

Program: Asif Ali Khan Qawwali Ensemble U.S. tour 2013:

ASIF ALI KHAN QAWWALI ENSEMBLE

Asif Ali Khan, lead vocals
Raza Hussain, harmonium & solo vocals
Sarfraz Hussain, harmonium & solo vocals
Ali Khawar, tabla & chorus
Imtiaz Hussain Shibli, chorus
Waheed Mumtaz Hussain, chorus
Shah Nawaz Hussain, chorus
Manzoor Hussain Shibli, chorus
Umar Draz Hussain, chorus

PROGRAM

Qawwali is an art that is transmitted orally. The texts of tonight's songs are drawn from ancient Persian Sufi poetry, as well as more recent Punjabi literature. They are sung in Urdu, Punjabi and Farsi. Since songs for a *qawwali* performance are chosen according to the mood of the artists and their assessment of the audience, there is no set program. Traditionally a performance will begin with a *hamd* (in praise of God) and continue with a *na't-i-sharif* (in praise of Mohammed). Then there will be verses dedicated to various Sufi saints. After that the artist's choice of verses is governed by his assessment of the audience, taking particular note of the preferences of any spiritual leader or important person in attendance. To give the audience an idea of the content of a typical *qawwali* performance, we have reprinted translations of songs from Asif Ali Khan's 2005 album *Mazarana* on the Long Distance label.

INTRODUCTION

*It is the courage of each, it is the power of flight,
Some fly and remain in the garden, some go beyond the stars.*

- Amir Khusrau, 13th Century

Americans were first introduced to the ecstatic singing of South Asia known as *qawwali* in 1975 when the Asia Society organized the first tour of the United States by the famed Sabri Brothers of Pakistan. A subsequent tour in 1978, culminating in a sold-out concert at Carnegie Hall, was greeted with wild enthusiasm by devotees and initiates alike. The tour is commemorated by a recording on the Nonesuch Explorer series that almost exceeded the limit of a long-playing vinyl recording of the time at 52.24 minutes. While the Sabri Brothers and other *qawwali* ensembles

visited the US from time to time, it was not until Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was invited to perform at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in 1989 and his subsequent residency at the University of Washington in 1992 that *qawwali* began to be heard again in the US outside the South Asian community. In 1993, a 13-city tour of North America organized by the World Music Institute cemented Nusrat's reputation in the US and helped to build a far wider interest in *qawwali*.

Qawwali means literally "utterance" in Urdu. The word stems from the Arabic *qua'ol* meaning an axiom or dictum relating to religious subjects, the recitation of which helps to purify both thought and deed. Associated in particular with the Sufi Chisti Order, it has its origins in the medieval mystical practice of *sama'* (Arabic: listening, audition). *Sama* like *zikr*, the ceremony of remembrance in which the names of God are repetitively invoked, is an essential vehicle for revelation and union with the divine. Both *sama'* and *zikr* may also be seen as instrumental in advancing the great classical music traditions of the Muslim world – the Turko-Arabic *maqam* and the Persian *dastgah* - which, in turn, influenced the North Indian *raga* tradition. Thus, while music as a secular pursuit has largely been condemned by orthodox Islam, for most Sufis it has traditionally been a fundamental prerequisite.

By the end of the 11th century, *sama'* was a spiritual concert which included sung poetry by a soloist or chorus with instrumental interludes. The concert took place under the direction of a sheikh or *pir* (religious leader). The faithful participated by listening in a state of inner contemplation, which might lead to a state of trance. The main argument amongst Sufis has centered around the use of music to achieve a state of ecstasy; while some see music as a means to get closer to the Divine, others see musical trance as an end in itself, implying that the state of ecstasy is a manifestation of God.

The art of *qawwali*, as with most of the great Asian musical and literary traditions, is transmitted orally. The mystical verse associated with *qawwali* is best appreciated by listening. The vehicle of music is used to bring one closer to the experience of the inner truth. The *qawwal* will dwell on certain words, often repeating them, taking the audience into the discovery of hitherto obscure meanings. Thus, mundane objects are imbued with deeper meaning – a spinning wheel becomes the wheel of life. Repeating a sentence or phrase until all meaning is exhausted and it becomes meaningless is a means to bring the audience closer to *ma'rifat*, inner truth. Thus, as with the Buddhist repetition of a mantra, semantic reality is negated and a new truth emerges that transcends linguistic barriers.

