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Posted: Wed., May 31, 2006, 2:09pm PT

Sounds Of Silence

Sot-E Sokut

(Documentary -- Iran-U.K.-Germany)

Produced by Amir **Hamz**. Executive producers, **Hamz**, Mark Lazarz, Marek Kowalek. Directed by Amir **Hamz**, Mark Lazarz.

With: Shadi Vatanparast, Shahram Sharbar, Babak Akhoondy, Mohsen Namjoo, Reza Abaee, Barob Band, Atma Tribal Rock Band.
(Farsi dialogue)

By **RONNIE SCHEIB**

This exploration of the underground music scene in Tehran supplies an illuminating peek at the arcane illogic of government censorship and a sampling of diverse bands that strive to express a national identity in contempo music. As structured by helmers Amir **Hamz** and Mark Lazarz, interviews with musicians and journalists alternate with recording sessions and videos downloaded from the Internet, frequently the sole source of distribution available. The integrity of the music presented and the sheer weirdness of Iran's religious bureaucracy could earn this Iranian-German-English **docu** a limited theatrical berth and a comfortable niche in ancillary.

Music and lyrics must be separately approved by the Ershad (aka the Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance), which claims no expertise and less interest in modern music. Often permission is granted only to suddenly be withdrawn just days before a proposed concert. Every aspect of performance is under scrutiny, including "superfluous" movements onstage, "unsuitable" grooming and "inappropriate" musical instrumentation, not to mention unsanctioned political and religious content. There is no copyright protection. Any grammatical errors in the verses and the use of a solo female singing voice are strictly prohibited.

Hamz and Lazarz have wisely interspersed excerpts of a long conversation with articulate and very feminine journalist Shadi Vatanparast to provide a concise overview of Tehran's music scene and at the same time subtly underscore the almost total absence of women

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elsewhere in the film.

The frustration of being forced to decipher the rationale behind completely arbitrary rulings causes some of Iran's most gifted players to emigrate. On the other hand, due in part to the high casualties of the Iran-Iraq war, more than half the population is under 25 years old, and interest in Western-style music cannot be easily squelched, nor can the Internet be easily monitored.

Hamz and Lazarz showcase a compelling mix of musical styles, from the spell-casting strains of Atma to the aggressively oriental rap of Soroush to the cutting-edge fusion sound of alternative rock band O-Hum, all integrating indigenous instruments and tropes into more Western-style forms. One almost misses hearing, if only for contrast's sake, at least a few snippets of the kind of bland pop music regularly greenlighted by Ershad.

Tech credits are above average, with shots of the city at all times of day forming thoughtful visual breaks in the exposition.

Camera (color, DV), Marek Kowalek; editors, Stefano Aiello, **Hamz**, Lazarz; sound, Nils Schomberg. Reviewed at Tribeca Film Festival (competing), April 26, 2006. Running time: 97 MIN.

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