

An Introduction to Music in Pakistan

Enoch Robbins

Abstract:

This article aims to provide the reader with a cursory understanding of the historical and cultural background of Pakistan, as well as its music theory and industry. It explores the long term history through the heritage art forms of Qawwali and Gazal. The contemporary musical landscape is explored through Pakistan's film and popular music. Lastly, it examines the modern state of the Pakistani music industry and the life of performers through the experience of a singer named Quaid Ahmed, and his experiences joining the ensemble: Sounds of Kolachi. The article concludes by providing context for Pakistan's modern popular music industry.

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The goal of this ethnographic study is to provide Western classically trained musicians an introductory understanding of modern Pakistani music theory, music history, and cultural norms. I seek to promote cultural understanding and encourage collaboration for performers, and to provide educators with a means to facilitate community engagement and professional development in the music classroom. This article will cover a brief history of Pakistan and an introduction to the music theory utilized in the country. It will also explore two prominent forms of Pakistani heritage music and the most prominent performers in each form. Lastly, it will examine popular Pakistani music and the modern music industry. To allow the reader to understand my own cultural lens, it is germane that I mention that I am a white, protestant, American male who is classically trained in instrumental music education.

Methods

Research for this article was conducted through a variety of methods including literature review, and interviews with Pakistani nationals. I also have begun taking lessons in Hindustani vocal music and have been documenting my experience as a musician who has been classically trained in Western music, embodying “bi-musicality” as a result. My teacher, Quaid Ahmed, has approached my instruction without attempting to make transfers from Western music aside from using words that are close translations of large concepts, such as “scale” and “key.” These close translations will be further explained in the section on theory. Additionally, Ahmed has provided me an insight into the Pakistani music industry and answered questions about the greater social, religious, and political landscapes of Pakistan.

History of Pakistan

Pakistan (Figure 1) is a country on the northwestern edge of the Indian subcontinent. It was formed from North India in 1947 at the end of the British occupation of India. The country's development was a unifying banner under which several cultural groups in the Indus valley could come together.⁶¹ For decades, this vision was



Figure 1. Map of the Middle-East and south Asia

upheld with minority groups heavily featured in popular culture and entertainment.⁶² The most prevalent religion in Pakistan is Sufi Islam, a form of Islam focused on spirituality and expressions of devotion and closeness to Allah. However, in the late 1970s, the government became increasingly militaristic and authoritarian, calling for a return to fundamentalist Islamic beliefs and traditions⁶³ This was accelerated by the escalation of military conflicts leading to the dictatorship of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who began censorship of the arts and media.⁶⁴ This created an environment where citizens were only allowed expression in government-approved ways.

⁶¹ Iftikhar Haider Malik. *The History of Pakistan*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008).

⁶² Dan Washburn, Matt Schiavenza, Salvador Pantoja, and Michelle FlorCruz. "The Musical History of Pakistan." Asia Society, last modified October 12, 2010, <https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/musical-history-pakistan>.

⁶³ NPR Staff. "Understanding Pakistan, By Way Of Its Pop Idols." NPR, last modified October 8, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130384137%3FstoryId>.

⁶⁴ Washburn et. al. "The Musical History of Pakistan."

Sufi Islam, Politics, Society and Music

Sufi Islam, sometimes referred to as Sufi Mysticism, is a religious ideology that was brought to south Asia from the Persian empire in the twelfth century and has played a large role in shaping the culture of Pakistan.⁶⁵ The acceptance of Sufi Islam in South Asia has been attributed to the similarities in philosophy with Indian Vedantists. Both philosophies place emphasis on the individual and exploration of the self.⁶⁶ Sufi poetry prominently features imagery of wine, drunkenness, and the cupbearer. Wine represents divine love, drunkenness represents the ecstasy achieved by closeness to Allah, and the cupbearer represents a teacher to share this drink. Terms of romantic love are also used to represent the reaction between Allah and the believer.⁶⁷ Some Islamic writers have condemned this evocative imagery as representative of impropriety and moral decay inherent in Sufi mysticism.⁶⁸

The relationship between Sufi Islam and musical expression has been controversial for some time. Orthodox Islam does not have any consideration for religious music. However, Sufi Islam employs music to induce ecstasy and bring closeness to Allah.⁶⁹ The primary genre of Sufi Islamic Music is called Qawwali, which will be discussed later. Some authors have condemned the practice of dance as being frivolous and improper, while at the same time rationalizing that

⁶⁵ Jahnavi Phalkey et al., “Sufi,” in *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 2015), pp. 263-264, 263.

