

BANNED: A ROUGH GUIDE

Marie Korpe and Ole Reitov have been tracking the music censors and the censored for more than a decade. They reflect on the tactics of modern censorship

When we founded Freemuse ten years ago, our aim was to defend freedom of expression for musicians and composers. Since then, we have documented music censorship in more than 100 countries. At first, we were not aware of the size of the problem, but the longer we have worked in the field, the larger the challenges become. Maybe we are still only seeing the tip of the iceberg. While more journalists have got music censorship on their radar and a number of musicians have benefited from our support, it is still rare to find records of music censorship and violations of musicians' rights to freedom of expression in reports from Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and other global free expression watchdogs. It is still rare to find mention of these violations in reports from embassies, and so far no organisation accredited to the United Nations has raised these issues during the sessions of the United Nations Universal Periodic Review. The silence from the music industry and organisations representing musicians and composers still astonishes us, as if the problem didn't exist. What follows below are scenes from our journey over the past 30 years through the landscape of music and censorship.

Desert of solitude: self-censorship in Pakistan, 1979–1980

'I cannot perform in public as long as my youngest daughter is not married,' said singer and actress Iqbal Bano. 'A "decent family" would never marry their son to the daughter of a woman who is performing in public, so this is why I can only sing for you here in a private setting.' The harmonium player set the tone and Iqbal Bano began singing:

dasht-e-tanhaai mein, ai jaan-e-jahaan, larzaan hain

In the desert of my solitude, oh love of my life, quiver

These are the words of Pakistan's beloved Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the intellectual socialist who never ceased to criticise corrupt leaders and generals and is known to millions as a master of *ghazals* – the semi-classical poetic songs which transcend boundaries of gender and age and have reached illiterate Pakistanis as well as the educated upper classes.

We were sitting in the house of one of Pakistan's most famous lawyers, Raza Kazim, a good friend of Faiz, with whom he shared revolutionary ideas and a passion for music. This was the first time that we had encountered the censorship of music and it opened our eyes. Kazim, renowned for his intellectual sharpness, had built his own music studio, sponsored musicians, developed new musical instruments and was a scholar on the role of Muslim musicians in the development of North Indian classical music. Kazim had invited us to his studio to exchange views and experiences on recording techniques and the arts in general.

Iqbal Bano was able to perform in this 'safe music house' in Lahore. Loved by millions across Pakistan as one of the most distinguished *ghazal* singers of the sub-continent, she had voluntarily abstained from public performances until her daughter found a suitable husband.

From 1979, the political and religious environment in Pakistan was extremely hostile towards music, dance and most other art forms. After seizing power in 1977, General Zia ul Haq had started using religion as a tool for his own abuse of power and easily found willing religious leaders as allies against all kinds of 'spiritual pollution'. He introduced Islamic law, thousands of boys joined the *mohalla* (local religious) schools and in an attempt to 'correct' wrong interpretations of Islam, the government banned a parade in the autumn of 1979 of Sufi musicians and dancers travelling from Rawalpindi to the small village Shahan Nurpur, one of the Sufi centres of the country. But the general and the army did not dare attack the hundreds of Sufi followers as they

danced and sang through the broad avenues of the capital – a small victory for unauthorised Islam.

Was Iqbal Bano, the former film star and winner of several awards, a victim of Zia ul Haq's terror regime? Most probably not. She simply shared the destiny of hundreds of talented women performers. Her 'self-imposed' censorship was a result of the complex cultural, religious and social conflicts of many societies, where music is considered a great joy, but musicians and performers are considered 'low caste'. This was little different from Europe, where daughters of rich families learned to play and sing but were not necessarily expected to make a career of it. So Iqbal, with that remarkable voice, was still climbing the ladder from being considered a 'courtesan' to becoming a respectable woman.

In the desert of my solitude,
Beneath the dust and ashes of distance
Bloom the jasmines and roses of your proximity

Iqbal Bano's voice was joined by the tabla player. She recited with a sense of bitter sweetness; her voice had thrilled audiences all over the sub-continent. We double-checked the tape recorder – this was her most famous song – we didn't want to miss a single breath, a single phrase.

