

“Your absence is a catastrophe:” The enduring versatility of Googoosh’s 1975 hit “Hamsafar” (“Fellow Traveller”)

Gay Breyley

Los Angeles-based pop diva Googoosh is the all-time most commercially successful Iranian-born performer. Apart from a two-decade break in her public career following the 1979 Iranian revolution, Googoosh has been active as a performer since her childhood in the 1950s. The height of her commercial success was the 1970s, when she dominated popular culture in Iran, not only in music, but also in cinema, television, celebrity press and fashion. In this period, Googoosh released many sentimental ballads that have retained their popularity with fans over the decades. This article analyses the nature of this ongoing popular success, with a focus on the multiple layers of meaning enabled by symbolic lyrics, the appeal of Googoosh’s work across music genres and generations, and the mediated intersections of romantic ballads and world events. A prime example of a ballad with all these elements is Googoosh’s 1975 hit “Hamsafar,” variously translated as “Fellow Traveller” or “Companion.” The song was written for the popular drama/romantic comedy *Hamsafar*, directed by Mas’ud Asadullah and also released in 1975. Through this example, the article argues that the emotive nature of sentimental ballads can enable, or at least contribute to, multiple forms of connection, from personal reconciliation to social unity and even political solidarity, however temporary such connections may be.

[T]he key questions surrounding sentimentalism are... about *distribution* in an economy of affect. For “right feeling” is a zero-sum game; those who have it have it only at the expense of others. So who derides whom for their sentimentalism and wrong feeling? Who draws the lines, across what kinds of spaces, and how? Under what circumstances? When they are tied to other forms of privilege and exploitation, as is so often the case, how are they contested? For what stakes? These are social, historical, and political questions. Neoliberal politics, which displace issues of social justice and welfare with insistent appeals to right feeling, has ensured that such questions are now globally pressing. (Stokes 2010: 189-90, emphasis in original)

In 2025, a fifty-year-old Iranian hit song, from the soundtrack of a popular 1975 Iranian film, was heard many times around the world, especially in centres of the Iranian diaspora. The film’s stars, pop singer Googoosh and cult actor Behrouz Vossoughi (Tabarraee 2024), reunited to tour North America and Europe for the fiftieth anniversary, accompanied by a new documentary film, *The Poem of the Journey* (Etemadi 2025). This title, “شعر سفر /sher-e safar” in Persian, borrows from a line of the song, “Hamsafar.” At the 2025 series of red-carpet events (as was evident in the many social media posts from these events), fans across generations shed tears and shared memories, hugs, kisses and jokes.¹ The events included screenings, glamorous receptions, in-conversation sessions, Q&As and interviews.² Attendees enjoyed opportunities to meet Googoosh and

1 For examples of these encounters, see the following hashtags on social media in 2025: #sheresafar, #poemofthejourney, #hamsafar, #googoosh, #behrouzvossoughi شعرسفر, #همسفر, #بهروزوئوقی, #گوگوش.

Vossoughi, obtain autographs and take photos with the stars. Many of these attendees were people who lived in Iran in 1975, carried complex memories with them, and accorded equally complex significance to the figures of Googoosh and Vossoughi, the respective past and present performances of the two stars, and the music of Googoosh. While those who “were there” in the 1970s enjoy a particular kind of insider status that informs and sometimes serves to “justify” their various forms of sentimental attachment and imagination, the attendees who had not experienced 1970s Iran firsthand also brought their own relational memories, imaginations and ways of attributing affective meaning to their encounters with Googoosh, Vossoughi, and each other.

