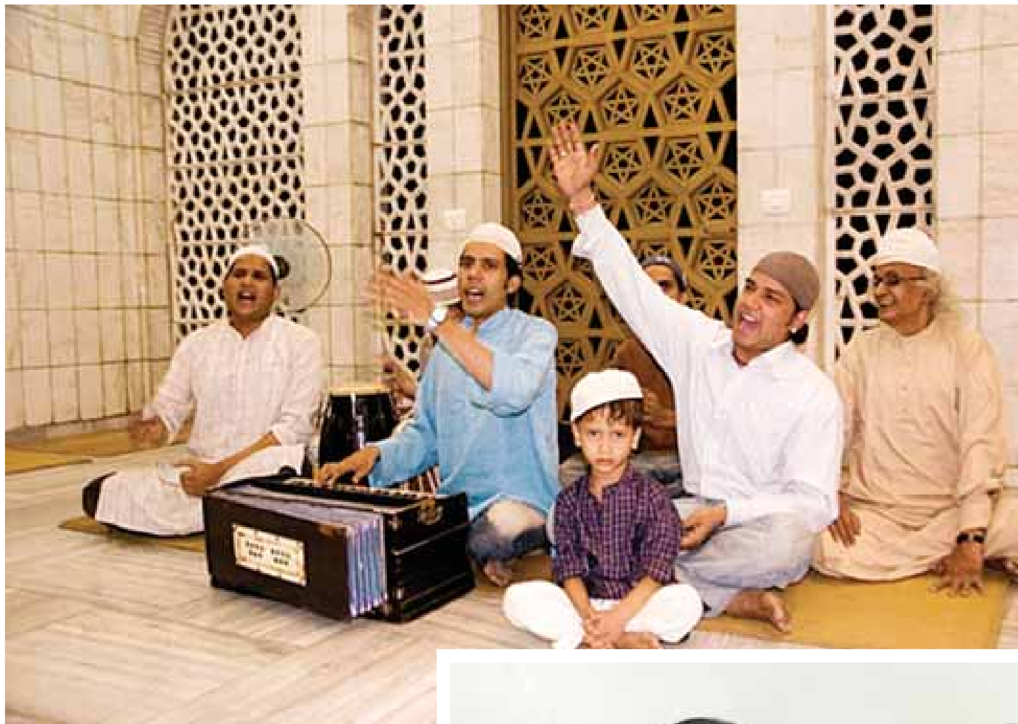
Call of the Mystic

The good ol' qawwali is torn between spiritual and commercial concerns

Margot Bigg

The famous Thursday qawwali at Nizamuddin Dargah, Delhi

The moon is full and the air crisp when Tahir Qawwal leads his qawwali party, Fanna-fi-Allah (annihilation into Allah), in the singing of a *hamd*, or song, in honour of Allah. The party will continue through the night, singing praises to Allah, the Prophet and saints from distant lands, all in heavily accented Urdu. I enter the venue just as the *hamd* is starting, bringing with me expectations from performances I have attended in the past. But unlike the qawwalis I've seen in India, this performance is not being held in a *dargah* (Sufi shrine), but in a large, dome-shaped tent in the middle of a music festival in California. Their party is made up entirely of Westerners (including one woman), most of whom have manes of long dreadlocks twisted neatly atop their heads. Their audience – a mix of smiling baby boomers clad in tie-dye, young men wearing fedoras and eyeliner, and blonde-haired college students in jeans and hooded sweatshirts – appear to have been plucked right out of suburban America. Many have their eyes closed, deeply moved by a poetry in a language they cannot understand, uplifted by the ecstasy-inducing sounds of the North American qawwali party. And it is here that I realise for the first



Ustaad Meraj (centre) and his qawwali troupe

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Ustaad Chand (centre) with his family

time how a seven-centuries-old tradition from the Indian subcontinent has started to seep into the musical consciousness worldwide, adapting to new contexts in the process.

On the other side of the planet, in central Delhi's Hazrat Nizamuddin neighbourhood, Ustaad Meraj Ahmed Nizami is just starting his day in the sparsely furnished one-room apartment he shares with eight of his children and grandchildren. The wiry-haired 82-year-old qawwal (Qawwali singer) is highly esteemed in his community for his 'heavenly' voice, his facility with the Persian language, and the accuracy with which he performs. He will practice his craft for two hours today, just like he has every day since he sang his first qawwali at the age of eight. He will be joined by his five sons; the ustaad is counting on them to continue a tradition that has been in their family for 30 generations. But his expectations are high and his approach to the trade strict. Ustaad Meraj is critical of the entertainment appeal of popular qawwali, which he believes detracts from the true essence of the art, and he expects that his sons carry on the tradition in the same form that it is currently being passed on to them.

