

## WEST OF MIDDLE EAST

A podcast by Neda Nobari Foundation

Interview transcript

Sulyman Qardash

TITLE: Afghanistan's First Rock Band Changes Narratives, One Song At A Time

Summary: The singer of Afghanistan's first rock band, now an immigrant in Oakland, California, talks about how music can bring communities together.

WEB:

[Sulyman Qardash](#) and I in a rehearsal studio in Oakland. Sulyman is the lead singer and guitarist of [Kabul Dreams](#) -- Afghanistan's first rock band, now immigrants in California. Sulyman picks up a guitar and plays me a song off their most recent album.

Sulyman says he hopes his music will teach people here in the U.S. about the many good things about Afghan people and culture.

"If a kid in California finds out about Kabul Dreams being from Afghanistan and being right now in an Oakland based band - If they listen to our music and they say, 'Oh wow I like their music,' I think that is a big change for me," says Sulyman. "I'm pretty sure they would change their perspective of from where we are coming from that would help...change his mind about people coming from outside of country. That would change his mind about the immigrants and people from different backgrounds, religion or maybe non religious people."

Sulyman's band moved to the U.S. in 2014 after receiving multiple death threats for being in a 'western' rock band in Afghanistan. Two years later Sulyman wrote the song 'Saturated Hope,' about displacement and having to leave your home country.

The lyrics start, 'sometimes I feel I was born at the wrong time. But looking back at history, there was never a right time. I never made a friend or I would leave when I made one.' Sulyman says it's the story of his life, and his two band members lives, Saddique Ahmed and Raby Adib.

"When I was born in the 90s, Afghanistan was going through a war. I was like, 'Okay what if I was born 10 years before that?' Still Afghanistan was going through a war. So still there was no right time to be born, I guess."

Sulyman was born in Kabul, but grew up as a refugee in nearby Uzbekistan. When he

was 17 years old, he returned to Afghanistan, only to flee again for his safety.

The song 'Saturday Hope' is about waking up every day and some days waking up in different places and starting all over again," says Sulyman. "And coming here and not having anything you have back home. When I'm saying anything it's anything, and then you have to start all over again. Forget the band. On your personal life. That takes time. If I was asked if I would repeat that life that I had, again. Yes. Was it perfect? No, not at all, but that makes you who you are. 28:20 It just makes you who you are. It gives you some sort of perspective and it makes you realize that you're slightly different. Maybe even a lot."

Sulyman has dark eyes, black hair and a thin frame. Today he's wearing skinny jeans, Converse and a black leather jacket -- a look he acquired hanging out with the punk kids in high school when he was a refugee in Uzbekistan. Sulyman says his friends introduced him to bands like Nirvana, the Sex Pistol, and Metallica. In 2016, Sulyman got to meet the drummer of Metallica, Lars Ulrich, when Kabul Dreams starred in an indie film called [Radio Dreams](#), about an Iranian DJ trying to get the two bands to have a jam session.

Soon after filming Radio Dreams in San Francisco, Metallica invited Sulyman and his other two band members, Saddique and Raby, to their concert and after-party in Oakland.

"Things like that really gives you some sort of encouragement too," Sulyman says. "It's really surreal. We are just couple kids from Afghanistan, from Kabul. We still remember our first rehearsal, how tiny it is. And now we are here in Oakland at Metallica's afterparty. That is a great thing. That is something that blows your mind. "

Sulyman and I head to the Guitar Center, a music shop in Emeryville near Oakland. Sulyman walks past a huge wall lined with electric guitars.

Sulyman traveled the world with Kabul Dreams before he came to the U.S. so he didn't ever have culture shock -- until he went to a Guitar Center, a music shock with walls lined with electric guitars, drums and dozens of others instruments.

Sulyman says back in Afghanistan, he struggled to find just one guitar. A family member eventually brought a guitar over from Canada during a visit. They couldn't mail it over, because there's is no secure mailing system in Afghanistan. Kabul Dreams would only play private concerts. They'd void public spaces so that they would be targeted by extremists. Until one day, in early 2011, Sulyman's band decided to play at a street market in Kabul. A suicide bombing had happened in the same location two week earlier. Sulyman wanted to give Afghan citizens hope by playing live music in the same market.

Sulyman says he also wanted to share rock music with the street kids of Kabul. The kids who wash your windows and shine your shoes. He wanted to expose them to something different and new.

“The main reason of that show was to play for kids on the street because they would never get a chance to go on our shows in Kabul because we don't publically announce them because of security measurements,” Sulyman says. “They have no idea who we are or what kind of music we play. And that is actually an introduction for them. I remember some kids after the show and asked, 'What was that?' In a very confused way. I couldn't tell if they like it or not but it was like, 'I liked what you did but I don't know what exactly was that.’”

Sulyman wrote the song, [Sadeya Man](#), or My Voice in 2010, when he lived in Kabul. He says the song was an anthem to the dreams of democracy people had back then for their Afghanistan.

“Especially back in 2010 what we were going through was that I think we needed a song to really encourage youth in a way to be united and that is what we felt, and that is really the entire idea behind having a band,” Sulyman says. “Where I come from having a band is not very common. Being a single artist, singer is very common. I think the song is about unity and really about teamwork in a sense.”

The band stayed united. But Afghanistan has seen better days. According to the United Nations there have been over [63 thousand civilian deaths in Afghanistan](#) between 2009 to 2016 alone. Sulyman says the dream that the U.S. invasion would bring peace and democracy to Afghanistan, has been shattered, at least for him.

“We quote on quote tried to copy the democracy that the U.S. or the western world provides,” Sulyman. “Especially in Afghanistan, we preach about that but if you look at it for me outside of Bay Area maybe, when I travel to different states, [[umm it's still experiencing]] I'm experiencing the things and thoughts that I had slightly was wrong because racism does exist in America. For me I thought those issues were already clear before I came to be very honest. So I thought, ‘Oh, they are still working on it.’”

Sulyman says he's lucky. He doesn't deal with racism on a daily basis because he lives in a progressive community in the Bay Area. But the xenophobia is there. Especially when he tells people that even though he's in a rock and roll band, he's also a practicing Muslim.

“I can be a Muslim but I can play rock n roll and I can be a doctor or an engineer. It is something very spiritual between me and whatever it is I believe in,” Sulyman says. “You don't really get to choose what I believe in I think the basic human rights and the basic elements of life are really important no matter what your background is or where you are coming from. You know, killing is wrong and stealing is wrong. Lying is wrong. So why don't you live based on those things.”

Sulyman says he often finds himself explaining Afghanistan's religions, culture and geography to people in the West. Like for example, that Afghanistan is not a part of the Middle East.

“Almost on a daily basis, I have to tell people that I’m not from the Middle East,” says Sulyman says, “And Afghanistan is not in the Middle East, it’s in Central Asia, just between the border of Central and South Asia to be precise. Not knowing that is okay. In the beginning I would really get frustrated about that but since I realize that I don’t know a lot about American history, so they have a right not to know about where I am coming from as well. So it’s kind of a combination of, you know, them giving me some information and me giving them some information about my background.”

Sulyman’s band Kabul Dreams recently released a new album, called Megalomaniacs. Sulyman says the title is a testament to our global political climate. He says megalomaniacs rule our countries and regions today. It’s happening in Afghanistan, in the U.S., in so many parts of their world. Sulyman says obsession with power leads to destruction of societies. Sometimes to the point where people have to flee their own countries to be safe, becoming refugees and immigrants. It’s a common story. It’s Sulyman’s story. It’s Kabul Dreams story. And it’s a story their band band will share one song at a time.

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