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ARTICLE

Songs that live in the bones

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Abstract
In conversation with playwright and theatre journalist Rina Vergano, multidisciplinary artist and musician Roxana Vilk unpicks her own experience of diaspora and the ways in which her cultural, familial and political roots have informed her artistic practice and inspired her current project about the power of lullabies.

Keywords: Lullabies; cultural heritage; singing to babies; community arts

I first met Roxana during the spring lockdown last year in Demofest, an online artist's platform hosted by MAYK, a leading live-performance production company based in Bristol, South West England. A handful of artists had been invited to talk about their work-in-progress and receive feedback from peers, and Roxana wanted to stress-test her ideas for presenting the lullabies material in a live showcase. I got into a conversation with her about the form of the showcase, as the nature of the material seemed to need a quite contained and intimate kind of presentation and an almost dreamlike space. I've continued talking to Roxana about the project, and this interview includes some of our on-going artistic conversation.

> Rina Vergano: I'm curious about the background of the Lullabies project, how it was set up, who the collaborators were, and how you went about involving communities. And how you settled on a form for presenting the material you gathered.

> Roxana Vilk: The Lullabies project started in 2019 and was very much seeded by my artist's residency on the Ignite Programme at the Trinity Centre, a community arts centre in Bristol. I'd only recently moved to Bristol and was struck by the number of different languages spoken and the incredible cultural diversity here. One night I was singing an Iranian lullaby to my son Darius to settle him to sleep, and I was gazing out the window at all the rooftops and twinkling lights of the city. I suddenly wondered what other songs were being sung in the night in different languages to send babies to sleep. So having moved countries and homes while trying to hang on to heritage, those experiences all collided in my brain at that moment.

Around the same time, I was volunteering at the Malcolm X Centre in Bristol, at a drop-in for refugee women to learn English, particularly with the aim of helping any Iranians or Afghans who needed help with Farsi translation. I started running a conversation class for refugee women with young babies who were too small to go in the crèche. And quite naturally, when one of the babies started crying then the mother would sing a lullaby in her language to soothe the baby. We soon found it was a fun way to find out about each others' cultures and also to learn a bit of English through song.

When you're an artist and a maker ideas hardly ever arise in a rational or linear way, so this was more of an impulse and instinct, a feeling, a curiosity around something that I wanted to follow. This was the idea that I pitched to Trinity's Ignite residency, and I cannot imagine the Lullabies project growing in a safer space, with community engagement at its heart. The Trinity Centre connected me with a local producer, and I was new to Bristol, so I felt very much supported and nurtured by people who believed in the idea and its potential. With the small pot of artists' residency money, plus the in-kind support of producer time, we then applied for some Arts Council England development money for Research and Development outreach work, and got it – which is always a small miracle.

I ran some lullabies workshops at a Community Centre and did some more work at the Malcolm X Centre and in a nursery. It felt right for the project to have a series of one-to-one interviews. It was very informal and casual, pre-COVID. I would just invite people around for a cup of tea to my house and we'd sit down and talk, about their heritage journey to Bristol, where they and their parents' culture had moved from, and then eventually maybe share a song. In that first iteration of the project, I interviewed people from the Somali, Kurdish, Irish, Israeli, Iranian, Hungarian and German communities. From that pool of interviews and songs, we created a 24-min piece that we presented last year as a celebration of the project.

Originally we'd conceived of doing an outdoor piece where we'd play the songs and project some film footage onto buildings, but the material turned out to need a far more intimate setting. The key elements were around fragility, trust, parenting and comforting, although lullabies in themselves are not necessarily sweet or cosy songs – the subject matter itself can be quite dark, with some songs exploring fearful situations. For example, the Kurdish lullaby, *Gorgane Shabeh*, is about the wolf of the night coming to steal away your child in the middle of the night – let it take the neighbour's child and not mine. Taban, an amazing Kurdish singer, poet and performer based here in Bristol, explained that her mother would sing them this song when they were all sleeping in one little room in Kurdistan at a time of war and conflict, and that perhaps her mother was expressing the fear of wanting to keep her children safe and not to have her sons conscripted into the army.

The very first person I interviewed, a wonderful Somalian singer named Maryam, was never sung to as a child because she was an orphan. She became a street child who sold ice cream on the streets of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, and she would sing to herself to keep her spirits up. She told me that the first time she sung to her son as a baby she felt a golden glow pass from her to him, through the song, and it filled her with great joy. She continues singing here in Bristol all the time, where she works as a cleaning lady. Her story touched me on such a deep level that I felt it had to be part of the project. Layers of meaning and narrative very quickly became apparent to me in this first research and development phase. The lullaby itself was a fragile but powerful emotional moment that I needed to honour, as well as honouring those who were brave enough to open up and share this beautiful and deeply personal material.