Regular participants in *qawwali* sessions often use the concept of flight or travel to describe their experience. This is a phenomenon well known to shamans and practitioners of religious ceremonies involving trance-like states. This sensation of flight brought about through rhythmic music and chant is known as *hal*. The manifestation of this ecstatic state can range from a simple swaying of the head or body to violent convulsions. At such times, as, when a member of a congregation at a gospel revival meeting is "possessed by the Holy Spirit," friends will shield him from

harm until he is eased back into a state of “normalcy.” The great masters of *qawwali* are able to move entire audiences to a *hal* even if they do not understand a single word of the language.

Qawwali texts are taken mostly from the great medieval Persian mystical poets such as Amir Khusrau, Jalal’uddin Rumi and Hafez, as well as Indian saints such as Nizamuddin Auliya (14th century) and popular Punjabi poets such as Bulleh Shah (18th century). While most *qawwals* are in Urdu or Punjabi, there are others in Persian and regional South Asian languages. Rarely is a complete poem recited; rather the singer will join segments or verses from different poems or add lines from another text to emphasize a point. Each *qawwali* song has, at its core, a principal poem, often a *ghazal*. The poem is usually preceded by two introductory parts: an instrumental prelude (*naghma*) played on the harmonium, and an introductory verse sung solo in a recitative style (*rubai* or *doha*). This introduction serves to indicate the topic of the main poem and to get the audience’s response. If it is favorable, the *qawwal* continues with the main poem in the same mode; if not, then he will chant another verse introducing a different poem. The poetry is often allegorical and charged with symbolism. Much of it has a seemingly erotic or romantic nature, but is not intended to be taken literally. Yet the profane world is never denied – for what is human is Divine and what is Divine is human. The frequently used term “Beloved” refers to Divine love (for God or his Prophet, Mohammed). Terms such as “face” and “tresses” signify the spiritual qualities of the master; building a “house” signifies the pursuit of material well-being. Much use is made of the terms “wine” and “tavern”: wine refers to the love of God, which intoxicates the initiate, and tavern refers to the spiritual master or sheikh, whose heart is the repository of God’s love.

The analogy of *qawwali* to African-American gospel is valid in more ways than one, for out of both idioms a secular form has evolved. Just as soul music grew out of the music of the African-American church, in recent years *qawwali*-style music, albeit with different lyrics, can be heard in Bollywood movies, as “disco,” or as background music for television shows.

- Robert H. Browning

THE ARTIST

Asif Ali Khan was born in 1973, the youngest son of Manzoor Hussain, a well-known singer from a famous Pakistani musical family. He traces his musical ancestry back more than 350 years. His great-grandfather Mian Maula Baksh, who was one of the most famous classical singers of the Indian subcontinent, founded his *qawwali* (Sufi music) group more than 80 years ago. After partition in 1947, Asif’s grandfather Santoo Khan moved the family to Pakistan, settling in Lahore. Here the group, known at this time as Santoo Khan Qawwal, became extremely popular both for its wide repertoire of classical, spiritual (Sufi) and popular songs, as well as their

superb command of the Urdu, Persian and Punjabi languages. The group was one of the first to record *qawwali* music and was regularly heard on All Pakistan Radio.

Santoo Khan died in the late 1980s whereupon his son Manzoor Hussain took over the leadership. By this time all seven of Manzoor's sons, including Asif Ali, were performing with the group. From his early days as a teenager, Asif was praised for his outstanding vocal qualities. In the early 1990s his father introduced him to the legendary Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who was acknowledged as Pakistan's greatest *qawwali* singer of the 20th century. Asif Ali's impeccable diction, brilliant inventiveness and sincerity inured him to the master. He became Nusrat's premier student in 1995 and within a short while took over the vocal leadership for the group from his father. In 1999, he was named "Best Young Pakistani Qawwali" by Lok Versa (National Institute of Folk Heritage of Islamabad). Over the past decade, he has embarked on numerous concert tours in Europe, Asia, Australia and the Middle East while continuing to offer his singing at religious shrines throughout Pakistan. His ensemble appeared at the 2012 Olympics in London, and in 2013 performed at WOMAD festivals in London and Moscow.

Since the death of the world-famous Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in 1997 there have been many contenders to inherit his place as "Emperor of Qawwali." There is no doubt now that Asif Ali Khan has emerged as the one of the genre's reigning princes. While remaining true to the Punjabi tradition that was Nusrat's hallmark, he has developed a style and presence all of his own.

THE POETRY

Na hai ghair ki zuroorat

Arifana kalam (araf – "he who knows" – Urdu)

I have no need of any other
Not even a shrine
This lover I revere
Is my God

O pious one, the prayer of love
You've not understood yet
You think it is enough to vanish into your shrine
Whilst I have Him in front of me.

