

Ziba, A Super Silent Beauty



Portrait of Ziba playing a reed instrument

Sarvenaz Mostofey

Ziba, an Afro-Iranian musician, led a groundbreaking folk ensemble that challenged gender norms in 1980s Iran. This musical group has been revisited today through a profeminist lens. Sarvenaz Mostofey's retelling of Ziba Shirvan's story connects the political and creative dimensions, societal punishment, and the suppression of artistic expression in Iran. Once silenced, Ziba's voice resonates as a symbol of empowerment amidst adversity. In the ongoing Iranian revolution, Ziba's memory becomes necessary, a voice that embodies resistance within women's struggle.



Ziba in white, from private photo albums
of people of Hormozgan

One story has haunted me ever since I heard it. It is a story full of vibration, sadness, and exoticism about an Afro-Iranian woman and musician named Ziba, which means »beautiful« in Farsi. She was a leader for other women, for those who play music and whose music mesmerizes and stands strong, who have a voice that makes some so envious they feel entitled to silence it. Is that possible? The sad truth is yes, but the echo finds its way. This is what I love about sound. Once spoken, the word has its way of coming back against the ephemeral.



Ziba and other band members
play in a ceremony

The story begins with a women's folk music ensemble from the province of Hormozgan in southern Iran. The group consists of three women whose descendants were brought across the Indian Ocean from East Africa to Iran during the Safavid and Qajar periods. The group's leader, Ziba Shirvan, whose heritage traces back to the colonial center of Zanzibar, was a singer and player of the *jofti* (a double-piped wooden reed played mainly in southern parts of Iran) and the *dohol gap* (a regional cylindrical drum). The other member, Nusra, played the *kaser* (a percussion instrument). Zoli (Zoleikha) played the pipa (another percussion instrument) and was also a background singer. With her *jofti*, Ziba, along with women from her musical group, were hired to play at weddings. She came with her band intending to make a statement, and she certainly did.

The group shifted from the traditional use and gendered status quo of music at the time by playing »all-male« instruments to perform »women's« songs. Their music was energetic and vibrant – a stark contrast to the patriarchal climate of the region. They played at weddings, mourning rituals, Zar ceremonies, and local religious events.

A few poor-quality tapes do justice to this somewhat »profeminist« Bandari group, but also the hostility they faced that forced the end of their musical journey. I would like to quote Ziba's cousin revealed to a journalist who published one of the few accounts on Ziba's life that still circulates online:

The revolutionary years were over, was it during the war in 1364?¹ There was a wedding in the Rooz district, and the police rushed in angrily and caught her with Nusra. She was in jail for three days, then they took her to the boulevard and whipped her. I didn't have the courage to go to her. When they finished, she came to our house alone, sat quietly, and didn't say a word. She only cried slowly when I put the ointment on her back. Well, after that day, Ziba didn't sing, she didn't go to weddings, she didn't earn money, and she couldn't do anything.²

Ziba became increasingly isolated and died a few years later. I came across a video of a poet on social media, who was dedicating his text to the memory of Ziba, in which he confirms that he witnessed her being flogged on the roof of a minibus. The image I pictured was a red minibus, a Mercedes-Benz O309.

How can we rethink the political and creative dimensions of Ziba's persecution and punishment of women musicians? Can Ziba's story expand the contemporary context of women's oppression for us? How does Ziba's inescapable end make artistic expression a transgressive, monumental, or iconoclastic act?

The small number of surviving recordings preserving the work by Ziba's group raises questions about this music's social status and roots, as well as the violent history of disintegration and isolation for these musicians. But the most important aspect, in my opinion, is the aesthetics and various practices of mass violence designed to drown out the artists and any expression of public freedom. Ziba's theatrically constructed punishment serves as a chilling and exemplary instance of societal discipline, foreshadowing the methods that would most certainly be employed under Iran's emerging regime.

I would like to draw attention to the monumental setting of the minibus and Ziba's outstanding character that had fallen victim to a patriarchal oppressive system, and was used as an example of instilling fear in others. This scene can be seen as a pyramidal sculpture of social unfreedom, with Ziba at the top and the witnesses surrounding the minibus at the base. Here, the popular and collective memory part of the pyramid testifies to the truth of Ziba's song. The buses and minibuses in Iran are the most accessible form of public transportation. The railroads are still not advanced and well-linked, and the metro system has only been active since the early 2000s and only exists in large cities. Local buses could play the center for public gatherings and a free description of the sociopolitical climate. Most drivers did not play propaganda programs on their radios, but rather a variety of music, either by local musicians or popular Iranian musicians who were forced to leave Iran after 1979. With their mixtapes, the drivers were acting as impromptu DJs with an unofficial, spur-of-the-moment duty to set a mood for their passengers. They take them on a short sonic journey pitting their mixtapes against the norms of the revolutionary regime and taking them to a public realm outside the confines regulated by state policy.

Ziba's voice could be heard at celebrations, and in the minibus on the way to work. In this sense, the flogging of a beloved singer was a public act of violence aimed at terrorizing and suppressing the

voice of resistance, of the people, and their agency regarding what music to play and enjoy.