⁶⁶ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “The Contested Terrain of Sufism,” in *ISLAM IN PAKISTAN: a History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 195-225, 196.

⁶⁷ Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, “Spiritual Music and Dance in Pakistan,” *Etnofoor* 10, no. 1 (1997): pp. 165-173, 167.

⁶⁸ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “The Contested Terrain of Sufism,” 198.

⁶⁹ Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, “Spiritual Music and Dance in Pakistan,” 165.

the movements done in response to religious music are not truly dance, but rather an expression of the ecstasy that is experienced during worship.⁷⁰

Pakistani Music Theory

Due to Pakistan's inception as a pluralistic nation, the culture has many influences. Be that as it may, the majority of music in Pakistan uses Hindustani music theory from North India because Pakistan was formerly a part of North India. The most obvious connection between Western classical music and Hindustani music is the concept of Sargam.⁷¹ This is their system of pitch, consisting of seven swaras, or words, that are used to define the high and low tones of a scale. These words are: Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, and Ni. This is much like the system of solfege in Western classical music. However, one key difference is the way in which chromatic pitches are expressed. In Western solfege, the consonant defines the scale degree, but the vowel can alter the pitch high or low. In Sargam, the vowel and consonant do not change. When written, Pakistani and Indian musicians capitalize the high semitone, and make the lowered semitone lowercase.

An important fundamental of Hindustani music theory are the *Thaat*, or parent scales. These scales comprise the set of notes that are used in Hindustani music. There are ten parent scales from which the majority of Hindustani music is drawn. Many of these scales exist in Western classical music, though there are a few that do not. All ten parent scales have the same first and fifth scale degree: Sa and Pa. The relationship between the first and fifth scale degrees is fundamental to Western music as well, and this similarity provides tonal context to the outside

⁷⁰ Ibid, 166

⁷¹ Quaid Ahmed, interview by author, Facetime from North Carolina to Pakistan, April 1, 2020.

listener first beginning to listen to Hindustani music. The ten *Thaat* are provided in figure 2.











Scale Name	Western Name	Key Signature Key of C	Solfege and Sagram
Bilawal	Ionian (Major)		Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do S R G m P D N S'
Kalyan	Lydian		Do Re Mi Fi So La Ti Do S R G M P D N S'
Khamaj	Mixolydian		Do Re Mi Fa So La Te Do S R G m P D n S'
Kafi	Dorian		Do Re Me Fa So La Te Do S R g m P D n S'
Asavari	Aeolian (Minor)		Do Re Me Fa So Le Te Do S R g m P d n S'
Bhairavi	Phrygian		Do Ra Me Fa So Le Te Do S r g m P d n S'
Bhairav	Double Harmonic Major		Do Ra Mi Fa So Le Ti Do S r G m P d N S'
Marwa	N/A		Do Ra Mi Fi So La Ti Do S r G M P D N S'
Purvi	N/A		Do Ra Mi Fi So Le Ti Do S r G M P d N S'
Todi	N/A		Do Ra Me Fi So Le Ti Do S r g M P d N S'

Figure 2. A chart displaying the 10 *Thaat* with their Western equivalents, key signatures, and solfege

Similarly, the idea of raga, or raag, is the collection of swaram that will be used in a certain composition. This is similar to a scale; however, ragas contain more information than just the notes of the scale. They contain information about melodies or motives for use in composition and improvisation. Additionally, a raga also has separate collections of notes on the ascending scale, *aroh*, and the descending scale, *avroh*. For example, the *aroh* for *Raag Yaman* begins on the *Ni* below *Sa*, and proceeds to skip *Sa* and *Pa*, as shown in figure 3. Additionally, the movement between these notes includes several slides that cannot be transcribed within the system of western music notation.



