

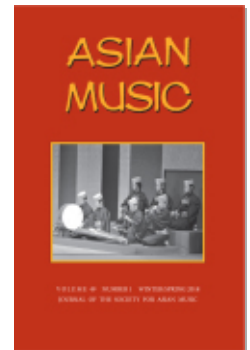


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Kuwait: Sea Songs from the Arabian Gulf by Hamid Bin Hussein
Sea Band (review)

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worked with described their own aesthetic. Second, I noticed in an acknowledgment section at the end of the notes Ornstein's special thanks to her friend David Schalit, who, among other things, "digitalized my field recordings and removed the background noise without compromising the sound quality" (21). For me, the "background noise"—usually chickens cackling, dogs barking, and children laughing or screaming—is at the heart of these performances, firmly grounding them in the "field" from which they arise. Finally, although Ornstein carries her discussion beyond her fieldwork years, citing works such as Brita Heimark's 2003 book, she mysteriously omits Michael Tenser's *Balinese Music* (1991) and Lisa Gold's *Music in Bali* (2005), both of which discuss *gamelan angklung*, its music, and changing musical and performance contexts, not to mention Robert Pringle's excellent *A Short History of Bali: Indonesia's Hindu Realm* (2004), a perfect companion to these music texts.

These quibbles aside, *From Kuno to Kebyar* beautifully demonstrates the kaleidoscopic musical landscape that exists in Bali today. Listening to one ensemble—specifically the one most overlooked by scholars and composers—and traveling through a musical history characterized by a creative flexibility and a canny ability to both create new musics and safeguard the old are truly a treat one should not miss.

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Kuwait: Sea Songs from the Arabian Gulf. Hamid Bin Hussein Sea Band. Recordings and text by Lisa Urkevich. Multicultural Media, Music of the Earth MCM 3051, 2014. One compact disc (55 minutes). 32-page booklet. Black-and-white and color photographs. Glossary. (download) \$8.99; (booklet available from Amazon), \$2.99.

At one time merchant seamen from today's Arabian/Persian Gulf states of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar sang aboard ship while working

and for their own evening entertainments during six-month winter voyages to ports in the far reaches of the Arabian Sea. Kuwaiti voyagers were accompanied by professional singers and often instrumentalists. The crew sang drones and responsorial phrases and clapped and stamped their feet in rhythm and syncopation.

Then in the hot summer months many of the same men sailed to offshore oyster beds as crew or even to dive for a share of the haul of rare and precious pearls.

[M]ost pearl diving boats were manned with musician-crewmen that included a solo singer, but sometimes 2–3 singers called *nahhāmīn*, sing. *nahhām*. There was also a drummer who performed on the large double-headed barrel membranophone, the *ṭabl baḥrī*, i.e., “sea drum.” . . . A third man would play a pair of small hand cymbals known as *ṭwysāt* [Kuwait, lit. lids] or *tus/tasat* that are linked together with a long cotton chord. (6)

They, singer(s) and instrumentalist, performed all day long in a constant effort to keep the morale of the laborers from flagging or to pray for divine protection and favor. There was no time whatsoever at sea for entertainment/recreation on the summer pearling journeys to the oyster beds. The author explains that the workday was 16 hours of continuous work in blistering heat followed by utter exhaustion at night. (Readers from temperate climes might pause to consider that 54C°/129.3F° was the recorded high temperature in Kuwait on July 23, 2016; see Shaikh 2016.)

The genre of sea songs as a whole is called *fjirī*.¹ While there had been land-based songs dealing with hull caulking, boat launchings, and so on, with the rise of a global market for cultured pearls and the discovery of oil in the region in the 1930s, the Gulf merchant and pearling fleets slowly dwindled away until all of *fjirī* had come ashore. When the Kuwaiti maritime industry was active, all-night entertainments were held in a seafarers’ community hall (*dīwāniyah*) after a ship’s safe return to port, but these days the performances are held as cultural heritage celebrations ranging from *dīwāniyahs* to weddings to concert halls.

The recordings reviewed here were made by Urkevich between 2006 and 2012, with two exceptions: the opening excerpt of the uniquely Kuwaiti *imjailisī* is from the 1960s (track 1), and the *hasawi* was recorded in 1970 (track 5). All performances are by the Hamid Bin Hussein Sea Band, a gathering begun informally in the 1940s by an assistant captain and formalized in 1952. Hamid’s son Mohammad leads the group today, with the principal *nahhām* being Mohammad’s brother Khalid Bin Hussein. Their offspring, the grandsons of the founder, are active in the Sea Band, joining in local, regional, and international performances.

The album's content is bipartite, with separation of recreation and work songs. Urkevich says each element of "true sea-song" (12) has a characteristic rhythmic mode or meter.