Drawing on DeNora’s (2015: 137) understanding of music as “an emergent, flexible medium that, like health/illness, takes shape in relation to other things,” this article examines some of the many ways a sentimental popular song may “take shape” in relation to the contexts of its composition, performance, circulation, and reception, along with a range of other variables. I suggest that the sentimentality associated with the song similarly interacts with the sentimentalities emerging from personal and collective experience, artistic forms and genres, and shifts in values and beliefs. “Hamsafar” has continued to take shape in different ways for more than fifty years, because it invites a range of readings, from the personal and romantic to the ideological and sociocultural. Through these versatile readings, the song connects its audiences across musical taste, locality, class, generations and other potential divisions. As DeNora (2015: 137) argues, “the idea of making general (acontextual and absolute) distinctions between different musical forms and formats is misguided and masks much of the good that music does and can be. By contrast, a flexible and emergent aesthetic, in which music that does good is good, makes it easier to perceive music’s value and importance in human culture.” For those who engage with “Hamsafar” sentimentally, whether they have done so for half a century or for five minutes, the song’s “value and importance” are evident. My reading of the song’s multi-layered significance in this article is based partly on engagement with the extensive online sharing of fans, including people who took part in the 2025 events with Googoosh and Vossoughi (which I did not attend). I also draw on my ethnographic research with Googoosh’s fans in Iran and the diaspora over two decades, which included attending her concerts in Europe, North America, and Australia.

Links between sentimentality, nostalgia and music have been examined with a range of theoretical approaches (e.g. Reynolds 2012; Hogarty 2016; Ahlberg, Hietanen and Soila 2020; Alaminos-Fernández 2025), as well as in less theoretical contexts, such as Akhavan’s (2017: 6) memories of 1970s Iran: “Young Iranian couples sipped whiskey in smoke-filled cabarets, shedding sentimental tears to the melancholic songs of Googoosh, Iran’s answer to Édith Piaf.” The significance of such links in diasporic contexts entails more complicated elements of memory and imaginative reconstruction, especially if it is not possible for those who remember to return physically to the sites of their memories and when those memories are informed or disrupted by trauma (Volgsten and Pripp 2016; Magowan 2019; Scheduling 2019; Barcus and Shugatai 2023; Bhowmik and Rogaly 2023; Carr 2025). Meanwhile, descendants of those who remember may live with various forms of post-memory (Kabir 2004; Breyley 2007; Maghbouleh 2010; Auliffe 2011; Breyley 2014; Malek 2021). In cases where the remembered or reconstructed place no longer exists in its remembered form, e.g. the pre-1979 Iranian monarchy or the pre-1990 German Democratic Republic, nostalgia also entails specific sociopolitical elements (Naficy 1991; Hemmasi 2017; Brockmann 2023; Salimi 2023; Astafeva 2024; Demmelhuber 2025). Aspects of all the above conditions may apply to the case of the song “Hamsafar” and the film *Hamsafar*, their shifting reception since 1975,

2 See advertisements for some of these events at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=764961572868276>, http://posttick.com/c/gab/the_poem_of_the_journey_25_09_2025_central_hall_westminster_london_s2/en, <https://www.tiktok.com/@posttick.com/video/7533183553115442454>, and a “throwback” post at: https://www.facebook.com/100064748770673/videos/1047075737757039?__so__=permalink.

and responses to encounters with Googoosh and Behrouz Vossoughi in 2025. During and after the events featuring the pair, many attendees posted short videos to social media, often including the song “Hamsafar” and/or the dramatic clip from the 1975 film that features the song and the couple on a motorcycle, riding through the spectacular mountains of northern Iran towards the capital city, Tehran. This scene is arguably the emotional peak of *Hamsafar*, as the two romantic leads come together emotionally and physically, although the song’s lyrics are ambiguous, leaving open the question of the “fellow travellers” union’s durability. The mountainous road from the north to Tehran is familiar to people who have lived in Iran, especially those who were in an economic position to holiday on the popular Caspian Sea coast. For many, the sight of this road brings back memories of family holidays, honeymoons, youthful or romantic adventures, a sense of freedom in the outdoors or, for some, memories of danger and heartache. That image, combined with Googoosh’s singing voice and the movement of mid-1970s Iran’s popular “golden couple” (Googoosh and Vossoughi were married from 1975 to 1976, following a long romantic relationship) through familiar, but distant, terrain, serves to intensify a range of individual and collective emotions.

