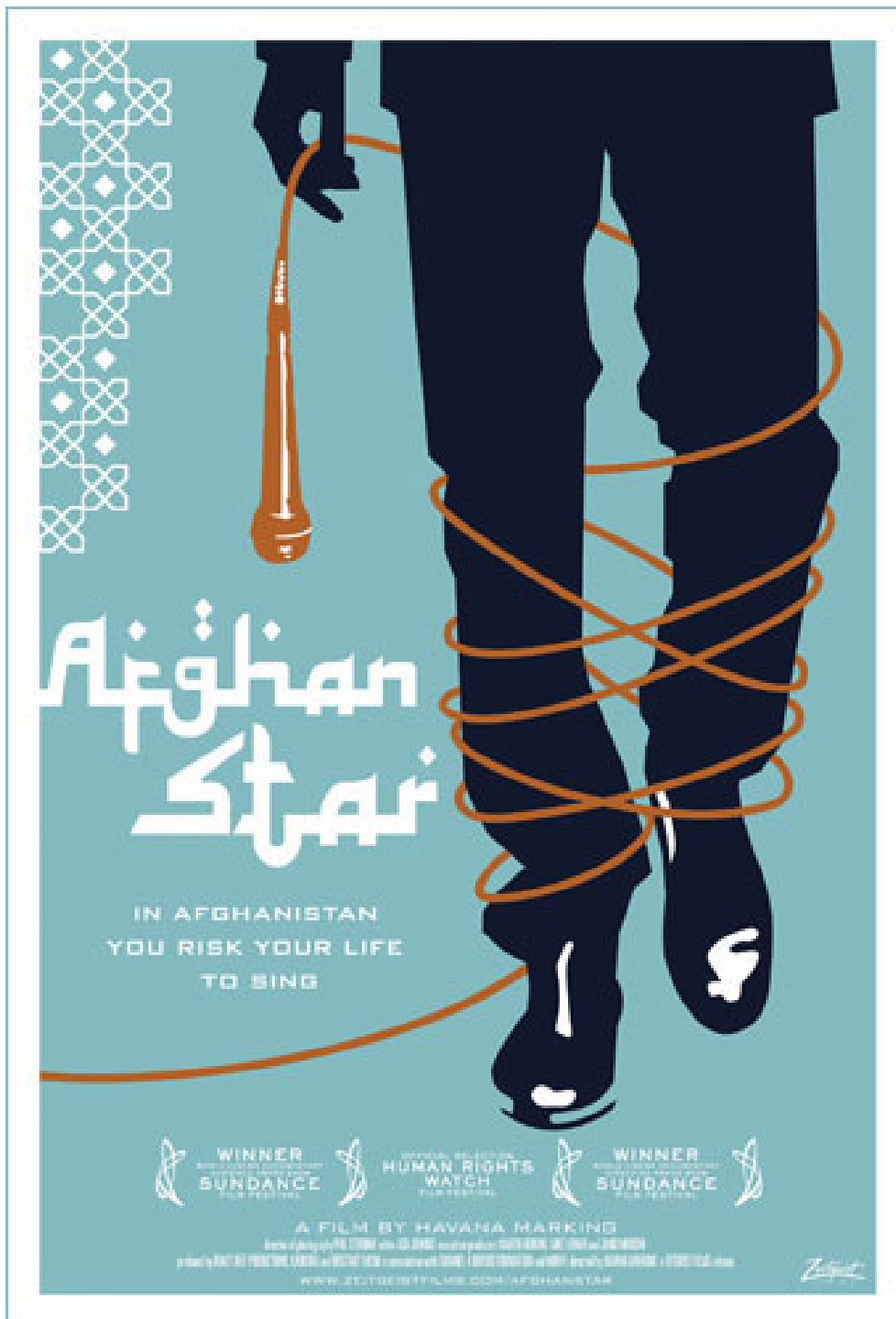




Theatrical Booking Contact:

Clemence Taillandier / Zeitgeist Films
212-274-1989 x18
clemence@zeitgeistfilms.com

Festival Booking/Marketing Contact:

Nadja Tennstedt / Zeitgeist Films
212-274-1989 x15
nadja@zeitgeistfilms.com

Publicity:

Sasha Berman
Shotwell Media
tel. 310-450-5571
fax 310-450-5577
SashaBerman@mac.com

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

Afghan Star

In Afghanistan you risk your life to sing. After 30 years of war and Taliban rule, pop culture has returned to the country—and since 2005, millions are tuning in to Tolo TV's wildly popular *American Idol*-style series *Afghan Star*. Like its Western predecessors, the show features ordinary people competing for a cash prize and record deal. More surprisingly, the contest is open to everyone across the country despite gender, ethnicity or age. Two thousand people audition, including three extremely brave women. And when viewers vote for their favorites via cell phone, it is, for many, their first encounter with the democratic process.