I revive this memory in light of the ongoing revolution in Iran, where women and ethnic minority working class are taking up resistance in the streets to fight against the dictatorship, a fight for their equal rights. The horror of Ziba's silencing, preserved in the collective memory, still casts a large shadow, regardless of the terror that continues in Iran. It comes close to what Julia Kristeva describes as »abject« – the feeling when an individual experiences or is confronted with the typically repressed »bodily reality« or the intrusion of »the real« into »the symbolic order.«

In her book *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva suggests that the abject is better understood through the experience of extreme situations. In the final chapter of her book, she writes:

Perhaps those that the path of analysis, or scripture, or of a painful or ecstatic ordeal has led to tear the veil of the communitarian mystery, on which love of self and others is set up, only to catch a glimpse of the abyss of abjection with which they are underlaid – they perhaps might be able to read this book as something other than an intellectual exercise.³

Something that can be evoked and identified in us, embodied. Can it also be heard in a loose connection to the words, in the forced silence, or in the rhythm and melodies? Is it recognizable in the high-tempo music that was played in the ceremonies? Or in the songs and sounds that simply tell of daily life?

Veit Erlmann, in his essay »The Sonic Abject: Sound and the Legal Imagination,« claims that »perhaps the most promising direction sound studies has taken in recent years, however, is toward a deeper understanding of sound as abjection – that is, as an obliterating force deployed in situations of extreme violence such as war or torture...«⁴

In remembering Ziba's suppressed voice, I want to explore the sonic spectrum to its outer limits – unwanted and aesthetically denigrated – and ask what we hear when we bring a sound and the voice from the past into the context of memory, consolation, or interpretation. How can the woman's voice be positioned as a narrator that brings a different sonic efficacy to our perception? And can it function as a representational voice to listen into the past through

an experiment with her recordings? I will include a recording of an experiment with their music that was conducted during an art residency in Budapest, which involved researching a historical Iranian film about a musical band in the Qajar era, some scenes of which were filmed in Hungary, and I will explain more about this project in the embedded link.

Her story is tragic by violence. There is not much music left of her but I do not want to be hemmed in by frustration saying that Ziba, her band, and their music were forcibly removed from Iran's musical scene. Although this is what happened, I want to think that Ziba's voice could not be silenced as a result of the »aesthetics of social terror.« A female Afro-Iranian musician forms a band, becomes a leader for other women like herself, makes a career in entertaining, and earns money to sustain herself and the other members of the band. Her music proves to surpass the patriarchal and racialized boundaries of her society, she created something that is authentic and engaging. All of this testifies to the fact that together with her group, Ziba pushed on to become a powerful symbol of woman empowerment in the face of adversity.

At the same time, a newly established government, intent on instilling terror and patriarchal control over society, selects this particular marginalized artist to publicly punish as a way to instill fear throughout the local community and send a message to people like her. For Kristeva, the abject is never completely repressed, but remains on the margins. Music becomes a lingering reminder of the social tensions emerging from repression. In the ongoing uprising and women's struggle in Iran, we can listen and look to Ziba and her band differently. Just as women in Iran are actively defying, identifying, and challenging the norms that have been handed down to them, unrolling in time, *tearing the veil of the communitarian mystery*, shouting in the streets, or walking silently in the streets and looking into each other's eyes – splattering *abject, simultaneously repulsive and fascinating*. Listening to and contemplating this story echoes historical discrimination, an injustice intersected with race and gender. In that sense, »Silent Beauty« for me is the urge to listen to what cannot be heard most of the time, because the politics of it are predetermined. Listening to her music raises something powerful, and that is the voice of women.

Sarvenaz Mostofey is an Iranian sound artist and composer currently living in Berlin. Interested in transcending the notion of interdisciplinary art, she has a background in film and theater. She received a BA in photography from Tehran Art University and an MA in ArtScience from the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. Her projects incorporate space as an active attribute in the art-making process, exploring the interconnections between modes of sonic attention and concepts of space. Her recent compositions are based on recordings, archival research, and spatial attributes of everyday life. Sarvenaz is a former resident of Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart.

To listen to the accompanying audio material, please access the online version of *Solitude Journal 5 – A Sound Was Heard!*



You will find the following material:

Sarvenaz Mostofey, *Ziba and her band in Kecskemét, 2023*

The recording was made in front of the Katona József Theater in Kecskemét, Hungary, as part of an artistic residency at Art Quarter Budapest in 2023. The music is by a folk music group that was active in the 1970s and 1980s in the Hormozgan province of Iran. The names of the band members are Ziba, Zoli, and Nusra.

The work by Sarvenaz Mostofey has been supported by the Berlin Senat through the grant for »Ernste Musik und Klangkunst 2023.«

1 Ziba's cousin refers to the Iranian calendar. According to the Latin calendar it was the year 1985.

2 Mansoureh Shojaee: »Avaze Shalagh Khordeye Ziba«

(article).

3 Julia Kristeva: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York 1982, p. 209.

4 Veit Erlmann: »The Acoustic Object: Sound and the Legal Imagination,« in: *Sound Objects*, eds. James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow. Chapel Hill 2019, p. 158.