During the 2025 tour, Googoosh’s (2025a) official social media posted a poem alongside a photo of Googoosh, Vossoughi and leading 1970s Tehran songwriter, filmmaker and composer Esfandiar Monfaredzadeh (see Salavati 2023):

Years have passed
But in this second frame,
Time stands still.
Behrouz, with a look that still has the depth of cinema and life in it.
And Esfandiar, with songs that arise from the heart of memories. 🎵
There was a time when cinema and music.
Not for fame, they beat for heart...
And we were only witnesses of a dream
That never left the hearts of people.
Remembering the days when art was honest.
. 🕊 »
#گوگوش #بهروز وثوقی #اسفندیار منفردزاده
#Travel_poem #Remember_yesterday_well
[Automatic translation from Persian by Instagram]

The reference to the perceived loss of “honest” art, the linking of sincerity with the “heart” and the implied disdain for artists seeking fame rather than, perhaps, constructive relational sentimentality, suggests how some makers of 1970s popular film and music in Iran may understand, or at least represent, their work. This proud representation serves to counter various forms of, arguably, snobbery that have pervaded film and music industries in Iran, as they have done in creative and cultural industries in most parts of the world (Jamieson 2025). Berlant (2008: 4) explains genre as a “form of aesthetic expectation with porous boundaries allowing complex audience identifications: it locates real life in the affective capacity to bracket many kinds of structural and historical antagonism on behalf of finding a way to connect with the feeling of belonging to a larger world.” Both the lush pop ballad “Hamsafar” and the popular drama/romantic comedy *Hamsafar*, as well as their respective genres, are generally understood as sentimental. This is associated with their respective commercial successes and their large audiences, often characterised in the context of 1970s Iran as “non-intellectual,” lacking in sociopolitical engagement, “derivative” or “vulgar” (Naficy 2011; Partovi 2017; Fish 2020; Rekabtalaei 2024). So-called intellectual audiences, by contrast, claimed to appreciate Iran’s arthouse films and the art and rock music of the period. Such characterisation, of course, usually carried implications of inferiority, however much solidarity the critics of the time claimed to have with their so-called “non-intellectual” compatriots (Matin-Asgari 2017). In the mid-1970s, widespread anger with social inequalities, the Iranian monarchy and the effects of colonialism around the world

was strengthening the diverse range of leftist movements that were active in Iran and would eventually come together to support the 1979 revolution (Kurzman 2004).

If, as Googoosh’s *Instagram* post suggests, sentimentality is associated with sincerity and the feelings of “the people,” what is its crime, as Barcan and Johnston (2024) put it? They (2024: 99-100) explain:

Sentimentality’s supposed aesthetic crime is to collapse rhetorical, emotional, conceptual or ethical distance, in contrast to the putatively universal, but in reality deeply classed and gendered, ideal of distance [Bourdieu 1984, 5; Felski 2009]. Paradoxically, sentimental texts are commonly castigated as simultaneously excessive and insufficient. They are ‘excessively’ emotional (‘mawkish’) and yet they are also somehow insufficient, because the emotions they express or produce are too conventionally conceived and scripted (unoriginal, clichéd, mere repetitions). Even these overflowing excessive emotions are not valued as genuine but are, rather, often seen as ‘borrowed’ rather than earned – picked up by facile emotional contagion rather than by the hard intellectual labour of reflection or the demanding emotional or cognitive pleasures earned by engaging with challenging or unfamiliar textual forms.

Notions of distance, excess and insufficiency are relevant to the workings of songs such as “Hamsafar.” The audience’s imagined proximity to the characters in the film and, in this case, to the celebrity actors, especially to the heroine/actor/singer Googoosh, is arguably central to the connections created between the “sentimental text” of “Hamsafar”/*Hamsafar* and its listeners (Breyley 2010; Atwood 2016). In the 1970s, as a singer and cultural figure, Googoosh was popularly seen in Iran as “modern” and her work as “Westernised.” Both these terms are problematic, but they were central to popular and intellectual discourse in 1970s Iran (Mirsepassi 2000; Breyley and Fatemi 2018; Khanlarzadeh 2023). Some people desired what they saw as modernity; others feared the losses it might entail. Some welcomed aspects of so-called Westernisation, while others saw it on many levels as a form of cultural colonialism. As a vocalist trained in theatre and film since childhood, Googoosh perfected melodramatic performance, with trembling vocals and emotive facial expressions. She (Googoosh with Dehlavi 2025) recalls growing up with both “heart-wrenching ballads” and “upbeat” songs introduced by her father: “They were the popular traditional songs with melancholic words sung by the greats like Marzieh, Delkash, and Pouran, who, unbeknownst to them, had been my first vocal teachers. They were also the Azerbaijani folk dances and operettas with lively tempos that Papa and I used to perform together.” However, Googoosh’s singing and performance styles were generally seen as less “excessive” (and, by implication, more “modern” and more “Western”) than those of popular Iranian singers who came before her. Her introduction of dancing into the performance of songs of heartbreak and heartache was part of this. There was also her capacity to shift smoothly from poses of cool youthful scepticism to intense emotional pain, potentially opening a space for moments of imagined distance – even a hint of irony for some listeners, a conventional justification for supposedly “uncool” tastes – and tempering the sense of both excess and insufficiency. For some listeners, this results in a kind of satisfying middle point, where something approaching camp and unironic sentimentality are simultaneously possible. As Sontag (2018) reminds us, “not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive.”³

The particular figure of Googoosh plays a role in the effects of “Hamsafar,” not only for the 1970s population of Iran, who, if they watched television, listened to commercial radio, or read popular magazines, were very familiar with her image, her work and details of her private life, however inaccurately they might be reported. The mythology around Googoosh has persisted

3 For a contrasting example in 1950s-70s Tehran (albeit one that arguably contributed to the development of Googoosh’s styles, especially in her childhood), see Khanlarzadeh’s (2023) analysis of *eshgh ast* (“it is love”) as camp.

across generations, at least in certain social contexts, perhaps most of all in the large diasporic communities who settled in North America, where Googoosh herself now lives and works. Hemmasi (2017: 168) analyses the narrative, especially popular in these communities, of Googoosh's "lack of agency, both pre- and post-revolution, that has allowed Googoosh's personal and professional victimhood to map onto the tragic depictions of both Iranian women's post-revolutionary subjectification and the nation itself." Referring to Zamani's (2000) documentary *Googoosh: Iran's Daughter*, made while the star was still living in Iran, Hemmasi (2017: 168) observes that the film's title "identifies Googoosh's lack of (agentive) voice as the key to her national political metaphorization," while the tagline, "Her silence made her the voice of a nation," is illustrated by Zamani "showing how he and his exiled interlocutors fill the emptiness of Googoosh's absence with their interpretations of her life, her choices and her relationship to Iranian history." Googoosh emerged as a child star from the working-class, "disreputable" sections of Iran's 1950s entertainment industries. She was introduced to the performance world by her father, who was a comedian and theatrical acrobat. Despite Googoosh's stardom, she, like her father, suffered from social prejudices against popular entertainers, even from those closest to them (Sarshar 2026). Googoosh (with Dehlavi 2025: 46) reflects on a shocking comment from Vossoughi – that he "didn't like his woman to be singing in public" – before the couple was married: "perhaps his family had pressured him, asking him to leave me, a previously married woman with a child, and an entertainer, what they called a *motreb*" (on the *motreb*, see Fatemi 2005; Breyley 2016; Breyley and Fatemi 2018; Khanlarzadeh 2023). At the same time, Googoosh's entry into the public sphere as a child, her humble background and her widely reported, often unhappy romantic experiences as a young woman made her a very relatable figure, albeit one who, for those same class and gendered reasons that made her relatable, was not afforded the kind of respect paid to so-called serious artists, such as those in art and rock music, where men dominated.

