

Iranian Culture and Identity Abroad

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by Sepideh Saremi

[Re-Interpreting Googoosh: An Interview with Musician Payam Bavafa](#)



Meet Payam Bavafa, songwriter/guitarist in a San Francisco-based experimental rock band called [Sholi](#). The band's [most recent EP, "Hejrat,"](#) features an awesome cover of Googoosh's song by the same name. We asked Bavafa, the group's sole Iranian-American member, what Persian music means to him, and why he and his bandmates - drummer Jonathon Bafus, bassist Eric Ruud, and keyboardist/percussionist Greg Hagel -

decided to cover the Persian pop legend. Here's what he had to say.

Pars Arts: Tell us about Sholi; how'd you guys get together, and how'd you pick the name?

Payam Bavafa: I started playing music with Jon (the drummer) in Davis, where we were both going to college. I wanted to have a Persian name for our group, and Jon liked "Sholi," the nickname that my dad gave my brother and me when we wrestled as kids.

PA: Your newest release is a 7" entitled Hejrat, which is the name of the famous Googoosh song you've covered. Why the fascination with Googoosh, and why did you choose the song Hejrat?

PB: Googoosh was the predominant soundtrack to youth in Iran in the '70s. My mother came to the United States then as a college student, and like many other young Iranian girls of the time, she was fascinated with Googoosh... her voice, her looks, her dancing, her fashions. For today's middle-aged Iranians, including my mom, listening to Googoosh's music is reminiscent not only of Iranian '70s music, but the family and the culture they left behind. Thinking about how powerful this inherently nostalgic music must have been to my mother and other Iranians struck a particularly strong chord in me.

My original idea was to do an entire album of Googoosh covers, reinterpreting them with Sholi as a means to turn American audiences on to her music and story. However at the time (November 2007), this seemed a bit ambitious, and also political rhetoric between Iran and America was escalating in such a way that I felt the urge to make a more concise statement right away - one that would turn an American artist's fan-base on to Iranian music and culture and vice-versa. That is still pretty ambitious, I suppose...

It was also then that I read an essay by Hamid Nafisi called [The Making of Exile Cultures](#), about the impact of media, particularly television, on Iranian expatriates looking back to images/sounds/relics of their pre-revolutionary past for a sense of cultural identity. This led me to thinking about how I seek out my own cultural identity, with Internet and new media playing a prominent role. The YouTube video and audio clips we sampled for the 7" - the front-cover image of Googoosh on the TV taken from the [Hejrat music video](#), the image of Joanna on the back cover taken from the [Sprout and the Bean music video](#), and the [audio clip of Iranians being interviewed](#) about what they do for fun at the end of Sprout and Bean, are all a testament to Nafisi's ideas and also the way I connected to the songs myself. My good friend [Michael Aghajanian](#) posed our parents watching Googoosh on television at his house in LA for the cover shot.

As for why I chose “Hejrat” in particular... it started with seeing the music video and being intrigued. After looking further into the lyrics and speaking with some Iranians, I realized that it’s commonly regarded as one of Iran’s most beautiful songs. I believe that the literal translation of the title is “Migration,” and it’s about a lover that has departed. I wanted to re-frame the song to be about Iran itself leaving the hundreds of thousands of natives who were essentially forced out of their homeland at the turn of the Islamic Revolution, a theme that I think Googoosh herself embodies.

PA: You’re the sole Iranian in Sholi’s lineup. How did you introduce Googoosh to your bandmates? Have you guys explored other Persian music, and do you have plans to do other Iranian covers?

PB: We don’t have plans for more covers at the moment, but I think that Persian music is something that is inherently explored within this band... in the melodies, rhythms, tunings, 1-chord song structures.

I introduced Eric (our bass player) to Googoosh’s music a long time before he was in the band. I could tell he was moved by it, not even knowing what the song was about. More recently I gave everyone “[Googoosh: 40 Golden Hits](#),” a best-of compilation on Taraneh Records my friend Razmin turned me on to.

PA: The B-side of this album is a cover of the [Joanna Newsom](#) song, “Sprout and the Bean.” Again, an interesting choice, as Newsom’s ethereal folk-style contrasts so much with Googoosh’s 1970s disco-chic. What does Newsom’s music represent here?

