

# Never mind the Taliban – Pakistan’s youth put their faith in rock’n’roll.

*Country’s internal turmoil is feeding underground music scene and popular guitar school*

Declan Walsh, 1 September, 2009

- 1 Wannabe rock stars don't have it easy in Pakistan. Last month a new band, Poor Rich Boy, took to the stage of a cramped Islamabad café for their breakthrough gig. On the first night, one person turned up. "It was the night of the world cricket finals. Bad timing," said the group's guitarist, Zain Ahsan, ruefully. The second gig was better – 30 people came along – but brought its own dark worries. "I asked the owner, 'What if a bomb goes off?'" said Ahsan. "She said, 'Don't worry, I'll be with you.'"
- 2 Even in a summer of Taliban violence young Pakistanis are rocking on. An underground music scene is quietly thriving in the country's major cities, nourished by the Internet and the passion of mostly amateur bands. In Lahore a pair of unemployed rockers have tapped into that enthusiasm with a new school for rock'n'roll. "We weren't getting a lot of gigs, and we needed to survive," said co-founder Hamza Jafri. "So we thought we'd try this."
- 3 The Guitar School, as it is known, has been surprisingly successful. Around 40 students have signed up, ranging from surly teenagers in drainpipe jeans to more practised musicians such as Ahsan looking to hone their skills. Classes take place in a small room lined with egg boxes; the school's teaching style is reflected in its motto: "Play it like you feel it." Many come from wealthy families that might once have stigmatized music, Jafri said. "People associated it with the red light district and sexual entertainment." But a popular new television show featuring live performances, *Coke Studio*, has given rock music an appearance of respectability.
- 4 On a recent afternoon a woman brought in two reluctant-looking teenage daughters for lessons. "It will do them good to learn," she said. But making it to the next stage is difficult and sometimes dangerous. For the past six months virtually all public performances in Lahore have stopped since extremist attacks on a performing arts festival and the Sri Lankan cricket team. The Pakistani music industry itself is disorganized and hamstrung by massive piracy.
- 5 But the country's internal chaos is also feeding creativity. Pakistanis have a rich musical tradition, mostly rooted in Sufism, but modern musicians have generally avoided political issues. But the new single from co-VEN, which Jafri fronts, is a sharp parody of Pakistan's controversial alliance with the US. "There's a lot of foreign pressure on our government to attack people in the tribal areas," he said.
- 6 Others have a playful take on the turmoil. The Islamabad band Bumbu Sauce – the name comes from a Pot Noodles packet – recently brought out *Jiggernaut*, a single that mixes references to kung fu, talking dogs and the Taliban. Guitarist Shehryar Mufti is not worried the insurgents might take the joke badly. "Their argument is with the government, not the people," he said. "I think rock music is low on their list of priorities."
- 7 Pakistani rock was boosted by the arrival of satellite television in the 1990s. Today the musicians, many self-taught, publicize themselves through networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace, and Pakistan's growing number of FM radio stations. And despite the security concerns, a fresh concert scene is emerging.
- 8 On a sultry Saturday night hundreds of young people, mostly dressed in jeans and T-shirts, crowded into a new outdoor auditorium on the edge of Islamabad called the Rock Musicarium. "People are thirsting for music, they want to get out," said the venue's founder, Zeejah Fazli. When it opens properly in November, the venue will have a recording studio and capacity for 600 people, said Fazli, who estimates there are 20 rock bands in Islamabad alone. But, he admitted, the project depends on a six-month lull in attacks on the capital continuing.
9. For some well-to-do Pakistanis, rock music represents the cultural tensions of their life, which is divided between western influences and the conservative direction their society is taking. "On one side kids feel like they are in England; on the other this strict Islamic thing is going on. It's not good for people's sanity," said Jafri.
10. About five years ago Junaid Jamshed, the country's most famous pop star, renounced music and returned to religion. Now he appears on religious chat shows with a long, curly beard. But most aspiring rock stars say they can live with the difference. In the soundproof room at the Lahore guitar school, 17-year-old Danish Khwaja strummed his guitar, long hair flopping over his forehead. "It's kinda cool doing stuff you love," he said.

