

GET UP, STAND UP

When your musical heroes defied the authoritarian regime

"There had been some murmurs about the one-point demand, but it was only after hitting the streets that I came to know more clearly about it, through the slogans and placards of various other protesting groups," shared vocalist Rezaul Karim Leemon.

SHARMIN JOYA

In the charged days of July, artistes from across the country stood with the people. Musicians, too, found their voice in the revolution. They came together under a single banner, *Get Up, Stand Up*—a name borrowed from Bob Marley's timeless anthem. And with that spirit—Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights—they raised their voices not just for rights but against brutality, mass killings, and fear that soaked the monsoon nights.

Before uniting all the voices

The July Uprising shattered all notions of being 'non-political', breaking through the rigid protocols imposed over the past 16 years—protocols that bred oppression and pushed the nation to its boiling point. Yet, it was not about politics, but about survival—a fight against overwhelming odds.

"We all were individually expressing our grief and anger through our social media handles," said vocalist Hasan Aether, one of the group Highway's founders. "I remember it was as early as July 18."



PHOTOS: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSVED

artistes alongside Samogeet, Shayan apa, Ghaasphoring, and I were present," said Armeen.

Many also said that musicians were bashed because they were late in responding. Although none of the artistes we spoke to for this article could verify such an incident, Armeen's response to this is, "It wasn't the students who showed frustration to me, but rather I to my fellow musicians. I still am angry with them for their blind loyalty towards a murderous dictator."

The emotions flooded with anger, grief, and at many points of fear, unpredicted by what was coming ahead. These people, who knew that appearing in such a rally might affect their careers, or even it could be life-threatening as well. Yet, they did it with full confidence, because it was now or never.

"16 years of suppression led many to boycott artistes who spoke out against injustice, and it was done by the big agencies that were affiliated with the government. Whenever anyone spoke, they were avoided, so we were aware of that. I believe Artcell was one of the first bands to protest against the violence, and then we saw how the revolution burst into the nationwide, and it even reached the international arena. We didn't think that we would win, but we were hoping and praying every second," asserted Jewel.

Jewel's 16-year-old son didn't hesitate to raise his voice. He shared that his son joined his school friends and united for the justice that was longed for. His wife also joined in.

"On August 3, at the Shaheed Minar, that's when I first heard—directly and in person—about the one-point demand," reminisced Elita. "We saw slogans demanding the release of rapper Hannan, who had been arrested for his song *Awaaj Uda*," recalled veteran singer Elita Karim. "It was a tense moment, charged with adrenaline. Our purpose was clear: to stand against injustice and support the students facing arrests, attacks, and the unbearable bloodshed of innocent lives."

Facing reality after a year

"After August 5, the hierarchy of the political figures in art and culture remains, and the wastage of money on banners and boring speeches still remains. It will take more than one year for us to bring real change, I get that; however, I applaud those who have left their main jobs to attempt, but a lot of the old ways are very prevalent, and if the new elected govt isn't worldly, doesn't value art, diversity, and most of all human respect, then there's not much hope," said Armeen.

After the fall of Awami League's long tenure,

on August 8, the new interim government took oath, showing a new ray of hope. What went through the minds of people?

"I remember students taking charge of the roads, directing traffic—it felt like hope was finally manifesting. Looking back, maybe I was naive to think things would instantly improve. We want change, but the system remains stubborn. The dream that everyone would suddenly become honest, follow rules, and end corruption felt, in hindsight, unreal."

Jewel continued, "In truth, over the past year, we haven't really seen the kind of progress we had hoped for. A new party has come to power—they're talking about change—but visibly, there hasn't been any improvement. Across the country, it was students and ordinary people who carried out the movement, but their representation still hasn't been properly ensured."

Threats to the cultural arena

After the dream of a new nation, one year passed, and the threat and attacks on the cultural arena still continue. Be it the attack on Baul *akhra* (settlements), postponing concerts quoting 'security issues', or creating mob violence to stop female artistes from participating in the inaugural ceremonies of different shops.

"Mob violence has become a major issue, and we're feeling unsafe even to step outside," said Jewel.

"The deterioration of law and order is largely to blame for this. People are committing crimes and still getting away with it—that's one of the key reasons." He continued, "Whenever a country is in such a vulnerable situation, art and culture are usually the first to be targeted by opportunistic extremists. They just wait for the right moment—and this was a perfect chance for them."

"It is too soon to tell if it's moving in the right direction—the can of worms has been opened," said Armeen. "But I don't see a lot of politicians who inspire me to be honest. Most educated, experienced, and moral people stay away from politics, so it's slim pickings for us right now."

"One hopeful sign is that we've all, to some extent, learned to ask questions. The way the entire nation came together last July, united by a shared dream, gives me reason to believe that our country can, in time, truly become the *Shonar Bangla* we aspire to. I have dreamt of a Bangladesh where thought, spirit, and integrity stand tall with pride. Where I can hold my head high and say, I am a Bangali. But if we fail this time, then perhaps we may never get another chance," concluded Leemon.



