



ECHOES OF HOME IN THE NEW WORLD

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Nearly three million Afghans live outside Afghanistan and on a recent Friday night, six of them are having dinner in a tiny commission flat in Flemington. As the Afghan dumplings go around the table, the talk circles the endless theme of being far from home.

Fazila Hajeb, here with her husband Hanif, is a broadcaster on SBS radio. She is discussing a talkback program she worked on recently about depression among Afghan women. To her surprise, women called in- a brave step in Afghan society- to lament their isolation, the scattering of their families around the world, and their children who are slipping from them into the strange Australian culture.

Near her sits Jalal Noorani, once editor-in-chief of Anis, one of Afghanistan's main newspapers. His family is scattered too, in Turkey, Canada, and the US.

It is a conversation bound by the long, thin thread of exile. But tonight is a happy night. Among them sits Khalil Gudaz, a slender man of about 40 who says little but smiles often. Jalal Noorani is beaming: it is such an honour to have "Master Gudaz" in his home. And tonight Master Gudaz will play.

To make space, a couch is carried from the living room. In the next room, 2 young girls are watching a Disney movie, *The Emperor's New Groove*; a boy is thumbing a gameboy. Gudaz takes his Sitar from a long, black case and sits crosslegged on the floor. His 16 yr old nephew, Ramin, will accompany him on *Tabla*, 2 drums beaten by hand.

Candles are lit, the light is switched off. And most imperceptibly, tuning turns to playing. The room fills with warm, spangled sound of Sitar.

Unlike his friends, Gudaz came to Australia as a migrant, not a refugee. But his story is no less remarkable. It is about displacement & reinvention, & whether anything of the old world can survive in the new. And it is about secrets hidden in the suburbs of Melbourne.

Gudaz is 13 when the story begins. He is playing ball with friends outside his family house in a village North of Kabul.

Inside, his brother is listening to an old radio. Through the window comes a kind of music the boy has never heard, though he has learnt instruments & song for half his life. He forgets his friends & runs inside. "What is that instrument?" He demands. "I will learn it."

He begs his family to buy him a Sitar, but a new one is too dear. He buys a broken one & has it fixed. He plays 11 or 12 hours a day. His mother brings him dinner but he asks her to leave it. She comes back hours later to find the food cold, her son lost in the music.

What moved him so much that day? Gudaz smiles, struggling not only with English but, as anyone does, with words to express music. "How can I say this? The sound was very clear, very bright...like a perfume. It attacked my heart."

The boy grows up. His playing becomes known across the country. In 1983, when he is 20, he is Afghanistan's musician of the year.

But the Sitar is not an Afghan instrument and people tell him he must go to India. They make him promise to come home one day, to be a great musician for Afghanistan.

In the West, thanks to George Harrison and Ravi Shankar, the Sitar is synonymous with the sound of India, yet its origins are partly Afghan. In the Persian language, "sitar" means three strings (though it can have as many as 20 today).

Its inventor was the great 13th century Sufi poet Amir Khusrau, whose father came from Afghanistan, and after whom Gudaz named his only son.

In Delhi, Gudaz studies under Amjad Ali Khan, the celebrated Indian master of the Sarod. They share the ancient bond of guru and disciple. Ali Khan instructs Gudaz in a technique and the pupil leaves to practise it for the rest of the day. Gudaz's skill grows; he is chosen to play on All India Radio, a rare honour.

But in modern India, making a living playing Sitar is hard and Gudaz has a wife and four children to feed. Worse by 1996 the Taliban is in power of Kabul. They are cutting off the hands of musicians, the tongues of singers. Gudaz can't go home. It is an agonising prospect: to leave India is to banish himself from the roots of his music, and Ali Khan urges him not to go. "You will be a great musician," he says. But what most counts, he and his wife Sabera decide, is the future of the children.

And so the family moves from Delhi to Mulgrave, to public housing and the lonely obscurity of the suburbs. "Take us back to India; it is so boring here," the children beg. Gudaz struggles to find work. A pub offers him a spot performing so people eat dinner, but the Sitar demands an attentive audience. Poor as he is, Gudaz says no.

But people are generous. An Indian man brings him a stack of Indian movie videos and invites him to play at a Sikh temple in Blackburn. A Tabla player from Brunswick called Rodney Wright turns up on his door. Pupils and performances start to come. And in March, he and Ramin are invited to close the world music festival Womadelaide.

The performance is brilliant, says Doug Spencer, producer of Radio National's music program The Planet. "Normally the last performer plays a kind of meditative end note as people stream out of the park. But in 10 years coming here, I've never seen so many people who were leaving, stop, listen, then turn back to the stage."

"He is probably the best Sitar player in Australia," says Dr. Reis Flora, who teaches Indian classical music at Monash University. "We're very lucky to have him in Melbourne. It saves the price of a ticket to Mumbai, because any concert he gives will be comparable to anything you'd hear in India."

Slowly, Gudaz is getting a foothold. Fazila Hajeb is helping him start a music school, which opens this month.

Tonight he is playing at Melbourne University's Melba Hall. And the fall of the Taliban is a great opportunity. He hopes to return to Afghanistan, to play and to see his family again.

In a sense, Gudaz's loss is our gain. No longer do you have to travel to India to learn the Sitar, or to Brazil, say, to learn the Samba. The notices in newspapers or pinned to cafe walls show how many traditions are here- transformed and diluted, yes, but alive. Gudaz's students are Australian, Indian, Vietnamese. The other day a Japanese woman rang wanting to learn. Music is a part of the astonishing new mix of the world.

The family now has a fifth child. The other children have friends and lives. They are happy, but Khusrau, eleven, prefers Nintendo to Sitar. Gudaz is accepting; if his children want to play one day, they will. He plays gently, late into the night while his family sleeps.

It is late in the Nooranis' Flemington flat. The two eldest daughters, Zora and Zohal have just come home, having worked all evening at KFC. When they finish school, one wants to work in fashion. Both have high hopes for the future.

In the living room, Gudaz is singing an Afghan love song. The haunting and melancholic sitar melody rises and falls in the tiny room. The words tell an ancient story; he is a long way from her, he cannot be with her, but if he doesn't see her he will die. Hajeb sings too. And so does Jalal Noorani, his eyes closed. You don't need to know the words or the music to feel moved. Khalil Gudaz has taken his people home.