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As Taboos Ease, Saudi Girl Group Dares to Rock

By [ROBERT F. WORTH](#)

JIDDA, [Saudi Arabia](#) — They cannot perform in public. They cannot pose for album cover photographs. Even their jam sessions are secret, for fear of offending the religious authorities in this ultraconservative kingdom.

But the members of Saudi Arabia's first all-girl rock band, the Accolade, are clearly not afraid of taboos.

The band's first single, "Pinocchio," has become an underground hit here, with hundreds of young Saudis downloading the song from [the group's MySpace page](#). Now, the pioneering foursome, all of them college students, want to start playing regular gigs — inside private compounds, of course — and recording an album.

"In Saudi, yes, it's a challenge," said the group's lead singer, Lamia, who has piercings on her left eyebrow and beneath her bottom lip. (Like other band members, she gave only her first name.) "Maybe we're crazy. But we wanted to do something different."

In a country where women are not allowed to drive and rarely appear in public without their faces covered, the band is very different. The prospect of female rockers clutching guitars and belting out angry lyrics about a failed relationship — the theme of "Pinocchio" — would once have been unimaginable here.

But this country's harsh code of public morals has slowly thawed, especially in Jidda, by far the kingdom's most cosmopolitan city. A decade ago the cane-wielding religious police terrorized women who were not dressed according to their standards. Young men with long hair were sometimes bundled off to police stations to have their heads shaved, or worse.

Today, there is a growing rock scene with dozens of bands, some of them even selling tickets to their performances. Hip-hop is also popular. The religious police — strictly speaking, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice — have largely retreated from the streets of Jidda and are somewhat less aggressive even in the kingdom's desert heartland.

The change has been especially noticeable since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when the Saudis confronted the effects of extremism both outside and inside the kingdom. More than 60 percent of Saudi Arabia's population is under 25, and many of the young are pressing for greater freedoms.

"The upcoming generation is different from the one before," said Dina, the Accolade's 21-year-old

guitarist and founder. “Everything is changing. Maybe in 10 years it’s going to be O.K. to have a band with live performances.”

Dina said she first dreamed of starting a band three years ago. In September, she and her sister Dareen, 19, who plays bass, teamed up with Lamia and Amjad, the keyboardist.

They were already iconoclasts: Dina and Dareen wear their hair teased into thick manes and have pierced eyebrows. During an interview at a Starbucks here, they wore black abayas — the flowing gown that is standard attire for women — but the gowns were open, showing their jeans and T-shirts, and their hair and faces were uncovered. Women are more apt to go uncovered in Jidda than in most other parts of the country, though it is still uncommon.

“People always stare at us,” Dareen said, giggling. She and her sister are also avid ice skaters, another unusual habit in Saudi Arabia’s desert.

The band gets together to practice every weekend at the sisters’ house, where their younger brother sometimes fills in on drums. In early November, Dina, who studies art at King Abdulaziz University, began writing a song based on one of her favorite paintings, “The Accolade,” by the English pre-Raphaelite painter Edmund Blair Leighton. The painting depicts a long-haired noblewoman knighting a young warrior with a sword.

“I liked the painting because it shows a woman who is satisfied with a man,” Dina said.

She had thought of writing a song based on “Last Supper” by [Leonardo da Vinci](#) but decided that doing so would be taking controversy too far. In Saudi Arabia, churches are not allowed, and Muslims who convert to Christianity can be executed.

Dina held out her cellphone to show a video of the band practicing at home. It looked like a garage-band jam session anywhere in the world, with the sisters hunching over their instruments, their brother blasting away at the drums and Lamia clutching a microphone.

“We’re looking for a drummer,” Lamia said. “Five guys have offered, but we really want the band to be all female.”

Although they know they are doing something unusual, in person the band members seem more playful than provocative. Unlike some of the wealthier Saudi youth who have lived abroad and tasted Western life, they are middle class and have never left their country.

“What we’re doing — it’s not something wrong, it’s art, and we’re doing it in a good way,” Dina said. “We respect our traditions.”

All the members are quick to add that they disapprove of smoking, drinking and drugs.

“You destroy yourself with that,” Lamia said.

Yet rock and roll itself is suspect in Saudi Arabia in part because of its association with decadent lifestyles. Most of the bands here play heavy metal, which has only added to the stigma because of the way some Western heavy metal bands use images linked to satanism or witchcraft. In Saudi

Arabia, people are sometimes imprisoned and even executed on charges of practicing witchcraft.

The first rock bands appeared here about 20 years ago, according to Hassan Hatrash, 34, a journalist and bass player who was one of the pioneers, and their numbers gradually grew. Then in 1995, the police raided a performance in the basement of a restaurant in Jidda, hauling about 300 young men off to jail, including Mr. Hatrash. They were released a few days later without being charged. There is no actual law against playing rock music or performing publicly.

“After that, the scene kind of died,” he said.

Mr. Hatrash, who has graying shoulder-length hair, recalled how the religious police used to harass young men who advertised their interest in rock and roll. He once had his head shaved by the police.

In recent years, with the religious police on the defensive, bands have begun to play concerts, and a few have recorded albums. Occasionally young men bring their guitars and play outside the cafes on Tahlia Street in Jidda, where young people tend to congregate in the evenings.

Although the music is mostly familiar to heavy metal fans anywhere — thrashing guitars and howling vocals — some of the lyrics reflect the special challenges of life and love in this puritanical country.

“And I Don’t Know Why,” a song by Mr. Hatrash’s band, Most of Us, has these lyrics:

Why is it always so hard to get to you

When it’s something we both want to do

Every time we have to create an alibi

So that we can meet and love or at least try...

As the Saudi rock scene grew, Dina gathered the courage to start her own band. It plans to move slowly, she said, with “jams for ladies only” at first. The band members’ parents support them, though they have asked them to keep things low-key. Eventually, Dina said, they hope to play real concerts, perhaps in Dubai.

“It’s important for them to see what we’re capable of,” she said.

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