

California Festival Celebrates Silk Road in Music, Dance

By Mike O'Sullivan
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The music and dance of Iran, Afghanistan, China, and other stops along the ancient trade route known as the Silk Road were recently on display in California. The Festival of the Silk Road brought together immigrants and others to celebrate the cultures of the Eurasian trade route.

The one-day festival featured music and dance from Azerbaijan, from India and the Uighur people of Central Asia.

The network of trade routes known as the Silk Road stretched from Europe and the Middle East through India to China.

Uighur dance

Merchants and missionaries shared their languages and cultures as they traveled along the ancient trade route. Many immigrants to the United States have roots in the region, and they came to share their traditions.

They brought colorful handicrafts. Cameron Douraghy, who is of mixed Persian and American background, displayed English-language comic books based on Persian myths, which he publishes with his brother and a friend. A woman in traditional clothing sold textiles from Uzbekistan.



VOA photo - M. O'Sullivan

Azeri dance

But the highlight of the festival was an evening performance of music, dance and poetry.



VOA photo - M. O'Sullivan

Iranian American dancer Farima Berenji, one of the performers, has studied the arts and dances of many Silk Road countries. "Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, China, all the way to India," she said.

One modern dance shows the blend of cultures.

Dancer and choreographer Wan-Chao Chang is ethnically Chinese, but her family has lived in Indonesia. She blends both cultures in dance. "I am very fond of their movement and their similarity, and also some charms that you don't find in other ethnic dances," she said.

Farima Berenji

Nearby, Neema Hekmat is tuning his santour, a Persian hammered dulcimer. An engineer by training, he has loved Middle Eastern music since he was a child. "The sounds just made me feel a certain way. It touched me. So I decided to play the

Persian dulcimer just because it has a great effect on me. It was mesmerizing, the sounds," he said.

The music and dance drew a variety of people with one thing in common: a fascination with Silk Road cultures, says Mehran Ebrahimi, who plays a Persian drum.

"They give me a good feeling because they really come and ask about our instrument - 'what is that? How do you play? This is really great.' And that makes us feel good," Ebrahimi said.

An Afghan music group includes a cousin, nephew and a friend. Tameem Afzali was American-born, but has played Afghan music for 15 years. "The interest [in Afghan music] was just amazing for me, to just start learning the tablas [hand drum], learning how to sing and learning how to play the harmonium. I just really dove into Afghan music wholeheartedly," Afzali said.

Sharlyn Sawyer founded the dance troupe called Ballet Afsaneh in 1986 to promote the music and dance of the Silk Road in the San Francisco Bay area. She produced this festival, and says California is a good location for it. She says the West Coast state is part of a modern Silk Road.

"There are so many people that come together, this confluence of culture, people experiencing others' culture and incorporating ideas, exchanging inspiration as artists. There's such a wonderful opportunity for that when you bring people together, very much like the Silk Road historically has been through the ages," she said.



Sharlyn Sawyer

She says she hopes to make this celebration of Silk Road music and dance an annual event.

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