Figure 3. Raag Yaman in C

Ragas are traditionally passed from teacher to student, and shared in the Hindustani community at large. As Hindustani music is traditionally not written down, this transmission and sharing must come through teaching or performing, with the rules gradually changing over time. The nature of this oral tradition has two effects on Hindustani music. The first is that new ragas can only be learned with slow training, study, and immersion. The second is that as with any oral tradition, these rules are subject to subtle organic generational changes as they are passed down.

In terms of rhythm, Hindustani music has the same elements of beat and meter as in Western music. In Hindustani music, the term for meter and rhythm in general is *Taal*. At a fundamental level, there are differences in how meter and rhythm are perceived in Western music. As described in a lecture by Naren Budhkar, Western musicians tend to think of meter as a straight line from start to finish, or left to right (as in a book). In contrast, Hindustani musicians perceive meter as a cycle, or circle, to be filled over and over.⁷² They also tend to have larger numbers of beats within the cycle, thus allowing for greater variety in the accenting of beats within a measure. The most common meter in Hindustani music is called *Teental* (Figure 4), has sixteen beats in groups of four, whereas the most common meter in Western music only has four beats.⁷³ This mathematical relationship allows for Western listeners to maintain some comfort and familiarity with Hindustani music, as they often perceive *Teental* as just four measures of

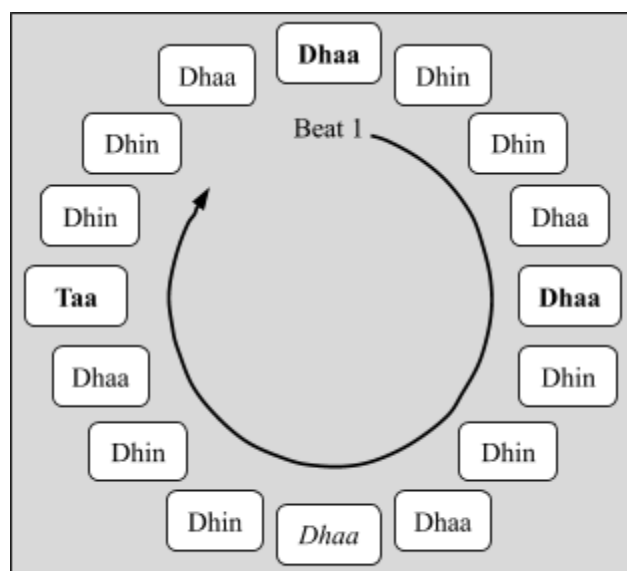


Figure 4. A graphic representation of *Teental*

common time. The words in the diagram represent different strokes on the *Tabla*, the most common Hindustani drum. There are other common meters that are less familiar to the Western ear, such as *Ektaal* with twelve beats divided into six groups of two, and *Rupak Taal* with seven beats in a three-two-two grouping.

⁷² Naren Budhkar, "Hand Drum Masters: World Percussion Traditions" (Open lecture and masterclass, at the The 2018 North Carolina Folk Festival, September 8, 2018).

⁷³ Sadhana, "Rhythm (Taal) in Indian Classical Music." Raag Hindustani, 2011. <https://raag-hindustani.com/Rhythm.html>.

Qawwali

The following section will describe two noteworthy forms of Pakistani heritage music: Qawwali and Ghazal. While there are many more genres of heritage music in Pakistan, these two have been selected as representative because of their religious significance, cultural influence, impact on modern Pakistani music, as well as their international presence.

As mentioned before, one prominent form of traditional Pakistani music is Qawwali. This artform began as a very expressive and energetic form of worship, and is deeply rooted in Sufi Islam, sometimes using Persian Sufi poetry as its lyric source.⁷⁴ The music involves groups of approximately eight musicians, including multiple harmonium players, several collaborative singers who clap the pulse for the entire song, and at least one person playing the tabla or another percussion instrument. In terms of form and structure, all of the songs are built on a grand crescendo from beginning to end, with the energy always ending in a higher place than where it started.⁷⁵ Aside from this, the music is structured with multiple strains sung in unison and with spaces for improvisation. These improvisations are usually dialogues between the soloists and the rest of the ensemble and can be performed as an echo, call and response, or as supplemental stingers added to the end of the existing union strains.⁷⁶ An example is represented in the following text, which is from the Persian Poem *Chasm-e-Maste*.⁷⁷ This text includes the

⁷⁴ BBC, "A Beginner's Guide to Qawwali Music." BBC. last modified August 8, 2017. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5Plm8bBlBd7wXjZN2zdb8Fm/a-beginners-guide-to-qawwali-music>.

