

Music in and for a Mobile World: Home, Place, and Memory in the Context of Migration and Displacement

Helena Simonett and Jawed Ahmadi

Abstract. Much practical knowledge resides in places of higher education where it has been accumulated by performers and scholars who have institutional access to both infrastructure and networking. While access to this kind of knowledge is a privilege that asylum seekers and refugees seldom possess, harsh real-life experience (e.g., forced migration) is usually something that academics lack. We must therefore ask: How can we bring these two realms into a productive relationship? In particular, is it possible to generate knowledge in an equal partnership and, if so, how? By jointly presenting our collaborative work, we hope to demonstrate how researchers' advocacy can benefit lesser privileged artists without falling into the trap of paternalism. Combining an artistic and a theoretical approach, we will address both mobility and location as essential components of musical identity construction. Of particular interest is the construction and performance of a sense of home, place, and memory in the context of migration and displacement.

This paper is based on a collaboration of the two authors, a Swiss ethnomusicologist with a permanent job position at the university and an Afghan singer/songwriter who arrived in Switzerland during the migratory movements across Europe at the end of 2015.

Being of Hazara descent, Jawed's family had fled to Pakistan before he was born as the third son of seven children in 1995. At home, the family continued to speak Hazaragi, a variety of Persian mutually intelligible with Dari, and some Pashto, which is mainly spoken in the northwestern provinces, as well as Urdu, Pakistan's official language which he learned outside the house. He attended an Afghan elementary school where Dari was spoken. At the age of 10 he was encouraged to recite the Qu'ran in the mosque but didn't enjoy doing it. Due to his father's dislike for music, Jawed was forbidden to listen, let alone to play music. A shy attempt to learn to play the keyboard ended with the demolition of the instrument at his father's hands. The limited economic resources of the large family forced the boy to work during school time in a Pakistani carpet store. Jawed didn't mind because at the shop classical Pakistani music blared from the cassette recorder all day long. He was mesmerized by vocalists such as the Afghan national icon Abdul-Rahim Sarban (1930–93) whose sad love songs left a lasting imprint on the boy's young mind. He also became acquainted with the greatest singer in the Urdu language, the Pakistani Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1948–97). A friend who played the harmonium took Jawed to a place after school where he heard a love song performed by Ahmad Zahir (1946–79). He was so touched by the song that he would practice it until the early morning hours to never forget it. The light-classical Afghan *ghazal* is still one his preferred genres: he and his Afghanistan-born wife love to listen to ghazals when cooking together. While he was still a teenager, Jawed was sent off to join his older

brother in Tehran, where he began working in a factory, like thousands of other Afghan migrants who do not have formal documentation (IRIN News 2007, Müller 2018). A modest wage allowed him to purchase some musical instruments, among them a hand-pumped Indian harmonium, keyboard, and *dambura* lute. Taking lessons in classical Indian singing, Jawed developed into an amateur musician whose reputation grew over the years as he was offered gigs at a variety of events and posted a couple of his songs on YouTube. Jawed remembered that in those years, he realized that music was as vital to him as water. He heard music in everything, even in silence.

Meanwhile, the situation for undocumented workers in Iran had worsened. Driven by the fear of deportation, Jawed decided to embark on a journey to Europe, following the path of so many other young people that had been stuck in some place with no future (REACH 2016). Via the Eastern Mediterranean and then the Western Balkan route, he arrived in Austria. Sweden was his next destination, but by that time, it had changed its asylum regulations, so Jawed followed a call from a friend who ran a restaurant in Zurich. He told Jawed that they were in desperate need for a singer to entertain at Afghan weddings and other private events.

Yet, like other European countries, Switzerland was utterly unprepared to handle the large number of asylum applicants. Jawed spent 2 years and 8 months waiting to eventually be allowed to take German language classes to prepare for complementary schooling. A language teacher at a transit center in Lucerne had offered him a harmonium that had just been sitting around at her father's house. He started receiving invitations for live events in the Afghan communities throughout Switzerland and formed a band. Recently he began his job training at a large retail store and wonders how to go about his dream of making a living from music. How can someone like him build a music network without financial, logistical, personal, and professional support?

