pop, which they hope will preempt the unruly Western variety.

Pop music is a good window into Iran's all-consuming politics. Most developments in the industry trace back to one faction or the other: a guitar is shown on TV (conservatives), a book of translated Pink Floyd lyrics appears in a city-run bookstore in Tehran (reformists), a young crowd gathers to hear a local rock band play the Dire Straits hit "Sultans of Swing" (conservatives), and Googoosh, a reclusive prerevolution star, hints she will soon return to the stage (reformists).

"Music has always been in the service" of the state, says Fouad Hejazi, Mr. Assar's 29-year-old composer. Mr. Hejazi doesn't mind. He gets what he wants: seven days in the studio to polish each song and free rein in arranging the music.

What the government wants is a bulwark against the "cultural invasion of the West." For their part, the hard-liners used the judiciary recently to shut down 15 newspapers, some of which they decried as "bases of the enemy." And they tried without success to derail Sunday's installation of a new Parliament that favors greater freedoms for Iran's youth.

Conservatives fret about the Madonna and Michael Jackson songs blaring illegally from car stereos in Tehran, but they worry even more about the Iranian artists in exile who record in Farsi in Los Angeles, evoking prerevolutionary nostalgia and new social freedoms. That music
seeps into Iran via smuggled cassettes, hidden satellite dishes and the Internet. A hardline judge recently decriminalized the private use of such music, but selling it is still against the law.

"With your sexy moves, you provoke me," goes a typical L.A. song. Young Iranians laugh with embarrassment at the suggestive lyrics but find the fast six-count rhythm perfect for co-ed dancing.

Co-Opting Pop

Iran's Islamic government doesn't condone dancing or dating, however. So, led by the conservatives, it came up with a plan to co-opt the forbidden pop. It put Tehran pop on the airwaves, with singers who could match the voices and melodies of the popular L.A. acts, but with slower rhythms and ambiguous lyrics. One example: "I wish it were possible, for the spring of my dreams, with you, to come true." Is this poem about God or a girl? It's hard to tell, and that's why it lends itself so well to the new Iranian pop scene.

Now, the Shandaz Nights restaurant can present live cover bands, under the watchful eye of government inspectors. If diners request a song by Iranian exile Dariush, they often get one from Khashayar Etemadi, who has the same rasp in his voice. Mr. Etemadi's career was launched by the conservatives, but the singer, who typically sports a goatee and suspenders, recently formed his own record company and wrote a song for Iran's reformist president, Mohammed Khatami -- "In the age of coin and gunpowder, come and believe in humanity."

In the Permitted Music store in a downtown alley here, shoppers asking for an under-the-counter tape of L.A.-based singer Ebi may end up with Tehran teen idol Shadmehr Aghili, with his silky voice, slick hair and showy violin solos. His songs have jazz, funk and Latin influences. "You know that life is hard without you, but how easily your eyes take death from my heart," Mr. Aghili sings in a track titled "Skylke."

The strategy works, according to those who deal in contraband tunes. One such merchant, who goes by the name Akbar, has operated downtown for the past eight years, approaching passersby with the whispered offer of "new tapes." Akbar says his business is off 50% since the Iranian pop cassettes became available.

As the novelty wears off, however, sales of sanctioned pop are slipping, too. "You feel that they want to talk about earthly love, but they have to talk about love for God. They should say whatever they want to say, frankly," says Morteza, 24, as his clandestine date nods. Shabnam Assadi, a 20-year-old management student, says the seven or eight Iranian pop tapes she owns aren't suitable for dancing, but "for listening to them once, they're not bad."

Iran's music industry is trying to break new ground. Mr. Etemadi’s coming album features a samba tune called "Wow." People who have heard the bootleg versions of Mr. Aghili's next release say it has words that are clearly about girls. Mr. Assar's next effort features "lambada and rap" rhythms, says his composer. Saxophones, Spanish guitar, techno-electronic beats and
lush string arrangements are all being squeezed behind Iranian pop's typically oriental melodies. Still, most of the music has the same 1970s-film-soundtrack style that Iran's pop musicians used before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

For centuries here, music was restricted to Islamic mystics who played only for themselves, or motrebi singers, who provided the royal court with cheap entertainment. The once-disdained motrebis moved into downtown cabarets in the 1970s, and some became superstars, with the aid of the shah's government, which subsidized record producers.

The Islamic Revolution initially banned all but traditional and classical music and barred women from singing in public. Most of the top performers fled to the West.

In 1990, Mr. Khatami, then minister of culture, tried to liberalize the arts. Mr. Assar, for example, recalls playing in a three-month blues show called "Victory of Chicago." But the establishment rebelled, and Mr. Khatami lost his job. Mr. Assar resorted to giving piano lessons.