I'm off now to the city of idols
Idolatry is my occupation
In this country, my beloved
Has turned me into an ill-doer.

My heart is ignorant
My faith is ignorant
What am I destined for then?
Only my Loved One knows the answer.

Dil yaar da nazarana

Na't-i-sharif (Praise to the Prophet - Punjabi). Text by Aamir Qadari.

My heart is my offering to the Loved One
May it truly reach Him!
My beloved is then free to choose,
He can take it or reject it.

I gaze on the path of the Loved One
I will not deviate one step from it
I will wait for Him forever
Whether He comes or not.

Oh wind, carry
My tears with you
Offer them, weeping, to the Beloved
That he be aware of my grief.

Who will explain to those people,
Those who say, "He's one of us"
Him whose jet black hair
God himself doth swear by?

Mere mahee, mere dhola

Manqabat (Sufi devotional poem) in homage to the poet and Punjabi Sufi saint Baba Fard, known as Ganj-e Shekhar – Urdu. Text by Aamir Qadari.

My loved one, my beloved,
My lord is Baba Ganj-e Shekhar

Our alliance means the whole world knows me
But if you weren't there, who would recognize me?
Whether we're talking of this world or the other,
My model is Baba Ganj-e Shekhar

Thanks to your favor, baba, my life goes on
I am cloaked in the mantle of your favor
My guide, my Kaabah
My faith is Baba Ganj-e Shekhar

I am heady with the wine you made me drink
From you Baba, I've acquired everything
You are the innkeeper of all those in a state of bliss
My keeper is Baba Ganj-e Shekhar

Every day I recite your face¹
My passionate love is for you alone
My Yassin, my Taha²
My Quran is Baba Ganj-e Shekhar

Since I belong to you alone, how could I turn to someone else?
I ask everything of you, I obtain everything from you,
My master, my benefactor,
My Bhagwan³ is Baba Ganj-e Shekhar.

Dam dama must Qalandar

Dhamal (mytical song or dance) in homage to the Sufi saint Lal Shabaaz Qalandar, from Sewan Sharif, Sindh – Punjabi. Text by Hazrat Sabri.

"My heart, my heart, my heart is drunk on Qalandar!
Say it with Heart! "The Ruby, the generous one,
Shabaaz Qalandar! Lord of the Walis⁴!

Your Sewan is the city of the blissful,
The Beautiful One! The one housing the line of the Prophet.
The great pilgrimage is made for him,
He who visits your Sewan.

Finer than Paradise, that's the bazaars of Sewan!

Where Shabaaz lives 'tis a strange country
The moon and the stars hide here
Men, heady, and intoxicated with joy dance the dhamal⁵

¹ Allusion to the metaphor of the face recalling the Quran

² Two suras of the Quran, dedicated to God's love of Mohammed

³ Hindu name for God

⁴ Friends of God

The naubat⁶ rings out here
Adding a rich note to the landscape
Hymns to Ali full of joy ring forth in the bazaars

The shade of Saint Ghaus⁷ falls across him
He occupies a remarkable rank in this world.
A beggar who arrives at his abode
Will not go away with empty hands

A descendant of Hassan and Husseun⁸, Sayed⁹, the Guardian of religion

By the grace of the sacrifice of Karbala
By the grace of the Prophet's gaze
Listen to the humble demands of Asif
By the grace of Hassan and Hussain

My precious Ruby, make the raft of my expectations arrive safe and sound!

¹ Allusion to the metaphor of the face recalling the Quran

¹ Two suras of the Quran, dedicated to God's love of Mohammed

¹ Hindu name for God

¹ Friends of God

¹ Mystical dance

¹ Percussion solo played at shrines

¹ The highest level of holiness a person can achieve – here in reference to Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani

¹ Grandsons of the Prophet

¹ Descendant of the Prophet

Asif Ali Khan's tour has been organized by Robert Browning Associates. Robert Browning was the co-founder of the Alternative Museum and the World Music Institute in New York. Under his direction, these two organizations presented more than 1,800 concerts and organized US tours by some of the most influential artists

⁵ Mystical dance

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⁷ The highest level of holiness a person can achieve – here in reference to Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani

⁸ Grandsons of the Prophet

⁹ Descendant of the Prophet

from Asia, the Middle East and Europe, including Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Masters of Persian Music, and The Gypsy Caravan. www.robertbrowningassociates.com

Asif Ali Khan's Management: ZAMAN PRODUCTION
jeanherve@zamanproduction.com