

Sweet Nomad Girl

Folk Music from Afghanistan

Abdul Wahab Madadi

Veronica Doubleday

John Baily



SWEET NOMAD GIRL

THE MUSICIANS

John Baily is an ethnomusicologist at Goldsmiths College, University of London, who specialises in the music of Afghanistan. He carried out fieldwork in Herat and Kabul between 1973 and 1977. Since then he has maintained contact with Afghan communities in and outside Afghanistan. In response to the devastation of Afghan culture in the past 25 years, he has set up the Afghanistan Music Unit at Goldsmiths College and is currently involved in international efforts to regenerate Afghan music in Kabul.

In Herat during the 1970s part of his work was to research the transformation of the Herati long-necked lute called the *dutar*, from a 2-stringed instrument of rural amateurs into the much more complex 14-stringed *dutar* now typical of professional urban musicians. To gain further insight into the issues involved, he learnt to play the various types of *dutar*. To do this he worked with individuals and learnt their material from tape recordings. These players ranged from humble rural amateurs to urban virtuosi. His main teacher was the highly regarded player Gada Mohammad (who has twice given concerts in Europe).

Veronica Doubleday, John's wife, accompanied him to Afghanistan and lived there with him during the main fieldwork period of the 1970s. She became actively involved in music research, working with women musicians and making recordings of their singing and drumming. Given the strict segregation of social and musical activities between men and women (due to local interpretations of Islam), John and Veronica's complementary work provides a holistic view of Herati music. Veronica learnt songs from various different people, but her main musical teachers were her neighbour and amateur enthusiast, Madar-e Zahir, and the locally famous professional singer Zainab Herawi. As well as learning to sing in the Herati style, Veronica learnt to play the *daireh* (frame drum), which women use to support their voices.

Over the years John and Veronica have given regular concerts at various venues and festivals in Europe and the United States. They have worked with a number of other musicians. On numerous occasions they have played with members of the most famous Afghan *tabla* playing family, who until recently were based in London: Ustad Asif Mahmud, his brother Ustad Arif, and Asif's son Yusuf. John has recorded a CD on the *rubab* (another type of Afghan lute) accompanied by Ustad Asif. John and Veronica have also toured with

the California-based Herati *dutar* player Aziz Herawi, also playing on one of his CDs. They first met Abdul Wahab Madadi in the 1970s, but their musical collaboration dates from his residence in Germany. In 2004 the Afghanistan Music Unit hosted a concert at Goldsmiths College and invited him over from Germany as guest singer.

Abdul Wahab Madadi is a well known singer in Afghanistan. A native Herati, he began singing from an early age. He went to study engineering in Kabul, where he sang several songs at Radio Afghanistan while he was still a student. Later, having trained in Germany in both radio journalism and Western music, he worked for over thirty years at Radio Afghanistan, and was an extremely important figure in its development. He organized the music archive, was a producer of music programmes, collected many Herati folk songs for the radio station, and eventually became Head of Music for both radio and television. At the same time he developed a career as a singer and recorded about 200 songs for the radio. Along with other famous Afghan musicians he went on prestigious tours in India, Iran and the Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union.

As an academic, Madadi has published many articles about music in Afghanistan, a matter on which he is a great authority. He left Afghanistan for Iran in 1992, where he published (in Persian) his invaluable book *The Story of Contemporary Music in Afghanistan*. In 1999 he moved to Hamburg, where he now resides. A number of his cassettes and CDs have been published and he has recently given concerts in several European countries. He is well known as a singer of both Herati and popular songs, and has worked with numerous musicians in many musical styles. In 2001, when the Taliban were ousted from Kabul, his patriotic song *Watan* ("Homeland") was the first piece of music to be broadcast on Radio Afghanistan after five years without music.

THE HERATI DUTAR

These recordings tell in part the story of the transformation of the *dutar*, with John playing four different versions of the instrument. The *dutar* is the most characteristic indigenous instrument of western Afghanistan. Its name means “two strings”. Although 15th-century miniatures depict this type of long-necked lute as a court instrument, it later became associated with rural amateur traditions.

The early form of *dutar* had two gut strings and an idiosyncratic system of fretting which provides some “neutral seconds” (intervals between a semitone and whole tone). The intervals in the upper tetrachord correspond to the Persian mode *Shur*. Herati *dutar* players call this fretting system *pardeh raste*: “simple fretting”. With the 2-stringed *dutar* the player stops the first string only; the second string sounds as a continuous drone. This form of gut-stringed *dutar* is now virtually obsolete, and in Track 1 John plays an instrument fretted with nylon strings that provide a similar sound.

