

Press Pack

Afghan Star

After 30 years of war and Taliban rule, Afghan Pop Idol is sweeping the nation. But this is more than just a TV talent show... in Afghanistan you risk your life to sing.

**Directed and produced by
Havana Marking**

**2009 Sundance Awards:
Best World Cinema Documentary Director &
World Cinema Documentary Audience Award**

**2009 Prix Italia
Best Cultural Documentary**

**www.afghanstardocumentary.com
87mins
HDCAM**

Funded by Channel 4 Britdoc Foundation, More4 & the CBA DFID Broadcast Media Scheme

**US Distributors:
Zeitgeist Films -
<http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/film.php?directoryname=afghanstar>**

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An Afghan-British Co-Production:
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See last page for further contacts.

Current status:

Screened at **SIDF** (UK Premier) & **IDFA** (European Premier) where it was nominated for IDFA First Appearance Award & DOC U! competition.

Recently had American Premier at **SUNDANCE WORLD CINEMA COMPETITION** – and was awarded **Best World Cinema Documentary Director & World Cinema Documentary Audience Award**.

Also shown as a Special Presentation at Hot Docs (Toronto) and SilverDocs (DC)

The film has TX'ed in the UK to rave reviews, and screened at the prestigious ICA cinema for one month.

The US theatrical release is due to start on 26 June. For details see
<http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/film.php?directoryname=afghanstar>

Winner of Prix Italia 2009 : Best Documentary

Synopsis

After 30 years of war and Taliban rule, Afghan Pop Idol is taking the nation by storm. But this is more than just a TV show... in Afghanistan you risk your life to sing.

Synopsis Short – 113 words

After 30 years of war and Taliban rule, pop culture has returned to Afghanistan. Millions are watching Afghan Star - a Pop Idol-style TV series in which people from across the country compete for a cash prize and record deal. 2000 people audition, including three brave women. The viewers vote for their favorite singers by mobile phone and for many this is their first encounter with democracy. This timely and inspired film follows the moving stories of four young contestants looking for a new life. But their journeys take a terrifying turn as one young woman dances on stage, threatening her own safety and the future of the show itself. In Afghanistan you risk your life to sing.

Synopsis Long – 629 words

After 30 years of war and Taliban-rule, pop culture has returned to Afghanistan. Afghan Star - a Pop Idol-style TV series – is searching the country for the next generation of music stars. Over 2000 people are auditioning and even three women have come forward to try their luck. The organizers, Tolo TV, believe with this programme they can ‘move people from guns to music’.

But in a troubled country like Afghanistan, even music is controversial. Considered sacrilegious by the Mujahiddeen and outright banned by the Taliban (1996-2001), music has come to symbolize freedom for the youth. While the conflict still rages many of those taking part are literally risking their lives.

But the old guard warlords and religious elite have more to worry about than just music. Millions of people watch the show (11 mn watched the final – a third of the country) and vote by SMS from their cell phone for their favorite singers. For many, this is the first time they have encountered democracy: one man or one women equals one vote. All - the different genders, ethnic groups, age sectors - are equal. This is a highly radical idea in a country still essentially based on a male-dominated tribal elder system. For the first time young people, ethnic minorities and women have an arena in which to shine. And at last, the people are allowed to vote for who they want.

This documentary follows the 3 month process from the regional auditions to the final in Kabul. Behind the scenes at all times we gained unprecedented access to the lives of contestants, fans and producers alike.

Characters like Rafi – a 19-yr old local boy from Mazar e Sharif and a classic wannabe pop star. His voice is strong and face is pretty. he has no interest in politics, he just wants his people to wake up – ‘for their souls to come alive again’. For the people of Mazar he is a hero. Posters are springing up across the city and the girls are sneaking looks from behind their burqas.

Lima, a 25yr old from Kandahar faces a very different experience. Coming from one of the most traditional and religious areas in the country, Lima fears for her life everytime she goes home. Her music teacher smuggles instruments into the house and they practice in secret. She says she has no choice but to sing and face the consequence. She is poor and the \$1000 prize is her only future.

Hameed is a young musician and classically trained singer from the Hazara ethnic group. The Hazara have always been the most exploited of the Afghans – many were massacred by the Taliban. In reaching the Top 10 Hameed has become a hero for his people and huge support network has sprung up: poster campaigns, door to door canvassing, outdoor concerts.

But the main story belongs to Setara, a 21 year old singer from Herat. Wearing modern fashion, Bollywood makeup and sometimes moving on stage made her a controversial figure: adored by the young girls, hated by the older generations. When she finally dances on stage and lets her headscarf slip, well, all hell breaks lose...

Setara’s story snowballs into terrifying territory in two ways: Setara fears for her life, and has to go into hiding, while the series and its producers are threatened by the powers that be. It is an extraordinary moment - both in Setara’s life, and for the future of the nation.

Our main characters reveal the true hopes and dreams of the Afghan youth, their desire for peace, education, and freedom to express themselves. 60% of the Afghan population are under 21, and despite the backdrop of conflict, corruption and repression they are funny, articulate and ultimately inspiring.

The film's journey

Afghan Star has been an extraordinary success, gaining momentum from the moment it was finished and entered into Sundance. The film is now being screened in over 40 cinemas in the US and screened on TV in many countries. In the UK it ran at the ICA for a month and will be aired on C4 in the Autumn.

The film has had unrivalled press attention all over the world, and has effectively worked to both raise human right's issues in Afghanistan but also subvert the cliché of Afghans as intractably primitive, superstitious tribespeople who have little in common with Westerners.

We are very proud to have partnered with Human Rights Watch, Afghan Aid and the Refugee Council on this film. Screenings have taken place to raise money and awareness of the issues but also to engage with relevant audiences and involve in the debate. The film is being now being used as a campaign and educational tool.

We know the film has been watched by the highest ranking and influential of people in government, including The British Ambassador in Kabul, Richard Holbrook, the Swedish foreign minister and many high ranking UN officials. Congressional screenings in DC, and Parliamentary Committee screenings in London are currently being organised.

Directors BIO

Havana Marking

Afghan Star is Havana Marking's first feature documentary, shot over the 4 months in Kabul. Before AS she directed *The Crippendales* (2007) – a 30min film about the first troupe of disabled strippers winning the UK Channel 4 scheme for New Talent. In 2005 she made the Great Relativity Show, a series of animated shorts (3MW) that explained the Theory of Relativity. These won a Pirelli Science award.

Before 2005, while she was TV producing, she worked on some of the most successful UK formats and films: The F Word, Michael Palin: Himalaya, River Cottage, No Going Back, War On Terra – What Would Jesus Drive?.

Her talent is taking very serious subjects and presenting them in fascinating and entertaining ways – but always maintaining impeccable journalistic integrity and respect for those taking part.

Havana is also a respected journalist with articles printed in the Guardian and Observer newspapers. Redstart Media is her own production company.

PHIL STEBBING Camera

Phil Stebbing cut his teeth as a Producer/Director on mainstream TV documentaries, working on projects for the BBC and Channel 4. As the industry has developed he has trained additionally as a skilled camera operator and editor. His wide experience meant he was perfect for the observational style of *Afghan Star*. He was able to follow action in the most extraordinary circumstances.

Phil likes a challenge, hence Afghanistan, and a cause, such as fish piracy and marine conservation: his film '**The Deadline**' is currently circulating the festivals. Phil is also creating The Lifeline, an Eco facebook for communities to build and support free and sustainable communities.

<blingstar@mac.com>

ASH JENKINS Editor

Editor Ash Jenkins has achieved a great deal for his young age of 26. His most recent work includes feature documentary '**Afghan Star**' for More 4 and Nick Broomfield's drama feature '**Battle For Haditha**'. Both screened at IDFA, and *Afghan Star* is selected to be part of the Sundance World Cinema Documentary Competition in January.

During his Film School studies in Wales, Ash spent time in Africa and made films for Amnesty International, ITN and Channel 4 News - documenting themes of war,

poverty and struggle. In 2004, his filmmaking was noticed by acclaimed British Director Nick Broomfield and the duo started working closely on some very exciting projects, '**His Big White Self**' and '**Ghosts**'.

Ash's work has continued to not go unnoticed and in July he was nominated as for the Broadcast Hotshot 2008 section, spotlighting the brightest talent each year. Broomfield said "Ash is unbelievably fast with the equipment. He's the only editor I've ever worked with who can edit as fast as he can think."

Ash is a mature Editor with passion, drive and an amazing aptitude for creative and thought-provoking storytelling. He is currently working on some key projects as well as managing his Post start-up company Roundtable Films.

ash@roundtablefilms.co.uk

Producers

KABOORA Production (formerly Aria) is the leading audio and video production company in Afghanistan, producing an astonishing 14 hours of content a day.

KABOORA Production is responsible for content for various media entities including TOLO TV (Afghanistan's most popular television network), LEMAR TV (Afghanistan's third most popular television station), ARMAN FM (Afghanistan's third most popular radio network), commercial advertising for private and government clients and documentaries for UN and other entities.

Over the last few years, KABOORA Production's capacity and expertise has grown substantially. Recently KABOORA Production was involved as the logistic support partner for DreamWorks for the film of the very popular book, *The Kite Runner*.

In addition, KABOORA Production has been responsible for production of a number of ads for Etisalat Afghanistan, the Afghan National Army, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Afghan National Development Strategy and various others.

KABOORA Production's Raz Hae Een Khana (The Secrets of This House) took out the Special Award at the Seoul Drama Awards in October 2008. Screened on TOLO TV, the nation's most popular TV station, is the first drama series ever entirely written, acted, filmed, produced and broadcast by Afghans, for Afghans in Afghanistan. It was selected for a Special Prize amongst 152 entries from 33 countries around the world.

Roast Beef Productions

ROAST BEEF PRODUCTIONS was formed in 2006 by Martin Herring, Ian Wright and Mike Lerner to produce international documentaries for US and UK broadcasters.

They currently produce a range of travel, observational and arts documentaries for Travel Channel and Channel 4.

Martin Herring has directed some of Channel 4 and Discovery Channel's most successful and controversial documentaries including "The Black Widow", "What Would Jesus Drive?", "Beijing Swings" and "Planet Soccer".

Mike Lerner has spent 20 years producing highly acclaimed, high-rating documentaries for BBC, Channel 4, FIVE and Discovery – blockbuster biographies include 'Picasso', 'Gauguin', 'Van Gogh' and 'The Sistine Chapel' – architecture includes 'Supercities' and 'The Stirling Prize' – and travel documentaries include 'Beijing Swings', 'Turkmenistan – The Happy Dictator' and the Muslim World – 'Paradise Found'.

Credits:

Produced and Directed By
HAVANA MARKING

Camera & Sound
PHIL STEBBING

Editor
ASH JENKINS

Executive Producers
MARTIN HERRING
MIKE LERNER
JAHID MOHSENI
SAAD MOHSENI

Commissioning editors
SANDRA WHIPHAM (MORE 4)
MAXYNE FRANKLIN (BRITDOC)

Development Producer
RACHEL REID

Production Manager
JANET KNIPE

Translators

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AKMAL KHALIQ
ZAKI KHALIQI

Assistant Editor

SAMIR NASIM

Production Accountant

RODNEY BROOKS

Colourist

ANDY LEE

Sound Dubbing

SCOTT WILKINSON

Post Production

ON SIGHT
FITZROVIA

Original Music Score

SIMON RUSSELL

With thanks to

BRITDOC FOUNDATION
CBA-DFID FUND

Reviews

"A fantastic documentary about a talent competition in a country where you would never dream such a thing is possible."

-Oprah Winfrey

"Wonderful movie!... takes us somewhere few movies have.... The sense of hope and danger is more palpable here than in any other movie I've seen at Sundance, and the film's hard-won good vibes had the audience cheering."

-Ty Burr, Boston Globe/Movie Nation

"An informed and entertaining dispatch about the collision of culture, ideology and history that ultimately suggests a darker, more rueful Afghani Slumdog Millionaire."

-Screen International

"Entertaining. Absorbing for the light it casts on those many Afghans who want an end to guns and fanaticism, and the return of a social liberalism."

Dennis Harvey, Variety

"It's a shrewd and entertaining guide to this popular phenomenon...Has the west brought democracy to Afghanistan? This engaging documentary by journalist and film-maker Havana Marking offers a startling answer."

Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian

"This fascinating documentary follows four competitors from the comical audition stage through to the nerve-racking finale."

Sarah Cohen, Time Out London

A Talent-Show Tonic for a War-Weary Land

By STEPHEN HOLDEN, New York Times

Published: June 26, 2009

<http://movies.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/movies/26star.html>

In "Afghan Star," Havana Marking's engrossing documentary, suspense surrounds a talent competition that becomes a national obsession, lending a steady narrative drive to this portrait of an "American Idol"-style television show in Afghanistan. The excitement is more than a matter of who will win. The movie uses the talent show "Afghan Star" as a prism through which to examine the fragmented tribal culture of Afghanistan as reflected in the backgrounds of four finalists (two of them women) and the public responses to their performances.

"Afghan Star" subverts the cliché image of Afghanistan as a nation of intractably primitive, superstitious tribespeople who have little in common with

Westerners. Most of the Afghans in the film speak decent English, and the kind of hysteria kicked up by the show is identical to the hoopla surrounding “American Idol.” The popularity of “Afghan Star” among the country’s youth is presented as a hopeful sign that Afghanistan is ready to exchange “guns for music,” to quote one talking head.

During much of the repressive Taliban rule, music, dance and television were banned in Afghanistan. And the film makes clear that in many places outside the more liberal stronghold of Kabul, Islamic fundamentalist strictures still apply. The documentary’s collective voices suggest the country is profoundly war weary after enduring 30 years of strife originating from inside and outside its borders.

The most intriguing contestant, Setara Hussainzada, is a beautiful, defiant young woman from Herat in her early 20s who is made up like a Bollywood star before appearing on the show. During her climactic performance, she flouts taboos by letting her head scarf slip and doing a brief little dance. She is not surprised, she says, when her performance elicits death threats; she is accustomed to living with fear.

Each of the four finalists comes from a different background. Lima Sahar, from Kandahar, is more conservative than Setara but also draws threats. She tells of having taken secret music lessons, which if found out by the Taliban might have gotten her killed. Hameed Sakhizada, a young man from Kabul, is a classically trained singer from the Hazara ethnic group. Rafi Naabzada, from Mazar-i-Sharif, is the obvious front-runner with his smooth good looks and pop-star manners.

Without putting too much of a smiley face on things, the movie portrays the success of “Afghan Star,” whose 2008 season finale drew 11 million viewers (roughly a third of Afghanistan’s population), as evidence of democracy in action. Viewers cast their votes by text message; the grand prize is \$5,000. The contestants (at least the two male finalists) are shown vigorously campaigning with posters, leaflets and sound trucks. Their friendly rivalry suggests a profound desire among many Afghans for national unity that transcends age-old tribal strife.

The “Afghan Star” phenomenon might seem frivolous if it did not take place in an environment fraught with real danger, not only to the women with the courage to compete, but to the show itself. The Taliban remains a well-financed force not to be taken lightly. A council of bearded Islamic scholars warns that if the show continues, society will collapse. Meanwhile there are threats from the Taliban to destroy the country’s mobile-phone network. As is obvious from the small, battered television sets with improvised antennas on which people follow the show, television service in the country is fragile.

Daoud Sediqi, the show’s presenter and director, is as gung-ho a television personality as Ryan Seacrest. Near the end of the film he declares, “The Taliban is finished.” But what does it say that after attending the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year, where “Afghan Star” won the directing and

audience awards in the world documentary competition, he didn't return to his native country and is thought to be seeking asylum in the United States?

Financial Times

By Nigel Andrews

Published: March 25 2009

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/4c50fdb2-195a-11de-9d34-0000779fd2ac.html>

The sleeper of the week – or more the wake-up call – is *Afghan Star*. Havana Marking's uproarious, awareness-raising documentary tells us more about the title country than a month of newscasts. A Kabul television channel transmitting Afghanistan's version of *Pop Idol* has, apparently, electrified the nation. One third of Afghans, huddled over screens in houses, bars, hovels, watched the final of the first series.

The show defies Taliban mission creep in the south (lobbing maledictions at the Kandahar contenders), braves death threats in the west (a Herat girl who dares to dance as well as sing) and generally boxes the compass in bringing freedom to a country shivering in its legacy of intolerance. It should be compulsory viewing for every liberty-lover and indeed liberty-hater. The latter might learn that music, in one boy's sweet and simple words, "stops people from being sad".

Screen International

<http://www.screendaily.com/ScreenDailyArticle.aspx?intStoryID=42605&strSearch=a%20ghan%20star&strCallingPage=ScreenDailySearchSite.aspx>

Afghan Star

Dir. Havana Marking. UK/Afghanistan. 2008. 88mins.

The winner of the directing prize and the audience award at Sundance's world documentary section Havana Marking's debut feature *Afghan Star* is an informed and entertaining dispatch about the collision of culture, ideology and history that ultimately suggests a darker, more rueful Afghani *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Produced by the UK's Channel 4, it tracks the fate of four contestants on the Afghan version of *Pop Idol*, turning up stories of individual tenacity transcending harrowing obstacles. The Sundance success coupled with the movie's accessible and culturally fascinating story guarantees festival play and a possible show on the international arthouse. Ancillary certainly looks healthy.

The central front of the war on terror, Afghanistan has been ripped apart for decades by the Soviet occupation, civil war, tribal and sectarian clashes, the rise of religious fundamentalism and the terrorist operations of al Qaeda. Culturally the country is still reeling from the six-year reign of the Taliban that outlawed art, dancing and the playing of music.

In these difficult times, one entrepreneurial broadcast company, Tolo, has inaugurated *Afghan Star*, where the country's population casts in their votes; drawing off the show's countdown structure, Marking's film follows the strange odyssey of semifinalists Setara Hussainzada, Rafi Nabaazda, Hameed Sakhizada and Lema Sehar.

The show quickly becomes a cultural sensation. For the finalists the consequences prove troubling, especially the two female contestants. In the most frightening passages, Setara shows how deeply entrenched the country's reactionary politics remain when her chaste dance number and removal of head covering results in a series of ugly recriminations. A religious cleric publicly condemns her and people on

the street chillingly call for her death.

Afghan Star is not a radical act of film-making and visually, it is far from an inspired piece of work – but it's a great example of a film where the strong content rules supreme. Marking is at her best illustrating the cultural struggle between those Afghans who view the program as a return to the country's open, somewhat progressive past and the religious clerics and political leaders who view it as a tool of Western imperialism which violates sharia law.

Boston Globe / Movie Nation

http://www.boston.com/ae/movies/blog/2009/01/sundance_day_3.html

"Afghan Star," by contrast, takes us somewhere few movies have-- into the heart of Afghanistan for the final episodes of a wildly popular "American Idol"- style TV contest. Havana Marking's film focuses on four contestants -- two men, two women (one in photo above) -- and a host bent on turning the country's energies from guns to song. Meanwhile, the Taliban and assorted hardliners make death threats and when one of the women dares to dance and remove her head scarf during her final song, the country reels from the scandal. The sense of hope and danger is more palpable here than in any other movie I've seen at Sundance, and the film's hard-won good vibes had the audience cheering. Wonderful movie.

Variety

<http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=festivals&jump=review&id=2471&reviewid=VE1117939399&cs=1>

Entertaining "Afghan Star" looks at the titular "American Idol"-like TV show, hugely popular yet also a magnet for criticism -- including death threats -- from those who think its Western-style pop frivolity an affront to Islamic law. Not the slickest or most crowd-pleasing among many recent performance-competition docus, it's nonetheless absorbing for the light it casts on those many Afghans who want an end to guns and fanaticism, and the return of a social liberalism.

Already blighted by foreign invasion and civil wars since 1979, the nation, under Taliban control in 1996, saw music, dance, film and television banned. When those restrictions were lifted eight years later, an explosion of new broadcasters included Tolo TV. Its still-running "Star" stoked both regional pride and national unity as ethnically diverse singers from all over competed for the top prize in a glitzy "Idol"-esque weekly showcase. Focus here is on four finalists from a couple seasons ago -- two of them women whose participation riled many, after one rebelliously uncovered her head and danced a bit. Despite worsening trouble from the Taliban, this competently crafted doc maintains an upbeat, pro-democracy tenor.

Hollywood Reporter

http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/news/e3i8bd9b0da7b2e5cc518eb662acd7888fc

Little-hyped films that could steal the Sundance spotlight

Jan 13, 2009, 09:12 PM ET

Afghan Star

*Director: Havana Marking
(World documentary competition)*

The success of Danny Boyle's game show-based "Slumdog Millionaire" could rub off on first-time filmmaker Marking's documentary about contestants who risk their lives

to appear on Afghanistan's version of "American Idol."

