

# THE MAKING OF *Amir*: An Afghan Refugee Musician's Life in Peshawar, Pakistan

By John Baily

---

## Contents

Introduction	Page 1
Research in Peshawar	Page 1
The Film Making Process	Page 3
The Structure and Content of the Film	Page 5
The Aftermath	Page 11
Notes	Page 12
References Cited	Page 13

---

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of these notes is to provide additional contextual information about the situation of Afghan refugee musicians in Peshawar in 1985, to give an account of the process by which *Amir* was made, and to comment from a variety of perspectives on certain scenes and shots in the film. Experiences with showing the film to many varied audiences have raised a number of questions, and the present notes are in part written with these queries in mind.

*Amir* was made in my first year as a Leverhulme Film Training Fellow at the National Film and Television School. 1 In planning the film I wanted to utilise my familiarity with the urban music of Afghanistan, acquired during extensive ethnomusicological research between 1973 and 1977, mainly in the city of Herat, in western Afghanistan, and also in Kabul, the capital. This was the period immediately prior to the Marxist coup of 1978, which led to the Soviet invasion of 1979, the war against the *mujahideen*, and the exodus of an estimated 4.5 million Afghan refugees to Pakistan and Iran.

In the background of the film lies the unseen spectre of Herat, Amir's home, a city celebrated in the history of the Islamic arts and in the 15th century A.D. the cultural centre of the Persian speaking world (for accounts of the city see Wolfe 1966; English 1973; Doubleday 1988; and Baily 1988a). In the Afghan context Herat was a highly musical city, second only to Kabul in Afghan art and popular music (vocal and instrumental), as well as supporting a number of other more local traditions. During my fieldwork in the 1970s I carried out extensive filming in Super 8 and eventually edited the footage into three videos. 2 This was my introduction to ethnographic film making. When in 1985 I had the opportunity, and the budget, to make a feature length 16mm documentary film about Afghan music I decided to go to the Pakistani city of Peshawar, in the expectation that Afghan refugee musicians would be living and working there. One heard that in the Peshawar bazaar cassettes could be found of nationalist songs in support of the resistance. I had read about a wave of new poetry (Moin 1985) which might also have musical implications. Nationalist songs were certainly part of Pashtun culture. An example of a song celebrating the annihilation of a British army retreating from Kabul in 1842 is to be found in André Singer's film *Khyber*, and *A Valley Against an Empire*, a French television film about Masud's *mujahideen* army in the Panshir Valley, ends with a song of resistance sung by a man sitting on top of a burnt-out tank playing *dambura* (a type of long-necked lute). I was therefore interested in finding out how musicians were faring as refugees. Were they able to continue in that profession? What effects, if any, did the political situation have on music making? Was a new kind of political music coming into existence? How was the long standing condemnation

of music by orthodox Islam (Baily 1988a, Chapter 9) affected by the present situation?

## RESEARCH IN PESHAWAR

The empire of the first Amir of Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah Durrani (ruled 1747-73), included much of modern Pakistan, territories which the Afghans lost to the Sikh leader Ranjit Singh in the early part of the nineteenth century. The "true Afghans", the Pashtun people<sup>3</sup> who have dominated Afghanistan since 1747, were divided by the Durand Line negotiated between the Afghan and British Indian governments in 1893, which demarcated the boundary between south-east Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier Province of British India.<sup>4</sup> This division became the source of much conflict for Pakistan when, after 1947, the Afghan government demanded the establishment of an independent state for the Pashtuns living in Pakistan, to be called "Pashtunistan". The issue remained a source of trouble until Afghanistan dropped these demands in the early 1960s, and for long periods the border between the two countries was closed, cutting Afghanistan off from the port of Karachi, on which its overseas trade largely depended. Afghanistan's championing of the Pashtunistan issue must be regarded as an important reason for the support given to both refugees and mujahideen by the Pashtun people of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) during the present war.

The capital of NWFP is Peshawar, formerly the winter capital of the rulers of Afghanistan, and still a walled city in the 1960s. Although located in the heart of the Pashtun area, the population of the old city of Peshawar were principally Punjabis, who spoke Hindku, a dialect of the Panjabi language. Refugees from Afghanistan began arriving in NWFP in the late 1970s and grew to a steady stream following the Soviet invasion of 1979, eventually numbering, it is estimated, about 3.5 million persons. The majority were housed in refugee camps in NWFP set up along the Afghan border by the Pakistani Government with financial backing from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Life in the camps was certainly harsh but most families received adequate provisions from the Pakistani Government and medical facilities and schooling were available in some degree. Gradually tents were replaced by more durable structures and the camps began to assume a more permanent aspect.

The camps were run according to strict rules and provided a situation in which the mullahs (Muslim clerics) were able to impose a rigidly orthodox regime. In many ways women suffered more from the rigours of camp life than men, who at least were free to spend time in the local bazaars. Purdah was strongly enforced in the camps. Individual families were often separated from their former local communities, within which women had considerably freedom of movement, and in the camps women were in many cases more or less confined to their tents, hardly able to get outside at all. In view of the manifold discomforts of camp life it is not surprising that many refugees, particularly those from towns and cities of Afghanistan, should prefer to live in cities like Peshawar and attempt to earn their living there. The influx of refugees in turn had an enormous effect on the city of Peshawar; its population had at least doubled and a much larger proportion of its inhabitants than before were Pashtuns.

No music was allowed to be played in the refugee camps, not even over the radio. The mullahs imposed strictly the prohibition on music which is latent in Islam. The camps were maintained in a perpetual state of mourning, justified by the constant influx of new arrivals who had lost relatives in the fighting. Those who were professional musicians amongst the refugee population had the choice of living in a camp and hiding their former profession, or of living in the city of Peshawar if they wanted to continue working as musicians. In fact, musicians were one of the more successful professional groups amongst the refugees, for they had a skill that was in demand in the NWFP region. In this region of Pakistan the profession of musician has a low social rank, and in Pashtun society, with few exceptions, professional musicians are recruited from a caste

of hereditary musicians called Dom. In Afghanistan attitudes towards musicians had been considerably more liberal, even in the Pashtun areas, where amateur status was clearly defined.<sup>5</sup> The professional centre for musicians in the city of Peshawar was Dubgari Road. Groups of musicians kept suites of rooms upstairs above the bazaar so prospective clients could come and visit them, usually to hire them to play at wedding parties. In 1985 Afghan music was popular amongst Pakistani Pashtuns in NWFP, and there were many Afghan musicians based in Peshawar. This was not an entirely new situation: Afghan musicians, especially from Jalalabad, a

and she has published several recordings in which he plays zirbaghali and tabla (Sakata 1983:132, 139). Amir was the nephew by marriage of Herat's most celebrated woman singer, Zainab Herawi, also recorded by Sakata (ibid. 88, 207) and one of my wife Veronica Doubleday's three women of Herat (Doubleday 1988). In her book Amir is called "Hakim" and Zainab "Shirin". The social group of thirty or so male professional musicians in Herat of which Amir was a member is described in Baily (1988a, Chapter 7), where an example of Amir's performance as a singer at that time can also be found (ibid. 91).



Map of Afghanistan and Pakistan

large town half-way along the road to Kabul, had been visiting Peshawar for a long time.

There was a large local cassette industry in Peshawar, including recordings of resistance songs. Typical of the performers of this genre was the singer Haikal, from Jalalabad. I purchased a cassette by him in the bazaar the day after arriving in Peshawar. It contained two long dasOns (epics) describing recent events in Afghanistan and recounting the exploits of a particular band of mujahideen. The music was fast and energetic and I was struck by the style of tabla playing, which seemed to be imitating the sounds of gunfire. When later I met the man who had played tabla on this recording he confirmed this was the case.<sup>6</sup> Another cassette I bought was of solo singing in Pashto with the continuous sounds of a gun battle mixed in to provide atmosphere. One had come a long way from bird song as the acme of the musical aesthetic (Baily 1988a: 153). It transpired that although such resistance songs were recorded on commercial cassettes there was little call for the live performance of such material. The patrons of the professional musicians amongst the Afghan refugee population were Pakistanis who wanted them to play for their wedding parties, and songs about the war were inappropriate at such times. Love songs were what was required.

It was soon evident that there was an Afghan music "scene" in Peshawar, the problem was how to gain access to it. The best known of the Afghan refugee musicians at that time was Shah Wali Khan, originally from the Jalalabad area, and a former singer for Radio Afghanistan. He broadcast regularly on radio and television in Peshawar, being one of only four local 'A' Grade artists (a classification used to determine status and rates of pay). When I met Shah Wali (the manager of the radio station sent for him to meet me) I immediately recognised him as the musician who had sung the anti-British song in the film *Khyber*<sup>7</sup> and when he took me back to his rooms in Dubgari I discovered to my surprise and delight that a musician in his band was a man I had known well in Herat ten years before, Amir Mohammad (or Amir, as I shall call him). He became the main protagonist of the film I eventually made.