Since the 1950s the *dutar* underwent notable transformations. The first change was to substitute the gut strings with steel ones, to give a brighter sound. Track 2 illustrates music played on such an instrument.

Then a 3-stringed form was developed, with a semi-chromatic fretting system that enables players to perform melodies in other modes. Musicians wanted to be able to play the Afghan popular music that was being broadcast on the radio. They referred to the new fretting as *pardeh filmi* - “film fretting” - because they could now play the melodies of Indian film songs. The 3-stringed *dutar* has steel strings and is played with a small metal plectrum, and it has largely superseded the 2-stringed *dutar*. For music played on this instrument, listen to Tracks 5 and 6.

The most dramatic development occurred in the 1960s. A much larger 14-stringed *dutar* appeared, with a single main string and three long drone strings complemented by ten or eleven sympathetic strings that vibrate and amplify the sound. The idea of using sympathetic strings occurs in other Afghan instruments, notably the *rubab* (short-necked lute) and *tanbur* (a long-necked lute played in northern Afghanistan and the Kabul area). Players developed the new 14-stringed *dutar* for use in urban bands, making it compatible with other instruments such as the *rubab* and harmonium (a small hand-pumped instrument brought to Afghanistan from North India and commonly used by singers). In Tracks 7-12, John plays a 14-stringed *dutar*.

THE DAIREH

The *daireh* is a round single-headed frame drum found all over Afghanistan. It is a women's instrument, rarely played by men. The name *daireh* comes from Arabic, meaning "circle". Round frame drums have ancient roots in Arabia and the eastern Mediterranean, and they came to Afghanistan centuries ago with the spread of Islamic culture.

The instrument is like a large tambourine with a goat skin. Pellet bells and rings are attached inside the frame, adding jingling effects. The drum is tuned by heating the skin to make it taut, or wetting it to lower the tone. To play it, women hold the drum in one hand, leaving the other free to strike different parts of the skin with the fingers, and the palm and heel of the hand. For added emphasis players make sharp finger-flicks on off-beats, using the hand holding the frame.

The drum is a necessary accompaniment to wedding rituals and festivities, announcing that there is a happy occasion in the household. As well as accompanying the voice, women use it for dance rhythms and ritual processions.

THE MUSIC

The recordings are based on the music of Herat that John and Veronica studied and recorded in the 1970s. Having grown up in Herat and performed this music throughout his career, Madadi knows this material intimately. All three performers therefore draw from the same source, delighting in the same music. Among Afghans (and especially Heratis) this repertoire is admired because it captures the essence of a time of peace and normality, before the turmoil and upheaval of war and the prohibitions of the Taliban period. Afghans look back upon this "golden age" of music with pleasure and nostalgia.

In the 1970s the music played in Herat consisted of local traditional material as well as pieces from outside Herat. Through the radio and commercial recordings, various types of music from other parts of Afghanistan were popular, especially styles of dance music. As well as this, people might play versions of music from Iran, India and occasionally other areas further afield.

In this CD the traditional sung poetry of the Herat area is represented in metred songs, and in two particular items in a slow unmetred style known as *chaharbeiti* (Items 8 and 10). Madadi is acknowledged as a prime exponent of this specifically Herati style, which is usually performed, as here, with the *dutar*.

The texts of these songs explore the delights, obstacles, difficulties and heart-aches of love. Poetry is important in Herati songs and Herati culture, and romantic imagery derived from Sufi mysticism prevails. The nightingale serenading the rose and the moth burning itself on the candle flame both symbolise the consuming power of divine love.

Although these recordings have their origins in Herati traditional culture, the performers bring new elements to the music. In the gender-segregated climate of Afghan society, men and women made music separately. Only at Radio Afghanistan would one hear a woman's voice accompanied by a melodic instrument. The *dutar* and *daireh* belong to the separate worlds of male and female music-making; although they are both depicted in 15th-century Persian miniature paintings (where Herat was a centre of excellence), they are not normally heard together. The sound of a man's and woman's voice together is also unusual. When a male and female singer performed together on radio in Afghanistan - as a duo - they normally took turns to sing. Here Madadi and Veronica sing choruses and refrains together. Transcending the barriers of gender, the three performers create a new type of musical sound.