After having spent many years abroad pursuing a professional career in ethnomusicology, Helena returned to her native country, Switzerland, in the summer of 2016. A strong interest in musical identity formations of migrants had been with her since graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles in the mid-1990s, where she explored musical practices in the burgeoning Mexican neighborhoods and beyond (Simonett 2001, Simonett & Burgos 2015). After joining the Music Department at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts as senior research associate, she conducted a pilot study at the Caritas Center for Language and Job Training in Lucerne, exploring the role of music in young refugees' everyday life (Simonett 2021). Based on some of the findings, she launched an applied project involving unaccompanied minor refugees in music- and instrument-making activities, assisted by music pedagogy students from her institution (Simonett 2019). Although the Long Summer of Migration in 2015 didn't impact Switzerland in such drastic ways as it did some of its surrounding countries, there was a pressing demand for German language

teachers to serve the rising number of asylum seekers and people who had received temporary permission to stay and now wanted to learn the language. Helena began to volunteer with local refugee organizations, among them HelloWelcome, a meeting place in Lucerne that featured a banner with the apt slogan: “Refugees had to leave everything behind except their talent.”

There, Jawed reached out to her, wanting to know whether she knew of a recording studio where he could record two of his recently composed songs. Rather new to the city herself, Helena reached out to her fellows at the university and learned that students at the music department were entitled to use a world-class recording studio to build up their portfolio. Intrigued by a music video which featured Jawed as lead singer (Ahmadi 2017) and which squarely fitted her research topic on the impact of forced mobility on individuals’ musicking, she asked the head of the department to extend the students’ privileges to use the recording studio at no cost to a non-student. The request was granted and a reservation for the studio was made with sound engineer Thomas Gabriel.

On a cold November morning in 2019, the two drove to Gabriel’s studio located in the alpine foothills with a splendid view of the mountains, newly covered in snow (<https://www.gabrielrecording.ch>). At first a bit intimidated by the size of the studio and its professional equipment, Jawed quickly developed the confidence to sing over prerecorded synthesizer tracks of the accompaniment which he had supplied. The two discussed the recorded vocal tracks at length to assemble the final cuts.



Illustration 1. Jawed at Gabriel’s recording studio (Photos by Helena Simonett)

The audio recording itself traveled quite a bit: through social media (Facebook), Jawed had made contact with sound engineers in Central Asia in 2019. He recorded a mp3 of his vocal part and sent it to (1) Kabul where a synthesizer accompaniment was added; this mp3 was returned to (2) Switzerland where Jawed recorded the final vocal tracks at Gabriel’s and then sent the wav file to (3) Tajikistan where the instrumental part was supposed to be added. However, the people ripped him off and kept the file. In a second attempt, he sent the vocals to (4) Tehran where the instrumentals were added and returned to (5) Switzerland (see map). The text of one of the songs, “Laila,” was created in collaboration with an Afghan friend who resides in Australia and the melody was composed with another

musician friend in Germany. The song lyrics for “Gulchera” were written by an Afghan musician from Austria, while Jawed composed the melody.



Illustration 2. The mobility of audio files

Although audio recordings had been “one of the main channels for the circulation of music within the Afghan transnational community” (Baily 2010: 70), such mobility of audio recordings was unthinkable before everyday people gained access to the Internet. Nowadays, however, professional music video productions are a must for any musician seeking fame among a diverse audience dispersed over the world.¹ The public’s expectations of professionalism are constantly rising. Young, aspiring artists watch hundreds of music videos to learn from the ones that have made it to the top.

Jawed’s first music video (Ahmadi 2017), “Dukhtar e Haraza” (Hazara girl/daughter) was not to his satisfaction although it features many of the filmographic traits of other popular videos produced by Afghan artists in Afghanistan as well as in the Afghan diaspora: a central focus on the singer in beautiful landscapes, photographs from a bird’s eye viewpoint shot with a drone, close-ups of musicians’ hands playing instruments, and a love story—albeit one that doesn’t correspond to the song lyrics. Jawed had no say in the production of this video since he was only engaged as a singer. So, for his next one, he not only wanted to have more control, but also to learn about every step in the process of realizing it. Once again, he reached out to Helena with the question of how to go about producing a music video without having the financial means to fund such a project.²

1. See Baily 2010 for an overview of recordings of Afghan music before the advent of the Internet, from 78-rpm records, LPs, and audio cassettes to CDs.

2. Switzerland is responsible for the social welfare for all asylum seekers and for those temporarily admitted, which includes coverage of the expenses for accommodation, assistance, and compulsory health insurance, as well as a monthly allowance for the basic needs for living, such as food, clothing, bus tickets, etc. For those who work and receive a salary, the social welfare contribution is reduced accordingly.

