

و هنوز هم می خوانم
AND STILL I SING

A documentary film by Fazila Amiri



Run Time: 90 mins, Dari with English Subtitles, Canada, 2022

LOGLINE

Despite death threats in a patriarchal society, three Afghan women singers fight for women's rights through music.

SYNOPSIS

Amidst the United States and Taliban peace negotiations, Afghanistan's controversial pop star and activist Aryana Sayeed mentors hopeful contestants on the hit singing TV series Afghan Star, including the only two female singers, Zahra Elham and Sadiqa Madadgar. As their hopes and dreams of becoming national singers begin to manifest into reality, the Taliban returns to power, reversing twenty years of progress for women's rights. Amidst the fear and panic caused by the fall of the Afghan government, each woman must make a harrowing escape from Kabul into exile while the US fully evacuates.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and became a refugee when the Taliban regime seized power in 1996. Under the Taliban rule girls schools were closed down and like many Afghan women, my mother was forced to wear the burqa and forbidden to work. We had no choice but to flee from the country and become refugees. Growing up in a liberal home in Canada, I feel fortunate to be a filmmaker and tell intimate stories that matter and make a difference. As a frequent traveler to my motherland Afghanistan, my films explore social issues, women's rights and show the nuances and complexities of Afghan culture.

I made AND STILL I SING from the point of view and emotional journey of three brave women singers who risk their lives to sing in a patriarchal society where it's taboo for women to sing. I've documented their daily efforts to achieve their dreams, and their strength to survive as independent women. They fight for their newly found voices, including Aryana Sayeed, whose pop music and activism has inspired millions of women inside the country and worldwide, while being condemned by local Mullahs and the Taliban. Through making this film, I began to learn about the rich and diverse history of Afghan music and show the significant role Afghan women singers have played in the music scene, up against the wrath of conservative society.

Afghanistan is often defined by war and strict Islamicism, but beyond endless conflict lies another story. A staggering 64 percent of the population is under the age of 25, revealing its true dynamic; a nation where traditional values clash with an emergent youth culture concerned with a brighter future, where young women seek feminine role models with modern values. This story is a celebration of the strength and creativity of Afghan women and their newly gained rights in post-Taliban society worthy of recognition.

In August 2021, the United States withdrew its military presence, ending the 20-year conflict, and the Taliban reclaimed power by force. Poverty is deepening due to sanctions imposed by the United States, and women have been hit hardest. Taliban have largely closed down girls' schools, women are

waiting to return to their jobs, activists have been arrested, and artists are forced to change their identities and flee the country. It is appalling to see the cycle of oppression and misogyny of Taliban rule repeating itself after 20 years. Through this film, I intend to show the emotional gravity of what it means to have gained so much, only to lose it almost overnight.

I hope that through this film, people understand the issue and how urgently a light needs to be shone on Afghanistan. We will continue the fight against the authoritarian Taliban rule and raise awareness about Afghan women's rights, culture and arts, which is under a significant threat. We continue demanding the international community to not recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government, and demand women's rights are at the center of all talks, especially reopening schools for all girls.

– FAZILA AMIRI



ORIGINS

The concept of AND STILL I SING was developed and written by filmmaker Fazila Amiri inspired by her short documentary film UNKNOWN ARTIST (2018), which tells the story of an Afghan child bride who writes and sings at the only women's radio station in the city of Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Fazila met with a community of artists in Kabul who created music and films and defied society's restrictions, full of dreams, optimism and hope for a new future, particularly when she first met Aryana Sayeed at friends gathering in a cozy Kabul restaurant. Fazila became very excited about the level of talent within Kabul and planned to preserve her story and develop the concept through documentary format and feature the new generation of Afghan singers from varying ethnic backgrounds and provinces.

The concept of AND STILL I SING was developed and written by filmmaker Fazila Amiri inspired by her short documentary film UNKNOWN ARTIST (2018), which tells the story of an Afghan child bride who writes and sings at the only women's radio station in the city of Jalalabad, Afghanistan. In her travels, Fazila met with a community of artists in Kabul, who created music and films that defied society's restrictions, full of dreams, optimism and hope for a new future. She first met Aryana Sayeed in a cozy Kabul restaurant and planned to develop her story into a documentary that also featured the new generation of Afghan



singers from varying ethnic backgrounds and provinces. In 2018, the project received support from the Telefilm Talent to Watch. Songs She Sings in Shadows Inc. was formed by Fazila Amiri, and producer Lesley Johnson. The film went into production in 2019 to capture Aryana's life and work in Afghanistan and as well as few other talented women singers from different ethnic backgrounds and music forms. Our film crew from Canada worked with local talented Afghans on the production.

While in Kabul, Afghanistan, Aryana Sayeed started planning her dream concert in Kabul's most prominent sports venue, Ghazi Stadium, a former Taliban execution site. She provided the team unprecedented access to her story, unfolding over two years in her life as Afghanistan's most notorious pop star and celebrity judge on Afghan Star, where she and her co-judges led 12 contestants - 10 men, but only two women. We met with Zahra Elham (18) and Sadiqa Madadgar (22), both childhood friends of Hazara ethnic background. They had returned home from living as refugees in Pakistan to audition and vied to become the first female singers to win Afghanistan's most popular television talent show, Afghan Star, despite heavy disapproval and death threats from their families and locals. Zahra has been fortunate that her family and friends were supportive of her aspiring singing career. She felt confident and well prepared. By contrast, Sadiqa is strong but worried that her disapproving parents might see her on television and pressure her to return to her family.