A certain amount of information is available elsewhere concerning Amir's former life in Herat, and about the life of music of which he was a part. Amir was encountered by the ethnomusicologist Lorraine Sakata in 1972

Amir was born in Pai Koh, a remote village some miles from Shendand, in Farah Province, into a Gharibzadeh (barber) family. His parents died when he was young and he was brought up in the village by his father's brother. At the age of twelve or so he was peremptorily sent off to Herat city to find another of his father's brothers, the barber Khalifa Shekar, who had married into the community of professional women musicians. It was in this social milieu that Amir became a musician, not through formal training but by exposure to music, observation, imitation and participation. In the 1970s he was a singer and harmonium player leading small bands composed mostly of amateur musicians who had turned professional and who mainly performed popular music. He was a low-ranking member of Herat's small community of professional musicians and had little knowledge of the theory or practice of art music. For various reasons he had been denied access to these matters by the more senior members of the extended family of musicians he lived amongst when he joined his uncle (ibid. 107).

In Herat Amir had been remarkable not so much as a musician but in his manner and conduct. He was a stylish dresser, wearing elaborately embroidered shirts and expensive silk turbans. He was very articulate, a wonderful raconteur in the stylised manner of talking found amongst certain men of the Herat "underworld" of gamblers, hashish smokers, dancing boys, kdkehs and some musicians (see, for example, Baily 1988b). Amir had a considerable knowledge of musician folk-lore; tales of great usOds of Kabul and of India, and of Sufis and their shrines. I recorded some of these tales but after my fieldwork I regretted not having worked in more detail with him, realising that I had missed a great opportunity. When we met again he greeted me as a long-lost brother, a link with the past. As he often said to me, "When I see your face I see Herat".

Since leaving Herat at the time of the uprising of March 1979 against the new Marxist regime, Amir had had a complicated life. He had been in Kabul for some months, where he was well known in the Kucheh Kharabat, the musicians' quarter in the old city, then went to Iran, then back to Kabul before finally leaving for Pakistan, where he had lived for about three years. He spent a year in a village near Quetta, then moved to Peshawar. Amir's first language was Dari but there were relatively few Dari speakers in NWFP, where Pashto was the dominant language. Herat was a long way away, few of the Afghan refugees living in or around Peshawar had ever been there. It was often regarded with some mistrust by other Afghans, who believed Heratis to be mostly Shiah, and suspected them of greater allegiance to Iran than to Afghanistan. Amir was therefore something of an outsider amongst the mainly Pashtun refugees in Peshawar but he knew some Pashto from his childhood, for Shendand had proportionately more speakers of that language than Herat.

I was a little surprised to find Amir as a member of Shah Wali's band. Shah Wali was praised for his knowledge of rags (melodic modes) and for the "classical" approach he brought to his singing, whereas Amir had known little about such matters. In Herat he had not usually played with high ranking musicians. The kind of Afghan Persian folk and popular songs that he performed in Herat were not in demand in NWFP and he was now playing the rubab, the short-necked plucked lute that is the national instrument of Afghanistan. That he could play this instrument a little I knew, but he was never the regular rubab player in a Herati

group. In Peshawar it was evident that his musical skills had developed considerably. He now had the opportunity to learn something about music theory, notably the musical identities of the various rags, and was getting better at the style of classical music played on rubab. His new knowledge derived from various sources: other Afghan musicians such as Shah Wali, Pakistani musicians in Dubgari and his mentor in Lahore, the Nawab Sahib. Although he was playing with a greater level of expertise, I found that he had considerable trouble tuning the rubab, especially the many sympathetic strings. He also fingered the frets from some unconventional positions and had adopted some idiosyncratic tunings (see Baily 1981 for an account of Afghan modal practice).

Amir had had the opportunity to advance himself through being a member of Shah Wali's band, which gave him some standing amongst the musicians of Dubgari. I was unable to find out what Shah Wali saw in Amir and, as discussed later, theirs was a sometimes quarrelsome relationship. Certainly Amir was a social asset; he had charm and tact with patrons, was ready to ingratiate himself with them and to act the henchman. When patrons came to hire the band Shah Wali would consult Amir about the terms offered, the distances to be travelled, and the comforts promised, for above all Amir was an experienced professional musician, the veteran of thousands of engagements, and knew how to get on well with people and create a good ambiance at a wedding or private party.

Having found Amir, there was no question that he had to be the central character of my film. His personality, articulateness and openness combined to make for near perfect casting. He provided the crucial access to the world of professional musicians in Dubgari. Shah Wali's was not exactly the band I had imagined I would work with: Shah Wali was too successful and performed rather little resistance music. But no-one could deny his pre-eminent rank amongst the Afghan refugee musicians.

### THE FILM MAKING PROCESS

*Amir* is a portrait film, a genre which provides a particularly successful cinematic approach in documentary film making. In concentrating on one or two central characters, the documentary portrait is obviously close in approach to the fiction film, which is, above anything else, about people. The portrait film follows the same person in many different situations, allows the audience to build up an acquaintanceship and creates an empathy. The question of casting becomes a crucially important issue, in the sense of choosing the appropriate person/people who will come over well on film. Amir is also to some extent an observational film, following relatively "undirected" actuality, but there is no thought of claiming to be a "fly-on-the-wall". The presence of the film crew is acknowledged at various junctures, and there is no pretense that this is anything other than a film.

Amir is very much in the documentary style of the National Film and Television School (see Baily, 1989, for a detailed discussion of this film style). There is minimal commentary and all the dialogue is subtitled. There are no inter-titles or cards, and no supplementary information is provided except in the brief narration in English at the start. All the information needed to interpret the action (or to arrive at an interpretation) is provided by the action itself. This is also a film about research and recreates something of the fieldwork experience. There is a feeling of getting deeper into things, of progressive revelation. The audience's initial access to the world of the Afghan refugee musicians is mediated by an Afghan interpreter/researcher (A.W. Sultani), and later the film maker takes over the investigative role.

### The Shoot

The film was shot by Wayne Derrick, then in his final year as a documentary director and camera student at the NFTS, someone with a special interest and commitment to the school's style of documentary film making. Wayne Derrick has a particular flair for the sequence-shot, and some good examples are to be found in this film, e.g. Shots 6-7, 38, 57-58.

I arrived in Peshawar on 26 March 1985 to carry out preliminary research. Within a week I was introduced to Shah Wali and through him had met Amir. After this I spent much time in Shah Wali's *deyrah* (suite of rooms) in Dubgari with Amir and other musicians, and went out with Shah Wali's band to observe it at various engagements. I played the rubab a great deal, having studied this instrument in the 1970s with one of Afghanistan's most revered musicians, Ustad Mohammad Omar. Such expertise as I possess in rubab playing gave me an invaluable entrée into the world of Afghan musicians in Peshawar. I also conducted some research on Pashtun music and recorded a number of Pakistani musicians. When Wayne joined me on 28 April I had a good idea of the range of activities we might hope to film. Shooting started on 4 May and continued intermittently until 5 June. We knew in advance that Ramadan, the Muslim month of fast, would start on about 21 May. I had hoped that Ramadan would be in some ways a month of festivity as it had been in Herat, with nightly concerts of music. I found this was not the case in Peshawar. Here is a brief diary of the shoot.

- 4 May: In Dubgari. Amir in the street; visit to a *rubâb* maker, Amir's account of the role of the *deyrah*.
- 5 May: In the *deyrah*. Amir plays *rubâb*. Wali sings. Shah Wali sings. Delawar Selab recites. Conversation about cassette.
- 7 May: At Amir's house. Amir's account of his experiences as a refugee. Satar talks about marrying his daughter to Amir. Tour of house and courtyard. Eating a meal.
- 8 May: In the *deyrah*. Professor Nawab Khan teaches Amir and Wali.
- 9 May: In Dubgari. Musicians prepare to leave for wedding. Shooting at the wedding in Mardan. Instrumental music and Shah Wali singing.
- 12 May: Area around Amir's house. In barber shop, Amir shopping. In Dubgari. Bakhtiar teaches Mushtar, conversation with Amir.
- 14 May: Dean's Hotel. Nawab Sahib, Amir and Shah Wali play. Amir's *rubâb* solo.
- 15 May: In the *deyrah*. Ezat Jan's visit. Ezat Jan play *rubâb*.
- 16 May: Outside Dean's Hotel. Interview with Amir about the Nawab Sahib.
- 18 May: Peshawar bazaar, following Amir.
- 19 May: Graveyard and shrine of Rahman Baba.
- 20 May: Peshawar bazaar. Traffic.
- 25 May: Swat. Amir, Shah Wali and others by river. Amir and Satar play *rubâb* and *nâl* in the evening.

5 June: Peshawar TV station. Interview with a staff member about Shah Wali's success. Copy of video of Shah Wali performing at the TV Station.

For equipment we used an Aaton 16mm camera with zoom lens, and a Nagra stereo tape recorder with a variety of microphones. The stereo facility was only used when shooting the musical performance at the wedding party on May 9th. Reducing the film crew to two (the so called "short crew") helps prevent the film makers from dominating the actuality being filmed. The role of the director is to direct the visual and sound recording units rather than the action. Although ideally one should film things as they happen, without provoking or in any way controlling them, this ideal is often difficult or impossible to achieve. Familiarity with the subject will inevitably suggest types of scene to be sought out, which may be passively awaited or more actively provoked. Any forward planning, such as arranging to shoot in a particular location, is likely to arouse certain expectations on the part of both film makers and actors. Thus the director inevitably exerts some degree of control over the actuality recorded.

Although some film makers apparently maintain that it is difficult to control efficiently the shooting while simultaneously making the sound recording (Zemp 1988: 258), I did not find this a problem, perhaps because I delegated much of the decision making about how to shoot to Wayne Derrick. I would usually signal to him when to start rolling, and sometimes when to stop, but other decisions to do with focal length, angle, framing and camera movement were largely left to him, though we often discussed in advance what was required. Part of our technique involved Wayne keeping his non-camera eye open, scanning the scene, and ready to respond to visual signals from me. Given that he came to Pakistan knowing virtually nothing of the language, and little about the culture, he did an extraordinary job, somehow divining accurately what needed to be shot at any given moment.

Although we went armed with an "imagined scenario", and had a general idea of the kind of film to be made, the film was in no sense scripted in advance. During the course of the shoot we had many discussions about what we had got and what we still needed to get, thinking about how the material shot so far fitted the original intention, how it suggested modifications and new scenarios. We were unable to screen rushes, but we did listen to the audio tapes, and in any case I was working on a rough translation of the dialogue recorded during the course of the shoot. The making of this kind of film is a mode of ethnographic inquiry in its own right.

There is no doubt that filming imposed considerable strains on relations amongst the musicians, notably between Amir and Shah Wali. The musicians were by no means naive about film making. They had often seen themselves on Peshawar TV and were familiar with Hindi and Urdu movies. They occasionally hired a VCR and monitor to watch films in the deyrh. Shah Wali had composed music for a film in Pakistan, and had performed in at least one Western documentary (André Singer's Khyber). In the musicians' experience film makers worked at high pressure, but we did not conform to that expectation and instead spent time taking part in the life of Dubgari and only reaching for the camera and tape recorder when something interesting started happening.

Amir was happy with this arrangement but it clearly began to irritate Shah Wali, who came to his deyrh less and less often. From his point of view we should have been making a film about him, the famous singer, not someone who was in certain respects his henchman and menial, a mere accompanist. Amir gave us access to Shah Wali, and Shah Wali did not particularly appreciate it. This tension culminated at the wedding party in Mardan (Scene 4) when during the last song Shah Wali suddenly turned and slapped Amir round the face, ostensibly because Amir was

chatting with Mena Gol, the tabla player, and not concentrating on the music. Amir was very quiet after this, and later told me that Shah Wali sometimes abused him in this way. They had quarreled before, and Amir had even been sacked from the band. 8 After this incident I feared that Amir would be dismissed, a disaster from every point of view. Fortunately, at this juncture Shah Wali and Amir's most notable patron, the Nawab Sahib, arrived from Lahore on a visit to Peshawar. He was able to get them to patch up their quarrel, a mediating role it transpired he had played before.

### Editing

The editing of *Amir* presented few serious problems. Several different types of audience had to be borne in mind.

1. The "general" audience of English speakers, who might have the opportunity to see the film on national television.
2. Specialists in ethnomusicology, anthropology and regional studies. For them the film is a report on the condition of Afghan refugee musicians in Peshawar.
3. The Afghan audience, for whom very few films had ever been made in their own languages, principally Dari (Afghan Persian) and Pashto.
4. The NFTS audience of staff and student film makers, concerned less with anthropology than with making "good movies".

In procedural terms I held regular weekly screenings of the film at the NFTS for whatever audience of film makers I could muster at the time. Their feedback was invaluable. After each screening we would have a long discussion, followed by a week's cutting before the next screening. Some people followed the changes made week by week; their feedback was valuable for estimating the success of solutions to problems identified at earlier screenings. Sometimes a new person would be present, very important for giving a fresh view of the material. Colin Young, Director of the NFTS, and main architect of the school's documentary film style, saw the film several times and made a number of valuable suggestions. All stages of the cutting, from synching-up to track laying, were carried out by me. In my opinion, editing is a crucial part of ethnographic film making and should be carried out by the anthropologist/film director and not by an outside editor.

The footage passed from a first assembly through four rough cuts to the first fine cut, which was later altered in the second (and final) fine cut. The first assembly had much of the structure of the final film. The most serious difficulties arose with the central section of the film, that dealing with the workplace. There was a lot of footage available and it was difficult to get the various "sub-scenes" in the right order. The name of the film, *Amir*, was established while synching-up the rushes, so that the whole editing process proceeded from this point of reference. In the midst of the editing, two months after the shoot, news arrived from Amir that Shah Wali had sacked him from the band. This intelligence was profoundly disturbing and threw something of a shadow over the editing. It was decided, partly for reasons of accuracy, that this information had to be included in the film, so an inter-title between the end of the last shot (*Amir* playing the *rubāb*) and the credits was inserted, saying:

A month later Shah Wali replaced  
*Amir* with another *rubāb* player.

The impact of this could be quite unsettling for the audience, with Amir's apparently cosy life in Peshawar seen in its true state of insecurity.

The first fine cut of the film was shown in video at the RAI Ethnographic Film Festival in London in September 1985. This version used voice-over translation in English of dialogue and songs, and ended with the news of Amir's sacking. Although it seemed at the time that the editing was finished, this screening served to show that the film was rather too long

and contained some potentially boring sequences. There were particular problems near the beginning of the film, with a scene in which Amir took his rubab to an instrument maker for a minor repair. Though badly lit, this had the virtue of being good observational footage of a real conversation about the instrument, but it made the start of the film slow and tentative and aroused the wrong expectations in the audience. It was decided the cut out the whole sequence.

While recutting the final version (after this particular screening), news arrived from Amir in Peshawar saying that he had patched up his quarrel with Shah Wali and was now back in the band. This was cause for rejoicing, and the final card was excised. By the time he was sacked from the band again (and this happened several times) the film was completed.

## THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE FILM

*Dramatis Personae* (in order of appearance):

**Amir Mohammad:** professional musician from Herat, *rubāb* player in Shah Wali's band.

**Ahmad Wali Sultani:** researcher, interpreter, interviewer.

**Satar Khan:** Amir's father-in-law, *tabla* player from Jalalabad.

**John Bailly:** film maker and ethnomusicologist.

**Mushtar Ali Haidar:** singer and harmonium player from Jalalabad.

**Bakhtiar Ustaz:** Pakistani master musician, *rubāb* player.

**Mena Gol:** *tabla* player in Shah Wali's band.

**Shah Wali Khan:** successful singer and band leader from Jalalabad.

**Delawar Saylab:** writer and poet, originally from Afghanistan.

**Ezat Jan Mujaddidi:** a friend of Amir's from Herat.

**The Nawab Sahib:** a son of the former Nawab of Dir, music connoisseur.

*Overall Structure of the Film:*

The film is sub-divided into scenes in this written analysis but the scenes are not labelled as such in the film.

Scene 1 - Introduction to Amir Mohammad

Scene 2 - Amir at home

Scene 3 - The musicians' workplace

Scene 4 - The wedding party

Scene 5 - Ezat Jan's visit

Scene 6 - At the shrine of Rahman Baba

Scene 7 - Ramaddn (Ramazdn) in Swat

Scene 8 - Amir plays the *rubāb*

*A Shot-by-Shot Analysis* (all dates refer to date of shooting):

A fragment of music played on the Afghan rubab precedes the title. This is taken from the beginning of Amir's final performance (Shot 57).

## TITLE CARDS

*Amir*  
*An Afghan refugee musician's*  
*life in Peshawar, Pakistan*

SCENE 1 - Introduction to *Amir*  
Shot 1 - Peshawar traffic. 20 May 1985

Scooter rickshaws in Chowk-e Yadgar, Peshawar. An establishing shot, showing the densely packed urban landscape and soundscape in which so much of the film is set. The commentary, spoken by John Bailly, begins:

“As a result of the civil war in Afghanistan several million refugees sought shelter in neighbouring Pakistan, especially around the city of Peshawar, which is close to the border and linked to Afghanistan by the Khyber Pass. The majority of refugees live in camps run by the Government and the United Nations, but many thousands have settled in the city of Peshawar and sought to make their living here. I came to ‘Peshawar hoping to find some of the Afghan musicians I had known ten years earlier. I soon found my old friend Amir... “

During the commentary the camera slowly zooms out to reveal more of the densely packed bazaar we are about to enter. At the mention of “Amir” we cut to Shot 2. The term “civil war” in the commentary is controversial, for many Afghans would claim that the war was against a Soviet invasion and in no sense a civil war. Certainly most of the fighting was between the *mujahideen* and the Afghan government backed by Soviet troops, but there were also local militias set up by the government, occasional fighting between *mujahideen* groups, and assassinations between the rival Marxist (*Khalq* and *Parcham*) parties in Kabul. I believe the term “civil war” is justified. The continuation of the war after the Soviet withdrawal of 1989 supports this interpretation.

Shot 2 - Amir walks along Dubgari Road. 4 May 1985

The commentary continues:

“...a native of the distant city of Herat. Amir became a refugee three years ago and eventually made his way to Peshawar, where he joined the band of the Pashto singer Shah Wali, the most successful of the Afghan refugee musicians and a star of local radio and television. Amir is an orphan, brought up in an extended family of hereditary musicians, and has been earning a living from music since the age of twelve. When I knew him in Herat he was a singer and harmonium player, but there is little demand in Peshawar for the style of Hearti popular music he performs. So now he plays Pashtun music on the rubab, a type of lute, and is even learning the more difficult classical style for his new instrument.”

The camera tracks Amir, from behind at first, passes him, and by the end of the shot Amir is seen from in front, as though we are now ready to meet him. Dubgari Road, to which we return later, is where the musicians have their rooms, but it is also occupied by a variety of shops and businesses, notably craftsmen making furniture, quilts and sandals. Amir carries in his hand a *rubāb* in its bag. He is walking to an instrument maker's workshop to have a broken peg replaced, and an earlier version of this film (shown at the RAI Ethnographic Film Festival in 1985) showed him with the instrument maker. This sequence served to introduce the *rubāb* but made the beginning of the film very slow, as noted above. So instead, the instrument is introduced by being played, with the sound laid forward over the end of Shot 2.

Shot 3 - Amir plays the *rubāb*. 5 May 1985

Amir is in Shah Wali Khan's *deyrah*, playing a *naghmeb-ye klāsik* (classical instrumental piece) on the *rubāb*. This is the Kabuli version of North Indian instrumental art music. The melodic mode is *Rāg Malkauns*, the metric cycle is *Tintāl* (16 beats). This piece shows the kind of music to which he now has access. At the end he attempts a *seh* (or *tiba'i*), but it goes wrong, a fact he acknowledges with good humor, and which demonstrates his incomplete control of this musical genre. He is accompanied by the *doholak*, a typical instrument of Pashtun regional music, played in turn by two musicians (both are brothers of Mena Gol, the *tabla* player in Shah Wali's band). Although this scene was unsolicited, it was in some ways “staged” by the musicians for the camera. But it does fairly represent the

kind of music making that sometimes goes on in the *deyrah*, to pass the time or to entertain guests or patrons, with clapping and finger snapping from the audience. Here the film crew are the guests.

#### SCENE 2 - Amir at Home

Shot 4 - Amir and Sultani in the alley. 12 May 1985

Ahmad Wali Sultani, then assistant to the Field Officer of Afghanistan in Peshawar, sometimes helped us as researcher, interpreter and interviewer, especially in the early days of the shoot. He and Amir walk along the alley where Amir lives in the Akhundabad suburb of Peshawar, a relatively poor area housing many Afghan refugees. Sultani carries two magazines for the Aaton camera and his briefcase. This scene was shot during our second visit to Amir's house for filming, and in fact they are walking away from his house rather than towards it, as is implied in the way this leads on to Shot 5.

Shot 5 - Amir enters his house. 7 May 1985

This shot conducts us into Amir's single-room house, and has been taken from the end of Shot 8, when Amir re-entered the house after showing us round the courtyard. Sultani's question "What's it like living here?" and Amir's reply are non-synch and are taken from the start of Shot 6.

Shots 6 and 7 - The tour of Amir's room. 7 May 1985

In this fascinating sequence Amir shows us round the room that he and his young wife share with his parents-in-law and their other children. He complains repeatedly about the lack of space. The walls have been covered with newspaper and decorated with pictures, garlands from Amir's wedding hang on the wall, while the ceiling is bedecked with flags, also from his wedding. There is a television set and radio-cassette player, and an electric fan. Amir's house was much more pleasantly "furnished" than some others I saw, and is a testament to his developed aesthetic sense; he knows how to make things look nice, a trait he shares with many Heratis. In the course of Shot 6 we see for the first time Satar Khan, Amir's wife's father, also a hereditary professional musician.

Shot 8 - Tour of the courtyard. 7 May 1985

This is where the women work, washing clothes and cooking. The tent has been put up to provide shade. Water was delivered by hosepipe from the adjoining house. While shooting this scene the women, Amir's wife and mother-in-law, who had been busy preparing our meal, were hiding on the flat roof. Something should be said about the absence of women from the film, which fairly represents my experience as a field worker in traditional Muslim communities in which *purdah* is still strictly observed. I never met, or even saw, Amir's young wife. Possibly if I had pressed him hard he would have allowed me to meet, and perhaps even to film her, but that would have raised problems in showing the film to Afghans, who would immediately point out how this confirmed some of their negative stereotypes of musicians as "bad Muslims."

Shot 9 - Amir tells us about coming to Peshawar. 7 May 1985

Amir's movements after leaving Herat soon after the uprising of March 1979 were complicated. He recounted some of his experience on film but the description was too long and detailed to be used. It was a question of selecting from the footage a continuous segment which had cohesion and which provided important information about his present circumstances. I decided to use a section which tells us about his meeting Shah Wali, his future band leader, and Satar Khan, his future father-in-law. Amir had known Satar since the time of their military service, in the late 1960s. While in the army they often played music together, to entertain the troops and their officers. When Shah Wali greeted Amir as "My brother from Herat"

he meant "brother" in the metaphorical, not the literal, sense. It is clear that Shah Wali had been generous to Amir. Amir joined Shah Wali's band in the following way. At that time a Pakistani musician, Bakhtiar Ustaz (Shot 24), was playing rubab in Shah Wali's band, but Bakhtiar, who was often employed as an accompanist for radio and television broadcasts, was not keen on going to Shah Wali's engagements far from the city. One day Amir played the rubab for a cassette recording session with Shah Wali, who then asked him to join his group as a regular member. Towards the end of this shot Amir tells us how his friends urged him to get married, and his disinclination to do so until Afghanistan was free. Ibis takes us into the next shot.

Shot 10 - Satar on his daughter's marriage to Amir. 7 May 1985

Satar - Amir's father-in-law - offers some important and revealing information in this shot. He was very fond of his daughter and did not want to lose her in marriage: he would not "give her away for a million rupees". He wanted to keep her within his household, especially since being refugees they might lose all contact if she was married and went to reside in the house of her husband's family (as was the custom). At the same time he was sorry for Amir, and also felt that the economic and social stability of the family would be increased if Amir came to live with them. The solution was to marry his daughter to Amir, which enabled Amir to move in with Satar. It is particularly significant that Shah Wah paid the expenses of the wedding, for this says a lot about the relationship between the two men. Paying for the wedding is indicative that Amir's status is akin to that of henchman, or dependant.

Shots 11 and 12 - Waiting to eat in Amir's room. 7 May 1985

Satar and his son have been bringing in the food. The music issuing from the cassette machine is from a tape of Ustad Sarahang, Afghanistan's great singer of North Indian art music, much respected by musicians like Amir and Satar. The meal is laid out, they are waiting only for the film crew to lay down their equipment. The sound of Shot 11 is out of synch and runs uninterrupted into Shot 12, which is in synch. The white drink is *duq*, a type of diluted yoghurt. At the end of the shot Amir gazes thoughtfully upward, which carries us into the next shot, as though Amir could hear the traffic in the distance.

The editing of Scene 2 posed some interesting problems. The shots were made in the following order: interviews with Amir and Satar, tour of the room, eating. In an early rough cut I put them in the order of- the tour, eating and talking. Colin Young suggested putting the eating last in this scene, saying he "needed time to digest the dense information" just given by Amir and Satar.

#### SCENE 3 - The Musicians' Workplace

Scene 3 is the longest in the film and proved the most difficult in terms of editing. Many of the problems were solved by Colin Young's suggestion that the visit to Shah Wali's *deyrah* (Shots 26-33) should seem like an interlude in the story of going out to a wedding that starts with Shot 25.

Shot 13 - Traffic in Dubgari Road. 18 May 1985

The purpose of this shot of a refrigerator being carried on a horse-drawn cart is to get us back to Dubgari. It works as a sound cut as much as anything, for Dubgari is distinguished by the high-pitched whine of scooter rickshaws.

Shots 14-16 - Satar Khan and John Baily walk down Dubgari.  
18 May 1985

I am tracked from in front as I walk along Dubgari Road with Satar

Khan. Satar explains that Dubgari Road is where all the musicians in Peshawar are based, each group of musicians having an upstairs deyrāh (room, or a suite of rooms) in this street. This shot was completely set up, and was repeated. In the first take I wore earphones while taking sound with the Nagra. We decided to repeat the shot without the earphones. The intention was to elicit information about Dubgari, and the basic points are made by Satar very clearly. This scene presented many problems in cutting, which were finally solved by inserting an originally mute shot (Shot 15) of musicians leaning down from the balconies of their rooms. In Shot 16 we meet a young Afghan musician Mushtar Ali Haidar, whose band Satar had recently joined as tabla player. Mushtar, who like so many of the Afghan musicians in Peshawar comes from Jalalabad, has lived in Peshawar from the beginning of the conflict. I have been justly criticised by some anthropologists who have worked in Afghanistan for the somewhat peremptory way in which I call Mushtar over and greet him; there should have been more enquiries about our mutual welfare and that of our respective families. The justification for including Shots 14 and 16, besides the information they give about Dubgari (which could have been presented in the form of inter-titles), is that they give the film maker an identity, and show the cumbersome equipment which a sound recordist has to manage. With Mushtar and Satar together Shot 16 also prepares us for the music lesson that is to follow, and helps us to keep track of who is who.

Shot 17 - Traffic in Dubgari Road. 18 May 1985

Another filling shot indicating the lapse of time.

