

My Detroit, My Afghanistan

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L LEFT MY HOMETOWN in the Detroit area in 1967 for dissertation fieldwork on the folk music of Afghanistan. Both of those places have been media stars for a long time now. The general picture of those two troubled areas I know well has little to do with my own sense of place. My recent book *Motor City Music: A Detroiter Looks Back* was triggered by the city's skewed coverage. As for Afghanistan, I've been reading mythology about it for decades now and keep in touch with developments. But after seventeen years on the ground, America can still neither figure the place out nor leave it. What follows is a short stab at setting the record straight just a little, not as an historian, but rather as someone who lived through the earlier, forgotten phases of two crisis-ridden spots on the globe. I'll profile each of my two misunderstood sites, then zoom back to think about what their situation says about America, starting with Afghanistan. But let me preface with a moment of overlap. In July of 1967, Detroit was in the throes of a major disturbance now often called an "uprising," or "rebellion," rather than "riot." US Army troops appeared

on the streets for the third time, a record for American cities. My new wife Greta evacuated her mother from Detroit to our safe house in Ann Arbor. My mother's friends had been very dubious about "the children" going to a place like Kabul. I just said, "We'll go if the rebels don't take Detroit airport."

In looking back at the two places, I'll be following two threads: Americans' lack of historical depth and the media's insistence on a simplified view of social decline and violence. Afghanistan started its climb to world attention just after my time there, in the late 1970s, when images of heroic American-armed freedom-fighters resisting the Soviet occupation flooded western media. Before 9/11, *mujahedeen* was an honorific. As the phases of the conflict ground on mercilessly, from civil war to the Taliban to American occupation, the iconography shifted. Probably the most famous photograph of recent times has been Steve McCurry's "Afghan Girl," revisited repeatedly, and even cruelly, by his lens and *National Geographic*, which paid for an expedition to track down the stunning maiden with the green eyes.

Finding a prematurely aged refugee woman who desperately wanted not to be known, they bought off her husband and projected the new image as a victory for western humanism. Eventually, such iconic shots of the locals were eclipsed on screens of all sizes by photojournalism and Hollywood depictions of American grit, heroism, and disillusionment. Almost never were actual Afghans the initiators or active agents who could control their own image. The few fine documentaries and feature films by Afghans themselves have appeared on the festival circuit, at best. The 2007 Hollywood film *The Kite Runner* tried to piggyback on Khalid Hosseini's immensely successful 2003 novel, in an attempt to take an insider's insights into mainstream territory.

The biggest steps forward have come in the more pliable, if less noticed, documentary field. James Longley's 2018 *Angels Made of Light*, though still directed, edited, shot, and scored by foreigners, comes as close as you can to letting Afghans speak for themselves by allowing the working-class school boys of Kabul narrate their own stories. Yet a fine vernacular film such as Attiq Rahimi's 2012 *The Patience Stone*, remains unseen by American audiences. Filmed in France and subtitled in Dari, its tough wartime tale was apparently too gritty for US distributors.

When I was there, however, Afghanistan was not a land frozen in time with seemingly endless "tribal" or "ethnic" warfare. It was a peaceable kingdom, a fully functioning democratic constitutional monarchy. The 1964 constitution granted significant equality to women. Often unveiled in cities and towns, they worked as teachers, doctors, radio singing stars, and cosmopolitan magazine editors like our friend Shukria. When the new Parliament was seated, each member was allowed unlimited time for a speech. It took days. We saw people listening on transistor radios

tied to their donkeys. Shukria had been sent abroad for training; she had been in Australia and Germany, and was handed an executive position while still in her twenties. The country was alive with helpful foreigners. Every nation that had some kind of peace corps or alternative military service sent people, from the East or West bloc. A welcoming foreign policy could easily be built onto the deep hospitality that Afghans normally show strangers. Whenever our lowly VW beetle got stuck in the pothole paradise that passed for country roads, people would materialize and just pick it up and move it. We youngsters were outliers—many Americans worked for USAID and lived in comfortable homes with central heating and air conditioners. For Thanksgiving, they would feast on turkeys trucked over the Khyber Pass from our air base in Pakistan. Dessert was a no-name version of those old super-market half-gallon squares of ice cream, looking out of place in the steppes and mountains of Central Asia. We didn't get PX privileges, but sometimes kindly Midwesterners would invite us over.