⁷⁵ BBC, "A Beginner's Guide to Qawwali Music."

⁷⁶ Real World Records. "Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan - Mustt Mustt (Live at WOMAD Yokohama 1992)." YouTube Video, June 16, 2017. <https://youtu.be/SDfELfpumEE>

⁷⁷ Hazret Amir Khusrau. 'Chashm-e-Maste', Abdur Rahman's Corner. <https://thecorner.wordpress.com/2011/03/15/chashm-e-maste/>.

previously mentioned references to wine and the relationship between Allah and believer being represented by a mischievous sweetheart, who teases and beguiles, offers protection while being a tormentor.

Chashm-e-Maste `ajabe, zulf taraze `ajabe	O wondrous ecstatic eyes, O wondrous long locks
Maiparaste `ajabe, fitna taraze `ajabe	O wondrous wine worshipper, O wondrous mischievous sweetheart,
Bahr-e-qatlam chu kashad tegh neham sar basujud	As he draws the sword, I bow my head in prostration so as to be killed
U banaze `ajabe man banyaze `ajabe	O wondrous is his beneficence, O wondrous my submission
Waqt-e-bismil shudanam chashm baryush baz ast	In the spasm of being killed my eyes beheld your face;
Mehrbane `ajabe bandanawaze `ajabe	O wondrous benevolence, O wondrous guidance and protection
Turk taze `ajabe shoba babaze `ajabe	O wondrous amorous teasing, O wondrous beguiling
Kajkulahe `ajabe `arbada saze `ajabe	O wondrous tilted cap, O wondrous tormentor
Haq mago kalma-e-kufr ast dar in ja Khusrau	Do not reveal the Truth; in this world blasphemy prevails Khusrau
Razdane `ajabe sahib-e-raz-e-`ajabe	O wondrous source of mystery, O wondrous knower of secrets.

The primary figure in Qawwali music is Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, shown in Figure 5. His name has become synonymous with Qawwali, and he is credited with bringing the artform into the global spotlight and modernizing it through collaboration with Western artists such as Peter Gabriel.⁷⁸



Figure 5. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in Concert

⁷⁸ BBC, "A Beginner's Guide to Qawwali Music."



Figure 6. The Nooran Sisters in concert

Notably, the role of women is still debated in Qawwali; however, there are female performers, such as the Nooran Sisters, shown in Figure 6.⁷⁹ In spite of the Nooran Sisters' established presence in Pakistan, some sources contend that women are not permitted to sing in

the performance of Qawwali, while others argue that they should not be allowed to perform at all.⁸⁰ The attitudes toward women are changing, but they are still heavily influenced by the traditional gender roles present in Islam.

Ghazal

Ghazal (sometimes spelled Gazal) is another heritage artform in Pakistani Music. Ghazal itself refers to a form of Urdu poetry that has existed for centuries. When applied to music, Ghazal refers to the practice of setting these poems to a raag or a musical scale. This art form is distinctly Pakistani, as it relies on Urdu poetry to derive its words. The musical style of this type of performance is much more like a conventional “band” setup, where there is a clear lead-singer or front man who is supported by the rest of the ensemble. In this genre, the artist's skill is measured by their ability to set the text to a tune; the consistent meter of a Ghazal makes managing the rhythmic elements much easier, so the song can be premeditated composition, or purely improvisational.

⁷⁹ White Hill Beats. “NOORAN SISTERS USA LIVE | NIT KHAIR MANGA | OFFICIAL FULL VIDEO HD.” YouTube Video, February 25, 2016. https://youtu.be/3yJtOO_Ub5c

⁸⁰ BBC, “A Beginner's Guide to Qawwali Music.”

