



# THE RISE OF WAAYAHA CUSUB

SOMALIA'S HIP-HOP RENEGADES ARE  
CLAIMING THEIR WAR-TORN COUNTRY'S  
CULTURE BACK FROM MILITANT EXTREMISTS

By DANIEL J. GERSTLE



**S**HIINE AKHYAAR, THE OUTSPOKEN LEAD SINGER AND manager of Somali hip-hop collective Waayaha Cusub, loves to share his political opinions, but rarely talks about his personal life. Today, though, as we chat via Skype, he allows a brief, wordless moment as he grins at me over the newborn baby swaddled in his arms – his son Omar. His wife (and fellow vocalist) Falis Abdi, also one of the best-known faces and voices in modern Somali music, slips through the room, her attention focused on their other child, two-year-old Sirad.

It's been three years since Somali extremists ordered Akhyaar and Falis – who moved to Nairobi, the capital of Somalia's neighbor, Kenya, to escape the brutal civil war that has ravaged their homeland for more than two decades – to stop making music. The entire collective was threatened, and the militants eventually broke into Akhyaar's home, then shot him several times. In October last year, another member of Waayaha Cusub, tenor singer Dikriyow Abdi (no relation to Falis), was attacked and beaten by militants in what he says was a response to the group's performance in Jijiga, Ethiopia. It's a dangerous time to be a Somali musician. But Akhyaar remains defiant. While he and Falis are reluctant to talk about the attempt on his life, he makes no attempt to hide his

the country. Our goal is to spread our message of peace and to tell people to say no to them.”

**W**AAYAHA CUSUB, WHOSE NAME means New Era, features not only Akhyaar, Falis and Dikriyow, but also rapper Lixle Muhuyadin, Ahmed Yareh, and a rotation of six other cameo singers. But the collective can also include just about anyone they befriend who can play music. When they perform, they collaborate with bands like Kenya's Afrobeat stars, Afro-Simba. Waayaha Cusub are already known in global media for challenging Somalia's warlords, pirates, and extremists (and as the group that pioneered a successful hybrid of African Horn music with global genres including hip-hop, reg-

Since then, there have been violent attacks on three different members of the group.

Waayaha Cusub are demonstrating how a local band singing directly to at-risk would-be fighters and youth inside the community in their own language, rallying them to peacefully resist armed gangs, could be the most effective way to pursue positive change in Africa through music.

**‘W**ITH RHYTHM, MELODY, and harmony, music expresses all aspects of human life,” says Salah Donyale, a U.S.-based Somali pop music producer and songwriter, reflecting on recent attacks and threats against musicians in the Horn of Africa. “And yet, these expressions create conflict with those people in power, such as governments and big corporations.”

None more so, currently, than Waayaha Cusub. “They are a political but patriotic band who promote peace and prosperity for all Somalis and they were one of the first to condemn the punitive actions of Al Shabab,” Donyale continues. “They also address taboo subjects such as AIDS, sex and drugs.” The group's music, he explains, is hugely influential in a region where many young people are looking for positive, hip role models, but where few are both.

## “AL SHABAB ARE RUINING OUR COUNTRY,” SAYS AKHYAAR. “OUR GOAL IS TO SPREAD OUR MESSAGE OF PEACE AND TELL PEOPLE TO SAY NO TO THEM.”

group's plan to bring live music back to war-ravaged southern Somalia and one of the most dangerous places on earth, the capital city of Mogadishu. He tells *ROLLING STONE*, “I want them all to know that I'm coming.”

Al Shabab, a radical Islamic militia backed by political force Hezb-ul-Islam, Al Qaeda, and other extremists, have controlled most of southern Somalia since 2006. They claim to be saving the country from warlords and depravity. They do this not only by limiting foreign aid, conscripting youth, and encouraging the assassination and bombing of their enemies, but also by outlawing any music and culture not directly promoting their Islamic views.

When Waayaha Cusub was founded in 2004, they made their name singing about friendship, romance and life in exile. But the politics of music – and the politics of politics – in their home country have led the group to focus on the fight against extremism on their latest albums.

“Al Shabab are bad people,” says Akhyaar. “They shot me and they are ruining

gae, and even Hindi pop). But Waayaha Cusub's new commitment to leading the return of live modern music to Somalia's frontline areas is building a legacy far beyond hip-hop diplomacy. They are rapidly conquering entertainment territory where global stars like Bob Geldof, Roger Waters, Peter Gabriel, and even Somali-born K'naan have, arguably, failed.

Violence- and hunger-stricken Africans have already seen wealthy foreign superstars holding galas to ask Westerners to donate money. And while their efforts have saved countless lives, authorities on humanitarianism ranging from the One campaign to global aid expert Alex de Waal still find it difficult to prove whether such galas have actually reduced the causes of famine and conflict rather than simply providing quick fixes.