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Oddly enough, this luxurious lifestyle went over well with some Afghans. In those days before the Soviets invaded and Americans began to bomb the countryside, the locals could compare the USSR calmly to the USA, since the cold war competition

was at its height. In Kabul, the Soviets paid their staff peanuts and refused to hire Afghan help. So not only did embassy staff clean their toilets, but their miserable salaries forced them to bargain in the bazaars. One Afghan told us that they could plainly see our system led to a comfortable life, as opposed to the penny-pinching Soviet situation. To top it off, the Soviets were godless, which didn't go over well in an Islamic country. The fact that Greta and I were Jewish was not a problem. We arrived just after the Six-Day War, during which King Zahir Shah posted guards around the homes of the small Jewish community in case anyone made trouble, which they didn't. Afghans had no particular love for the Arabs, and I recall one Foreign Ministry official pointing to the map on the wall, incredulous that the tiny nation of Israel could defeat all those surrounding countries—that's how you score points with the Afghan warrior mentality.

At that time, the West thought of Afghanistan as a place you could drive your VW mini-bus to on the way to Singapore, perhaps. The Balkans, Turkey, and Iran were not a big deal to get through, all being colorful, cheap, and pretty safe around 1970. You could live in Kabul on a dollar a day, fleabag hotel, gritty food, and hashish all included. The influx of these WT people—"world travelers"—raised eyebrows in Afghanistan. Used to helpful foreigners who made an attempt to learn a language and stayed long-term, the locals simply could not understand the newcomers. Children started to chant "tu-rist, tu-rist" when they saw them coming and to beg for treats. WT men would offend by walking around shirtless, women by wearing shorts or skimpy tops. A carpet dealer we knew expressed his disgust for a dirty couple who walked in one day, offering to trade the woman's sexual services for a fine carpet. "What kind of people are these?" he asked me in Persian. After the 1971 Indo-Pakistani

war, a swarm of travelers got stuck in India since the border to the west was sealed. These were the ones that couldn't afford to fly out or had to take their cars back with them. Hungry, perhaps with needy children, they piled up at the crossing and refused to leave, though it was stinking hot in the desert. Finally, the Red Cross made a deal with the Pakistanis to let the foreigners through during a prisoner swap, on condition that they could not over-night in Pakistan. So they expressed into Afghanistan in dire straits, a Foreign Affairs ministry official told me. "We helped them—we're hospitable," he said, "but we're a poor country." How often in the last decades have we heard of a place like Afghanistan charitably bailing out desperate westerners?

This curious, generous interlude slipped out of memory as spasmodic cycles of conflict fired up in 1979. Now the rivalry that had brought foreign aid and helpful westerners turned ugly, with American arms countering Soviet troops in a vicious proxy war. Half the country became refugees. Many of the rest, along with their communal life, fell to resistance and infighting. The music I collected was muted by dislocation and rising theological control. But what interests me here, in parallel with the Detroit story that follows, is the way the sense of Afghanistan so easily shifted, with no real attempt to get at why the media needed new iconography to fill a gap of imagery in the popular mind. If America's role in helping Pakistan to arm the wrong rebels was mentioned, it was perversely celebrated, as in the 2007 film *Charlie Wilson's War*. By the time we got to the Bin Laden episode, no one had a clue what had gone on, except that we needed to bomb and occupy the place in revenge for the 9/11 attack that had nothing to do with Afghanistan. The Taliban themselves provoked a media storm by blowing up the ancient colossal Buddhas of Bamian, delighting in our outrage.