Not an expert in the visual arts, Helena decided to elicit help from the university's department of art and design which offers degrees in film. Two (Swiss) students answered to a call directed to the video classes, one of whom eventually created the music video with Jawed in the summer of 2020. Although a novice to the production of *music* videos herself, the collaboration was a productive one, the learning curve steep, and – despite some less optimal choices and setbacks in the process of making the video – the resulting product may serve well for grant applications for Jawed's future artistic projects.

Covid-19 changed the artistic project we started collaborating on in early 2020 in various ways. After a couple of meetings in person, and a wonderful Afghan meal at Jawed's, the pandemic forced us to rely on WhatsApp for communicating and planning the filming. Helena exercised her role as facilitator while Jawed was in charge of enlisting friends from his community and Swiss musicians who would help to make the video. A temporary relaxation of the strict Corona rules in the summer made filming at different locations in and around the city possible, and even allowed for a short trip to the Alps for the drone shots.

Before continuing our report, let's briefly pause to reflect on the significance (and inherent dangers) of artistic collaborations between local citizens and refugees. In recent years, hundreds of music projects with refugees have been initiated throughout Europe—from music lessons in shelters to refugee choirs and sessions in the camps. Yet, ethnomusicologist Theresa Beyer questions the effectiveness and benefit of these usually rather short-lived private initiatives. Despite being well-intentioned, one is tempted to ask who is benefitting from such encounters: the European “helpers” or the refugees?³ Indeed, a number of artistic productions emerged from the fringes of society—in the midst of the encampments and shanty towns of stranded refugees and migrants. Among those camps, the so-called Calais Jungle, located on a former landfill site east of the French city of Calais, came into global spotlight due to its rapidly growing number of inhabitants (from 3,000 in July 2015 to over 8,000 at the time of its demolition in October 2016), displaced people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and other places of political upheaval trying to make their way to Britain. Local and international activists, artists, and grassroots aid organizations flocked to the Jungle in support of the migrants. Social media campaigns and charity appeals enlisted celebrities who endorsed, advocated, partnered, and performed for fundraising events. Out of the Jungle came many artistic productions, some intriguing, others rather problematic.

A prime example of the latter is American singer/composer Moira Smiley, one of the artists who had joined the “camp touring” to Calais and elsewhere, collaborating with other touring musicians as well as with musicians from the camps. A closer look at Smiley's song

3. “Musik im Flüchtlingscamp: Harmonie und Misstöne,” a critical report about the Calais-Sessions by Theresa Beyer, *SRF Kontext*, broadcast 13 April 2016 (srf.ch); for the initiative of the Calais-Sessions, “a collective of creatives from the UK who use the universal language of music to empower and entertain Europe's refugees,” see <https://www.thecalaisessions.com> (accessed 14/08/2020).

“Refugee,” from her 2018 album *Unzip the Horizon*,⁴ illustrates the point. The song talks about the refugee experience *in first person* (sung by Smiley): “In your world I’m a refugee ... danger all around me ... bring me shelter, I won’t harm you ... please” (excerpt). The song lyrics are visually supported by people walking and stumbling over the earth, running, climbing fences, grasping dirt, making fists, holding each other—shot in black-and-white with a lot of close-ups.

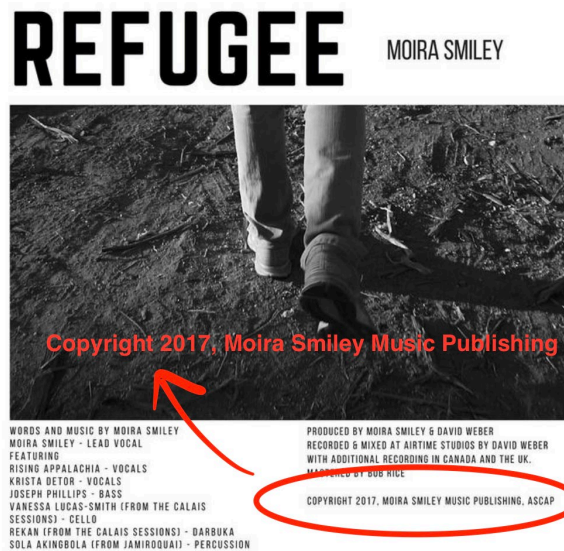


Illustration 3. Cover of Smiley’s song “Refugee”

The song, according to Smiley, “is about feeling bereft and misunderstood, and inviting empathy. We are all much closer to being refugees than we want to imagine.” Really? Can a privileged person truly understand what it means to “be a refugee”? Is it ethical to represent refugees artistically? To benefit from artistic encounters born from the suffering, plight, and misery of others? To superficially appropriate their music and knowledge? (see Hochman 2018).⁵ The problem of speaking for others, especially for the suppressed and marginalized,

4. <https://moirasmiley.bandcamp.com/track/refugee> (accessed 14/08/2020).