In Iran in the 1970s, as elsewhere in other periods, part of the disdain for sentimental music and film relates to the gendering of these forms (Germanaz et al 2023). As Laing (2017: 1) observes:

It seems that female characters are burdened with a mode of musical-emotional representation that, as Gorbman [1987] suggests, serves less to characterize them as 'ordinarily' emotional than to distinguish them through an association with the 'excessively' emotional. As a result, when female emotions become a particular focus of the melodrama and woman's film of the 1940s, the lush symphonic scores that seem to define cinema at that time are bound to follow.

While "Hamsafar" serves as an example of such characterisation, the performances of Googoosh and Vossoughi arguably illustrate some shifts in popular gendering conventions. As Berlant (2008: 3) suggests, the "convention is... sometimes a profound placeholder that provides an affective confirmation of the idea of a shared confirming imaginary in advance of inhabiting a material world in which that feeling can actually be lived." Just as the figure of Googoosh was widely relatable for her perceived "failures," humility and, sometimes, her "working-class" humour and cultural knowledge (Sarshar 2026), Vossoughi presented his audiences with a complex model of 1970s masculinity. Tabarraee (2024) argues that Vossoughi's "violent characters fail in their fights," but that this "model of failure" provides:

a very relatable experience for the Iranian audience, many of whom have witnessed or been engaged in constant battle with various forms of authority and patriarchy over the past half-century. The world of other male stars in Iranian cinema offered the audience a modern avenue for re-experiencing traditional conceptualizations of male heroes: men who would act heroically in everything associated with manhood, from fights to chivalry to sex. The cinematic world of Bihrūz Vusūqī [an alternative spelling of Vossoughi's name], however, was a bitter, dark, and poisoned environment in which a man got beat up by different forces without being able to do anything about it except to take pleasure in the process of humiliation. Failure, then, could also mean resistance against powers beyond one's control.

While Vossoughi’s performances were subtly shifting popular masculinities in Iran, a country singer in Australasia, Tex Morton, was doing something similar with his sentimental songs, as Bellanta and Martin (2012: 365) argue:

Far from expressing solid ‘family values’, they romanticised the ‘sins of the son’: the lone hand’s inability to carry out his domestic responsibilities. His sentimental songs turned the itinerant man’s ‘soft’ feelings into symbols of his hardy and footloose masculinity. They offered up bitter tears and tender longings as proof of his inability to lead a steady life, of the fact that he would forever be a black sheep or a rolling stone.

As with the futile struggles of Vossoughi’s working-class characters against “powers beyond one’s control,” here, too, the mobile sentimental man feels deeply, but most of his attempts to enact those feelings are blocked by violent, arguably unjust, systemic obstacles. Such “noble,” “honest” failures, presented with simultaneous intensity of emotion and self-deprecating humour, along with the subtext of inequitable sociopolitical structures, contribute to the shaping of 1970s sentimentalities. They entail relatability, honour in trying rather than succeeding, and persistent battling against the increasing odds. On his 2025 tour with Googoosh, the then 88-year-old Vossoughi continued to present himself as a relatable figure, dressed less glamorously than Googoosh and engaging attendees with characteristic humility, charm and humour.



Figure 1. Googoosh and Vossoughi on the set of *Hamsafar*, 1974. Photo by Manoochehr Jamalipoor.