Recreation Songs

- (1) *Imjailisī* (often performed at weddings, unique to Kuwait and without meter)
- (2) *'Adsānī* (characteristically prayer-like lyrics, in a slow 16/4)
- (3) *Ḥaddādī* (12/4)
- (4) *Imkhālif/Imkhōlfī* (8/4)
- (5) *Ḥasāwī* (6/4)

Work Songs

- (6) *Sanginī*, a blessing in three movements that followed work; respectively, a 64-beat pattern, a uniquely Kuwaiti 16-beat *khammārī* rhythm, and a short 16-beat closing
- (7) *Dawwārī*, lit. "capstan," a song for heaving the main anchor cable or hauling a boat ashore, in a 12-beat pattern
- (8) *Khatfah*, after an opening invocation, a song to hoist the mainsail, in a 16/4 pattern
- (9) *Khrāb ṣidra*, sung without rhythm over a choral drone, a song to pull cable
- (10) *Yāmmāl/Midāf*, rowing song
- (11) *Rāṣṭabl (Yāmlī)*, work song in 12/4, used for a variety of tasks at sea or onshore

The *fjirī* tradition in contemporary cultural heritage performance emerged in a moment of historical identity crisis for the Gulf's maritime trades, a somewhat nostalgic response to a sudden decline and ultimately the demise of the natural pearl industry. The direct causes were the rise of a market for cultured pearls (from Japan) beginning after World War I and the discovery of oil in the region in the 1930s. The thriving and lucrative global pearl trade of the nineteenth century faded away on the western shores of the Gulf. Kuwait was the last to disband its pearling fleet, in 2000.

The origin of pearling in the Gulf is ancient, predating the Qur'anic promise that in heaven believers will be "decked in bracelets of gold and of pearls" (سورة الحج, The Pilgrimage 22:23, Ahmed Ali translation), the biblical admonition not to "cast pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:6, King James Version), or even Job's comparison of pearls to the pricelessness of wisdom (Job 28:18, King James Version) in the Old Testament. Habib Touma reported a fantastic tale from Bahrain, a mythical origin story of half human/half donkey *djinn*

(Arabic, “genie” or “demon”) singers who transmitted the pearl divers’ song genre to humankind long ago (1978, 4–5; 1995, 91–92).

I have a romantic attraction for the singular sea songs of the Gulf. In a 1980s graduate seminar on Arabian music led by A. J. Racy at UCLA, I was swept away in my imagination to the shore of the sparkling aquamarine Gulf when first I heard the Bahraini “Khrab” on the UNESCO disc (Touma 1978).² At that early career point, I knew nothing of Poul Roving-Olsen’s late 1950s fieldwork in Bahrain (1969, 2002). My perspective now is that *fjirī* is a persistent regional identifier and unique musicultural expression. It has been more fully contextualized and better anchored in my understanding by Urkevich’s rigorous work and valuable contribution to music scholarship. I hope to read more one day about the daily lives, thoughts, and feelings of the members of the Hamid Bin Hussein Sea Band and their communities.

Lisa Urkevich serves as professor and chair, Department of Music and Drama at American University of Kuwait (AUK). She has researched extensively on the western shore of the Arabian Gulf since the mid-1990s and has been home based in Kuwait for more than a decade.

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Notes

¹ The variants *fjirī* and *fidjeri* depend on which romanization schema for Arabic-English is used.

² *Bahrain: Fidjeri: Songs of the Pearl Divers*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings (UNES8046), (accessed April 2, 2017, <http://www.folkways.si.edu/bahrain-fidjeri-songs-of-the-pearl-divers/world/music/album/smithsonian>).

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Zurkhaneh: The House of Strength: Music and Martial Arts of Iran. Federico Spinatti, director. Film (108 minutes). University of Alberta in collaboration with Lab 80 Film, 2010, 2014. Color. In English and Persian. (DVD) \$13.00.

The institution of the *zurkhaneh* (gymnasium; lit., house of strength) and the series of exercises that are performed there known as *varzesh-e bastani* (ancient exercises) are deeply embedded in the fabric of Iranian society. They play a major role in the ways in which Iranian masculinities are constructed—physically, spiritually, and psychologically. The *zurkhaneh*, to the casual observer, can appear to be a complex martial arts genre designed to build the bodily strength of its performers. However, as this documentary reveals so clearly, the institution has clear religious, spiritual, and philosophical components that reveal to the viewer the importance of the music and its rhythms, the verses that are chanted, and the series of physical exercises that are performed. The round spaces in which the exercises are performed, centered on the *god-e moqqadas* (sacred pit), and the circular and upward quality of the movements demonstrate the ritual and ceremonial aspects of these performances. The film reveals that this is not simply a martial art with its accompanying physical aspects but a deeply complex way of life for thousands of Iranian men, and increasingly it is finding adherents in other countries around the world. The interviews, and an astonishingly fascinating series of scenes in a Sufi ritual, demonstrate the connections between religious and spiritual aspects of Iranian life and the lives and practices of the participants in the *zurkhaneh*.

The film states that there are at least five hundred *zurkhaneh* in Iran, and that is probably an accurate figure for this uniquely urban phenomenon. The *zurkhaneh*, in spite of its historical depth, is dynamic. For instance, there currently exists a federation of *zurkhaneh*, which indicates government interest in this uniquely spiritual and Iranian institution that did not exist when I was a student in Iran in the 1950s. Also, currently, in conformity with the Islamic Republic's morality standards, the participants wear T-shirts, but when I was in Iran the men went bare chested.

Most of the few existing films about the *zurkhaneh*, whether made in Iran or abroad, focus almost exclusively on the performance of the exercises alone. They exclude all the other elements of this institution that are so central to male life in Iran—music, vocals and percussion, clothing, the historical