5. Interview excerpt: [Hochman:] *You have worked with refugees, yourself, so the inspiration for the song is personal.* [Smiley:] I’ve been for the last couple of years going with a group of Americans to teach music, bring medical supplies, volunteer at refugee camps in Europe. It’s called Expressive Arts Refuge. I was invited by Betsy Blakeslee, who has spearheaded this throughout the world. She also worked in the Bosnian war in the ’90s. She’s interested in using the arts to help others. When we were in the Calais Jungle, and then were in Athens last summer, there were a lot of Arabic-speaking people there. They also speak their own languages, but Arabic is spoken across cultures, and I came to realize what a vast and ancient music culture that is—and how modern it is. I recorded a lot of young Arab rappers, fully fledged hip-hop artists, but they were also playing ouds and sazzes and all mixed together. That was an eye-opener back into some of the early music work that I’ve done, music from Spain in the 1400s and what happened after that [the expulsion of the Arabic, Moorish, and Jewish people]. So here we are again, in a different, but related era of diaspora. What can we learn from the past? How can we be compassionate to each other as these big forces are hurting us and our brothers and sisters? [Hochman:] *Do you see yourself as a musicologist or folklorist?* [Smiley:] Roughly. I have long worshipped that role, the ethnomusicologist, song collector, for sure. I’ve done it, but I wouldn’t call myself anything official.

has been addressed in feminist and postcolonial discourses for more than three decades. Inspired by the “crisis of representation” in anthropology, Linda Alcoff (1991) has raised the question whether it is ever valid to speak for others who are less privileged than oneself. The practice of speaking for (as well as about) others is not only based on one’s own situated interpretation, but often reinscribes the hierarchy that privileges the speaker in the first place (Alcoff 1991: 29).

During the first couple of meetings, the two students from the university’s department of art and design watched Smiley’s music video with Jawed and wondered about the intended audience of such a production. Jawed himself could not identify with the figure of the “refugee” portrayed in the video. And none of them liked the overall audiovisual aspects. What were the aesthetic considerations that went into this production? What story is being told by the pictures? What kind of story did we want to tell? One of the students suggested watching a number of her favorite films made by renowned Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami (*Where is the Friend’s Home?* – 1987, خانه دوست کجاست; *Taste of Cherry* – طعم ... گیلان, 1997; *The Wind Will Carry Us* – باد ما را خواهد برد, 1999) to familiarize ourselves with his distinctive visual aesthetics and cinematic storytelling, but regrettably, the planned film night had to be canceled due to the lockdown. Instead, Jawed sent a lot of YouTube links of his favorite music video artists via WhatsApp, our main tool for communication during this time. In this way, we began to learn about each other’s likes and dislikes, a keystone for aesthetic decisions that had to be made throughout the upcoming artistic collaboration. Unfortunately, by the time we were able to resume working in person, only one of the students, Maya Baur, was able to continue with Jawed’s project.

The core production team chose to tell a little story to accompany the love song “Laila,” which Jawed had recorded at Gabriel’s. The collaboration was time consuming, as we experienced several setbacks. For instance, we did not get permission to film on the stunning Bürgenstock mountain—our dream setting to film the video—, nor did we get permission to use a drone at lake Lucerne—an element Jawed insisted on despite Maya’s concerns that this gadget could spoil the intimacy of a love song. Due to these external contingencies, the storyboard had to be adjusted several times.

For Jawed, it was crucial to learn what it meant to create a storyboard and meticulous planning of the production days, to make decisions regarding the settings, the costumes, and the gestures, and to gain insight into the craft of cutting, editing, and postproduction. Jawed and Maya walked through the city to find the ideal locations and discussed their different aesthetics: she from the visual perspective of a filmmaker; he from his own experience of watching hundreds of music videos made by people from his part of the world. As a result, the two spent much time negotiating their approaches to reach agreements that met the expectations of both.

