

A Magical Conversation with Rebabnawaz Larry Porter



[Larry Porter]

By Farhad Azad
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Lemar-Aftaab

LARRY Porter's CD, *The Magical Rebab of Larry Porter*, is truly captivating. Porter has mastered the rebab to perfection with his noted style. Without a doubt, he is one of the best rebab players of his generation.

We have the privilege to converse with Larry Porter:

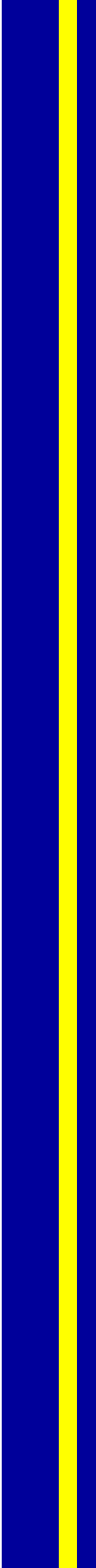
Question: What inspired you to study Afghan music?

Larry Porter: I have been a musician all my life. I began piano lessons at the age of 6 and had instruction in European classical music for seven years. As a teenager, I began teaching myself jazz and at the age of 20 decided to drop my studies of math and science and devote my life to music.

In 1973 at the age of 22, I went to Germany for the first time and worked as a jazz pianist. At this time, through friends and various recordings, I became intensely interested in Arabic, Central Asian and Indian music and increasingly disillusioned with the unbridled commercialism of the music industry in the West. I wondered what role music played in other cultures.

My curiosity became so great, that in 1976 I set out overland from Munich with a backpack bound for India. For one year I traveled through Eastern Europe, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. I listened to all the music I could along the way.

But when I arrived in Herat, after crossing the border from Iran, I



was especially fascinated by the world I encountered there. I felt I had arrived in a land where the music still truly reflects the soul of the people. I heard great vocalists on the street and in tea houses.

In Kabul, one could hear Logari music playing all day long, and I enjoyed the incredible way the musicians play together very much.

I often went to the Istanbul Restaurant in Shar-i-Nao to hear a great rebab player named Mohammed Sarwar. I wonder what happened to him. I began to get familiar with the different folk rhythms and learned to sing a few folk tunes. I decided I had to get deeper into this music.

Question: Why did you choose to study the rebab?

Larry Porter: I was particularly captivated by the sound of the rebab. It had something magical for me. I think this comes about from the combination of both soft and hard aspects of the sound. There is a certain mellowness stemming from the gut (nylon) playing strings and the wonderful resonance of the sympathetic strings.

On the other hand, there is a percussiveness produced by the rapid-fire picking technique and the sound bouncing off the goat skin. This built-in tension is rather unique to rebab.

I wanted to find a teacher. Looking back, I realize I was extremely lucky in this respect. I met a very friendly student named Daud who offered to take me to the master, Ustad Mohammed Omar! One day we went to his house in Kharabat, and Ustad Omar agreed to take me on as a student.

He found me an instrument and we had a lesson every other day because I knew that visa restrictions would limit my stay. We worked exclusively on ragas in the Afghan classical style which he did so much to perfect.

This was great training and represented a solid foundation on which I could continue to build over the years, despite the relatively short period of time I was with him.

I recently discovered that Daud, whom I had lost contact with for the past 24 years, lives in Cologne, Germany and is a very good rebab and sarod player.

Question: What memories do you have of Herat and its artists



and musicians?

Larry Porter: One memory of Herat stands out particularly vivid in my mind. I was sitting in a tea house one evening, one of those nice big rooms with rugs and cushions on the floor. Some musicians were playing harmonium and drums, and a 10-year-old boy came in and began to sing. Not only did he have a beautiful voice, but he sang with incredible soul and maturity.

I was completely taken by his performance. How could a child sing with such abandon and intensity? In talking to him afterwards, I found out he was an orphan and survived by just sleeping and eating here and there. I often think about the directness and innocence of that musical experience and how far away it is from the runaway commercialism of the Western music world.

Question: What was Kharabat like in the mid 1970s?

Larry Porter: I loved taking the bus to the old city in Kabul and walking to Ustad Omar's house in Kharabat. The bus would leave me off basically at the entrance to the old city and I immediately found myself in a different world. There were dirt streets thick with flies lined with open shops where the shopkeepers sat crosslegged on raised platforms.

