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What's Happening

Culture, Stars and Honored Leaders

Islamist Iran facing tough music challenge



Leo Sayer inspired a subculture of underground easy listening.

Tehran, Iran- The Western music has actually been banned since the Islamic revolution

of 1979. Funnily enough, two acts were allowed to be published - Elton John and Queen. They got permission - somebody convinced the government that they are not really bad, and they would not influence the young generation. I'm sure the government doesn't know the true sexual orientation of the singers. But what president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said at the end of last year was that we have to be careful because Iranian music inside Iran, produced and recorded by young Iranians, is becoming more and more Western. He said the country has to go back to its revolution, and sing revolutionary song - higher love, and things that are beyond this world. Western music now is not meant to be heard - but in most hi-fis and cars, you can still heard Pink Floyd, Elton John and George Michael. Young Iranians inside Iran are still listening to this music, although the government does not allow it. Meanwhile, the suppression of music and youth culture in Iran - which has been going on for the last 25 years - has led to the development of a lot of sub-cultures. Kids in school listen to Metallica and death metal bands, and they have invented their own Iranian style of rock and hip-hop. You can hear a lot of their own home recordings on the internet. One of them became much bigger than just a home recording - O-Hum. A rock band, O-Hum emerged six years ago. They deceived many government officials by giving private concerts in Ukrainian churches.



O-Hum paved the way for other bands

They recorded music in good quality and put it on the internet for free - they even managed to perform concerts

in Germany. What all this has done is pave the way for other bands. One recent group, 127, has now been able to give concerts in the US and South America - but O-Hum began it. O-Hum are still in Iran, struggling to change things. Other acts, however, base their sound on another Western style. In Iran's underground subculture, the easy listening of acts like Leo Sayer has always been very fashionable. Iranian youth has translated that into a style of a single guitar, singing together and clapping hands. Also, they sing in English - although many of them are not very good at it. One song, Zan, was put on the internet by the singer Golhay on Iranian Women's Day. To me, it was a fantastic example of Iranian easy listening - with a message.

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Developing new cultures: It took a long time, but hip-hop is taking off too. At first the rapping was really bad - the Persian language does not really sit well on those beats. But in the last five years, lots of underground bands have started experimenting - they have really funny voices, and they try to copy the African-American style of voice. One big bands is Hich-Kas, which means "nobody" in Persian. Even in Europe I have heard people listening to them. They are critical about the way we live in Iran - they complain about unemployment, the way we live with violence, and the government ignoring the people. Recently, London-based Iranian rapper Reveal went to Iran and the two recorded a track together. They think they can give messages of being unhappy in Iran, in rap and also in rock. What is also exciting is the emergence of female rappers - which will particularly upset Ahmedinajad. Two rappers, Salomi and Mani, have interestingly had their pictures put on the internet - without the hijab. That could be quite dangerous for them. They talk about the way of life in Iran from a girl's point of view. I recently spoke to another female rapper, Nazila, who left home in Iran. She is looking for a group to help her write a song about why girls in Iran run away from home, and the violence and unfairness towards women. Rap really is developing in new areas in Iranian culture.

A RABBI ELECTED AS MAN OF THE YEAR



Man of the Year, American Rabbi Moshe Wiener taking part in the official ceremony of receiving ancient Jewish scrolls lost for years in the Former Soviet Union. Wiener was selected for such an honor, in virtue of his humanitarian and cultural contributions to his community in Brooklyn, a suburb of New York City.

London- This year, the Yanks reassessed priorities and searched for quality in choosing their most honored socialites and community leaders. Really! Yep, you bet. The New York Monthly Herald published by WJNA in New York city chose Rabbi Moshe Wiener as Man of the Year. Good for a change. We had enough of Madonna, Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. Wiener, a humanitarian and published author was written up in a most glowing fashion. The magazine called him a saint, an angel, man for all seasons and all the American nine yards. Wiener apparently is different from the rest of the group. The American rabbis clan, that is. He is modest, well-spoken and a man of charity and compassion. On his humanitarian itinerary is the rescue and assistance of Jewish immigrants from Russia and former Soviet republics. He trains them, places them and provides them with social, cultural, educational and financial assistance. Perfect.

How many rabbis or priests do you know, who advocate such a policy. None. Here in London, we have Tony Blair. Next door, in France, Chirac, and somewhere else around the globe, leaders who want to be seen as new messengers of peace. Talks are cheap. Deeds count. Rabbi Moshe Wiener was not available for comments. The selection of a humanitarian rabbi is welcome. Many magazines should follow suit and change their criteria in electing men and women of the year. No more Bin Laden on Time magazine cover and enough of Anna Nicole Smith and Angelina Jolie on People's front page. Media should become more responsible and selective. I was delighted to see a nonpolitical leader such as Rabbi Wiener making headlines amid turbulent and gossipy news about Wall Street scandals and the White House aids.- By Nigel Huntington

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