Ghazal was originally an Arabic poetic form that was brought to the Indian subcontinent by the Sufi Musims in the eighteenth-century. It is a form of poetry that traditionally expresses romantic, familial, religious, or metaphysical longing and love.⁸¹ Ghazals are composed of five to fifteen couplets, with the a repeated word or phrase at the end of each couplet.⁸² The example below is by the prominent twentieth-century poet, Syed Ahmad Shah, known by his pen name: Ahmad Faraz. This poem reiterates the phrase “*ke liye aa*” loosely translated as the imperative “come for.” The syntactic differences between Urdu and English can make translation a daunting task when communicating true meaning. This can be seen in the following example, where the repeated Urdu phrase *ke liye aa*, is translated to the English imperative “come.”⁸³ This poem has been performed and recorded by many singers over the years.

ranjish hī sahī dil hī dukhāne ke liye aa aa phir se mujhe chhoḌ ke jaane ke liye aa	Even if you are annoyed come just to give me pain come even if you have to then leave me yet again
kuchh to mire pindār-e-mohabbat kā bharam rakh tū bhī to kabhī mujh ko manāne ke liye aa	The notion of my love's self-pride please do pacify you should surely come one day and try to mollify
pahle se marāsim na sahī phir bhī kabhī to rasm-o-rah-e-duniyā hī nibhāne ke liye aa	even tho no longer close we are as used to be come even if it's purely for sake of formality
kis kis ko batā.eñge judā.ī kā sabab ham tū mujh se kḥafā hai to zamāne ke liye aa	The reason for our parting to whom should I relate if cross with me then come and to the world narrate
ik umr se huuñ lazzat-e-girya se bhī mahrūm ai rāhat-e-jāñ mujh ko rulāne ke liye aa	a lifetime have missed the joy of tearful ecstasy Life's comfort thus to make me cry, you should come to me
ab tak dil-e-kḥush-fahm ko tujh se haiñ ummīdeñ ye ākhirī sham.eñ bhī bujhāne ke liye aa	my heart is optimistic yet, its hopes are still alive come to snuff it out, let not this final flame survive

⁸¹ “Ghazal.” Poets.org. Academy of American Poets. Accessed September 14, 2020.
<https://poets.org/glossary/ghazal>.

⁸² “Ghazal.” Poetry Foundation. Poetry Foundation, 2020.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/ghazal>.

⁸³ Ahmad Faraz . 'Ranjish hi sahi dil hi dukhane ke liye aa', rekhta.
<https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/ranjish-hii-sahii-dil-hii-dukhaane-ke-liye-aa-ahmad-faraz-ghazals>.
Translated by rhekta.org

The preeminent name in Ghazal is Mehdi Hassan. Hassan was born in 1927 to a family of professional musicians in India, and he received traditional Hindustani musical training from a young age. His family immigrated to Pakistan after it gained independence in 1947 primarily because of their Muslim faith. At the time, the market for professional musicians was very limited, so he took up work as a bike mechanic.⁸⁴ Having received musical training before his family immigrated, he immersed himself in Urdu poetry, applied his skills in improvisation, and went on to become a world renowned singer of Ghazal. Hassan's impact is widespread. He is credited with popularizing the genre of Ghazal with a new generation of listeners and inspiring many Hindustani classical musicians to take up singing Ghazal.⁸⁵

Hassan, seen in figure 7, exists in some ways as a cultural bridge between Pakistan and India, with his heritage and music being influenced heavily by both countries. However, he is the subject of much posthumous debate. Pakistani writers claim that he belongs more to their cultural history due to his residence, religion, and use of Urdu poetry.⁸⁶



Figure 7. Mehdi Hassan in a televised performance.

Meanwhile, North Indian writers claim him by virtue

⁸⁴ Reginald Massey, "Mehdi Hassan Obituary." *Guardian News and Media*, June 13, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jun/13/mehdi-hassan>.

⁸⁵Haresh Pandya. "Mehdi Hassan, Who Sang Urdu Lyric Verse, Dies at 84." *The New York Times*, June 14, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/14/arts/music/mehdi-hassan-ghazals-voice-of-god-dies-at-84.html>.

⁸⁶ Reginald Massey, "Mehdi Hassan Obituary." *Guardian News and Media*, June 13, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jun/13/mehdi-hassan>.

of where he was born.⁸⁷ Today, his music is still heavily enjoyed in both Pakistan and India, and he is responsible for bringing Ghazal to a worldwide audience.