Waayaha Cusub's mere arrival on a remote desert airstrip in their last tour to northern Somalia, in 2008, however, raised local morale so much that extremists actually complained in their sermons that the band's influence was making it harder for them to conquer the country.

Donyale writes and produces many of the top Somali pop songs coming out of North America, including “Wax Barasho,” his latest Afrohop hit, written about staying in school and sung by Mohamed Yare and Ilka Case. Somali music, Donyale says, originated in the storytelling tradition of the nomadic camel-herding communities of the region around the Gulf of Aden, then evolved rapidly as Sufi scholars, trained in Arabia and Yemen, spread the word of Islam.

After independence from Italy and Great Britain in 1961, Somalia's music industry grew rapidly. President Siad Barre, though accused by many of fomenting ethnic tension, endowed Mogadishu with programs supporting national arts. The National Theater would become home to Waaberi, a label-like collective which introduced the world to stars like Hasan Samatar, known for his ballads, and Maryam Mursal, whose song “Somali Udiida Ceeb” was the first Somali song to circulate globally, winning the attention of Peter Gabriel who signed her to Real World Records.



#### FIGHTING BACK

(Above, from left) Akhyaar, Amal Kuseey, Ahmed Yare and Falis in the studio in Nairobi. (Left) Akhyaar in hospital following his shooting.

Today, Waaberi alum Abdi Shire Jama is the most widely known Somali singer to promote politics through music. His old-school group, Qaylodhaan, singing over pre-recorded synthesizers, are the less-hip, old-school, equivalent of Waayaha Cusub.

By 1988, when the Barre regime started bombing rebel strongholds in the northwest – triggering the current civil war, which swept into the capital in 1991 – musicians, including Mursal, Samatar, and Jama, fled. New stars are now recreating the Somali music industry in exile. K'naan took off in Toronto. Aar Manta and newcomer Mohamed Ameen are rising in London. Most of them – Salah Donyale, Jaabir Jarkadood, Abbas Hirad, and many others – cultivate their music in wintery Minneapolis.

Meanwhile, ultra-conservatives, who had gone instead to the Gulf seeking religious study, returned to Somalia, bringing back the idea that Somalia's culture of musical storytelling, now weakened, should be erased altogether.

**A**KHYAAR, WHO GREW UP IN THE central town of Dhusamareeb, witnessed this dramatic radicalization of Somalia up close. Not wanting to distance himself from his country entirely, he fled south to Kenya

where he connected with fellow newcomers to music. Falis Abdi, facing the same changes in the southern port city of Kismayo, took the same route. Soon enough they met Lixle, Dikriyow, Ahmed, Burhan, and others and created their new collective; they shared Waaberi's format, but with an entirely new genre of music. They set up Scratch Records (through which they've released six albums), and Scratch Filmz to produce their videos.

Akhyaar and Falis became a couple. They revealed their romance and marriage in Nairobi to fans through lyrics and music videos. Conservatives hissed at Falis's sultry dance moves in performances and videos – even those songs in which she pledged herself to her new husband. Meanwhile, thousands of fans rallied behind her and continue to celebrate her as that rare combination of hip, loyal, and moral. No matter how she dances.

Their videos have invited heated criticism online. Even a seemingly innocuous track like "Allaa Weyn" (God Created) – which features the group dressed in Nairobi fashions dancing together to a song that bemoans mankind's cruelty to mankind in a beautiful world – is described as "SHOCKING" and "UN-ISLAMIC." But Waayaha Cusub also have plenty of defenders. "This talented, smart, intelligent crew are setting a very good example for the Somali people," writes one in the comments to another song, "Nabad" (Peace). "I love what

they are doing. Guys, keep your heads up. Insha'Allah, one day Somalia will be at peace."

In 2008, radicals aiming to cleanse Mogadishu of such cultural liberalism killed Waaberi's Aden Hasan Salad, Abdulkadir Adow Ali, and Omar Nur Basharrah in separate attacks. Their allies in Nairobi threatened Waayaha Cusub, ordered them to stop making music, and broke into Akhyaar's home, guns blasting.

Shot in the hip and the arm, Akhyaar has survived with an even stronger commitment to his quest to bring modern music back to Somalia. There are precedents: When global star K'naan bravely returned to Mogadishu in 2009 it was a dangerous time for any musician to do so. Music lovers took a breath of hope from his visit, but he was there so briefly the rebels hardly noticed. Somalia-based radio producer Mohamed Ayaanle, of the Global Broadcasting Company, remembers the furious debate over music and radio in the country during this time.

"Al Shabab and Hezb-ul-Islam ordered our radio station to close twice," Ayaanle says. The first time, he explains, all radio and TV stations in Mogadishu were told to stop playing songs. It turned out that wasn't comprehensive enough to achieve the militants' goals, however. So the second time, they extended that ban to cover all sonic representation of humans or animals besides normal speaking and prayer, thus managing to outlaw the use of jingles, intro music and any other ways that DJs had managed to get around the first ban. [Cont. on 77]