In the same neighbourhood, in a small room tucked behind the shrine of renowned Sufi saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, Ustaad Chand Nizami is also practicing the devotional form of music that has been preserved by his family for centuries. He is the leader of Nizami Bhandhu, a family party comprising him and his two adult nephews. In

The qawwali session at Nizamuddin Dargah, Delhi

many ways, Ustaad Chand leads a similar life to that of his elderly counterpart a few lanes away: both live in the same community and both have been charged with passing down the tradition of qawwali to the next generation of men in their family. What sets them apart is their approach to the changing face of qawwali: while Ustaad Meraj considers qawwali for entertainment purposes unauthentic and inappropriate, Ustaad Chand is happy about the recent evolution and ensuing surge in popularity of the musical form.

One need not be an expert in music or Islamic studies to appreciate the moving beauty and power of qawwali. Most casual observers of a traditional qawwali performance will notice, and maybe even be brought to ecstasy by, some specific traits of the centuries-old musical form. Qawwals sing poetic songs of praise, devotion and divine love (*ishq*), usually in Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi and Persian, which are sung with such intense feeling that one doesn't always have to understand what the words mean to feel the emotions behind them. The songs are usually much longer than the three-to four-minute clips that today's shortened attention spans demand; a typical qawwali song lasts anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes or longer (the longest noted recorded track – Aziz Mian's *Hashr Ke Roz Yeh Poochhunga* – is almost two hours long).

Qawwalis start softly with long instrumental and vocal introductions and eventually build up, peaking with the main refrain of the song. This build-up allows for a gradual transition from regular consciousness to the state of *wajd*, or divine ecstasy, that is said to bring both singers and audience members closer to God. Traditional performances are usually held in *dargahs*, although these days they are often held at weddings, concert halls and other non-traditional venues – pretty much anywhere where there is a demand. Although qawwali parties vary in size, most consist of up to eight or nine men: one or two harmonium players (one of whom is usually the lead singer), one or two percussionists (on tabla and/or dholak) and a chorus of background singers who double as tempo-setting hand clappers.

Qawwali has its roots in Sema, a form of Sufi devotional music that came to South

Asia from Persia in the 11th century. However, it wasn't until the 13th century that qawwali was developed into what it is today by the famed poet/musician Amir Khusro Dehelvi, a member of the Chisti order of Sufis and devotee of Nizamuddin Auliya, whose contributions to developing the form have earned him the title of "the father of qawwali."

Khusro was born in Uttar Pradesh, but moved to Delhi as a small boy. His father was Turkic, hailing from what is now known as Afghanistan, and it was he who first exposed the young Khusro to artistic traditions from outside the Indian subcontinent. Khusro began working as a royal poet as a young adult, and compiled volumes of works during his lifetime, mostly in Hindavi (the Hindi/Urdu proto-language) and Persian. Many of his poems and couplets are sung by qawwals to this day. He developed qawwali by blending Persian elements such as *muqams* with Indian elements, such as *ragas*. Khusro's artistic contributions did not stop there; he also refined what has come to be known as Hindustani Classical Music by adding Persian and Arabic elements to what already existed. He is also widely credited with inventing the tabla by splitting the pakhavaj, a much older type of Indian drum, into two. Some also attribute the development of the sitar to Khusro, although this has never been substantiated.

The tradition has been passed down orally from father to son over the centuries, with particular attention paid to the precision with which the poetry is recited. This meticulous approach has been crucial in preserving the original sound of qawwali. However, while much of the poetry of qawwali has remained more or less the same over the centuries, outside influences have shaped it into what it is today.

The harmonium is believed to have revolutionised Indian music since it was first popularised in the subcontinent in the 19th century, and qawwali is certainly no exception. Before introduction of the instrument by French missionaries, qawwali was generally accompanied by the sarangi. But unlike the sarangi, the harmonium doesn't need to be retuned after each song, allowing for a quicker transition and smoother flow during performances. This was good news for the qawwals of the time, who replaced their sarangi with the more practical import.