Popular Music

Pakistan has experienced periods of great prosperity and artistic freedom, interspersed with periods of cultural and religious oppression. In the periods of prosperity, music flourished. This was driven by the rich musical traditions of Sufi Islam, with its focus on emotional expression as a core element of worship.⁸⁸ This prosperity and development was compounded by the globalization of the music industry in the late twentieth century, allowing for cross-cultural influences between countries.

The 1960s are referred to as the golden age of Pakistan. This was the time during which the nation's artistic expression flourished the most.⁸⁹ There were great strides made in entertainment, such as music and cinema. Up until the 1980s, there were many live performances in schools and communities, and the popular music of the country featured the same genres as the world today. Songs such as "Ko-Ko-Korina" by Ahmed Rushdi, "Albela Rahi" by Alamgir, and "Disco Deewane" by Nazia Hassan demonstrate the global nature of Pakistani Popular music. These songs have the same style, form, and harmonic structure as any European pop hit. "Ko-Ko-Korina" by Ahmed Rushdi has a classic rockabilly guitar riff, "Disco Deewane" by

⁸⁷ Ziya Salam, "A Voice That Knew No Border." *The Hindu*, October 22, 2016.
<https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/music/A-voice-that-knew-no-border/article12859820.ece>.

⁸⁸ Riaz Hassan, "Religion, Society, and the State in Pakistan: Pirs and Politics." *Asian Survey* 27, no. 5 (1987): 554-555

⁸⁹ Riaz Haq. "History of PAKISTANI MUSIC(1/3)." YouTube Video, May 4, 2011.
<https://youtu.be/mxJ9YPMRCrg>

Nazia Hassan lives up to its name with a syncopated bass line, and “Albela Rahi” by Alamgir shares a chord progression with The Troggs’ “Wild Thing.”



Figure 8. From Left to Right: Still Frame from “Ko-Ko-Korina,”⁹⁰ Poster for “Disco Deewane,”⁹¹ and Image from an advertisement from Alamgir’s⁹² appearance on Coke Studio Pakistan (2013)

The Pakistani popular music industry has also been heavily influenced by film. Many Hindustani films feature large musical numbers, however these songs are not sung by the actors. Instead they lip sync over pre-recorded tracks. These recorded musicians are called playback singers, and they have their own division of film awards in Pakistan. All three of the artists mentioned have worked not only as recording artists, but also as playback singers.

During this more liberal time period from the 1960s to the 1980s, concerts were commonplace, with young Pakistanis engaging in social behaviors such as partying and drinking.

⁹³ Nevertheless, the late 1970s saw the advent of a more conservative government, along with

⁹⁰ Usman Habib Chaudhry. “Ko Ko Korina - May Ray Khayalon Pay Chaey Hai - (Late) Ahmed Rushdi.” YouTube Video of the 1966 Film, Dec 10, 2011. <https://youtu.be/R9QW9pBmf1U>

⁹¹ Birbal Studios. *Instagram Photo of Nazia Hassan Featuring the Typeface of Disco Deewane*. October 27, 2014. *Instagram*. https://www.instagram.com/p/uq3ajKKIa6/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet.

⁹² Think Twice Pakistan. *Photo of Alamgir Haq Playing Guitar*. 2016. *The Express Tribune*. <https://c.tribune.com.pk/2016/01/alamgir-ThinkTwicePakistan.jpg>.

⁹³ Arshard Bashir, interview by author, Zoom from North Carolina to Pakistan, April 11, 2020.

social and political pressure that led to the restriction of religious freedoms and individual expression. Much of this happened under the rule of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq from 1978 to 1988, who sought to de-Westernize the region through codified Sharization.⁹⁴ He began to write Islamic religious fundamentalism into national law. This was a deliberate shift away from the spiritual and mystic Sufi Islam to a more legalistic form of the religion. As a result, artistic expression was heavily censored and music was only allowed if it presented the government-approved image of Pakistan. Some “Western-style” music was able to make it past the censors by using extremely patriotic lyrics. One example of this is “Dil Dil Pakistan,” literally meaning “Heart Heart Pakistan.” This song has deeply patriotic lyrics, but the video shows very “Western” and “cool” Pakistanis. This song has become so beloved that it is now called Pakistan’s unofficial national anthem.⁹⁵