Shots 18-23 - The music lesson. 12 May 1985

On my first visit to Dubgari I noticed this ladder (it can also be seen in Shot 2) and wondered when I would come to go up it. In due course I did, to visit Satar in Mushtar's deyrāh. The music lesson was an example of a quite unforeseen spontaneous situation. I knew that Bakhtiar was in Dubgari that afternoon and I wanted to see him and perhaps film him. Amir was dispatched to ascertain where he was, and came back to say that Bakhtiar was up in Mushtar's deyrāh. In Shot 18 Amir climbs the ladder and confirms that Bakhtiar is there. Faint sounds of music filter down. Wayne Derrick scaled the ladder, shooting all the time, and followed Amir into the qeyrah, where we found Bakhtiar giving Mushtar a lesson in harmonium playing, with Satar playing tabla. Although Wayne succeeded in getting up the ladder without interruption it was eventually decided to cut a rather "flat" section out of the middle of this sequence-shot (a decision I now regret). Shot 19 takes us into the deyrāh and the musicians, who have paused during our entry, continue with their activities.

Shots 20-23 are from a single sequence-shot of musical performance which has been shortened by cutting out several sections. The cuts are determined primarily by consideration of the sound, to preserve the integrity of the 01 (metric cycle). With cyclical music of this kind it is not too difficult to make relatively unobtrusive sound cuts, especially if the picture cut is made in a different place. Careful listening reveals where they occur. There was a problem in getting from this material into Amir's conversation with Bakhtiar (Shot 24); this was solved by inserting a synch shot of Mushtar's hands on the harmonium which comes originally from the beginning of the long sequence-shot.

This scene is of great interest. Besides revealing the poverty of Mushtar's deyrāh in comparison with Shah Wali's (which we see next), it shows what goes on in an advanced music lesson from an ustad ("master musician") to a student. Notice how the ustad sings the composition and the stereotyped variations using oral notation (the sargam system: Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa), and also the way the sam beat, the first beat of the metric cycle, serves as a point of resolution of rhythmic tension, with head movements and gesticulations.

The music lesson has further significance in that it shows the Afghan refugee musicians "taking lessons" from the senior Pakistani musicians in Dubgari. This puts them in the role of students. Even the great Shah Wali regularly "took lessons" from Professor Nawab Khan, another Pakistani doyen of the musicians' quarter. According to my interpretation, this placed the Afghan refugee musicians in a junior role in the Dubgari hierarchy. Amir had certainly benefited greatly from such lessons. Shah Wali had benefited less, but submitting to lessons was a small price to pay for maintaining good relations with his Pakistani colleagues in the music profession.

Shot 24 - Amir and Bakhtiar Ustaz in conversation. 12 May 1985

This shot shows the way that Amir, after a week's shooting, has grasped the intentions of the film makers, and engages Bakhtiar in conversation. Bakhtiar Ustaz (ustaz, a form of the word ustad, a master musician) is the leading rubab player in Peshawar, and is from a hereditary musician family. Besides giving some basic information about his life and his passion for music, he articulates very nicely some of the values attributed to music. He talks about music as a great science, a river, or an inexhaustible ocean. I often heard such ideas articulated by musicians in Afghanistan. On hearing these statements Amir pulls at his earlobes as a sign of respect, a gesture I have also seen in Afghanistan. Bakhtiar says there are some women amongst his students, and mentions "Margaret", a young American archaeologist working at Peshawar University. The other women, or girls, are probably from courtesan families. On one occasion before the shoot I attended a ceremony in Dubgari where a male singer and harmonium player went through a string tying<sup>9</sup> with a girl student, described to me as a "dancer". Dubgari was a celebrated red light district before General Zia ul-Haq came to power, but that side of Dubgari life was much suppressed in 1985.

Shot 25 - Mena Gol in the street. 9 May 1985

Mena Gol is the tabla player in Shah Wali's band; he and Shah Wali have played together for many years. He also appears in the film Khyber. After greeting the film crew and engaging in a little horse play with a Pakistani musician we learn that soon we are going to a wedding in a mini-bus barely discernable across the street. This is a linking shot; Mena then leads the film crew up the stairs to the deyrāh, where we at last meet Shah Wali.

Shot 26 - Shah Wali sings and talks. 5 May 1985

This performance was shot on our second day of filming, and although put on for our benefit is very much the way that Shah Wali would entertain friends and patrons in the deyrāh. We have seen this room before, in Shot 3, which came from our first shooting on that day. After that Shah Wali had arrived and performed this song for us. It is worth giving the complete text as filmed in a single sequence-shot:

I will not forget that night of love I have been beaten by the  
needle-like ends of your hair My life is passing as if I were lying  
on a bed of thorns My heart has been pierced by the points of  
your eyelashes

This is a drop of blood from my wounded heart  
Your cheeks are red from the blood of my heart  
My life is passing...

Like a moth bewitched by the beauty of candlelight  
I am scorched by the flame of your love

My life is passing....

Saylab, you are rocking the world like a cradle from her plaits  
Like swinging it over the oceans My life is passing....

In the film the song starts from the third verse. The footage shows Shah Wali performing in “romantic mood”; the smiles, facial expressions, the subtle wink. We discover that Amir is accompanying him on doholak. At the end we are told that the poetry was written by Delawar Saylab, an Afghan who has lived for some time in Peshawar and who is a writer by profession. He sits by Shah Wali whispering the text to him while the latter sings. His pen-name, Saylab, appears in the last verse of the song.

Shots 27-30 - Conversation about recording a cassette. 5 May 1985

This conversation took place immediately after Shah Wali had sung his song. It has been reconstructed with careful editing, and though some of the shots do not cut well together, the intrinsic interest of this scene - which shows the musicians’ involvement in the world of commercial music and that they have little to do with resistance music - far outweighs these deficiencies. In Shot 27 Shah Wali’s brother asks Delawar Saylab about some resistance poetry he has promised to write him to record on a cassette. Delawar Saylab excuses his failure to have done this for Wali by appealing to the unpredictability of Fate, and then launches into another political poem he has written:

There is a voice against the oppressor  
In the dum dum. of bullets  
Innocents are dying now that BabrakI is in power

The whole world is shaking  
Because warriors have put on their bandoliers  
While the man on the throne of power slumbers

The animated recitation of this poem is of interest, showing something of this quite distinct style of delivering text

Shot 28 is a cutaway to Amir to cover my asking about a cassette that had been discussed earlier, before we started shooting. Due to a misunderstanding, arising from my imperfect Dari, Shah Wali’s brother thinks I am talking about the cassette he had discussed with Delawar Saylab in Shot 27 and in Shot 29 tells us this cassette will be about Afghanistan. As a result of this misunderstanding a very revealing bit of information was thrown up in Shot 30, where Shah Wali corrects the mistake and says they are talking about recording a cassette of love songs the next day “for business”. He looks embarrassed at having to make this admission.

Shots 31-33 - Amir explains about uses of the deyrak. 4 May 1985

The three shots making up this scene were shot on the first day of filming. Sultani’s discussion with Amir is more like an interview (or even an interrogation!) than a conversation, with a rapid stream of questions. The sound is also very bad, with a radio blaring film songs from the shop below. The use of this shot also interrupts the flow of events from Shot 25, when we are informed that we are going to a wedding party, to Shot 36, where we get into the mini-bus and depart. Shots 31-33 have been used because of the important information they provide about the deyrak and the work of Shah Wali’s band. The point is made that the musicians do not live in Dubgari Road; it is a business centre, the deyrak is like an “office”, where patrons come to hire musicians. Shah Wali’s was the best appointed set of musicians’ rooms (three rooms in all) I saw in Dubgari, and was suitable for entertaining important and wealthy patrons. Shah Wali had occupied these rooms for six months; his former rooms, which I visited, were much less salubrious, and were now occupied by another group of

Afghan musicians. We also learn how widespread Shah Wali’s patrons are, and how far the band sometimes travels to perform. In one sense it is the inclusion of this scene which makes Amir an “anthropological” film; there is a sacrifice of cinematic to ethnographic considerations here. Cinematically we would be better off without this scene.

SCENE 4 - The Wedding Party  
Shots 34-35 - Loading the van. 9 May 1985

The harmoniums in their covers are carried out and loaded on the minibus. Shah Wali’s brother, also a singer and harmonium player, acts as the group’s manager, and also looks after their PA system (which is charged as an extra to patrons).

Shot 36 - Shah Wali emerges. 9 May 1985

Half-an-hour later than Shots 34-35, it is early evening and the light is failing. Shah Wali emerges with all the grandeur of a great usuid and takes his place in the front seat. He says in English “Sit down please!” to the film crew.

Shot 37 - Logari dance tunes at the wedding. 9 May 1985

The wedding was held at Mardan, a town some eighty miles from Peshawar. It is important to note that this was a Pakistani Pakhtun wedding, not a wedding amongst Afghan refugees, which would have been on a much smaller and simpler scale (I attended one in Peshawar, near Amir’s house, before Wayne arrived). We attended the men’s wedding party while an equivalent party for women was held in an adjacent house, but I saw nothing of it. These separate celebrations for men and women were perfectly familiar from Herat (Baily 1988a: 124-3 1).

