



HELLO KITTY

Bahman Ghobadi reveals Iran's underground. It's a world teeming with life

BY ALEX RITMAN

No *One Knows About Persian Cats* is one of those film titles that instantly tickles the curiosity bone. Why Persian cats? And what exactly is it we don't know about them? Anyone who has seen Kurdish/Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi's fifth full-length feature will know that all feline queries are dismissed early on. In a rare instance for films with interesting names, the story is far more captivating than the title.

The story goes something like this: Two young Iranian musicians – Ashkan and Negar – have been invited to perform at a UK concert. But in order for them to pass through the towering levels of bureaucracy required to exit Iran, they must find a backing band. With this basic groundwork, *Persian Cats* sets off on a fast-paced musical tour of Tehran.

Soon after he became president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad imposed a ban on “Western and decadent music”. But Ashkan and Nagar's adventure unmasks an underground city thriving with rappers, heavy metal fans and indie kids, practicing in dingy basements and rooftop sheds, sporting Strokes t-shirts and trading copies of *NME*.

“The government has never allowed us to make a film about the real Tehran,” says Bahman. “It's always got to be about children, or Islamic culture, something like that. In the last 31 years, this is the first film about music.”

Not that Bahman actually got any government approval to make this film, of course. “We did it without a permit. If I'd told the authorities I was making a film about the underground music scene, they'd never have let me.” He describes how frustrating it is to get a permit. “They want to know exactly what you're filming, word-by-word in a 100-page document. And you've got to go to the right office every day, sometimes for two or three years. It drives you crazy.”

Over 17 days, with a team of around eight people and two motorbikes, Bahman began to assemble footage of what would become *Persian Cats*. “It was while editing that I realised I needed to make a feature film rather than a documentary,” he says. “Before then we didn't have a screenplay.”

Despite such an unorganised method of filmmaking, certainly in comparison to Bahman's previous cinematographic efforts (including *Turtles Can Fly*, the first film to be made in Iraq after the fall of Saddam), it's *Persian Cats* which has brought him the most international attention. It picked up a Special Jury Prize in Cannes, plus a couple of awards at Abu Dhabi's Middle East International Film Festival.

Aside from seeing a city bubbling with life beneath the hard-edged, government-controlled surface, what is perhaps most warming about the *Persian Cats* tale is that it's absorbed in truth. “The main story is real,” says Bahman. “Ashkan and Negar are musicians and wanted to leave Iran. They're now both in London and the government has accepted their refugee status.”

Like most Iranians in the film industry who have found international fame, Bahman also now lives outside of his homeland;



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BAHMAN GHOBADI

in his case in New York. “I could go back to Iran, but I'd be unable to leave for the next three years. They'd take my passport and maybe put me in prison.” He pauses then smiles ironically. “After all, I didn't get a permit for this film did I?”

But back to that title: why Persian cats? “Persian cats outside of Iran are very expensive. And inside the country, our government takes them to jail.” His face creases into another smile. “So artists in Iran are like Persian cats.”

Watch *No One Knows About Persian Cats* at the Picturehouse in The Dubai Mall between January 7-28. The DVD will be released by Front Row Filmed Entertainment in February.

SHOULD PERSIAN CATS TICKLE YOUR TASTE FOR A MUSICAL EXPERIENCE SLIGHTLY DEEPER THAN YOUR GIRLFRIEND'S JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE DVD...

Heavy Metal In Baghdad (2007)

Fairly self-explanatory. Two filmmakers attempt to track down the heavy metal band Acrassicauda amid the destruction-scattered aftermath of the Iraqi war.

Democracy in Dakar (2007)

Many believe that the current Senegal president Abdoulaye Wade wouldn't have been elected without the support of the country's hip hop community, as this documentary shows.

Knowledge is the Beginning (2005)

Paul Smaczny's beautiful chronicling of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, made up of young Arab and Israeli musicians, culminating in a performance in Ramallah.