Figure 2. Promotional post for 'The Poem of the Journey (*Shere Safar*)' event, 23. September 2025 - Cine-maxX Dammtor Hamburg, posted by Posttick, 7 August 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/posttick/posts/the-poem-of-the-journey-shere-safar23-september-2025-cinemaxx-dammtorhamburgfilm/1198406295660985/>.

Supported by the sentimental soundtrack of *Hamsafar*, the 2025 tour enabled fans of Googoosh and Vossoughi to idealise again the 1970s romantic relationship and marriage between the two stars. Vossoughi had long been represented in popular Iranian media as the love of Googoosh's life. Googoosh's memoir, *Googoosh: A Sinful Voice*, was released shortly after the tour concluded, in December 2025. In the book, Googoosh does not contradict the narrative of Vossoughi as her greatest love. However, she (with Dehlavi 2025: 49) presents memories of a different Vossoughi from the character so admired by fans, effectively puncturing some aspects of the associated sentimentality:

From the outside, our relationship seemed perfect: two young famous artists, co-stars in romantic films, in love. Glossy pictures in magazines captured our chemistry, comparing us to Hollywood dream couples like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. But they didn't tell the whole story. Like most relationships in the spotlight, our hectic schedules, long stretches of time apart, and the constant rumors got the best of us and brought out our worst. The magazines didn't know about all the women swarming around Behrouz, including his rumored ex-lovers, nor his extreme jealousy over me that bordered on paranoia. Several times I caught him going through my clothes, checking my pockets for evidence, or sniffing for another man's cologne. I would get so mad.

It felt like a slap in the face. I loved him so much and I couldn’t understand how he could doubt my loyalty. But then it also made me wonder whether he was simply acting out of guilt... I kept everything bottled inside, never wanting to upset him, never wanting to risk him leaving me.

Here, Googoosh’s direct prose reinforces the relatability of her personal experiences, for some fans perhaps even more than her emotive performances on stage and screen. However, her writing works in different ways from her music, with its space for ambiguity, symbolism and the complex “affective and sensory aspects of aural experience” (Hofman 2020: 309). As Hofman observes, these aural aspects also work in various ways, depending on how affect is “caught in power relations” (309) and “affective intensities are differently experienced and narrated in different historical moments” (310). Variations in forms of narration, such as memoir and sentimental ballad, also relate to genre and gender, as Berlant (2008: 5) argues: “gender-marked texts of women’s popular culture cultivate fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real – social antagonisms, exploitation, compromised intimacies, the attrition of life”. While Berlant refers primarily to contexts in the United States, which was intervening in Iranian sociocultural conventions and fantasies throughout the 1970s (Naficy 2011), these effects are evident in a range of translocal and transtemporal fan responses to Googoosh’s various “gender-marked texts”.

Berlant (2011: 223) suggests that “[i]ntensely political seasons spawn reveries of a different immediacy. People imagine alternative environments where authenticity trumps ideology, truths cannot be concealed, and communication feels intimate, face-to-face.” This informs the context of 1970s Iran, as well as that of Googoosh and Vossoughi’s tour and the release of Googoosh’s memoir in 2025. The sentimentality of fan gatherings and book discussions in 2025 related to spatial and temporal distance, diverse constructions of memory and post-memory, and Iran’s turbulent history of sociocultural uprising, revolution, war and migration. However, of course “Hamsafar” already carried multiple layers of meaning, enabled by its symbolic lyrics, the heterogeneous significance of Googoosh’s work, and the mediated intersections of romantic ballads and world events. Within the plot of the film *Hamsafar*, the song comes at a point where Googoosh’s disillusioned, upper-class character, Atefeh, begins to trust the rural, lower-class hero Ali, played by Vossoughi. The taciturn Ali has repeatedly rescued Atefeh from men attempting to assault her sexually. These encounters, along with Atefeh’s betrayal by her wealthy ex-lover, illustrate the local complexities of social divisions and conflicts that have long been central to politics, humour and cultural productions in Iran (Rekabtalaei 2019). Here, notions of goodness, beauty, success, honour, and justice are reconfigured and shifted, but not towards new or imagined “Western” ideals. Rather, within the fluctuations of youthful inter-class modernity, the two characters’ largely silent intimacy, accompanied by the sounds of “Hamsafar,” transports – or perhaps returns – them to an ineffably familiar sense of imagined “authenticity” and “truth,” in Berlant’s terms. In the song’s lyrics, this is also security and purpose in a dangerous, unpredictable world.