The director's visual aesthetic for the film was observational, and the storytelling focused on relationships and heartfelt personal stories through daily interactions and interviews. She captured how the three characters naturally vibed and bonded together, their substantial level of sisterhood and friendship, and how they grappled with the reality of being women singers in a society where music still remains a taboo career path. It is empowering and emotional to witness the transformation of Zahra Elham and Sadiqa Madadgar from being contestants to becoming superstars for the new Afghan generation. The story is set against the backdrop of a significant escalation in suicide bombs and violence in Kabul and amidst the ongoing US-Taliban peace negotiations, highlighting the lack of women's participation in the talks about the return of the Taliban to power, as Afghan women were deeply concerned about the return of dark times.

We were in the post-production stage during the pandemic when Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban in August 2021. Our team was gravely concerned about the lives of each character and our crew, and we tried our best to help each character and evacuate them to safety. Now living in exile, Sadiqa is currently in Doha, UAE, living in a refugee camp waiting to be resettled in the United States or Canada. Meanwhile, Aryana lives in Turkey, and Zahra lives in limbo with her family in Pakistan. They continue to fight for women's rights through their powerful music, and they do their best to raise awareness and remain hopeful.

The team is so thankful to the people of Afghanistan, Aryana Sayeed, her manager and fiancé Hasib Sayed, Sadiqa Madadgar, Zahra Elham and their families, Afghan Star Season 14 judges, musicians, contestants, Moby group and Tolo TV, the entire film crew, and we couldn't make this film without the support of Telefilm Canada, levelFILM, and the Hot Docs family.



CHARACTER BIOGRAPHIES

ARYANA SAYEED

Aryana Sayeed is Afghanistan's national and global singer. Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, Aryana and her family fled Afghanistan during the Afghan civil war in the 1990s. They settled in England where Aryana discovered music as her career. After building her career in post-Taliban Afghanistan and the global diaspora, Aryana's music videos have obtained millions of viewers. She is the winner of the 2018 Atlantic Council Freedom Award (Berlin, Germany). In addition to writing and composing her own songs, Aryana is also an Afghan artist whose work and activism have appeared on MTV World, BBC, Reuters, TOLO TV, New York Times, and Al Jazeera. She is known to ruffle feathers with conservatives, regularly receiving death threats from local Mullahs and the Taliban for openly defending the rights of Afghan women and raising awareness of ongoing social issues.



ZAHRA ELHAM

Zahra Elham was born to a middle-class ethnic Hazara, Afghan refugee family in Pakistan. Zahra is competitive, passionate, determined, and unafraid of not conforming to society's expectations of her. Zahra gained a talent for singing in high school. As a contestant on the 14th season of Afghan Star, Zahra was praised for her classical vocals and her unique song choices from Afghan singers of the past. She's Afghanistan's first female contestant to win on Afghan Star, in all 14 seasons. Just after her win, Zahra released many songs composed by herself and Aryana Sayeed.



SADIQA MADADGAR

Sadiqa Madadgar is from ethnic Hazara, from Ghazni province of Afghanistan. She studies Law at American University and is an MMA trainee in her spare time. On the outside, Sadiqa is extroverted and social, but inside she's a head-strong fighter dealing with too much pain, heartbreak and conflict of a disapproving family. Having a passion to become a national singer, she auditioned for the 14th season of Afghan Star and started her singing career in Kabul. After Afghan Star, Sadiqa has released several video songs and hopes to obtain her Master's degree in music and Law.



THE TEAM

DIRECTOR / PRODUCER'S BIOGRAPHY

FAZILA AMIRI is an Afghan-Canadian film director, writer and producer based in Toronto. She holds an MFA degree in Film Production from York University and a BFA in Film Studies from NSCAD University. Her work includes both fiction and documentary, exploring social issues, personal histories, women's rights, and presenting a nuanced and contemporary view of Afghanistan to international audiences. Her short films *THE RED BICYCLE* (2019), *UNKNOWN ARTIST* (2018) have been shown at the Canadian Film Fest, Hot Docs International Canadian Documentary Festival, and Atlantic Film Festival.

She is an alumni of 2021 Cannes Docs, Hot Docs Accelerator Lab, RIDM Talent Lab, the winner of the Lindalee Tracey Award (Hot Docs'18), and the winner of the Don Haig Award, Pay It Forward Prize (Hot Docs'19). *AND STILL I SING* is Fazila's first feature documentary film.



PRODUCER'S BIOGRAPHY

LESLEY JOHNSON is a filmmaker whose work focuses on intimate stories that connect personal transformation with environment and culture. She holds an MFA in Film Production from York University, is an alumna of RIDM's Talent Lab, the Documentary Institute's Breakthrough Program and Sundance's Documentary Collab program. Her projects have appeared on CBC and been selected for TIFF and Canada's Top Ten. Lesley released *I Hold the Dehcho in My Heart / Sedze Tah Dehcho E'toh* (2018) on CBC Docs, and won the NWT Professional Media Association's award for Best Documentary. Her short films *Princess Jack* (2016) and *Charlie* (2018), have won awards,

such as the NSI's BlueAnt Best Documentary Award and screened at numerous festivals including BFI Flare, Inside Out, and TIFF's "Share Her Journey" program. Her latest documentary, *Revolution Moosehide*, is currently in festivals.



CREDITS

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AND STILL I SING

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PRODUCER

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PRODUCER

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AND STILL I SING

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