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Review of *The Song Collector* by Erik Koto

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The Song Collector

Erik Koto. Distributed by Collective Eye. Ladakh, India. 2016. 54 minutes.

Reviewed by Anna Morcom

The Song Collector is an immensely rich film exploring the rapid social and cultural change in Ladakh, focusing particularly on its music and the story of a remarkable individual, Morup Namgyal. Now an old man, Morup Namgyal gained great popularity as a singer in 1964 when he sang for India's Republic Day. He worked in All India Radio in Leh for thirty years and also founded the Lamdon Society in 1969 with a group of friends. Lamdon, literally meaning 'illuminating a path,' is a social welfare organization focusing on culture, education, and knowledge. One of their activities was using songs to address the changes taking place in Ladakh and they performed in villages across the region. They played a key role in using and adapting traditional arts and culture to serve contemporary imperatives. They also set up the first school in Ladakh that taught Ladakhi language with

just seven students. There are now ten branches and 1900 students, and traditional music and dance are also taught. The film documents these stages of Namgyal's life and his work to not just preserve traditional songs and culture but to interweave them with today's world.

More than relating these facts, however, the film enters into the experience of the musical and cultural heritage of Namgyal through his thoughts, hopes, fears and songs told in interviews and observational filming. Accompanying and interspersed with these is an array of footage including contemporary scenes of Ladakh and Leh and musical performances and scenes of Namgyal's family and, in particular, his ten-year-old grandson Stanzin 'Nono' Samchok. There is also a wealth of archival footage and photographs of Ladakhi traditional music and ways of life and performances of Lamdon from 1969. These threads are interwoven beautifully with the thoughts and perspectives of Namgyal on the past, the here and now, the future, the family, music and change.

One of the main ways in which the sense of change and Namgyal's perspectives on it are presented is the contrast of him and Nono. Namgyal's daughter, Tsering Chorol (who also provides some direct commentary in the film) has followed in the footsteps of her father closely, working at All India Radio as a musician and a producer. However, Nono is growing

up in a starkly different world. The opening of the film brings this to the fore. A solo flute plays behind old colour footage of a bridge over a river and the village and rocky terrain beside it, moving into the village and showing traditional Ladakhi buildings and a monastery on a cliff edge. As a tabla joins in, a pointer over a vintage map indicates the tiny space of Ladakh lying between India, Pakistan, and China. Namgyal's voice is heard, reflecting on the strangeness of time as old footage of Ladakhi girls spinning wool into thread is shown, and then many other scenes of traditional Ladakhi tools, clothes, music and dance, and monastic life. Namgyal tells of the traditional ways that existed when he was young and the ways that songs interwove all of life's stages and events, brought joy and unity, and encapsulated stories and history. The music stops as we move to the present day with an image of a broadcast tower and then the barren landscape of Ladakh's hills and mountains over which a low-flying aeroplane appears as Namgyal talks. We finally move to Namgyal himself, sitting on a cliff looking over the city with Nono, describing their two childhoods as being 'as different as sky and earth.'

In a later section of the film, changing attitudes and knowledge of traditional songs between generations is again conveyed in this subtle layering of images and voiceover. Namgyal tells how he is frequently called to weddings to sing as he knows all the old songs. However, whereas people

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Anna Morcom on *The Song Collector*

used to join in with him as he sang, even if they did not know the song, now they do not. We see scenes of a wedding where Namgyal and another man are singing ceremonial songs accompanied by large kettledrums and *shawms*. As they sing, guests talk amongst themselves and eat, not showing much interest in the songs. The voice of his daughter Chorol continues over the wedding footage, saying people do not have time to sing and dance together unlike before when they continued all night till sunrise on such occasions. We then move to Namgyal sitting in his home in the morning, having tea as he looks out the window pensively whilst Nono is transfixed watching a Tom and Jerry cartoon on a laptop. In a voiceover reflection as this scene continues, Namgyal tells of a child who asked him at a wedding what he was singing, and when he answered 'a folk song,' said 'what is that?.' This left him profoundly sad and unable to sing for several days.

The film shows the very real change and distancing of younger people from the old songs and ways of life. However, although the film tells a story of loss, it does not abandon itself to a story of nostalgia. This is important, as the protagonists of this film are clearly concerned about traditional culture to a level that many other ordinary Ladakhis would not be. Namgyal outlines his ideas of keeping tradition and modernity together as the film progresses, and we see more of the fruits of his work with the Lamdon Society with chil-

dren at one of the schools performing music and dance in front of the Dalai Lama who has come to open a new science lab. The staged folk dance performed by school children is certainly different from traditional folk music, a folkloric model, and the songs of the Lamdon Society urging social progress were also a modern reworking of folk music. However, these are nevertheless successful adaptations of folk music and the achievements of the Lamdon schools are remarkable. In another scene, we see Nono, with props, singing a ceremonial song enthusiastically and well in front of members of his family, his grandfather singing along and intoning bits of percussion. Clearly, this young boy is keenly imbibing traditional culture as a relevant, living and joyful activity. Towards the end of the film, Namgyal's thoughts on the value of the modern world is particularly poignantly expressed as he explains, simply, how 'development' saved Nono's life: he was born with a hole in his heart and had to be flown to Delhi by plane for an urgent operation.

Namgyal is an understated and gentle yet charismatic and articulate character and his deeply felt and deeply thought through knowledge and experience of traditional music and change come across acutely through the film: his sadness at the rate of change, his concern, yet also the remarkable successes he has helped to bring about. The film tells a familiar story of rapid change to traditions, and the issues that we can boil the film down to are not

new. However, what makes this a compelling film that I would highly recommend is that it relates these familiar things with particular depth, insight, charm and sincerity, illustrating them masterfully through contemporary or vintage footage, and different generations. The film is also extremely accessible to any viewer and would appeal to those interested in tradition, change, and traditional music beyond the Himalayan world.

Anna Morcom works on Indian and Tibetan music and dance from a variety of perspectives including politics, nationalism, modern history, media, gender, and economy and development. She is the author of Unity and Discord: Music and Politics in Contemporary Tibet (Tibet Information Network, 2004), and her latest book is Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion (2013, C. Hurst and Co; OUP New York), which won the Alan Merriam prize of the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM).