

Iraqis Find Refuge In The Mournful Strains Of Their Countrymen's Songs

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BAGHDAD - Iraqi pop star Hosam al-Rassam's current hit, "Plant a flower," opens with the sound of sirens and exploding bombs. The sound effects quickly fade into a mournful opening verse, "Why do you plant a bomb in the road? Plant a flower instead."

It's part of "Sorrow of Iraq," a collection of Iraqi recording artists singing about their homeland. The recording, which came out this year, has become one of the country's bestselling albums.

More and more Iraqi musicians are singing about peace and justice - and Iraqis are finding refuge in their songs.

Artists such as Rassam, Mohammed Abdel Jabbar, and Hatem al-Iraqi are providing the soundtrack for Iraqis frustrated with power outages, car bombs, and the country's uncertain future.

"My people are very tired," says Tareq, a wiry owner of a record store in Baghdad that devotes an entire wall to the Iraqi songs. "People are sometimes put in a corner and stressed, and they feel more comfortable when they listen to such songs."

Tareq, who declined to give his full name because of security concerns, says he too looks to the music on his shelves for relief from the violence that touches every aspect of life here.

"If a place is attacked by a bomb, work stops for a while and then goes back to normal. It's not a huge change in salary," he says, matter-of-factly naming half a dozen neighborhoods that have recently been bombed.

His friend Abbas Mohammed leans on the shop counter and energetically objects to all the wallowing.

"We're full of suffering and sadness, and listening to sad songs will be too much. I like the happy songs. You can't escape from reality, but it's a way to make you feel better," says Mohammed, who also declined to give his real name for fear of being targeted.

"It's not right that everyone is sad and expressing that in their art. You should do something to cheer up the people."

In Shiite neighborhoods, the sound of radood - lyrical recitations of poetry about saints who died tragically and heroically - blares from large street speakers during holidays, or drifts across traffic jams from cars' cassette players.

The recitations are usually set to the rhythm of a drum and the sound of men beating themselves

with metal chains in unison. Self-flagellation is a common practice by Shiites on holidays honoring saints, like Imam Ali or Imam Hussein, to signify their willingness to suffer as the saints suffered. After Saddam Hussein fell, a forbidden underground trade in radood exploded.

Abdel Hadi Ali, a security guard, says the recitations make him feel the hob ahl bait, or love of the family of the prophet, somehow easing his burdens.

"All the hair on my arm stands up" when he listens to the mournful recitations, says Mr. Ali.
"When I feel sad, it makes me feel better.... You will cry, and when you cry you feel better."