'Saba', 'Pett Kata Shaw' selected for Indian Film Festival of Melbourne

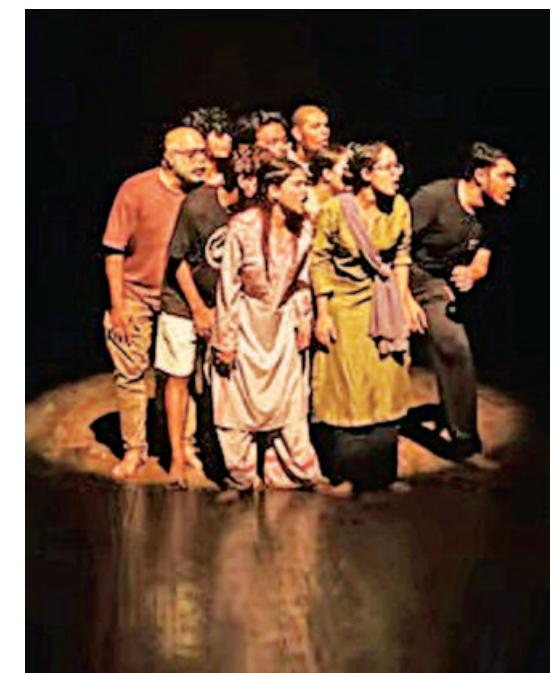
Bangladeshi productions *Saba* and *Pett Kata Shaw* have been officially selected for the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne (IFFM) 2025 under the From the Subcontinent category.

Directed by Maksud Hossain, *Saba*, starring Mehzabien Chowdhury, will screen on August 17. The film follows a woman navigating financial and emotional turmoil while caring for her ailing mother.

Nuhash Humayun's horror anthology *Pett Kata Shaw*, co-written with Gultekin Khan, features Afzal Hossain, Mosharraf Karim, and Sumaiya Shimu, and will screen on August 20 and 24.

The IFFM, running from August 14 to 30, will also feature Bengali films from West Bengal and pay tribute to Ritwik Ghatak with screenings of *Titash Ekti Naderi Naam* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara*.

'July Reawakening Theatre Festival' underway at Shilpakala



The *July Reawakening Theatre Festival* is ongoing at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, showcasing 11 new plays by 11 troupes in honour of the July movement. Running from July 31 to August 8, the festival revisits themes of resistance, loss, and social responsibility.

On August 1, Teerondaz Repertory premiered *Shuvonkar Haad Dhorche Cheyechhilo*, written and directed by Deepak Suman, drawing praise for its layered storytelling. *Deyal Janey Shob* by Spandan Theatre Circle also had its second showing that night.

Athera Theatre's *Rokto Kadam*, directed by Ira Ahmed, is set to stage today. Organised by the academy, the festival aims to engage the youth with cultural consciousness and was inaugurated by Secretary Mohammad Wares Hossain and director Nayla Azad's *Re-Revolt*.



Their plan to gather at Rabindra Sarobar was scheduled for August 3. Adding to this, Armeen Musa, the founder and lead vocalist of Ghaasphoring Choir, said, "Before Shaheed Minar on July 28 at Zero Point, I saw the one-point demand in the hands of Rehnamra Madam. It said 'Chhatriro Khuni' (student murderers). I didn't join in their chants; I was still scared. Later, at Shaheed Minar, a group of people from all walks of life—businesspeople to day labourers—made me realise it was time to be braver."

"My direct involvement with the movement truly began after the administration's extreme oppression of students and incidents of open fire," recalls Rezaul Karim Leemon.

"We basically stood for the students, against how they were fired on the streets by the police, and innocent people getting killed. We stood for justice, and it was never a political movement for us," said Jewel.

On August 3...

Major bands, musicians of the country, and young musical artistes—they all showed up as planned. From there, they moved to Shaheed Minar. Upon reaching, they saw people from all walks of life were present, chanting different slogans, out of which the one-point demand was the most powerful one, and shocking to many as well.

"There had been some murmurs about the one-point demand, but it was only after hitting the streets that I came to know more clearly about it, through the slogans and placards of various other protesting groups," shared vocalist Rezaul Karim Leemon.

"I didn't find myself separate from those students or protestors. From the beginning,



Bidrupe Bidroho, a six-day exhibition at La Galerie, Alliance Française de Dhaka in Dhanmondi, is commemorating the first anniversary of the July 2024 uprising—a 36-day movement that toppled the Awami League regime. Organised by Earki, it revives resistance not through slogans or speeches, but with satire—cartoons, memes, graffiti, installations, and interactive games. The exhibition is open to all from 3pm to 9pm daily, except Sundays, until August 5.

PHOTOS: THABIT AL BASHAR