The sun of separation has set
And the night of union has arrived.

When her daughter got married, Iqbal Bano returned to her public. Breaking the ban on performing the revolutionary songs by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, she gained cult status in 1985 when she performed the inspirational anthem 'Hum Dekhenge' (We Will See), a song that became a symbol of resistance, in a recorded concert in front of an audience. Iqbal Bano died in 2009.

Music is bad for your health: Africa and Asia, early 1980s

After living in Pakistan for a year, we set off for a three-year broadcasting and research programme on local music industries around the world, and travelled to Sri Lanka, Kenya, Tunisia and Tanzania. One pattern was striking – in each country there was tight media control and oppositional voices were not very willing to talk while the tape recorder was switched on. Censorship was widespread and artists were rather unwilling to discuss it. What we had experienced in Pakistan was not



Revellers dancing to music at a wedding, October 2001. Under the Taliban, the activity was banned
Credit: Martin Adler/Panos

unique. Religious forces and political leaders kept a firm grip not only on the media, but even on the arts scene. Censorship had suddenly become an embedded theme in our work – we were both journalists covering music and current affairs. But in those pre-web days we were unable to find a lot of material on the subject, apart from reports on increasing censorship in apartheid South Africa.

In Tanzania, we visited the small bookshop of a shabby four-star hotel. Our eyes were attracted by the title of a booklet, *Music and Its Effects*, published in 1974 (<http://www.islamic-laws.org/musicanditseffect.htm>). The first chapter, 'What is music?', told us that music, according to the 'new national dictionary', was the 'art of combining sounds or sequences of notes into harmonious patterns pleasing to the ear and satisfying to the emotions'. Then we read the third paragraph: 'In Islam, music is called *ghina* and in sharia law it is counted as one of the "great sins"'. 'A brisk and lively musical programme, in particular if it is accompanied by musical instruments, disturbs the

equilibrium of the various systems; digestion is badly affected; palpitation of the heart is increased; blood pressure increases and abnormal secretion of hormones [sic] leaves a lasting effect upon general health.'

A few blocks away from the bookshop, Radio Freedom, the exile radio of the ANC, was producing revolutionary programmes, and we heard samples of music banned from South Africa – a great contrast to state-controlled radio.

The birth of Freemuse, 1997-2000

When the Rushdie affair exploded in 1989, media all over the world started focusing on threats against writers. While famous authors have defended Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin, who has faced similar problems in Bangladesh, famous musicians run campaigns against hunger and other good causes – but neither Bono, Sting or Bob Geldof are out there defending their musical colleagues. The music industry and music media seem to have a blind spot.

In the autumn of 1997, we decided to organise the world's first-ever conference on music censorship from our base in Copenhagen. The Danish Institute for Human Rights supported the idea and became a partner, Danish Broadcasting offered office space and the Danish minister of culture, Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen, provided funding to gather banned musicians, human rights lawyers, the media and scholars for a world conference on music and censorship. Ursula Owen, then chief executive of Index on Censorship, liked the idea of collaborating on a special *Index* issue on music and censorship, 'Smashed Hits' (*Index* 6/98), for the conference.

The opening session set the tone. Cecile Pracher, a former censor from SABC, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, sat next to Ray Phiri (of Graceland fame) and Sipho Mabuse. She explained why and how their music was banned. 'It was very simple,' she said. 'We had 13 rules and if the lyrics, the musical style or the combination of musicians were violating these rules, we just banned it and scratched the tracks on the vinyl.'

The participants agreed that it was not sufficient to protest against censorship. We needed to analyse, document and understand the effects and create space for dialogue. A small group of dedicated conference participants decided to set up an organisation to defend freedom of expression for musicians and composers. Freemuse – the first and so far only international organisation advocating freedom of musical expression – was born. After two years of hard work fundraising, the Freemuse office was set up in Copenhagen in August 2000, with the aim of documenting violations of freedom of expression against musicians and to advocate their rights.