Many people cite Mr. Khatami's 1997 election as president as the beginning of Iran's musical reform. Actually, it began a few years earlier with Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. A champion of the hard-liners, he is also a shrewd politician who knows a bit about music; he plays the dotar, a traditional stringed instrument. His cultural advisers convinced him that if Iran didn't produce its own pop, music from abroad would corrupt Iran's youth and undermine Islamic values.

Ayatollah Khamenei quietly sought the approval of top Islamic scholars. "He told them he would look for classical poems and military themes," says one adviser.

One tool he used was the Islamic Arts Center in Tehran, which was set up at the beginning of the revolution to help spread Islamic culture. The center put aside its traditional-music projects and learned to rock. It installed a modern studio on its tree-lined campus, and in 1997 started a one-year search for musicians.

Television was there to help. Iran's five TV channels are all run by Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, whose politics are clear from the portraits hanging in the studio's lobby: Ayatollah Khamenei's, not President Khatami's. IRIB's music director is a close friend of the ayatollah.

The conservatives introduced pop to Iran in gradual doses, to let religious hard-liners get used to it. IRIB started Radio Payam, which aired instrumentals by such acts as the Gipsy Kings. Some songs featuring drums and guitar were played on TV. Soroush Distribution, an affiliate of IRIB, issued a pop tape two years ago, a compilation of patriotic songs tied to the soccer World Cup. "Iran, Iran, ey-mahd-e daliran. Iran, Iran, eftekhar-e dowran," one singer intones over a disco-like beat. ("Iran, Iran, the land of the brave. Iran, Iran, the honor of the era.") IRIB polled young people about their preferences and auditioned singers.
Unlikely Material

Mr. Assar and Mr. Hejazi, his composer, seemed unlikely material. The two musicians had grown up together listening to progressive rock. But Mr. Hejazi had a friend at IRIB and went to Mr. Assar's apartment one day to persuade him to audition. Their recording, with Mr. Assar singing a classical text by the poet Hafez, aired on TV over a nature film.

An Islamic Arts Center producer heard Mr. Assar and signed him up. Arts center officials interpreted classical poems with him. Looking for "thoughtful" music, the center encouraged the singer to emphasize the words through careful articulation, like Canadian superstar Celine Dion.

Mr. Assar says he isn't "into politics" and has warned his backers he would withdraw if they used him to pursue a right-wing agenda. He has, however, developed an interest in Islamic mysticism, and the image that goes with it. The singer grew a beard, started wearing a black robe and avoided parties where men and women mixed or alcohol was served. The sleeve of Mr. Assar's first album, "Kooch," which means migration, shows his profile in blue light, with liner notes citing his lineage to the prophet Mohammed and asking God's help "not to fall out of the honest path." The album, with its tense, syncopated tunes, sold an estimated 300,000 copies, producing a windfall for the arts center.

Meanwhile, the reformists were establishing their own pop empire, centered on the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, whose approval is needed to release an album. The ministry is under Mr. Khatami's control, but that doesn't mean it lets artists do what they want.

On a recent day, Farid Salmanian of the ministry's Music Council sits in his office and listens to a demo tape, with a clipboard that holds marked-up lyrics of a soft-rock song about traveling. The ministry's Lyrics Council has changed the words: "It's the start of the hard road of the hot weather of the West" becomes "It's the demands of the long road." Mr. Salmanian says the tape will be rejected anyway because the singer is out of tune.

A Shocking Decision

The Ministry of Culture gives some record labels financial aid and advice on music and packaging, and labels close to the ministry have recruited some of the TV-launched singers. In November, the ministry shocked the music industry when a Khatami appointee overruled the Music Council by approving a Shadmehr Aghili album that included songs with a fast, six-count rhythm. The album has sold more than a million copies.

The musical battles between the two camps have escalated. Iranian TV shows only singers who have stayed on its own record label. Several pop singers appeared at a rally for a pro-reform political party before the February parliamentary elections. Conservatives and reformists have vied for control of civic centers where many concerts are held.
The reformists may hold the ultimate pop weapon: Googoosh, the sensuous empress of 1970s Iranian pop. Iranian expatriates still adore her, and sometimes portray her as a silenced prisoner of the Islamic regime. These days, women are allowed to sing solos only before female audiences, and they can perform for mixed audiences or on recordings only as part of a chorus.

Googoosh was in the first row recently at a women-only pop festival sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. And she may well perform at the next festival, in October, says the head of Revelations of Dawn, a record label with connections to the singer. If Googoosh returned to the stage, the regime would score a propaganda coup and, music-industry insiders say, the reformists would get the credit.

Updated June 2, 2000 12:27 a.m. EST