THE RECORDINGS

The pieces on this CD are derived from recordings made on two separate occasions: a concert with all three performers on 7 August 2004 at the Semley Music Festival in Wiltshire (UK) (which was subsequently broadcast on the BBC World Service Persian Service) and a follow-up recording session on 17 August with John and Veronica at Barcombe church in Sussex.

1. **Nasar Jan** ("Dear Nasar") and **Aushari**

Veronica Doubleday (vocal and *daireh*) and John Baily (2-stringed *dutar* with nylon strings)

This love song addresses a young boy called Nasar Jan. (Jan means "dear"). The chorus says: "my sweet little flower, my little heart, my pink and white flower, if you go off with anyone else I'll be heart-broken". Veronica learnt it from a young girl in Herat's old city. Her name was Zamarud, which means "emerald". One of her verses refers to a small shrine near her house, the shrine of the Saint of the Pigeons:

*If you want to get a special boy
At dusk prayer-time go down [to the shrine] near the tea-house
[O saint] you granted the wishes of all the world
O Saint of the Pigeons, grant my wish [to get that boy]*

The song is followed by an instrumental dance piece called *Aushari*. Men perform this circular dance at weddings, typically to the accompaniment of an oboe and drum duo (called *sorna* and *dohol*). Urban musicians also play *Aushari* as an instrumental piece.

2. **Naghmeḥ bajekhaneḥ**

John Baily (2-stringed *dutar* with steel strings) and Veronica Doubleday (*daireh*)

John created this piece based on traditional material. *Naghmeḥ* means "melody", and *bajekhaneḥ* refers to military bands (brought to Afghanistan from Turkey) playing in a marching rhythm. The piece is similar to a well-known traditional *Khorasani* melody called *Nawai*.

3. **Sefid kheimeḥ** ("White tents")

Veronica Doubleday (vocal and *daireh*)

This is a nomad song about a bride who is sitting on display at her wedding. Veronica learnt it from Zainab Herawi. Zainab said she'd been invited to provide music at a nomad

wedding, but the nomad women preferred making their own music and Zainab learnt this song from them. The chorus refers to the bride sitting in the bridal tent: "Black tents, white tents - so many tents. In the middle of the tent sits the shining-moon bride." Veronica sings it with a verse that seems to be well known in different parts of Afghanistan:

*On the high mountain, I'm playing my flute
I've lost my camel, so I'm walking.
I've lost my camel, a leader-camel
Its bells are tinkling: where are you my love?*

4. **Bada bada** ("Let it be")

Veronica Doubleday (vocal and *dairah*)

This important Afghan wedding song blesses the couple's future together, come what may. It's known in all the major cities and towns of Afghanistan, except perhaps for the Pashto-speaking areas. The first verse says:

*O let it be, whatever you want, let it be!
I gave you my heart, trusting in God
I gave you my heart so you'd be my loved one
In my arms at night and at my side by day.*

Veronica learnt this song from Zainab, and she sometimes performed it with her in its ritual context, in front of the bride and groom.

5. **Shishkebab**

John Baily (3-stringed *dutar*) and Veronica Doubleday (*dairah*)

This well known dance piece comes from Turkey, and its name refers to grilled meat (kebab). When the music stops still, the solo dancer freezes in a stylish pose. It's an attractive and coquettish dance. John learnt this piece from a *dutar* player called Safar Shalbaf ("Safar, the weaver"). He lived in a village outside Herat and had a workshop in the city right by the Great Mosque.

6. **Shah Koko Jan** ("Dear Shah Koko"), and **Uzbeki**

John Baily (3-stringed *dutar*) and Veronica Doubleday (*dairah*)

This is an instrumental version of a song dedicated to a girl named Shah Koko Jan. John made field recordings of it performed by various players. He intersperses the melody of

the song with sections in the popular *Logari* dance style (referring to Logar in south-east Afghanistan). The second piece, which follows straight on, is in the style of Uzbek dance music from northern Afghanistan. John learnt this piece from Safar Shalbaf.