© Guardian News & Media 2009

First published in *The Guardian*, 01/09/09

## 1. Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

wannabe, gig, thrive, hone, piracy, turmoil, insurgent, well-to-do, renounce, strum

1. A \_\_\_\_\_ person is rich and belongs to an upper-class family.
2. If you \_\_\_\_\_ a guitar, you move your fingers quickly across its strings.
3. An \_\_\_\_\_ is someone who belongs to a group of people fighting to take control of their country by force.
4. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a public performance, especially of jazz or popular music.
5. If you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you state formally that you no longer believe in it or support it.
6. If you \_\_\_\_\_ a skill that you already have, you improve it even further.
7. A \_\_\_\_\_ is someone who wants to be famous or successful.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ is a state of excitement or uncontrolled activity.
9. If something \_\_\_\_\_, it becomes very successful.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ is the crime of making illegal copies of DVDs or CDs.

## 2. Find the information

Read the text quickly and find the answers to these questions.

1. How many people came to the new band's first gig?  
.....
2. How many came to their second gig?  
.....
3. How many students have signed up for the Guitar School?  
.....
4. Where did the band Bumbu Sauce find their name?  
.....
5. When did satellite television arrive in Pakistan?  
.....
6. What will the capacity of the Rock Musicarium be?  
.....

## 3. Comprehension check

Choose the correct answers according to the text.

1. Why was Poor Rich Boy's first gig poorly attended?
  - a. Because they were relatively unknown.
  - b. Because the venue was a cramped café.
  - c. Because it was the same night as the world cricket finals.
2. What is helping the underground music scene to thrive in Pakistan?
  - a. Wealthy families that used to stigmatize music.
  - b. The Internet and the passion of amateur bands.
  - c. The rich musical tradition of Pakistan.
3. Why isn't Shehryar Mufti worried about the Taliban?
  - a. Because he believes that their argument is with the government, not with the people.
  - b. Because their music is simply a parody on the turmoil in Pakistan.
  - c. Because Pakistan has a rich musical tradition rooted in Sufism.
4. How does rock music represent the cultural tensions in the lives of well-to-do Pakistanis?
  - a. A new concert scene is developing despite the security concerns.
  - b. Rock music is an example of western influence and Pakistan is moving in a conservative direction.
  - c. Some people have renounced music and returned to religion.

## 4. Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. A noun meaning *a time when you begin to be successful at something*. (para 1)  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. An adverb meaning *in a way that shows you are sorry about something*. (para 1)  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. A two-word phrasal verb meaning *to use something in order to get benefit from it*. (para 2)  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. A verb meaning *to treat a particular type of behaviour as wrong or embarrassing and to try to make people who behave in this way ashamed*. (para 3)  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. An adjective meaning *not willing to do something*. (para 4)  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. A two-word phrasal verb meaning *to want something very much*. (para 8)  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. A noun meaning *a quiet period during a very active or violent situation*. (para 8)  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. A verb meaning *to hang in a loose, heavy and uncontrolled way*. (para 10)  
\_\_\_\_\_

## 5. Adjectives

Match the adjectives from the text with their meanings.

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| 1. sultry        | a. prevented from doing what you want to do             |
| 2. controversial | b. unfriendly and rude                                  |
| 3. cramped       | c. intended to be funny or friendly rather than serious |
| 4. hamstrung     | d. hoping and trying to be successful at something      |
| 5. massive       | e. unpleasantly hot and humid                           |
| 6. aspiring      | f. small and crowded                                    |
| 7. surly         | g. extremely large in amount or degree                  |
| 8. playful       | h. causing disagreement or disapproval                  |

## 6. Word building

Complete the sentences with the correct form of the verb in brackets at the end of each sentence.

1. A new TV show has given Pakistani rock music an air of \_\_\_\_\_. [RESPECT]
2. Pakistan's \_\_\_\_\_ with the US is controversial. [ALLY]
3. The Guitar School has been \_\_\_\_\_ successful. [SURPRISE]
4. The Pakistani music industry is \_\_\_\_\_. [ORGANIZE]
5. The internal chaos in the country is feeding \_\_\_\_\_. [CREATE]
6. Some people say the division between western influences and religious conservatism is not good for people's \_\_\_\_\_. [SANE]

## 7. Discussion

Can music change society? If so, how? If not, why?