In “Hamsafar,” the combination of Varoujan Hakhbandian’s musical arrangement and Jannati-Ata’s lyrics supports such seemingly mysterious familiarity, a source of the song’s sentimental impact. Varoujan, known professionally by his first name, was a prolific and influential composer for stage and screen, writing and arranging songs for the most prominent stars in Tehran’s pop and rock scenes, before his early death in 1977 (Assaran 2020). Like Azeri-Iranian Googoosh, although from an older generation, Armenian-Iranian Varoujan grew up in a multicultural Tehran, home to members of Iran’s many ethnic groups, some of whom had moved to the city in search of employment (Barry 2017; Breyley and Fatemi 2018; Rekabtalaei 2019; Rezvani Naraghi 2023). Inspired in childhood by newly available radio and records (Lewisohn 2008), Varoujan went on to undertake extensive formal studies in music and became a sought-after innovator. For “Hamsafar,” Varoujan’s orchestration draws on Iranian melodic pop and film-music techniques,

producing a smooth, fluid accompaniment to Googoosh's vocals and phrasing, with strings providing a lush texture. The verse-refrain form includes subtle dynamic arcs that swell into the more fully orchestrated refrain and gently relax in the interludes. The instrumental texture, along with the lyrics, progresses from intimacy to more sweeping gestures.

"Hamsafar's" lyricist, the poet, playwright, and theatre director Jannati-Ata'i (1947-), was also prolific and influential in 1970s Iran, perfecting the use of multivalence to appeal simultaneously to sentimental, intellectual, and political impulses. Trained in drama and sociology, he worked with the intersections of political organisation and emotion in his song lyrics. Responding to a BBC interviewer's question, "Why did songs become screams in your time, while in another time they could have been romantic sighs?", Jannati-Ata'i (2011) observes:

Because... of the changes and developments that occur in the world, social needs and, as a result, human emotions are also formed, or their shape, speed, and direction change. [It]... was a time when the world was experiencing changes and developments in every way, and we saw and heard its effects in songs in different countries... [W]hen the last waves of all this reached our homeland, it is natural that it left its own social, political, cultural, artistic, and social impact...

With the emergence of protest in its organizational and emotional forms, the emergence of guerrillaism, and its dealings with everyday issues, society slowly began to want to see the effects of what it was experiencing in song.

Jannati-Ata'i's ambiguous lyrics about deep emotions, disillusionment, and the uncertain fates of entangled but isolated lives were well suited to the performance styles of some of Iran's most popular vocalists in the 1970s. Most notable, perhaps, is Dariush, known for pop music that is both mournful and politically mobilising (Hemmasi 2013; Breyley and Fatemi 2018; Alizadeh 2023). Like Dariush, Jannati-Ata'i faced censorship and imprisonment under the Pahlavi regime for his artistic activism. He (Jannati-Ata'i 2011) reflects:

When we started, what existed were one or two departments in radio and culture and art that had special knowledge in relation to how to stop those metaphors and those symbols and those underlying meanings. But in the period when we started singing, what was happening in the streets and what people were experiencing, this language was not yet a language that those in the censorship and review departments were familiar with...
[T]he culture of creativity that lives in a society of oppression is not a culture of explicitness.

With a different style and politics from that of her occasional collaborator, Dariush, Googoosh's performance of Jannati-Ata'i's lyrics adds further dimensions, setting a romantic relationship more subtly in the context of systemic injustice and existential anguish. Jannati-Ata'i's theatrical training and sense of character and dialogue also contribute to his lyrics' suitability for Asadullah's dramas.