The first Freemuse report, 'Can you stop the birds singing?', was published the following year. Written by Professor John Baily, it was quoted in more than 50 countries and became an eye-opener for many. A country without music? Is this possible?

For a period, the Taliban exercised severe music control in Afghanistan and the old idea of music as a 'tool of the devil' was getting increasing support from radical religious groups, spreading to Sudan, Pakistan, Somalia and pockets of Europe and Africa. The idea of the negative effect of music is not new. Plato wrote that 'music is seductive' and therefore music that stimulated negative behaviour should be controlled. Christian missionaries banned drums in Africa and Greenland. Swedish fiddle players were told to burn their instruments in the late 19th century and Stalin, Hitler and McCarthy had various pretexts for banning artists and musical expression they didn't like. Somehow history repeats itself, but underneath the mechanisms is the same aim: control.

Musicians under fire: Nigeria, 2000

In the northern Kano state, sharia law had been implemented. This had a harsh impact on local musicians, who reported that they were being molested and their equipment and loudspeakers broken by the local *hisbas* (religious militias). Ali Bature, a tall, proud state bureaucrat, did not question sharia but in his view there were 'regulations and regulations'. He believed that if something was banned people should know why and if something was allowed it should also be safe for artists to perform. In 2002, a censorship board was set up in Kano, ironically in the name of protecting the Hausa musicians.

Freemuse sent French journalist J C Servant to Nigeria to investigate the mechanisms and impact of censorship. Bature, a member of the censorship board, explained: 'The role of this office is to maintain and to protect the culture of the people in Kano.' Having travelled the country, Servant wrote in his report: 'Kano's cultural interaction appears to be the exception that proves the rule in the north. Elsewhere an insidious campaign against musicians and music censorship appears to be gaining ground.'

Femi Kuti, whose song 'Beng Beng Beng' was banned by the authorities (see pages 108-111) and who is the son of the legendary Fela Kuti, told Freemuse: 'A band like my band cannot play in the north. The dancers would be stoned to death and I would be persecuted.' But in the south, Pentecostals were also gaining ground as public guardians of morality. Femi Kuti continued: 'It's more difficult to talk about sex or religion than

politics today in Nigeria. Although they work hand in hand, it has been so embedded in the system that nobody can do anything with religion, and if you are against any of the religious bodies, Islam or Christianity, automatically you are an outcast in society.'

All that is banned is desired: Beirut, 2005

They were all there: Marcel Khalife, the Lebanese oud maestro, who went on trial for quoting a verse of the Quran in one of his songs; Salman Ahmad, the Pakistani rock star, whose band Junoon was censored for protesting against nuclear tests and political corruption; Syria's famous filmmaker Mohamad Malas, whose film about music, *The Passion*, had been banned; Davey D, the walking hip-hop encyclopaedia; and Iran's amazing vocalist Mahsa Vahdat, who cannot perform in her home country. Freemuse and the Middle East Office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation were hosting a conference on music censorship. Mai Ghousseub, artist and founder of Saqi Books, quoted a phrase she loved as a child in her keynote speech: 'It is banned to ban.'

Remembering the small booklet *Music and Its Effects*, published by the Bilal Mission in Tanzania, one of the spearheads for missionaries of radical Islam, we were all looking forward to hearing the perspective of the respected Islamic scholar Sheikh Ibrahim Ramadan al Mardini of the Beirut Studies and Documentation Centre. We had asked Sheikh al Mardini to discuss music and Islam with a representative from Hamas, who suddenly had to go to Mecca.

'There is no ban on music in the Quran and those talking about which music is *haram* and which music is *halal* have very weak evidence', said al Mardini. 'Censorship has turned into a totalitarian tool, which is preserving the existence of regimes.' Mardini totally rejected censorship and said that religious leaders can guide people, but not ban anything. The report summing up the conference in Beirut easily found its title from an Arabic proverb: 'All that is banned is desired'.

Dirty tricks: Gothenburg, Sweden, 2006

In South Africa, Calvinism inspired the architects of apartheid, so obviously lyrics propagating nihilism were banned. But it is one thing to physically scratch a 33rpm vinyl with a needle, another to stop the career of musicians with more violent methods.