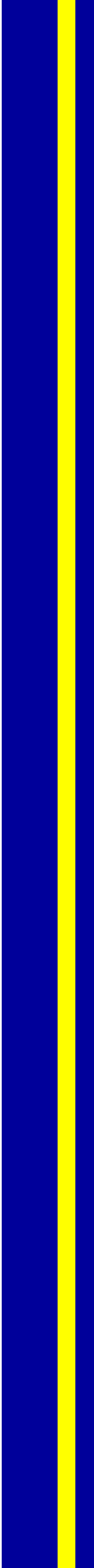
There was always a lot of life and activity. I remember the only two rehab-makers in Kabul had their shops on the first street I walked down. They were across the street from each other and I believe one of them was named Gul Mohammed.

Question: Describe your first encounter with Ustad Omar?

Larry Porter: The first time I took this walk with my friend, we were looking for Ustad Omar's house, not knowing for sure where it was. I was astounded by how well-known and revered he was by virtually everyone. Anyone we asked knew exactly where he lived, and as we got closer, people even knew if he was home or not and what time he'd be home!

When we finally found him home, he lead us into his music room, which had nothing more than an Afghan rug and his instruments in the corners. I was always fond of this tradition in Persia and Afghanistan of having a peaceful room with a carpet in the house devoid of clutter.

He had many people around him and I think they were curious about this American interested in Afghan music. After he agreed



to take me on as a student, it was time to find an instrument. I imagined I would have to look for one myself, but Ustad Omar simply sent off one of his attendants, and after ten minutes he came back with a rebab.

After trying it out and disapproving of it, the process was repeated until he found one he approved of. I bought it for the equivalent of \$40. I still have this rebab and recently had it fixed up with a new skin and new bridge.

Question: As a young man, what was it like living in Kabul and studying in Kharabat under Ustad M. Omar?

Larry Porter: It was a great experience going to his music room every other day. Ustad Omar did not speak English, but my Persian [Dari] was good enough to get through the lessons.

I found him to be a gentle and friendly man. His eyes would light up whenever he talked about the concert he played with Zakir Hussain in Seattle. Apparently, he really enjoyed traveling to America and sharing his music with the people there.

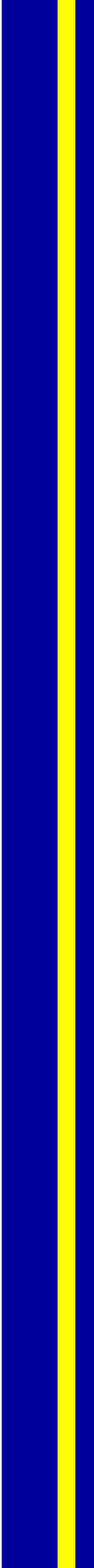
Unfortunately, as far as I know, the Seattle concert was the only time he did that. Sometimes he would laugh and talk about how one day we would sit on a stage somewhere in America and play the rag *Gujri Todi* together.

The first lessons, of course, dealt mainly with instrumental technique. We usually sat on the floor, each with a rebab in hand (I got to play his large concert rebab). He then began giving me material from his classical repertoire, compositions in various ragas and talas.

He would dictate these to me in *sargam* (vocal syllables). Each composition had 4 parts: *astayi*, *antara*, *boog* and *sanchayi*. This form is reminiscent of the ancient vocal style of *dhrupad*. He would also give me variations called *peltas*, which would be in double time. In general, there is not much improvisation in this style, rather the music derives its excitement from endless rhythmic variations of the melody, which are precisely matched by the drums.

Question: You mentioned that you learned folk songs; did you learn to speak the local dialect and can you still sing those songs that you learned?

Larry Porter: During this time I also heard a lot of folk and popular music and felt very drawn to it. I did learn to sing a few



Dari songs.

I think the first one taught to me was *Anor Daane Ne Dara (The Pomegranate Has No Seeds)*. I began to play these songs on the rebab. There's a certain magic to these deceptively simple melodies. They can possess an amazing depth and power, considering their simplicity especially relative to the complexities of Western music. This actually allows them to enter other dimensions that Western music with its ever-changing tonic has trouble reaching.

In any case, the folk music became a great love of mine and still is. I have lost my ability to speak the language after 23 years of not using it, but I do try to research titles and lyrics of songs I play, so I at least know what they're about.

Question: Did you also study Logari music?

Larry Porter: The Logari bands were the closest thing in Afghanistan to jazz bands. There was usually vocal, rebab, tanbur, harmonium and dhol and sometimes other instruments.

