

# FEATURES

MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2009

PAGE 13

## 'Tajik Jimmy' sings his way to fame in Russia

One-man band Baimurat Allaberiyev, who first drew attention after shaky videos shot with mobile phones surfaced on the Internet, has been compared to Susan Boyle of 'Britain's Got Talent'

BY ALEXANDER OSIPOVICH  
AFP, KOLOMNA, RUSSIA

**B**aimurat Allaberiyev, a diminutive native of Tajikistan who has herded sheep, picked cotton and toiled in construction, hardly looks like Russia's latest musical sensation.

But Allaberiyev has remarkable talent that sets him apart from the millions of Central Asians who come to Russia to escape crushing poverty at home.

A musical prodigy, he can perform Bollywood showstoppers as a one-man band, equipped with nothing but an uncanny falsetto and a metal bucket.

That — and the miraculous star-making powers of the Internet — have turned this 37-year-old into a cult celebrity here.

Allaberiyev won fame after shaky videos shot with mobile phones surfaced on the Internet that showed him performing songs like "Jimmy Jimmy Aaja" from the 1983 Bollywood classic *Disco Dancer*.

Set against grim backdrops such as a construction site or a storeroom full of boxes, the videos became a viral sensation. They have now been viewed more than 400,000 times on YouTube, the video-sharing Web site.

Allaberiyev — who is widely known as "Tajik Jimmy" despite the fact that he is actually an ethnic Uzbek — now has a record deal and has given concerts in Moscow and St Petersburg.

His success is striking given that Central Asians suffer widespread discrimination in Russia and are often targeted in racist attacks.

Despite his budding musical career, Allaberiyev remains down to earth and has not quit his day job hauling cardboard boxes at the Rio shopping center in Kolomna, a town 100km southeast of Moscow.

"I can't quit working here," Allaberiyev said in an interview, surrounded by the sleek glass and metal of the shopping mall. "But if someone asks me to do a concert, I'll go and perform."

But fame has led to surreal changes for Allaberiyev, who has been compared to Susan Boyle, the middle-aged Scottish woman



Baimurat Allaberiyev, or "Tajik Jimmy," a Tajikistan native who has herded sheep, picked cotton and toiled in construction, performs as the opening act for British electronica group Asian Dub Foundation in St Petersburg on April 5.

PHOTO: AFP

who soared to fame when her audition on *Britain's Got Talent* became a smash hit on YouTube.

Allaberiyev spoke to AFP the same day he was filmed by a television crew and visited by a local newspaper photographer.

Encouraged by a musician uncle, Allaberiyev enrolled in after-school music classes, while a projectionist brother introduced him to the colorful world of Indian musicals.

Relatives noticed that Allaberiyev could break into a falsetto and sing the female parts of Bollywood songs, as well as the male ones.

No less impressive was his ability to memorize a song within several days by repeatedly listening to it on tape, and then re-create it with perfect rhythm, without even knowing the language.

"My uncle used to play drums. He used to tell me, when you grow up, I'll buy you drums and a synthesizer," Allaberiyev said.

But history interfered when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and civil war broke out in

newly independent Tajikistan. The country plunged into deep poverty. Allaberiyev spent some time herding sheep in Tajikistan, then picking cotton in more prosperous Kazakhstan.

He sang for friends and performed at the occasional wedding, but was only noticed by a broader public after coming to Russia.

The videos that brought him fame reflect the grittiness of migrant workers' lives as well as Allaberiyev's exuberant love of performance.

In one movie, after he is done singing, a man dressed in a suit walks into the storeroom and commands: "Let's go. Get dressed and get out of here."

Allaberiyev went mainstream after local journalists tracked him down and one of them introduced him to a music producer, Ilya Bortnyuk, head of the Light Music promoting company in St Petersburg.

Bortnyuk agreed to let "Tajik

Jimmy" be the opening act for the politically outspoken British electronica group Asian Dub Foundation when it visited St Petersburg in April.

When Allaberiyev's performance got an enthusiastic reception from the hip club-going crowd, Bortnyuk was so impressed that he signed a record deal with him that same night.

"I consider him a very talented person," Bortnyuk told AFP. The producer said he would seek to preserve Allaberiyev's aura of raw talent as they worked together in the recording studio.

"We will not impose any strict conditions on him. For instance, he might not need any instrument other than an aluminum bucket," Bortnyuk said.

Despite his newfound fame, Allaberiyev faces the same risks as other Central Asians in Russia. One April evening, he was riding a train when he was attacked by a group of strangers who knocked out his two front teeth.

Allaberiyev said the attackers were not skinheads and that he was assaulted "for no reason" — but violence against Central Asians motivated by racist hatred is frequent in Russia.

In fact, before Allaberiyev's rise to fame, the best-known Internet video featuring a Tajik was perhaps *The Execution of a Tajik and a Dagestani*, a notorious clip apparently created by Russian ultranationalists.

The video, which surfaced online in 2007, shows masked men decapitating one dark-skinned man and shooting another in the head after they are forced to kneel under a Nazi flag.

But Allaberiyev says he feels comfortable in Russia, and he says his fame has helped shield him from another problem that plagues migrants — police harassment.

For many Central Asians in Russia, being stopped by the police means they must pay a bribe or face jail and deportation. But not Allaberiyev. "The police all know me," he said. "They say, Jimmy, you're a good singer, you're our star! And they let me go."

Freeman's attorney claims a woman who was with the actor when he wrecked a car in Mississippi last August was partly to blame for the accident, though he won't elaborate.

Demaris Meyer is suing Freeman in US District Court, claiming Freeman was negligent when the car he was driving ran off the road and flipped.

Both Meyer and Freeman were seriously injured in the crash on a two-lane highway about 8km west of Freeman's home.

Meyer sued Freeman in February for medical expenses, pain and suffering, lost wages, permanent disability and property damage.

Meyer has denied reports she's romantically linked to Freeman. Freeman's attorney, Jack H. Hayes Jr, responded to the lawsuit Friday in a four-page court document denying almost all the allegations or saying Freeman doesn't know enough about them to form an opinion.

Hayes would not elaborate Friday when contacted by phone. "It's just a car wreck case and that's it," he said.

— AGENCIES

[ MUSIC ]

## American who lost file-sharing case gets replay

BY STEVE KARNOWSKI  
AP, MINNEAPOLIS

**T**he Minnesota woman who became the only music file-sharing defendant so far to go to trial in the US is getting a replay two years after losing the case.

Jammie Thomas-Rasset, a 32-year-old mother of four and self-described "huge music fan," will be armed with aggressive new lawyers when her retrial begins in federal court here today.

The lawsuit is among the last vestiges of an anti-piracy campaign that the recording industry ultimately dropped amid widespread criticism. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) said in December it had stopped filing lawsuits like these and would work instead with Internet service providers to cut access to those it deems illegal file-sharers. But the recording industry plans to proceed with cases that are already filed.

Thomas-Rasset is the rare defendant who has fought back.

Music companies have filed more than 30,000 similar copyright lawsuits in recent years against people they accused of illegally swapping songs through Internet file-sharing services such as Kazaa.

None of the others has made it to trial yet. Faced with huge legal bills, most settled for an average of about US\$3,500, even if they insisted they had done nothing wrong.

Thomas-Rasset's new lawyer, K.A.D. Camara, notes the settlements add up to more than US\$100 million; the RIAA contends its legal costs exceeded the settlement money it brought in.

The lawsuits have turned into a public relations nightmare for the recording industry, putting music companies in the position of going after their most ardent fans. Blogs and media reports have highlighted heavy-handed tactics against several improbable targets.

In 2006, for example, the industry dropped a lawsuit against Tanya Andersen, a disabled single mother in Oregon. Andersen said she had been misidentified and never downloaded the music she was accused of stealing. Industry representatives allegedly threatened to question her 10-year-old daughter if she didn't pay up.

And in 2007, the companies backed off their attempt to sue an elderly Texas grandmother, Rhonda Crain, who had been displaced by Hurricane Rita in 2005 and said she never downloaded music. They settled for no money, just her agreement not to download any music illegally.

Camara said he hoped to turn Thomas-Rasset's retrial into a trial against the RIAA, both before the jury and in the court of public opinion. A win by the defense, he said, could undermine the other music-sharing cases.

RIAA spokeswoman Cara Duckworth insisted the music companies will again prevail, just as they had in 2007 when a federal jury in Duluth found Thomas-Rasset had violated copyrights by offering 24 songs on the Kazaa file-sharing network. She was ordered to pay US\$222,000 in damages, or US\$9,250 per song.

Duckworth said the group does not have figures on cases still pending, but the industry will press ahead with them, saying it had to pursue those "who have regularly illegally downloaded music and thumbed their nose at the law and the legal process." Nor did Duckworth have figures on how many defendants decided to settle after Thomas-Rasset lost.

"Suffice to say, the first trial generated a fair amount of attention and certainly caused a number of people to think twice about downloading music illegally," she said.

Thomas-Rasset, who still denies any illegal song swapping, is getting a retrial after US District Judge Michael Davis decided last September he erred in telling jurors the companies did not have to prove anyone downloaded the copyright-protected songs she allegedly made available. Davis later concluded the law requires that actual distribution be shown.