After the death of Zia-ul-Haq in 1988, there was a brief period of democracy and loosening of social restrictions. This began under the leadership of Benazir Bhutto from 1988 to 1990, a formidable woman with the distinction of being Pakistan’s first female Prime Minister. This reprieve was short-lived; in the 2000s, the American War on Terror threw the region into political upheaval and led to renewed restrictions on freedom of expression, along with a severe impact on the economy. As a result, there has been a vast reduction in the number of live performances, resulting in limited opportunities for emerging musicians. Fortunately, the 2010s have seen an increase in the number of performances once again, with programs like Coke Studio Pakistan presenting new artists, bands, and ensembles on an international platform.

⁹⁴ Lawrence Ziring, “Public Policy Dilemmas and Pakistan's Nationality Problem: The Legacy of Zia Ul-Haq.” *Asian Survey* 28, no. 8 (1988): 796

⁹⁵ NPR Staff. “Understanding Pakistan, By Way Of Its Pop Idols.”

The Life of a Performer⁹⁶

The musical heritage of the Indian subcontinent is passed down through *Gharanas*, or musical families. They can be families related by blood or chosen apprentices from a young age. There are no general music or ensemble classes in the public schools of Pakistan. Because of this, aspiring musicians who were not born into a *Gharana* or taken into apprenticeship at a young age are at a disadvantage should they decide to pursue music as their professional career.

Quaid Ahmed, in figure 9, is an example of one such artist. He is currently a member of the ensemble: Sounds of Kolachi. This group blends traditional Pakistani musical elements with popular music such as rock and blues.⁹⁷ Quaid has performed with this group on the Coke Studio National Television program, and has participated in international tours and talks at colleges around the world. The band's public journey has been widely documented in newspapers



Figure 9. Quaid Ahmed on Coke Studio Pakistan

and other outlets, but the backgrounds of the performers themselves have received much less attention.

Quaid's musical background begins in childhood, where he watched traditional performers on television and heard them on the radio. He grew up saturated with Sindhi, Ghazal,

⁹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the details of this section are from the Author's Interview with Quaid Ahmed on April 1, 2020.

⁹⁷ Coke Studio. "Coke Studio Season 11| Ilallah| Sounds of Kolachi." YouTube video of a live music recording, Sep 28, 2018. <https://youtu.be/3CJQGf7ldZU>.

Qawwali, and other forms of Pakistani heritage music. He heard Pakistani cultural icons such as Medhi Hassan, and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. These early experiences formed the beginnings of his musical acculturation and influenced his style and decisions later on. As a result of these influences, Quaid picked up much of the Hindustani musical tradition. For Quaid, this was not learned through formal music education and theoretical lessons, but through practical exposure and listening with intent.

In 2012, Quaid began performing at weddings, celebrations and other small events. During his early career, he received encouragement from his family and sought out more performance opportunities. Eventually, he resolved to seek out auditions and attempted to build a professional career out of his vocal music. It is at this point that his story becomes truly unique.

Quaid's initial attempts with record labels and producers, such as Shahzad Hasan, were not successful. Eventually he received a call from Ahsan Bari, a well-known Pakistani composer, performer, and producer. Bari viewed him as a "raw untrained talent" with the goal of forming an ensemble built from traditionally trained master musicians and emerging talents that they could mentor.⁹⁸ In this combination of experts and amateurs, Quaid was one of several young musicians brought into the industry. He was presented with not only a career opportunity but the chance to receive on-the-job training from master musicians.