The Freemuse-sponsored film *Stopping the Music*, produced by Michael Drewett at Grahamstown University in South Africa and premiered during the second world conference on music and censorship in 2002, revealed



*Femi Kuti performs as part of celebrations for Africa Day, Johannesburg, South Africa, 25 May 2007
Credit: Sipiwe Sibeko/Reuters*

how the secret police in South Africa destroyed the career of Roger Lucey, one of the country's most promising singer-songwriters. In the film, Lucey came face to face with Paul Erasmus for the first time, the police agent behind the 'dirty tricks business'. Lucey and Erasmus attended the premier and opened the conference.

Drewett had curated an exhibition on music censorship, and when this was shown at the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg, we invited the two former combatants to talk about the film and their lives in front of an audience. This was their fifth public encounter in five years since Freemuse had first introduced them to each other. The former enemies had become reconciled. Documenting and understanding the mechanisms and effects of censorship is one of the prime activities of Freemuse. This was a chance to complement our material.

We were doing another interview with Erasmus in the cafeteria of the museum. In a few moments he would be sitting with Lucey in front of an

audience and trying to tell why and how he, a white policeman, got involved in the destruction of the white protest singer Roger Lucey.

Lucey came by. 'You need a beer, Paul?' he asked. Paul nodded and continued the interview. 'I even threatened to open a file on one of the members of my family because he talked about "right and wrong". In those days you were either for or against the apartheid regime.'

He recalled another incident, when he walked into the office of the record company that released Lucey's music and said to the company executive: 'This Roger Lucey is a communist and is going to be detained, so you are not going to produce his music anymore!' That worked. Paul was in the 'dirty tricks' department of South Africa's much feared and brutal special branch dealing with dissidents. He had a licence to use any method necessary to 'destroy the filth'. 'Yeah, that was the term we used. Roger had been interviewed by Voice of America and one of our seniors simply told me to stop "this filth".' Tapping Roger Lucey's telephone, Erasmus and his colleagues always knew where Lucey was going. But why spend a lot of time and energy on a long-haired dissident 'communist voice' who criticised the apartheid regime, when things could be settled quickly and easy?

Getting bored of the usual 'in the middle of the night house search' to scare the guy, Erasmus decided to make a spectacular move. Why not

throw a bit of tear gas into a club while 'that Lucey' was performing one of his 'communist songs'? Erasmus and a couple of buddies did their usual pub visit, had a few beers and threw a bit of tear gas into Jo'burg's well-known Mangles club, where the upcoming 'Dylan of South Africa' was performing for a crowded house. And that did it, says Erasmus: 'After the tear gas thing at the Mangles Club – when we talked to the club owners – the last thing they needed was a show stopped by beefy police guys. Remember, the terrorist war had started. So we told these people: "Look, if you are going to have that bastard communist play we'll blow

Marie Korpe and Ole Reitov's playlist

Dasht-e-Tanhae Mein
Iqbal Bano
Available on YouTube

Alisero
Ferhat Tunç
Grappa

Beng Beng Beng
Femi Kuti
Universal Music

your bloody place.” So after Mangles, I think they stopped his show within a week.’

Erasmus, who later came forward during the South African reconciliation process, could have killed Lucey. He almost did. Lucey was deprived of his promising career and became a self-destructive addict. Lucey did not even know that he was the target of the secret police. His friends told him not to ‘overestimate his importance’, so Lucey was completely unaware of the dirty tricks business until Erasmus called him many years later and told him: ‘Look Roger, all these things happened and I am to blame for this. What can I say? I am really sorry.’

Recalling those days when he was more than happy to serve as a communist hunter he said: ‘I grew up with communism being Satanic. It was the hammer and sickle or the cross. I gave money to people claiming to bring Bibles into communist countries. I always saw this horde of people taking over Africa. We almost had nightmares like during the First World War, shooting hordes of communists who just keep coming. Those were the images. You know growing up in this Calvinistic, apartheid system we thought they wanted our oranges, our churches and they were anti-Christ. Reading the books of Karl Marx would be the end of the world.’

