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FLOWER CHILDREN
District Unknown (from left, Qais Shaghasi, Pedram and Qasem Foushanji) are among the leaders of Kabul's "popband" counter-culture movement.

AMPLIFIERS IN KABUL

Fotos by David Gill
district unknown

we’re cutting through the black, dusty night searching for a rock party in a secret underground bunker in Kabul, Afghanistan. Crossing the intersection past a police checkpoint and heading down an empty street, we hear a low, throbbing growl emanate from the basement of an apartment building. The bass and drums softly pulsing in the shadows of a silent war zone are enough to drop blood pressure, hasten respiration, and spark the bitter taste of adrenaline.

Descending hidden stairs into smoky, red light we are swallowed by the thunder of amplified guitar in Hoodies, the city’s first hard-rock club. Inside, people are dancing and drinking on the edge of the crowd just drinking in the music, and snare. Shaghasi, standing on the edge is a cold steel intellectual with surgical intimidates and boyish at the same time. His brother, Pedram, moshing beside him, has that way of looking both

He believes musicians and artists are compelled to find meaning in what is happening around them, not simply escape it. This is the critical passion that District Unknown have tapped into, particularly in a people’s attempt to re-emerge after a prolonged national tragedy like Afghanistan’s latest war.

Qasem, as an abstract painter whose work – like his lyrics – is saturated in blacks and grays, or contrasting in reds and yellows, believes music and art are intertwined, particularly in a people’s attempt to re-emerge after a prolonged national tragedy like Afghanistan’s latest war.

Qasem grins devilishly. I do my best to slam him back into the frame before getting an elbow in the eye from someone else. He laughs, then slams Pedram into yet another taint of the mask. Tonight is District Unknown’s night to let go and support Adib and their other friends in White Page. Tomorrow District Unknown will let the stage themselves, performing publicly for the first time without wearing masks.

For that reason, the ultra-conservative student found District Unknown’s Facebook page and sent them a message warning that they should stop making modern music. Accusers had constructed a lie that the band had been receiving funds from Westerners to tempt the city’s youth – and girls in particular – toward sin. Fearing more false rumors, it was not an actual attack, Pedram and Qasem went for help to state security. They explained they were not only peaceful but pious, only to find that the government, too, had been watching the band.

Not sure what else to do to protect themselves, the band took a page from their metal heroes, Slipknot, and decided to wear white masks on stage.

“they turned up saying they were a metal band,” says gallet. “all rock-star stoners, but we didn’t know how to play and did not have a single instrument.”

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For District Unknown, music has been a source of catharsis and meaning beyond to share vocals with Qasem, who grabs to produce the loudest, meanest music metal band and pioneers of “psychedel-Width

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They turned up at the door one day, all rock-star-styled up, long hair, T-shirts, saying they were a metal band," remembers Gallet. "But they didn't know how to play and did not have a single in-...
DISTRIBUTED UNKNOWN

[Cont. from 57] laments a NATO attack going awry during a wedding party, begins with Shaghasi pulling a long, low-E string bend. Then Pedram and Qasem come in together with a growing roar like a B-52 taking off. This is the dream come to life. Fans in the audience who have never been to a concert before are now seeing their friends and allies, surrounded by enemies, creating a new chapter in Afghanistan’s cultural history.

“You’re inspired by your surroundings and the people around you,” John Cale once told ROLLING STONE, reflecting on the Velvet Underground’s role in America’s cultural history. “You may not even know them, but you’re inspired by the singularity of purpose. To break things down. To smash things.”

Speaking for District Unknown and the ispani movement of Afghanistan, Lemar tells me, “Every act has its own place and every word has its own situation and time. In my opinion, all these brutal and enraged genres of the music world are the best weapon in my country. Smooth and blank, it hits you right where it hurts. And the pain will wake anyone from their deep winter sleep.”

District Unknown, and others, performed safely to small but fascinated crowds over three weeks of Sound Central, and the band have scheduled more shows at expat restaurants and friends’ houses for this winter. Their sound is evolving from slowed-down Slipknot metal to more of a “Paranoid”-era Black Sabbath rock.

Lester Bangs once wrote that Black Sabbath, in the face of mothers’ fears of evil intentions, were actually “the first Catholic rock band.” Sabbath’s deadly power, boiling up in songs like “War Pigs” and “Electric Funeral,” was a badass, macho kind of pacifist brotherhood. Young men full of balls and brawn, who might otherwise have grabbed a rifle and run into battle, were seduced by music about bombs and battles, which ultimately convinced them of the errors of war.

Sabbath’s metal, and the music of bands like Slipknot and System of a Down, is, in fact, a threat to the power of angry fathers. It gives young men in crisis the chance to be masculine and aggressive without having to be blindly obedient or violent.

District Unknown and their allies have survived, but are still threatened by, one of the longest and most brutal wars of our time. So it is fitting they have snatched up the banner of anti-war metal. The alternative is far more of a danger to society, despite what the authorities may say.

FROM ARMY TO ACTIVIST

[Cont. from 65] about the Israelis who join them in their struggle:

“These demonstrations that I organize have had a positive influence over my beliefs; they have allowed me to see people from the other side who believe in peace and share my struggle for freedom. Those freedom fighters have freed their minds from the occupation and put their hands in ours in peaceful demonstrations against our common enemy, the occupation. They have become friends, sisters and brothers. We fight together for a better future for our children and theirs.”

Segev himself is still trying to clarify his role in the solidarity movement and its effectiveness in his own mind. And how it has changed him. “The more active you are, and the more you see occupation, the more you remember what happened in the army, for instance,” he says. “As a soldier you do not see the occupation. But as a civilian, when you go back to those places, even in your head, you understand what occupation really is. To see a refugee camp or to see [the Palestinians] locked up in cities or villages and [unable to leave].”

Segev isn’t optimistic about the prospects for an end to occupation in the near future. Nor does he think that Israeli soldiers will easily be persuaded to put down their guns. He knows from experience that a soldier lacks perspective and objectivity, "When I see soldiers I understand. It is impossible to tell a soldier, ‘Lay down your weapon,’” he says. “So the best hope I have for those people is that when they are released from the army they will understand what they did. It’s the only way.”

Segev’s younger brother is now serving his first year in the army. Although Marco could not dissuade him from entering – refusing to serve is tantamount to social suicide in Israel – he has offered himself up as a confidant to discuss any moral misgivings his brother may have in the course of his military duties. It’s the closest he has come to allowing his life as an activist to cross over into his personal life. If his two worlds collide, he says, he will be excluded from everything he knows. For now, it’s a sacrifice he is not prepared to make.

It’s Segev’s great hope that, someday, his double life will no longer be necessary; that the physical and psychological barriers erected by Israelis and Palestinians will begin to melt away. He imagines going to Nablus for his morning coffee and hosting his Palestinian friends at his home near the beach in Tel Aviv.

“Maybe I am dreaming but I would really like to see one state, one flag, one name, one anthem, a government united – Palestinians and Jews. Not promoting their own interests, but promoting life, promoting peace. I think it’s doable, I think it’s reachable,” he says. “Probably it is far away but it is there.”