PB: I think “Sprout and the Bean” is beautiful and poses an interesting counterpoint to “Hejrat,” thematically. The song climaxes with a chorus of voices asking “Should we go outside?” Googoosh’s answer, through “Migration,” the name and theme, is delivered on side A. The backwards sequencing here - implying action or “migration” preceding thought or choice or questioning - is suggestive of many Iranians’ sudden plight at the turn of the revolution. A large number of these exiles still look to the past for answers in their search for happiness and a sense of cultural identity. While Joanna’s and many Americans’ existential dialogue is far-removed from political pressures, Googoosh’s and the expatriated Iranians’ dialogue is heavily centered on their cultural displacement. Joanna embodies the fantastical and other-worldly, and works within an original, mystical universe that she’s seemed to have created all on her own. I think that her work moves the audience forward into a fantasy realm, rather than backward into a realistic, nostalgic one. It’s full of “danger of broad boats,” “hollow chatter of tadpoles,” among a myriad of other fantastical constructions that are characteristic of her free-flowing musical ideas. To me, what Googoosh represents now is a repressed cultural icon. Her songs have rigid, repetitive structures, and are mostly romantic in nature. Her work, in its current context, is most often interpreted as nostalgic, turning listeners back to the way their lives were before political circumstance changed everything.

PA: You’re touring now, with recent stops in Brooklyn complete. How has your music been received thus far, especially the Persian-language Googoosh cover? A couple of your stops were in my old neighborhood, Williamsburg - I’m so curious about what the hipsters made of your show.

PB: I think we were received well at [Brooklyn venue] Union Hall. The place was a strange combination of hipster kids and 30-something parents with their babies playing bocce. This Norwegian prog band called [Ungdomskulen](#) played with us. They were awesome.

Oddly enough, the Googoosh song has been the highlight of many shows among Americans and Iranians alike. In Portland, this very nice Iranian woman came to the show with her American husband, and they liked it so much they welcomed us to stay the night at their house! I feel like in some ways doing such a cover has allowed us to connect with a crowd of people who would have never connected to our music otherwise... the main example of that being my parents. Another highlight was a [Take Away Show](#) we recently did with director [Vincent Moon](#) (yet to be released). For one of the videos we walked through Dolores Park in San Francisco carrying guitar, cello, and bells, playing “Hejrat” to hundreds of unsuspecting listeners.

PA: What other Persian music has influenced your and Sholi’s music?

PB: Lately I've been listening to the [Golha Radio Programmes \(The Flowers of Persian Poetry and Song\)](#) on [radiogolha.com](#). They are very beautiful and inspiring; it's so nice that they've been digitally archived since their original broadcasts from 1956-1979.

When I was young, I listened to a lot of [Andy and Kouros](#), and actually still do. I think [Balla](#) is one of the best Iranian pop albums. Besides that, Shajarian, Javad Maroufi, Ebi, Hayedeh, Marzieh, Dariush and probably a hundred other artists that I couldn't name that my parents have filled the house with since I was young. A lot of traditional Persian music.

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Hear Sholi's music here:

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28 Apr 2008, 12:57pm
by Mary Bavafa

Great job!!

28 Apr 2008, 3:42pm
by [Holocene Music | Sholi Interview](#)

[...] a great interview with our friend Payam from Sholi here, with a lot of great background on that great Sholi 7" we helped put out. [...]

30 Apr 2008, 12:10pm
by Shahrzad

Well done, beautiful, but not convincing! Not because of the strange accent which doesn't sound Persian, but more Dutch/German looked Farsi, but also due to the noisy rock 'n roll-ish background. This is not a remix, but a reproduction!

2 May 2008, 8:03am
by Catalina Atria

No one said this was a remix, but a cover, an interpretation. How boring would it be to simply play what is already there. You need Sholi's originality to come through for it to be worth it, and it does, in the intricate beats and smooth voices. Love it.

6 May 2008, 8:56am
by [Interview with Sholi and streaming single : The Bay Bridged - San Francisco Bay Area Indie Music](#)

[...] Great new interview with Sholi over at Pars Arts. [...]

10 Aug 2008, 12:24am
by [Pars Arts » Blog Archive » Googoosh and The Believer Music Issue 2008](#)

[...] as well as Sholi's cover of Googoosh's Hejrat (for more on Sholi, check out the Pars Arts interview with Sholi frontman, Payam Bavafa, who brought this cover to my attention). You can buy a copy of the issue (\$10) at any big [...]

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