The country became a place to try out solutions that had little to do with the problems or the people. Zillions of dollars were dispensed to a growing corrupt elite, with no accountability. Some small-scale organizations pierced the fog of war and brought some sunshine to women and communities. But by and large, American intervention usually imagines that local understandings and initiative should yield to some tenuous and shaky larger social order. Yet it was—and remains—a land of local leanings. Traditional ways were so locked into village life that a strong state could never really get a foothold, especially with huge ethnic diversity, with the country divided by the Rockies-height Hindu Kush (“killer of Hindus”) mountains. And there was no water to speak of. Sure, there were rich people, but in a land-locked, low-resource country, who could get wealthy enough to really count? The ruling classes lived in mud-brick fortified compounds, different mainly in scale from village life. The few multi-story buildings in Kabul did little to change the tone. In a recent book, Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili has argued that Afghan stability is much better served by nourishing grassroots models than imagining that a shaky coalition of dubious state actors can impose top-down solutions, often mandated by foreigners.¹

Time to turn to Detroit, again surveying the short view of history, which assumes that today’s despair is just another chapter in a saga of hopelessness, and the refusal to let the locals represent themselves in the media. In Detroit, the idea of a timeless “ghetto” or “jungle” is lodged deeply in the nation’s white psyche. Detroit moved into the visual field of the “world eye” a bit later than Afghanistan, with the period

eventually called “ruin porn.”² Paralleling the focus on the ruins of Bamian and Kabul, visitors from Tokyo and Berlin ran around the city looking for the picturesque remnants of what had been a great world city. A colleague living downtown told me one of those Japanese-German teams asked her to direct them to the ruins. “Which ones?” she said. “Ze bee-utiful ones,” they replied. No one from the media seemed particularly interested in finding out why the city had fallen into such a sorry state. Even when the bankruptcy phase a few years ago brought a new focus to the city, the reportage was about the shocking proposal to sell off the pricey paintings of the Detroit Institute of the Arts rather than the impact on the remaining, mostly African American citizens whose fate was at stake. Talking to friends, I found myself trying to describe the city I had known in earlier times. My resulting book is part memoir, part social history of an eclipsed metropolis from the angle of its music.

It might be helpful to sketch out the meteoric rise and fall of the city on the straits (which is what *Détroit* means in the French of 1701, the founding year), perhaps better known as the city in dire straits. Until 1910, it was a fairly sleepy city with a complex and violent past. As the auto industry exploded, the population doubled by 1920, doubled again by 1930, and reached a peak of nearly two million when I was born in 1943. Late-arriving waves of white and African American southerners poured into the city, which expanded to 139 square miles. What would have been suburban development elsewhere became neighborhoods within this mushrooming city placed on the flatlands of southeastern Michigan. Despite the vicious racism and

1 Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

2 For a fine perspective on the wider implications of urban ruins, see Dora Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (Rutgers University Press, 2015).

anti-Semitism as the father of Detroit's prosperity, Henry Ford, factory work made possible a solid African-American middle class. Reverend C. L. Franklin's church, the training ground for his daughter Aretha's voice, embodied a confidence that produced results such as Motown, America's only major black-created and -controlled record company. Despite enforced school segregation, my father became a diligent and helpful high school teacher at all-black Miller High, where he taught kids like jazz great Kenny Burrell. My own magnet school, Cass Tech, produced legions of classical music success stories alongside nurturing talents like Diana Ross, Lily Tomlin, and Jack White. Everyone visited the Detroit Institute of Art and patronized the stately Public Library. When World War Two and I arrived, Detroit was dubbed "the arsenal of democracy" by President Roosevelt. One fighter plane rolled off the old auto line every hour in a single factory. The unions had finally gotten recognition, if only by shedding their more radical members.

True, social progress was outweighed by the weight of vicious policing of the black community, who were not allowed into white neighborhoods, thanks to government-sanctioned "redlining" policies. Beginning the process of ruination, the city destroyed the heart of the black entertainment and business district, Paradise Valley, to build a freeway that would link the downtown with the newly-hatched white suburbs. The auto moguls had long been quietly moving the work out to places out of the union's reach, beginning in doomed Flint, to Ohio and down South and abroad. Eventually, there was neither work nor decent housing for those left in the city limits.³ No wonder the city fell into