Lullabies are also a way of remembering loved ones who are gone, parents, grandparents and family members. In one of the interviews we carried out using the binaural baby (binaural is explained later in the article), a Mexican man shared the lullaby that was sung to him by his grandmother. It had been sung by 60 family members and friends at her funeral, as her coffin was being carried out. That was such a powerful image, and a powerful sound memory, that everyone was singing the lullaby back to her that she had passed down to them. A song that lives in the bones.

Rina: In making work, ideas often start with the self, the own point of view, and they can take a long while to brew. How did the idea of lullabies brew in you, and then go on to become a project?

Roxana: When I was growing up in Iran as a child, I lived in an intergenerational flat in which my great-grandmother, grandmother, my mother and I were all under the same roof for a

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time. It was a collective upbringing in a very extended family. I had my parents, but I might also spend nights at my auntie's house with my cousins who were the same age as me. There was always a lot of family around. Songs and music are a big part of Iranian culture, and my mother and grandmother loved singing folk songs, when they were cooking or tidying or cleaning the house. There was always a song being sung.

My grandfather, who had spent time working in Germany, had brought back a record player and loved playing records. So there was always music around me as a child. If we drove to the Caspian Sea, on a holiday or for a weekend, he would sing and tell stories on those 6-hour-long car journeys. I have a crystal clear memory as a child of looking out at those starry nights through the back window of the car and hearing this mixture of songs and storytelling, and being lost in those worlds. When we left Iran my grandfather recorded his songs and stories onto a cassette tape, which we then carried with us through all the different countries we passed through. That tape had such a powerful resonance for me, and this Lullabies project echoes that strongly.

That world I had as a little child is something I want to pass down to my own children. I've never been able to take them back to Iran because of political reasons, and so I wanted them to feel a connection with my motherland and with this rich culture that I grew up in, without borders and geography stopping us. It's something that's very important to me, both as a mother as an artist, and it's something that interests me in other people's histories; those notions of heritage and the need to integrate while keeping part of your true identity and your sense of self alive in a new culture.

The moment of the Brexit vote and the very well-documented rise in racism in this country made me incredibly angry and upset. At the time we were living in a small seaside town outside Edinburgh, in Scotland. We were asked as a family whether it was going to be difficult for us to stay now that Brexit had happened, even though I have a British passport. Because of the colour of my son's skin and the racism that he was experiencing at school, I suddenly had a very strong sense of othering, of looking at difference through skin colour and through language. My son even tried to scrub his skin white in the bath because he didn't want to be different. That was a pivotal moment for us, when we decided we wanted to move to Bristol and live in a more diverse multicultural city. His first day at school in Bristol my son said to me: 'Mum, look at Ali, he looks like me!'

The rise of rightwing rhetoric was something I wanted to directly address in my artistic work. Anger is a great energy that I can channel into doing something about it in my own small way, by celebrating diversity and showing that we are all one humanity.

And yet with all these beautiful differences, the details in our histories became increasingly important. When I started interviewing people and hearing their histories of migration it reconfirmed in me that it's important for others to share their heritage too.

Rina: How do you see yourself, culturally, where is home for you, and how have you dealt with crossing boundaries and borders?

Roxana: I'm often asked where home is and where I see myself culturally aligned, whether it's with Iran or with the UK or somewhere in between in this liminal space. I find those questions very difficult because I think anyone who has grown up in multiple cultures moving around a lot will struggle with identity and home. I've put that struggle into my work and into finding those resonances with others. I think maybe the point at which I can answer that question is the point at which I'd probably stop making work! I would hate to choose any country to be specifically home because I am fearful of the idea of nationalism and borders. I think ultimately, the freedom of being an artist is that you can reject being put in a box and confined by a border.

I took those questions into the film that I made in 2014 in collaboration with the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) called *Iranian Enough: My Search for Identity*. I went across the UK and USA and spoke to people from the Iranian diaspora around those questions of identity and everybody had a very different way of dealing with it: through music, the arts, history and even through food. Many people talked about going back to their motherland but no longer recognising it because things had changed. There are a lot of people in cities who share that experience and who move between many languages and cultures. I think that's why cities like Bristol feel like home for many people from many different cultures, because we can all relate to that. It's a shared experience.

Rina: Do you feel part of an artistic community here in Bristol, and is this a Bristol-based project or more universal than that?

Roxana: The Lullabies project was very much sparked by settling in Bristol and being embraced as part of an artistic community here. I think there is a universality in lullabies that makes it a project and a process that has allowed many people to quickly connect with it on an emotional level. In one of the workshops we ran at a Community Centre we expected around a dozen people, but 40 turned up. We couldn't fit them into the room and so the building was filled with the sound of voices singing together everywhere. Peter Vilk, my partner and co-producer of the Lullabies project, and I couldn't believe it when it just took on its own momentum.