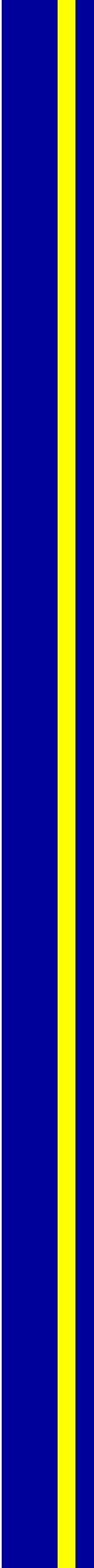
The degree of interplay among the musicians in this music is unbelievable and a joy to hear. While I haven't myself played in a band like that, I have been very influenced by this interplay and other aspects of Logari, for example, the way of speeding up the tempo to reach a sort of ecstatic state, and then punctuating it with an off-beat ending. There's also a certain freedom as to where the music is going next and always the freedom to change rhythms (time signatures).

Question: In your marvelous CD, *The Magical Rebab of Larry Porter*, you have selected two Afghan folk songs: *Sakhijan Mayrawi* and *Naziko Naz Ko*; why did you select these two in particular?

Larry Porter: The original purpose of the CD was to document the music Franc Menuzan and I had been playing every weekend at the Taste Of India restaurant in Greenwich Village in New York City. We had worked up a sizable repertoire of Afghan songs, Hindi film tunes, Punjabi songs, ghazals, and some classical pieces.

It is interesting how Afghan folk music has in part influenced Hindi film music, and conversely how Hindi film songs have been adapted and sometimes given new words by Afghan musicians.

Franc is a wonderful sitar player and a master of Hindustani music



but plays many other instruments. On the tabla, he has a remarkable affinity for the rhythms of Afghan music.

In the studio, we recorded a sampling of our repertoire and picked the best takes. *Sakhijan Mayrawi* in *pashtu tal* (the typical 7-beat rhythm I'm very fond of playing) is a melody I had heard from different sources, including an instrumental recording and a recording by Ustad Netu. It has a beautiful swing to it and can be played at a fairly brisk tempo, which we do at the end of the take.

Naziko Naz Ko is also in *pashtu tal* but much slower. It has a very evocative melody in the scale we would call harmonic minor in the West and makes beautiful use of the major third (*shuddh ga*), something which is quite common in Afghan folk music. I learned this arrangement from a recording by Ustad Omar. I somehow lost this recording a long time ago, but remembered the arrangement.

Question: You also have selected *Yarak-e Ma* by the late Ahmad Zahir; why did you make this selection?

Larry Porter: I hadn't listened so much to Ahmad Zahir until my Afghan friends in New York turned me on to some recordings of his. It took me a while to get used to the sound of guitar in this kind of music. The bass lines and chords give the music somewhat of a Western flavor and I like his trumpet player [Ustad Nangalai].

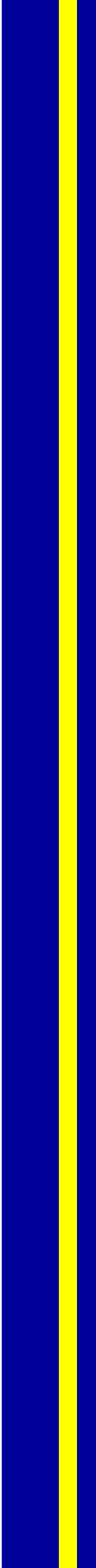
But he was a great singer, a true pop singer and crooner like Sinatra was in America, and I grew to like his songs, many of which I learned to play on the rebab.

Yarak-e Ma is one of my favorites and one we played a lot at the restaurant.

Question: Do you plan to release any more of your rebab recordings?

Larry Porter: I do plan to release more rebab recordings. The project which interests me most is to compose and record music for rebab and piano together, to combine everything I know about jazz and Western music with everything I know about Afghan, Central Asian and Indian music. It is of utmost importance to me that an actual transformation takes place in this fusion and not just a layering. I hear this music as having its own integrity different than the mere sum of its parts.

I think the greatest contribution I can make is to use what I've learned about various music traditions in a creative way. I've



already written many pieces in this direction and am currently looking for a record company interested in this project. I also have the idea of releasing some music on a web site which I'd like to set up.

Question: **Anything else you would like to add?**

Larry Porter: I would also like to continue playing rebab with tabla and to further develop what we were doing on the CD, which is a style of improvising over songs, a way of playing folk tunes but using elements of classical improvisation to bridge the different sections.

I enjoy the fact that this way of playing was able to grow naturally out of working together every week. It is in many ways similar (not surprisingly, I suppose) to the jazz approach to a standard song.

One thing not represented on the CD are pieces I composed for the rebab in the Afghan style. I started writing this kind of rebab music in Kabul already and would like to record it with tabla someday. I also want to continue to expand my repertoire of Afghan music, which I do mostly through recordings but also through friends and people I meet. For as much as I want to create something new with my music, I also long to remain immersed in a tradition which has cast a lifelong spell over me.

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