The companies suing are subsidiaries of all four major recording companies, Warner Music Group Corp, Vivendi SA's Universal Music Group, EMI Group PLC and Sony Corp's Sony Music Entertainment.

The defense is now being handled by Camara and his partner, who agreed to take the case for free after the court last month relieved her previous attorney, Brian Toder, who had put in nearly US\$130,000 worth of unpaid time.

Camara, who's about to turn 25, was just 19 when he became the youngest person ever to graduate from Harvard Law School, and he graduated with high honors. He and his partner at their Houston law firm, Joe Sibley, 34, a classmate, were already involved in a couple of similar cases. He said they agreed to defend Thomas-Rasset for free in hopes of setting precedents for other cases.

In the short time since they took over the case, Camara and Sibley have tried some new legal tricks, with mixed success.

On Thursday, Davis shot down their request to suppress evidence gathered by the MediaSentry anti-piracy service. The judge did not buy Camara's claim that MediaSentry violated a federal wiretapping law and a state law regulating private detectives when it tracked down his client. Had Camara won on that point, however, the recording companies could have been left without much of a case against her or other defendants.

But the defense did manage to create at least a headache for the music labels by demanding that they produce certified copies from the US Copyright Office of the copyrights on the 24 tracks in question, to prove they really do own the songs.

The industry's lawyers were caught by surprise, having gotten by with uncertified copies during the first trial. Although music companies told Davis on Monday of last week they were not sure they could get certified copies in time for the new trial, Davis reminded them that they had the burden of proving they owned the copyrights.

Camara said he will seek dismissal of the case if the plaintiffs fail that test.

Corryne McSherry, a staff attorney with the digital-rights group Electronic Frontier Foundation, said the new defense team is taking a creative approach. She said it would have been interesting to see how all the cases that settled might have turned out if those defendants had free lawyers who were willing to push as hard.

"This case could end up being the tail end of a frankly shameful and certainly failed campaign to go after users," McSherry said.

"Maybe this will be the coda to that long campaign."

On the Net: Recording Industry Association of America: [www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com); Recording Industry vs The People lawsuit-tracking blog: [recordingindustryvspeople.blogspot.com](http://recordingindustryvspeople.blogspot.com).

## PLANET POP

**R**ihanna will testify at next month's hearing in the **Chris Brown** case, her lawyer has confirmed. Prosecutors have said that they will issue a subpoena calling the singer to discuss the events of Feb. 8, when Brown allegedly assaulted her.

Rihanna's lawyer Donald Etra said that she will comply with the order and attend the hearing on Monday of next week. This would be the singer's first court appearance since charges were filed against Brown in March. Etra would not comment on the current relationship between Brown and Rihanna, but said that his client was closely following the case.

Brown is accused of attacking Rihanna in the couple's rented car on the weekend of this year's Grammy awards. If convicted, he faces up to five years in jail. Making his first public comments since being charged, Brown said yesterday that he was "not a monster."

Brown is also confirmed to appear at

the June 22 hearing, setting the stage for a tense confrontation between the couple.

Los Angeles superior court judge Patricia Schnegg has also ruled on a motion brought by Brown's lawyer, **Mark Geragos**, regarding a police photograph of Rihanna that was apparently leaked to the press.

Judge Schnegg deemed the motion premature, calling it "a fishing expedition."

A day after fleeing Andorra 6-0, England soccer star **David Beckham** launched a new underwear campaign for the Giorgio Armani fashion label.

Beckham said he was "proud but a little embarrassed" by the colossal billboard photograph of himself in nothing but a pair of tight, black briefs emblazoned with the Emporio Armani eagle logo, which now looms over London's Oxford Street retail hub.

The 34-year-old Beckham, currently on loan to AC Milan from the Los Angeles Galaxy soccer team, and his Spice Girl wife **Victoria**, have stripped down before for Armani campaigns.

The photograph shows the English sex symbol naked



Rihanna will testify in Chris Brown's case next week.

PHOTO: AP

except for the underpants, perched on a chair with his legs spread. A braided rope is draped around his torso which partially covers his tattooed arms.

"He's gorgeous," 18-year-old model Georgia Palmer raved, one of hundreds of fans who turned up to witness Beckham's three-minute appearance, despite a city-wide tube strike that plunged large parts of the British capital into chaos.

Fans in the crowd were mostly appreciative of the photograph, though some were more impressed by his football prowess.

"I preferred him last night on the pitch," said eight-year-old Ben-Jasper from Germany, who stumbled upon the crowd of onlookers while exploring London on a family holiday.

Court records show singer **Usher** has filed for divorce from Tameka Foster Raymond after less than two years of marriage.

The 30-year-old Grammy-

Beckham stripped down to his briefs for an underwear billboard.

PHOTO: AP