The shot starts with a pan around the audience to give some indication of the location, then concentrates on the musicians, whom we see playing together as a band for the first time: Shah Wali and Wali with their harmoniums, Amir on rubab, Mena Gol on tabla, and a member of the group we have not met before, Mustafa, who plays clarinet. He is a Pakistani, and like Bakhtiar, often plays on radio and television. He was rarely to be found in Dubgari.

The band plays a type of music called Logari, a style associated with the performances of dancing boys in the region of the Logar Valley. It was particularly popular with the Pakistanis, and was being adopted by Pakistani bands in Peshawar. The style consists of sequences of short melodies, with long pauses between them, at which points the dancing boy, had one been present, would “freeze”. Amir leads one of the sections with his rubab. Note the vigorous style of tabla playing and the glissandi made by running the finger across the head of the larger drum (bayan), an example of “mischievousness” in Afghan music.

Shot 38 - Shah Wali sings two songs of resistance. 9 May 1985

This sequence-shot, with a total length of six minutes and fifteen seconds, is a tour deforce by cameraman Wayne Derrick, a model of how musical performance should be filmed. The only interruption in this sequence-shot is the insert of the Kalashnikov being fired towards the end of the second song (Shot 38a). Of course, we had good luck, in that some very interesting things happened during this performance, such as the donating of money, the dancing, and the firing of the gun.

The first song is in the genre known as tappa, short verses (each a tappa, or landay) strung together, with a distinct musical setting. The mention of the name Malang Jan in the third tappa, the takhalos (“pen name”) of a prominent Afghan poet writing in Pashto, who had been active 20-30 years earlier during the Pashtunistan dispute between Afghanistan and

Pakistan, suggests that the complete poem was written by him. Shah Wali's brother sings the second of the four tappas. The melodic mode is Bairaini and the metric cycle is Geda (Baily 198 1; 1988a, Chapter 4).

I sacrifice myself  
God take me back to Kabul  
Because the children of my village are praying for me

I sacrifice myself for you  
The homeland belongs to me and I belong to it  
With my red blood I will make it free for ever

I sacrifice myself for you  
I am the gardener of my country  
Because I, Malang Jan, learned to crawl in it

I sacrifice myself  
Being in love is like having half a kingdom  
Particularly when the beloved is fighting on your side

This is an excellent example of Pashtun music. During the instrumental section after the second tappa we see a man approach to shower money over the musicians. This is standard practice and operates in the following manner. The band's "boy" (in this case Joma, a young relative of Shah Wali) has a wad of one hundred 1-rupee notes. A patron who wishes to express his appreciation of the music, and to lay claim to being a "big man", approaches with a 100-rupee note, which he exchanges for the hundred 1-rupee notes. These he then scatters slowly over the musicians, to be collected off the floor by the boy, who puts them back into a wad and exchanges with the next patron who wants to honour the band. Thus the same notes may circulate a dozen times in the course of the evening, adding substantially to the musicians' agreed honorarium. After the tappa Shah Wali launches into a nationalist song which is a staple item of his repertory. This is another excellent example of Pashtun music, this time in the chaharbeita genre, with Shah Wali starting lines, his brother finishing them. The melodic mode is again Bairaini, and the metric cycle is Dadra. The text is as follows:

The blind cannot remain here  
This is the homeland of the sighted  
My homeland is the country of the angels  
The blind cannot remain here  
My homeland is the country of the angels

Here every Pashtun is standing up for his honour and grace  
He is standing up to protect his homeland with honour and courage  
Those who are prepared to die for their homeland  
Are the defenders of their homeland  
My homeland is the country of the angels  
The blind cannot remain here  
Afghanistan is the homeland of the angels  
Afghanistan is the homeland of the warriors

As the cries of the warriors are full of zeal for freedom  
Similarly every maiden is modest and full of zeal  
The Pashtun way of life binds one to the homeland  
My homeland is the country of the angels  
The blind cannot remain here  
My homeland is the country of the angels

As these rocks and mountains are witnesses The enemy remains thwarted  
Rashid, this is the homeland of the lions My country is the homeland of  
the angels The blind cannot remain here My country is the homeland of  
the angels.

This song is of interest. According to Shah Wali, the poetry was written by the aforementioned Malang Jan at the time of the Pashtunistan crisis, when Afghanistan was seeking to promote the separation of North West Frontier Province, which is predominantly Pashtun, as an autonomous state to be called Pashtunistan. This was a period of great tension between the two countries, and lasted from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. The song originally expressed Pashtun nationalistic sentiments. Shah Wali had altered the text slightly to bring in Afghanistan, but the song remains a vehicle of Pashtun sentiment, which is presumably why the audience reacts to it with such enthusiasm.

In a filmed conversation Shah Wali explained to me that he was not able to sing what he called "mujahideen" poetry over the radio and television, it was not permitted. Nor was this the kind of song text that Pakistani patrons wanted to hear at their wedding parties. For these reasons Shah Wali could not be regarded as a singer of resistance songs. When he sang these two songs at the wedding Shah Wali signalled to me, knowing that this was the kind of material I was particularly interested in. As Shah Wali starts the second song a roar goes up from the audience, and a man previously nursing a gun springs to his feet to dance. Another dancer joins him, another roar goes up from the crowd. Both are showered with money. After they have danced Joma gathers up the money and narrowly escapes injury when the man with the gun lets off four rounds in his enthusiasm. The musicians look concerned, a mixture of anxiety and condescension over this "childish behaviour". The insert where the Kalashnikov is fired (Shot 38all) was filmed during an earlier song, the loudness of the firing conceals the sound of extraneous music. This shot was cut in partly to cover over a rather hesitant section of shooting in the later part of this long shot, partly because of its inherent dramatic quality. It also reminds us that a war is going on, and heralds a turn to more serious matters in the next part of the film. The camera holds on to Amir at the end of the music, giving us a vignette of the activity that occurs between songs. Furthermore, this helps to bring us back to the subject of the film, Amir, after a long scene in which he has played a relatively minor role.

At the beginning of Shot 38 Amir is smoking charas, as the Afghans call hashish, but it should not be thought that is the case every time we see him smoking. Several times during the shoot Shah Wali criticised Amir for smoking (ordinary) cigarettes while being filmed, saying that it "looked bad". "What will the people in England think?" he would ask. Shah Wali tolerated Amir's predilection for smoking charas, but on this occasion it seems to have particularly annoyed him. During the last song at the wedding party Shah Wali turned and slapped Amir round the face, angry that he was being inattentive and chatting to Mena Gol (see page 9). Fortunately we were no longer shooting by this time or the emotional connotations of Shah Wali's action would have been even more profound.

#### SCENE 5 - EZATJAN'S VISIT

Ezat Jan Mujaddidi comes from a prominent Afghan family, whose members lived until recently in various parts of the country, including Herat. The Mujaddidis are a powerful and important Pashtun clan who have played a significant role in Afghanistan's history. They are associated with the Naqshbandi Sufi Order and are treated with great reverence. Professor S.M. Mujaddidi heads one of the seven parties in the Peshawar mujahideen alliance. I had met Ezat Jan a few times in Herat. In many ways he did not conform to the earnest image of his clan. He was a wealthy music enthusiast and amateur musician, and he used to run a tourist hotel primarily as a place to entertain his friends and play music. Amir played there many times with Ezat Jan and his friends. Ezat Jan had become a refugee several years before and lived in Islamabad. Amir had given me his address and I called on him during a trip to Islamabad, but he was away. Two weeks later he came to visit us in Peshawar.

Amir in the front room of Shah Wali's deyrāh, overlooking Dubgari Road. The impression intended is that this is the day after the wedding. Shah Wali is stretched out asleep on a bed, instruments in their covers and bags lie in the corner. Amir performs the mid-day prayers. Although a rather stereotyped shot - Afghans are invariably shown at prayer at one point or another in a film - I felt it was important to document this side of Amir. There is no doubt that at least externally he was a much better Muslim in Peshawar than he had been in Herat, where he rarely performed the five prayers per day required of the orthodox and pious. Given the rather negative attitudes towards musicians in Afghanistan it was important to show Amir in a good light. There is a further symbolic reason for showing Amir praying at this point, for we are about to enter upon matters of life and death.

Shots 40-42 - Ezat Jan describes the uprising in Herat. 15 May 1985

Sultani engages Ezat Jan in conversation about the uprising that took place in Herat in March 1979. In the middle a short shot (Shot 41) is inserted showing Jorna washing his feet preparatory to performing his prayers, with the sound of Ezat Jan talking laid over from Shot 40. This insert helps effect the transition from Shot 40 to Shot 42, where Amir reappears. Although Ezat Jan's account is no doubt exaggerated, recent evidence shows that the uprising was of considerable importance, and included a mutiny by some of the Afghan troops stationed in Herat. The uprising lasted for four days and many thousands of civilians were killed. It was quelled after bombing and strafing raids by Soviet aircraft flying direct from the Soviet Union. A number of Soviet and other Eastern bloc civilian personnel were horribly murdered. It was intended that simultaneous uprisings should take place in Kandahar and Kabul, but for some reason they did not materialise. It is thought that the Herat uprising was important in the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan in December 1979. Heratis like Amir were very proud of the fact that "the revolution" (or, more precisely, the counter-revolution) had started in their home town.