Winner of the Directing and Audience Awards in Sundance's 2009 World Documentary competition, Havana Marking's timely and moving film follows the dramatic stories of four young finalists—two men and two women—as they hazard everything to become the nation's favorite performer. By observing the Afghani people's relationship to its pop culture, *Afghan Star* is the perfect window into a country's tenuous, ongoing struggle for modernity. What Americans consider frivolous entertainment is downright revolutionary—and more human—in this troubled part of the world.

EXTENDED SYNOPSIS

After 30 years of war and Taliban-rule, pop culture has returned to Afghanistan. *Afghan Star*—an *American 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 program 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 million—a third of the country—watched the final) and vote by via 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—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 three-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. The contestants that the film follows reveal the true hopes and dreams of Afghan youth: their desire for peace, education, and freedom to express themselves. 60% of the Afghan population is under 21, and despite the backdrop of conflict, corruption and repression they are funny, articulate and ultimately inspiring.

THE CONTESTANTS

Rafi is a 19-year-old man 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 burkas.

Lima, a 25-year-old woman 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 consequences: she is poor and the \$1000 prize is her only future.

Hameed is a young male 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 a huge support network has sprung up: poster campaigns, door to door canvassing, outdoor concerts.

Setara is a 21 year old female singer from Herat. Wearing modern fashion, Bollywood makeup and sometimes even just moving on stage made her a controversial figure: adored by the young girls, hated by the older generations. When she finally dances on the show and lets her headscarf slip, death threats force her into hiding, while the series and its producers are threatened by the powers that be.

THE FILMMAKERS

HAVANA MARKING DIRECTOR

Afghan Star is Havana Marking's first feature documentary. Previously she directed *The Crippendales* (2007), a 30-minute film about the first troupe of disabled strippers that won the UK Channel 4 scheme for New Talent. In 2005 she made *The Great Relativity Show*, a series of animated shorts that explain the Theory of Relativity. These won a Pirelli Science Award.

Before 2005, as a TV producer, she worked on such successful UK programs and films as *The F Word*, *Michael Palin: Himalaya*, *River Cottage*, *No Going Back* and *What Would Jesus Drive?*.

Havana is also a respected journalist who published articles 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 TV documentaries, working on projects for the BBC and Channel 4, as well as a skilled camera operator and editor. His vast 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 causes such as marine conservation. His film *The Deadline* is currently screening on the festival circuit. Phil is also creating *The Lifeline*, an "Eco Facebook" for the building and support of free and sustainable communities.

ASH JENKINS EDITOR

Ash Jenkins' most recent work includes Nick Broomfield's dramatic documentary *Battle For Haditha*.

During his Film School studies in Wales, Ash spent time in Africa and made films for Amnesty International, ITN and Channel 4 News—documenting war, poverty and struggle. In 2004, his filmmaking came to the attention of Broomfield and the duo subsequently worked together on *His Big White Self* and *Ghosts*. Broomfield has 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."

In 2008 Ash was nominated for a Broadcast Hotshot award. He is currently working on other film projects in addition to managing his Post Production company, Roundtable Films.

THE PRODUCERS

KABOORA PRODUCTION

Kaboora (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 the UN and other entities.

Over the last few years, Kaboora's capacity and expertise has grown substantially. Recently Kaboora Production was involved as the logistic support partner for DreamWorks for the film adaptation 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 other entities.

Kaboora Production's *Raz Hae Een Khana (The Secrets of This House)* won the Special Award at the Seoul Drama Awards in October 2008. Screened on Tolo TV, it 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 from 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 including *Picasso*, *Gauguin* and *Van Gogh*; documentaries on architecture including *Supercities* and *The Stirling Prize*; and travel documentaries including *Beijing Swings* and *Turkmenistan – The Happy Dictator*.

Afghan Star

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

SAFIYA FRISTA SAID

WAIS MOHAMMED

GULALAI DAQI

WALI NAROGH

Production Team, Kabul

NASIM KARIMI

AMIR SHAMIL

HABIB AMIRI

SEKANDER SALEH

REZA SHER MOHAMED

MUMTAZ

AREEF MOHAMMED

QAIS BAKHSHI

AKMAL KHALIQ

ZAKI KHALIQI

Assistant Editor

SAMIR NASIM

Production Accountant

RODNEY BROOKS

Colorist

ANDY LEE

Sound Dubbing

SCOTT WILKINSON

Post Production

ON SIGHT

FITZROVIA

Original Music Score

SIMON RUSSELL

With thanks to

BRITDOC FOUNDATION

CBA-DFID FUND

UK/Afghanistan • 2009 • 88 mins • In Dari, Pashto and English with English subtitles • Color • Digital

Photos are available to download at www.zeitgeistfilms.com

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247 CENTRE ST • 2ND FL • NEW YORK • NY 10013

www.zeitgeistfilms.com • mail@zeitgeistfilms.com

(212) 274-1989 • FAX (212) 274-1644