SUNDANCE:

After 30 years of Taliban and wartime rule, pop culture is creeping back into Afghanistan. Director Havana Marking has captured it in this inspired documentary, Afghan Star. An American Idol-type contest set in Afghanistan? What more intriguing inroad into a region usually represented in our news media by death and violence? To understand the magnitude of this film, we must look at the facts—2,000 contestants compete for a chance to be the next Afghan pop idol. Three of them are women. In an unheard-of precedent, all genders, ethnic groups, and age sectors are equal. More than one-third of the country watches the show and votes with text messages. For many this represents their first encounter with any kind of democratic process. Marking follows the dramatic stories of four of the contestants over three months, from regional auditions to the finals in Kabul. All is not safe for her subjects because they must actually risk their lives to sing. In a larger sense, we get a glimpse into the ongoing struggle of a country trying to segue into the modern world and the dangerous underpinnings its citizens must navigate. Though moving and inspiring, what is really brilliant about Afghan Star is that by observing a people's relationship to pop culture, we get a different, if not more human, look at this troubled part of the world.

STANDPOINT MAGAZINE

<http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/dispatches-march-09-afghan-star-sundance-afghanistan>

Movie that Pulls Aside the Veil

JAMES SHINN FROM PARK CITY, UTAH

March 2009

Afghan Star's première brought the jaded indie filmmakers to their feet in a cheering ovation, and won both the Best Director and Audience Choice awards at the week-long Sundance Festival.

The director, Havana Marking, takes an irreverent look at the collision between feminism and fundamentalism and paints a surprisingly light-hearted portrait of the country that will be the Obama administration's most serious foreign policy problem.

"Our movie is a revelation, not a revolution," insists producer Jahid Mohseni, and he's right. It pulls aside the veil of war to reveal the witty, engaging, sometimes hilarious inner world of Afghan society.

Guns and Taliban are scarce in this film, a sharp contrast to the grim machinery of destruction I've been watching from choppers and armoured 4x4s on my visits to Afghanistan over the last few years. Instead, Star is all about pop music and twenty-something singers trying to make it big. Like Slumdog Millionaire, which swept the screen awards, Star is set in a TV game-show format. Both films feature gritty third world settings, sympathetic characters and the deft handiwork of quirky British directors. And both films hit hot-button issues with a hammer.

The film spotlights the ethnic fault lines that fracture Afghanistan as deeply as caste divides India. Star also causes major heartburn for the mullahs. Hold on

to your turbans. As the film warns early on, "Music was considered disrespectful by the Mujahideen and sacrilegious by the Taliban." Havana Marking says that she handled the risks of threats of violence and kidnapping "with spontaneity and energy in our on-site filming" - evident to the viewer - and also with armed guards, unusual equipment for documentary film-makers.

The film follows four top song contestants chasing a \$5,000 (£3,500) prize while being voted on by the Afghan public via cellphone text messages. Rafi Nabzaada is a Tajik heart-throb, from Mazar-i-Sharif in the North. Handsome, dark and grinning, he could fit into any teen boy band. Lema Sahar is a Pashtun woman from Kandahar - a composed, wary singer beneath her veil and conservative silk garb. Hameed Sakhizada is the ethnic Hazara guy, a classical musician turned pop singer. Setara Hussainzada is a Herati, brassy and brave, uncowed by the mullahs and even a public denunciation by the Herati warlord Ismael Khan. Marking's camera follows Setara on a trip home after she's voted off the stage, right into her family compound on a dusty Herat side street, where it captures a teary, emotional reunion with her family on film - something no male director could have achieved.

Voting is a novel notion in Afghanistan. The Afghans pay to vote for their favourites - the cost-per-call of 10 cents (6p) is serious money for people with an average annual income of \$400 (£280). Larger-scale organised political activity also emerged during the song competition. Marking's camera follows the four stars around the country as they "campaign" like politicians. Their fellow ethnics (Tajik, Pashtun or Hazara) line up behind them in the campaigns, but the film shows the stars trying hard to appeal across ethnic lines, like politicians striving to attract the median vote after locking in their base. President Hamid Karzai and his rivals are shuffling the same ethnic cards in the run-up to September's scheduled election.

"One result of Star is that the primary ethnic identifier will become less and less relevant over time" in music and politics, predicts co-producer Saad Mohseni. Samuel Huntington said this was the way it was supposed to work in his 1968 classic, Political Order in Changing Societies, but Huntington probably didn't have a pop song contest in mind.

Political scientists know that national identity is forged by a shared sense of community and choice, captured in the phrase "Imagined Community", from Benedict Anderson's seminal book. Anderson theorised that otherwise unconnected citizens reading about the same events in newspapers is what creates national identity, and hence nations. TV shows are an even hotter crucible for creating a national imagined community, especially in a young country like Afghanistan with a 28 per cent literacy rate.

