

On becoming a singer

Suna Alan

I am a Kurdish/Alevi singer based in London. I was born in the mountainous province of Cewlik (Bingol), an ancient Kurdish and Armenian province in Northern Kurdistan (officially Turkey). I'm the fifth of the seven siblings. When I was two years old, the family left the village due to the conflict and settled in Izmir on Turkey's west coast.

Moving to Izmir in my early childhood meant that much of my formative years were spent surrounded by traditional Kurdish *dengbej* ("bard") music and Kurdish-Alevi laments within a rich cosmopolitan cultural environment.

Coming from a Kurdish Alevi family means growing culturally with the sound of the *tembur* and folk songs. When relatives came together, they would play *tembur*, either men or women, and sing and dance together. I was a good observer and listener despite being a child, which is why I still remember those sounds and the timbre of the sounds. I also liked to listen to folk and protest songs playing on the radio. I grew up with such a cultural memory.

Throughout my education, I was involved in music in amateur level, including during my university years. But after settling in London, I began to express myself professionally with music.

Although my main focus remains Kurdish folk songs, my repertoire also includes Armenian, Greek, Sephardic Arabic and Turkish songs.

Since Ottoman times, Izmir (Smyrna) has indeed embraced a myriad of ethnic and religious communities — people such as Kurdish, Greek, Albanian, Circassian, Armenian, Sephardic, Christian, Alevi, and Jew. This led me to incorporate stories from many other ethnic and religious identities in my music.

The politics of music

Not only singing in Kurdish but also listening to Kurdish is political. I started learning this at a very early age. During the criminalisation of the Kurdish language after the military coup of 1980 in Turkey, when my family was still in the village, I heard that they had buried Kurdish music cassette tapes in the ground.

If they were caught [listening to Kurdish music], they were more likely to be ill-treated as terrorists and separatists and put in prison. It seems that not one cassette was saved from the fascist period under Kenan Evren's rule of Turkey.

When I was a student at high school in Turkey, my nose was broken by the racist students as I had sung a Kurdish folk song at our music class. Later, I witnessed that the artists who volunteered in pro-Kurdish institutions where I was engaged in political activities in my early youth were often detained and mistreated because they sang in Kurdish.

In Kurdistan, but mainly in the Turkish part, over many decades, hundreds of Kurdish singers have been murdered, on the grounds of their identity and because of their fight against injustice and oppression.

For example, in the late 1970s, while even listening to Kurdish music was considered a crime, Hozan Hemido was singing Kurdish revolutionary songs in public in the province of Mardin. As a result, he was imprisoned and repeatedly tortured. His fingernails were removed so that he could no longer play the tembur. He was murdered by JITEM (the Turkish Gendarmerie Intelligence Organisation) in 1993.

Also, from my hometown, the artist Rençber Eziz, who was also blind, composed a piece in the Zazaki dialect named “Way Way Ninna” to criticise the fascist junta administration after the 1980 military coup.

Referring to Kenan Evren, the lyrics say: Your (Kenan) Evren has been our donkey / He has entered our garden / He peeled the leaves of our hawthorn / Our people are not like before / If Rençber gives the ox and takes a rifle / Fascist has no salvation.

After a while, Rençber Eziz’s music was banned and he was jailed. Eziz suspiciously fell from a tall building in Hanover, Germany where he was an asylum-seeker in 1988 and died.

Eyaz Yusif (Zaxoyi) and many other artists, who were kidnapped and murdered by Saddam Hussein’s agents in 1986, responded to the persecution with music and therefore paid a heavy price. There are many Kurdish artists, whose names we have not yet counted and have been subjected to serious pressures, torture and death due to their identity.

Even recently, in 2015, Nudem Durak, a young female singer who was teaching Kurdish folk songs to children in her town of Cizre in Turkey, was sentenced to 19 years in prison.

The government falsely tried to link her to both Kurdish political organisations, KCK and PKK, but Nudem’s family says that the real reason she was arrested is because she tries to keep Kurdish culture and language alive.

Like almost every Kurdish child who was torn from their land at an early age, I am one who has experienced identity conflicts through growing up in Turkey’s metropolises.

I also spent my childhood with my maternal uncle and aunts as a result of migration. The fact that each of them was playing *tembur* and singing impressed me naturally as the next generation.

In addition to their music, the story of all of them affected me. Aunts who went from Izmir to the mountains to become freedom fighters; an uncle who was sentenced to life imprisonment because of his political thoughts. I believe that these people, both artists and seekers of freedom, have shaped my art.

I grew up in such a political environment because there was persecution. Where there is persecution, you express your reactions with culture, art or different methods; and I chose music.

Music in Kurdish culture

As to the importance of music in Kurdish culture, and its ability to bring about change, the political and occasional military conflict that started in the mid-1980s and continues today has changed the role and position of Kurdish music, which is an important part of social and cultural life in Kurdish society.

In Kurdish social life, music has become a political activity; and it has been one of the main channels through which Kurdish resistance in Turkey is nurtured. Functioning as a kind of alternative communication system that might break the barriers created by language, it has had a vital role in organising the culture of resistance through which a significant portion of the concept of Kurdish identity is shaped.

Production style and products arising from the difficulties that musicians face as both Kurdish musicians and Kurds alone, has found an important response in the Kurdish people and a style of expression emerged from the pain and anger they were exposed to.

In addition to the role of political Kurdish music to strengthen the sense of Kurdish belonging, it has an important opposing role to the dominant Turkish identity. In other words, a person who performs or listens to Kurdish music will not only associate themselves with Kurdishness, but will also separate themselves from Turkishness.

In this way, the Kurdish political and social opposition has established an effective and sustainable music-political discourse over a national identity that fights injustice and oppression.

* Edited from Suna's interview with Steve Sweeney, *Morning Star*, 26 June 2020.

* Many of Suna's recorded songs can be accessed online.