Erasmus is now a farmer trying to get on with his life and has totally distanced himself from his work. ‘I haven’t reconciled with myself, I don’t know how to,’ he said. ‘I really devastated my life. I knew exactly what I was doing and I was tricked by the power, there is no excuse for that. You know, Roger, in my mind, was not a person – he represented communism. Anything anti-national was labelled communist and the rock musicians represented the collapse of morals. Lennon was a communist, underground was Satanic, yeah, music was the most dangerous thing. Why music? we asked. ‘It is an expression of the soul. And it reaches people who can’t read.’

Music on trial: Izmir, Turkey, 2007

The Freemuse website, www.freemuse.org, launched in 2001. The first musician to link to it was the Turkish singer Ferhat Tunç, who has constantly struggled for freedom of expression and faced numerous court cases. We invited him to the world music expo Womex, in Germany in 2004, a country where he had earlier spent several years in exile during the Turkish military regime. At the third Freemuse World Conference in Istanbul in 2006, and a couple of court cases later, he was one of the speakers. We discussed how Freemuse could create more awareness about the situation in Turkey in general and for musicians in particular. One year later there was a dramatic court case against Tunç (see pp.131-139).



Mahsa Vahdat at the Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression Awards, London, March 2010
Credit: Karim Merie

When Tunç entered the Izmir tenth high criminal court, the courtroom was completely packed and the front row was occupied by ten police officers armed with machine guns. Ferhat Tunç stood facing the judges, who were on a podium six feet above him with the prosecutor. Although this was neither the first nor the last time the popular Kurdish singer and writer appeared in court, the charges this time were really serious. Tunç was accused of 'making propaganda for a terrorist organisation'. The new case against him was triggered by his remarks during a concert in Alanya on 22 July 2006, where Tunç mentioned the Kurdish issue and demanded a peaceful solution. The indictment quoted Ferhat Tunç as saying: 'Each killed guerrilla is a son of this country too. I feel sorry for each killed soldier and also for each guerrilla.' The prosecutor demanded 15 years imprisonment and the atmosphere in the courtroom was tense as the main judge threw out one of the onlookers who forgot to switch off his cell phone.

Observing the trial, Freemuse was joined by a small delegation which included Jens Peter Bonde, president of the EU Democrats, and senior political advisor Selma Kiliçer from the EU Commission office in Ankara. The prosecutor read the charges. Tunç was requested to present his version. He started by talking about Turkish history. After six minutes, the main judge interrupted him and said: 'Mr. Tunç, you are not here to give the court a history lesson.'

Tunç replied: 'With due respect, sir, but in order to give perspective to these charges I need to go back in history.' Then he continued for another 20 minutes. His lawyer, who had 12 assistant lawyers, then demanded Tunç's immediate release and requested the prosecutor to present witnesses.

But there were no witnesses. The two policemen who reported the 'incident' had not been called to the court. After some discussion, the three judges left the court room and return after five minutes. Then the prosecutor said that due to lack of evidence he wished to withdraw the case for the moment. Everyone in the courtroom held their breath. Was this the much feared, so-called 'deep state' of Turkey at its worst? Once again the judges left the room. Five minutes later they returned and the main judge announced that Ferhat was acquitted.

Outside the court there was a massive media reception. European parliamentarian Jans Peter Bonde spoke: 'Freedom of speech is one of the fundamental freedoms in the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of Human Rights, which Turkey has joined and is therefore obliged to follow. It is also a condition for EU membership. This membership moves closer with Ferhat Tunç's acquittal.'

After all the media interviews, Ferhat took his friends to a restaurant in a beautiful mountain setting. We talked to the Scandinavian media and Ferhat called his wife in Istanbul. 'I was acquitted,' he said.

'I know,' she replied. 'I saw it all on TV.' Three years later, the 'deep state' is running new cases against Ferhat. It never stops. And with Web 2.0, the whole world can now watch and read. ◻

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