During the pre-Independence nationalist movement, the harmonium was criticised for its foreign origins, its appropriateness for Indian music publicly questioned until it was eventually banned from All India Radio (AIR). Ironically, this ban was instigated by an Englishman named John Foulds. Foulds, considered one of the foremost experts in Indian music in the West at the time, travelled to India to take up the post of director of AIR's European music department. He died of cholera one week later, but before he died he wrote an article insisting that the instrument was not apt in producing the 22 *shrutis*, or microtones, needed to properly play Indian music (NB a *shruti* harmonium has since been developed). Fould's argument spurred Lionel Fielden, AIR's controller, to ban the instrument from the airwaves in 1940. It wasn't until 1971 that the ban was finally lifted. Despite the politics around the harmonium, the instrument continued to be the primary accompanying instrument to most qawwalis, a position that it retains to this day.

The buzz around qawwali today can be attributed, in a large part, to the advent of cinema in the 20th century. Qawwali first showed up in films as early as in 1945, when the appearance of an all-ladies party in the Pakistani film *Zeenat* made waves across South Asia. Since then, secularised – and, as some claim, bastardised – forms of qawwali, known as filmi qawwali, have become a regular feature on the silver screen. These days, fusions of electronic music and qawwali, known as techno qawwali, are also gaining fame through Bollywood and Lollywood films, and have even made their way to the dance floors of nightclubs worldwide.

However, while Hindi and Urdu cinema have played important parts in introducing the subcontinent audiences to qawwali, the international popularity of the form can be attributed to a handful of qawwals from Pakistan, particularly the Sabri Brothers and the late Ustaad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. The Sabri Brothers first released a major-label album in 1958 (on EMI Pakistan), making qawwali accessible to audiences outside of the holy dargahs of South Asia. They are considered the first to have introduced qawwali to the West in 1975 when they played a sold-out concert at New York's Carnegie Hall. The Sabri Brothers continue to record and perform to this day, albeit with different members than in the original party. While the Sabri Brothers' contribution to popularising qawwali was certainly groundbreaking, it was Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan who brought qawwali to worldwide fame, and much in the same way it was done in India and Pakistan: through films.

Ustaad Khan was born in 1948 in Pakistan to a family of distinguished qawwals and took over the family party after his father's death in 1971. By the early 1980s, the qawwal had signed a record deal in the UK, where he toured regularly from then on. In 1985, Khan collaborated with British pop star Peter Gabriel on the soundtrack of Martin Scorsese's Academy Award winning film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. He went on to contribute tracks to the sound-

tracks of *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and *Dead Man Walking* (1995), with American singer of Pearl Jam fame, Eddie Veddar. During this time, Ustaad Khan continued to work with Gabriel, whose Real World Record label released five albums of the ustaad's work. Back on the subcontinent, Khan also kept busy with a number of film projects, composing for and performing in several Pakistani and Indian films. He also co-composed the soundtrack for the 1994 cult classic, *Bandit Queen*.

The ustaad died in 1997, but has remained the inspiration for numerous musicians across the world to this day, some of whom have sampled, remixed and covered his songs. Jeff Buckley, an American singer-songwriter and devoted admirer of Khan, covered *Yeh Jo Halka Halka Saroor Hai* on a live album, stating, "Nusrat, he's my Elvis", before starting the song. Indian playback singer Kailash Kher admits that his sound has been heavily influenced by Khan's vocals. Remixes of Khan's tracks have also been released by British artists such as Massive Attack, Bally Sagoo and Gaudi. In 2004, New York jazz musician Brook Martinez formed an 11-piece jazz ensemble, Brooklyn Qawwali Party, which covers the maestro's songs with a jazzy twist. Then there are the scores of more traditional qawwali parties – among them, Fanna-fi-Allah – who can trace their musical lineage directly back to Khan (Fanna-fi-Allah members studied under Khan's nephew-successor, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan). More than a decade after Khan's death, these artists are continuing his legacy, doing their parts to maintain qawwali's mainstream appeal. But not everyone sees the popularisation of qawwali as something to be happy about.

It's a sweltering day back in pre-monsoon Delhi. Ustaad Meraj Ahmed Nizami of the Hazrat Nizamuddin neighbourhood is taking refuge from the heat in his small home, tucked at the end of a two-foot-wide lane. To reach him, one must navigate an intricate series of serpentine lanes, dodging rowdy children, fugitive goats, and the occasional hand-pulled cart. It's a near-impossible feat for an outsider like me, who is more accustomed to the neatly arranged alphabetised blocks of Delhi's newer settlements. I have for help a local, who leads me deep into the entrails of the neighbourhood and straight to the qawwal's door.

