



Power to the people: 127's lead singer Sohrab Mohebbi speaks out

## **Tehran, Iran:** *In a country where fun is censored, baggy trousers and rock'n'roll are revolutionary acts.*

In Iran, being in a band is a risky endeavour, with the stakes stretching beyond aspirations for MTV videos or a gig at Glastonbury. In the Islamic Republic – a closed society where religious leaders enforce strict government policy and regulate the media – musicians face harsh scrutiny and have limited opportunities, while contending with Ershad, its Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which regulates the arts. Since the revolution in 1979, Western entertainment has been virtually banned in Iran, leaving its mostly young population (almost 70 per cent are under 30) desperately searching for ways to get a pop culture fix. “It’s a multi-layered society,” explains Shahram Sharbaf, vocalist in O-Hum. “Despite the laws, there are people who live underground lifestyles, exchanging the latest music videos and fashion tips, throwing parties and enjoying their lives.” Shahram formed O-Hum, a band that meshes modern rock with the words of Hafez, a historic Iranian poet, in 1999. “He talked about the same problems we have in Iran today,” says Shahram. “Lies, not being able

to be yourself, taking advantage of people in the name of love and God. These problems still exist, and I’m suggesting a new way to look at them.” Despite being one of Iran’s most popular groups, O-Hum have been unsuccessful in their attempts to persuade Ershad to allow them to record albums and play concerts, making it impossible for them to officially release music or perform. Ershad deemed their music “too Western-minded and cheap”, claimed they used “banned instruments” – electric guitars – while shaved heads and baggy jeans didn’t quite fit the Ministry’s fashion aesthetic. “Ershad is a tool to prevent unwanted voices, not support them,” explains Shahram, frustrated with the agency’s vague rationale. Sohrab Mohebbi, vocalist for 127, the first Iranian band to play the US since the revolution, refuses to even apply to Ershad: “It’s insignificant. You have to change your music. I don’t want to change anything.” Acts supported by the government – generally “Islamic and ideological” groups – don’t necessarily fare any better. “No one listens to their music,” explains Shahram.

“They could earn a living, but doing so fucks up their reputations as artists.”

Both groups, as well as other non-sanctioned bands in Iran, perform the occasional clandestine show in universities, foreign embassies and private homes – attendees are notified by IM. Yet because of restrictions, 127 have only performed in Iran seven times in five years.

The internet however, has given bands a fresh opportunity to present their music without restrictions. “The fact that you cannot work in your own country means the government is unconsciously doing musicians a favour, forcing us to promote and sell our work internationally,” says Shahram. Both 127, who played SXSW, and O-Hum have steadily gathered fans worldwide. “Music and the arts are powerful tools. They make people think differently. Older generations tried war, politics and boundaries, which didn’t work. We are doing this with very limited resources. Time will show what changes we can make.”

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