



ABDUL AND IVAN JOIN THE 21ST CENTURY

by Susan Wood

Do you remember Abdul Abulbul Amir and Ivan Skavinsky Skavar? If so, we can probably establish at once that you're my age or older. My father's generation knew their ballad quite well. Thanks to the posters at a folk-music web site (<http://www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poems/358.html>) it appears that I'm far from unique in hearing my father sing it to me with great gusto at bedtime. Thinking back on the experience, it strikes me as a distinctly odd choice for a lullaby or a bedtime story, but we all know that children are bloodthirsty little fiends who love violent tales.

Some members of Generations X and Y, however, may also have a passing familiarity with this tune, thanks to *Star Trek the New Generation*. In the episode *Brothers*, Commander Data's android "brother" Lore sings a stanza of the ballad. Gene Roddenberry alone knows how a 24th century android would know a 500 year old song, but the choice was clearly no accident. The episode deals with evil twins and battling siblings, a plot for which Abdul and Ivan make ideal prototypes. For you young folks who aren't Trekkies, "Abdul Abulbul Amir" is a ballad originally written by Percy French, but then set to music, elaborated with additional verses and generally appropriated into the folk music tradition by British soldiers and sailors. It made a fine after-dinner entertainment, especially if the slightly inebriated listeners could join in loudly on the last line

of every verse. Each stanza ended with the name of one of the two protagonists, and the listener could easily guess from the rhyme-scheme which name was coming up. The ballad tells the sad story of two heroic warriors with more testosterone than brains who have a fatal encounter. First we meet Abdul:

“The sons of the prophet are brave men and bold
And quite unaccustomed to fear.
But the bravest by far in the ranks of the Shah
Was Abdul Abulbul Amir.

When they wanted a man to encourage the van
Or harass the foe from the rear
Or storm fort or redoubt, they had only to shout
For Abdul Abulbul Amir.”

French then introduces us to Abdul’s nemesis:

“Now the heroes were plenty and well known to fame
In the troops that were led by the Czar,
And the bravest of these was a man by the name
Of Ivan Skavinsky Skavar.”

To make a very long story short, both men go out one day spoiling for a fight, and find one. Ivan disses Abdul in the marketplace, and Abdul rises to the bait:

“‘Young man,’ quoth Abdul, ‘has life grown so dull
That you wish to end your career?
Vile infidel know, you have trod on the toe
Of Abdul Abulbul Amir.

So take your last look at the sunshine and brook
And send your regrets to the Czar
For by this I imply, you are going to die,
Count Ivan Skavinsky Skavar.’”

A ferocious duel ensues, with neither man willing to back down, and the results for both of them—not to mention their heartbroken widows—are sadly predictable. There is also, perhaps inevitably, a dirty version (*very* dirty—we’re talking barracks humor here) in which the warriors square off in a (cough) somewhat different contest of manhood. Well, at least no one dies in that version, although I was dismayed to see that the ever-reckless pair eschew the use of “protection.” I won’t give the URL, for fear of possible legal ramifications, but it is available on line. Google it yourself if you must, but caveat Googlor. It really is crude. The ethnic stereotypes of Arab and Russian soldiers in all versions of the ballad are, of course, more than a bit embarrassing in this day and age. That could explain why we don’t hear much about Abdul and Ivan from folk singers these days. The contemporary folk music revival has a definitely leftist bent that isn’t compatible with the Victorian British ethnocentrism.

Now why, you might ask, have I suddenly waxed so nostalgic about a politically incorrect song that’s a century and a half old, and that I haven’t heard since childhood except in that *STNG* episode? Well, ever since the latest anniversary of 9/11/01, I’ve found it running relentlessly through my brain, as the most annoying of “ear worms.” I don’t want to think about it, being old enough now to understand the full implications of the story, but the melody is irresistibly jaunty, despite the sad lyrics, and when it gets stuck in your head it’s hard to remove. So in the spirit of communitarianism for which I am so justly famous, I’ve decided to share my misery with the rest of the OU community, along with a few musings of my own.

There’s something about contemporary politics that puts me in mind of men who invent fights on the flimsiest of premises, and then, finding themselves in over their heads, insist on “staying the course.” But it occurred to me that we need to update our paradigms a bit, and immortalize the type of hero who’s willing to fight to the death as long as it isn’t, you know, his *own*. One of the most annoying features of having an “ear worm” is that whether you planned to or not, you start making

up new lyrics. So ladies and gentlemen, I give you the fruits of my unwilling labors: the Abduls and Ivans of the 21st century. If you don't know the melody, it's available at the Contemplator web site: <http://www.contemplator.com/ireland/abdul.html>. Here are my lyrics, guaranteed to be totally politically incorrect, and offering something to offend everyone. Can you resist an invitation like that? All together now, with feeling:

“There are virgins in Heaven,” the Sheik told his men,
“And martyrs will win their sweet glamour.
Then the Takbir he gave, and off to his safe cave
Went that glorious hero Osama.

They warned him Bin Laden was planning to strike
And the blood of civilians would gush.
“Now you covered your ass, so don't give me no sass”
Said President George Walker Bush.

“The Shi'ites are pressing us hard on all sides
So let's make believe we've got The Bomb.
If Iraqis hang tough we can pull off this bluff
Just listen to Uncle Saddam.”

“We'll be greeted as heroes,” the Veep told his boss
“To think they'd fight back would be zany.
Just a little white lie and it's easy as pie,”
Said courageous Vice President Cheney.

“Bush knows what he's doing, so let's send in troops
To question him wouldn't be fair.
I'll stake my career that I've nothing to fear”
Said Prime Minister Anthony Blair.

“Stay the course,” said the President, “don't cut and run.”
Then he went to his ranch to clear brush.
And three thousand men died for the pig-headed pride
Of our President George Walker Bush.”