After this, at Amir's prompting, Ezat Jan describes how many of his Mujaddidi relatives were arrested after the uprising. This occurred both in Herat and in other parts of Afghanistan. They were never heard of again and it is presumed they were all killed. Perhaps because of his proclivity for music and disinterest in politics Ezat Jan was not arrested. We filmed him later on the same day playing the rubab with Amir in the deyrāh, but eventually I decided not to use this footage, which did not fit well between the account of the uprising and the graveyard scene that follows.

SCENE 6 - At the Shrine of Rahman Baba

Shots 43-45 - Amir visits the graveyard. 19 May 1985

This vast graveyard lies between Akhundabad and the shrine of Rahman Baba and is about fifteen minutes walk from Amir's house. I had passed the graveyard when visiting Rahman Baba with Amir before the shoot started, and he had told me that his daughter was buried there. We had talked about going to do some filming at the shrine and Amir asked me several times when could we go. I realised that in such a place it would not require much to get Amir to tell us how he really felt about being a refugee and decided that we should visit his daughter's grave on the way.

In Shot 43 Amir walks to the graveyard. His path led him through a large group of women visiting graves and we had to be careful to turn off at this point so as not to give offence. In Shot 44 Amir prays at his daughter's grave and tells us how she died. He blames his misfortune on his being a refugee but infant mortality is in any case high, and his daughter died in the Lady Reading Hospital in Peshawar. Medical assistance was available, but too late. In Shot 45 Amir leaves the graveyard and we get some idea of its enormous extent.

Rahman Baba was one of the great poets of the Pashto language, and his burial place in Peshawar has become an important Sufi shrine.<sup>12</sup> Amir later says he has a great love of shrines, indeed, he is interested in all those aspects of Islam that he connects with Sufism. His profession as a musician even finds approval within a Sufi framework of belief. After praying Amir shakes the flagpole and hands a small amount of money to a custodian of the shrine. He then slowly circumbulates the grave. The connection between the shrine and the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, seems to have a special significance for Amir, who must be described as a nationalist at heart. This is a corner of Pakistan that he can identify as "Afghan".

In Shot 48 Amir goes to the mosque next to the shrine, picks up a copy of the Holy Koran, kisses it and presses it to his forehead in order to absorb some of its spiritual essence.

Shots 49-51 - Amir and the malangs. 19 May 1985

Various types of holy men of one kind or another inhabit shrines. Amir refers to them as malangs at one point, but a malang is only one type of mendicant. In the subtitles this is translated as "dervish", a more familiar term to an English speaking audience. In Shot 49 Amir arrives at the teahouse in the shrine grounds. In Shot 50 someone calls the pigeons and feeds them while Amir watches. At this point, in order to explain something of the significance of the pigeons, remarks from a later shot have been overlaid, as though Amir is thinking aloud. There are good reasons why this device should not work; it is a new convention to introduce so late in a film. But it does work. Amir's reference to Herat also prepares us for his "moment of truth". In Shot 51 he catches a pigeon, kisses it twice and lets it go, telling us that his mother's name was Kaftar (Pigeon), a remark made more poignant if we recall that Amir is an orphan. His mother died when he was a few years old and he can remember little about her.

Shots 52-53 - Amir's "moment of truth". 19 May 1985

When we came to the shrine I had determined to confront Amir with some searching questions about his deeper feelings. After feeding the pigeons we took him off to a quiet corner and set up for what may be called the "Stephen Peet method" for eliciting apparently spontaneous information to camera. In this technique the interviewer sits just below the camera, asks a question, and is careful not to make any audible response while the answer is given, but conveys attention and agreement through facial expressions. Later, the original question is cut out, and the result is a seemingly natural statement. Stephen Peet used this technique very effectively in his long-running BBC series *Yesterday's Witness*. I came into this situation armed with a list of questions (on a piece of paper in my pocket) to put to Amir. We set up, and I asked Sultani to put a question about pigeons at shrines, just to get things going. Some of what Amir said about this has been used with Shot 50 (see above). We turned off. Then I told Sultani the next question, which was what did Amir pray for when he visited the shrine. Amir gave a very open and interesting reply, dwelling on his predilection for shrines (Shot 52). At the end of this shot Sultani said "That's enough, you've got what you wanted haven't you?" "Let's try one more question," I said, "ask him what it is that upsets him most." Sultani did so, and evoked a powerful and moving response from Amir, in the course of which he started to weep. Since I had seen him in tears on a number of occasions I was not unduly surprised by this. It may seem heartless but I felt that I had a licence to do this, not just for cinematic effect, but to obtain the powerful statement about the universal predicament of the refugee I knew Amir could express. After this shot we

stopped filming for a while and I got Amir to talk about aspects of life in Herat, which I recorded. He soon recovered his spirits and took us off to visit his spiritual mentor, a holy man at the shrine.

#### SCENE 7 - Ramadān in Swat

In Herat before the war Ramadan (the month of fast, pronounced Ramazan in Afghanistan and Pakistan) was a period of festivity by night, and a time when there was a lot of public music (see Baily 1988a:131-4). I had hoped that the same would be the case in Pakistan, especially as the time scheduled for the shoot extended well into the month of fast. I soon discovered that in Pakistan Ramazan was not a time for playing music, and I also learned as Ranzazan approached that Shah Wali and his band liked to go with their families to Swat, in the mountains to the north of Peshawar. There they would rent accommodation for the month. It was a chance for a holiday at a time when there was no work in Peshawar, and being much cooler it was easier to keep the fast. As expected, the band left for the hills at the start of Ramazan, on 21 May. Wayne and I followed a few days later intending to get some final footage needed for the film. I planned that the film should finish with Rwnazan.

In editing the film I was faced with the problem of how to get from Amir's "moment of truth" up to Swat. At the end of Shot 53 it happened that an aeroplane passed overhead, making a lot of noise and adding a rather ominous presence to the proceedings, as though it might attack us. Amir looks up pensively, listening intently. We had taken some shots of the river in Swat and I realised that the pitch spectrum of the sound made by the plane matched the sound of the rushing water. This suggested a cross-fade: the possibility of a sound edit dictated the choice of cut to the river (Shot 54). The sound of the river is added to the sound of the plane at the end of Shot 53, and boosted by running an "atmos" track of running water, to reach a crescendo just before the picture cut. In cinematic terms I found the result very satisfying, a metaphorical river of tears, and a perfect transition to the next shot.

Shot 54 - A river in Swat. 25 May 1985

Shot 55 - Amir by the river. 25 May 1985

Amir, back in his usual cheery mood, explains why they have come to Swat in Ramazan, and how it reminds them of Afghanistan, with its mountains, forests and rivers, and cool air. "Here we can smell Afghanistan."

Shot 56 - Shah Wali by the river. 25 May 1985

Shah Wali explains that they sometimes get engagements to play for private parties while in Swat. A few days later, after Wayne had returned to Peshawar, I accompanied them to such a gathering. Note the very diplomatic way in which Shah Wah speaks, referring to "our Pakistani friends, our Muslim brothers from Pakistan."

#### SCENE 8 - Amir Plays the Rubāb

This scene was shot well before the musicians left for Swat. It belongs to a quite separate aspect of Amir and Shah Wali's life in Peshawar, one that is otherwise not dealt with at all in the film. The scene is presented, following Shah Wali's statements in Shot 56, as though they are now playing for some of their Pakistani patrons in Swat. Anyone with first hand experience of Peshawar and Swat in early summer will see through this deception straight away, for this scene was clearly shot in a hot room on a hot day in Peshawar, not in the cold night mountain air of Swat. But after Shah Wali's talk of their Pakistani patrons the scene is appropriate since here Amir plays the rubab for his patron par excellence.

Shahbuddin Nawabzade is a son of the last independent ruler of Dir State, on the Afghan frontier (Dichter 1967:60-66). His father was deposed in 1960 for alleged insurrection (ibid., Fraser-Tytler 1967:323-4) and his son, whom the musicians call the Nawab Sahib, feels himself to be an exile. He lives in Lahore and is forbidden to visit Dir. The closest he can come is Peshawar. The Nawab Sahib is a keen amateur musician, a dilettante in the best sense, with a good knowledge of rags and of old filmi git (film songs). He speaks Persian and Pashto, as well as Urdu and English, and he has been generous to Amir and Shah Wali, giving them musical instruments, including two rubabs to Amir. In this scene Amir plays one of these, which is lavishly decorated. When the Nawab was in Peshawar he would stay at Dean's Hotel and Amir and Shah Wali spent much of their time there, waiting on him, learning from him, and playing for him and his guests. It was on such an occasion that the footage in this scene was shot.