And when we had to move the workshops onto Zoom during lockdown, we'd always start by sharing songs from our own heritage. Peter would share a Slovak *viola* that was sung to him by his mum. I'd share an Iranian song and we'd learn it. And then very quickly, people would share their own songs and take ownership. The concept of co-creation and collaboration is something I've been keen to explore from the outset. Of course, as makers you have to have a vision, a structure and some sort of leadership around the whole process, but we wanted to make it as open as possible for people to get involved. I connected with a lullabies project in India, and also a group in Sarajevo and Kosovo who are collecting heritage songs, stories and lullabies from older people. They hold so much history and might not be around for much longer, so we need to document and archive that.

In many ways, lullabies and the interest in them is a truly global thing. That became very clear under lockdown when BBC News picked it up and suddenly we had people from all over the world getting in touch with us. I went on Saturday Live on BBC Radio to share some lullabies, and the response to that has been huge as well. We've had people writing in sending beautiful, heartfelt stories and songs from all over the world. So as much as it's been a Bristol project, I feel like it's taking wings and growing in its own way.

Rina: In singing lullabies to their children, do parents often draw on their own generational body memory of having in turn been comforted by a lullaby? What happens if a parent hasn't had that experience themselves, or if they are living in a difficult situation?

Roxana: Lullabies are definitely a way of comforting small children and babies lulling them to sleep, but they're also a way of comforting the parent. Early on, Edson Burton, who is based at the Trinity centre and who was supporting me in the early stages of the Lullabies project, asked a great question. He said: 'who is the song for, and who is singing to whom?' You're also singing that song to calm your own fears and stresses and exhaustion of all those tricky moments of being a parent, especially in the early stages when you're sleep deprived. It's not just a song, for a song's sake, it's actually a song with a real practical purpose. You

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need to get a baby back to sleep, and you also need your nerves to be calmed as the parent or grandparent.

Science and neuroscience tell us that singing is beneficial for the nervous system because you are breathing in a different way, with your diaphragm. Diaphragmatic breathing also connects you to your parasympathetic nervous system. So you're soothing your whole system through this act of singing. Especially now since COVID, people are realising the mental health and the wellbeing benefits of singing.

Lullabies are such a powerful area of research and raise questions on many levels. What about those who haven't been sung lullabies? How do we encourage this idea of singing to babies for wellbeing and bonding for those who *don't* have songs that come to mind? Do we need workshops for parents who need help learning songs? Can we share the resources? Can there be workshops in refugee camps? I recently read about a project where parents in prison are working with musicians to write songs for their children who are back at home to keep that bond of parenting alive. There is so much to be taken further in all this.

Rina: How does something delicate like lullabies stand up to the technology involved in the project without being overtaken by it, and how did you create a safe space within the technology for people to share their songs?

Roxana: This project does have quite a big technical angle which is very much led by my partner Peter Vilk, who is a professional sound designer and music producer. He's very much been at the forefront of getting the technology absolutely right in recording songs and interviews. As part of the latest funding we've had from the Arts Council we've been able to start exploring a new recording technique. We worked with a binaural artist called Aaron Hussein who's based in Dorset and who specialises in making recording heads out of wood. We've created a prototype which we've called the 'binaural baby' which allows participants to hold a recording device that looks and feels like a small baby, evoking that moment of singing a lullaby to a real baby. People often feel nervous about singing, so we have to coax them and make them feel comfortable, and the binaural baby has been part of that.

Binaural basically means that you're immersed in sound. Our research shows us that lullabies are very much the first immersive sound experience that you might have as a child. It's like a sound bath. We wanted to recreate that, so when people listen to lullabies on the website and podcasts through headphones, it feels like the sound is all around them. We've also been working with a brilliant coder called Rebecca Saw who's making a series of adaptive podcasts with us for BBC. So we're very excited about being able to share those binaural podcasts with you all soon.

Rina: This project has grown and generated a lot of interest, also internationally. Do you ever feel overwhelmed about how big it could get, and do you have any wider aspirations for it?

Roxana: The Lullabies project has definitely grown more than we ever imagined and now feels bigger than Pete and I can manage as Vilk Collective. So we're very much looking for new partners to connect with, whether that's other organisations or UNESCO or museums of mankind, because as well as the outreach aspect of the project, there's also the archiving aspect. We want to create a living archive as a resource for anybody wanting to learn and share lullabies. It's a huge project and we're looking for ways that we could collaborate.

I don't see Lullabies ending anytime soon. It's something that's growing all the time.

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