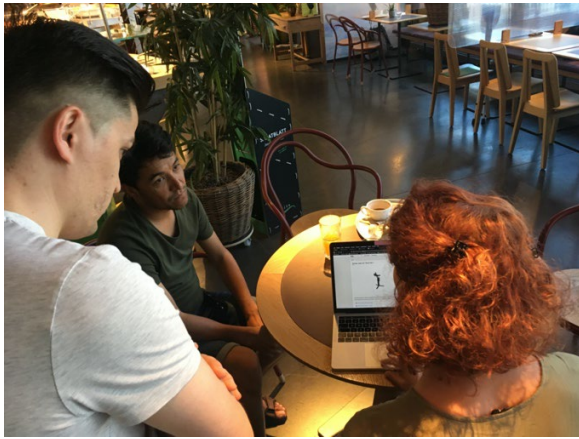


Illustration 4. Scenes from the film production, summer 2020 (Photos by Helena Simonett)

A couple of years ago when Helena watched the music video “Dukhtar e Haraza” (Ahmadi 2017) mentioned above, she was immediately intrigued by the complex relations between mobility, place, and identity. Unable to understand the song lyrics in Hazaragi, her focus was on the visuals: the effortlessness with which the images oscillate between the modern/cosmopolitan and the traditional, close-ups and drone shots, accelerated and slow motion, and the vivid colors of the Swiss landscape—green pastures, blue lakes, and sky: all elements of prime importance to the targeted audiences in the Afghan diaspora, as Jawed explained. He illustrated these preferences through a number of other popular videos of Afghan, Iranian, and Pakistani artists—videos he finds visually and aesthetically very appealing and, hence, which serve as blueprints for his own (planned) creations.

The majority of those videos feature wide-open and lush landscapes, almost as if the producer wanted to shoot a promotional video for the region's tourist bureau. Jawed is very taken with such landscapes and is sure that people from Central Asia feel the same way. He recalled a Pakistani woman's visit to Switzerland: astonished how green the lawn in front of the house was, she asked whether she could take a picture of it. He also remembered the large cooking oil canisters of the Kashmir Banaspati brand, a constant with the Pakistani household for over half a century, that featured colorful images of alpine sunsets which he associated with Switzerland rather than the Kashmiri mountains.

Also common in the videos is the use of visual markers of Afghan culture such as traditional costumes, for both men and women, and traditional instruments, in particular percussion instruments.

On the other hand, the videos underline the modern and cosmopolitan. Access to digital media is of particular importance for migrants (such as refugees and asylum seekers) in order to navigate their new environment and to stay connected with the people and places they have left. Such everyday use of technology is also featured in music videos: for example, the opening scene of "Laila" shows Jawed exchange messages with his beloved Laila on his mobile phone (Baur 2020).

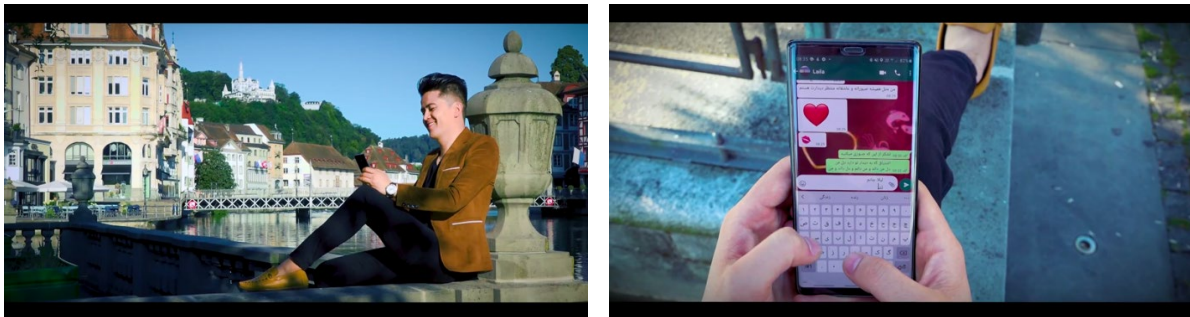


Illustration 5. Screen shots from the music video

Modern technologies not only help people stay in contact and affect cultural circulation; they also challenge ideas of fixed musical identities and styles bound to specific social groups or cultural areas. In fact, the music of "Laila" itself has an "Afghan feel" if we agree that today's Afghan popular music is a mixture of Persian melodies, Hindustani (Pakistani) compositional features, and Afghan folk music elements, with influences from Indian and Western pop music.