Quaid refers to Sounds of Kolachi as an ensemble, not a band. He says that in the professional setting, the distinction between ensembles and bands is very important. Because of the competitive market and the friction between front-men and band members, band culture

⁹⁸ The Narrator. "Sounds of Kolachi Has Changed Our Perspective toward Music: Ahsan Bari." Red Bull, June 1, 2020. <https://www.redbull.com/pk-en/sounds-of-kolachi-has-changed-our-perspective-toward-music-ahsan-bari>.

stopped being effective in Pakistan in the 1990s. With the idea of an ensemble, the hierarchy of authority is more formalized and clearly defined. In some ways, it is like hiring studio musicians because the ensemble leaders call the shots and make the big decisions. However, the best elements of a band are also found in an ensemble. The group has a united identity and are all working toward a mutual success. There is a fusion of ideas brought about by the diverse backgrounds of the group members. For example, Gul Muhammed, the Sounds of Kolachi sarangi player, was taught Pakistani Heritage music in a traditional master-apprentice relationship, while Ahsan Bari, the ensemble leader, brings an expertise in popular music. They have experienced friction in the past when composing songs and breaking traditional forms, but this dialogue lets them work together creatively and create a fusion of ideas. The blending of these ideas gives Sounds of Kolachi its unique appeal and makes them representative of the many ethnic groups in Pakistan.

Industry

Pakistan is a composite country, built out of many different cultural groups. This diverse and heterogeneous identity is reflected in their professional music environment. The musical landscape contains elements from all over the world. Some instruments, like the sarangi, are still taught in the traditional Master-Apprentice Model. However, Quaid demonstrates an emerging model of learning through listening to masters and honing the skill on the road, similar to the stories of American jazz legends like Miles Davis.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Miles Davis. *Miles: the Autobiography* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

The music industry in Pakistan is visually driven, like that of America, and is still impacted by the colorism imposed by British occupation of the area. Artists are encouraged to use skin creams, such as Fair and Handsome for men and Fair and Lovely for women. The practice of skin-lightening is done to make artists more marketable. In this regard, the Pakistani music industry is not unlike the Western music industry or the idol cultures of Japan and South Korea. In these industries the record labels have a potentially invasive level of influence over their artists' personal lives.

Today, music is one of Pakistan's primary exports. North India has developed a fascination with Pakistani artists, and much of this can be attributed to combining a shared Hindustani musical system with the diverse cultural groups and influences of the Middle-East and Sufi Islam.¹⁰⁰ In addition to the Ghazals of Mehdi Hassan inspiring more performers, the Coke Studios television program gives Pakistani artists a worldwide platform, facilitating the transmission of their cultural heritage around the globe. This program highlights the musical traditions of the diverse cultural groups in Pakistan. Likewise, the increased use of Pakistani artists singing in Bollywood has created interest in and beyond North India.¹⁰¹ A.R. Rahman is the preeminent name in Bollywood film music and he has been very vocal in his praise of Pakistani musical skills. Notably, he shows great respect for performers of traditional Pakistani artforms like Ghazal and Qawwali, giving validity to their heritage artforms.

¹⁰⁰ Quaid Ahmed, interview by author.

¹⁰¹ Bollywood is North Indian cinema, a combination of the words Bombay and Hollywood.

Conclusion

Pakistan's music has been shaped by its history. It shares cultural elements of the Middle-Eastern Islam and North Indian Hindustani music theory. This unique cultural environment has allowed for the fusion of creative philosophy, religious symbolism, and musical elements from both regions. The core of the music theory comes from North Indian musical heritage, with *thaats* and *ragas* providing melodic structure, and *laal* providing rhythmic structure. These musical elements were then blended with elements of Sufi Islam, resulting in genres such as Qawwali with its large ensembles, constantly increasing dynamic, and wine-based imagery. The blending of Hindustani music and Persian Ghazal poetry based on couplets and repeated phrases created its own genre. Understanding the basic elements, musical structure, and lyrical themes of these elements is the beginning of understanding Pakistani heritage music and should enable the reader to begin listening to Pakistani music with a more informed perspective.

The popular music of Pakistan proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s, with artists recording rock and disco albums that would fit well into the average American record collection. Film music has also played a large role in Pakistani pop music development, with many prominent artists getting their start as playback singers. The industry struggled under the Sharization of the 1980s and then again in the early 2000s after the war on terror, but has seen a strong revival in the 2010s with television programs such as Coke Studio giving Pakistani artists a global platform. Today, there are many roads to success as a professional musician, from traditional learning under a guru to on-the-job musical training. Pakistan's music has become one of its largest cultural exports, and their artists are heavily sought after in the international market both as playback singers in North India, and as collaborating artists in America and Europe.

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