Shots 57-58 - An-fir plays the rubab. 14 May 1985

. In my judgement this is a fine example of solo rubab playing, in which Amir excels himself. It is used here as a cathartic expression of Amir's state of mind, perhaps another "moment of truth". It would be interesting to compare people's comments after watching just this scene with those who view it in its proper place, at the end of the film, for we now have some of the information necessary for an interpretation of the performance. Amir starts with the shakl, the unmetred introduction equivalent to the alap of North Indian music. He then plays two song tunes. The first is a nationalist song composed by Awal Mir, with the Pashto text "This is my beautiful country".<sup>13</sup> The second, played at the request of Shah Wali, is "My dear dervish, step forth lightly". Both are well established items in Amir's repertory. The melodic mode of the shakl and both tunes is Bairami. Wayne's sequence shooting here is remarkable, gradually unfolding the scene. He pulls focus on Shah Wali, whose face registers a twinge of envy as he turns away from Amir, now the centre of attention. The camera pans slowly from face to face of the intent audience, finally to the Nawab, with his walking stick and Casio keyboard by his side. 14

A cut has been made in this shot to remove one repetition of part of the second tune which otherwise goes on slightly too long for the general audience. At the end of Shot 58 Amir gets up from his chair and there is a fade to black followed by the credits. It is at this point that the inter-title saying that Amir was replaced a month later by another rubab player formerly came up (see page 11). Originally I wanted to continue Shot 58 with the next bit of action, in which Amir kisses the hand of the Nawab Sahib and apologises for his performance. When the rough cut was screened which ended in this way I found the audience was waiting for the next reel! Rather than completing the preceding scene this bit of action had the effect of raising expectations of the next one. It was therefore cut.

•

#### THE AFTERMATH

The film was shot and edited in 1985. Amir and I kept in contact by sending audio cassettes to one another for several years after. He was in and out of Shah Wali's band several times but finally dropped out altogether. He still lives with Satar Khan, now in a somewhat larger house in Akhundabad, and is the father of two healthy boys. If anything his contact with Westerners in Peshawar that began with the film has served him well and he has become much in demand with the expatriate community. I often hear from people who have visited Peshawar recently on "Afghan business" who tell me they saw Amir recently playing at some party or other. I hear less of Shah Wali but believe he is continuing to advance his career and becoming a popular singer throughout Pakistan.

Ezat Jan Mujaddidi came as a refugee to the USA in about 1987 and lives in San Diego. He has his musical instruments with him and sometimes plays at concerts of Afghan and Iranian music. He must be counted one of the outstanding Afghan musicians resident in the USA. Living on welfare is not easy when you were formerly the owner of several thousand acres of Herat's best agricultural land. He will surely return to Herat as soon as it is safe to do so. Now nearly a year after the withdrawal of Soviet troops no end to the conflict in Afghanistan is in sight and the situation only grows more complex. It may well be many years before refugees like Amir and Ezat Jan can return to their homeland.

January 1990

•  
NOTES

1. The Leverhulme Film Training Fellowship Scheme was established in 1984, when the Royal Anthropological Institute invited applications for two training fellowships in the making of anthropological films, tenable at the National Film and Television School, Beaconsfield, just to the west of London. The aim of the scheme, made possible by a grant from the Leverhulme Trust, was to train anthropologists with an aptitude for visual anthropology, in the use of film, and to enable them to make at least one documentary film during their year's work. The intention of the scheme was to stimulate the tertiary education sector to provide facilities and finance for filming of this kind. The scheme ran for three years; the first two successful candidates were accepted for a second year of training, while in the third year two new fellows were selected.

2. *The City of Herat* (30 mins), *The Annual Cycle of Music in Herat* (55 mins) and *The Shrines of Herat* (30 mins). A copy of these videos is available for hire from the Royal Anthropological Institute, 50 Fitzroy Street, London W1P 511S.

3. The size of the population of Afghanistan at the time of the Marxist coup of 1978 is generally estimated at about 15 million. Of these perhaps 7 million were Pashtuns, the politically dominant ethnic group. Other ethnic groups in Afghanistan are Tajiks, Uzbaks, Hazaras, Taimuris, Aimaqs, Turkmens, Pashais, Nuristanis, and other smaller groups. The official languages of Afghanistan are Pashto and Dari (Afghan Persian), and Dari is effectively the lingua franca.

4. The Pashtuns are called Pakhtuns in Pakistan, and the language Pakhto rather than Pashto. This simply reflects a difference in dialect, in the easterly tribes the sh sound is pronounced kh. The same tribal peoples were known to the British as Pathans. To minimise confusion the Pakhtun people of Pakistan will be referred to here as Pashtuns.

5. The importance of the distinction between amateur and professional musicians in Afghanistan is discussed in detail by Baily 1988a: 101-2; 1988b).

6. The musician in question was Satar Khan, Amir's father-in-law, who was a member of Haikal's group at that time. At about the time I met Amir, Satar Khan joined another band, that of Mushtar Ali Haidar, whom we meet in Scene 3. In one dastan on the cassette Haikal sang:

It was in the dark of night when the mujahideen were fighting  
It was difficult to distinguish friend from foe  
In the morning it was time for the third attack  
'Allah O Akbar' could be heard amongst the bombardment

The mujdahideen were going now into that district  
And they were happy for the blood they shed in martyrdom  
They prepared themselves for martyrdom  
As they made their third attack upon the town

The use of the *tabla* to imitate the sounds of gunfire was, for example, especially prominent after the first line of the second verse above. It seems clear that the written history of the war in Afghanistan will have to utilise the stories recounted in epics such as this.

7. The English translation of this song as sub-titled in the film is worth reproducing:

Keep your hands off  
For you cannot succeed  
This is the land of the Afghans  
And we will not be fooled any more

Child of Imperialism, listen to me  
Stay silent and don't play with fire

For I am the Afghan  
And I made the British flee  
I was the thunder over their heads  
And my hands destroyed them

So get out British  
For you cannot escape  
This is the land of the Afghans  
And we will not be fooled any more

8. Curiously, I had once seen exactly the same treatment meted out to Amir in Herat, this time from the senior member of the extended family of musicians with whom Amir lived.

9. The tying of a string around the wrist of the student is the way that students are initiated in the world of South Asian music. See, for example, Kippen 1988: 41, 113-5, 135.

10. Babrak Kamal was the President of Afghanistan in 1985. He was brought to power in the Soviet invasion of 1979 and was replaced in 1986 by Dr Najibullah.

11. This shot is labelled as "a" (i.e. 38a) because it is (in this film) a unique instance of a visual insert over a continuous sound track, which immediately reverts to synch.

12. A translation of Rahman Baba's divdn, book of poetry, has been published by Enevoldsen (1977).

13. Awal Mir was a celebrated Pashto singer from Kandahar. At the time of Daud's coup in 1973 there was a competition for the best patriotic song. Awal Mir won the competition with this song, whose chorus runs:

This is my beautiful country, This is my handsome country  
This is too dear to me, This is Afghanistan

Many other singers performed the song but their renditions apparently lacked something when compared with Awal Mir's original version. Playing this tune makes Amir seem very patriotic to an Afghan audience.

14. The Nawab Sahib usually plays the harmonium, at which he is something of an expert. Due to a back injury he finds the pumping of the harmonium somewhat taxing and had recently purchased the Casio keyboard.

## REFERENCES CITED

Baily, John

1981 "A system of modes used in the urban music of Afghanistan", *Ethnomusicology*, XXV(1):46-64.

1988a *Music of Afghanistan: Professional musicians in the city of Herat*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. With accompanying audio cassette.

1988b "Amin-e Diwaneh: The musician as madman", *Popular Music*, 7(2):131-146.

1989 "Film making as musical ethnography", *World of Music*.

Ditcher, David

1967 *The North-West Frontier of West Pakistan. A Study in Regional Geography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Doubleday, Veronica

1988 *Three Women of Herat*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Dupree, Louis

1973 *Afghanistan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

English, Paul

1973 "The Traditional City of Herat", in L. Carl Brown (ed.) *From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City*. Princeton: The Darwin Press. Pps. 73-90.

Enevoldsen, Jens

1977 *Selections from Rahman Baba. Heming (Denmark): Poul Kristensen*.

Fraser-Tytler, W.K.

1967 *Afghanistan. A Study of Political Developments in Central and Southern Asia*. Third edition. London: Oxford University Press.

Kippen, James

1988 *The Tabla of Lucknow. A cultural analysis of a musical tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. With accompanying audio cassette.

Moin, Baqr

1985 "An Afghan cultural renaissance?" *The Middle East*, January, page 29.

Sakata, Hiromi Lorraine

1983 *Music in the Mind: the Concepts of Music and Musician in Afghanistan*. Kent State University Press. With two accompanying audio cassettes.

Wolfe, Nancy Hatch

1966 *Herat*. Kabul: The Afghan Tourist Organization.

Zernp, Hugo

1988 Review of Amir, in *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 20: 257-260.

Researched, directed and edited by John Baily

Camera - Wayne Derrick

Sound recordist - John Baily

Produced jointly by

The Royal Anthropological Institute, and  
The National Film and Television School, UK

©1985

Study guide written by John Baily ©1990

With thanks to Ahmad Wali Sultani, Veronica Doubleday and  
Nabi Misdaq for help with translations of dialogue and song texts.

---

Shot and edited in 1985

52 mins / 16 mm / optical sound, color

Languages: Dari (Afghan Persian) and Pashto, English subtitles,  
brief commentary in English at the beginning

Available from:

Documentary Educational Resources

101 Morse Street

Watertown, Massachusetts 02172

Telephone: (617) 926-0491

Fax: (617) 926-9519

© copyright 2004 Documentary Educational Resources

101 Morse Street Watertown, MA 02472 Tel 617.926.0491