According to ethnomusicologist John Bailey, the kind of Afghan popular music (*kiliwāli*) that was created and disseminated by the radio station in Kabul in the 1960s–70s blended musical elements from different sources: "The new music brought together Dari texts, Pashtun musical style, and Hindustani theoretical concepts and terminology" (1994: 58) and was based on models of regional music of the two main ethnic groups, Pashtun and Tajik. This "synthesized" Afghan popular music has been further influenced by Indian and Pakistani

film music and popular music styles from other neighboring countries such as Iran and Tajikistan (Bailey 1994: 55). Jawed also cites the influence of his favorite genre, the *ghazal*, the main vocal art music genre of Afghanistan. The musical accompaniment that was added to Jawed's vocal track in Tehran (which at the time of filming hadn't been ready) consists of instrumental tracks, such as harmonium, created on a synthesizer, and an Afghan percussion instrument, the goblet-shaped hand drum called *zerbaghali*.



Illustration 6- Screen shots from the music video

Mobility and location are essential components of musical identity constructions. Jawed's sense of home, place, and memory in the context of migration and displacement is evidenced by his songs, even if he claims that it is not his conscious intention to stress those topics. All his compositions are about love.

But "Laila" is not simply a love song. It refers to the centuries' old story about a heartbreaking romance between Laila and Qays (Layla Majnun), subsequently popularized throughout the Islamic world by numerous poets praising their love story. Laila is a common name for females in Afghanistan. Yet, Jawed doesn't address a specific Laila: rather, it is a Laila who is representative of all women. In the video, this is illustrated by not showing the face of this supra-woman. She is seen in the distance walking through the grass. When the camera zooms in, it's not on her face but rather on her long, swinging dress. While the singer remembers her beautiful eyes and hair, she remains "faceless," elusive, mysterious. She only exists in the memory and the longing of the singer who wants to reunite with her in Dasht-e Barchi, a neighborhood located in Western Kabul⁶—a place Jawed himself has never been,⁷ but one that resonates with every Hazara. As the visuals make clear, he/the singer is firmly placed in Switzerland, with its lush green pastures, deep blue lakes, majestic mountains, and quaint old cities. While this fabled "garden of Eden" is an imagined place for the many who

6 Previously barren and agricultural, Dasht-e Barchi became populated in the early 2000s by newcomers from the provinces, mostly ethnic Hazaras.

7 In fact, Jawed (who was born in Pakistan) has never been in Afghanistan.

have remained in Central Asia, the singer longs to be reunited with his beloved one in Kabul's Dasht-e Barchi, an imaginary place for so many displaced Hazaras.

At universities, especially in the departments of music and music education, the number of applied projects with refugee musicians and people with a migration background has increased in recent years. Working with refugees or other disenfranchised people bears some inherent challenges, of which the well-meaning European "helpers" are often unaware. Where unequal power relations and dependencies exist, contents and representations must be carefully examined. Cultural practices based on romanticizing solidarity or unquestioned paternalism have the potential to consolidate hegemonic power (such as in the earlier example of a "camp touring" artist).

The art-historians Maren Ziese and Caroline Gritschke (2016) warn against making people with experience of flight the target group of pedagogical efforts and objects of action of the majority society. Rather, they must be perceived and treated as participants and actors. How—and whether—a creative participation of refugees in cultural life can take place on an equal footing is based on a fundamental and critical understanding of the social power relations that cause marginalization (Micossé-Aikins and Sharifi 2016: 78). For this reason, current efforts to culturally integrate refugees should not be left to well-meaning helpers or project leaders of NPOs or established cultural and educational institutions alone; they should also be accompanied by scholars who are specialized and sensitized in cross-cultural matters. Scholars, such as applied ethnomusicologists, who are actively involved in tackling concrete problems faced by minoritized individuals and groups, have the necessary tools and are therefore particularly suited for this type of work.

It is in that spirit that Helena and Jawed are continuing their collaboration, learning and benefitting from each other's strength and knowledge.

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<https://www.hslu.ch/en/lucerne-university-of-applied-sciences-and-arts/about-us/people-finder/profile/?pid=3789>

Jawed Ahmadi is an Afghan singer/songwriter residing in Switzerland. He recently began his job training at a large retail store. In his spare time, he performs music and is working to build a music career. His dream is to eventually make a living from music.

https://www.instagram.com/jawed_ahmadi_music/?hl=en

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