7. **Gol-e bikhar** ("Rose without thorns")

Veronica Doubleday (vocal and *daireh*) and John Baily (14-stringed *dutar*)

Veronica learnt this love song from Zainab. The chorus says: "I'm in love with your face! O rose without thorns - entangled in your hair! O rose without thorns". Here is one of the verses:

*In your garden there are two sugar cane bushes
Under the sugar cane there are two girls with sugar lips
They've fallen asleep with their arms under their heads
Don't wake them, they're in love and their heads ache.*

8. **Siahmu wa Jalali** ("Siahmu and Jalali")

Abdul Wahab-Madadi (vocal), John Baily (14-stringed *dutar*) and Veronica Doubleday (*daireh*)

The poetry of this famous *chaharbeiti* love song was composed by a shepherd called Jalali, who lived in the Herat area in the first half of the 20th century. He was passionately in love with a girl named Siahmu ("Black Hair"), but she came from a rich family and her father refused to allow them to marry. Madadi learnt this song as a young man in Herat, and he considers this recording to be one of the finest of his numerous performances. The verses declare Jalali's distracted love:

*Jalali's in love with Siahmu's face
Captivated by Siahmu's bewitching eyes
In true sincerity he prostrates himself
At the prayer-niche of her eyebrows*

9. **Gol-e zard** ("Yellow flower")

Abdul Wahab Madadi (vocal), Veronica Doubleday (vocal and *daireh*) and John Baily (14-stringed *dutar*)

Madadi learnt this song a long time ago in Herat, and Veronica heard and learnt it from Abdul Sadiq Bolbol, a noted male singer and imitator of bird sounds. The chorus is by a

poet named Turabi, and the verses are on the theme of the loved one as flower. This is the chorus:

*Yellow flower! O cruel yellow flower!
You've put my heart under your foot, don't you realise? O yellow flower
You could break my heart under your foot
Carefully lift your footstep from my dust! O yellow flower*

10. Shirin dokhtar-e maldar ("Sweet nomad girl")

Abdul Wahab Madadi (vocal), Veronica Doubleday (vocal and *daireh*) and John Baily (14-stringed *dutar*)

This is in the same unmetred *chaharbeiti* style as track 8, but in another mode. The song addresses a "sweet" nomad girl called Shirin ("Sweet One"). Madadi heard this song sung by Zainab Herawi, when he was collecting traditional material in the 1970s. Zainab told Veronica she had learnt it in the village where her mother was born. Madadi changed some lines of the chorus from the original Zainab version. His chorus is as follows:

*Shirin, sweet nomad girl
By the sequinned shawl she wears
She's the beauty of the mountains
May God protect her*

Here is one of the verses about the pain of separation that Zainab used to sing:

*Separation has blackened my life
Fate has made tearful and sad - my friend
O flower, don't laugh at my torn breast!
These days that you witness are the work of God - alas*

11. Jam-e narenji ("Tangerine dress")

Abdul Wahab Madadi (vocal), Veronica Doubleday (vocal and *daireh*) and John Baily (14-stringed *dutar*)

Madadi learnt this song many years ago in Herat and was the first person to record it on the radio. On an official visit to Tehran in 1962 he sang this song for Reza Shah, the king of Iran. The melody is traditional and the poetry was composed by a Herati poet named Abdul Hossein Taufiq. Veronica and John had often heard this song in Herat, but they performed

it for the first time with Madadi. The song is about a girl with a tangerine-coloured dress. She has offended the poet, and his cheeks are yellow with love-sickness (tangerines are yellowish in Afghanistan). One of the verses says a tangerine looks sweet, but it turned out to taste sour. Here is the chorus:

*Tangerine dress, tangerine cheeks
I left the town of Morghab because of the tangerine girl's cruelty*

12. Wa wa Leili ("Leili, how wonderful!")

Abdul Wahab Madadi (vocal), Veronica Doubleday (vocal and *daireh*) and John Bailly (14-stringed *dutar*)

This is a very well known traditional song from Herat which became popular all over Afghanistan through the radio. Madadi learnt it in Herat, and Veronica heard it from numerous singers. When she first met Zainab, at a women's big wedding party, Veronica sang it there and Zainab made all the guests laugh by reprimanding her and correcting her timing. The chorus addresses a girl called Leili, saying how wonderful it will be to meet in the holy city of Mazar-e Sharif. Mazar is an important pilgrimage place, where Ali, nephew of the Prophet Mohammad, is said to be buried. The following verse expresses devotion to Ali:

*Ali, lion of God, heal our pain,
Take our wishes and prayers to God
I light an oil lamp burning at your shrine
So you will protect lovers, wherever they are.*

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Produced, engineered and digitally edited by David Lefeber
Recorded at St Leonards Church, Semley on 7 August 2004 (tracks 8-12)
And at St Mary's Church, Barcombe, on 17 August 2004
Photography: Veronica Doubleday
Textile design: traditional Herati embroidery

mwd 73601

LC 15631



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