The lyrics of "Hamsafar" (translated below from the original Persian) are addressed by Googoosh's character, Atefeh, to Vossoughi's Ali – or, perhaps, to herself, as she silently rides pillion, depending on his control of their swerving, potentially precarious, vehicle as it transports the couple through an unpredictable, but stunning, landscape, and considering their tentative relationship:

What story are you from, that yearning for you becomes a habit?
Your absence is a catastrophe, your presence security
What land are you from? What air are you from
That from my people you are a sky apart?
Whatever place you are from, you are the bearer of blossoming
In confusion and trouble, you are the saviour of my heart
Purity of water or clouds, no, by God, you are pure as dew
You are the size of my embrace, no more, no less
Take me with you, oh you, my support

It's good, like your body, to become your travel companion
Take me with you, I am happy to go
Whatever is pleasant, what you want, I am content with that...
Oh, my old dress has taken on your scent
How good it is to go with you, to go, always going
How good, like a shadow, to be your fellow traveller
Pacing along the roads, embarking on a journey
What if the poem of the journey had no final line
If the uprooted life of me and you had no last breath?
The end of the poem of the journey is the end of my life
The moment of my death is the moment of arrival...
In love with the conquest of the horizon, I'm the enemy of returning
Take me with you.

Here, Jannati-Ata'i's lyrics complicate notions of sentimentality, as they feature much of the perceived excess and lack of distance that sentimentality is charged with – and even insufficiency, in Barcan and Johnston's sense, with such dramatic words of death voiced by a seemingly privileged young person. However, of course, “final breaths,” “death,” and “the horizon” are open to multiple readings, from the literal to the political. These themes of love, the human condition, mortality, futility, and paradoxical notions of “conquest” are classic themes of so-called serious art. Wrapping them in a pop ballad, within a scene simultaneously depicting freedom and danger, intimacy and distance, in a commercial drama, performed by a star who is loved in paradoxical ways, arguably adds to their significance, or expands it, rather than detracting from it.

In the mid-2020s, as in the mid-1970s, Iran and the world face unpredictable powers, crises without clear solutions, and seemingly insurmountable obstacles to collective and personal freedoms and justice. As Stokes (2023: 87) reflects:

In a world that seems to be run by criminals, figures of everyday decency, persevering against the odds, become our citizenly heroes. But... we have learned to question the need for any kind of hero—and especially the singular, White, and male versions of them that history conventionally provides... The quest for them continues, nonetheless. But it does so now on more complicated terrain—in mass media, in crowds, and in social movements. It occupies more complex emotional territory, too. This is no longer a matter of marble-pillared, major-key triumphalism. It is marked, rather, by the signs of loss, damage, and suffering.

What does sentimentality, delivered through popular, enduring songs and performances, contribute to this world's desire for decency and perseverance? It allows audiences to consider the “loss, damage, and suffering” in their collective lives, to mourn, celebrate and imagine futures in which citizenly heroes come together and work again for the “conquest of the horizon,” however out of reach that horizon may appear.

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About the author

Gay Breyley
Monash University
gay.breyley@monash.edu

Gay Jennifer Breyley is Adjunct Associate Professor, Musicology and Ethnomusicology, in the Elder Conservatorium of Music at Adelaide University, where she recently completed an Elizabeth Wood Research Fellowship in Musicology. She is also a sessional lecturer in the Faculty of Arts at Monash University. Drawing on theories of mediation, translocality and cultural memory, Breyley’s research focuses on music cultures and sociopolitical change, especially in West Asia, Europe, Australia and diasporic contexts. She has published widely in this field, including an award-winning book, *Iranian Music and Popular Entertainment: From Motrebi to Losanjelesi and Beyond*, co-authored with Sasan Fatemi.