Demographics are the other driver of political change. In a country with 60 per cent of the population under 20 and a median age of 17, Afghan Star engages big segments of Afghanistan in a new collective exercise of choice. "Star is a way for younger Afghans to change the way we do politics in Afghanistan," says Jahid Mohseni. "Until now, it's been the older generations who have been saying what's right and wrong in terms of social conduct."

The Mohseni brothers are young high-octane Afghan entrepreneurs who built Tolo TV into Afghanistan's dominant network with pizzazz and slick programming. Their dubbed Indian soaps deeply annoyed Islamists who took offence at the sight of unveiled females, and then mobilised the government to ban dancing on TV. The sight of an unveiled Setara grooving around the stage while singing her final number on the show - a very modest prance by Western standards - further scandalised the clerical ulama.

"Singing was frowned upon as a profession in traditional Afghanistan," says Saad, "So we wanted to make it more acceptable. We also wanted to 'home grow' some talent and entertainment."

As sheer entertainment, the warbling Afghan pop songs may not jump to the top of the iTunes charts tomorrow, but most have a foot-tapping rhythm line, as the tabla drums in the soundtrack drive the movie insistently forward. Star's Dari and Pashtun ballads have their roots in classic Persian poetry, usually love songs, many surprisingly sensual. In her final number, Setara belts out an evocative lyric, "The bend of your eyebrow is like the sting of a scorpion" - probably not the favourite line of Taliban chief Mullah Omar in his hidden mountain lair. He could well have been listening. After one competitive round, Lema coyly observes: "I'm a Pashtun and the Taliban are Pashtun too. I'm sure some of them are voting for me."

As in Slumdog, the game show format nicely lends itself to the classical film plot flow of hero begins quest, hero encounters adversity, hero finally triumphs. Marking lets the singers do the talking, acting and singing with just enough superimposed text to clue the viewers into Afghanistan's bloody history without banging them over the head with it. "Viewers are drawn into a compelling story about real people in a real country," says media executive Jason Hirschorn, CEO of Slingblade Media, who was wowed by the première. "The history and the war stuff are introduced gradually and skilfully." Some viewers were taken aback by the opening shot of a blind boy chanting an Afghan melody, but the tone is otherwise light-hearted; the grimmer overtones are folded in later by the visual narrative, not by a narrator.

The movie was based on a third TV season of the show. The fourth is currently being filmed in Kabul, on a brightly lit stage erected inside the Markopolo Wedding Hall. The Markopolo lights up like a Christmas tree at night, a rare glimpse of gaiety in a sombre war-worn capital with little electricity and frequent blackouts. As we drove past the building on a chilly evening, my otherwise laconic Blackwater guards gestured at the Markopolo through the bullet-proof windshield: "They got more lightbulbs in that 'polo building than any place in this whole damn country."

I recall being struck by that brief glimpse of normality, thinking how appealing it would have been to drop by the Markopolo rather than my usual Kabul digs in the fortress-like US embassy or the military's Camp Eggers - the target of a deadly suicide bomb attack that killed one American soldier and wounded six others.

The big networks and movie studios were on the prowl at Sundance, and several have indicated serious interest in bidding on *Afghan Star*, particularly after it garnered the two festival awards. "This movie could be a real winner," says Tom Freston, the MTV founder who, as head of Viacom, plucked Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* from obscurity and helped it win an Oscar. "The social impact of Afghanistan's media explosion has been overlooked by journalists and policy-makers. I think *Afghan Star* lights up the whole country and perfectly captures, not just the power of music, but the deep yearning for normalcy and joy among the people."

If Freston is right and *Star*'s awards enable it to break out of the crowded field of documentaries, it will energise the debate over the war in Afghanistan, just as the US and Nato allies are debating the size of their commitment and the effectiveness of their strategy. European publics are tired of the place: a recent FT poll showed a clear majority in Britain, Germany, France, Italy and Spain believe their government should not send more forces to Afghanistan, even if pressed to do so by President Obama. *Star* may provide a timely antidote to "donor fatigue" by putting a human face on the travails and talents of the Afghan people.

One viewer buttonholed Daoud Siddique, *Star*'s host, after the première as the excited crowd spilled out into Park City's freezing night air. "My son is serving in the US Army in Afghanistan," he said. "I feel better about what we're doing over there having watched your movie." When *Afghan Star* reaches TV stations and cinemas in the rest of the world, a lot of people may feel the same way.

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