Inside, Ustaad Meraj is seated cross-legged on his bed, a clunky ceiling fan whipping around noisily above him. He beckons me in, scooting over to make room for me to sit next to him, while two of his sons look on from their post against an eggshell-green wall across the room. A glance around the family's sparsely furnished flat reveals that the Nizamis are living at a standard that is far below what one would expect from internationally touring performing artists – their only luxuries are a fridge and a small television. Theirs is the sad reality like many artists and musicians who are languishing for the lack of people's interest in supporting art and music.

We begin by talking of the changes that qawwali has gone through since the ustaad first entered the tradition some seven decades ago. He tells us that there are many forms of qawwali out there and that he can only speak about his own style, Riwayat Qawwali, which is intended only for *ibadat*, or divine worship, and includes elements from other Indian religions (such as *bhajans* from Hinduism and the *raga basant* from Sikhism). Ustaad Meraj is clearly disdainful of some of the new forms of qawwali that have popped up over the last few decades. "It's not even real qawwali," he exclaims, his voice rising in pitch as his interest in the conversation intensifies. "It's for entertainment, for picnics, to pass the time," he continues. I can tell from his tone and expressions that we've touched on a sensitive topic and that it is important to tread carefully. Perhaps he senses this, for his face softens as he continues with the resigned diplomacy unique to the old and wise, "The type of qawwali that you like to listen to depends on your nature," he tells me. "It depends on if you like listening for *ibadat* or just for fun."

Ustaad Chand Nizami clearly knows what angle suits him best. He's seated in his room, his harmonium placed in front of him, as a photographer clicks away. Like a professional model, the musician turns his head up and slightly to the right, raising his hand as qawwals often do while singing their divine poetry. When the shoot is over, he hands me his party's brochure, filled with photos of the party with public figures, including one with the Dalai Lama. There's no denying that there's a certain star quality here.

Ustaad Chand sees the international spread of qawwali as a blessing for qawwals like himself, citing Nusrat's contribution to popularising the genre. "Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan-ji has lent a big hand to making qawwali successful," he says. He and his party, Nizami Bhandu, have a number of commercial recordings to their credit and have sung for films. They have no qualms performing filmi songs, which naturally makes them a popular group for weddings and other social gatherings. However, the ustaad recognises that although some flexibility is helpful when introducing new audiences to qawwali, it is necessary to maintain authenticity so that people don't get the wrong impression about what qawwali is. He has been publicly critical of the misrepresentation of qawwali in films in the past, although he believes

that the film industry has done a better job at portraying it lately.

Ustaad Chand seems to be trying to find a happy medium between traditional and modern takes on qawwali. He upholds the standards of his family trade, while adapting to new contexts when need be. His sentiments seem to echo those of qawwali fans in India and abroad, who are interested in traditional qawwali, but also enjoy listening to popular songs sung in the qawwali style. It's a double-edged sword: the very changes that purists believe are killing qawwali by reducing it to entertainment are also keeping qawwali alive by making it an economically feasible – and possibly quite lucrative – profession.

Any art form – be it painting, literature, theatre or music – is deeply rooted in the context from which it emerges. The arts reflect society, and society is ever changing. Should art not also evolve to reflect these changes, lest it become obsolete in its stagnancy? Just as qawwals in the 19th century adopted the harmonium when it was introduced, shouldn't the qawwals of today also adapt to suit the needs of the day?

While such questions are valid when discussing musical changes in qawwali, the sacred context of the tradition should not be overlooked. Ustaad Meraj says that qawwali is, in its very essence, a spiritual practice, a form of devotional worship. Adopting a new instrument or even adding a pop-inspired bass line should be acceptable in this understanding of qawwali, as it gives a modern appeal to the music without tampering with the poetry of the songs. Unfortunately, far too many fans forget that there is more to qawwali than the uplifting sounds and clap-along rhythms, that there's a spiritual aspect that has pervaded in qawwali for centuries before the genre's foray into pop culture.

"This qawwali that you will hear tonight is for bringing peace to the soul," says Ustaad Meraj before entering the *dargah* of Sufi Inayat Ali, where he and his sons are about to perform. It's Friday and the crowd is tiny; it's the jam-packed Thursday night performances at Nizamuddin's *dargah* that attract the masses. The party is joined by the ustaad's small grandson, who croons along with the parts of the songs that he knows, still far too young to sing in the ripe timbre of his elders. While the ustaad clearly hopes that the young boy will keep the tradition alive just as his ancestors have for centuries before him, there's always the possibility that this won't happen, that the child will grow up with other interests in mind or that he might stray from the pure form of devotional music that his forefathers have struggled so long to preserve. □

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