³ The best account of this process remains Detroitier Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton

ruins after mixing this toxic cocktail of arrogance, the inexorable logic of capitalism, and strong vintage racism. Detroit turned out to be the most ephemeral of great cities, streaking from nowhere across the American sky and fading into oblivion within three generations, from 1910 to 1970. It seems the momentum of this violent trajectory made it possible to forget everything that had happened in those sixty years. Joyce Carol Oates describes it this way in the Afterword to her breakthrough 1969 novel *Them*, based on her time teaching there: "Detroit at the peak of its economic power...a rhapsody of chemical-red sunsets, hazy-yeasty air, relentless eye-stinging winds...overpasses, railroad tracks and shrieking trains, factories and factory smoke, the choppy, usually gunmetal-gray and greasy-looking Detroit river..."⁴

The triumph of organized labor, the emergence of a solid black middle class built on factory jobs and small business, the careful construction of a quality school system and major cultural institutions—Detroit Institute of Arts, a magnificent Public Library—all this and more vanished in the urban haze that Oates describes. As in Afghanistan, the locals lost control of the narrative. Except, that is, in the utopian arena of music. The city became synonymous with Motown, the shining exception to the blotting out of black enterprise. But that's an illusion as well. Having built his empire on the model of the auto industry, Motown's inventor, Berry Gordy, followed the corporate plan and pulled production out of Detroit in 1972,

University Press, 1996; new paperback edition, 2014). The scholarly literature on this major city remains woefully sparse—it seems the city needs to exist more in myth than documented reality.

⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, *Them* (Random House, 1969), p. 540.

moving to Los Angeles and leaving the workers who made the songs just as badly off as the ones who made the cars. Still, the main theme of my book is the way that music cut through and overarched the barriers and congestion of the dense Detroit social traffic. Motown itself was built to do this job, and it retains a (carefully engineered) feel-good charge after decades of disruption in the city and America.

Progress has been more pronounced in drama and fiction, with Dominique Morisseau's skillful insider Detroit drama trilogy (*Detroit '67*, *Paradise Blue*, and *Skeleton Crew*), while Angela Flournoy's 2015 novel *The Turner House* made a breakthrough in laying bare the full complexity of an African American family's fate in a period of domestic and urban dissolution and evolution.⁶

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You do see white people solving their problems by singing a Motown song together in a number of Hollywood movies, but mostly, popular entertainment continues to score points off Detroit's desperation, from the dystopian wasteland of 1987's *Robocop*, sort of on the side of law enforcement, to the opposite view of the police as sadists in Kathryn Bigelow's 2017 *Detroit*. Thankfully, for both Afghanistan and the Motor City, recent depictions are edging into empathy; any progress is welcome. In 2002, the rapper played by Eminem in *8 Mile* humanized the dispossessed white population through appropriation of blackness, a standard trope. By 2007, Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* needed violence, as always, to make his point, but softened towards an acceptance of diversity, if only in the case of Asian Americans, rather than black neighbors. Bigelow's *Detroit* at least held the legalized violence of the police to account, if still not fully giving voice to its victims.⁵

My own experience with these two far-removed case studies of the American imaginary at work suggests just how wide the gap can be between personal experience and America's short-term memory, as mediated by popular culture. The incomplete or distorted views still circulating about Detroit and Afghanistan come from the same sources: an easy, often racist assumption about how minorities and foreigners "have always" lived, and a penchant for facile and image-driven memory traces, rather than taking the long view of events and peoples. Both habits of thinking are lazy and lead to bad decisions. Sometimes those of us who write about such situations can help to shift attitudes, but only a few inches off dead center. In my work over five decades, I've found that presenting music as a positive force can create some empathy, or even sympathy, and I will keep trying to play that tune over the noise. **A**

⁵ Documentaries have done a better job of offering insider viewpoints. There are too many to review, but it's worth noting that a few even reach beyond the standard black-white polarity that brands Detroit, such

as Mike Holland's 2015 *Stateless: Syrian Refugees in Detroit*.

⁶ Two entertaining insider accounts of life in Detroit today are Drew Philips's *A \$500 House in Detroit* (Simon and Schuster, 2017) and Aaron Foley's 2015 *How to Live in Detroit Without Being a Jackass* (Belt Publishing, second edition 2018).